

It's the small things in life that matter, isn't it? It's a statement often made sentimentally: "Sometimes the smallest things take up the most room in our hearts" (Winnie the Pooh).

The Preacher in Ecclesiastes would agree that it's the small things that make the biggest impact. But if we've learned anything about this guy by this point, he's no sentimentalist! He's an unflinching realist. Any idealistic bubble he sees, he pops. He knows it's the small things, but in his view, the small things can be the most disruptive.

I don't know if you caught the news story last October about the high school in Baltimore that had to be evacuated because of a strange smell wafting through the building. At first a few students began to cough; then some experienced difficulty breathing. An administrator called the fire department, while others quickly moved students out of the building to fresh air and safety. A Hazmat team searched the building and took readings, while EMTs evaluated several staff and students at the scene. Five people were transported to area hospitals as a precaution, though the Hazmat team's readings were all negative. Thankfully, fire fighters were able to pinpoint the cause and eliminate it before the members of the school community or their building suffered any further harm—a seasonal air freshener loaded up with a new pumpkin spice scent. Gives a whole new meaning to the ad slogan "Breathe happy," doesn't it?

Yes, it's the small things that make the biggest mess. At least, that's what the Preacher would say. In today's text, he wants to talk to us about little creatures like flies and snakes and birds—specifically, how much damage they can create, all out of proportion to their small size. He makes his point most clearly at the break between chs 9-10:

**9:18-10:1** *Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good. <sup>10:1</sup> Dead flies make the perfumer's ointment give off a stench; so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor.*

"Wisdom is powerful," the Preacher says. "Even more powerful than military technology. But a little folly can undo even great wisdom."

That's the theme of this entire section of about 30 verses, bridging 3 chapters. Wisdom is better than strength and power, but a little folly can undercut even the best wisdom. It's the little things.

Before we get into it, let me remind you where we've been and why this topic comes up now. We're reading the personal journal of an ancient Jewish philosopher and king, a man this book calls "the Preacher," on his earnest quest to find this answer:

**1:3** *What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?* He's asking: When all is said and done, what will remain from my existence? What's the point of this? ***In other words, he's looking for meaning in life.*** And he's challenging us to join him. He wants to talk to us about the meaning of our own lives. He's pushing us to think about what we're really living for, stop avoiding the big questions of "Why?" and "What for?" He's performing a much-needed service, especially for us citizens of the digital age. We are experts of distraction, adept at avoiding unpleasant thoughts and filling every quiet void. We know if we're quiet for 30 seconds, we'll start to think about these big existential questions. In our natural state, we can't avoid it. Why?

**3:11** *God has put eternity in our hearts.* God made us this way. He wrote into our souls a longing for something transcendent. We know intuitively that this life cannot possibly be all there is.

These are big questions—the biggest questions we can possibly ask ourselves. Yet I know that for some of you, this stuff is too abstract, too remote to matter. You're more concerned with things right here and now—living well, making the most of every day. The Preacher acknowledges that approach to life, and it's what he wants to deal with in today's selection: how to be wise, live well, be effective in the simple stuff of everyday life. Previously (9:11-12), he dealt with the fact that life is random and unpredictable. But that doesn't mean we should throw up our hands and quit; rather, we can still live well in this random, enigmatic world.

If you're a live-in-the-moment kind of person, listen up. If you're more concerned about making a difference in the here and now than big philosophical questions about the meaning of life, the Preacher has something important to say to you. Or maybe you just want to know how to live with a difficult boss or you're paralyzed by an important decision. Whatever the case, the Preacher's message will probably hit home one way or another. It's a wide-ranging, often puzzling collection of sayings, but here is his main point: Wisdom is better than foolishness;

but if you're going to make wisdom (i.e., living well in the moment) the guiding principle of your life, you need to realize that just a little foolishness can undo a lot of wisdom. He lays out that principle in the first section, and then he illustrates or expands on it in 4 particular areas: authority, work, words, risk.

## The Principle

**9:13-18** *I have also seen this example of wisdom under the sun, and it seemed great to me. <sup>14</sup> There was a little city with few men in it, and a great king came against it and besieged it, building great siegeworks against it. <sup>15</sup> But there was found in it a poor, wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city. Yet no one remembered that poor man. <sup>16</sup> But I say that wisdom is better than might, though the poor man's wisdom is despised and his words are not heard. <sup>17</sup> The words of the wise heard in quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools. <sup>18</sup> Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.*

It's an engaging story: a small city, a powerful enemy, a one-sided battle, a certain outcome. But then a key figure enters the tale—a poor but wise man. Whether through diplomacy or clever strategy, we're not told; but somehow this man by his wisdom delivers the city. Wisdom wins the day! What value wisdom has—better than might (v16), better even than weapons of war (v18).

