

SCRIPTURE LESSON TEXT

ECCL. 9:11 I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race *is* not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.

12 For man also knoweth not his time: as the fishes that are taken in an evil net, and as the birds that are caught in the snare; so *are* the sons of men snared in an evil time, when it falleth suddenly upon them.

13 This wisdom have I seen also under the sun, and it *seemed* great unto me:

14 *There was* a little city, and few

men within it; and there came a great king against it, and besieged it, and built great bulwarks against it:

15 Now there was found in it a poor wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city; yet no man remembered that same poor man.

16 Then said I, Wisdom *is* better than strength: nevertheless the poor man's wisdom *is* despised, and his words are not heard.

17 The words of wise *men are* heard in quiet more than the cry of him that ruleth among fools.

18 Wisdom *is* better than weapons of war: but one sinner destroyeth much good.

NOTES

Wisdom over Strength

Lesson Text: Ecclesiastes 9:11-18

Related Scriptures: Psalm 33:12-22; Ecclesiastes 2:12-16; 7:11-14;
Proverbs 15:14-17; 16:32—17:1

TIME: between 971 and 931 B.C.

PLACE: Jerusalem

GOLDEN TEXT—"Then said I, Wisdom is better than strength: nevertheless the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are not heard" (Ecclesiastes 9:16).

Lesson Exposition

We have seen in previous lessons what typically happens to the foolish. Ecclesiastes, however, recognizes that righteous living sometimes reaps what seem to be unfair consequences, and fools sometimes seem to prosper. The wise fear God and follow His commands, but that does not guarantee good things in this life. The wise recognize that seemingly bad things happen to God-fearing people. "Chance" occurrences are within God's control, so the wise trust Him, even when things feel out of control.

WISDOM AND CHANCE— Eccl. 9:11-12

Things do not happen as we would predict. Every year, shocking upsets happen. This keeps sports fans engaged. The best teams do not always win. Although it is entertaining in sports, uncertainty can be deeply frustrating in daily life. People who are deserving often receive recognition (cf. Prov. 22:29), but not always. Our hard work is not always rewarded, and we cannot always explain why things happen. We spend extra hours at work, our project succeeds, and then the wrong people get promoted. The wise some-

times go hungry. The intelligent do not always prosper. We want to believe hard work guarantees success. But life does not always work out that way.

Within the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, Proverbs emphasizes the typical results of wise living, but even Proverbs acknowledges the exceptions (cf. 16:8). In contrast, Job and Ecclesiastes emphasize that life does not always go as we might expect. Job features a debate over whether the good suffer or whether all bad circumstances are judgment. In the end, the book reveals that good things happen to bad people, and bad things happen to good people. Those who are most deserving do not always prosper. Sometimes we do nothing wrong, yet we still suffer.

Ecclesiastes emphasizes that from a purely human, under-the-sun perspective, life does not make sense. It seems that chance often matters more than merit. The reference to the word "chance" in Ecclesiastes 9:11 causes some Christians consternation. After all, seemingly random events are in God's control (cf. Prov. 16:33). So what is the meaning of this reference? There are at least two possible explanations.

First, the Hebrew word meaning “chance” is elsewhere translated as “misfortune” (cf. 1 Kgs. 5:4). Although unlikely considering the rest of the verse, it is possible the teacher emphasized that bad things happen to all people, not that random things happen. If so, any consternation about “chance” would be much ado about nothing. No one disputes that bad things (“misfortune”) happen to everyone.

Second, it is crucial to remember that Ecclesiastes is largely written from an under-the-sun perspective. The book contains seemingly contradictory statements because the author is commenting on a worldly-wise viewpoint. Elsewhere, Ecclesiastes urges us not to be overly righteous (7:16) before concluding that fearing God and keeping His commands is the entire duty of humanity (12:13-14)! Individual verses taken out of context will perplex us until we remember that the teacher was presenting a hopeless perspective for our instruction. Chance is part of an under-the-sun perspective, so it is included here. This verse does not contradict the rest of the Bible, since it is presented as part of that under-the-sun perspective.

No one knows how long he or she will live. We should do all the right things to take care of our bodies: exercise consistently, eat healthy food, and avoid things like smoking. But countless people die from unpredictable events that are not their fault, from drunk drivers to childhood cancer. People save for retirement because virtually no one expects to die young. Yet roughly 4 percent of Americans die before age forty. Just as a fish does not expect to be captured by a fisherman and a bird does not expect to be ensnared, so we do not expect to die suddenly. Yet death is an unavoidable, unpredictable reality. We will all die unless Christ returns first.

WISDOM FORGOTTEN— Eccl. 9:13-16

The teacher considered another example. Although he sometimes provided hypothetical examples (cf. Eccl. 5:8-10), here it seems he provided an example that he had observed.

A small city was delivered from a great king by a poor wise man. What response should we expect to this? Probably wealth and fame. Yet the man was quickly forgotten. If this seems unrealistic, consider that a 2007 survey conducted by the Gallup organization found that only 7 percent of Americans could name the first four presidents of the United States in order! Even powerful, world-shaping people are quickly forgotten. The rest of us will be forgotten even more quickly.

Even having tremendous wisdom does not exempt us from the unavoidable fact that we will all die, and almost all of us will be quickly forgotten. Yet the teacher insisted that wisdom is better than might. Even if we consider life from only an under-the-sun perspective and for the sake of argument assume that there is no life after death, we can see that wisdom has benefits, though they are fleeting. Wisdom is better than might. After all, through one poor man’s wisdom a tiny city was saved. Without his wisdom, the city would have fallen. His wisdom had benefits!

