

The Unheard, Quiet Wisdom That Keeps Us From Ridicule

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[0 : 00] We're going to turn now to God's Word and to the book of Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes chapter 9. So do turn your Bibles if you have one with you.

It comes just after Psalms and Proverbs, about halfway through your Bibles. Ecclesiastes chapter 9. And we are reading from verse 11 this morning.

Ecclesiastes 9 and from verse 11. Again, I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all.

For man does not know his time, like fish that are taken in an evil net, and like birds that are caught in a snare.

So the children of man are snared at an evil time, when suddenly it falls upon them. I have also seen this example of wisdom under the sun, and it seemed great to me.

[1 : 21] There was a little city with few men in it, and a great king came against it and besieged it, building great siege works against it. 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. But I say that wisdom is better than might, though the poor man's wisdom is despised and his words are not heard.

The words of the wise, heard in quiet, are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools. Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.

Dead flies make the perfumer's ointment give off a stench. So a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor.

A wise man's heart inclines him to the right, but a fool's heart to the left. Even when the fool walks on the road, he lacks sense, and he says to everyone that he is a fool.

[2 : 27] If the anger of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your place, for calmness will lay great offenses to rest. There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, as it were an error proceeding from the ruler.

The 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 stone 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.

Amen. Well, may the Lord bless his words to us this morning. Well, do turn with me, if you would, to the passage that Paul read for us there, from Ecclesiastes 9, verse 11.

[3 : 56] And this is a passage all about the unheard, quiet wisdom that saves us from ridicule in life, and indeed ultimately. Now, as mortal beings living in a passing world, there are many things that we simply have to come to terms with if we're going to be at peace with ourselves and with the world, and not allow our experiences in life to embitter us, and to rob us of the many joys that God has blessed us with for these earthly lives.

And the way of real liberation, the way from the hardened face to the shining face, remember we saw in chapter 8, verse 1, that way is the way of wisdom that accepts that all things are in the hands of a sovereign God.

That's what chapter 9, verse 1 affirms. And it's to be content to let God be God, and not for us to try and be God.

So that instead, we're enabled to actually hear everything that God is saying to us, and so that we're enabled to be led under his gracious hand into all the blessings that he does have for us in life.

To find the joy that we saw last time expressed in chapter 9, verses 7 to 10. Joy in life's simple refreshments, in food and drink, in life's relationships, especially within marriage and the family, but also in life's responsibilities.

[5 : 42] Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, says verse 10. You see, it's when our eyes are fully open to the reality, the supreme reality above the sun, that is the mysteries of a transcendent God and his wonders and all his ways, well, it's only then that we'll begin to have a right perspective on life under the sun.

Which is the way this book keeps calling our life in this fallen world, with all the mysteries, with all the perplexities that that presents to us. That is the way, and it's the only way, to true liberation in life.

But of course, at the same time, the preacher will never allow us to drift towards triumphalism. He does, yes, frequently urge us to see these positive things, these joy in life.

And this joy is real, it's meant to be our experience under God, really is. But at the same time, the preacher is, of course, a supreme realist. And he's very aware of the dangers of self-delusion.

And so he always brings us back to earth, doesn't he, with a bump. Unless we should think, well, ah, at last, now I've got it cracked. Now I really can get control of my life, because I've got this wisdom from God.

[6 : 59] No, you can't, he says, you can't. And that's why you need to keep living with real godly wisdom. That is, living by constant trust in God's words of revelation.

Because that is what real wisdom is in life. It is hearing and heeding the quiet, consistent, unchanging truth of God. In the midst of all the noise that's around us in life.

And the many mysteries and the many snares of life in this fallen world, which is full of bitterness and bafflement. Now that is exactly the emphasis of our passage today.

It's the need for ongoing trust in God's revealed wisdom. If we're not going to be floored by a world that is adrift from God. And even by our own hearts, which by nature constantly drift away from God and his wisdom.

We must never underestimate the power of human folly. That is, of rejecting God's wisdom and truth. The power of that folly to bring our lives into ridicule.

[8 : 07] To make fools of us. And ultimately to ruin us. And if you're quite a new Christian. Let me say it's especially important for you to hear that message.

Because it can be very tempting to think when you find Christ. Ah, now I've got the answers. And so life's going to be so much easier than it was before. I'm afraid that's a really big mistake to make.

