

When Two are Better than One (vv. 9-12)

VERSE 9 Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor

טוֹבִים הַשְּׁנַיִם מִן־הָאֶחָד אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁלְּהֶם שְׂכָר טוֹב בְּעֵמְלָם [adj.m.p.abs. tob “are better” + d.a.w/adj.m. dual abs. shenayim two + prep min w/d.a.w/adj.m.s.abs. echad one + rel.pro. asher + part. yesh + prep lamed w/3m.p.suff. they + noun m.s.abs. shakar wages; “return” + adj.m.s.abs. tob good + prep beth w/noun m.s.constr.w/3m.p.suff. amal labor]).

VERSE 10 For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion (אֶת־חֵבֶרֶו)

כִּי אִם־יִפְּלוּ הָאֶחָד יִקֶּים [part ki for + part im if + Qal impf.3m.p. naphal fall + d.a.w/adj.m.s.abs. echad one + Hiphil impf.3m.s. qum lift up + d.o.w/noun m.s.constr. w/3m.s.suff. cheber companion]).

But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up (שְׁנֵי לְהִקְיָמוֹ)

וְאֵילֹוּ הָאֶחָד שִׁיפֹל וְאֵין [waw w/interj. i only here and in 10:16 + prep lamed + d.a.w/adj.m.s.abs. echad one + rel.w/Qal impf.3m.s. naphal fall + waw w/part. ayin not + adj.m.s.abs. shenayim two + prep lamed w/Hiphil infin.constr.w/3m.s.suuf. qum lift up]).

VERSE 11 Furthermore, if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can

one be warm alone (גַּם אִם־יִשְׁכְּבוּ שְׁנַיִם וְחַם לָהֶם וְלְאֶחָד אֵין יָחַם) [conj gam furthermore + part im if + Qal impf.3m.p. shakab lie down + adj.m dual abs. shemayim two + waw wQal perf.3m.s. yacham be warm + prep lamed w/3m.p.suff. + waw w/prep lamed w/adj.m.s.abs. echad one + part ek how? + Qal impf.3m.s. yacham be warm])?

VERSE 12 And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him (נְגִדוּ)

וְאִם־יִתְקַפוּ הָאֶחָד הַשְּׁנַיִם יַעֲמִדוּ [waw w/part. im if + Qal impf.3m.s.w/3m.s.suff. taqeph prevail; “overpower” + d.a.w/adj.m.s.abs. echad one + d.a.w/adj.m. dual abs. shenayim two + Qal impf.3m.p. amad stand; “resist” + part neged before]).

A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart (וְהַחֹט הַמְּשֻׁלָּשׁ לֹא בְמַהֲרָה יִנְתַּק)

[waw w/d.a.w/noun m.s.abs. chut cord + d.a.w/Piel part.m.s.abs. shalash do three times; “three stands” + neg lo + prep beth w/adv. macher quickly, easily + Niphal impf.3m.s. nataq break]).

ANALYSIS: VERSES 9-12

1. Having portrayed the lonely miser, Solomon shifts to the consideration of companionship.
2. These verses present three examples depicting the advantages of having a companion.
3. A proverb (another “better-than proverb”) introduces these examples: “Two are better than one...” (v. 9).
4. Even though the lesson herein is not monumental, nevertheless it embodies real significance.
5. Verse 9a states the principle of verses 9b-12.
6. Verse 9a provides the first illustration that companionship is better than isolation.
7. Again, the negative example of the lonely miser is the background to this lesson.
8. There is nothing in this first example or section to restrict its application to marriage.
9. These examples make the most sense if we view them against the background of travelers away from their natural surroundings.
10. This first example (vv. 9b-10) is presented in two contrasting circumstances: (1) economic advantage of two as opposed to one worker; (2) care for one another, if one falls.
11. The language of the first example is economic (“good return...labor”) and humanitarian (“if either of them falls, the one will lift his companion.”).
12. The term “return” (*saker* cognate verb is *sakar* ‘to hire’).
13. It could mean a business partner.
14. It could also mean that the two of them get larger profits from their combined labor.
15. It has been suggested that there is a derived satisfaction in being helpful one toward the other, and that is the “return” or “reward” associated with a solid relationship.
16. In v. 10a the situation involves peril (“falls”) and requires assistance from his associate (“lifts him up”).
17. It is a simple point: A companion is able to rescue his friend.
18. We are to assume that this is a serious fall (i.e., like falling into a pit).
19. To accentuate the advantages of “two is better than one” the author entertains the pathetic situation where the single person falls with no one to assist him (v. 10b “But woe to the one who falls when there is no one to lift him up.”).
20. The third example of the benefits of friendship (v. 11) also involves two travelers.

