

## Ecclesiastes Chapter Ten

Wisdom and Folly (vv. 1-4)

**VERSE 1** Dead flies make a perfumer's oil stink, so a little foolishness is weightier

than wisdom *and* honor (יְבִיאִשׁ יְבִיעַ שֶׁמֶן רוֹקַח יָקָר מִחֲכָמָה מִכְבוֹד סְכִלּוּת מְעַט)

זְבוּבֵי מוֹת [noun m.p.constr. zebub flies + noun m.s.abs. maweth dead + Hiphil impf.3m.s. bash ash stink + Hiphil impf.3m.s. naba pour; “make” + noun m.s.abs. shamen fat; “oil” + Qal part.m.s.abs. raqach mix; “perfumers” + prep min w/noun f.s.abs. chakamah wisdom + prep min w/noun m.s.abs. kabod glory; “weightier” + noun f.s.abs. sikluth folly + adj.m.s.abs. me-at little]).

**VERSE 2** A wise man's heart *directs* him toward the right, but the foolish man's

heart *directs* him toward the left (לֵב חָכָם לְיַמִּינוֹ וְלֵב כְּסִיל לְשְׂמֹאלוֹ) [noun m.s.abs.

leb heart + adj.m.s.abs. chakam wise + prep lamed w/noun f.s.constr.w/3m.s.suff. yamin right hand + waw w/noun m.s.abs. leb + noun m.s.abs. kesil fool + prep lamed w/noun m.s.constr.w/3m.s.suff. shemol left hand]).

**VERSE 3** Even when the fool walks along the road, his sense is lacking and he

demonstrates to everyone *that* he is a fool (הֵלֵךְ לְבוֹ חָסֵר וְאָמַר לְכָל סָכָל הוּא) [waw w/conj gam “Even” + prep beth w/noun both s.abs.

דֶּרֶךְ [כְּשֶׁסָכַל] וְגַם-בְּדֶרֶךְ (כְּשֶׁחָסֵר) [כְּשֶׁסָכַל]

derek way; “road” + prep kaph w/rel.pro.w/d.a.w/noun m.s.abs. sakal fool + Qal part.m.s.abs. halak walk + noun m.s.constr.w/3m.s.suff. leb heart; “his sense” + adj.m.s.abs. chaser lacking + waw w/Qal perf.3m.s. amar speak; “demonstrates” + prep lamed w/noun m.s.abs. kol all + noun m.s.abs. sakal fool + pro.3m.s. hu he]).

**VERSE 4 If the ruler's temper rises against you, do not abandon your position,****because composure allays great offenses** (אֶל־תִּנַּח כִּי מִרְפָּא יִנִּיחַ חַטָּאִים גְּדוֹלִים)

אֶם־רוּחַ הַמּוֹשֵׁל תִּעֲלֶה עָלֶיךָ מִקּוֹמְךָ [part. im if + noun both s.abs. ruach spirit; “temper”

+ d.a.w/Qal part.m.s.abs. mashal rule; “ruler” + Qal impf.3f.s. alah go up; “rises” + prep al

w/2m.s.suff. “against you” + noun m.s.constr.w/2m.s.suff. maqom place; “position” + neg al not

+ Hiphil impf.2m.s. nuach rest; “abandon” + part ki for + noun m.s.abs. marpe healing;

“composure” + Hiphil impf.3m.s. ruach rest; “allays” + noun m.p.abs. chatta sin; “offenses” +

adj.m.p.abs. gadol great]).

