

Session 1a
Our Uncertain Future
 (Ecclesiastes 9:1-10)

Introduction: Ecclesiastes is one of the most puzzling books of the Bible both because of its form and its contents. It is written in a form designated as wisdom literature. Wisdom literature was a popular form of writing in the ancient world. It functioned as a literary means of giving instructions for successful living or to contemplating the perplexities of human existence. *Job*, *Proverbs*, and *Ecclesiastes* are commonly referred to as the wisdom books of the Bible. The instructions in these books occur in the form of short pithy (*Proverbs*), dialogue (*Job*), or contemplative monologue (*Ecclesiastes*). The wisdom books have universal appeal because they deal with topics of concern and are relevant to people everywhere and in all eras of history. *Job* faces the problem of the existence of evil and suffering; *Proverbs* discusses how to have a successful existence; and *Ecclesiastes* probes the problem of a meaningful existence.

Wisdom has been defined as: *“the essence of what man needs for a proper life,” “the practical knowledge of the laws of life and of the world,” “the ability to make godly choices in life.”* The person with biblical wisdom has more than secular, intellectual insight; he has a spiritual perspective that pervades all his life. The truly wise person is the godly person. Solomon, the writer of the book, is not writing as a baffled pessimist who is feeling his way through. He is a true man of God who is offering valuable counsel to those living “under the sun,” that is, in a sin cursed world. Yet the way he presents his material is almost impossible to outline. Some view the book as a literary “patchwork quilt” composed of various random reflections, maxims, and exhortations. Walter Kaiser in his commentary noted, *“There have been an almost infinite number of schemes suggested for discerning an outline of Ecclesiastes.”* The reason for the difficulty in outlining the book is that life, like the book of Ecclesiastes, does not fit into a discernable and symmetrical outline. Life contains both contradictions and irregularities. **Solomon’s style of writing is not a defective quality but rather a deliberate literary device meant to reflect the contradicting and irregular nature of this present world.**

We cannot go through the entire book in four sessions, but I do want to focus our attention on 9:1-11:6. Three times in the last verse of chapter 8 Solomon affirms the inability of man to comprehend God’s providential dealings with him [see 8:17]. Man simply has to arrive at the place where he can live with his ignorance. (9:1-11:6) instructs us on how we are to live in view of our ignorance of God’s providential dealings. This section is characterized by the repetition of the phrase “man does not know” or “you do not know” 9 times (9:1, 5, 12; 10:14, 15; 11:2, 5 twice, 6). This formula (“man does not know” and “you do not know”) serves to introduce the four subsections of this portion of Ecclesiastes [9:1-10] see **9:1**; [9:11-10:11] see **9:12**; [10:12-20] see **10:14, 15**; [11:1-6] see **11:2**. **Here in these four subsections Solomon gives practical guidance on how to live in view of our ignorance of the future.** This first section gives instruction on how the *righteous* are to live in view of our ignorance of the future? **There are three admonitions the righteous must heed in view of our ignorance of the future.**

I. We Must Confess that God is in Control of Life. (Verses 1-3)

A. God is in control of the inscrutable distribution of prosperity and adversity during life. (vs. 1)

1. Solomon warned in chapter 6 that prosperity is not necessarily a good thing—it can even be an evil thing.

(6:1-2) There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, and it lies heavy on mankind: a man to whom God gives wealth, possessions, and honor, so that he lacks nothing of all that he desires, yet God does not give him power to enjoy them.

2. Solomon warned in chapter 7 that adversity is not always an evil thing—it can even be better than prosperity.

(7:2-4) It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of face the heart is made glad. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.

3. Solomon now warns against concluding that God loves those who receive prosperity and hates those to whom he sends adversity.

a) *You must beware of judging your relation to God by what is “before you.”* (vs. 1)

(1) You cannot use good and bad events as criteria to decide whether God loves you or hates you.

(Luke 16:25) But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish.

(Malachi 1:2-3) Is not Esau Jacob’s brother?’ declares the LORD. “Yet I have loved Jacob but Esau I have hated.”

(2) Your future may be a mixture of two.

(a) When trouble comes, it is easy to ask, ‘What have I done to deserve this?’

(b) It is less easy to ask this same question when happiness comes.

b) *The Bible offers several reasons for suffering.*

(1) Common suffering.

(Job 5:7) Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward.

(Luke 13:1-5)

1 There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.

2 And he answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way?"

3 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.

4 Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem?

5 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

(Romans 8:23-24) For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

(2) Corrective suffering.

(Hebrews 12:6) The Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives."

(3) Constructive suffering.

(Romans 5:3-5) We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

(4) Christ-glorifying suffering.

(John 9:1-3) As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth.

And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.

(John 21:18-19) "Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go." (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.)

