

“Strength vs. Wisdom”

Ecclesiastes 9:13-18

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Introduction:

As some of you already know, we spent a week studying the book of **Ecclesiastes** at Beaver Creek Bible Camp this year. Every class and every lesson focused on a passage from the book of **Ecclesiastes**, and then for those passages that we did not cover, we had a Scripture reading every morning for each of those major sections. During one of our Scripture readings, we read a passage that I had forgotten was in the Bible. It was a powerful passage, and so I took out a piece of paper and wrote down, **“Preach on this!”** The passage is found in **Ecclesiastes 9**. In our pew Bibles, the Scripture is found on **page 1058**.

We assume that the book of **Ecclesiastes** was written by King Solomon, and we know that King Solomon was the wisest man who ever lived. As Solomon took over as king, the Lord asked him what he wanted. He asked for wisdom so that he would be able to rule God’s people well, and since he asked for wisdom instead of asking for power or great wealth, God was so impressed by that that God gave him wisdom, but then God also made him rich and powerful. The gist of the book of **Ecclesiastes** is that Solomon set out to discover the meaning of life, he set out to figure it all out, and he had a series of experiments where he tested wine, and women, and work. He tried out all of those ways that people normally try to find true happiness, and his conclusion is found right there at the end of the book, in **Ecclesiastes 12:13**, ***“The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person.”*** That is the conclusion, but in the middle of the book, King Solomon tells us some of what he learned during his many years as king. If you will, please look with me, then, at **Ecclesiastes 9:13-18**...

¹³ Also this I came to see as wisdom under the sun, and it impressed me. ¹⁴ There was a small city with few men in it and a great king came to it, surrounded it and constructed large siegeworks against it. ¹⁵ But there was found in it a poor wise man and he delivered the city by his wisdom. Yet no one remembered that poor man. ¹⁶ So I said, “Wisdom is better than strength.” But the wisdom of the poor man is despised and his words are not heeded. ¹⁷ The words of the wise heard in quietness are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools. ¹⁸ Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.

And so we find in this passage that Solomon tells a story. Whether this is an actual account or just a parable, we do not know. We do know, however, that there is at least one very similar account that actually takes place during the reign of King David, Solomon's father. In **2 Samuel 20**, the Bible describes a ***"worthless fellow"*** by the name of Sheba who blew a trumpet and rallied the people against King David. The Bible explains that ***"all the men of Israel withdrew from following David and followed Sheba,"*** all the men, that is, except the men from the tribe of Judah. Well, David could see that it was a serious situation, and so King David sent Joab, one of his mighty warriors to go take care of the situation. In **2 Samuel 20:14-22**, the Bible explains that Joab, ***"...went through all the tribes of Israel...and also went after him. They came and besieged him in Abel Beth-maacah, and they cast up a siege ramp against the city, and it stood by the rampart; and all the people who were with Joab were wreaking destruction in order to topple the wall. Then a wise woman called from the city, 'Hear, hear! Please tell Joab, 'Come here that I may speak with you.'"*** At this point, the woman basically says, ***"You don't want to destroy this entire city, do you? How about if we just throw Sheba's head over the wall?"*** That sounded pretty good to Joab, the people threw the head over the wall, and verse 22 tells us that, ***"...Joab blew the trumpet, and they were dispersed from the city, each to his tent. Joab also returned to the king at Jerusalem."***

This is something that would have taken place perhaps as Solomon was a little boy, as Solomon was growing up. And so as they say, perhaps the names have simply been changed here to protect the identities of the innocent. We have no way of knowing for sure whether this is the actual incident that inspired Solomon's little parable here, but we do know that in Solomon's story a wise man saves the city and is then forgotten. As we think about this little parable, I would invite you to ask the question, ***"So what?"*** And as we ask that question, as we ask ourselves why this passage is even in the Bible, I believe that Solomon (in the text itself) gives us some very important answers to that question.

- I. **And first of all, as we read through this text, we clearly understand that Solomon is frustrated that the people of the town are NOT THANKFUL FOR THE WISE MAN'S ADVICE. And so we have a lesson, first of all, about the UGLINESS OF INGRATITUDE.**

And we read this, and we also get angry! I mean, here is a city that is in the process of being invaded. It is a small city with just a few men, and we have this powerful king and a huge army building siegeworks against it. We think, ***"Okay, they are going to lose this battle."*** What does it mean to lose a battle? It means that the city would be leveled and that all of the inhabitants of the city would either be sold into slavery or put to death. There was no hope for a happy ending here...until this poor wise man speaks up and saves the day. But then we come to Solomon's shocking observation at the end of **verse 15**, as he says, ***"Yet no one remembered that poor man."*** No one gave the man any kind of reward. There was no parade. There was no spot on the evening news. There were no streets or schools named

after the man. No one offered him a job so that he would no longer need to be poor. But instead he was simply forgotten.