**ANALYSIS: VERSES 1-4**

1. This first proverb is parallel in thought to 9:18 (“Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.”).
2. It takes only a little of something to spoil something good.
3. Flies are small creatures that are attracted to sweet smelling perfume, where they land, and die, and cause an otherwise valuable product to stink rendering it useless.
4. This analogy in the first line serves to illustrate the abstract truth set forth in the second line.
5. It takes only a little bit of something (foolishness) to spoil something worthwhile.
6. A person who is respected for “wisdom and honor” can undermine that by “a little foolishness.”
7. The second proverb is an antithetical proverb and its thrust is that wisdom and folly go in two different directions (v.2).
8. The wise go to the right and the fools to the left.
9. Right and left are to opposite directions in the lift of people.
10. It is like the right and wrong path in approaching the issues of life.
11. The “heart” is the center of one’s volitional makeup.
12. Good choices and bad choices are in view here.
13. Verse 2 describes the different directions that the wise and the fool take.
14. Now in verse 3 the image it advanced evoking the image of the fool walking on a road.
15. While it may be true that the road is an actual road, and not a metaphor for life, the two are connected.
16. The precise behavior of the fool walking down a road is not specified, but the point is that when a person sees the fool all know the fool for what he is.
17. The verse says that the fool “lacks sense” (cf. Prov. 6:32; 7:7).
18. That fact that a full-blown fool cannot conceal is folly, but exposes it every time he opens his mouth and actions is found in Proverbs (12:23; 13:16).
19. Verse 4 is not closely connected with the first three verses of this chapter.
20. Q. here gives advice on how to deal with an irate superior (*mosel* only here an in 9:17).

21. This verse is similar to court wisdom found in Proverbs and other wisdom literature.
22. He advises how to serve a leader or king to blunt the leader's "temper" with gentleness.
23. In this way the wrath of a leader can be turned aside.
24. The second line of verse 4 gives the motive for the first half.
25. The servant of the leader is not to leave because his calm "composure" will pacify the leader.
26. In this particular instance the servant is also advised "not to abandon [his] position," signifying that the one under authority and experiencing extreme displeasure is in the right in this instance.
27. One who is in the right, but under verbal abuse, is to calmly hold his "position" which will (hopefully) commend itself to the one who wields power over an underling.
28. When confronted with a situation such as this, the temptation is to cower or run away defeated.
29. A calm but immovable posture can do a lot to reverse the situation.
30. It is not immediately apparent if "great offenses" referring to the actions of the ruler, or not.
31. Nevertheless, a calm response is able to diffuse the situation.
32. While the term wisdom is not found here it is clear that this is an example of the benefit of wisdom (cf. Prov. 16:14 "The wrath of a king is like messengers of death. But a wise man will appease it.").
33. Again, even though wisdom is superior to folly, it can be overturned if the one under duress acts inappropriately.

#### An Example Story: A World Upside Down (vv. 5-7)

**VERSE 5 There is an evil I have seen under the sun, like an error which goes**

**forth from the ruler** (יש רעה ראיתי תחת השמש כשגגה שיצא מלפני השליט) [*part.*

*yesh there is + adj.f.s.abs. ra-ah evil + Qal perf.1s. ra-ah see + part. tachath under + d.a.w/noun both s.ab. shemesh sun + prep kaph w/noun f.s.abs. shigagah sin "like an error" + rel.pro. asher w/Qal part.f.s.abs. yatsa go forth + prep min w/prep lamed w/noun both p.constr. paneh face + d.a.w/adj.m.s.abs. shallit master] –*

**VERSE 6 folly is set in many exalted places while rich men sit in humble places**

נתן הסכל במרומים רבים ועשירים בשפל ישובו [Niphal perf.3m.s. nathan; “set” + d.a.w/noun m.s.abs. sekel folly + d.a.w/pep beth w/noun m.p.abs. marom height: “exalted places” + adj.m.p.abs. rab many + waw w/adj.m.p.abs. ashir rich man + d.a.w/pep beth w/noun m.s.abs. shepel lowliness; “humble” + Qal impf.3m.p. yashab sit]).

**VERSE 7 I have seen slaves riding on horses and princes walking like slaves on**

the land ראייתי עבדים על-סוסים ושרים הלכים כעבדים על-הארץ [Qal perf.1s. rah see + noun m.p.abs. ebed slave + prep al upon + noun m.p.abs. sus horse + waw w/noun m.p.abs. sar prince + Qal part.m.p.abs. halak walk + d.a.w/pep kaph w/noun m.p.abs. ebed slave + prep al on + d.a.w/noun both s.abs. erets land]).