Robert Murray McCheyne observed that "some believers are very surprised when they are called to suffer. They thought they would do some great thing for God, but all God permits them to do is to suffer."

(5) Cosmic suffering.

(Job 1:8) The LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?"

(a) Job in the hands of Satan (chapters 1-2).

(b) Job in the hands of his friends (chapters 3-31).

*(c) Job in the hands of God—where he had been all along.
(chapters 32-42)*

(6) Christian suffering.

(1 Peter 4:15-16) Let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name.

(2 Timothy 3:12) Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

(7) Crusading suffering.

(Colossians 1:24) “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.

(a) Paul’s sufferings complete Christ’s afflictions not by adding to their worth, but by extending them to the people they were meant to save.

(b) Christ’s suffering is for propitiation, our suffering is for propagation.

B. God is in control of the indiscriminate events of life. (vs. 2)

1. All share the same event.

“*same event*” is used in verses 2 and 3.

2. This same event does not refer exclusively to death, although the passage goes on to that.

3. The point is that the righteous are not visibly favored by providence any more than the wicked.

(Matthew 5:45) He makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

(Job 2:10) Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?

(Isaiah 45:7) I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the LORD, who does all these things.

(Amos 3:6) Does disaster come to a city, unless the LORD has done it?

a) God may use secondary means.

b) God is the ultimate cause of all things.

C. God is in control of the inescapable sentence of death. (vs. 3)

1. Death is the one event that awaits every person no matter how he stands in relation to God.

“The inclusiveness of the grave [is] universal.” (J. Barton Payne)

2. It is especially evil that those who specialize in doing wrong receive exactly the same as all others in that they only die.

Under the sun is emphasizing human limitation.

It almost seems as though God does not care whether people are good or bad (v. 2). So why be good?

If evil pays in this life, why should they not fling themselves into whatever they want to do? The end is only death, after all, and good people die just as others do (v. 3).

(1) This does not mean that Solomon did not believe in life after death.

(2) He is confronting us with the harsh realities of death.

(a) Death functions as the great equalizer.

(b) The one certainty of life is death

(i) Since death cannot be circumvented the key to life and living is to be found in facing death and dying.

(ii) The meaning of life can be found only by facing the inevitable reality of death.

II. We Must Concede that Life is Preferable to Death. (Verses 4-6)

A. The living have hope. (vs. 4)

1. In the ancient Near East people despised dogs and they honored lions.

a) Dogs were the lowest of the low.

b) Lions were the greatest of the great.

2. Solomon's point was that it is better to be alive and have no honor than dead.

a) Life offers hope of change.

b) Death shatters all dreams.

B. The living affect life. (vs. 5-6)

1. The living can do things: Even though the living can foresee their death they are at an advantage by virtue of what they can do. (vs. 5a)

2. The dead cannot do things: The dead are at a disadvantage to the living because of what they can no longer do with mankind. (vs. 5b-6)

a) The dead have no future to look toward. (vs. 5b)

(1) "The dead know not anything" does not mean they are insensible in soul sleep.

(2) Solomon is speaking of life "under the sun" not life after death.

(a) He is not describing what the state of the dead is.

(b) He is describing what the state of the dead is not.

(Psalm 6:5) For in death there is no remembrance of you; in Sheol who will give you praise?

(Isaiah 38:14) For Sheol does not thank you; death does not praise you; those who go down to the pit do not hope for your faithfulness.

b) The dead have no further reward to receive by men since they are forgotten. (vs. 5c)

(1) The “reward” could refer to wages or earnings.

(2) The “reward” could refer to recognition.

c) The dead have expended all of their passion for life and are no longer effective. (vs. 6a)

d) The dead no longer have an ability to affect life on earth. (vs. 6b)

III. We Must Conduct our Life with Fitting Behavior. (Verses 7-10)

In view of the *uncertainties* of what the future may bring, whether adversity or prosperity (vv. 1-3), and in view of the *certainty* of death with the loss of all opportunity for enjoyment (vv. 4-6), **Solomon recommends two activities which befit these two harsh realities.**

A. By enjoying life. (vs. 7-9)

1. Again Solomon recommends the present enjoyment of the good things God allows us to experience in life.

a) He is not advocating sensual indulgence, but joyful contentment.

b) This is a call for contentment, satisfaction, enjoyment.

(2:24) There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God.

(3:12-13) I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God’s gift to man.

(3:22) I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot. Who can bring him to see what will be after him?

(5:18-19) Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot. Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and

possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil—this is the gift of God.

(8:15) And I commend joy, for man has no good thing under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun.

2. Only here Solomon spells out in greater detail than elsewhere some of the aspects of life which should be enjoyed.

a) Enjoy the fruits of life. (vs. 7)

(1) Bread and wine sustain life and make it merry—these are staple products (necessities).

