

# ***Ecclesiastes***

## **Chapter 10**

Dead flies make the perfumer's ointment give off a stench; so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor. 2 A wise man's heart inclines him to the right, but a fool's heart to the left. 3 Even when the fool walks on the road, he lacks sense, and he says to everyone that he is a fool. 4 If the anger of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your place, for calmness will lay great offenses to rest. 5 There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, as it were an error proceeding from the ruler: 6 folly is set in many high places, and the rich sit in a low place. 7 I have seen slaves on horses, and princes walking on the ground like slaves. 8 He who digs a pit will fall into it, and a serpent will bite him who breaks through a wall. 9 He who quarries stones is hurt by them, and he who splits logs is endangered by them. 10 If the iron is blunt, and one does not sharpen the edge, he must use more strength, but wisdom helps one to succeed. 11 If the serpent bites before it is charmed, there is no advantage to the charmer. 12 The words of a wise man's mouth win him favor, but the lips of a fool consume him. 13 The beginning of the words of his mouth is foolishness, and the end of his talk is evil madness. 14 A fool multiplies words, though no man knows what is to be, and who can tell him what will be after him? 15 The toil of a fool wearies him, for he does not know the way to the city. 16 Woe to you, O land, when your king is a child, and your princes feast in the morning! 17 Happy are you, O land, when your king is the son of the nobility, and your princes feast at the proper time, for strength, and not for drunkenness! 18 Through sloth the roof sinks in, and through indolence the house leaks. 19 Bread is made for laughter, and wine gladdens life, and money answers everything. 20 Even in your thoughts, do not curse the king, nor in your bedroom curse the rich, for a bird of the air will carry your voice, or some winged creature tell the matter.

Ecclesiastes 10 is like a slice from the book of Proverbs. The Teacher-king raps out one short proverb or wise-saying after another. Often there is little or transition as Solomon jumps from one thought to the next. Yet there is a consistent theme running through the chapter: wisdom is better than folly. Solomon backs this theme with many examples from life. He offers us wisdom to apply to our lives – godly wisdom for life under the sun. (PBS)

**10:1** *dead flies* – This is literally “flies of death.” The expression might mean flies that are dead or flies that are deadly, poisonous. In either case, when these flies get stuck in oily perfume, they give it a bad odor. The Hebrew word for fly is worth an interesting little digression. The word is *zebug* (you can almost hear the buzzing). Combining it with the word *baal* or *beel* (meaning lord, master), we have *Beelzebub*, the lord of the flies who brings disease and death. This is one of the names we have come to apply to Satan, “the prince of demons” (Matthew 12:24). The devil is the lord of the filthy, disease-bringing kingdom of evil demons. (PBC)

Dead flies would make sacred oil unfit for temple use. Cf 9:18. (TLSB)

*a little folly outweighs.* 2Ki 20:12–19 presents a striking example. (CSB)

Just as one little fly can make a whole bottle of perfume stink, “so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor.” It takes only one foolish little mistake or one thoughtless slip of the tongue from someone to bring about a great deal of pain to many people. (PBC)

The higher a man's standing and reputation, the more injurious to himself and others is the exhibition of folly. A little foolishness may overshadow great wisdom. (CB)

**10:2** *to the right ... to the left*. These can stand for the greater and the lesser good (cf. Ge 48:13–20); or perhaps here, as in some later Jewish writings, for good and evil. (CSB)

Terms of good versus evil, honesty versus deception and lying. (Lat “sinister” means “left.”) The right-hand side is also a position of honor, prestige, or power for a ruler. Evil goes along with folly and arises out of the heart. (TLSB)

Right frequently symbolizes good and left bad, as when Jesus says He “will put the sheep on His right and the goats on His left” on Judgment Day (Matthew 25:33). Solomon is comparing godly wisdom with the lack thereof. The wise man trusts in God. The fool, on the other hand, disregards God and His Word. In the end such a person will end up on the left. He will be damned. (PBC)

**10:3** *walks on the road* – Solomon pictures the fool walking “along the road.” This refers to when he is out in public in contrast to being at home. Deuteronomy 6:7 puts the two side by side; there we are told to be attentive to God's commandments no matter where we are. “Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road.” The fool, however, ignores God's Word both in public and private. (PBC)