**ANALYSIS: VERSES 5-7**

1. Verse 4 demonstrates how a calm response could appease the anger of a ruler, and so avoid “great offenses.”
2. Verses 5-7 further demonstrate that folly can destroy that which is good.
3. This story is something the author became aware of in actual practice, and something he characterizes as “an evil [he] had seen under the sun.”
4. This example also deals with a ruler, (this time the noun is *shallit* also at Gen. 42:6 [of Joseph]; Eccl. 7:19; 8:8), and in this instance, as with the preceding, the ruler is at fault (“an error which goes forth from the ruler”).
5. But this time folly triumphs, not wisdom.
6. This “error” (*segagah*) is the term used in Leviticus 4 referencing unintentional sins—that is, sins done in ignorance.
7. A person may commit a sin and not even know it is a sin (cf. Lev. 5:2).
8. In the present example it takes only an inadvertent sin to cause much harm.
9. The misplaced judgment of the ruler allows “folly” to triumph within his domain.
10. Here this folly is characterized as a reversal of the proper order of a society.
11. The “exalted places” refer to important and influential places in a society.
12. Fools who are favorites of the king occupy these positions of power and influence.
13. His cronies are ill-suited to ruling.
14. The “wealthy” represents those who are accomplished, but they are marginalized, due to misplaced favoritism on the part of the ruler.
15. Q. came to learn of this situation which grieved him being a ruler himself.
16. He further highlights this deplorable reversal in verse 7.
17. Again, he begins with “I have witnessed.”

18. He observed “slaves riding on horses, and princes walking like slaves on the land.”
19. The term “princes” refers to those who are advisers to the king, such as city officials, royal officials, and military officials.
20. The mention of “horses” refers to a symbol of status, while “slaves” typically held no status in society.
21. What motivates a ruler to establishing this reversal is left to the reader’s imagination.
22. In any case, this “error” seemed like a good idea.
23. False altruism infected the thinking of the foolish ruler.
24. It is not a matter of favoring the privileged class, but rather a matter of competence.
25. The well-to-do would normally have more experience (wisdom) managing the affairs of state.
26. Incompetent people can do a lot of damage (see Prov. 30:21-22), so such a reversal based on the whims of a leader hurts everyone.
27. Slaves typically lack the experience necessary to governing a society.
28. Once again, something small illustrates the principle of 9:18 that a inadvertent error can destroy much good.

#### Accidents in Life Illustrated (vv. 8-11)

#### **VERSE 8 He who digs a pit may fall into it, and a serpent may bite him who breaks**

**through a wall** חָפַר גּוֹמֵץ בּוֹ יִפּוֹל וּפְרִיץ גָּדֵר יִשְׁכְּנוּ נֶחָשׁ [Qal part.m.s.abs. *chapar* dig + noun m.s.abs. *gumatx* pit; also Prov. 26:27 + prep beth w/3m.s.suff. + Qal impf.3m.s. *naphal* fall + waw w/Qal part.m.s.abs. *parats* break + noun m.s.abs. *gadder* wall + Qal impf.3m.s.w/3m.s.suff. *nashak* bite + noun m.s.abs. *nabash* serpent, snake].

#### **VERSE 9 He who quarries stones may be hurt by them, and he who splits logs**

**may be endangered by them** נָסִיעַ אֲבָנִים יַעֲצֵב בָּהֶם בּוֹקַעַ עֵצִים יִסְכֵּן בָּם [Hiphil part.m.s.abs. *nasa* pull out; “quarries” + noun f.p.abs. *eben* stone + Niphal impf.3m.s. *atsab* grieve; “hurt” + noun m.p.abs. *etz* tree; “logs” + Niphal impf.3m.s. *sakan* incur danger + prep beth w/3m.p.suff.].