(Psalm 104:15) Wine to gladden the heart of man, oil to make his face shine and bread to strengthen man's heart.

(a) Man cannot control or predict adversity or prosperity.

(b) Man can enjoy each day's joys as gifts from God's hand and be savored as God permits.

(2) The phrase "for God has already approved what you do" summarizes what Solomon had previously taught about enjoyment in life.

(a) Wealth and possessions, which stem from one's "labor," ultimately are gifts of God (5:18-19)

(b) Only God gives the ability to enjoy the fruits of one's labor (2:24; 3:13; 5:18).

(c) The ability to enjoy those things depends on whether one pleases God (2:26).

(i) Possessing God's gifts and the ability to enjoy them evidence God's prior approval that one can do so.

(ii) If God had not so approved the gifts, one could not enjoy them.

(1 Timothy 4:4) For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving.

(1 Timothy 6:17) As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy.

“In themselves, and rightly used, the basic things of life are sweet and good. Food, drink and work are samples of them...What spoils them is our hunger to get out of them more than they can give.” (Kidner, p. 35)

b) Enjoy the festivity of life. (vs. 8)

(1) The descriptions here are the opposite of mournful grief.

(2) These represent luxuries.

“All the things that we call the ‘goods’ of life—health, riches, possessions, position, sensual pleasures, honors, and prestige—slip through man’s hands unless they are received as a gift from God and until God gives man the ability to enjoy them and obtain satisfaction from them.” (Kaiser, p. 59)

c) Enjoy family life. (vs. 9)

(Proverbs 18:22) He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the LORD.

(Hebrews 13:4) Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled.

3. Solomon encourages his readers to enjoy life because it is brief (vs. 9a) and it is God’s will for them to do so. (vs. 9b)

a) “Vain” emphasizes life’s brevity [used twice].

b) “Under the sun” emphasizes life’s limitations [twice].

c) “Portion” emphasizes life’s allotment.

(1) This is not an outburst of a cynical pessimist or the slogan of the indulgent sensualist, but good advice for the righteous.

(2) Enjoying life as a gift from God, not searching for meaning in life itself, should be our guiding principle.

“Meaning in life is not in life, but in the God who gives life. Life is not a puzzle, but an incomprehensible gift to be enjoyed under God. While life appears to be futile, frustrating and empty from a natural viewpoint, there is meaning, perspective and purpose found in the superintending hand of God!” (David Malick)

B. By laboring diligently. (vs. 10)

1. **Because this is the only time you have.**

2. **Because when death comes all opportunities for work and service will cease.**

(John 9:4) We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work.

a) As in vs. 5 Solomon is not speaking of soul sleep.

b) As in vs. 5 Solomon is speaking of life "under the sun" not life after death.

Conclusion: The emphasis in verses 1-10 is on what man does not know because God has not revealed many things. This ignorance must not diminish our joy or prevent us from working with all our might.

There are three admonitions the righteous must heed in view of our ignorance of the future.

(1) We must confess that God is in control of our life.

(2) We must concede that life is preferable to death.

(3) We must conduct our life with fitting behavior.

Let me close this session with a series of questions:

Do you admit that God has appointed all that occurs in life?

Do you acknowledge your limitations?

Do you ascribe to God supremacy?

Do you accept life as a gift from God and enjoy it?

Do you affirm the goodness of God's plan?

Session 2a The Ignorance of the Wise (Ecclesiastes 9:11-10:11)

Introduction: Chapter 9 begins with a summary statement that the *righteous* and the *wise* are subject to the same uncertain future as anyone else (9:1). Solomon's emphasis in verses 2-10 is on the fact that a *righteous* person cannot be more certain of his or her earthly future than the wicked. Now in 9:11-10:11 his point is that the *wise* cannot be more sure of his or her earthly future than the fool. "Again I saw" indicates that he is again taking up the subject introduced in verse 1. Again you will notice the phrase, "*under the sun*." This phrase occurs 29 times in Ecclesiastes. This phrase is not referring to the *manner* of Solomon's reflections, but to the *sphere* of his reflections. It speaks of the earth upon which man dwells as a set limit upon himself and his understanding.

We must arrive at the place where we can accept our limitations and live with our ignorance. Solomon's wisdom exceeded all of his peers yet he too had to accept his limitations and live with his ignorance.

(1 Kings 4:30-31) Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all other men.

In spite of Solomon's immense wisdom he was not guaranteed of success. Here Solomon reveals five reasons why wisdom by itself cannot guarantee success.

