

The Protection of Wisdom

📖 Ecclesiastes 10:2-11

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We're studying Ecclesiastes, which means "the teacher." Some say it means "the preacher," but it's not too preachy of a book and the gospel is certainly not preached, so I prefer the teacher. Solomon is the teacher and he's teaching us wisdom. Ecclesiastes is in the wisdom section of the Hebrew canon, which is called 'the writings.' All the books like Psalms and Proverbs and even Daniel, are in the writings because they contain wisdom. This book is like no other though, because it approaches wisdom from the negative standpoint in so many instances. In other words, how not to live your life. But there are sections that are positive and either way we can always work out the implications, so we come away with true wisdom. When we say true wisdom we're talking about something that can seem amorphous at times, but it's skill in living, and it's very practical because it's talking about how you live your life, how you do things, how you spend your money, how you spend your time, what to expect out of life, how to deal with people, your job, your marriage, etc., etc. The wisdom to do these things and do them well so that there is significance to them, only comes when we put God at the center. He really can't be divorced from all these things and at the same time we obtain satisfaction and fulfillment. He won't let us have the enjoyment apart from Him. So, we have to figure this out or we're not going to be enjoying life. It's just going to be constant frustration after constant frustration and we won't be able to roll with the punches and give thanks to God. Tonight we're one step closer to the end of the book.

Turn with me to Ecclesiastes 9:11-10:1. In this section Solomon showed some of the pitfalls of wisdom in a fallen world. In other words, it's very valuable, but it doesn't guarantee success in this world. It seems that his thought in 9:11-12 is building off of verse 10 where he said that whatever you do, do it with all your might. The implication being that you will be successful. However, in verse 11 he looked at this idea again and noticed that success was not always guaranteed to the one who worked the hardest. Some who worked hard to become fast runners did not win the race, some who trained hard did not win war. So, in the same way, some gain wisdom and discernment and ability, but they don't have food on the table, wealth and favor among men. Thus, wisdom is no guarantee of success. His explanation is that time and chance, or occurrences, happen to us all. In verse 12 he elaborated, saying that we simply do not know the appointed times in our lives which are part of the sovereign plan of God. Therefore, sometimes we are like fish caught unexpectedly in a fisherman's net or birds

trapped in a trapper's snare. We are going along pursuing wisdom and applying it and suddenly misfortune falls upon us and the good results we were hoping for are negated. In verses 13-16 Solomon gives an illustration from something he observed. Verse 14, there was a small city with just a few men and a great king and his armies came and surrounded it and built up battlements against it. The city was in need of deliverance. In verse 15 the deliverer turned out to be a poor wise man. One would think that the man would become rich and famous, but afterward no one remembered him. In verse 16, Solomon concluded that wisdom is better than strength because it delivered the city from a strong force. However, just because wisdom won that day did not guarantee success for the poor wise man. Afterward the poor man was still despised by people and his words were not listened to. In verse 17 Solomon says that the words of the wise listened to in quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools. Apparently, a fool won the people over. So, in verse 18, while wisdom is better than weapons of war, one sinner, the fool, can destroy the good results of wisdom. In this case the king was the fool and the sinner and he won the people over and destroyed much good that had come from the deliverance of the poor wise man. In 10:1 he simply illustrates how easily all the hard work of gaining wisdom was destroyed. Just like the hard work of a perfumer is brought to ruin by one dead fly, so a little foolishness can destroy all the hard work of gaining wisdom. Therefore, the lesson is that wisdom does not always guarantee success. This does not mean that wisdom never results in success. Usually it does. But Solomon observed that this is not always the case. So, there are some limitations to the effectiveness of wisdom and we should not think that it is a solve all. You can live skillfully and still be brought to ruin. Such is life in the plan of God. Yet, wisdom should still be pursued. Why? Because while success in this life is not guaranteed, it is guaranteed in the next life. God will remember our efforts to gain and apply wisdom and they will be rewarded. But as for this life, there is no 100% guarantee.

