

IT'S COMMON SENSE

ECCLESIASTES 10



A Scriptorium Study from The Fellowship of Ailbe

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The Fellowship of Ailbe

It's Common Sense: Ecclesiastes 10
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Ecclesiastes 10: Introduction

Solomon is unrelenting as he tries to persuade his son, Rehoboam, to leave off the pursuit of folly and find true life “under heaven”.

In chapter 10, the king plies his son with common sense – things Rehoboam doubtless knew, but had perhaps lost sight of through all his self-indulgence. Solomon is working every angle to try to bring some sense to Rehoboam, and we have to give him an A for effort.

But it's too little, too late. His son watched his father prosper in a life of folly, and he was convinced he could do the same. Solomon knew better, but his words lacked the power to persuade Rehoboam. But let's allow them to persuade us.

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We hope you find this study of Ecclesiastes a challenging and stretching experience of journeying more deeply into the Word of God. Thank you for joining us.

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1 A Little Folly Goes a Long, Long Way

Pray Psalm 38.9.

Lord, all my desire *is* before You;
And my sighing is not hidden from You.

Read Ecclesiastes 10.1-3.

Prepare.

1. Summarize Solomon's main point about folly.
2. Which way does the wise person's heart incline? What does that mean?

Meditate.

We recall Solomon's attempt to inject a little folly into his quest for wisdom (Eccl. 2). Well, OK, a lot of folly. It marked the temporary end of his wisdom, the beginning of his wandering, and the ruin of his kingdom. He learned his lesson the hard way; and he wanted, if it were possible, to protect Rehoboam from making the same mistake.

The fool thinks he can have just a little folly in his life and still get by. But folly, like dead flies, is repulsive, no matter how much you try to dress it up (v. 1). It will ruin all that is beautiful, incline our hearts increasingly in wrong directions (v. 2: "left" is equated with evil in many cultures; the Latin word for left is *sinister*), and betray us for what we really are to everyone who sees us (3).

The best course, therefore, is not to see how much folly we can get away with, but how much we can get rid of.

We don't know if all these proverbs were original with Solomon. Perhaps some of them were well-known bits of wisdom and common sense in circulation during those days. The effect of piling them up here together is to intensify the lesson. Our age offers its own share of proverbs and sayings which can be used in an effort to lead people to evaluate their chosen course in life: "play with fire and you'll get burned"; "look twice before you cross"; "a penny saved is a penny earned"; and more. We use these to remind one another of things we might, in unguarded moments, fail to remember.

Solomon hoped this barrage of proverbs would create an avenue for truth and wisdom into the heart of his son. Proverbs can do this powerfully still, which is why the "wisdom literature" of the Old Testament includes so many of them.

Reflect.

1. Why are proverbs an effective way of reminding people of important basic truths?
2. Why should the Christian be especially vigilant against harboring any folly in his heart?
3. What is a wise man's heart "at his right hand"? How would you counsel a new believer to seek such a heart?

Flies falling into perfume, and drowning, make the appearance and use of that pleasant oil unseemly; so, too, it is

improper to have both wisdom and foolishness together in one's mind. Gregory Thaumaturgus (fl. 248-264),
Paraphrase of Ecclesiastes 10.1

Cleanse me of all folly, Lord, and help me to have my heart in the "right" place today as I...

Pray Psalm 38.5-8.

As you pray, let the Spirit search your soul for any "dead flies" or "left-leaning" ways. Confess, repent, and seek the renewing grace of the Lord.

Sing Psalm 38.5-8.

Psalm 38.5-8 (*Leoni: The God of Abraham Praise*)

My sinful wounds grow foul, and fester painfully;

I bend and groan within my soul most mournfully!

Sin fills my every part;

conviction stings my breast.

Lord, ease my numbed and burning heart and grant me rest!

2 Folly in High Places

Pray Psalm 38.15.

For in You, O LORD, I hope;
You will hear, O LORD my God.

Read Ecclesiastes 10.4-7.

Prepare.

1. Why does Solomon mention rulers in these verses? In what sense are we all rulers?
2. Are rulers immune from folly?

Meditate.

I think the point of this bit of wisdom is fairly simple: being a ruler doesn't protect one from being a fool – whether you rule a nation or just your own sphere of influence.

Witness Solomon.

The ruler who blows up and plots revenge against those who oppose him, or the one who plays the fool from his throne – both are “evils” that ought not be. However, “under the sun”, they are all too common. As ridiculous as it is to consider a king walking while his servant rides the horse, it is just as ridiculous to believe that a fool on the throne is anything other than a fool. If Rehoboam is thinking that being king will protect him from being “found out” for his folly, he should think again.

