

THE ONLY WAY TO GO

by Ray C. Stedman

We have all seen the wall plaque which says, in a strong German accent,

"We grow too soon oldt,
und too late schmart."

Many people agree with the conclusion that in life age increases faster than wisdom does. By the time you learn what you need to know it is already too late to use it!

But in the book of Ecclesiastes we learn that although that is a common experience in life, it is not a necessary one. It is possible to learn before it is too late the wisdom which will guide you through life. Wisdom, however, will not help you avoid all the hurt and pain of life. Many people make the mistake of thinking that wisdom will deliver them from all pressure and struggle, but it will not. We learn in this book that struggle, pain, pressure and sorrow all are part of the learning process. But by discovering and obeying the wisdom of God your life will not be rendered bitter, angry and resentful by such pain. You will not find yourself plunged into a morass of self-pity and depression; you will not find your life ravaged and torn apart, all your dreams collapsed at your feet. The wisdom of God will lead you into fullness and liberty and inward peace in the midst of the pressures and dangers of life. That is the message of the book of Ecclesiastes, as it is the message of the whole Bible.

In the section we come to this morning, beginning in Chapter 9, Verse 11, the Searcher tells us that the first and probably most difficult lesson of all to learn is that natural gifts in themselves are not enough to handle life; natural abilities and diligent effort will not lead us into truly successful living.

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 the men of skill; but time and chance happen to them all. For man does not know his time. Like fish which are taken in an evil net, and like birds which are caught in a snare, so the sons of men are snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them. {Eccl 9:11-12 RSV}

Many of us have had experiences that confirm this. All our carefully laid plans have fallen apart; all our dreams, that we had what it took to succeed in some particular area of life, crumbled, and we could not understand why. We had to learn, as this text says, that "the battle is not always to the strong, nor the race to the swift." That is true even in athletics. In the early part of this century Jim Thorpe, the famous Indian athlete, won many gold medals at the Olympic Games. He stood before the King of Sweden and was publicly acknowledged as the greatest athlete of his time. Yet all those medals and honors had to be given back when it was learned that as a boy he had played professional baseball for five dollars a season, which rendered him no longer an amateur.

It is not always the strong, the mighty, the able and the gifted who win in politics. We have recently seen men whom everybody thought a cinch to win public office, defeated, unable to fulfill their dreams. "The battle is not always to the strong," though many have sought the awards and the prizes of men. The Nobel Prize was given to a little woman in India, Mother Teresa, who ministered fully to the needs of the poor around her. Though Hollywood does its best to impress the American public, the picture that won first prize as the best picture of 1982 was *Chariots of Fire*, the story of a Christian athlete. The *Qoheleth* clearly tells us that natural gifts are never enough.

Other factors really make the difference. "Time and chance happen to them all." What does he mean by that? We often say, "You have to be the right man, at the right place, at the right time." In other words, there are elements of rightness that have to fall together before the abilities that someone may have can accomplish his desire. What the Searcher is saying, of course, is that life is not in our control. The illusion which the secular media presses upon us all the time is that we can handle our life by our choices. "It's your life! You can live it the way you please." So the television commercials proclaim. But *Qoheleth* says it cannot be done that way. "Time and chance happen to them all." Just when you think you have something under control it can all fall apart. Disasters come when we least expect them: "Like fish which are taken in an evil net, and like birds which are caught in a snare." Everything can fall apart. Every one of us has had some experience of that.

But, his point is, there is a wisdom which can handle that. Even though disaster may strike, it can be turned into victory. He has an example to give us, in Verses 13-16:

I have also seen this example of wisdom under the sun, and it seemed great to me. There was a little city with few men in it; and a great king came against it and besieged it, building

great siegeworks against it. 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 heeded. {Ecc 9:13-16 RSV}

There is no record of this event elsewhere in Scripture. Perhaps Solomon, the greatest king of his day, heard of this from a delegation from some other country. It may be that he was slightly confused about an incident, recorded in 2 Samuel chapter 20, that did happen, probably when he was a boy. King David sent his general, Joab, to capture a traitor named Sheba, who had taken refuge in a small city in northern Israel. Joab set his army around the city, built siege works against it, and was ready to knock down the walls and capture the city when a wise woman called out to him from the walls and suggested that the leaders of the city throw the traitor's head out to Joab. They did so, and thus saved the city. Perhaps that is what Solomon is referring to here.

