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WATCH OUT FOR FLIES IN THE PERFUME

Ecclesiastes 9:11-10:3

A friend once related to me a story of something that happened to a daughter of a friend of his. This young woman frustrated her dad to some extent. She was a fine person, but was kind of aimlessly floating through life. She managed to get through college, but did so by just doing the minimum amount of work in a major that she had no real interest in, finishing with a completely unimpressive academic record. After she graduated she just kind of bounced around from one nothing job to another with zero ambition. She had zero idea what to do with herself. She seemed uninterested in making any real effort to pursue a direction in life. At one point she took what looked like a dead end job with a guy who had started up a new company. Her pay was low, and to make up for it the boss gave her a small piece of the company as part of her compensation. You probably have an idea where this went. To the surprise of the girl’s dad, the company actually succeeded. In fact, it took off. After she had worked there just a couple of years a larger firm came along and bought the company. Her company was called Blue Mountain. It makes e-cards and printable greeting cards. Her portion of the company was worth over $20 million in the sale. After a few years of working in that seemingly dead end job, that young lady was a multimillionaire with a net worth much greater than her dad’s. Life just doesn’t make sense sometimes.

We live in an unpredictable world. Oh, some of it is predictable. I feel confident in predicting the sun will come up in the east tomorrow and in less than a month the days will start getting shorter. But there are so many things that are unexpected, and what is disappointing is that it feels like there’s more unexpected unpleasant than there are serendipitous events like what happened to that young woman. Our culture has codified that reality into a law. It seems a fact of life that if anything can go wrong, it will. Yes, the famous Murphy’s Law seems so true it has spawned corollaries. Is something absolutely cannot go wrong, it will anyway. If everything seems to be going right it’s because you don’t understand what is really happening. Every solution creates new problems. Murphy was an optimist.

How do we get through life in a world ruled by that perverse reality? It turns out that thousands of years ago a wise man observed this confounding aspect of life and came to the conclusion that what can enable us to navigate through it all is wisdom. We will find out about that in Ecclesiastes 9:11-10:3.

TIME AND CHANCE HAPPEN TO ALL

The Teacher has emphasized a few themes in this book. He returns to them repeatedly. This is characteristic of ancient Hebrew wisdom literature. You see this in the book of Proverbs. In part this is a way of emphasizing how important a theme is. Repetition was a classic grammatical device in Hebrew for emphasis. The reason the Teacher wanted to emphasize his themes is that we humans tend to be forgetful. It is a curious thing that there are lessons that we realize are hugely important, and then, somehow, we forget them.

One of those themes in this book is that life, when seen purely by what happens under the sun, makes no sense. It appears random, even unfair at times. It feels hopeless and futile. If all we have to go on is what we see happening to us and to other people in this world, we will conclude there is no point to it and there is certainly no justice in it.

We see those ideas crop up again in 9:11. “The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant.” It makes sense that the fastest person should win the race and the strongest army should win the battle. But Solomon claims it doesn’t always work out that way. We object that most of the time it does work that way. The fastest person usually does win the race. If you were a betting person, you would be wise to put your money on the fastest person in the race, on the better team in the game, on the stronger person in the fight. But Solomon’s point is that it doesn’t always work that way

As exhibit A I give you the 2021 San Diego Padres. I told Toby before the baseball season that I have never been as excited about the prospects for the Padres as I was for this team. I believed it was the best team the Padres have had in their history. All of the experts were predicting the Padres would battle the Dodgers for the National League championship and might well go to the World Series. For the first couple of months they proved to be exactly what everyone thought. They were the most exciting team in baseball. How did that turn out? The race did not go to the swift. Not only did they not battle for the championship, they ended up with a losing record. In fact, at the end of the season they were one of the worst teams in baseball. They left everyone asking, “What happened? How could a team with that much talent end up being that bad?”

