

Ecclesiastes 10: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Ecclesiastes chapter 10 As it were an error proceeding from the ruler Folly is set in many high places And the rich sit in a low place I have seen slaves on horses And princes walking on the ground like slaves He who digs a pit will fall into it And a serpent will bite him who breaks through a wall He who quarries stones is hurt by them And he who splits logs is endangered by them If the iron is blunt and one does not sharpen the edge He must use more strength But wisdom helps one to succeed

If the serpent bites before it is charmed There is no advantage to the charmer The words of a wise man's mouth win him favour But the lips of a fool consume him The beginning of the words of his mouth is foolishness And the end of his talk is evil madness A fool multiplies words Though no man knows what is to be And who can tell him what will be after him The toil of a fool wearies him For he does not know the way to the city Woe to you, O land, when your king is a child And your princes feast in the morning 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 Through sloth the roof sinks in And through indolence the house leaks Bread is made for laughter And wine gladdens life And money answers everything Even in your thoughts 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

Ecclesiastes chapter 10 contains a selection of proverbs Which perhaps most especially treat the way that wisdom itself Operates in a realm of vapour And is limited by it While being much to be preferred to folly A little misfortune, error, accident Or intrusion of folly Can undermine all of its achievements The opening verse should be read along with the verse That precedes it at the end of chapter 9 Wisdom is better than weapons of war But one sinner destroys much good Wisdom is implicitly compared to perfume Something that's delightful and good And that has a scent that is quite distinctive In the sharpest contrast to wisdom Folly is like a dead fly Associated with impurity And the smell of putrefaction However, one of the aspects Of the vaporous character of life Is that wisdom and folly Are not equal and opposite Wisdom can so easily be outweighed And overcome by just the littlest bit of folly All of its efforts proving to be in vain The sharp contrast between wisdom and folly

Continues in verse 2 The wise man moves towards the right The fool moves towards the left They are polar opposites And just as the smell of the fly Announces its presence Even when it cannot be seen So the fool declares his folly In the way that he does everything As Proverbs teaches on many occasions The fool pours out folly He cannot help but express it Indeed, there are few things That a fool more delights to express Than his own folly No matter how much he dishonours himself In the process A fool is seldom that ashamed of his folly Wisdom is not always found in kings And shrewd subordinates need to know How to deal with foolish masters In Ecclesiastes chapter 8 verse 3 The preacher had said Proverbs chapter 25 verse 15 Encourages the use of careful speech To change the mind of the ruler With patience a ruler may be persuaded And a soft tongue will break a bone The good subordinate responds To the anger of the ruler with calmness And with wisdom and circumspect speech Is able to turn the mind of the ruler Round to his opinion His calm response will also soften The temper of the ruler The wisdom literature is often alert To the mismatch between character and station It is not a good thing To have weak people in positions of power While some might think that scripture generally delights in reversals And sometimes it does Poor, vulnerable, subservient and weak people Are generally ill-suited to exercise power The ideal is that the ruler is wise, rich, personally powerful And able to dominate Weak and insecure people in power can easily turn to tyranny We might think about the paranoia of King Saul Who as a result of his sense of insecurity Terrorised the whole land When the rulers of a land are not rich and powerful You will also have to deal with the danger Of the rich and powerful people being elsewhere Fomenting

rebellion Proverbs chapter 30 verses 21 to 23

[5 : 06] Also speaks about such a situation Under three things the earth trembles Under four it cannot bear up A slave when he becomes king And a fool when he is filled with food An unloved woman when she gets a husband And a maidservant when she displaces her mistress Each of these situations speaks about someone Who is poorly suited for a position of power Who gains it The slave may be subservient and resentful Ill-suited for exercising the responsibilities of power The fool filled with food is emboldened in his folly The unpleasant woman who gains a husband Gains new authority and influence within the community And the maidservant who displaces her mistress Presumably by committing adultery with her master Is someone who will use her new power According to her evil character The notion of someone falling into their own pit Or getting trapped in their own snare Is a familiar one in the book of Proverbs In Proverbs chapter 26 verse 27 for instance Whoever digs a pit will fall into it And a stone will come back on him who starts it rolling

The wicked who seek to trap others End up being trapped themselves He who lives by the sword will die by the sword However, in Ecclesiastes chapter 10 A slightly different point seems to be made The person who falls into the pit that he has dug Is here connected with the person who suffers a serpent bite As a result of breaking through a wall Or the person who is injured in the course of quarrying or forestry These are inherently dangerous occupations And a slight slip of awareness Or a bit of carelessness or incaution Can lead to great injury The person engaging in the toil of life Clearly needs wisdom But wisdom is walking a tightrope A minor misstep or accident can lead to ruin And no matter how great are wisdom and skill It cannot account for or master all possible eventualities This too is part of the vapour In verse 10 we have an example of the benefit of wisdom in toil The person who sharpens the edge of his iron axe Is able to work far more effectively Likewise, the person who acts with wisdom