21. He contrasts the image of two people traveling who might share body heat to keep each other warm, contrasted with pathetic image of the solitary traveler who at night vainly tries to keep himself warm.
22. The final example (v. 12a) also finds its setting during a journey.
23. Roads in the ancient Near East were often hazardous as one traveled beyond the towns and cities.
24. A lone traveler was easy prey of robbers, while two could provide resistance, and aid one another, if confronted with a lone robber.
25. The second line of v. 12 is a proverb (“A cord of three stands is not easily torn apart.”), and is applicable to the entire section dealing with the advantages of having a companion.
26. The point of the image of a three-strand cord is that there is strength to be gained in human relationships.

An Anecdote: Transitory Political Power (vv. 13-16)

VERSE 13 A poor yet wise lad is better than an old and foolish king who no longer knows how to receive instruction (זָקֵן וְכֶסֶל אֲשֶׁר לֹא יָדַע לְהִזְהֵר עוֹד)

טוֹב יָלָד מְסֻבֵּן וְחָכָם מִמֶּלֶךְ [adj.m.s.abs. tob “better than” + noun m.s.abs. yeled youth, lab + adj.m.s.abs. miskin poor; only 9:15, 16 + waw w/adj.m.s.abs. chakam wise + prep. min w/noun m.s.abs. melke king + adj.m.s.abs. zeqen old + waw w/noun m.s.abs. kesil fool + rel.pro. asher who + neg lo + Qal perf.3m.s. yada know + prep lamed w/Niphal infin.constr. zahar admonish + part odh no longer]).

VERSE 14 For he has come out of prison to become king, even though he was born poor in his kingdom (כִּי־מִבֵּית הַסּוּרִים יָצָא לְמֶלֶךְ כִּי גַם בְּמַלְכוּתוֹ נוֹלַד רָשׁ)

[part. ki for + prep min w/noun m.s.constr. bayith + d.a.w/Qal pass.part.m.p.as. esur bond; “out of prison” + Qal perf.3m.s. yatsa come out + prep lamed w/Qal infin.constr. malak be king, rule + conj ki for; “though” + part gam even + prep beth w/noun f.s.constr.w/3m.s.suff. mamlakuth kingdom + Niphal perf.3m.s. yadh be born + Qal part.m.s.abs. rush be poor]).

VERSE 15 I have seen all the living under the sun throng to the side of the

second lad who replaces him (תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ עִם הַיָּלָד הַשֵּׁנִי אֲשֶׁר יַעֲמֵד תַּחְתָּיו)

רָאִיתִי אֶת־כָּל־הַחַיִּים הַמְהַלְכִים [Qal perf.1s. ra-ah see + d.o. + noun m.s.constr. kol all + d.a.w/adj.m.p.abs. chay living + d.a.w/Piel part.m.p.abs. halak walk; “throng” + prep tachath under + d.a.w/noun both s.abs. shemesh sun + part im with + d.a.w/noun m.s.abs. yalad lad + d.a.w/adj.m.s.abs. sheni second + rel.pro. asher + Qal impf.3m.s. amad stand; “replaces” + prep tachath]).

VERSE 16 There is no end to all the people, to all who were before them (לְפָנֵיהֶם)

אִין־קֵץ לְכָל־הָעָם לְכָל־אֲשֶׁר־הָיָה

[part ayin no + noun m.s.abs. qets end + prep lamed w/noun m.s.constr. kol + d.a.w/noun m.s.abs.am people + prep lamed w/noun m.s.abs. kol “to all” + rel.pro. asher + Qal perf.3m.s. hayah “were” + prep lamed w/noun m.p.constr.w/3m.p.suff. paneh; “before them”], **and even the ones who will come later**

will not be happy with him [גַּם הָאַחֲרוֹנִים לֹא יִשְׂמְחוּ־בּוֹ]

[conj gam even + d.a.w/adj.m.p.abs. acharon afterwards; coming after + neg lo + Qal impf.3m.s. samach rejoice; “be happy” + prep beth w/3m.s.suff. “with him”], **for this too is vanity and striving after**

wind [כִּי־גַם־זֶה הֶבֶל וְרַעְיוֹן רוּחַ]

[part ki for + conj gam too + adj.m.s.abs. zeh this + noun hebel vanity + waw w/noun m.s.abs. te-uth striving + noun both s.abs. ruach wind]).