You have got the ultimate answer. Of course you have. But life and your Christian life is not going to be quite as easy and straightforward as you might think.

Or as you might want it to be. And of course, that's not just a lesson for new Christians. It's a lesson for all Christians. All of us. The preacher in Ecclesiastes has absolutely no time at all.

For what some people like to call the simple gospel. If by that, what you mean is that you become a Christian. And life will become smooth and simple as ABC. No, it will not.

[9 : 07] Not a bit of it, says the preacher. In fact, it's actually the reverse. Because precisely, well, we've seen it, haven't we? In the last couple of weeks. Precisely because we as Christians have to take account.

Both of the transcendence of God. Which means there'll always be mysteries for us. But also, we're the ones who understand more fully the tragedy of sin.

That there's always going to be a mess around us in this world. And so here in verses 11 and 12, he reminds us again that life is not simple.

That it's always going to be complex and unpredictable. And we're going to have to just accept that we cannot be in control of that life. Look at verse 11. I saw under the sun that the race is not to the swift.

The battle is not to the strong. Nor is bread to the wise. Nor riches to the intelligent. Nor favor to those with knowledge. But time and chance happen to them all. You see, that's reality in our world,

isn't it?

[10:10] Whether we like it or not. We all want control. We want success in the world. That is constantly offering us these things. Trying to sell us success in this product or that.

Or promoting happiness to us in this identity or that. But the fact is that time and chance, or better time and circumstances, affect us all.

And we must all face up, mustn't we, to the predictable ravages of time. And as well as that, the unpredictable events in life that suddenly and often very unexpectedly can happen to anybody.

Verse 12. For man does not know his time. We're not in control, are we, of everything going on right about us. And we never know when some calamity is going to face us.

Some sudden event pounces on us and catches us out. Like a bird or a fish suddenly caught in a net or a snare. Indeed, as one scholar says, the God of order brings chaos to life so as to remind us that we are not gods who control the present or the future.

[11:22] Instead, we're mortals in need of repentance in dust and ashes. Every such occasion, he says, is a moment of grace. And an opportunity to look reality straight in the eye.

It's a moment in which we are helped to remember who controls the times. I wonder if the events of the past two years and the chaos of the pandemic have been seen in that light by many people. Not much sign is there of humbling. Rather, the opposite, isn't there? An awful lot of signs of human hubris.

Thinking that we can control nature in a pandemic with all sorts of human dictates and decrees. And a lot of rejoicing in that idea that we can. However empty it's actually turning out to be.

But there's very little sign in the world, is there? A lot of repentance in the face of Almighty God. That's what the Lord Jesus says we should be learning from every calamity that happens in life, isn't it?

[12:28] Read Luke 13. When these things happen, he's saying, God's speaking to you. Unless you repent, you also will perish. And the same is true on a personal level.

None of our lives can be planned and controlled, can they? Down to the last detail. Your job might suddenly move you to a different city or even to a different country altogether. Or your job might be taken away all of a sudden.

Or you suddenly get struck by some illness or some disability. Or maybe it's just some innocent thing that happens. Not some tragedy, but something that just turns the plans of your life right around 180 degrees.

Changes everything. Time and circumstances happen to all. And that's why we need constantly the steady, quiet wisdom of God.

So we're not unbalanced. We're not floored. We're not left floundering in life. When events might otherwise make absolute fools of us. And that's the message of verses 11 to 18 here.

[13:30] They're saying receiving God's wisdom will rescue us. Amid the many snares of an unpredictable fallen world.

And only receiving God's wisdom will rescue us. God's wisdom is the only anchor that will hold us firm and sure in the storms of life. As the old B.B. hymn says.

When the squalls blow up so quickly. And sometimes cause havoc for our lives. And God's wisdom rescues us because it keeps us anchored in that greater, bigger reality.

The truth of the world that is above and beyond this earthly sun. And that is what helps us to see this world with all its complexities with an eternal perspective.

And that above all is what we need. Among the many nets and snares that he speaks about here in verse 12 of life.

[14:28] Under the sun. However great those crises that we fall into might be. And that's the point, isn't it, of this little parable in verses 13 to 15. A little beleaguered city that's facing mighty siege works.

Literally, it's the same word as verse 12. Nets. The nets that catch the bird. The mighty nets of the great invading king's armies. But the answer isn't in the might of man.