Tonight in 10:2-11, Solomon sets forth the value of wisdom and how it is like a shield, a protection for the wise and how it's important to have wisdom but only if you apply it and apply it at the right time. We'll only get to verse 11, because again, these things are difficult to sort through. If you think it's all perfectly clear when I get through, that's great, because it means I did my job, but getting there is not easy because I have to sort through a lot of other arguments that people think Solomon is making and I have to decide what the right argument is in the passage. I'm not taking you through all that, so I just give you the results as best I can communicate. Let's start in verse 2, **A wise man's heart directs him toward the right, but the foolish man's heart directs him toward the left.** Now, I'm sure you heard this before in the context of politics. It sounds good for the conservative team. Unfortunately, that would be a liberal interpretation! In the English translation it sounds like it could be political, but it's not in the original Hebrew. Briefly, the OT was originally written in two languages; Hebrew and Aramaic. Only a few sections are written in Aramaic, most of it is Hebrew, but there are always some things lost when you translate. That's why we need pastor-teachers or teachers who know these languages or are at least able to work in them and study in them. In the NASB you will notice that the translation team added the words **directs him. A wise man's heart directs him toward the right and the foolish man's heart directs**

him toward the left. The meaning in English would be that the two men's hearts direct them down two different paths. That is true enough, however, that is not the meaning of the Hebrew text. The literal translation is, "A wise man's heart is at his right hand." What does this mean? Obviously by **heart** he is not referring to the physical heart, but to his mental disposition. His mental disposition is at his right hand; while the foolish man's mental disposition is at his left hand. So, then what really matters is determining the meaning of the right and left hand. The right hand in the Hebrew Bible is "the place of protection." The LORD said to David in Ps 110:5, "The Lord is at your right hand; He will shatter kings in the day of His wrath." This meant that the Lord was David's protection. So when Solomon says a wise man's heart is at his right hand, he means that the wise man's mental disposition is his protection. It serves to protect him when there is danger. And if the right hand is the place of protection then what is the left hand? It is the place of danger. Therefore, when he says **the foolish man's heart** is in his left hand, it means that his mental disposition is his danger. He lacks the mental disposition of wisdom that would give him protection. Therefore, he is vulnerable. This is another reason why gaining wisdom is so valuable. The only alternative is to be a fool and that comes with many dangers.

As for the fool, verse 3 spends a little time describing his everyday life. Verse 3, **Even when the fool walks along the road, his sense is lacking and he demonstrates to everyone that he is a fool.** The word **sense** is the same word used in verse 32 of heart. It's *leb* and it means "mental disposition." So it's saying **his "mental disposition" is lacking.** And this is in the everyday activities, as the phrase **when the fool walks along the road** makes plain. Even as the fool goes about his ordinary, daily activities, his mental disposition is lacking and Solomon says this means **he demonstrates to everyone that he is a fool.** So the point we are to gain from verse 3 is that it is not good to be a fool because it can't be hidden. Everyone will notice because he manifests it in everyday life. So unless just you want to appear like a fool, you should be striving to gain wisdom to avoid it. Wisdom is a protection from looking like an ignoramus.

In verse 4 he begins to show that even though wisdom is a protection, it still doesn't guarantee success from a world full of fools. In this situation there is a capricious ruler and a man underneath his authority who must exercise wisdom, and this ruler makes decisions that don't necessarily reward wisdom as it should be rewarded. Let's see the situation. Here the **ruler** gets angry at you. And **if the ruler's temper rises against you, do not abandon your position, because composure allays great offenses.** The word **ruler** is a general Hebrew word for one in authority over others. In that sense it could be a husband's authority over his wife, an employer's authority over an employee, a parent's authority over a child or a ruler's authority over a people. The context seems to be vocational, like an employer over an employee, but the principles would apply to any of these relationships. So here we see an employer in the place of authority and the employee is getting the what for! And it doesn't matter whether the employer is right or wrong, **if the ruler's temper rises against you, you should not abandon your position.** So the boss is mad at you and he is railing against you like a raving lunatic. The temptation is to quit your job. But how should you respond? Should you respond in kind? Is that wisdom? Should you quit your job? Is that wisdom? No, wisdom is a protection, and if you have it at your right hand you

