

Wise Living in Foolish Times

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[0 : 00] Initially, when I read this passage from Ecclesiastes, I thought it was the Bible's guidance on how to vote. Chapter 10, verse 2 says, The heart of the wise inclines to the right, but the heart of the fool to the left.

But actually, the way to understand this passage is by picturing a leader. Picture a leader in your head, but make sure they're a fool. Can you picture an incompetent leader?

That might not take too long. A big theme of this passage today is living under foolish leaders. Time and again, the verses will talk about how disorganized the land is and how unqualified types keep getting promoted while skilled people are left out in the cold.

We'll read about a land of neglect and disordered priorities where selfish ambition trumps the welfare of the people. And none of it will make any sense.

But actually, like all the other passages in Ecclesiastes, I think this passage makes perfect sense of the world we see around us, of living and working under foolish people.

[1 : 14] This passage calls them rulers, but they are the managers at your workplace. They're the politicians you see on TV. The presidents, the committees of the clubs we belong to, perhaps even the leaders of religious denominations.

We see foolish leaders all the time. It's a sign of life outside the garden and life under the sun. What hope does wisdom have when it's clearly outnumbered and swimming against the tide?

I think this passage is enormously helpful and practical for a time like this when our leaders are on show. But also, if you have to deal with foolish people in your life on a daily basis.

As we picture that person, the temptation will be to grumble and gossip against them. But this is a passage for us. This passage asks us to worry about our own lives rather than pointing fingers and going on witch hunts.

The teacher will give us a godly and wise way to navigate life in a city of fools. And he begins with this story.

[2 : 30] 9 verse 13. I also saw under the sun this example of wisdom that greatly impressed me. There was once a small city with only a few people in it.

And a powerful king came against it, surrounded it, and built huge siege works against it. Now there lived in that city a poor man but wise. And he saved the city by his wisdom.

But nobody remembered that poor man. There's a small city with a few people versus a powerful king and his military might.

The outcome seems inevitable. But amazingly, the city was saved. Not by its might and power, but by the wisdom of this small, poor man.

We're not sure who he was or how exactly he saved the city. But the point is verse 16. So I said, wisdom is better than strength.

[3 : 28] Its brains over brawn, as we might say. But I think the really amazing thing happens after the battle. When there are no medal ceremonies.

No statues erected of that poor, wise man. The teacher says, verse 15. Nobody remembered him. 16. His wisdom was despised and his words are no longer heeded.

And there's lots of parallels between that and the gospel. Christians, we are poor and helpless. Our enemy is sin, the death, and the devil.

On our side, all we have is a foolish-sounding gospel and a weak-looking cross. Instead of people rushing to us, asking us how they can be forgiven and how they can be saved, they think we're the fools and they despise Jesus.

But 1 Corinthians, which is on your screen, it says, The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing. But to those of us who are being saved, it is the power of God.

[4 : 38] It says again on the next slide, To those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God. You see, just like that poor wise man, the test of God's wisdom is whether it saves.

Just like that city. Not how impressive it looks to the fools around us. And the teacher of Ecclesiastes seems to agree. He says in verse 17, The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouts of a ruler of fools.

It seems that wisdom is understated and underestimated. It's the quiet achiever in a city of fools. Verse 18, Wisdom is better than weapons of war.

And that means it's strong and effective. Maybe we might say the pen is mightier than the sword. Strong and effective, but wisdom is also very fragile.

Look at verse 18. But one sinner destroys much good. As dead flies give perfume a bad smell, so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honour.

[5 : 51] Just a moment of foolishness can undo a wise and godly life. Think about people like Bill Clinton. Distinguished life in politics.

But all he's remembered for is that one indiscretion. His reputation destroyed forever. Think about actors and athletes. A good life.

Successful, but undone by discretions. It's the marital affair that ruins years and years of commitment. In the Bible, people like King David.

A wise and godly life, but totally undone. Through one indiscretion with Bathsheba. Peter, the great apostle. But he's still remembered for denying Jesus three times.

You see, just as a tiny dead fly can ruin a whole bottle of perfume, or one bad apple can spoil the whole bunch, so too a wise and godly life.

[6 : 52] A good reputation can be undone by a moment of foolishness. And it's the reason why is because they're totally opposite. 10 verse 2 says, The heart of the wise inclines to the right, but the heart of the fool to the left.

Verse 3 says, Even when fools do something simple like walk down the street, they can't help but shout out to everyone what fools they are. Whereas in verse 4, Wisdom is resolute and calm.

If a ruler's anger rises against you, do not leave your post. Calmness can lay great offenses to rest. I don't know if you've ever had a manager at work have their anger rise up against you.

Perhaps you've had a teacher shout at you when you did nothing wrong. The temptation is always to respond in kind or to lurk in the background and destroy their reputation with gossip and innuendo.

But that is foolish because it only escalates the situation. Wisdom is resolute and calm. It diffuses the tension and seeks peace and lives to fight another day.

[8 : 05] On your screen from the one Peter reading, which Andrew brought us, Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.

