Preparing to Teach Ecclesiastes 9-10

In his summary of Ecclesiastes 8, William P. Brown reminds us: “That ‘the Lord works in mysterious ways’ is not an empty cliche for Qoheleth. Mystery is endemic to the Deity, Qoheleth claims, and it is this same mystery with which all life “under the sun” is fraught.” [P. Brown, William. *Ecclesiastes: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), p. 90]. I can positively relate to this in that I often use the term “mystery” to describe how God works or, ultimately, how we understand God. Whenever I use that word, it expresses submission in the presence of greater knowledge than I can know, but not submission in terms of “giving up,” but submission in terms of being open to further revelation.

This is extremely important during the portions of these two chapters in which our sage goes “negative,” suggesting that the accomplishments of wisdom, power, and wealth are futile, as well as implying that God’s judgment isn’t clearly discerned or something to be counted upon (though he comes around again in Chapter 12). We need to remember James L. Crenshaw’s comment: “The careful reader will have noted that Qoheleth seems to know far more about God than his theology of divine mystery allows. In truth, he frequently makes assertions about God’s will and activity despite his protestations of God’s hiddenness.” [Crenshaw, James L., *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1981), p. 139.]

Even in the wise man’s questioning of justice after death, the value of his own search for wisdom, and the inevitability of death, it all leads back to realizing: “In the fear of God the world which stands under the condemnation of vanity opens itself up anew for Ecclesiastes [Latin for Qoheleth], so that he can joyfully take the good things coming to him.” [Kaiser, Otto, *Introduction to the Old Testament: A Presentation of its Results and Problems* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1977), p. 404.]

So, we ended Chapter 8 with the assertion that no mere human is wise enough to penetrate the opacity of the mystery of God. “The Creator is attested as the incomprehensibly wonderful, one who can never be incorporated as ‘universal Mind’ into a rational cosmic system, …” [Eichrodt, Walther, *The Old Testament Library: Old Testament Theology: Volume II* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1967), p. 111.] Now, we begin Chapter 9 with a verse that starts off sounding very traditional, but ends with a real shocker. After all his reflection and diligent observation, he asserts by faith that those who live according to God’s teachings [the righteous] and those who are observers of practical matters for living [the wise] cannot secure their fates because everything is in God’s mysterious hands. Then, after this life, one doesn’t know whether to expect love or hate from God. “Since God’s ways are opaque one cannot know whether God’s providential actions toward him will be favorable or unfavorable (9:1) [Peterson, Wayne H., “Ecclesiastes” in Clifton J. Allen et. al (eds.), *Broadman Bible Commentary: Volume 5: Proverbs-Isaiah* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1971), p. 123.]

So, as we often do at the start of these sessions, let’s look at a couple of outlines or schematics of what we’re attempting to cover.

* **9:1-10 *Carpe Diem* [Why we need to seize the day!]**
* **9:11-10:15 The World is Full of Risks**
* **10:16-11:16 On Living with Risks\***
* **9:1-10 The Shadow of Death**
* **9:11-12 Time and Chance**
* **9:13-18 Wasted Wisdom**
* **10:1-20 Proverbs on Wisdom and Folly\*\***

**\*Seow, Choon-Leong, *The Anchor Bible: Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1997), p. 47.**

**\*\*Crenshaw, James L., *The Old Testament Library: Ecclesiastes* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1987), p. 48.**

I don’t usually have time to translate both chapters for these sessions, but I translated this first verse just to make sure. ***1) Because all of this I gave to my heart, so to make it clear that the righteous and the wise, and their accomplishments are in God’s hand, even love, even hate, humanity cannot know; it is before them.* [PJT]** A lot of translations make this “I took it to heart” and that’s okay, but we need to remember that one’s “heart” represents one’s “will,” one’s “decision-maker,” in the Hebrew Bible. When he GAVE all of his observations to his heart, he was putting all his energy into understanding. He wanted to prove to himself that God was in charge of everything, but even as he was striving to understand, he was reminded of human limitations.