It's not a moral tale to show what people *should* do; it's a cautionary tale to show what people *are like*—namely, fickle, ungrateful, forgetful. Our popularity with people often follows our usefulness to them very closely. To put it in the terms of this little story, wisdom can't guarantee you anything!

But then the Preacher takes the story in an ominous direction: “one sinner destroys much good” (v18). It takes far less to damage something than to build it. It's the same point he makes in the next verse:

**10:1** *Dead flies make the perfumer's ointment give off a stench; so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor.*

It's easier to make a stink than sweetness. One angry outburst, one unguarded moment, or one stupid move can ruin a career, a marriage, a reputation. We all know instances of a good beginning marred by a single reckless moment. So much damage a tiny bit of foolishness can

do! David, Rehoboam, Ananias & Sapphira.

The worst thing about it is, this foolishness isn't an out-of-character moment where we were overtaken by a hostile force from outside us:

**vv2-3** *A wise man's heart inclines him to the right, but a fool's heart to the left. <sup>3</sup> Even when the fool walks on the road, he lacks sense, and he says to everyone that he is a fool.*

This isn't politics; it's proclivities. In this culture, the right side was the side of morality, strength, honor (cf. Mt 25, sheep [right] and goats [left]). The Jerusalem Bible says: “A wise man's heart leads him aright; a fool's heart leads him astray.” The Preacher's point is wisdom and foolishness are matters of right vs. wrong.

Verse 3 teaches that there's nothing we can do to hide it. Foolishness shows up in one's lifestyle—the fool can't even walk respectably without his foolishness showing.

## Authority

**10:4** *If the anger of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your place, for calmness will lay great offenses to rest.*

Don't rush off in a huff. Don't join the reactionary protests or boycotts. Don't respond in kind. Christians more than anyone should strive to live out the character of their Savior who “when he was reviled, did not relive in return” (1 Pt 2:23).

**10:5-7** *There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, as it were an error proceeding from the ruler: <sup>6</sup> folly is set in many high places, and the rich sit in a low place. <sup>7</sup> I have seen slaves on horses, and princes walking on the ground like slaves.*

What happens when foolish people are in positions of authority? Other people end up in the wrong places. Those qualified are marginalized (“the rich” – people competent to manage business). If folly reigns, there's not a lot wisdom can do.

**10:16-17** *Woe to you, O land, when your king is a child, and your princes feast in the morning! <sup>17</sup> Happy are you, O land, when your king is the son of the nobility, and your princes feast at the proper time, for strength, and not for drunkenness!*

Foolish government is a hardship to a whole nation; wise leadership is a blessing to a nation.

## Work

**10:8-11** *He who digs a pit will fall into it, and a serpent will bite him who breaks through a wall. <sup>9</sup> He who quarries stones is hurt by them, and he who splits logs is endangered by them. <sup>10</sup> If the iron is blunt, and one does not sharpen the edge, he must use more strength, but wisdom helps one to succeed. <sup>11</sup> If the serpent bites before it is charmed, there is no advantage to the charmer.*

The inherent risks involved in any kind of work. There's a hint of the action-consequence connection in v8: "digging a pit" is often seen as a malicious act, intended to harm others. Likewise, "breaking through a wall" is breaking in to steal, not removing old construction to install new. There's a hint here of retribution for evil-doing. The easiest way to minimize the dangers of work is to make sure your work is legitimate.

But verse 9 shows that there are risks bound up with any kind of work, any vigorous action. The point: work smarter, not harder. Prepare, look ahead, take time at the beginning to plan.

But let's face it: some workers are just plain stupid:

**v15** *The toil of a fool wearies him, for he does not know the way to the city. Here's a guy who's such a moron, he doesn't even grasp the most basic concepts of his work—namely, directions to and from the field where he's supposed to be working.*

Vern: "Josh, you're so smart, we dumb beef farmers would never be able to figure out how to get 'er done that-a-way."

He describes another foolish approach to work—namely, not doing it:

**vv18-19** *Through sloth the roof sinks in, and through indolence the house leaks. <sup>19</sup> Bread is made for laughter, and wine gladdens life, and money answers everything.*

The consequences of laziness (v18) and benefits of work—bread, wine, money.