**VERSE 10** If the axe is dull and he does not sharpen *its* edge, then he must exert

**more strength** אִם־קָהָה הַבְּרִזָּל וְהוּא לֹא־פָנִים קָלָקַל וְחִילִים יִגְבֵּר [part im if + Piel perf.3m.s. qachah be dull + d.a.w/noun m.s.abs. barzel iron; “axe” + waw w/pro.3m.s. hu he + neg lo + noun m.p.abs. paneh face; “edge” + Pilpel perf.3m.s. qalal be be swift; “sharpen” + waw w/noun m.p.abs. chayil might; “strength” + Piel impf.3m.s. gabar prevail, be mighty; “must exert”]).

**Wisdom has the advantage of giving success** וְיִתְרוֹן הַכֶּשֶׁיר הַכֹּמָה [waw w/noun

m.s.abs. yitron advantage + Hiphil infin.constr. kasher give success + noun f.s.abs. kokmah wisdom]).

**VERSE 11** If the serpent bites before being charmed, there is no profit for the

**charmer** אִם־יִשָּׁךְ הַנָּחַשׁ בְּלֹא־לַחֵשׁ וְאֵין יִתְרוֹן לְבַעַל הַלָּשׁוֹן [part im if + Qal impf.3m.s. nashak bite + d.a.w/noun m.s.abs. nabash serpent + prep beth w/neg lo w/noun m.s.abs. labash a whispering, charming + waw w/neg ayin no + noun m.s.abs. yitron advantage; “profit” + prep lamed w/noun m.s.constr. ba-al owner; “charmer” + d.a.w/noun both s.abs. lashon tongue]).

#### **ANALYSIS: VERSES 8-11**

1. This section consists of another series of proverbs.
2. The proverbs of verses 8-9 illustrate accidents that arise due to carelessness.
3. Those who hunt animals need to be careful, lest the hunter becomes the prey (v. 8).
4. Even breaking down a stone wall can conceal the hidden danger of a serpent that bites (v. 9).
5. The walls in view here are uncut stones plied on top of each other (Prov. 24:31; Num. 22:24).
6. Snakes lurk between the stones.
7. The two activities of verses 9 & 10 also require caution.
8. These two things have built-in dangers that any worker must be on the guard against (quarrying stones and cutting logs).
9. There is nothing substantial to suggest that the author is talking about the deed-consequence principle expressed elsewhere.
10. In other words, these potential dangers are not the result of evil behavior on the part of the participants.

11. This section is simply setting forth accidents that can occur in life.
12. There is no indication that those involved in these activities are wise or foolish.
13. Any activity that produces good results can be frustrated by an accident.
14. The two proverbs of verses 10 & 11 are united in form teaching something about wisdom.
15. The basic idea of verse 10 (linguistic problems notwithstanding) is quite clear.
16. A sharp axe will make the job much easier than a dull axe which requires the exertion of much more strength on the part of the one wielding it.
17. The dull axe requires more time and effort and perhaps, even increases the possibility of an accident as the worker tires.
18. The final clause of verse 10 drives home the point of the benefit of wisdom in this particular example: “wisdom had the advantage of giving success.”
19. Wisdom on the part of the axe wielder motivates him to keep his axe sharp for each day’s work.
20. It is also to be noted that the exercise of good judgment in human activities can serve to avoid accidents.
21. Wisdom, both natural and supernatural, helps people to succeed in life, and reduces the risk of personal harm.
22. But accidents will happen.
23. For wisdom to succeed it must be applied as illustrated in the second example of verse 11.
24. This is the point of verse 11: “If the serpent bites before being charmed, there is no profit to the charmer.”
25. The word ‘charmer’ translated literally is “master of the tongue” (*ba-al halinson*) and refers to those who are experts in this activity.
26. Any ‘advantage’ to the charmer is gone if he is in a hurry.
27. Even in this case a few minutes or seconds can make the difference between success and death.
28. Wisdom must be applied at the right time for there to be success.