I was reminded of an old black-and-white movie, *The Night of the Hunter* with Robert Mitchum. There was a lot of symbolism in the film centered around the tattoos on his hands. One was labeled “Love” and the other was labeled “Hate.” It was supposed to represent how he could meet out mercy or justice. It might even have been inspired by this verse. Yet, if it was, it missed the point. God is the one who deals with humanity in love and hate. I’m uncomfortable with the idea that God hates human beings. I believe the Bible teaches that God hates sin and has given everything in God’s quest to redeem the sinner. But when it comes to grace versus punishment, God is the one who determines and, as Qoheleth assures us, it is not for humanity to know.

I am not claiming that this is a New Testament perspective. Qoheleth was inspired by the Holy Spirit, but the fullness promised in the New Testament had not yet been revealed. Qoheleth’s stark observations are a corrective for taking older wisdom such as Proverbs too complacently in much the same way the New Testament letter from James keeps believers from being so heavenly-minded that they are of no earthly use [a comparison brought to mind in Childs, Brevard S., *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2011), p. 588.]. Qoheleth says that everything is before humanity so that we can’t know our future. It’s pretty obvious to Qoheleth since he is writing from his personal observations and no one has returned from the grave to tell him what happens after death. In our case, however, the Holy Spirit gives us assurance that we are the children of God. That’s a major advantage we have over the wise man.

That verse 1 is about divine love and hate, divine favor or judgment, is how most interpreters teach it. However, the Hebrew wording would more likely be “IF” love or hate rather than the “EVEN” you see in my translation (the literal Hebrew reading). So, it could mean that humanity doesn’t even know the things they will love and the things they will hate in front of them. It would simply be a powerful way of saying that we don’t control our own destinies. Yet, even if that’s what it means, we get to the idea of death as the great leveler as we continue in the passage.

***2) Everyone is just as everyone else, one [common] fate: for the righteous and for the wicked, for the good [and for the bad], for the pure and for the impure, for the ones sacrificing and for those not sacrificing, as the good so the sinner, the ones giving [positive] oaths just as those fearing giving oaths. 3) This is evil among all which is done under the sun because there is one fate for everyone [lit. “all”], so even heart(s) [or “wills”] of the children of humanity are full of evil and madness is in their hearts during [lit. “in”] their lives and afterward, to their deaths.* [PJT]**

If you’re getting the idea that Qoheleth doesn’t see evidence of God’s fairness in dealing with people on the basis of their actions, you’re right. Our wise man seems to be frustrated that you can’t get clear evidence of God’s justice within his lifetime. If death is the great equalizer, Qoheleth argues that it really doesn’t make any difference whether one is good or bad, righteous or wicked, pure or impure, because the same, inevitable event occurs to us all. One of the founding fathers of the U.S., Benjamin Franklin, was commenting on how long-lasting the U.S. Constitution was poised to last when he wrote: "Our new Constitution is now established, everything seems to promise it will be durable; but, in this world, nothing is certain except death and taxes." A remarkably accurate observation, indeed, but don’t miss the last part of the verse.

The last part of the verse seems to indicate that since humans know that they have death as the ultimate event in their lives, they let their desires and intentions (their “hearts”) go crazy. They try to make up for their inability to control death by being as selfish and amoral as they can. It’s a pretty ugly picture of humankind and it’s even uglier if you think about the strange wording at the beginning of verse 2. Two scholars, Robert Gordis and James Crenshaw, have observed that “Everyone is just as everyone else” sounds amazingly like the humanist version of Exodus 3:14 where God reveals Himself as “I am Who I am.” [Crenshaw, James L., *The Old Testament Library: Ecclesiastes* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1987), p. 160.]. So, the madness at the end may well be Qoheleth’s ironic statement of what happens when humanity tries to be a god for itself. It makes these two verses the rough equivalent of Jeremiah’s indictment in Jeremiah 17:9-10: “9) The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt; who can understand it? 10) I the LORD search the mind and try the heart, to give to every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings.” [Revised Standard Version] Obviously, Qoheleth is saying that he can’t understand it, but in the midst of his negative thoughts, his near nihilism, is there a hint of the understanding that God is the only one who has all the facts and can make the decisions?