IV. Unforeseen Circumstances Can Nullify Wisdom. (9: 11-12)

A. Human ability does not always guarantee success. (vs. 11)

- 1. There is not a natural or automatic cause-and-effect relationship to life.**
- 2. Solomon lists five abilities exercised in five different areas of life that do not always guarantee success.**

a) Athletic swiftness does not guarantee success.

b) Military strength does not guarantee success.

c) Vocational skill does not guarantee success.

d) Financial shrewdness does not guarantee success.

e) Academic scholarship does not guarantee success.

- 3. Two factors which may upset all human advantages. (vs. 11)**

a) Bad times—"time."

(1) The seasons of our life are in the hands of God.

(2) This is both a warrant for faith and a death blow to self-confidence.

(3:1) For everything there is a season, and a **time** for every matter under heaven:

(3:11) He has made everything beautiful in its **time**.

b) Unexpected events—“chance.”

(1) Chance does not refer to impersonal fate or a random event.

(2) Chance refers to an unexpected or unplanned event.

(a) Unexpected by us.

(b) Not unexpected or unplanned by God.

(2:14-15) The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I perceived that the same event happens to all of them. Then I said in my heart, “What happens to the fool will happen to me also.

(3:19) For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other.

(see 9:2-3)

“He [God] may allow the events and situations of life to overwhelm and overthrow those whose endowment abilities seems to deny the possibility of their ever failing.” (Kaiser, p. 103)

(i) Who was swifter than Asahel, who died by the butt end of Abner’s spear? (2 Samuel 2:18, 22-23)

(ii) Who was stronger than Samson who was seduced by Deliah? (Judges 16:19)

(iii) Who was wiser than Solomon, but who was more indulgent in sin? (1 Kings 11:1-25)

(iv) Who was more learned in the ways of the Egyptians than Moses, yet he murdered an Egyptian and fled to Midian? (Acts 7:22-25)

"The misery or happiness of our life is often derived from accidents that appear quite trivial...We may indeed recollect a variety of accidents that have proved hurtful, as well as others that have turned out beneficial to us. But to those who are taught to make a due improvement of what befalls them, nothing is eventually hurtful." (Lawson)

B. Human ability does not always deliver from calamity. (vs. 12)

1. The seasons of life are unpredictable—*does not know*.
2. The seasons of life are inescapable—*an evil net...a snare*.
3. The seasons of life are sudden—*it suddenly falls*.

a) Man in this case is not better than animals.

b) Man is not the master of his time.

(Jeremiah 10:23) I know, O LORD, that the way of man is not in himself, that it is not in man who walks to direct his steps.

V. Thoughtless Negligence Can Nullify Wisdom. (9:13-16)

A. The historical situation. (vs. 13-14)

1. There is a contrast between *prestige (a great king)* and *insignificance (a little city)*.
2. There is a contrast between *strength (besieged it, and built great siegeworks against it)* and *weakness (few men)*.

B. The unlikely deliverer—"a poor wise man." (vs. 15a)

C. The cruel reward. (vs. 15b-16)

1. He is forgotten.
2. He is despised because of his status.
3. His advice is not heeded.

A few years ago there was an article in our local newspaper about an evangelistic campaign that Billy Sunday conducted in Wilkes-Barre in 1913. A 37,584 sq. ft. tabernacle that could seat some 10,000 people was built with \$15,000 from community donations.

The first 3 services on February 23 drew 30,000 people with thousands being turned away. On April 6 a parade of support was held with an estimated 15,000 people participating and another 15,000 spectators.

During the 7 week campaign attendance totaled 668,300. Roughly 16,580 professed faith in Christ. Thousands joined churches with hundreds being taken into the membership in one day.

The most surprising outcome occurred on June 2 when 10,000 men from marched through Wilkes-Barre demanding the enforcement of law and order and the "establishment of moral decency and right living everywhere." The *Wilkes-Barre Record Almanac* wrote, "The parade was

in the nature of a sequel to the Billy Sunday revival meetings, which stirred the valley as never before.”

The closing sentences in the article in our local paper read, “For all his notoriety, Sunday today is an historical footnote. And no trace of the grand tabernacle remains.”

VI. Sinful Activity Can Nullify Wisdom. (9:17-10:1)

A. A single sinner can destroy much good. (9:17-18)

1. A disobedient or belligerent church member.

a) They can contradict the words of the wise.

b) They can subvert the words of the wise.

2. A malicious gossip.

B. A single sin or small character flaw can destroy a reputation. (10:1)

1. A moral lapse—David.

2. A loss of temper—Moses.

3. A small character flaw.

VII. Capricious Decisions Can Nullify Wisdom. (10:2-7)

A. The value of wisdom. (vs. 2-4)

1. To protect. (vs. 2-3)

a) The right hand is the place of protection.

b) The left hand is the place of danger.