But it's in the wisdom of one who seemed insignificant and foolish to the world. Just a poor man, verse 15. And yet it was his wisdom that actually saved the city. That's a great biblical theme, isn't it?

The foolishness of God is wiser than men. And the weakness of God is stronger than the strength of men. But we're so slow often to accept that, aren't we?

See the end of verse 15? No one remembered that poor man. And it's a tragic truth. That's God's wisdom, which is of supreme value in the complex mess of this world's unpredictability and all of its challenges.

[15:38] And yet so often it is supremely undervalued. It's unheard. It's just forgotten. Why is that? Well, it's just because it is God's wisdom and not man's.

And the human heart is programmed against that at the deepest level. And that's the reason, verse 16, you see, such wisdom is despised.

And his words are not heard. We're fools, you see, not because we're intellectually deficient, but because we're morally deficient. Because we're sinful. That's why people reject God's wisdom. Folly in the Bible is not a mental handicap. It's a moral choice to reject the truth of God about life and about eternity, about absolutely everything.

That's why there's a repetition there. Look at chapter 9, verses 18 and chapter 10, verse 1. One sinner destroys much good. So a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor.

[16:44] Folly is sinful. It's sin that makes us stupid. And that's the key, isn't it, to understanding all of this. The preacher is saying that only true wisdom can rescue us from all the snares and the pitfalls of life.

But it's axiomatic for him that true wisdom means heeding the revelation of reality that comes from God alone. Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, says Proverbs repeatedly.

And that's why I remember back in chapter 5, verse 1 of Ecclesiastes, it said, You draw near to the house of God to be quiet, not to speak, but to listen to him. God is the one you must fear, he says. If you want not to be, find a fool in this life. You see, he's talking about a worldview. He's talking about an understanding of the whole cosmos that comes uniquely from God himself.

It's God's truth. It's God's word that teaches us how to live. It's God's word that teaches us what's right and what's wrong. And so it's God's moral order that we must pay heed to if we're going to navigate life with a sense of proper values about absolutely everything.

[18:08] That's what Solomon prayed for. Do you remember? In 1 Kings chapter 3, when he was made king, he prayed for wisdom from God. Give your servant, he said, an understanding mind that I may discern between good and evil.

Well, how many presidents and prime ministers pray that on their accession to power, do you think? But you see, that is the wisdom that protects in life.

We saw that in chapter 7, verses 11 and 12. It protects those who see under the sun. And remember, that verse goes on to say, well, ultimately preserve the life of him who has that wisdom. Because that alone is the wisdom of true faith. Real submission to the authority of Almighty God. His words and his ways.

Including his ordering for life here under the sun. Verse 17 here, the quiet, humble acceptance. The hearing of the true words of wisdom is far better, verse 18, than all the human armor and weaponry in the battles of life.

[19:21] But alas, so often it is that wisdom that goes unheard. It's drowned out. It's howled down, he says in verse 17, by the shouting of those who will not listen.

Won't listen even for a moment. To God's truth for life. Those who hold positions of power, he's talking about.

Positions of influence in society. Those whose loud cheering and cheerleading is lapped up by the masses. The shouting of a leader among fools, he calls it.

Loud voices that will silent, will not tolerate for a moment the sound of something that threatens the self-assertion. The self-rule of rebellious humanity. Think of just one example of this today.

The area of sexually transmitted infections. I was reading about how in recent years there's been so much talk of a sexual health crisis in this country.

[20:21] Half a million sexually transmitted infections a year. That's about one in every hundred of the population. And the rates of things like gonorrhea and syphilis have been rocketing in recent years. And there's a great worry about drug resistance and so on because these are very serious diseases.

But friends, there is a wisdom from God that will 100% protect you from all such folly and harm. And that is God's ordained purpose for human sexuality.

Which is lifelong exclusive union in monogamous marriage. If a man and a woman never have sexual relations until they marry. And only then within that marriage.

They will avoid all of these possible diseases. That is a fact. But you see, if you even mention such a thing in public.

The barest hint that that should even be a part of a preventive program. That clamor of derision will be deafening.

[21 : 23] Deafening. Dare suggest that in schools or indeed anywhere else, abstinence should even have some part, however small, to play in teaching about these things.