In a secular age, when faith in God seems to be on the decline, folly and fools are cropping up everywhere (cf. Ps. 12), even in places of high authority. But since folly, like a spiritual virus, is infecting more and more people, it's becoming difficult to discern the idiocy and evil that everywhere are on the rise. Insipidity, violence, and licentiousness pervade pop culture; corruption and self-aggrandizement stalk the halls of legislatures and sit in the seats of corporate executives; babies are slain – and their body parts sold, we now know – by the millions in the name of “pro-choice” anti-ethics. And many churches are ruled by those who lack passionate intensity for the Law of God.

Rehoboam was blinded *by* his folly and *to* his folly; the same can be said of many in our own generation. We must not add to the folly of our day by ruling like fools in our own sphere. And, as Solomon persevered with his son, so must we with the lost and blind people of our day, including those who rule over us, insisting that people seek the goodness of the Lord, and turn away from folly.

Reflect.

1. How is it evident that our rulers are following an agenda which is more “under the sun” than “under heaven” in its orientation?
2. Can nothing be done about this? Should Christians seek to help governments and churches fulfill their callings as servant of God for good (Rom. 13.1-4; Matt. 5.13-16)? Explain.
3. Christians are called to be light, salt, and leaven of the Kingdom of God – righteousness, peace,

and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14.17, 18). What can we expect if we do not bring our influence to bear on the work of civil government?

Things are simply not always what we think they ought to be (9:11); but God is still in control, and He works His good purposes through events we do not understand. Earl Radmacher (1937-2014), *NKJV Study Notes on Ecclesiastes 10.6*

Lord, You have appointed me as a ruler in my own Personal Mission Field. Help me to seek Your Kingdom for good, so that...

Pray Psalm 38.1-4.

Just as a nation is weakened and threatened by corruption among its leaders, so are we, when we allow sin to take root in our lives. Use these verses to let the Lord search you for any hidden sins. Confess and repent.

Sing Psalm 38.1-4.

Psalm 38.1-4 (*Leoni: The God of Abraham Praise*)

O Lord, rebuke me not, nor chasten me in wrath!
Your arrows pierce my sinful heart and fill my path.
Your heavy hand weighs down;
my flesh and bones grow weak.
My sins oppress, confuse, confound – I cannot speak!

3 Folly Can Bite

Pray Psalm 38.1, 2.

O LORD, do not rebuke me in Your wrath,
Nor chasten me in Your hot displeasure!
For Your arrows pierce me deeply,
And Your hand presses me down.

Read Ecclesiastes 10.8, 9.

Prepare.

1. What is implied by “digging a pit” and “breaking through a wall”?
2. Is Solomon trying to discourage us from work?

Meditate.

How many times have we seen it? Someone sets out to do a foolish, sinful thing at someone else’s expense, and it comes back to bite him big time. You lay a trap hoping to snare someone, and you fall into it yourself. You trespass someone’s person or confidence, and it ends up costing you (v. 8). And even honest work (v. 9) holds hazards we can’t always avoid.

The folly of men – the sin that plagues us all – affects even the world we live in day by day (Rom. 8.20-22). Damage is done to the systems by which human beings make their way in life. Danger lurks even in the workplace. Folly is woven into the warp and woof of life “under the sun”.

We don’t have to look far to see the evidence of sin’s entrenched presence in the systems of our own culture and society. It’s not hard to find examples of people taking advantage of other people by using a good system and corrupting it with sinful intent. Innocent people are killed by drunk drivers every day, and guilty criminals get off easy because of sinful notions of justice and human perfectibility.

It is inevitable, in a fallen world, that the good gifts God distributes among men will be hijacked by the father of lies and made to serve his sinister purposes. Not even the just and righteous can escape the effects of sin and folly unscathed, as we see in the example of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Since the folly that accompanies sin is present in everything “under the sun”, we are best advised to minimize it in our own lives, and to seek a firmer foundation on which to build our hope.

Reflect.

1. How can you see that sin and folly affect all the systems of human life – our culture, institutions, relationships, roles, and responsibilities?
2. The power of the Gospel overcomes sin and its effects. How have you seen that in your own life?
3. Paul instructs us to work out our salvation in fear and trembling (Phil. 2.12). How does this mandate address the sin that remains in us and in the world? How would you counsel a new believer to fulfill Paul’s instruction?

Pithy aphorisms are common in the East. The sense is: Violations of true wisdom recoil on the perpetrators. Robert Jamieson (1802-1880), Andrew Fausset (1821-1910), and David Brown (1803-1897), *Commentary on Ecclesiastes 8*

Lord, help me to repent of any sin in my life, and to follow the path of wisdom, so that I...