## Words

**10:12-14,20** *The words of a wise man's mouth win him favor, but the lips of a fool consume him. <sup>13</sup> The beginning of the words of his mouth is foolishness, and the end of his talk is evil madness. <sup>14</sup> A fool multiplies words, though no man knows what is to be, and who can tell him what will be after him?*

<sup>20</sup> *Even in your thought, do not curse the king, nor in your bedroom curse the rich, for a bird of the air will carry your voice, or some winged creature tell the matter.*

The tragic-comedic side of foolishness gives way now to the danger. At first, a fool's lips just sound ignorant, but it ends with "evil madness" (v13) = moral wickedness + intellectual stupidity, the final fruits of rejecting God.

If there are innumerable unbelievers whose earthly end could hardly be described as either wickedness or madness, it is only because the logic of their unbelief has not been followed through, thanks to the restraining grace of God. (Kidner, 92).

Verse 14 describes a guy who talks about things he knows nothing about, just to appear as if he does. "Wise men speak because they have something to say; fools speak because they have to say something."

## Risk

**11:1-6** *Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days. <sup>2</sup> Give a portion to seven, or even to eight, for you know not what disaster may happen on earth. <sup>3</sup> If the clouds are full of rain, they empty themselves on the earth, and if a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where the tree falls, there it will lie. <sup>4</sup> He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards the clouds will not reap. <sup>5</sup> As you do not know the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything. <sup>6</sup> In the morning sow your seed, and at evening withhold not your hand, for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good.*

Two points here:

- Disaster may come, so hedge against it best you can.
- You can't be assured of the results ever... but you should still get to work. You can always find reasons to delay!

The road of life is paved with flat squirrels who couldn't make a decision.

## CONCL:

Wisdom has its limits, doesn't it? The Preacher tells us again and again: "You do not know..." (10:14, 11:2, 11:5 2x, 11:6). How can he say that with such assurance? Because this Preacher claims to be Solomon, and if the wisest man in history couldn't figure it out, you can be sure there's no way you will. We need someone much greater than Solomon. Three thousand years after Solomon's time, someone greater than Solomon came:

**Matthew 12:42** *The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here.*

Jesus is greater than Solomon because, whereas Solomon *had* wisdom, Jesus *is* wisdom (1 Cor 1:30, Col 2:2-3). Solomon's wisdom was finite; Jesus' wisdom was infinite. Solomon says, "You do not know the work of God who makes everything"; but Jesus says, "The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing" (Jn 5:20)= "I know what God is doing." Jesus is the True Wisdom of God, friends; and to live in wisdom is to live every day fully dependent on Him. Even the best of biblical wisdom is not meant to be lived out on your own, independent of your relationship with God. Jesus is our wisdom. He helps us live wisely and righteously in this world. "Lord Jesus, help me as I seek to live well. Be my wisdom. Work out your wisdom in me today." You need more than this information to live well. God has given you an intellect; use it. But far more importantly, He gives you Jesus. God gives you His word and He gives you Himself.

But there's another way Jesus is greater than Solomon, and it's this: He actually does something about the problems He sees. One of the most frustrating things about this book is how often the Preacher complains about evil in high positions—rulers who don't care, judges who won't bring justice, princes who are stupid fools. If he's the king, why doesn't he do something about it?! In fact, this is such a glaring problem, many scholars believe this is proof positive Solomon couldn't possibly be the author, or he would have used his authority and indignation to do something about the problem. I don't know, but this I do know...

In Jesus, we have a Wise Man so good and so concerned about us, He doesn't just pass on His insightful philosophies and clever sayings like some ancient sage from his ivory tower. He doesn't just journal about

the problem and tell us what vanity it all is. We already know that! We live here, too! What we need is to be saved from this vanity, from the curse of life in this fallen world. What good news it is then to hear that Jesus didn't stay up in the "ivory tower." The True Wisdom of God is so good and so wise, He entered into our suffering, walked right where we walk, experienced the futility we all feel, and then bore it all away in His own body on the cross.

Why the cross? Because only the cross can turn spiritual fools into savants. When we look at this portrait of the fool, we're looking at ourselves! We are prone to the tiny moment of folly that outweighs wisdom and honor (v1). We lack sense and everyone sees it (v3). We are consumed by our own lips (v12) and prone to evil madness in our speech (v13). Our ultimate folly is turning away from the goodness and wisdom of God, not on rare occasions, but by the very disposition of our hearts: "A wise man's heart inclines him to the right, but a fool's heart to the left" (v2). What power can possibly change that? Only the radical power of the cross. The cross deals with our folly, not on the surface, but down at the very core of who we are.

1. Jesus bore the wrath of God against our sin, which melts our rebellion and wins our loyalty—which is to say, it turns us from foolishness to wisdom.
2. Jesus' death and resurrection provides for our own, death to our own former foolishness and life anew filled with the wisdom of Christ.

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