Can spare himself a great deal of toil However, even with wisdom and skill Our toil can easily come to ruin The preacher illustrates this with the work of the wise snake charmer This figure deploys considerable skill in a dangerous endeavour In this regard he has much in common with the person Who is trying to master the vaporous character of life Like the serpent The vaporous character of life is dangerous And has a mind of its own as it were It should be treated with respect and caution And only a fool would complacently regard himself as its master The vicious serpent that must be tamed Might relate quite nicely to the verses that follow Concerning the tongue of the fool The tongue itself is like a serpent And the fool has never truly mastered it Just as the careless snake charmer gets bitten by his serpent So the lips of a fool consume him He speaks boldly and presumptuously And because he is speaking light and airy words He multiplies them exceedingly They pour out profusely from his mouth Never having been weighed by his heart The fool is worn out by his toil

What is the toil in question? Daniel Fredericks suggests that it's his speaking That which comes most naturally to the fool And what he has been doing in the preceding verses Craig Bartholomew argues that it's his work more generally Since he lacks wisdom, skill and competence The most basic tasks exact of him far more effort Than they do of anyone who applies that bit of wisdom to them Indeed, this fool is so incompetent That he does not even know the way to the city Commentators differ on what this means Is the city the place of business?

Is knowing the way to the city just an example of basic competence? Or is the city being thought of as the place of council? I'm inclined to think of the city here as the place of business The fool exhausts himself by wandering aimlessly Because he does not know the way to his destination A little wisdom applied to that task Would save him a lot of misery Verses 16-17 return to the theme of the mismatch between character and status Which the preacher spoke of earlier in this chapter in verses 5-7 It is not a good thing to be ruled over by children In the notion of bossiness, for instance We recognise the mismatch between the child's desire to exercise authority And their actual capacity and aptitude to represent and exercise it in a positive form In Isaiah chapter 3, being ruled over by children is presented as a judgment upon the land Verses 4 and 5 of that chapter And I will make boys their princes And infants shall rule over them And the people will oppress one another Every one his fellow And every one his neighbour

[9 : 42] The youth will be insolent to the elder And the despised to the honourable And then in verse 12 My people, infants are their oppressors And women rule over them O my people, your guides mislead you And they have swallowed up the course of your paths In Ecclesiastes chapter 10 The particular feature of the child that seems to be picked out Is the fact that their character has

not been formed They desire instant gratification And so they feast in the morning Rather than waiting to feast at the proper time In Proverbs chapter 31 King Lemuel's mother warned him about the danger of being given to drink And to feasting as a king There is a right time to feasting There is a right and good time to enjoy the blessings of the realm Indeed, feasts celebrated at the proper time Can strengthen a people Joyous celebration and festivity Is one of the forces that brings people together And so feasts can be forces for strength But the person who is given to feasts Will squander a great deal of wealth This should probably be connected to verses 18 and 19

Which speak about the danger of the sloth and indolence That lead to the roof leaking The person who is always feasting Will end up having nothing The joy and gladness of a good feast Of bread and wine Are positive things But everything has its cost And money must be sufficient for all such pleasures Where it is not Ruin is near at hand The ideal king is the son of the nobility Someone who has been raised with an aristocratic background Who is familiar with And able to exercise money and power Who has a formation of character sufficient to fill the office When faced with wicked, unjust or oppressive rulers It can be very tempting to curse them Exodus chapter 22 verse 28 Commands us not to do so You shall not revile God Nor curse a ruler of your people In verse 20 We are also warned against cursing the rich in our bedroom The preacher may be referring to more than just people Who exercise official authority But also to people who exercise power in other ways The advice may be less about the moral command of Exodus chapter 22

And more about the prudence with which we should deal with powerful people The chapter began with a very small creature A fly in the ointment It also ends with a very small winged creature The little bird or other flying thing That might bring our words to the king or the rich man We often fancy that we have more power over our words than we actually do A careless word once uttered Can end up in all sorts of places where we never intended it to go People eavesdrop People betray confidences And carelessly uttered secrets can return to bite the speaker Our desire for catharsis in the face of misrule and injustice Can tempt us to unwise utterances that can make our situations much worse The wise person must be circumspect in his speech And guard his lips And no more so than when dealing with the rich and powerful A question to consider Can you think of examples of the imbalance between wisdom and folly That the preacher describes in this chapter?