Earlier this year Texas A&M was scheduled to play number 1 ranked and undefeated Alabama. Scott and Lori Strom, who are avid A&M fans, were scheduled to go to the game. They canceled their plans because their Aggies had been playing so poorly and had no chance to beat Bama. Of course, the Aggies then went out and did exactly that, pulling off the biggest upset of the college football season. The better team did not win that football game.

The point here is not that upsets happen in sports. It is as Solomon wrote at the end of verse 11, “time and chance happen to them all.” Life appears to be awfully random because unexpected things happen all the time. Harold Kushner wrote a book way back in 1981 that had a title that expresses the point of this verse. It was *When Bad Things Happen To Good People*. Our problem is that happens too often. It doesn’t seem fair. Life starts to look awfully random. Time and chance seem to rule all that happens here.

It’s interesting at the stage of life I’ve reached to look back and see how things have gone. Most of us would agree with the Teacher, because things haven’t gone the way we expected. Few of us would say life has gone the way we hoped it would. I thought about some friends I had when I was in my 20’s. I thought a couple of them would make a mark in the world. They were gifted, creative people and to me they seemed destined to do some significant things. But time and chance happen to all in life. Their lives took twists and turns I never saw coming. They haven’t been total disasters, but neither of them ever got close to having a significant effect in this world, and one of them suffered some real unexpected disappointment.

Solomon’s point is that we don’t know what is going to happen to us. For most of us, life doesn’t go according to whatever plan we had, and all too often real setbacks or even tragedies befall us. We don’t control how life goes. We try our best to force our will on this world, but time and chance happen to us all, and this is frustrating for us.

Verse 12 drives this point home. No one knows when their hour has come, meaning the end of life. That’s ominous, but unfortunately true. Allen Pinkerton, the founder of the famed Pinkerton’s Detective Agency, tripped on uneven pavement and bit his tongue. The tongue became infected, gangrene set in and killed him. Isadora Duncan, the famous dancer, died when the long scarf she was wearing got caught in the wheel of a car she was riding in and she broke her neck. Tennessee Williams, the playwright, choked on a bottle cap and died. In 2010 Mike Edwards, a founding member of Electric Light Orchestra, died when a large round bale of hay rolled down a steep hill and collided with a van he was driving, killing him. Rebecca Berger, a fitness blogger and model, died in 2013 when a can of pressurized whipped cream exploded and struck her in the chest, causing cardiac arrest.

Verse 12 says, “As fish are caught in a cruel net, or birds are taken in a snare, so people are trapped by evil times.” A fish minding his own business swimming along in the water the way he always does, is suddenly he yanked up out of the water in a net. He has no reason to expect that such a thing could happen. In an instant his existence is brought to an end. Solomon says we may not get caught in a net, but evil times, even death can happen just as suddenly and unexpectedly to us.

Psalm 103:15-16 says, “The life of mortals is like grass, they flourish like a flower of the field. The wind blows over it and it is gone, its place remembers it no more.” James 4:14 says, “Why you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.”

Ecclesiastes 10:8-9 says, “Whoever digs a pit may fall into it; whoever breaks through a wall may be bitten by a snake. Whoever quarries stones may be injured by them, whoever splits logs may be endangered by them.” What a description of life in a world ruled by Murphy’s Law. You dig a pit to capture an animal and then fall into yourself. You try to split logs and one of them somehow flies up and slams into your head. Solomon was right. In this world, stuff happens and we are more vulnerable than we can even imagine.

IT IS BEST TO SHARPEN THE AX

Solomon wanted to drive home to us an unpleasant reality that we don’t like to think about. It is that our lives are tenuous, that stuff that we could never imagine and certainly cannot anticipate can suddenly show up out of the blue and blow up our lives, that none of it makes sense, and that life is short and can end abruptly. There appears to be no pattern to what we see happening in the world, it seems random, a product of pure chance, and it has no point whatsoever.