2. To pacify. (vs. 4)

(8:2-3) I say: Keep the king’s command, because of God’s oath to him. Be not hasty to go from his presence. Do not take your stand in an evil cause, for he does whatever he pleases.

a) By not quitting his post.

b) By a calm composure.

(Proverbs 16:14) A king’s wrath is a messenger of death, and a wise man will appease it.

“The lesson is that the self-controlled person who has less rank is really more powerful than the out-of-control supposed superior.” (Hubbard)

B. The subversion of wisdom. (vs. 5-7)

1. By giving high positions to fools and low positions to the rich.

The rich in this case are the wise

(Proverbs 14:24) The crown of the wise is their wealth, but the folly of fools brings folly.

(Proverbs 19:10) It is not fitting for a fool to live in luxury, much less for a slave to rule over princes.

2. By giving slaves horses and princes walking as servants.

Riding on horseback was a position of honor.

a) These positions were not earned by character.

b) These positions were awarded by caprice.

(1) This can happen in government.

(2) This can happen at work.

(3) This can happen in church.

VIII. Improper Timing Can Nullify Wisdom. (10:8-11)

A. The repetition of the words “serpent will bite” in verses 8 and 11 forms a bracketing effect (an inclusio).

B. In the intervening verses Solomon illustrates the value of wisdom to help us avoid the potential dangers inherent in daily tasks. (vs. 8-10)

1. By applying wisdom we can avoid danger when we are digging a pit—preventing falling into the pit. (vs. 8a)

2. By applying wisdom we can avoid danger when we are tearing down a wall—prevent being bitten by serpent. (vs. 8b)

3. By applying wisdom we can avoid danger when we are quarrying stones—prevent being hurt by stones. (vs. 9a)

4. By applying wisdom we can avoid danger when we are splitting logs—prevent endangering yourself. (vs. 9b)

C. The lesson is that though wisdom has advantages, that gain can be lost when wisdom is not applied (vs. 10) or is applied too late. (vs. 11)

1. Applying wisdom to using an ax makes it easier to succeed. (vs. 10)—there must be preparation.

2. Wisdom has no benefit if it is not applied at the proper time. (vs. 11)—there must be promptness.

Conclusion: Here are five reasons why wisdom by itself cannot guarantee success. What should be our response?

Humility before the Lord.

(Zechariah 4:6) Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts.

Dependence upon the Lord.

(Psalm 20:7) Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God.

Knowledge of the Lord.

(Jeremiah 9:23-24) Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me.

Heidelberg Catechism Q 1. What is your only comfort in life and in death?

That I, with body and soul, both in life and in death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ, who with His precious blood has fully satisfied for all my sins, and redeemed me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me, that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that all things must work together for my salvation. Wherefore, by His Holy Spirit, He also assures me of eternal life, and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for Him.

Session 3a

The Folly of Fools

(Ecclesiastes 10:12-20)

Introduction: Beginning with chapter 9 Solomon has been instructing his readers on how we are to live in view of our ignorance of God's providential dealings. This section is characterized by the repetition of the phrase "man does not know" or its equivalent nine times (9:1, 5, 12; 10:14, 15; 11:2, 5 twice, 6). 9:1 begins with a summary statement that the **righteous** and the **wise** are subject to the same uncertain future as anyone else. Then in 9:2-10 Solomon discusses this fact with regard to the **righteous** (in contrast with the wicked), and then in 9:11-10:11 he discusses this fact with regard to the **wise** (in contrast to fools). In other words, neither the righteous nor the wise can be any more sure of his or her earthly future than the wicked or the fool.

Lest we should think that there is no real value in wisdom Solomon reinforces the value of wisdom over folly through a series of loosely connected maxims in the style of the book of Proverbs. We must remember that in the Bible folly and foolishness do not refer to telling jokes or being humorous. Folly in the Bible depicts a person with moral rather than mental deficiencies. It describes one who is dull and obstinate. It denotes any deviation of the mind from what is true, good, right and wise. The root problem of a fool is not mental, but moral. **These verses reveal four distinguishing characteristics of fools and the cure for foolishness.**

IX. Fools are Destructive in Their Speech. (Verses 12-14)

A. They are typically unkind. (vs. 12)—our words reveal our character.

1. The wise are characterized by gracious words.

a) They are gracious in content.

(Luke 4:22) “And all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth. And they said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?”

(Ephesians 4:29) Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.

b) They are winsome in spirit.

(Proverbs 13:15) Good sense wins favor, but the way of the treacherous is their ruin.

(Proverbs 22:11) He who loves purity of heart, and whose speech is gracious, will have the king as his friend.

c) They are affectionate in appeal.

(Proverbs 15:1) A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.

(Proverbs 15:4) A gentle tongue is a tree of life, but perverseness in it breaks the spirit.

d) They are agreeable in tone.