Even in simple things, it is possible for one to be foolish. (TLSB)

Solomon is not necessarily depicting some kind of clown when he says the fool “shows everyone how stupid he is.” The fool may be clever and disguise his talk with a cloak of pseudo-wisdom. And there may just be enough people out there who are themselves fools, and who look upon his stupidity as the highest wisdom! (PBC)

**10:4** *do not leave your place* – Don't flee or quit, which would imply guilt. Cf 1Pt 2:13–25. (TLSB)

**10:5** *error ... from a ruler*. For the Teacher's observations on human regimes see vv. 4, 6–7, 16–17, 20; 3:16; 4:1–3, 13–16; 5:8–9; 8:2–6, 10–11; 9:17. (CSB)

Solomon urges us not to give in the unjust anger of others, even if they are people in authority. If you know what you have done is right and in keeping with God's word, stick to it. Maybe your boss is angry with you because you were honest or didn't take advantage of some customer. Don't go along with. And don't become angry and quit. Be calm. The “ruler may even come to his senses and thank you for it in the end. Think of how the Prophet Nathan calmly reproved King David for his sins of adultery and murder (2 Samuel 12:1-13). Had Nathan not spoken so boldly to the king, David might never have repented of his sins. (PBC)

The error consists in exalting the mean and unworthy to office, a common evil in the despotic governments of the East. (CB)

**10:6-7** *folly...in many high places* – The fact is, Solomon continues, rulers can be as foolish and in need of correction as anyone. Fools are “in many high positions” while “the rich occupy the low ones.” In this context “rich” must mean someone who is rich in wisdom and knowledge. Similarly “slaves in horseback, while princes go on foot” is a way of saying things are mixed up. They aren't what they should be. (PBC)

Being rich and being wise are often paired and should further result in positions of honor, prestige, and responsibility. The author is offended about a reversal of fortune. (TLSB)

This upside-down world produces many an “error.” On the spur of the moment King Herod makes a half-drunken promise to a dancing girl (Mark 16:14-29). This error results in the beheading of John the Baptist, whom Jesus had honored as the greatest individual of the entire OT era (Matthew 11:11). (PBC)

Luther comments, “So it is that the fool is in charge everywhere, prevailing in the senate, in the court of rulers, etc. The world is foolish, and it is ruled by fools and by foolish opinions.” (PBC)

It is good for us to keep these truths in mind. They prevent us from being overawed by the words of the high and mighty. They also lead us to the Scripture, the only source of real wisdom. (PBC)

The elevation of unworthy men to offices of power and trust is a heavy calamity to the people. Whether it proceeds from their rulers, or as in the case of free government, from themselves, the result will be corruption, misrule and misery. (CB)

**10:7** Horses were used by those with power and authority (esp for war). Here, people who would make better princes and leaders are often the ones oppressed by those less capable, less honorable, or less noble. Such false princes often obtain their position in ways deserving punishment. (TLSB)

**10:8–10** Dangerous activities that demand wisdom in order to avoid injury or death. (TLSB)

**10:8** *digs a pit* – This shows that evil intentions can recoil on those who are out to harm others. Psalm 57:6 also uses the imagery of digging a pit to trap someone. “They dug a pit in my path – but they have fallen into it themselves.” (PBC)

*serpent will bite him* – This refers to a person trying to break into some else’s field or house. The land of Israel has always been very stoney. Farmers still use the stones from their fields to build dividing walls or hillside terraces. In breaking through such loosely constructed walls, a person might disturb a snake from some crevice. Solomon’s point – in seeking to harm others many people end up harming only themselves. (PBC)

Walls often had hollow spaces, a good habitat for snakes. (TLSB)

**10:9** *quarries stones* – The work of quarrying stones was a big business in Solomon’s day. When he built the temple “Solomon had seventy thousand carriers and eighty thousand stone cutters in the hills, as well as thirty-three hundred foremen who supervised the project and directed the workmen. At the king’s command they removed from the quarry large blocks of quality stone” (1 Kings 5:15-17). No doubt it could be dangerous work removing those large blocks. (PBC)