There will be cries of shame. Silence these fascist fanatics. No, no, no, no, no. It's all a problem of failed government. It's all a problem of structural racism and homophobia and transphobia and health inequalities.

That's what the Terence Higgins Trust says about this problem on its website. And the last thing that anyone wants to hear ever is the wisdom of God that is far, far better than any of the weapons of war that our health services or our government deploys against any of these things.

But God's wisdom is despised, isn't it? His words are not heard. And that is because, of course, the sinful human heart is hardwired for folly.

As chapter 9 verse 3 puts it, the hearts of the children of man are full of evil and madness is in their hearts while they live. Chapter 10 verse 13, the same.

[22 : 37] The end of this talk is evil madness. See, it's not an intellectual failing. It's as obvious as the eye can see.

But it's a moral and a spiritual one. Our folly is madness. Yes, it is. But at its root is simple badness. Rejection of Almighty God. Paul says in Romans chapter 1, we suppress the truth in wickedness. Well, where does all that lead?

That's what the preacher lays before us here in chapter 10. And in very practical ways, in the issues of daily life, he lays before us the consequences of wisdom and folly. And especially the result of ignoring God's truth and rejecting it.

The second half of chapter 10 from verse 12 onwards, we'll look at next time, it focuses more on speaking words of wisdom and folly. And especially the folly of not speaking God's words of wisdom.

[23 : 39] But here this morning in verses 1 to 11, we're looking at verses here that show the folly of not hearing, not listening to God's words.

It's the theme of verses 17 and 18, which is carried on into chapter 10. And it shows that complete contrast with verses 13 to 15, where receiving God's wisdom did rescue the city, rescued all the people.

The poor wise man, by his wisdom, brought deliverance to the city. So receiving God's wisdom is what rescues us. But what these verses in the first half of chapter 10 show us is that refusing God's wisdom will ridicule us amid the many snares of our unpredictable and fallen world.

It will make fools of us in all the things that really matter in life and ultimately. Notice how right at the outset the preacher acknowledges how counterintuitive this is to natural human thinking.

Verse 17, God's words are not heard. They're shouted down, as we've said, by those in high places. By the opinion formers of society.

[24 : 52] Who are cheered on by all the fools who lap up that falsehood. Seems that ancient Israel and modern Britain are not that different. And because, you see, by nature we are not wise, we are foolish.

As Paul puts it in Romans, our foolish hearts are darkened. Then everything is stacked against us really listening to God's wisdom. Verse 18, one sinner destroys much good.

One loud fool with position and power and influence can influence so many and can destroy so much good and can lead so many people into ruin.

Well, we know that. We know very well, don't we, how powerful the voices of little groups of influential lobbyists can be in our media.

In our government. To swing whole populations. Destroying so much that is good, so much that's healthy. And promoting instead, what the preacher calls evil madness.

[25 : 54] Verse 1 here of chapter 10 might just be a vivid repetition of that point. Like one nasty fly in the ointment.

That's where we get our saying from, the fly in the ointment. One nasty fly in the ointment. A little folly outweighs wisdom and honor. That is, it devalues it.

It makes it easy to ignore. As Derek Kidner puts it, it's easier to create a stink than to create a sweetness. But it may actually be that there are different points being made here.

A more literal reading of verse 1 is this. The flies of death emit a stench. Yet they pour forth perfumed oil. More precious than wisdom and honor is a little folly.

Now, Ian Proven, the commentator, suggests that the image here is of a dead body. A dead body whose decaying stench is disguised by the spices of the perfumer and the perfumed oil.

[26 : 55] In other words, the point he's making is the difference between the true smell and the apparent smell. And in Proverbs, often the words of fools are frequently linked with death.

And in fact, the only other identical use of this phrase, giving off a stench, is in Proverbs 13, verse 5, where false speech, deceitful speech, is described as a stench.

In other words, the point is this, to quote Proven, The words of fools are foul-smelling words of death. And yet they are scented sufficiently to lead the majority of people to value them above the words of life.

People prefer the gushing, oily, scented utterances of the wicked to the bubbling brook that is the fountain of wisdom. But that is certainly true, isn't it, in our world?

And even in the church, there's such a temptation to want to have a message that will smell sweet and seem to attract the majority. Smell sweet to the prevailing cultural mores, to the loudly proclaimed values and virtues of the day.