(Proverbs 25:12) Like a gold ring or an ornament of gold is a wise reprove to a listening ear.

(Proverbs 25:15) With patience a ruler may be persuaded, and a soft tongue will break a bone.

2. The foolish are characterized by devouring words.

(Psalm 52:4) You love all words that devour, O deceitful tongue.

a) Devouring words consume the fool’s reputation.

(10:3) Even when the fool walks on the road, he lacks sense, and he says to everyone that he is a fool.

b) Devouring words consume the fool’s character.

(James 3:6) The tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.

c) Devouring words consume the fool’s influence.

d) Devouring words consume the fool himself.

B. They are defined by depravity. (vs. 13)

The terms “beginning” and “end” indicate totality. The words of a fool are madness from “start to finish.”

(Psalm 58:3) The wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray from birth, speaking lies.

(Proverbs 15:2) The tongue of the wise commends knowledge, but the mouths of fools pour out folly.

(Romans 3:13-14) Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.

(James 1:26) If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.

1. A fools talk takes its rise from his own weakness & wickedness.

2. A fools talk rises up to fury, and tends to the hurt and injury of others.

"It is not strange if those that begin foolishly end madly; for an ungoverned tongue, the more liberty is allowed, grows the more violent." (Matthew Henry)

C. They are endlessly arrogant. (vs. 14)

1. He speaks without restraint.

Restraint of speech is characteristic of the wise.

2. He speaks with confidence about the future.

"The fool, without any consciousness of human ignorance, acts as if he knew all, and utters about all and everything a multitude of words." (Delitzsch, p. 384)

(Luke 12:16-20)

16 And he told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man produced plentifully,

17 and he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?'

18 And he said, 'I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.

19 And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'

20 But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?'

(James 4:13-16)

13 Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit"—

14 yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.

15 Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that."

16 As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.

X. Fools are Incompetent in Their Work. (Verse 15)

A. Verse 15 is a proverbial expression for extreme ignorance like the modern proverb, “He doesn’t know enough to come in out of the rain.”

1. Although he neither knows nor accomplishes anything, he becomes weary.
2. His limited knowledge and accomplishments are quite apparent since he does not even know the way to town.
3. He is utterly ignorant of things easily attainable and accessible to all.

B. A fool is someone with “a moral intellectual laziness which leads to a stumbling (2:14), fumbling (10:2), crumbling (10:18) life.”

(2:14) The fool walks in darkness.

(10:2) A wise man’s heart inclines him to the right, but a fool’s heart to the left.

(10:18) Through sloth the roof sinks in, and through indolence the house leaks.

XI. Fools are Detrimental to Society. (Verses 16-19)

Solomon moves from personal affects to national affects of fools.

A. Because they are immature. (vs. 16)

The word *child* does not pertain so much to chronological age as it does to maturity. A land whose king acts childishly is in serious trouble.

B. Because they are indulgent. (vs. 17)

1. Drinking in the morning indicates a lack of moral restraint.
2. The morning hours are to be reserved for the administration of justice.

C. Because they are indolent. (vs. 18)

(Proverbs 26:13-16) The sluggard says, “There is a lion in the road! There is a lion in the streets!” As a door turns on its hinges, so does a sluggard on his bed. The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; it wears him out to bring it back to his mouth. The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who can answer sensibly.

“The sluggishness of the fool results not in flashes of divine judgment, but in the more subtle judgment of steady decay.” (Eaton, p. 137)

“The sluggard is no freak, but, as often as not, an ordinary man who has too many excuses, too many refusals and too many postponements. It has all been as imperceptible, and as pleasant, as falling asleep.” (Kidner, *Proverbs*, p. 43)

D. Because they are incompetent. (vs. 19)

1. The clause *money answers everything* means that the rulers *think* money can meet all their demands.
2. Luther once said of such fools, “Money must procure everything for them.” (Delitzsch, p. 389)
3. “The failure of the slothful life is seen here: bread...wine...money is the limit of its horizon.” (Eaton, p. 138)

XII. Fools are Unconcerned About Consequences. (Verse 20)

A. They are unconcerned about the consequences of their thoughts—what is thought will ultimately be verbalized.

B. They are unconcerned about the consequences of their words—what is uttered in private will be announced.

1. This may mean that the words become as a bird which is released, cannot be recalled, and will make its flight to the intended person.
2. This may mean that a gossip is likened to a bird, as he moves about, disclosing what he has heard.

“The opposite of wisdom is folly, meaning the short-term self-indulgence which marks out the person who doesn’t think about long-term priorities and goals but lives on a day-to-day basis, asking, ‘What is the most fun thing to do now?’” (*Your Father Loves You*, James Packer)

Conclusion: These are the distinguishing characteristics of fools.