That’s what Christopher Wright seems to think when he writes: “Even our sense of outrage at the evilness of evil (which is so characteristic of Qoheleth) is a sign of hope. Protest only makes sense when it emerges from a longing for a reality that one knows to be good. Protest against evil, on the assumption that it *is* evil, shows that we know there could and should be something better.” [Wright, Christopher J. H., *Hearing the Message of Ecclesiastes: Questioning Faith in a Baffling World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 2023), p. 107.] He knows there needs to be something better than death as the final word on the subject, but he’ll have to circle back around to his faith in God to get there.

Speaking of faith, check out the next verse. ***4) Because, who is the one who chooses? To all the living there is certitude because for the living dog it is better than [for] the dead lion. 5) Because the living know that they will die and the dead don’t know anything, they don’t even have any reward belonging to them because their legacy [lit. “memorial” is not remembered.* [PJT]** I probably overstated these verses as referring to faith, even though some translations take the word for certitude as “hope.” In this case, we’re talking about the only certainty being the fact that you are living right this moment. Later, Qoheleth will urge us to make the most of it, but for now, he is almost an existentialist, focusing on being alive in the moment.

If you know about the Near East, you know that this is a very ironic verse. Here is a spokesman for God saying that dogs, unclean scavengers—forbidden as sacrifices just like pigs, as well as associated with death like the Egyptian mythology regarding Set, king of the underworld who took the shape of a dog—can be superior to lions, symbol of royalty to such an extent that the Messiah is called the “Lion of Judah.” The distinction is that the vile dog is alive and the noble lion is dead. [Seow, Choon-Leong, *The Anchor Bible: Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1997), p. 301.] So, this would have been a shocking idea to Qoheleth’s hearers and/or readers. How could such a thing be true?

Here's what another interpreter wrote: “The lion and the dog are emblematic of opposing reputations: intelligence and folly, might and weakness, majesty and lowliness. According to the sages of convention, reputation is the individual’s lasting legacy for future generations; it is the immortalized self. But for Qoheleth, the groveling dog holds an absolute advantage over the lion’s carcass. Life cannot be lived for the sake of the future.” [ Brown, Ecclesiastes, p. 92.]

That’s where verse 5 comes into play. The living are, at least, aware of their mortality, but the dead don’t know anything. There is an interesting bit of wordplay in this verse because the word for reward (שכר = “sah-KAHR”) and the word for memorial or legacy (זכר = “zah-KAHR”) sound almost the same. The dead are neither gaining anything more in this life, nor is the memory of what they have accomplished reliable.

So, you’re asking, where is the advantage? The living know they are going to die—so what? “Yet, this is important knowledge, for it enables humans to make the most of their time among the living, as the advice which follows (9:7-10) indicates (11:8).” [Miller, Douglas B., *Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes: The Place of* Hebel *in Qohelet’s Work* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), p. 144.] Rather than giving up, awareness of our mortality should help us to want to accomplish more.

Please forgive me as I make an observation from this verse that is not really tied to Qoheleth’s rant. It’s about the dead knowing nothing. Now, obviously from our anticipation of fellowship with our Lord after we die, we would know something. We would know about what’s happening in the heavenly dimension. Yet, I take this idea of the dead knowing nothing as referring ultimately to knowing nothing more of what’s happening in this life. And I take that as an idea of hope. We often have this picture of the departed as looking down on us and observing us. I don’t think that’s biblical. I don’t think it would really be heaven if our beloved departed ones could look down and see our failures and our suffering. So, I take this verse to mean that those dead to this life don’t know anything more about this life. And I say that even though I believe they are experiencing life with God in heaven.