[28 : 07] People are always saying that, oh, the church must be relevant. We must move with the times. Must have a good witness if we're ever seen to be on the right side of history, and so on.

And it's easy for the church to convince ourselves, well, just a little folly, just a little suppression, a little amendment, a little updating of the Bible's teaching is more precious. It outweighs the wisdom and the honor of the faith once for all, unchangeably delivered to the saints.

But you see, friends, when we think like that, what is left is just half a gospel. What Paul calls the appearance of godliness, but with no power.

But half-truth is, in fact, no truth. It's no longer a word of life, is it, but just of death. It's just like a dressed-up, perfumed corpse. All that can spread is death and decay.

And I'm afraid we have to be honest, don't we, that very often that is the church in our Western world today, in large measure. Refusing God's true wisdom and preferring such folly.

[29 : 23] But has it rescued the church and the church's place in the world and in society, in our Western world? Are churches being built and flourishing all over the place, or are they being shut down and turned into other things?

But you see, where the true wisdom of God is heard and is treasured, then his whole revelation is able to make us wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus as the apostle.

And where that's not refused, where that is taken to heart, however poor, however unimpressive, unfashionable and forgotten it may seem to be, there is something there far better than all the power and might and the weapons of man.

And that is seen, isn't it? In the great advance of Christ's church in so many parts of the non-Western world today, where the true gospel has not been watered down, and it's believed and cherished and proclaimed.

Because the hearer of God's true wisdom has a real and a realistic view of life, with all its snares and dangers.

[30 : 34] The snares and dangers that are both from a fallen world, but also from our fallen hearts. And therefore the true believer listening to that wisdom is equipped to guard against these with the humility of faith.

Whereas the fool, and that includes foolish Christians, they live with naive optimism that in the end, cannot lead to their undoing.

And the preacher shows us here how that's seen in just some of these very basic things in life. The fool, the one who refuses God's revealed wisdom, will be lacking in so many areas of life, and life will in the end ridicule him.

First of all, in verses 2 and 3, he speaks very generally. And he says, The fool who rejects God's wisdom lacks the basic attitude that will protect on life's varied and unpredictable road.

A wise man's heart inclines him to the right, but a fool's heart to the left. Even when the fool walks on the road, he lacks sense. And he says to everyone that he's a fool. Now, verse 2, I must say here, is not a comment on politics, as somebody once hopefully asked me.

[31 : 51] The fool tends to the left and the wise to the right. Some might like that to be, but that's not what he's saying here. What he's saying, actually, is very clear. He's saying everything in life stems from the heart.

And a wise man's heart, literally here, is at his right hand. That is, it's in the place of strength, of spiritual competence, in the ancient way of thinking.

Whereas the fool, because he ignores God's wisdom, he follows his heart's natural inclination, which is to folly. And the end of that just can't be hidden.

In countless ways, the story of his life along life's road broadcasts to the whole world his lack of moral wisdom. He brings ridicule on himself because his basic attitude to life is so flawed.

But by contrast, you see, the man who has God's wisdom on life's road, he has a spiritual compass, a moral compass to guide him on the right paths. And one obvious place where that can be seen very clearly is in the next thing that the preacher turns to in verses four to seven.

[33 : 00] He's saying here, you see, that the fool who rejects God's wisdom lacks the basic acceptance that protects you under life's varied and unpredictable rulers. He can't handle the painful reality of authority in life.

And especially, he can't handle dealing with unjust and incompetent authority, which so often is the reality, isn't it, in life in this fallen world of ours.

Remember verse eight, man has power over man to his hurt so often in our world. Well, here it is again, verses five to seven are speaking of fools in high places, while the worthy ones who ought to be in the high places are overlooked and in the low places.

Those who should be demoted to the bottom as slaves are actually riding high, while those who should be ruling as princes are left at the bottom. Well, goodness me, that is so often exactly what our world is like, isn't it?

Not just in politics and government, though goodness the papers are full of that at the moment. But think of those who so often have huge power, huge influence in our world today.

[34 : 15] Vacuous celebrities. Influencers, so-called. All sorts of utter nonentities in our culture. Well, so often it is many people of real substance and quality and integrity whose voices are wise, but are just utterly unheard and unknown.