Pray Psalm 38.17-22.

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. Let the Lord search your soul – all your thoughts, desires, and values. Confess any sins He brings to light, and repent of them by charting a new course for yourself. Don't let the lingering effects of sin and folly ruin your life!

Sing Psalm 38.17-22.

Psalm 38.17-22 (*Leoni: The God of Abraham Praise*)

My sins I now confess; my anxious soul relieve!
Though foes are strong, Lord, heal and bless all who believe!
Forsake me not, O Lord!
Repay my foes with wrath.
Stand by me with Your saving Word and guard my path!

4 Wisdom for Work and Words

Pray Psalm 38.21, 22.

Do not forsake me, O LORD;
O my God, be not far from me!
Make haste to help me,
O LORD, my salvation!

Read Ecclesiastes 10.10, 11.

Prepare.

1. What wisdom does Solomon recommend for our work?
2. How does he want us to think about the use of our tongue?

Meditate.

In the everyday areas of life, it only makes sense to use a little wisdom. Even Rehoboam would acknowledge that; yet, as time would tell, he didn't practice it.

A sharp axe gets more work done than a dull one. For better success in chopping, wise up and sharpen the axe! There is wisdom in preparing well for the work God gives us to do. Wisdom brings success.

But folly is unpredictable. You never know when it might bite you, like the unpredictable snake in a charmer's basket. You think you've got this situation in hand, then BANG, it blows up in your face. And suddenly, you're saying things maybe you'll regret.

But wisdom never fails. If it makes sense to be wise in the small things of life – and thus to avoid predictable and unpredictable outcomes – doesn't it make sense to pursue wisdom for *all* of life? Rehoboam would learn the hard way how the "snake" of folly can suddenly turn on the one who thinks himself its master. No one can master folly. Its stench will out (v. 1); its tendencies are inevitable (v. 2); and everybody can see it, even though they might hold their peace in the presence of its ravings (vv. 3, 4).

Solomon's ability to appeal to common sense and everyday realities is seemingly unlimited. Certainly, he has thought long and hard about the value of wisdom. He sees it everywhere, as indeed, wisdom can everywhere be found (cf. Prov. 8.1-3).

But you have to look for wisdom, study it, pursue and embrace it, and not try to balance wisdom with a little bit of folly. They just don't mix, and it's always wisdom that gets spoiled.

The folly of an unbelieving age has made many inroads into the Church in our day. Believers would be helped by paying a little more attention to the ways God speaks into the ordinary situations of life. Jesus was the Master of such careful observation.

Reflect.

1. Wisdom is the skill to live "under heaven" in every aspect of our lives. Where can we acquire such wisdom?

2. What can we do to bring more of God's wisdom into the everyday situations of our lives?
3. What would you suggest is the wisest way to keep our tongue under control, so that we only use it for edification (Eph. 4.29)?

*The snake is powerful, when it spreads its poison secretly. In the one who is tricked, an impression is created that he has received something good which in reality is not good. The teacher who charms should not do so in a superfluous way but in a way that accomplishes something. Then he shows his [student] the error, the guile of his seducer. Didymus the Blind (313-398), *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* 304.20*

Help me to be alert, Lord, as every situation requires wisdom, so that I...

Pray Psalm 38.9-16.

Look to the day ahead. Where will you be tempted or tried? Where does the serpent lie in wait to bite? Seek the wisdom of God *now* for help in keeping your foot from slipping.

Sing Psalm 38.9-16.

Psalm 38.9-16 (*Leoni: The God of Abraham Praise*)

You know all my desire, my sighs You know full well.
My strength fails and light's holy fire my eyes dispel.
My friends and loved ones fail;
The wicked do me wrong.
My life they seek, my soul assail the whole day long.

Their threats I will not heed, nor speak to their reproof;
To hear or speak I have no need – I claim Your truth!
Lord, hear my fervent prayer!
Let not my foes rejoice;
Redeem me from their traps and snares – Lord, hear my voice!

5 Words of the Wise and Foolish

Pray Psalm 38.9.

LORD, all my desire *is* before You;
And my sighing is not hidden from You.

Read Ecclesiastes 10.12-14.

Prepare.

1. How many different ways does a fool show himself to be one by his words?
2. How are the wise person's words described? What does this mean?

Meditate.

Perhaps particularly in the words of his mouth, the fool betrays his true character. Fools don't tend to think before they speak; or, if they do, their words betray the corruption of their hearts. The more they talk like fools, the more they act like them. Folly is a cancer that fills the soul and spreads to every area of life. It has to be cut out and controlled, or it will destroy a person.