But God's wisdom can turn what looks like sure defeat into victory, although his wisdom may not even be remembered; it may even be popularly rejected. That is what Verse 16 implies: "I say that wisdom is better than might, though the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are not heeded." But popular rejection is no sign that it is wrong or ineffective. We have to remember today that the world will never applaud the basic truth of the Christian faith because Christianity judges the world, points out its error and exposes its illusions; it humbles it. The world cannot take that. So we can expect that the wisdom which we are learning from God will not necessarily be popular. Nevertheless it is that which can deliver, that which can free.

I want to share with you a paragraph from a full-page ad describing their work which the *Jews For Jesus* group ran in various metropolitan newspapers recently:

God promised a Messiah, a deliverer, a problem solver. And if there is anything more difficult than the fact of sin, it's the idea that God solves our problems. But He can! He can make us want peace, give us hearts to care about one another, relieve guilt, mend broken homes, give meaning to our lives and diminish the din of the Twentieth Century with the music of His love.

That eloquently expressed the message of the Searcher.

What is this wisdom we are talking about? All through this book we have been looking at wisdom versus foolishness, and in the section we have this morning there is a great contrast drawn between them. What does the Bible mean when it uses those terms? It ought to be clear to us by now that wisdom is to act upon the revelation of reality which the Scriptures give us; wisdom refers to actions that are controlled by the revelation of God. In Romans 12:2 Paul says, "Do not be conformed to this world [do not run after all the attractive, illusive dreams shouted at you constantly by the world] but be transformed by the renewal of your mind," {Rom 12:2a RSV}. Think Christianly about life! Look at what you are going through, not from the standpoint of what seems right -- the Scriptures warn about that -- but upon what is right according to the word of God. Here is true wisdom: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not to your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will direct your paths." {cf, Prov 3:5-6 KJV}. The opposite, of course, is foolishness, the adopting of the secular mind, the spirit of the age, of running after the advice of those who are devoid of insight from the Word of God.

There follows in this next section a tremendous contrast between wisdom and foolishness, which I would like to illustrate on a very pragmatic level that concerns us all this morning. Last week as we talked together about some of the counseling matters that we were going through, our elders and pastors learned that there are at least twenty-three couples here at Peninsula Bible Church who are contemplating or are actually involved in divorce. I do not know their names, we did not talk about names, but about facts. Some of the couples involved are probably here this morning. I do not know who you are, so I am not talking to any person or aiming this at anyone. But I want to express the deep concern of the elders and pastors about this situation because it represents a running after the spirit of the age, the wisdom of the world, rather than a following through of the wisdom of God.

We need to understand clearly what *Qoheleth* himself has warned us about earlier in this book. In Chapter 5 he said, "When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it." Married couples have taken sacred vows before God and witnesses, that they would stay together for better or for worse until death shall part them. That is the wisdom of God. That is what preserves a society. If anything is going to arrest the fragmentation of life around us, the breakdown of morals and all the other terrible things that are happening in our day, it has got to come from Christians who will stand against the spirit of the age, who will refuse to go along with what is being suggested on every side.

Verse 6 of Chapter 5 continues, "It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. Let not your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger [the representative of God] that it was a mistake [that is what many are saying today, 'I made a mistake']; why should God be angry at your voice, and destroy the work of your hands?" That is not painting God as a killjoy, as a heartless avenger who visits judgment upon people. It rather recalls that God has set the rules of life, and he does not change them. To forgive us does not mean he relinquishes the penalty for our misdeeds; it means that he goes through it with us, he strengthens us in the midst of it, but the agony and the hurt is all there.

I want to express the deep sense of sympathy that I personally have, as do all the elders and pastors, with couples who are

struggling with their marriages. This is not at all uncommon. Almost all married couples go through pain, hurt and struggle. I remember how hopeless things looked at times in the early years of my own marriage, how difficult it was to relate to one another, how easy it would have seemed to walk away, forget the whole thing and start over. But that is why there are marriage vows -- in order to help us face up to a situation that will result in tremendous learning processes about ourselves.

The problem with every threatened marriage is the people involved in the marriage -- both of them! They need to know something about themselves; that is what we have been seeing from the Scriptures. We do not know that we are mysteries to ourselves. Conflict in marriage is a way of helping us discover what we are contributing to every situation. To flee marriage is to flee into another set of problems, hurts and pains that are usually worse than the ones you are trying to run from. Many people testify that the divorce which they thought was so simple a solution to a mistake they thought they had made, only introduced them into a more painful and hurtful situation, one that continued in many ways for the rest of their lives.