Is Solomon suggesting that we give in to despair, that we say as he did in the first couple of chapters that life is futile and empty? Is he saying we are supposed to just accept that and live hopelessly with the absurdity of it all? Many modern people have come to that conclusion. The whole thing, they have decided, is nothing more than a brutally cruel trick that means exactly nothing. There is no hope, so we might as well just try to medicate ourselves with substances so we don’t think about it, or we try to escape feeling the emptiness and hopelessness of it all by ever increasing frantic activity or entertainment.

This is not what Solomon suggests as the remedy for the randomness and emptiness of life under the sun. in 9:17 he says, “The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouts of a ruler of fools.” The fools, obviously, are those who do not have wisdom. There are a lot of them in the human race, and they are a noisy bunch. They clamor for attention. The ruler of them, the one who leads the pack, shouts loudly. The rulers in that day were considered the best, the ones who knew best. The rulers of fools are the ones that the fools all think know best. The majority of humans are going to follow the rulers of fools, because they are so loud and insist they know what is right. In fact, that is a characteristic of fools. They are certain they know the way to go, they are right in their view of things.

It is hard to hear quiet words when people are shouting around us. But the Teacher says that is exactly what we need to do. The wise person is not boisterous, loud, obnoxious, insistent that we listen. The wise person just shares quiet words, wise words that are totally at odds with the shouts of the ruler of fools. Solomon says we may be frustrated by life’s randomness and the lack of justice that we see around us. But the best way to deal with that is to have wisdom. True wisdom will produce the peace that we long for and will give us the strength and the patience to deal with whatever life might throw at us. In 9:18 Solomon says, “Wisdom is better than the weapons of war.”

Why would he use weapons of war as a point of comparison? It is because weapons of war usually represent the height of human achievement. Whatever technology is created, one of its first uses will involve the application of it to warfare. This is still the case today. Our latest technological advances often come as a result of the effort to build more sophisticated and effective weapons. On top of that, weapons represent the pinnacle of human power. The point of weapons is to exert control over other people and circumstances. They in a sense are an effort to control life. So Solomon says consider the greatest power of the human race, its efforts to control things, its greatest abilities. Wisdom is better than all of them.

I have to talk about 10:1 because it is a truly classic Bible verse. It is memorable, though it absolutely is not a verse one would meditate on. I’ve never heard a single person quote this verse when asked what their favorite verse in the Bible is. It presents a truly graphic, unforgettable picture, but it also has a crucial point to make. “As dead flies give perfume a bad smell, so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor.”

Um, what now? How gross is that? I feel confident that Chanel is not going to come out with a new perfume called Eau De Morte Mouche Domestique. That would mean “dead housefly water.” It would be revolting to pick up a bottle of expensive perfume and see a dead fly floating in it. We get the icky factor of this picture, but would dead flies give the perfume a bad smell?

This is a figure of speech, one intended to grab your attention and turn your stomach. No, the smell of the perfume might not literally be changed, but it would feel like it was changed. It would not literally smell bad to anyone who saw this, but the presence of the dead flies would make the perfume gross. No one would want anything to do with it.

Laurie and I once went to a restaurant that prided itself on serving high quality, healthy food. Laurie was eating her salad when she stopped and said, “Oh, gross!” I asked what was wrong. She pointed it out. There was a small worm in the salad. If a dead fly makes the perfume smell bad, what do you think a live worm does for a salad? That pretty much ended our desire to eat anything at that restaurant.

Lovely mental picture, but what does that have to do with anything? The teacher says that’s what even a little bit of foolishness is like. How many dead flies does it take to ruin the perfume? Just one. How many worms in the salad does it take to ruin the meal? Just one. How much foolishness does it take to mess up a life? The presence of any foolishness at all is sufficient to cause problems.