The wise person, on the other hand, finds favor with his words, because they enlighten and edify those with whom he speaks. As king, Rehoboam could expect to use a lot of words. Would they leave his servants mocking or admiring him? His people submitting or rebelling?

Sadly, Solomon seemed to know the answer, and it troubled him.

In our unbelieving, secular age, words proliferate. We all can feel like Liza Doolittle sometimes: "Words, words, words! I'm so sick of words!" Politicians, preachers, promoters, professors, pundits, and policy-makers at every level proliferate words, as though words alone make a difference in reality. So many of those words are based on equivocation and deceit, that people are left not knowing what to believe or why (v. 14).

This is why it is so important for believers to choose their words carefully and use them for God's glory (Eph. 4.15, 29). The light of wisdom in a dark age of folly and lies can go a long way in helping people know the stability and reliability of truth.

Reflect.

1. Why are words so important for those who live "under heaven"?
2. How can we know when we're using our words more like fools than wise people?
3. How are the wise person's words like those of Christ (cf. Ps. 45.1, 2)?

It is the inability of the fool to choose his words carefully that will bring about his own destruction. Earl Radmacher (1937-2014), *NKJV Study Notes on Ecclesiastes 10.12, 13*

Help me to guard my words today, Lord, so that I use them only to...

Pray Psalm 38.9-16.

As you think about the day ahead, consider the situations in which you will use your words. Pray now

that God will make your words gracious, that you'll know what to say, and when to say nothing at all, and that you'll respond to any who offend you by *their* words with the grace of a wise person.

Sing Psalm 38.9-16.

Psalm 38.9-16 (*Leoni: The God of Abraham Praise*)

You know all my desire, my sighs You know full well.
My strength fails and light's holy fire my eyes dispel.
My friends and loved ones fail;
The wicked do me wrong.
My life they seek, my soul assail the whole day long.

Their threats I will not heed, nor speak to their reproof;
To hear or speak I have no need – I claim Your truth!
Lord, hear my fervent prayer!
Let not my foes rejoice;
Redeem me from their traps and snares – Lord, hear my voice!

6 Folly is Exhausting – for Men and Nations

Pray Psalm 38.1-3.

O LORD, do not rebuke me in Your wrath,
Nor chasten me in Your hot displeasure!
For Your arrows pierce me deeply,
And Your hand presses me down.
There is no soundness in my flesh
Because of Your anger,
Nor *any* health in my bones
Because of my sin.

Read Ecclesiastes 10.15-17.

Prepare.

1. For whom does work seem a wearisome thing? Why?
2. Which rulers are to be preferred, and why?

Meditate.

It would be pretty hard for Rehoboam to miss the point of these words. The life of folly is exhausting – physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Folly obscures the straight path to the Lord's city, littering it with attractive but vain distractions. Solomon himself is testimony to this. But there is more than just one foolish kid at stake here; the nation must be served.

Fools in office think of themselves first and the people they serve last. Rehoboam will weary and ruin the nation if he persists in his folly. As it turned out, that would actually be the case, but only because Solomon himself had incurred the wrath of God for his own folly. We can imagine that these are words as much an indictment of Solomon himself, and a confession of his sin, as an admonition to his son.

We never sin alone. Our foolishness and rebellion impact others, and the more people there are in our sphere of influence, the more people there are to hurt with our sin. Love of neighbor requires that we eradicate folly and sin from our lives as much as possible. Wisdom – following in the footsteps of Jesus – is the way to bring blessing to others. Folly and sin may bring momentary gratification, but they can come back to bite us, and they always leave a bruise on someone else.

In our day, the Church is not wise to be following a policy of downplaying sin. Church leaders seem to think they can promote the Gospel of Christ without confronting the folly of their members – don't want to offend anyone, you know. But this "tolerance" only promotes more sin, more damage, and more of the wrath of God that Solomon brought on his own nation.

Reflect.

1. What's so wearisome about living "under the sun"?
2. How can you know whether a ruler – civil or ecclesiastical – is a wise person or a fool?
3. How should the advice of verses 16 and 17 guide us in thinking about our Personal Mission Field?

The princes of the devil's city "eat in the morning," that is, before the proper time—in the sense that, being overeager to attain perfect happiness at once in the society of this present world, they are unwilling to await the only true happiness which will come in due time in the world to come. But the princes of the city of Christ await in patience the time of a blessedness which is sure to be theirs. The conclusion, "in strength and not in confusion," means that their hope will not cheat them. Augustine (354-430), City of God 17.20

Keep me from sin, Lord, and set my heart to serve others today as I...

Pray Psalm 38.5-12.