But let’s get on with Qoheleth’s observations in scripture. Verse 6 should sound a little bit familiar. *6) Even their love, even their hatred, even their enthusiasm [lit. “zeal”] is already destroyed, and their portion [legacy, purpose] shall not belong to them again for ever, in everything accomplished under the sun. [PJT]* Hmm! That sounds a lot like what I was saying about the dead not knowing. They have no impact on this life. What one loves or what one hates can definitely be motivation in this life, but they are no longer relevant when we go to be with our Lord. When we die, what we were so motivated to accomplish, what we saw as our purpose, is finished as far as we are concerned. Oh, to be sure, some portions of our accomplishments continue to earn dividends and we can generate resources for a cause beyond our deaths with our estates, but our direct involvement and impact is over. If nothing else, Qoheleth’s observation here should inspire us to follow our passions and our sense of what’s important (in the Lord) to accomplish what we can in this life.

But it isn’t all about accomplishing. It is also about enjoying, savoring life as a gift from God. ***7) Go, eat your food in pleasure, and drink your wine with a good heart [“Enjoy, but don’t overdo it!”] because God is already pleased with your accomplishments.* [PJT]**

This is the fifth of the “Carpe diem” [“Seize the day!”] passages in Ecclesiastes. If I were teaching this in Sunday School, I would give them the previous four references, give them time to read them, and then, list what they were supposed to do on the whiteboard. To review, there are: 2:24-26 (eat, drink, gain satisfaction from work, and please God), 3:13-14 (eat, drink, gain satisfaction from work, prioritize what God wants to last, and reverence [“fear”] God), 5:18-20 (eat, drink, gain satisfaction from work, treat blessings as a gift, allow God to provide joy), and 8:15 (enjoy with eat, drink, pleasure to balance toil, and savor God’s gift of life).

Walter Brueggemann notes the potential for abusing these passages, but he makes an astute correlation between this passage and Jesus’ parable in Luke. “Taken in context, it is more likely that this statement seeks to provide a curb to excessive self-aggrandizement, and counsels the pupil to enjoy what is at hand in order to remain free from social conflict, excessive guilt, or destructive ambition. It is plausible that the parable of Jesus in Luke 12:19 alludes to this text, for it contains the same triad of ‘eat, drink, and be merry.’ …perhaps Jesus’ parable is a curb to the satiation that seems to be warranted by the proverb, or more likely, the parable is a reminder of the permit of the proverb that never intended what the ‘fool’ in the parable has made of it.” [Brueggemann, Walter, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), p. 332.]

I think Brueggemann is right. The “fool” in Jesus’ parable has taken the idea that God has “pre-approved” his accomplishments in a different way than I believe Qoheleth meant. I believe Qoheleth was indicating that when we have accomplished those things of which we believe God will approve, it is appropriate for us to enjoy the gifts of food, drink, and satisfaction with which God has provided us. I don’t believe, as Crenshaw seems to suggest, that this is Qoheleth telling us that since grabbing all the pleasure we can is a “grasping for a straw” or merely, “lifeboat ethics” in the sense of doing the best we can. [Crenshaw, *Wisdom*, p. 141.]

Indeed, I believe that the summons to enjoyment of life and engaging in satisfying accomplishments invoked by Qoheleth, despite his limited understanding of our eternal hope, fits well with certain New Testament passages. I would ask my students to read the following passages and see if they agree:
John 9:4 (We need to prioritize our efforts because of our limited time.), Ephesians 5:15-16 (We need to grasp opportunities when we discover them.), and Philippians 1:21-22 (Since we know death is coming, we need to be productive.).

***8) In every circumstance [lit. “in all times”], let your garments be white and don’t ration [lit. “diminish”] the oil upon your head.* [PJT]** That’s my translation of verse 8, but my paraphrase would be: “Don’t cheap out on your appearance lest you miss out on opportunities.” Washing clothes wasn’t easy in the ancient world and the oil one put on one’s body and in one’s hair was expensive. So, white garments and oil were largely for ceremonial occasions like weddings [Esther 8:15, Psalm 45:7]. And that’s valid, as far as it goes, but considering the next verse, it may also suggest that you remain attractive for your spouse.