My counsel to those who are struggling in this regard is to call off the legal dogs and seek counsel and help from those who are ready and available to help you through difficult times. Look to the Lord, look to your God for help in solving the problems of life. That is what Jesus came for, "to give us hearts to care about one another, to relieve our guilt, to mend our broken homes."

With that situation in mind, let us look at the passage that follows, Verse 17:

**The words of the wise heard in quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools.
{Eccl 10:17 RSV}**

That is simply saying that the insights of Scripture, heard in the inner self, quietly, before God alone, are more effective to solve problems that worldly rhetoric or propaganda, better than the ideas of some prominent opinion maker who says things that are popularly received but are contrary to Scripture. In Scripture, rulers are not always governors and kings; they are opinion-makers, shapers of the minds of men. Yet what they say is often merely what foolish people around them want to hear. The words of wisdom heard in quiet are much more effective than such empty propaganda. He goes on,

Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.

**Dead flies make a perfumer's ointment give off an evil odor;
so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor. {Eccl 9:18-10:1 RSV}**

This is true of actual battles that nations have fought at times. Oftentimes quiet, biblical principles have overcome the power of force. Look at the Civil Rights movement under Dr. Martin Luther King who, though he may have had a somewhat incomplete knowledge of Scripture, yet was basing his actions and leadership upon Scriptural principles of non-violent protest. There is a vivid example of how powerful such a movement can be to overcome injustice and outright physical abuse and set things right. This is true in an individual's, or in a couples' life, as well. Wisdom is better than war, better than fighting.

But a warning is included here: "... one sinner is like a dead fly in the perfumer's ointment which can give off a very bad odor." One person, insisting on following the world's philosophy, can often harm, arrest, or even destroy the healing work of wisdom.

The *Qoheleth* says,

**A wise man's heart inclines him toward the right,
but a fool's heart toward the left [that ought to be the motto of the Republican Party! I don't understand why it isn't].
Even when the fool walks on the road he lacks sense,
and he says to everyone that he is a fool. {Eccl 10:2-3 RSV}**

God's wisdom provides a safer guide through life than the impulsive actions of those who are following the popular views around. Even when a fool does take the right course he makes it clear that he does not understand why; he reveals his ignorance even when he talks. Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer used to tell us at Dallas Seminary, "It is much better to keep silent and let everybody think you are a fool, than to open your mouth and remove all doubt!" *Qoheleth* is saying that even when fools take the right course and do the right thing, the way they explain or describe it reveals how wrong they are. It is like the man who jumped into the water to save another man who was drowning. Asked why he did so, he said, "I had to; he had my watch on!" So even when a fool walks on the road he lacks sense, and says to everyone that he is a fool.

Then the fourth contrast: wisdom is better than running away:

**If the anger of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your place,
for deference will make amends for great offenses. {Eccl 10:4 RSV}**

There are occasions when running away, getting out of it, looks like the best thing to do, but this text warns us that it is not. It

is much wiser to give a soft answer that turns away wrath, or to show deference -- which means to acknowledge another person's feelings and rights instead of your own -- to the individual involved who may be offended. Even a ruler, even a king, can be placated by deference.

Then in Verses 5-7 we have the opposite of this, the hurt that foolish thinking can cause:

There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, 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 foot like slaves. {Ecc 10:5-7 RSV}

An error that people in authority often make is that they appoint their incompetent friends to office; they put the wrong people in the right place. People who have no ability are exalted and put in high places, while those with great ability are treated like slaves and have no opportunity. Favoritism, this is called. In the last issue of Time magazine there was an article on how political appointments have diminished the authority and prestige of the Supreme Court of California. This is the very thing this verse is talking about.

Then in the next section, Verses 8-11, the Searcher returns to wisdom to describe the kinds of insights that wisdom will embrace. First, there is a section on avoiding dangers, understanding that certain situations have inherent dangers:

**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. {Ecc 10:8-9 RSV}**

Very few of us are ever going to be involved extensively in digging pits, breaking down walls, quarrying stones, splitting logs. But he is not only talking about actual physical situations; these are also descriptive, symbolic of the things we do to each other. Did you ever dig a pit for somebody, lay a trap to embarrass him, to make him look bad, or injure him in some way, only to find that you yourself were trapped by the situation you had designed? Wisdom understands that when you dig a pit you too are in danger; you may fall into it yourself.