Likewise in our daily lives, a little wisdom goes further than a lot of thoughtless effort. Although the adage “work smarter, not harder” is often used sarcastically, there is some merit to it. If we use a dull ax, we must work much harder than if we use a sharp one (10:10).

If we think before we act, we will not waste as much effort as we would if we had acted thoughtlessly. It does not matter how mighty a nation is if it is governed foolishly. Its economic and military advantages will be wasted.

WISDOM'S VALUE—Eccl. 9:17-18

The loudest voices are rarely the wisest. Fools delight in sharing their opinion (Prov. 18:2). In contrast, we ought to listen before we speak. Since the words of the wise are better than the shouting of fools, we may need to talk less. If we are constantly sharing our opinions, we may never listen to the wise person we are talking over.

Beyond that, we may need to seek out wise people. If we listen only to the most popular pundits, we will listen to the loudest voices but not necessarily the wisest. Some positions of influence are earned by years of wise counsel; others by marketing and self-promotion. Consider whether you get your news and advice from wise voices or from loud ones.

Wisdom can lead to greater prosperity than weapons of war. War leads to destruction, whereas wisdom leads to growth. Although sometimes wars are necessary in our fallen world, they produce casualties. War can lead to a nation's growth only at great cost to another nation, which loses everything the other takes. Wisdom can lead to blessing and growth that does not burden others.

Though wisdom can lead to blessing, a single sinner can destroy much good. Hundreds of workers may build a magnificent cathedral, but a single arsonist can destroy it. Many people can labor for years to cultivate a healthy church, but a single leader who sins grievously can destroy the church's reputation. It is easier to destroy than it is to build. Yet the teacher gave an example of a single man saving a city. An individual can make a difference, for good or for bad. Although time and chance happen to all, and the most qualified people do not always succeed, a single person can still make a difference in an unpredictable world.

A person who gives twenty-five dollars a month consistently can donate thousands over a lifetime. Parents who love their children well can break generational cycles of sin and suffering. A single person can make a difference! That is especially true when we do not consider the world from an under-the-sun view. A single wise person can make an eternal difference.

Reading Ecclesiastes can feel discouraging to some people. But when we remember that it is written from an under-the-sun perspective and that it reveals how hopeless and meaningless many people feel, it should motivate us to show them God's love. After all, if a single poor, wise man can save a city, you can certainly bless those around you.

—Tom Greene

QUESTIONS

1. How did the author of Ecclesiastes begin the passage?
2. What truths do the wisdom literature books emphasize?
3. Why is Ecclesiastes 9:11's reference to "chance" not concerning?
4. How are we compared to fish or birds in this passage?
5. What happens to all people after they die?
6. Does wisdom have benefits from an under-the-sun perspective?
7. Why is wisdom greater than might?
8. How can we ensure that we hear the quiet words of the wise?
9. Why is wisdom greater than weapons of war?
10. What two statements did the author make showing that an individual can make a difference?

—Tom Greene

PRACTICAL POINTS

1. We should not assume that we can accurately predict what will happen (Eccl. 9:11).
2. All people experience bad things and death. We do not know how much time we have left (vs. 12).
3. We should accept that people will forget us after we die (vss. 13-15).
4. Even from an under-the-sun perspective, wisdom has value (vs. 16).
5. Someone may be well known and popular without being wise (vs. 17).
6. We should be careful about how we act toward others, for it is easier to destroy than to do good (vs. 18).

—Tom Greene

RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

1. Which do you think happens more frequently: deserving people receiving recognition (cf. Prov. 22:29), or those who are less deserving succeeding (Eccl. 9:11)?
2. Do you find it discouraging that the race is not always to the swift, or is it encouraging that you have a chance, even if you are not the most qualified?
3. If you knew exactly when you would die, how would you live differently?
4. How do you feel when you accomplish something but receive no recognition for it?
5. Why is wisdom better than strength?
6. Are there areas of your life in which you put forth mindless effort that could benefit from reflection?
7. Is there someone who is quietly wise to whom you should listen more often?

—Tom Greene

Golden Text Illuminated

“Then said I, Wisdom is better than strength: nevertheless the poor man’s wisdom is despised, and his words are not heard” (Ecclesiastes 9:16).

In a world that often celebrates physical prowess, financial might, and forceful personalities, the words of Ecclesiastes in our golden text present a striking contrast to human priorities. The assertion that wisdom surpasses strength challenges our natural inclinations and societal values.

Wisdom goes far beyond mere intellectual knowledge. Biblical wisdom encompasses not only knowledge but also discernment, insight, and the ability to apply truth in ways that honor God and benefit others.

Ecclesiastes recounts a story of a poor wise man who saved his city from a powerful king and his army. This small but significant man illustrates how wisdom can overcome insurmountable odds, achieving what brute force cannot. Yet the author observed this paradox: “The poor man’s wisdom is despised, and his words are not heard.” Society often overlooks or undervalues wisdom, especially when it comes from unexpected sources. We are prone to judge by appearances and to be swayed by credentials or status rather than by a person’s character or wisdom. Yet even if it is ignored, wisdom is better than strength.

To benefit from the superiority of wisdom, we must cultivate it in our lives. This involves study of God’s Word, prayerful seeking of His guidance, and the humble application of truth in our daily lives. Let us remember that true wisdom is “better than strength” and is available to all who seek it from God.

—Gene Kissinger