***9) Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days living in your wisp [of life] of life which were given to you under the sun, all the days of your wisp [of life], BECAUSE it is your legacy [portion, purpose] in life and in your unsatisfying work with which you toil under the sun.* [PJT]**

This may not be comfortable for some people, but this verse suggests that marriage is definitely part of God’s plan for human satisfaction in life. Part of our purpose in life is to love our spouses and be loved by them. And in terms of work-life balance, notice that the wife comes before the labor necessary for survival—something we’ve forgotten in the U.S. Learning to enjoy life with one’s spouse is learning to value one’s spouse. The phrasing at the beginning of verse 9 is reminiscent of Proverbs 5:15-19. If you read that passage and the verses that come later, you’ll realize: “The admonition is comparable to that of Proverbs 5:15–19, which is designed to (re)kindle the flame of marital passion in the face of extramarital temptations (w. 20–23).” [Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, pp. 93-94.]

Remember that this word often translated “toil” in the English translations is translated as “unsatisfying work” in my translation. But notice that Qoheleth is saying that even difficult and unfulfilling work is better than the prospect of no meaningful work at all after death [Wright, *Hearing*, p. 110.] So, Qoheleth makes a case for accomplishment in verse 10. ***10) Everything you hand discovers to do, accomplish it with all your might BECAUSE there aren’t accomplishments, reasoning [lit. “accounting”], knowledge, and wisdom in Sheol [place of the dead] or the grave where you are going. [PJT]***

During the session, I didn’t really have time to mention it, but these verses are an example of where Qoheleth might have borrowed traditional sayings from other cultures. Have you heard of the Gilgamesh Epic? It was written long before Ecclesiastes, but it has a speech from a tavern keeper that sounds similar to these verses: “Let your belly be full, enjoy yourself day and night. Find enjoyment every day, dance and play day and night. Let your garments be clean, let your head be washed; bathe in water. Look upon the little one who holds your hand, let your spouse enjoy herself in your embrace.” [quoted in Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 305.] I note this to indicate that much of Qoheleth’s counsel in the book is secular advice, not necessarily spiritual advice. Of course, God wants us to be effective in our ordinary lives, too. It enhances our witness when we are competent.

Verses 11-12 offer five instances in which the expectations of the hearers or readers are turned upside-down. During battles in the ancient world (or sometimes, just before a major military encounter), generals would send messages by multiple couriers in hoping that at least one would get through in a timely fashion (especially if they needed reinforcements or supplies). One would think that the fastest courier would be most likely to succeed, but there were possible accidents, ambushes, obstacles, and wrong terms that could interrupt the courier’s route. And, since the first courier to reach the emperor, another general, or an ally was usually rewarded with a monetary prize, this was a competitive thing.

I like to compare this with the old fable about the tortoise and the hare. Who would win? The assumption was that the hare (the swiftest) would win, but the real winner was the tortoise (the most persistent). James Crenshaw calls these five instances where merit and advantage are overruled by time and chance (Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes, p. 164):

* Speed doesn’t always win
* Might doesn’t always win
* Sages not always paid well
* Pundits don’t always profit
* Being “in the know” doesn’t
always lead to favor.

Next, verses 13-18 offer a parable of a city that has been besieged by a mightier king. As you would expect coming after five examples where the most advantaged do not always succeed, the parable is an upside-down story. It is also very realistic in terms of mob/crowd/populist mentality. I think there is a connection between verse 12’s net (מצודה pronounced muh-tzoh-DAH) which captures the fish regardless of where they are on the food chain and the siegeworks of verse 14 (מצודים pronounced muh-tzoh-DEEM). There is a wise man in the city who has a plan where he might have saved the city [Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 321.]. However, no one wants to listen to him because he is poor. Sadly, then, as now, many people assume that the poor are failures and that the rich are successes. In this case, however, verse 17 seems to imply that the ruler, the authority, was bombastic and authoritative, so the people (fools that they were) must have listened to the louder “leader.”