ANALYSIS: VERSES 13-16

1. The story (real or made-up) here is a one that raises interpretative questions.
2. There is ambiguity as to how many characters are involved.
3. In general, the story recounts how someone from a lowly social position becomes king through wisdom gathers to himself a large following.
4. But this does not last due to the human element.
5. The main difficulty comes in verse 14, where *he* is used without a clear indication to whom it refers.

6. Does 4:14 refer to the “old but foolish king”, or does it refer to “the poor, but wise youth”?
7. Are there just two characters in the story, or are there more than two characters?
8. Actually there are three characters as per “the second lad” of v. 15.
9. Two characters are introduced in verse 13, the “poor yet wise youth,” and “the old and foolish king.”
10. In v. 13 we have yet another “better than” proverb contrasting two citizens within a kingdom who are opposites in terms of social standing, age, and wisdom.
11. The youth is wise, that is, he possesses common sense, ambition, and savvy, while the old foolish king is stubborn and refuses wise counsel and is cut off from reality.
12. Despite the disparity between these two individuals, the author asserts that it is better to be poor and wise than to be an old and foolish king.
13. Again, verse 14 is ambiguous, begging the question as to the *he* is: the youth or the king.
14. The nearest antecedent from verse 13 is the old and foolish king.
15. If so, the old and foolish king rose to the pinnacle of political power from the most improbable circumstances.
16. Like the poor wise youth, he too was born into poverty, plus he was imprisoned, and eventually “became king.”
17. The probable circumstance behind his imprisonment was a debtor’s prison.
18. Another view (one taken here) sees the *he* of verse 14 as referring to the poor wise youth of v. 13.
19. In that case the poor wise youth is the one who came out of prison, and eventually became king in the place of the foolish old king.
20. The wisdom of the youth was the key to his success in securing the throne.
21. “His kingdom” refers to the kingdom of the old foolish king.
22. So v. 14a refers to the youth who “became king”, while v. 14b refers to the king who “was born in his kingdom, became poor” (Hebrew word order is reflected in this translation: “for likewise he was born in his kingdom, he became poor.”).
23. The contrast between the two characters sets up the lesson of this story.
24. The old king enjoyed all the privileges of kingship, and the youth in his kingdom was the victim of circumstance.
25. But the youth had wisdom on his side, and the old foolish king forsook the wisdom of his advisors.
26. The ‘better than’ saying of verse 13 reverses the readers’ expectations, because normally age is associated with wisdom, and youth is associated with foolishness.
27. The foolishness of the king is described as one “who no longer knows how to receive instruction/admonition.”
28. Cf. Prov. 11:14; 15:22; 20:18; 24:6).
29. The first youth rose to power through wisdom, but his reign gave way to a “second lad” who rose to power on a wave of popularity.
30. This is brought out in the words “I have seen all the living under the sun throng to the side of the second lad who replaces him (i.e., 1st lad).
31. He had the acclaim of the multitude that were taken in by his personality.
32. The first youth enjoyed a period of popularity, but this apparently did not last long with the appearance of a rival who captured the allegiance of the people.
33. The success of wisdom was short-lived and soon forgotten in favor of an attractive personality.

34. The one overcame the obstacles of youth and poverty through wisdom, but people are easily swayed.
35. Again, the story begins with a ‘better than’ saying demonstrating the benefit of wisdom, but in the end wisdom cannot produce anything lasting.
36. The disadvantaged youth could not maintain his position of power.
37. Wisdom can bring temporary success, but it cannot guarantee what a king desires: a long reign and a hereditary successor.
38. The reason wisdom fails is that people are fickle.
39. People follow leaders based on something other than wisdom.
40. Popularity is fleeting (Prov. 14:28).
41. This is seen in an examination of the life of Christ from the triumphal entry on Monday of Passion Week to the day of Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion.
42. This story demonstrates two lessons: the abuse of power and the fleeting nature of political power.
43. What becomes of the second youth who rose to power strictly based on his charisma?
44. Verse 16 addresses that question.
45. The words “there was/is no end to all the people” refers to those who turned from the 1st lad who was king, and who heralded in the second youth based on a personality cult.
46. Yet even the final king, the popular one, failed to permanently capture the people’s loyalty (“even the ones who will come later will not be happy with him...”).
47. The moral lesson is obvious.
48. Political power is “vanity and chasing after the wind”, even political power attended by old age, wisdom, and popularity.

END: Ecclesiastes Chapter Five
December, 2018
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