What is the cure for folly? Wisdom, and wisdom begins with a fear God.

a) *Seven times man is commanded to fear God (3:14; 5:7; 7:18; 8:12-13 [three times]; 12:13)*

b) *The fear of the Lord is the first and controlling principle of wisdom.*

(Proverbs 9:10) The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.

“It may be said with confidence...that the fear of the Lord was the dominating concept and organizing theological principle in wisdom literature.” (Kaiser)

c) *The fear of the Lord is the essence and heart of wisdom.*

(1) It is not just an attitude toward God.

(2) It includes the full range of response to God.

(a) Fear includes knowing him intimately.

(b) Fear includes submitting to him humbly.

(c) Fear includes trusting Him fully.

(d) Fear includes obeying him always.

"Indeed, 'To fear the Lord' was to commit oneself to Yahweh by faith."
(Kaiser, p. 34)

"The fear of God which he recommends is not only the beginning of wisdom; it is also the beginning of joy, of contentment and of an energetic and purposeful life." (Eaton, *TOTC*, p. 48)

3. The fear of God summarizes his purposes as a writer.

a) *Theistic purpose—To explain for unbelievers and believers that meaning in life is not to be found in life, but in the God who gives life.*

(1) He is the Creator.

(2) He has set eternity in our heart.

(3) He will bring us into judgment.

"Everything that has been said about wisdom and folly points again to the main lesson of Ecclesiastes: the need to face life as it really is, and take our life day by day from the hand of a sovereign God." (Eaton, p. 138)

b) *Realistic purpose—To affirm that much that happens in life cannot be understood, and therefore must be accepted by faith not by sight.*

(1) Man views his life "under the sun."

(2) God is in heaven.

(5:2) Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few.

"The Preacher wishes to deliver us from a rosy-colored, self-confident godless life, with its inevitable cynicism and bitterness, and from trusting in wisdom, pleasure, wealth, and human justice or integrity. He wishes to drive us to see that God is there, that He is good and generous, and that only such an outlook makes life coherent and fulfilling." (Michael Eaton, *TOTC*, p. 48)

“Wisdom is still the only proper guide to joyful involvement in life, despite life’s pitfalls and inexplicable twists.” (*Kaiser*, p. 110)

c) Ethical purpose—To emphasize the central theme that an understanding of life begins with the fear of God.

Do you acknowledge your limitations?

Do you admit that you cannot solve all the enigmas of life?

Do you fear God?

We must ask God for wisdom instead of trusting our instincts.

We must obey God’s word rather than trying to read providence.

We must submit to God’s ways rather than becoming bitter and cynical.

Session 4a
Present Activity
(Ecclesiastes 11:1-6)

Introduction: As we have noted several times before Solomon has been instructing us from 9:1-11:6 on how to live in view of our ignorance of God’s providential dealings. This section is characterized by the repetition of the phrase “man does not know” or its equivalent nine times (9:1, 5, 12; 10:14, 15; 11:2, 5 twice, 6). Four of these times occur in these verses before us this morning (vs. 2, 5 twice, 6). What Solomon has said up to this point could lead some to a life of inactivity, aimless drifting, or fatalistic despair. Solomon will not tolerate this. Here he calls for action. This whole section is a sustained call to activity. **These verses give further instruction on what our present activity should be in light of our ignorance of the future. These verses emphasize three ways our ignorance of the future should motivate our present activity.**

XIII. Our Ignorance of the Future Should Motivate Us to Diversified Efforts in the Present. (Verses 1–2)

A. Casting one's bread on the water probably refers to commercial transactions involving the transportation of commodities by ship, not to charitable acts.

Eastern bread has for the most part the form of cakes, and is thin so that when thrown into water it floats, and can be carried away by a stream.

1. The word “*cast*” refers to the action of sending something to someone.
2. The term “*bread*” is used as a figure of speech standing for the grain and wheat from which bread is produced.

a) Here bread stands for “goods.”

b) Here bread stands for “livelihood.”

(Deuteronomy 8:3) Man does not live by bread alone.

(Proverbs 31:14) She is like the ships of the merchant; she brings her food from afar.

3. Sea trade was risky in the ancient Near East, but it brought big returns to its investors.

B. The point is not to urge investment into charity, but diversity in business.

1. “*Give*” is literally “*divide*.”

2. The numerical sequence “*seven, and also to eight*” expresses an indefinite number, a full measure.

3. “*Disaster*” refers to the unpredictability of events.