One commentator points out that there is a significant contrast between the “quiet” associated with either the way the wise speak (quietly but with authority) or the way the attentive listeners are to pay attention (quietly in expectation) and the “shouts” of an impetuous leader [Longman, Tremper, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), p. 236.] In case one didn’t understand the point of the parable told in verses 13-16, the contrast between this admonition to listen to the wise compared with the foolish ignorance of the crowd in ignoring the wise man in the parable should be enough for us to understand what is important. “As ’prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown’ (Mark 6:4), so the sage is a *persona non grata* in the world of the absurd.” [Brown*, Ecclesiastes*, p. 97.]

The chapter closes with a traditional “better than” statement**: *18) Better wisdom than weapons of war [lit. “battle”] but one sinner destroys a large amount of good.* [PJT]** If you’re reading carefully, you’ll notice that the ending of the verse dovetails with the first proverb in Chapter 10. It only takes a little bit of foolishness, evil, or carelessness to undo a lot of positives. Indeed, commenting on verse 10, Seow writes: “this verse seems to be making the same point as the preceding and following verses: that a single or little thing that is bad may outweigh a whole lot of good.” [Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 311.]

The second proverb in Chapter 10 is about choosing the correct way. Why does the wise individual (or noble, or leader) choose the path to the right? It is because the right (because most people are right-handed) was often seen as a symbol of moral correctness while the left (because the minority of people are left-handed) was viewed with suspicion—so much so that we can see how “left” is phrased in two ancient and one modern language. In Greek, it is σκαιός (pronounced skeye-OHS) and not only means “left-handed,” but ill-omened, unlucky, awkward, and clumsy [Liddell, Henry George and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon based on the German Work of Francis Passow* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1864), p. 1351.]. In Latin, it is sinister (pronounced “SEEN-ees-tehr”) and, in addition to left-handed, means wrong, perverse, and unfavorable [Simpson, D. P. (ed.), *Cassell’s New Compact Latin Dictionary* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1963), p. 208.] In French, it is gauche (pronounced “GOHSH”) and means, in addition to left: awkward, clumsy, crooked, ugly, or uncouth [Girard, Denis (ed.), *Cassell’s French Dictionary: French-English, English-French* (New York: Macmillan & Company, 1962), p. 373.] That we have a clear binary choice between right and wrong here (Wright, *Hearing*, p. 118.] could also be deduced from Jesus’ instruction on the last judgment in Matthew 25:33 with sheep on right and goats on the left [Peterson, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 125.]

Verse 3 suggests that even ordinary actions like walking along the road will demonstrate that a fool is, indeed, a fool. It reminds me of the U.S. folk-saying: “It is better to be thought a fool than by opening one’s mouth to prove it.” This idea that the fool exposes himself or herself isn’t just found in Ecclesiastes. “The fact that a fool cannot conceal his folly but exposes it every time he speaks and acts is found also in Proverbs (12:23; 13:16).” [Longman*, Ecclesiastes*, p. 240.]

Verse 4 doesn’t seem to fit the three verses found before it. Longman sees a tenuous connection with the reference to a leader in 9:17 [Ecclesiastes, p. 240.], but I think it is intended as a general guideline for court behavior prior to the little parable about the incompetent ruler in 10:5-7. Royal anger must be met head-on, not with guile or fear but with placating calmness, for only by such a response is there any hope of a credible and fair resolution. Qoheleth’s advice reflects the sentiment evocatively expressed in Proverbs 25:15: “With patience a ruler may be persuaded, and a soft tongue can break bones” (cf. 16:14). [Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 98.] The key verbs in this proverb are built off the same root as Noah’s name, “rest.” [Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes, p. 170.] So, this idea of submission and self-effacement reducing the royal anger (or that of any authority) is not only good psychological advice, but it seems similar to our current memes of “Keep Calm and …” in everyday life.