But the preacher says, that's life. It's like that in an unpredictable fallen world. It's not the race to the swift. It's not always the battle to the strong.

It's not favor to those with knowledge. And it's very annoying that that's the case, isn't it? Maybe you feel very often that the government is a disaster.

Well, are you going to let that eat you up, destroy you, and embitter you? Maybe you think your boss is a disaster and should be demoted.

And you should perhaps be in their place. Not many people think they can't do a better job than their boss. It's fair to say. Well, how are you going to react to that? Maybe your boss is very unreasonable.

[35 : 22] Or the structure that you work in is very unreasonable. Well, are you going to just storm out in a huff every time your boss gets cross with you?

That's what verse 4 is talking about. Are you just going to leave your place? Are you going to resign in disgust at the very first hiccup? Or are you going to accept the reality of God's revealed wisdom about this fallen world and its unfairness and its unpredictability?

And are you going to accept that? The calm acceptance, verse 4, the calmness, the calm acceptance of reality that he says can lay even greater fences to rest.

That's the acceptance, isn't it? That full justice in this world is only going to come when the Lord Jesus comes again to reign in perfect justice. And that in the meantime, there's going to be all kinds of things we find so difficult.

Well, are we going to be people who in the midst of all of that say, blessed are the peacemakers, those who will lay great offenses to rest, strive for calmness and healing in all these different situations?

[36 : 38] Or just the person who storms out in a rage at the end and a half? That's very important, isn't it? Because it affects so many different areas of life. And often we can be super sensitive.

And actually our whole culture nowadays encourages people to be offended, to be super sensitive. We're offended at everything, all the time. But actually we just bring ridicule on ourselves, don't we, when we're offended and huffy like that?

Just because somebody says something against us. Or just somebody makes some criticism of us. Or even a perceived criticism doesn't even have to be real. Sometimes people might like to think, oh, I'm a very sensitive person.

Often, the truth is, that's because we're actually very proud. We don't like the bubble of our pride being pricked. We feel we're above criticism.

Friends, that's foolish, isn't it? It just ridicules us in the eyes of others. God's wisdom says, be humble, humble yourselves, says Peter, under God's mighty hand.

[37 : 49] The preacher here says, don't let folly lead you to ridicule, to make a fool of you. God's wisdom gives control of our daily lives so that we learn the acceptance that can lay these great offenses, even very great offenses, to rest instead of fanning the flames of strife.

folly, you see, lacks the necessary attitude to protect us on life's unpredictable road and the necessary acceptance for living wisely under life's rule.

And thirdly, verses 8 to 11, the preacher shows us again that ignoring God's wisdom denies us the aptitude that can protect us through life's very various and unpredictable risks.

And again, these things can so easily lay us open to ridicule in life. But someone who is solidly grounded in God's revealed wisdom will have an approach to life that is balanced, that is steady, and therefore that is able to be ultimately fruitful for God, genuinely fruitful in that ultimate sense. Verse 10, wisdom is what helps one to succeed, that is to find the gain, the lasting profit that the preacher talks about, which is so elusive through this book.

[39 : 09] The wise know that as verse 8 illustrates so vividly, pursuing wrong ways will not end in lasting profit, but actually will rebound on us in the end.

If he digs a pit to try and trap and hurt somebody else, well, he'll be hurt. Or if he breaks through a wall to try and steal from somebody, well, he'll be bitten.

As we would say in our kind of parlance, if you play with fire, you will get burnt eventually. Maybe not in the short term. The wicked, of course, can prosper.

Wickedness can seem to abound. But the wise know, don't they, that in the end, as we saw in chapter 8, verse 13, it will not be well with the wicked. Because in the very last verse of Ecclesiastes, he says, God will bring every deed to judgment.

And so the wise believer will not be ensnared like that to pursue wicked ways for gain. But of course, the wise believer is also wise to the reality of verse 9, that even honest work, honest labor, has risks.

[40 : 19] Whether you're a quarry worker or a woodchopper or indeed in any other trade or profession. And so he's prepared for that. He doesn't shun labor. He's wise to the fact, though, that risk is inherent in all work.

And so he's realistic and he's balanced. He's not over hasty, verse 10. He doesn't dive in with a blunt axe. Not properly equipped for the job and so exhausting himself with nothing to show for it. No, he's wise. He makes sure he's well prepared. But on the other hand, he's not so over cautious that he never even gets started on anything. That's verse 11, isn't it?