The Teacher claims that what can help us in life is true wisdom. In 10:10 he says, “If the ax is dull and its edge is unsharpened, more strength is needed, but skill will bring success.” I get that if you’re trying to chop wood with an axe and it is dull, that makes the task much more difficult. You’ll have to work harder. But what in the world does that have to do with any of this? In his commentary on this book Tremper Longman says the last line of that verse could better be translated, “But the advantage of wisdom is success.” In other words, having wisdom in that situation is a big advantage because it will enable one to succeed much more easily and readily.

How does that work? What does the wise person do in that situation? He takes some time to sharpen the axe. No doubt the guy using a dull bladed axe could eventually bludgeon the wood into submission. But wouldn’t it be a lot smarter and easier to use an axe with a sharp blade that will quickly cut through the wood?

In our family albums we have a picture of me that reminds me of the truth of that verse. Laurie and I were just married and were very poor. We lived in an apartment decorated in a style I would call Early Salvation Army. We were going to have some friends over for dinner. Somehow we had a big chunk of ice that I needed to chop up so we could have ice in iced tea or ice water. But I didn’t have a tool for chopping up ice. Now wisdom would say either just buy some chopped ice at the store or go buy an ice pick. But I didn’t want to go buy anything because we had no money, and besides, I have more than my share of foolishness and figured I could come up with a way to handle the problem. I found a big barbecue fork. It had two sharp tines that I was sure could do the trick. So I started chopping ice using that fork. I was able to get enough chopped ice, but it turned out to be quite hard and time consuming, plus I ended up ruining that fork. The picture shows me holding it up and the tines have the shape of an L. A little bit of wisdom would have come in handy in that situation. It turned out that the dullest tool in the situation was the guy chopping the ice.

We are faced with trying to get through life in a world that is often confusing and at times even seems perverse, chaotic and unfair. It doesn’t always make sense, but it is often difficult and confounding. We can try to bludgeon our way through it, but we will have a much greater chance of succeeding if we are wise about it. But how do we define succeeding? Remember that Solomon has said several times that it is good if we can get through life enjoying what God has for us and making the best of it. I believe he would define succeeding as living a life where we experience joy, peace, contentment and fulfillment, and where our life ends up meaning something. We have a life that is not just an empty exercise in total meaninglessness.

Wisdom is the way we can have that kind of life. But that raises the question, what is wisdom? The dictionary defines wisdom as “having the quality of being wise.” Not very helpful. What does it mean to be wise? The dictionary says it means having the ability to discern what is true or right.” That’s good, but not quite right. A great definition of wisdom is the ability to determine what is right and best to accomplish as well as the best way to do it. A wise parent will be able to determine what is the best goal in raising their child, and then discerning the best ways to accomplish that goal. A wise investor determines what the best goal is for their money, then finds the best way to accomplish that goal.

For us to have wisdom then is to look at our life and determine what is the best goal for it, to know what the best end of our life will be. Then we must discern what is the best way to accomplish those goals. So we face the question, what is the best thing to do with my life? Is it to gain so much power that I can control people and events? Ultimately that means that our goal really is to get our way, to have whatever we want, especially to not have pain. Or perhaps we might say our goal is simply to not ever hurt or experience disappointment. Perhaps we might determine the best goal is to amass so much money and so many possessions that we will never be threatened by need. Or maybe we might set as our goal is to be liked and acclaimed by everyone, or to never disappoint anyone. There is an almost limitless number of possible goals we can choose for our lives. But I warn you, any of those goals I just listed are nothing more than flies in the perfume. They are foolishness, and they will inevitably end with a life that is, as Solomon said, futile and meaningless.

The good news of this passage is it is possible to have wisdom. It is possible to have the kind of wisdom that will enable us to have the kind of life that Solomon has alluded to previously, to be at peace, to have joy and contentment, even in the storm of chaos and the havoc that chance and time will flood us all with.