The little parable about incompetent rulers in 10:5-7 is interesting. In it, Qoheleth sees a great evil in the fact that the incompetent has been placed in charge by the ruler himself. Normally, the word for mistake would have the idea of something done by accident or negligence [Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 242.], but the Hebrew added a prefix to the word which emphasizes that this is a real, a serious, a verifiable mistake [Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 314.] Things are all the worse because the person who is supposed to be in charge and seeing to the welfare of the city or country has elevated an incompetent to a post that said incompetent doesn’t have the skills and/or sense to accomplish.

We’ve all seen bad hiring decisions and questionable promotions from within. When I was with the media corporation, one of the corporate presidents left and promoted her personal assistant to take over our division. Her reasoning was that he had been handling the division’s issues for her over several years, so he should be able to handle the job. However, he didn’t have the demeanor to handle the job. He was so used to obeying orders that he didn’t really know how to think for himself. He made such a mess of it that he was relieved of his duties within less than four (4) months, but not before he had damaged my magazine and several others. Why? Because he didn’t understand the product and how it should relate to the explosion of the World Wide Web, so he simply acquiesced to convention wisdom. When he was allowed to resign after that short tenure, I led my editorial staff in a short chorus of “Ding, dong, the witch is dead!” from the *Wizard of Oz*.

I bring this up to make sure that you don’t discount what Qoheleth is saying just because we don’t live in a monarchy. This parable applies to any misuse of authority. It turns order into chaos, as illustrated by the idea of slaves having horses and nobility traveling on foot. Horses were very valuable in the ancient world. Emperors, generals, wealthy cavalry men, aristocrats, and wealthy merchants would have horses, but ordinary folk and, especially, slaves wouldn’t have them. So, we’re talking complete role-reversal taking place due to the incompetence of those in authority.

I believe the importance of this parable at this juncture is to illustrate that the guidance provided in verse 4 doesn’t always work. Sometimes, those in authority are going to be determined (consciously or subconsciously) to destroy the organization/populace which they are in charge of. Being calm, quiet, and submissive in such situations is no formula for success, even though it is generally the best procedure (as we’ll see at the end of this chapter.

The next set of proverbs are basically describing the risks of life (vv. 8-11). Toward the end of this chapter and at the beginning of Chapter 11, there is some guidance for dealing with risk management. Right now, notice that many English translations are more definite than the Hebrew text. For example, the Revised Standard Version says that the one digging a pit will fall into it (as does the American Standard Version, King James Version, and New Revised Standard Version). However, the CSB, ESV, NASB, and NIV all read “may fall.” The disaster isn’t guaranteed, but Qoheleth wants us to see the risk involved in certain activities.

The same breakdown in translations is found in the second half of the verse with ASV, KJV, RSV, and NRSV seeing the warning as definite and other translations (including mine on the slide) emphasizing the possibility as opposed to the certainty. Some commentators insist that this should be “breaking down” the wall instead of “breaking through” it, but in terms of the warning about possible snake bites, it really doesn’t matter whether one is breaking through or breaking down. The risk is there.

The same is true for quarrying stones with ragged edges and splitting logs or chopping trees (the Hebrew could mean either) with splinters. However, when we get to the axe proverb, I believe it is a metaphor. The dull axe is inefficient (and can be so inefficient that it would be dangerous to use). Certainly, as the proverb indicates, one can muddle through with it if one knows what one is doing, but it isn’t necessarily the best. I believe that the metaphor would suggest that wisdom sharpens the axe and that we can move successfully through life better with wisdom than without it. Since the axe proverb follows immediately upon the proverb about the occupational hazard of cutting trees, I believe my interpretation is supported by this comment on the text: “A little precautionary measure in the routine reduces the danger of accidents. It does not prevent accidents, but the risks may be significantly reduced. So, the author concludes in 10:10b that there is advantage to the proper use of wisdom—despite the fact that wisdom’s effectiveness is also subject to chance.” [Seow*, Ecclesiastes*, p. 326.]