*splits logs* – “The craftsmen of Solomon ... cut and prepared the timber and stone for the building of the temple” (1 Kings 5:18). The Bible mentions one of the dangers connected with such work. “A man may go into the forest with his neighbor to cut wood, and as he swings his ax to fell a tree, the head may fly and hit his neighbor and kill him” (Deuteronomy 19:5). (PBC)

Solomon is saying that there is danger in honest labor as well as in dishonest work. Consequently, we should pray for God's guidance and help and see to it that our work is God-pleasing. (PBC)

**10:10** *if iron is blunt* – If the ax is dull, the workman needs more strength than if he's working with a sharp ax. In a way, we are all dulled, imperfect axes because of sin. When God uses our services He needs both strength and skill to carry out the work. Parents, too, need skills to sharpen their children for useful lives in God's kingdom. (PBC)

Wisdom is compared to the sharpened ax, which will work better with less effort. The wise person will use wisdom to diminish the danger of hazardous occupations, as well as the overall hazards of life. (TLSB)

**10:11** *snake bites before it is charmed* – This verse has a double meaning. Of course, a snake charmer is going to lose business if his snake bites someone before it rises for the charmer. Interesting, the word translated "charmer" literally mean "a master of the tongue." Understood in this way, Solomon is also saying "Watch that tongue of yours. Don't speak before you think." David expressed a similar thought. "Rescue me, O Lord from evil men; ... they make their tongues as sharp as a serpent's; the poison of vipers is on their lips" (Psalm 140:1,3). We should learn to charm our tongues before they bite. James says it very strongly. "If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless" (James 1:26). (PBC)

Inattentive snake charmers who allow themselves to be bitten are seen as foolish. They receive no sympathy and surely no money for their performance. (TLSB)

**10:12** *Words*. A favorite topic in wisdom literature (see, e.g., Pr 15). (CSB)

The Bible frequently stresses that words (along with actions and thoughts) are important. It is through human words that the almighty God has revealed Himself to us. We, in turn, are to be careful with our speech. Earlier Solomon showed that what we say to God is not to be taken lightly. "Do not be quick with your mouth ... to utter anything before God" (5:2). Now he emphasizes that we should also be concerned about our speech to others. Our words and the manner in which we say them are important. What does it mean to have "gracious" words? It means to answer others "with gentleness and respect" (1 Peter 3:16), to keep "filthy language from your lips" (Colossians 3:8) and "to speak the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15). (PBC)

Primary means of sharing wisdom with others. Words also make it clear when someone is foolish. (TLSB)

**10:13** *foolishness...madness* – Perhaps he starts with a "little white lie," then turns to lengthy cover-ups. Peter's denial of Christ is a classic example of this (Matthew 26:69-75) (PBC)

Folly, rooted in rejection of God's wisdom, is not neutral, but shows itself to be evil. (TLSB)

**10:14** *fool multiplies words* – "When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise" (Proverbs 10:19) (PBC)

It is often the case that the less men have to say that will benefit themselves or others, the more they abound in words. "A wise head makes a short tongue," is the true Arabic proverb. (CB)

**10:15** *does not know the way to city.* Since in Scripture a fool is one who refuses God’s teaching, this caustic saying (probably proverbial) refers to more than mere stupidity. (CSB)

The fool finds even the most obvious and well-known things difficult and therefore tiring (e.g., following well-marked and well-known roads). (TLSB)

The fool makes his plans, talk on and on, and endlessly carries on his labors, even to the point of exhaustion. He may have very definite ambitions and plans. In reality all his work is meaningless, because his endeavors are without God. So the fool aimlessly wanders through life. (PBC)

As much as to say, when he undertakes the simplest enterprise, he know not how and where to find the means of success. (CB)

**10:16** *your king is a child.* A small-minded upstart, not a “poor but wise youth” as in 4:13. See 2Ki 15:8–25; Hos 7:3–7, which portray some of the short-lived usurpers and vicious courtiers who hastened the downfall of Israel. (CSB)