The *NEB* accurately reflects this interpretation of Ecclesiastes 11:1-2, “*Send your grain across the seas, and in time you will get a return. Divide your merchandise among seven ventures, eight maybe, since you do not know what disasters may occur on earth.*”

Today we say, “*Nothing ventured, nothing gained*”, or “*Don’t put all your eggs into one basket.*”

- a) *Diversification demands thoughtful decision—cast.*
- b) *Diversification demands total commitment—bread.*
- c) *Diversification brings promised reward—you will find it.*
- d) *Diversification demands disciplined patience—after many days.*
 - (1) This principle is applicable financially.
 - (2) This principle is applicable academically.
 - (3) This principle is applicable evangelistically.
 - (4) This principle is applicable ecclesiastically.
 - (5) This principle is applicable culturally.

XIV. Our Ignorance of the Future Should Motivate Us to Decisive Efforts in the Present. (Verses 3-4)

Note: We pass from a maritime trade (vv. 1-2) to farming (vs. 3-4). These verses probably refer to calamity. “disaster” of verse 2.

A. Knowing that we cannot control the difficulties of life. (vs. 3)

1. We cannot control the difficulties of life even when we *expect* them—the *falling of the rain* (vs. 3a)
2. We cannot control the difficulties of life because usually they are *unexpected*—the *uprooting of a tree by a storm*. (vs. 3b)

B. Knowing that we cannot avoid the uncertainties of life. (vs. 3)

1. There is an inevitability of sequence in many of life's events.
2. There is a finality in many of life's events.

a) "Man must do his part and not be immobilized by the independence of nature. He can neither predict nor manipulate nature."

b) "Man must do his work no matter how great the risks for only then will he realize the possibilities of life."

C. Knowing that we should not procrastinate for just the right moment to begin an activity. (vs. 4)

1. To plant when there is no wind to blow away the seed.
2. To reap when there is no rain in the clouds to threaten ripened harvest.

"Few great enterprises have waited for ideal conditions; no more should we."

a) Some are waiting for a larger salary to begin saving or giving.

b) Some are waiting for a larger crowd to gather before they commit to a church.

c) Some are waiting for tranquil life before they begin serving.

"Our ignorance of the future is often, under the leadings of God's providence, a necessary condition of our worthiest undertakings and largest successes." (John Broadus)

John A. Broadus speaks of the opening session of Southern Seminary after the Civil War with a mere seven students. He tells of his class on Homiletics: "It is remembered that the Professor of Homiletics had but one student in the class, and that a blind man. But we were determined to keep up the instruction in every department; and as the student could not read text-books, the professor tried to lay out a somewhat complete course, and give it to him in lectures, to which the brother listened with unfailing manifestations of kindly interest. A work which appeared five years later, entitled, "Preparation and Delivery of Sermons," and which a good many persons have found useful, quite possibly owed its origin to that year's lessons with the blind student. We often find that by "doing the thing that is next" to us, even though it

be "the day of small things," we find the way opening for undertakings which otherwise might never have been planned." (*Memoirs of J.P. Boyce*, p. 201)

XV. Our Ignorance of the Future Should Motivate Us to Diligent Efforts in the Present. (Verses 5-6)

"Negatively the Preacher has forestalled alarm by warning of our ignorance and difficulties; now positively he encourages unremitting diligence." (Eaton, p. 143)

A. We must be diligent even though we do not know how God works. (vs. 5)

1. We are ignorant of the origin of the human spirit.
2. We are ignorant of the growth of the human in the womb.

a) The mystery of pregnancy does not preclude union between husband and wife, and ignorance of the wind ought not prevent the sowing of seed.

b) "We cannot understand all the ways God works to fulfill his plan, but we can follow God's rules for daily living and thus help bring God's purpose to birth." (Wright, EBC, p. 1189)

c) Solomon is affirming that there is much that we do not know about God's way, but we do know that God has a way.

(1) The life of faith does not remove the problem of our ignorance; rather, it enables us to live with it.

(2) "Faith flourishes in the mystery of providence; it does not abolish it." (Eaton, p. 143)

B. We must be diligent even though we do not know what God will prosper. (vs. 6)

The terms "morning" and "evening" form a to include everything in between. The point is not that the farmer should plant at two times in the day (morning and evening), but that he should plant all day long (from morning until evening). [NET Bible]

"We do not always know when opportunity knocks at our door. Many of the great decisions of life are made without our meaning to make them. We take a step and then another and we are off upon the great adventure of life." (A. T. Robertson)

1. We need to be diligent spiritually.
2. We need to be diligent financially.
3. We need to be diligent evangelistically.

Conclusion: Our ignorance of the future should motivate us to **Diversified, Diligent, and Decisive** efforts.

“It is wise to not become immobilized by the uncertainties of life, but by entrusting them to God to make the most of today's opportunities of life.” (Malick)

“Solomon urged people toward constant, diligent effort and prudent diversified investment of their energies and resources, recognizing that all is in God’s sovereign control.” (Glenn, *BKCOT*, p. 1003)