The devil is laying snares for you even now. Make sure your desires are focused on the Lord. Let the thought of sinning against the Lord so trouble you, that you will resist the devil however he approaches you today.

Sing Psalm 38.5-12.

Psalm 38.5-12 (*Leoni: The God of Abraham Praise*)

My sinful wounds grow foul, and fester painfully;
I bend and groan within my soul most mournfully!
Sin fills my every part;
Conviction stings my breast.
Lord, ease my numbed and burning heart and grant me rest!

You know all my desire, my sighs You know full well.
My strength fails and light's holy fire my eyes dispel.
My friends and loved ones fail;
The wicked do me wrong.
My life they seek, my soul assail the whole day long.

7 The Neglect of Wisdom

Pray Psalm 38.22.

Make haste to help me,
O Lord, my salvation!

Read Ecclesiastes 10.18-20.

Review Ecclesiastes 10.

Prepare.

1. How is being wise like maintaining a house?
2. Why should we not speak ill of others?

Meditate.

Being wise is full-time work. Neglect wisdom and you will pay (v. 18). Yes, there is a time for laughter and gladness, and even money is not inherently evil (v. 19). But it won't solve all our problems (Solomon is being ironic here), and it can't be looked to as the source of happiness.

It's more important to get wisdom than to get bread, wine, or money. In the end you'll know more joy, peace, and prosperity by "keeping the roof in repair" than by filling your life with good times. This makes being wise and working at wisdom full-time work. No flies in the ointment, ever.

And if Rehoboam thought about mocking his dad to his friends, he needed to remember that he will be king one day, and the scornful words of those who oppose him will find their way back to him, one way or another (v. 20). Then what will the fool do?

Jesus Christ is the Wisdom of God (Col. 2.3), and He never rests from applying His wisdom to the task of upholding the world and all things in it (Heb. 1.3). There is no such thing as a "spiritual vacuum" in life (Eph. 5.15-17). Wherever we are not keeping up the wisdom of God, the rot of folly will find a foothold.

Jesus is our example – steadfast and faithful in exerting His power, love, and wisdom on the entirety of creation.

We must not become distracted by the things that merely gratify, satiate, and entertain us, so that we neglect the larger and more important duty of keeping up the wisdom of God. The King of Heaven knows the folly we think we can get away with in secret. He loves us too much to sit by and let us destroy our lives with sin.

Reflect.

1. What do we mean by saying that wisdom is "full-time work"?
2. In what sense are "laziness" and "idleness" antithetical to wisdom?
3. Why should we guard our hearts and mouths against saying wicked things about others, even though we're alone and only speaking to ourselves?

Our house, which was built to human stature, along with the habitation we shall have in heaven, will collapse if we are

lazy and hesitant to do good works. And every floor that depends upon a rafter for support will crush its inhabitant when it falls to the ground. It is when the assistance of our hands and our strength is lacking that all the storm clouds and violent winds from above burst forth upon us. Jerome (347-420), Commentary on Ecclesiastes 10.18

Help me to work hard at being wise, Lord, especially today as I...

Pray Psalm 38.1-22.

Repent of any sins, renew your hope in the Lord, and seek Him for the wisdom you will need for this day.

Sing Psalm 38.1-22.

Psalm 38.1-22 (*Leoni: The God of Abraham Praise*)

O Lord, rebuke me not, nor chasten me in wrath!
Your arrows pierce my sinful heart and fill my path.
Your heavy hand weighs down;
My flesh and bones grow weak.
My sins oppress, confuse, confound – I cannot speak!

My sinful wounds grow foul, and fester painfully;
I bend and groan within my soul most mournfully!
Sin fills my every part;
Conviction stings my breast.
Lord, ease my numbed and burning heart and grant me rest!

You know all my desire, my sighs You know full well.
My strength fails and light's holy fire my eyes dispel.
My friends and loved ones fail;
The wicked do me wrong.
My life they seek, my soul assail the whole day long.

Their threats I will not heed, nor speak to their reproof;
To hear or speak I have no need – I claim Your truth!
Lord, hear my fervent prayer!
Let not my foes rejoice;
Redeem me from their traps and snares – Lord, hear my voice!

My sins I now confess; my anxious soul relieve!
Though foes are strong, Lord, heal and bless all who believe!
Forsake me not, O Lord!
Repay my foes with wrath.
Stand by me with Your saving Word and guard my path!

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Why must we resist every temptation to indulge in sin and folly?
2. Sin and folly will “catch up to us” at some point. Explain.
3. How does the wise man improve his time at work?
4. How do a fool's words betray him?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned from Ecclesiastes 10? How are you putting that lesson to work in your life?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.