Then, as Mr. Zane noted at the end of our session, there are some humorous ideas in Ecclesiastes—at least, humorous from the purely human perspective. He said the people would probably laugh if the snake bit the charmer before the charmer could get the snake charmed. He’s right. But I also believe as I advocated before, that there is a figurative meaning here, as well. One doesn’t get paid until the job is done. Incomplete jobs aren’t worthwhile. In fairness, though, I should point out that my old professor from Golden Gate Baptist Seminary took verse 11 differently than I do. “If a snake has already bitten, there is no need to call a charmer. One might compare the modern proverb about the folly of closing the gate after the horse has escaped.” [Peterson, Ecclesiastes, p. 125.] Some emphasize the idea of being too late, but others emphasize as I do that an unused skill is wasted [Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 173] or “…even the experts fail if they don’t apply their skill.” [Roland Murphy quoted in Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 245.]

In verses 12-17, we get back to the theme of fools in authority. Naturally, I couldn’t read these verses without thinking of modern politicians. So, I put images of two loudmouths on the slides who are so full of foolish conspiracy theories and so inexperienced regarding government and foreign policy that their ideas do more harm than good. One, Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. is a Democrat and the other, Vivak Ramaswamy, is a Republican. Both are good examples of the type of fool of which Qoheleth is warning us in this section.

Notice that the mouth of the wise communicates words that are useful (12a), but the fool is swallowed by his own lips (12b). Even what he says doesn’t make sense and becomes a trap for him. But it’s verse 13 that really frightens me. He starts out speaking foolishness (13a), but when people believe him, it becomes sheer madness (13b). The crowd is out of control, as it were. Verse 14 follows on the out-of-control idea. Even astute observers can’t figure out what the results are going to be. As for verse 15, it closes with the idea that the fool doesn’t even know how to get to the city. Big cities are obvious targets, clear goals. BUT, fools don’t know the route to accomplishing anything.

Then, Qoheleth zigs when we expect him to zag. He leaves the world of politics and offers a rather typical proverb. The house’s beams, the support for the very structure, is falling because of the laziness (18a) of the one who doesn’t provide upkeep. It sounds a lot like the description of the sluggard in Proverbs 6. In the same way, one can blame the leaks in the roof on idle hands (18b). Remember that Qoheleth has earlier urged us to take advantage of the opportunities in front of us. Clearly, verse 18 is reminding us of the folly of those who refuse to accept the work responsibilities and stewardship of the gifts that God has given us.

But after that zig, we zag to another idea. He’s talked about the joy of eating in the past, but he reminds us that there is a cost. He’s talked about the joy of drinking in the past, but now he reminds us that there is a cost. Some interpreters take this as money being the answer to everything [Wright, Hearing, p. 120] but I think it is simply a reminder that there is a cost for everything [Longman, Ecclesiastes, p. 252.], though it is possible that he is referring back to the profligate celebration of verse 16 and cynically lamenting that money can buy anything for the powerful [Crenshaw, p. 177.]. I prefer my interpretation.

Finally, we come to a serious word of wisdom. Even in the modern day, those in power have their spy networks. So, as Qoheleth seems to be reminding his hearers and readers that one must be circumspect, careful about what one says. Gossip, complaints, and criticisms can be disastrous, even if we think we’re talking to trust confidantes. Modern proverbs like “the walls have ears” or “a little bird told me” seem to have their origin in verse 20. Frankly, it really doesn’t apply merely to kings and “royalty,” but to anyone. My grandma used to tell me not to say anything behind someone’s back that I wouldn’t say to their face. It’s pretty clear that Qoheleth would agree with that.

These chapters are hard to teach because they are much more practical and ordinary than spiritual. Yet, there is wisdom in the midst of questions and cynicism. In addition, there is definitely a foundation that pleasing God, gaining God’s approval, is better than just sailing through life under your own resources.