In Proverbs 8 wisdom speaks to the reader. The message of wisdom is summed up in verses 35-36. “Those who find me find life and receive favor from the Lord. But those who fail to find me harm themselves; all who hate me love death.” This is a life and death issue. If you find wisdom, you find life. But if you don’t find wisdom, you harm yourself. In fact, if you hate it, which was an ancient Hebrew way of saying you don’t love and pursue wisdom, then you love death. You are choosing it, and you will get it.

IMPLICATIONS

At this point we should all want wisdom. We want life, not death, and if wisdom is the key to life then surely we want it. But that raises the question, how do I get wisdom? There are a number of things to factor in to your thinking to have wisdom. Remember the law of consequences. Everything we choose, everything we do, has consequences, and a wise person learns that good choices have good consequences in the long run and bad choices have bad consequences. The wise person thinks long term, rather than short term. He sees the big picture instead of focusing on immediate gratification, and especially he sees that the big picture is eternal. He always views life through the lens of eternity. But I will give you 4 actions you can take that will produce wisdom.

PURSUE

The first thing we must do is value wisdom and pursue it. Proverbs 2:2 tells us we should be “turning your ear to wisdom” and verse 4 says we should, “Look for it as silver and search for it as hidden treasure.” Retired art dealer and writer, Forrest Fenn announced once that he had buried a treasure that consisted of $2 million worth of gold and precious gems somewhere in the Rocky Mountains. He published a poem that he said contained clues to the location of the treasure. For 10 years people frantically followed their interpretations of the clues. Four people died in their pursuit of the treasure. Others went bankrupt trying to find it. Fenn and his family had to endure stalkers, death threats, home invasions, frivolous lawsuits at the hands of people desperate to find that treasure. Some claimed it was a hoax, that there was no treasure. But in June last year a 32 year old medical student named Jack Stuef found it in Wyoming.

I tell you that story as a way of reminding you that people can become obsessed with treasure. If we value wisdom as the great treasure, worth more than any amount of gold or silver, then we will pursue it. We will be obsessed with it. It will be more important to us than anything else. We won’t find it if we don’t look for it.

If you want to make sense of life, live with peace, real meaning and purpose, have a truly vital and fulfilling life, then you need wisdom. But you won’t get wisdom without going on a treasure hunt and looking for it. I first heard about Forrest Fenn’s hidden treasure maybe 4 or 5 years ago. It intrigued me. I could envision how that money could make life much easier. I didn’t find the treasure. I’m disappointed. I had lots of uses for it dreamed up. There was one big reason why I didn’t find that money. I never looked for it. I guess my thought that it would just drop in my lap turned out to be misguided. Just as misguided as our thinking that the treasure of wisdom will just drop in our laps. If we want wisdom, we will have to go on a search to find it. We must pursue it aggressively. Fine, but where do I pursue it and how do I go about that? That’s crucial, and it leads to the next point.

FEAR

Proverbs 9:10 says, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” Real wisdom is found in worshiping God, in seeking him, knowing him, seeking what he says about our lives and about how to live. This actually makes lots of sense. If you need wisdom about how to make the best of your car and maintain it, where would you get that kind of wisdom? You go to the owner’s manual, given to you by the people who made the car. They know what will make it run the best. God made us, so he knows what will make us run best.

Consider the question of consequences. If we are to be wise we have to consider the consequences of our choices. But that’s where we have problems. We don’t know what the consequences will be. That happens to us very often. Our son, Toby, has treated many patients who are in the hospital with serious, even potentially life altering or life threatening cases of Covid. Pretty much all of them the past few months have been unvaccinated. He has heard a common refrain. Many have said, “I made a bad choice. I wish I would have gotten vaccinated.” My point is not to debate the vaccine issue. My point is that those people made a decision that at the time seemed like the best one to them. They always had reasons for their choices. If they could have seen what the result would be they would have made a different choice. We can’t always see what the result will be.

But God knows what the results will be. The Bible tells us he knows the end from the beginning, that every day of our lives is written in his book. He knows what our choices will lead to. So the best thing we can do is seek his wisdom on how we should live.