It seems that wisdom and folly are at odds with one another. Folly is constantly trying to knock a wise life off its course and off the path.

Wisdom is strong and effective, but it is fragile. It only takes a moment of foolishness to undo a godly and wise reputation.

And in this city, when it comes to reputations, people walk around saying, I don't care what people think of me. But is that wise? As Christians, we're living for something bigger than ourselves.

We ought to care about our reputation. We're not to bring the gospel into disrepute, are we? We have to honour Jesus by the way we live.

[9 : 08] On the slide, 1 Peter says, live such good lives among the pagans that though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits.

And the Christian life will always be tough in a city like this. We might be despised and ignored, but a wise and godly life can even lead fools to be saved, just as 1 Peter says.

As they see a quiet, resolute and calm example, maybe they will glorify God one day in their own lives.

Look at verse 5, chapter 10, verse 5. There is an evil I have seen under the sun, the sort of error that arises from a ruler. Fools are put in many high positions while the rich occupy the low ones.

I've seen slaves on horseback while princes go on foot like slaves. It seems the very fools who in verse 3 lack sense are the ones promoted to positions of leadership while qualified people are subjected to service.

[10 : 20] And perhaps that makes sense of the city you see around you. Perhaps that makes sense of how foolish politicians keep getting elected and calling the shots.

Maybe that explains the managers at your workplace. Managers who throw resources at fruitless projects, promoting other fools while you're left out in the cold.

Bosses who snap their fingers and expect results all the while having no idea what it takes to produce and the work that you have to do to get it done.

And of course, taking credit for all your hard graft. Perhaps this sort of foolishness is what you see in the Anglican diocese or the local club that you belong to.

How did the city get so upside down? According to verse 5, it says, through the foolish error of the ruler. It's a decision here, a budget cut there.

[11 : 24] The wrong person gets promoted here while the right one is made redundant. And just like that, through just a little bit of folly, the whole organisation can be undone and thrown off course.

Wisdom is strong and effective but fragile and susceptible to folly. In verse 8 and 9, it's the same idea. A little lapse in concentration, you can fall into the pit.

A little bit of a hurry bitten by the snake. A little bit of carelessness injured by stones and so on. A little foolishness can bring on serious injury.

And I think that makes wisdom very precious in the world. Verse 10, when the axe is dull, sure, you can smash the way through with brute force, but wisdom is successful because wisdom knows to sharpen the blade before you begin.

And I guess these small proverbs are self-evident. Of course you should be careful and not rush through a dangerous situation. Of course you should think your way through a project.

[12 : 35] It's strange, isn't it, that the Bible has to make such a strong case for wisdom. And I guess that's partly due to life outside the garden, to our sin and this broken world.

The book of Proverbs, it says, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction. In this city, most people don't fear the Lord, so there won't be many wise and godly examples to follow.

Of course the Bible will have to contend for wisdom when no one fears the Lord. And I guess that makes us as Christians quite similar to that small city at the start, facing trouble, surrounded by fools, and like that city, we can't rely on worldly power to save, only a God-given wisdom.

And that means the Christian needs to be vigilant to live a wise life, on guard, as it were. We said that folly and wisdom were at odds with each other, that folly tries to throw us off course, and perhaps on guard is already the posture you adopt as you navigate life amongst fools.

If you're anything like me, the big danger area will be with our words and how we use our speech. look at verse 12. Words from the mouth of the wise are gracious, but fools are consumed by their own lips.

[14 : 13] At the beginning their words are folly, at the end they are wicked madness, and fools multiply words. I don't know about you, but do you know a fool who, the more they keep talking, the more they keep digging themselves into trouble?

the whole time you're saying, why don't you just stop while you're ahead? The picture in verse 12 is that they're consumed, or eaten alive, by the very words that come out of their mouths.

They have a mouth that just keeps getting them in trouble. Their words start out as foolishness, perhaps even a bit of folksy humour to begin with, but by the end, their conversation it says descends to wicked madness.

And what's worse, verse 14 says, they multiply their words, which means they just can't stop themselves, they just can't be quiet. They just keep talking and talking and getting themselves into trouble.

I see lots of Christians like this on social media, Facebook, they want respect, they want to win their friends for Jesus, but they just keep posting drivel on the internet.

[15 : 28] And you can see their good reputation be consumed or gobbled up by endless posts that are completely foolish.

What's worse, they keep posting something stupid every other day. Verse 14, they multiply their words and so they multiply their problems.

Wisdom with our speech is huge. Verse 16, Woe to the land whose king was a servant or a child and whose princes feast in the morning.

Blessed is the land whose king is of noble birth and whose princes eat at a proper time for strength and not for drunkenness. Verse 16 and 17 talk about two lands.

One is in ruins because the king is like a servant or a child. His land is upside down. His princes feast and party in the morning instead of working for the welfare of the people.

[16 : 27] They are lazy, verse 18, and their land is like a neglected house whose rafters sag and whose roof leaks. Just as rafters hold up a roof, so people hold up a nation.

