

A Study of the Wisdom Literature

OT Survey Lesson 301—Eccl. 9:11-10:20

Introduction: The preacher's observations about life now turn toward wisdom and folly. In this section we are able to see both the benefits of wisdom and the problems caused when it is lacking.

Lesson aim: To see the practical benefits of wisdom in life

Some observations about wisdom under the sun

The theme running through this section is wisdom and folly. Wisdom is a great blessing to those who live the life of faith and it ensures a life of blessing under God's providence. However, it does not guarantee success in every endeavor or exemption from life's hardships.

1. What observation did the preacher make that indicates that success in all of life's endeavors is not guaranteed? (v. 11)

Things like skill, strength, wisdom, discernment might seem to guarantee the success accomplishment of one's purposes. However, there are two uncontrollable elements that prevent this: time and chance. By chance the writer refers to unanticipated events that man cannot foresee or prepare for. The stress here is upon man's limitation, not God's. Question: How does this statement fit into the general view of providence the Bible reveals? Surely it does not nullify the principles of divine intervention in the lives of the righteous; yet, it does show that the life of faith under God does not guarantee that we may by ourselves prepare for every possible outcome and/or circumvent life's hardships and difficulties.

2. What does the preacher say may occur at any time? (v. 12)

This continues the argument. Even under God's providence men can be trapped by an evil time. Cf. Job as an example. Did Joseph know that the day he went to visit his brothers he'd be sold into slavery?

3. What story did the preacher relate in order to teach a lesson about wisdom? (v. 13-15) What do you think is the point of this story?

Either the man delivered the city and was forgotten (i.e. gratitude was short-lived); or he might have delivered the city, if they had remembered him. His poverty was a stumbling block to those who could have learned from him.

4. What practical observations about wisdom did this cause the preacher to make? (v. 16-18) What is the main idea of each one?

The two lessons derived from the story: 1) Wisdom is better than strength. 2) The wisdom of the poor is often despised. 3) Quiet wise advice is better than loud emotional rhetoric. 4) Wisdom is better than weapons; but one sinner can reverse the wisdom of the wise and destroy much good.

5. What does the preacher affirm about “a little foolishness”?

Just as a small dead animal like a fly can corrupt the fragrance of perfume, so a little foolishness can weigh more than wisdom.

Some observations about folly under the sun

1. How does the preacher contrast the wise vs. the foolish? (v. 2)

These go in different directions. The right hand is the symbol of strength and righteousness.

2. What point is the preacher stressing about the fool in v. 3?

A fool can even be identified by how he walks down the street.

3. How might one allay the anger of a foolish ruler? (v. 4)

Sometimes keeping your cool helps your position. The ruler may not be quite as confident as he pretends to be.

4. What observation does the preacher make about where wisdom and folly appear? (v. 5-7) What do you think is the point of these observations?

Wisdom is not always assured a place of influence. Sometimes folly is found where wisdom “should” be.

5. How did the preacher show the evil consequences of those who are intent upon doing evil? (v. 8) Is the person who avoids evil actions no longer vulnerable to misfortune? (v. 9)

Vindictiveness often punishes those who practice it. The snares they lay for others, they fall into themselves.

6. How did the preacher indicate wisdom could be beneficial? (v. 10) How did he show that the failure to use one’s skills properly may lead to hurtful consequences? (v. 11)

Wisdom teaches one how to make the best use of his time and skills. However, they have to be used before harm comes.

7. How does wisdom and folly affect speech? (v. 12) What is the ultimate end of foolish speech? (v. 13) Yet what does the fool do? (v. 14) For all his self-confidence what does the fool not know? (v. 14)

Fools spout off all kinds of things not realizing how little they know; but the wise man speaks words that are gracious and aware of the limitations.

8. How does the toil of a fool affect him? (v. 15)

Just as the wise uses his time and skills properly, the fool exhausts himself in unproductive labor.

9. How does the preacher describe the effects of a ruler who does not have the wisdom of age and experience? (v. 16) In contrast, how does he describe a good ruler? (v. 17)

It is folly to abandon responsible work for a “party”. Young people are often undisciplined in working and prefer to play. In contrast is the government that is noble in character and works responsibly.

10. How does folly affect the individual? (v. 18) What three things seem to dominate the thinking of those who lack the perspective of wisdom? (v. 19)

The deterioration of one’s home is just a metaphor for the whole life of the foolish person who is lazy and unproductive. In addition, a fool often has a very narrow perspective on what is important in life.

11. What final word of advice is given to the wise man who lives under the influence of others? (v. 20)

Be careful what you say about others; it gets back to them.