are mentally disposed or inclined to use it in the situation. And the wise thing is to **not abandon your position**, meaning don't quit your job. Constable said, "The wise man does not quit his job when his boss gets angry with him. He maintains his composure..."¹ By composure it means he is able to remain calm. Now, the foolish man's mental disposition does not give him the ability to remain calm. He wants to fly off the handle. But that would only lead to more danger. So if you have wisdom you can protect yourself by using it and not quitting your job, not flying off the handle, not responding in like way. And what it will protect you from is committing **great offenses**. Now this is a figure of speech called metonymy, where the cause is substituted for effect. So the **great offenses** are the cause. The effect(s) is(are) not stated. But we can imagine what they would be easy enough. If you flew off the handle and quit your job you would have much more difficulty getting another job. And that's a danger because you have to have a job to make a living. So the protection of wisdom in this case is that it protects you from committing **great offenses** that would cause a lot of problems down the road. Therefore, the lesson is that when you have wisdom as your mental disposition and the boss flies off the handle, you are able to maintain your composure so that you don't create greater offenses. And thereby you actually demonstrate that you outrank your employer. So get wisdom.

Now in 10:5 Solomon observes that even though wisdom protects you, it still doesn't guarantee success in your job. Sometimes the boss is capricious in decision making, and so fools get promoted while you get forgotten. He says, **There is an evil I have seen under the sun**. Now the word **evil** can be translated "evil," but it can also be translated "wickedness," "misfortune," or "disaster." It seems in the context like "misfortune" or "disaster" is the best translation. Disaster might be better because the end of the verse says **like an error which goes forth from a ruler**. And what happens when a ruler makes an error? It's usually a "disaster." But it could also be "misfortune" and I think that's the best because in the context the wise person who deserved a promotion is not going to get promoted, whereas a fool is going to get promoted. So, I'd translate verse 5, "There is a misfortune I have seen under the sun." Now, what is the misfortune?

10:6. **Folly is set in many exalted places while rich men sit in humble places**. In other words, fools get to move up the ladder into the important positions, the high up positions where the big decisions are made, decisions which affect everyone, while the people who are **rich** remain in the less important positions. It may bother you that it says **rich**. But when it says **rich**, it doesn't mean rich in money, it means rich in wisdom, because it is contrasted with **folly** or fools. So the people who are rich are rich in wisdom and here they are down at the bottom of some organization and the people who are up top are fools. That's the picture. Some nincompoop put the wrong people in the wrong positions. And what is going to be the result of this? Disaster for the organization. Or it could be misfortune, especially when viewed from the eyes of those rich in wisdom who are down at the bottom. Both are certainly true. But I'm divided on which is the best understanding and I lean toward it being a misfortune because it is emphasizing the point we've seen before in the context, that wisdom does not always guarantee success. Because here are men rich in wisdom and they are stuck at the bottom of the totem pole while fools get promoted. So while wisdom is a protection, again, it still doesn't

guarantee success in this life. Or we might put it together this way, wisdom is a protection in that you still have your job, you didn't fly off the handle, but it might not guarantee you get a promotion. And I think we have all seen that in our professions.

In verse 7 he gives another example of misfortune. **I have seen slaves riding on horses and princes walking like slaves on the land.** Again, like with the rich he didn't mean rich in terms of money, here by **slaves** he doesn't mean literal "slaves," he's using it as a metaphor. And the same is true with **princes**. It's just a metaphor. The point is there is an incongruity. Slaves riding horses while princes are walking like slaves? The **slaves** are metaphorical fools and the **princes** are metaphorical wise men. And his point again is that wisdom, even though it's a protection, does not always guarantee success because there will always be people in this world who are fickle, and they promote fools and ignore the wise. Maybe it's because they are buddies, maybe it's because of some other thing, but no matter the reason, this is the way the world is. Constable said it this way, "Unfortunately one's good work does not always receive the praise it deserves. Sometimes the promotion goes to the less qualified person because of the supervisor's caprice."²

In 10:8-11 Solomon shows that while wisdom does not always guarantee success, it does have its advantages, but these advantages can be nullified when it is not applied or when it is applied too late. Verse 8, **He who digs a pit may fall into it, and a serpent may bite him who breaks through a wall. He who quarries stones may be hurt by them, and he who splits logs may be endangered by them. If the axe is dull and he does not sharpen its edge, then he must exert more strength. Wisdom has the advantage of giving success.**