A child ruler or a ruler acting childish. Such rulers seek to satisfy their own needs before attending to the needs of the people. This is not the “poor and wise youth” of 4:13. (TLSB)

What a tragedy when foolish people come to power and rule an entire nation! The word for “servant” here literally means “child.” Regardless of his numerical age, he is immature and more interested in enjoying life and the privileges of power than in guiding the people and seeking their welfare. Little did King Solomon know that after his death his own son Rehoboam would “reject the advice the elders gave him and consult the young men who had grown up with him” (1 Kings 12:8). So Solomon’s words proved prophetic, although he did not mean them that way. (PBC)

The primary qualification for ruling others is the ability to rule ourselves. They who destroy themselves by self-indulgence, will destroy also the people committed to their care. (CB)

*feast in the morning* – In Israel, the proper time for feasting was later in the day, to sustain one’s strength for labor. Such feasting did not include alcoholic beverages. (TLSB)

**10:17** *king is the son of the nobility* – Solomon’s point is not that the leader must come from high society or the nobility, but with his own noble traits. (PBC)

Suggests a wise person capable of governing with sensible moderation and attention to the needs of all. (TLSB)

*feast at the proper time* – He and his advisors are effective and good at what we might call time-management. They work during the day. When they break for eating, they dine “for strength and not for drunkenness.” These words remind us of a passage from Proverbs: “It is not for kings ... to drink wine, not for rulers to crave beer, lest they drink and forget what the law decrees and deprive all the oppressed of their rights” (Proverbs 31:4,5) (PBC)

As is his custom, Solomon immediately contrasts the good with the bad. The opposite of a good, industrious leaders is a lazy man. If the lazy person is a homeowner he lets the roof sag and leak. If the lazy man is a leader in the government or the church, things soon start to slow down and become sluggish. When leadership is sluggish, corruption and immorality can begin to creep into an organization. (PBC)

**10:19** *bread...laughter...wine gladdens life* – There is a time for feasting, laughter, wine and merriment. The wise person will know when that time is and not let it interfere with his duties in life. Rather than overindulging in these pleasures, he will recognize them as God’s gifts for needed times of recreation and relaxation. (PBC)

What sustains life is meant to be enjoyed. A caution against excess should not cause a person to forsake any and all pleasures of life (cf 9:7). (TLSB)

*money answers everything.* Can be read at various levels—as a wry comment on human values, as sober advice to earn a good living rather than have a good time (see the first two lines) or as stating the great versatility of money (cf. Lk 16:9). (CSB)

The Preacher has already indicated that money is not the final solution for all things (5:10–14). Yet, money can provide relief from certain problems (e.g., protection in 7:12). (TLSB)

In earlier chapters the Teacher had stressed that money is not the answer. In an of themselves, riches are meaningless (5:8-6:12). How sad, then, when people – especially people of influence – can’t see beyond their own greed. (PBC)

**10:20** *do not curse the king* – We should take his words and actions in the kindest possible way and not belittle him or speak evil of him. This proper attitude begins in our hearts, with our thoughts. If our hearts are full of bitterness and resentment, sooner or later it will out in an ill-advised utterance. “For out of the overflow of the heart,” says Jesus, “the mouth speaks” (Matthew 12:34). (PBC)

*bird of the air will carry your voice* – Vain is the hope of escaping punishment by the secrecy of our evil deeds. God is able, in numberless unforeseen ways to bring them to light here, and He will expose them all hereafter in the presence of men and angels. (CB)

Common proverb in many cultures. Be careful; others are listening. (TLSB)

**9:11–10:20** The twists and turns of life often tempt one to be foolish, because wisdom does not always quickly gain respect or results. Still, it is better, and possible, to follow the course of God’s wisdom. No matter how much foolishness may control every level of our society and life, we are to avoid it. Because God encourages us to wisdom, we may expect something more in the outcome of our life than just death. He promises life everlasting in Christ, our Wisdom. • Lord, as we ask for Your wisdom to carry us through life, teach us also to be patient with foolish people. Keep us mindful of the outcome You have prepared for us in Your Son’s death and resurrection. Amen. (TLSB)