But instead of looking after their welfare, the rulers prioritize themselves. The princes scoff at the thought of doing good, verse 19, a feast is made for laughter, wine makes life merry, and money is the answer for everything.

Let the good times roll, they say. And I wonder if that makes sense of the world you see around you. It seems as though this passage gives us license to grumble and gossip against fools like this.

The temptation will always be to bash a leader like that. It's so easy when they're so inept. There's not much accountability with our words.

Not many people will say, hey, is that the godly way you should be speaking about those other people? Wisdom with our speech is huge.

[17 : 38] And so let's give the poor old polities a break. Let's not gossip and backstab the boss, even if they are a ruler like the one we described just then.

The president, the committee of the local club you belong to, perhaps it's the medical specialist you thought was your great saviour. It's so easy and tempting to lurk in the background and gossip and destroy someone's reputation with innuendos.

verse 20, do not revile the king, a king like that, even in your thoughts, or curse the rich in your bedroom, because a bird in the sky may carry your words, and a bird on the wing may report what you say.

In other words, the walls may have ears. And that doesn't mean it's okay to gossip just as long as you get caught. It would be foolish, wouldn't it, to curse the king, foolish to backstab the boss.

Careless talk, loose lips, will always land us in trouble and damage a Christian reputation. Be wise and stop talking is the idea.

[18 : 58] The rector of my old church, he used to say, don't come and talk to me about other people unless you talk to them face to face first.

And I think that's not a bad start. What if we only spoke about people as if they were right in front of us? What if we only spoke about people knowing that God was listening and that our Christian reputation was at stake?

Wisdom is effective, but remember it's also fragile. It only takes a moment of folly, just a little bit of loose lips to sink a Christian reputation.

For some of us, I wonder might that mean you only get to use half your normal word quota for the day? If you stop talking about other people, I wonder if that reduces the words you say by half.

A bit more quiet wouldn't be too high a price to pay to strive for wisdom in a city of fools.

[20 : 08] We don't have the time this morning. Chapter 11, that is about life under foolish leaders. The idea is we just don't know what tomorrow will bring.

Verse 1 and 2, it talks about shipping your grain across the sea. You just won't get a return in this land. Verse 2 talks about spreading your money out because you don't know what disaster will happen when fools are running the economy.

Verse 5 says, just as we don't know the path of the wind or how the body is formed, so we cannot understand the work of God, the maker of all things. We don't always understand why God puts these foolish leaders where they are.

We can't always see how they fit into his sovereign plans. We can't complain these leaders away. As we said at the start, all we can do is work on ourselves and the teacher holds out wisdom as the way to navigate life when we're surrounded by them.

In our New Testament reading of 1 Peter, the context was similar to that small city at the start. Suffering in the face of fools, Peter cautions a wisdom with speech just as Ecclesiastes does.

[21 : 29] He says on a slide, actually I've got it here, he says, do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. Keep our tongues from evil and seek peace and pursue it.

I wonder what would be the reaction to anger if you came with calm peacemaking. How might your friends treat you if you responded to their gossip with quiet from your end?

Like that poor man at the start, perhaps we might be despised, our words, our actions not heeded. But Peter says on the screen, even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed.

Do not fear their threats, do not be frightened, but in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. But do this with gentleness and respect. He says keep a clear conscience so that the fools who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

It is better if it's God's will to suffer for doing good than doing evil. And in case you missed it there, the big idea was to do good even if you suffer for it, to keep being wise even if it's unrecognised and understated.

[22 : 49] And that means being diligent without behaviour, it means being on guard, especially with our tongue, means acting with one eye on God and our Christian reputation.

That would be the wise thing to do in a city of fools. And obviously it's exactly what Jesus would do on the screen. Christ also suffered once for sins.

He suffered for doing good, the righteous for the unrighteous. Why? For salvation's sake, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body, but made alive in the spirit.

He is just like that city at the start. No one recognised him, thought he was foolish, thought the cross was weak. But Christ, the power of God, the wisdom of God, through his wisdom he saves.

There aren't many models of godly wisdom in a city that doesn't fear the Lord. Peter says you'll always have Jesus to look up to. He suffered and was despised, but he didn't fight back with his words, but was quiet, godly with his mouth, entrusting himself to God.

[24 : 09] If Jesus suffered for doing good like that, if he models the wise way, let him be the model for us when we're suffering under foolish people, foolish leaders.

God will be the Lord. Let me pray as we finish. Father God, thank you for wisdom. Father, please help us guard our mouths, guard our Christian reputations, especially when we have to suffer under foolish leaders.

Perhaps we're surrounded by fools in our neighbourhoods. Father, please would we be quiet. help us to be vigilant. Help us to remember the lesson that a little bit of folly can knock us off our path and damage our reputation.

Father, we thank you for Jesus. Jesus is your wisdom and we thank you that he gave us the ultimate example of a quiet and godly and wise life.

Father, we thank you that wisdom saves. Help us to be like Jesus. We ask it in his name. Amen. Amen.