Colossians 2:3 says in Christ, “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” Do you want wisdom? Then seek to know Jesus. Make Christ the center of your entire life. Make the goal of everything you are and do to know him and serve him and do what he tells you to do. Living every moment in awe of God is what will give us wisdom. Seeing him as the wisest being in existence, as wanting us to know his wisdom, is the key point. We will only be wise to the degree that we humble ourselves before God and seek his ways and his thoughts.

I was listening to a friend who was describing his frustration over things happening in our society, things that threaten its very foundations. I could feel myself getting anxious. I certainly could see his anxiety. But then I thought, what about how God sees this? Oh, wait. He has known about this since before the world began. This is zero threat to his purpose and plan. If I live in awe of him, seeking to honor him, none of this worrisome stuff is a threat to me. God’s wisdom enables me to be at peace.

I have known several people who were focused on success in a career or on amassing wealth. Instead of seeking God’s way, they pursued their goal. Following their own “wisdom” rather than God’s they ended up with regret. They damaged or lost their families as well as friendships. It all could have been avoided if they had feared God and sought his wisdom.

Fearing the Lord, living to worship him and follow his wisdom, applies to everything in our lives. We had that rare terrific flight home on our vacation. These days it seems like every airplane we are on is packed. When we boarded, as always we walked through first class to get to our cramped seats in steerage. The privileged folks in first class had already boarded. First class was packed, every seat taken. Then we got to our seats and settled in. An astounding thing happened. We were expecting the crush of passengers to come and fill every seat. It never happened. In the section we were in there were about 90 seats, and about 20 passengers! It was wonderful. We could have had 2 rows apiece. And I thought, “Ha, ha first class. Enjoy your packed seats.” God’s wisdom says that’s an ugly attitude.

LISTEN

Proverbs 23:9 says, “Do not speak to fools, for they will scorn your prudent words.” One of the characteristics of fools is they don’t listen. They love to talk and to spout their own ideas. And they are sure they are right. Proverbs 12:15 says, “The way of fools seems right to them, but the wise listen to advice.” Do you listen to people with an open mind? Can you think of times when you have changed your mind because though you thought you knew the truth, after listening to a wise person you realized you were wrong? That is the sign of a wise person.

Here’s the problem with a fool. They can’t learn. They have to be right, so if something goes wrong or something bad happens, it can’t be their fault because they are right. The problem with that is the fool can’t learn from his or her mistakes. They are doomed to keep repeating them.

Do you have to be right? Is it important to you to prove that you are always right? I’ve got bad news for you if that’s true. You are a fool. I realize the very fact that you are a fool means you won’t listen to me so you won’t learn anything from this sermon. But at least I can say I told you so.

Proverbs 13:20 says, “Walk with the wise and become wise, for a companion of fools suffers harm.” In other words, get around wise people and listen to them.

HUMBLE

There is a seemingly paradoxical verse in 1 Corinthians 3 that is related to that idea that we need to listen to others if we want to become wise. We have to humble ourselves in order to listen to other people. We have to say, “I don’t always know what is best, I’m not always right, and there are others who are wiser than me. I need to listen to what they say.”

In verse 18 in that chapter Paul wrote, “Do not deceive yourselves. If any of you think you are wise by the standards of this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. The way to become wise is to become a fool. In other words, it is to humble yourself and let others think you don’t know much if they choose to do so. In other words, don’t worry about what other people think about you. Stop worrying about how you look to others. Humble yourself. Don’t care one little bit if they think you are a nincompoop, a fool who doesn’t know anything.

In 2 Corinthians 12:10 Paul said, “For Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” If the world insults me, thinks I’m an idiot and treats me abominably, great, for then I will trust in Christ and his grace all the more. And it is when I do that I become wise and strong. Humbling ourselves means not caring even a little what people think of us, how we look to the world, and focusing totally on what God says, submitting to him.