Wisdom understands that when you try to break down some wall of obstruction that keeps you from getting at someone or something, you are in danger, for hidden in that wall is a serpent that will bite you. Many a person has discovered that in heavy-handedly trying to break down somebody's resistance he has triggered a serpent within himself that flashes up in anger and leads to hurtful, dangerous things. He himself has been bitten.

"He who quarries stones," who attempts to remove something of value, to dig out something for himself that will be of great use and profit to him, has to remember that he can be hurt by that. He may get what he wants, but it will be the worst thing that could happen to him. Psalm 106 says of the Israelites in the wilderness, "He gave them their request, but he sent leanness into their soul," {Psa 106:15 KJV}. "He who splits logs is endangered by them." Here is the same principle. The idea is that care must be exercised in all these attempts to do things that may endanger you as well.

Then there are two verses on how wisdom enlists help in time:

**If the iron is blunt and one does not whet the edge,
he must put forth more strength,
but wisdom helps one to succeed. {Ecc 10:10 RSV}**

If you do not think through what you are going to do and sharpen the edge of your approaches, thinking carefully through how you are going to go about something, you will only expend a lot of effort and find yourself worn out in the process. But the wise man, understanding the need for sharpness and clarity, will whet the edge of his thought before he attempts something, and thus succeed.

**If the serpent bites before it is charmed,
there is no advantage in a charmer. {Ecc 10:11 RSV}**

The damage is already done. So do not go seeking counsel or help to remedy a situation after it has happened. Go for help before it is needed. Seek the counsel of one who can defuse the situation, one who can calm the serpent which is within all of us, before you get into trouble. That is the point of wisdom. How practical this is!

We will close this morning with the section from Verses 12-15, where *Qoheleth* sets forth the dangers of foolish talking:

**The words of a wise man's mouth win him favor,
but the lips of a fool consume him. {Ecc 10:12 RSV}**

When without thinking we follow the secular wisdom around us (wisdom that looks good and feels right but nevertheless is foolishness), we will end up hurting ourselves. How tragically this has been illustrated in the lives of those who fling overboard the wisdom of the Word and act according to the mind of the world. They end up broken, hurting, wretched, miserable, defiled, debauched, empty and lonely. All the increasing misery and anguish of life that we see around us is due to a deliberate turning away from the wisdom of the mind of God. It consumes, it destroys one.

Furthermore, it escalates:

**The beginning of the words of his mouth is foolishness,
and the end of his talk is wicked madness. {Eccl 10:13 RSV}**

Read the papers tomorrow morning and you will see illustrations of people who started out trying to express themselves in a simple way, but the situation escalated until they resorted to violence, even murder. This is the power of foolishness.

Verse 14:

**A fool multiplies words,
though no man knows what is to be,
and who can tell him what will be after him? {Eccl 10:14 RSV}**

One of the marks of foolish wisdom is the effusiveness of it, of saying things for the sake of being heard. I am reminded of the man who said, "All my wife ever does is talk, talk, talk!" His friend asked, "What does she talk about?" He replied, "I don't know; she don't say!" Words that are devoid of content -- this is characteristic of our time. There never was such a day in which people were so bombarded with many words, much literature, much pouring out of words through the media. Yet so much of it is thoroughly empty, unsatisfying and misleading in the extreme.

So the Searcher closes the section,

**The toil of a fool wearies him
so that he does not know the way to the city. {Eccl 10:15 RSV}**

Isn't that revealing? The fool doesn't know The Way to San Jose; he doesn't know how to go; he is confused, weary, empty. So much of what we are hearing today leaves you like that. You run after these things and find they do not fulfill you, you do not feel strengthened. You spend hours looking at television, reading magazines, novels, or whatever, yet you are not fed, you are not satisfied, strengthened, or helped; you feel empty, lonely, and depressed.

Worse than that, you are confused. Many are saying, "I don't know what to do about this problem; I don't know what steps to take." But the Scriptures tell you that in every situation where you are looking for guidance there is a step to take, something you can do that is right. If you do the right, another step will open, then another, and soon you will find there is a Divine Hand guiding you step by step through the very situation. Instead of breaking up, ruining and damaging all that God has been doing, gradually the situation unfolds and leads to life; there comes a sense of joy and satisfaction that God has worked out the problem.

I have deliberately set this passage in the context of applying it to marriage, although it applies to many other situations. I want you who are struggling with your marriages to know that the congregation understands, we sympathize, we know it is difficult. But you are making a sad and sorry mistake if you resort to divorce. That is the world's way out.

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By: Ray C. Stedman

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