Not preparing so much but never actually doing anything. Verse 11's really comical. Think of the snake charmer. He's got a crowd around him and he's so slow to actually start the charming that the snake comes out of the basket and bites all his audience.

Well, he's not going to get many coins in his hat if that happens, is he? Well, I'd like to get a black eye. You see, that's the sense of balance of rounded wisdom that's so important in life, isn't it?

[41 : 24] And in spiritual life. Some Christians are so keen so desperate to get on and do things and get places for Jesus. They charge at it like crazy. But it's a blunt axe.

They make things so hard for themselves. A bit more wise preparation would just make all the difference. Sometimes there are people who are desperate to preach and teach.

They charge off and start doing all of that. But enthusiasm is no substitute for exposition. It's the word of God that is the double-edged sword. Our own words can very often just be a blunt axe, can't they?

We're not properly prepared and trained. And the wisdom that comes from a rounded biblical learning and understanding, that is what will save us from all sorts of angst and all sorts of effort. If we'll just be patient, humble learners of the wisdom of God for life. It's the same very often in choosing people for Christian service and responsibilities. Paul says, don't be hasty laying hands on people for that.

[42 : 29] Well, friends, there are many blunt axes in leadership positions in churches because that advice was roundly ignored. Of course, we need verse 11 as well.

Don't forget that. Sometimes Christians in churches are so slow, they're so overcautious, they're so afraid to ever put a foot wrong that they're absolutely paralyzed with fear and they never get anywhere. They don't get started even.

And no advantage is achieved from that. And worse, actually, in seeking to avoid all risk, in the end, they can end up with the opposite, being bitten very badly by their inaction.

Being too cautious can be as big a risk as being too cavalier. Both of these things can make us ridiculous. We can think of countless examples, can't we?

You see, these verses are just giving us a few pictures of the reality of life, but they're telling us important things. That life's road and life's rulers and life's risks present us with all kinds of unpredictable snares and traps, all kinds of things that we have to deal with all through life.

[43 : 40] But the question is, to whom are we listening to protect our lives from harm, from being made fools, and above all, from being exposed ultimately to ridicule on the day of judgment?

We live in a world which, as one writer puts it, where information technology is a more important school or college subject than philosophy. A world in which, have you heard the latest, is a more pressing question than, do you know the truth?

The truth is, we've never known so much and understood so little. And he goes on, we will not find this truth by watching TV chat shows. We will not find it by listening to powerful politicians or famous actors or performers.

We will find it only, only in God's revelation in Jesus Christ, who is the touchstone of all reality, who is the focus of all wisdom.

And that's the message of the preacher here in Ecclesiastes as he teaches us the words of truth, the words of the one shepherd, as they're called in chapter 12. The good shepherd, the great shepherd.

[45 : 00] It's the message of the whole Bible, isn't it? Because all scripture says the apostle Paul, is God-breathed. It's given that we should be wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

And Paul says, we need it all, the whole counsel of God. Put on the whole armor of God, he says to the Ephesians, to protect you, to prosper you all through life.

So friends, the preacher is saying to all of us this morning, don't be among the fools. don't be those lapping up the loud shouting of those who rule the airwaves in our society.

What comes from those high places in our world all too often is just folly, loud folly. And if you listen to that and are led by that, it will lead you to ridicule.

It'll make a fool of you in life, and at the end, it will be shown to have made a fool of your life. Now rather be quietly content to receive the true wisdom of God, full of wisdom and honor, better by fire than all the weapons of man, all the shouting of man.

[46 : 19] Be the one who prays with the psalmist as we sang, teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth. Unite my heart to fear your name.

And if you ask him, he will, he will do that. He leads the humble, the humble in what is right. And he teaches the humble his way.

And that is the only wisdom, the quiet wisdom of God that will save us from ultimate ridicule in this life and eternally.

Let's pray. Therefore, everyone who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock and the rains fell and the floods came and the wind blew and beat on that house.

But it did not fall because it had been founded on the rock. And so, O Lord, open our eyes that we may behold wondrous things out of this your word.

[47 : 35] Teach us your way. Lead us in your way of wisdom and of righteousness and the way everlasting for the sake of our Saviour, Jesus Christ the Lord.

Amen.