Solomon describes four inherently dangerous tasks to communicate the importance of using wisdom. These were daily kinds of task; digging **a pit**, tearing down **a wall**, quarrying **stones** and splitting **logs**. If you apply wisdom in these situations it will give you the advantage of keeping safe, but if you don't apply wisdom it will nullify any advantage and possibly put you in danger. The first one in verse 8, is digging **a pit** without knowing the inherent dangers of shifting ground or taking the time to set up boundaries to ensure the area is secure. If you don't do these things you could possibly **fall into it** and die or break an arm or a leg. In any case, you might not be able to get out till help arrives. So exercising wisdom in digging **a pit** is essential to avoiding getting hurt. Therefore, not only should we get wisdom, skill in some area before we just go for it, but we should apply wisdom. This is often as simple as reading the instruction manual of some new machine, tool or appliance and following the directions. So don't rush through because it could be potentially dangerous. It's foolish. They say fools rush in. That's true. Wisdom applied is a protection.

The second one is in verse 8b, when breaking **through a wall** carelessly, you may get **bit by a serpent**. Serpents would sometimes make their homes in old buildings. If you went to pull down a wall you might get **bit**. It was inherently risky to engage in such activity. Therefore, wisdom applied would be ready and equipped for such a possibility in order to avoid it.

The third one is in verse 9, **He who quarries stones may be hurt by them.** Rock is extremely heavy. At a quarry the rocks are shifting all the time and you certainly don't want a boulder coming down on you. So you should exercise wisdom in quarrying stones so you are not hurt by them. But these are only examples of wisdom applied and any inherently dangerous situation the same principles apply; cutting with knives, hunting, working on cars, walking through fields of cactus, etc...are all potentially hazardous situations. Wisdom has the advantage of giving success in these activities, but only if you apply it.

The fourth one is in verse 10, **If the axe is dull and he does not sharpen its edge, then he must exert more strength.** The Hebrew does not say **axe**, but "iron." It is another figure of speech called metonymy. In this case the metonymy is the material for the object. Just as we refer to a gun as an "iron" so they referred to an axe as an iron. The edge must be sharp when splitting logs, or else the worker will find that **he must exert more strength** to do the same amount of work. I used to think that it was no big deal and I'd just work harder and it would make me stronger. Later it got to where there was too much work to do. So you need more and better tools to get the job done as quickly as possible so you can move on to the next job. Here's an example of how wisdom doesn't give an advantage unless you apply it and take the time to sharpen the axe.

The principle is the end of verse 10; **Wisdom has the advantage of giving success.** It has the advantage of keeping us safe from the inherent dangers involved in digging a pit, quarrying stone and splitting logs, as well as any other potential dangerous activities. Anything you do that could be potentially dangerous should have wisdom applied to it. We may have to get the skill to do an everyday job safely, but it's worth taking the time to develop the skill because the fool rushes in and skips steps and ends up hurt or worse, dead. And, of course, we've all rushed in or skipped steps, especially when we have done it over and over and over and we get that false sense of security. Friend, that is a recipe for disaster. And one day there is a disaster and we are paying the price because we decided to forego wisdom. Don't be a fool, take the time to do it right.

In verse 11 Solomon adds one more idea to wisdom being an advantage. **If the serpent bites before being charmed, there is no profit to the charmer.** One may have the wisdom to charm a serpent, but if he does not exercise it at the right time, it could be too late, and then the serpent bites and that leaves the charmer dead. So the principle here is that there is no profit to having wisdom in an area but not employing it at the right time. You could have all the wisdom in the world, but if you don't apply it at the right time, it's worthless.

So, two sections tonight, vv 2-7 which emphasize that wisdom does not always guarantee success, sometimes fools get promoted while the wise get forgotten. And vv 8-11, which show that it's not enough to have wisdom, wisdom must be applied, but even that's not enough, because it must be applied at the right time. But some of us just need to get wisdom period. That's the starting point. Get wisdom. That means ask for it, that means study the word of God. Because the more you study the word of God the more examples you can pull from different circumstances that have application to your circumstances. So you've got to be in this book. God's not going to just light one on ya. It happens by spending time with Him. That's number 1. What's your number 1?

¹ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Ec 10:2.

² Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Ec 10:2.