And so we start to see King Solomon's frustration here—frustration that such a wise and helpful man could be so easily forgotten. Of course today we know what Solomon was talking about. Very rarely are people honored for their great wisdom. Think for a moment about what our world has been focused on over the past week or so. I don't know about you, but it seemed this past week that the media were obsessed with Lindsey Lohan. In fact, the website TMZ.com reports that there were nearly 2.3 million people who logged in to view the live coverage of what Lindsey Lohan was up to this week. And what did she do to deserve all of this media attention? Did she save a city? Did she cure cancer? Did she plug the oil well? No, she did not. But instead, what put her at the top of the news this week was the fact that she was hauled into court where she was sentenced to 90 days in jail and 90 days in rehab for violating her probation by not attending an alcohol class that was imposed on her as the result of a drunk driving and cocaine possession conviction back in 2007. That's the kind of person this world cares about. We don't care about the poor wise man. As a society, we want to know, **"How's Lindsey feeling?"**

Solomon has a message for the world today: Be thankful for the poor wise man! Be thankful for wisdom. Regardless of how much money they make, show at least a little bit of appreciation for those who are wise. The lesson for us this morning is that we are to pay at least a little attention to the wise man. Don't forget the guy, don't abuse the guy, but be thankful!

II. There is another lesson for us to consider this morning, and it comes through Solomon's reminder that WE ARE NOT TO PUT OUR CONFIDENCE IN HUMAN RESOURCES.

And as we step back and look at these six verses, we see a number of vivid contrasts—a small city with a few men compared to a great king who constructed a great siegeworks, a single man versus a powerful king. Everything about this story points to doom and destruction for the small city. Those in the city knew that they were about to die. Those in the army knew that they were about to win. As far as the king was concerned, it was just a matter of time.

However, Solomon says that the city was delivered—not by physical strength, not by weapons of war, but by nothing more than the wisdom of one man. We do not have any details, but we know that the **"poor wise"** man **"delivered the city by his wisdom."** And there's another contrast: The wise man was **"poor."** Of course, we know that the natural tendency is for us to look down on those who are poor. Perhaps we think, "They must not have ambition, and they must not have wisdom; otherwise, they would be rich!" Several weeks ago, we studied **James 2** and the fact that some people in the early church were apparently giving a place of honor to those who were rich, and the poor were then invited to stand up in the back. And James was incredibly upset by that, because it makes us judges with evil motives. By the way, there is one passage in the entire New Testament that even remotely addresses

the kind of clothing that is worn in the worship assembly, and it comes in the form of a stern warning about the danger of giving people honor because of the clothes that they wear. I know that's a little off the subject here, but it is something that I feel very strongly about. Years ago, we met a woman who seemed to be interested in the truth, and she came to Keola nearly in tears. She said to my wife, **"I do not have any nice clothes. Do you think I would be welcome at your church?"** And at that, my wife offered to wear jeans to worship so that that woman would feel comfortable in our assembly. She and her husband were baptized just a few weeks later. That is what **James 2** is all about.

But back to **Ecclesiastes 9!** Solomon is making a vivid contrast—a poor wise man and a powerful king. Our power, and wealth, and armies, and clothing do not win the battles, but God is looking for wisdom! As human beings, we may FEEL better with wealth, and power, and armies, and luxurious clothing, but those things do not really matter. And remember, this story is coming from a rich and powerful king, King Solomon. King Solomon knew this by experience, and so he says it in **verse 18**, ***"Wisdom is better than weapons of war."*** In other words, might does not make right. Power and wealth may get us ahead in the short term, but over the long run, ***"Wisdom is better than weapons of war."*** We are not to put our trust in human resources. And this is the second lesson this morning (this applies to us as a nation, but it also applies to us as a congregation and as individuals): We are not to put our trust in human resources.

III. There is a third basic idea in these verses, and it comes in the form of an implied command, and that is: LISTEN TO THE WISE MAN!

In **verse 17**, Solomon says, ***"The words of the wise heard in quietness are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools."*** The NIV says that, ***"The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouts of a ruler of fools."*** The NKJV says that, ***"Words of the wise, spoken quietly, should be heard Rather than the shout of a ruler of fools."*** We get the idea: It is better to listen to the wise, even though they may be speaking quietly, than it is to listen to the shouting of a foolish ruler. Of course we know how easy it is to get this backwards. In our society, those who shout often get the most attention. When a politician is a good public speaker, we may think, ***"Oooo, I need to listen to that guy!"*** But if we listen with wisdom, we may realize that he is not really saying anything! The same thing goes for preachers. There are some good speakers out there who really have nothing to say. But then on the other hand, those who speak God's truth may be rather quiet, we could almost say ***"boring."*** But the style of speaking does not determine whether the words are true.

Among preachers, we have an old story about a very dynamic preacher. Someone found his sermon outline, and out in the margin he had written a note to himself, ***"Weak point—pound pulpit."*** And so the idea was that to make up for a weak point, he had to tell himself to make a scene—to scream and shout and pound the pulpit. But King Solomon says that it is better to listen to the wise speaking quietly than to listen to the shouting of a fool. The lesson for us this morning is that we are

not to focus on style, we are not to focus on the size of a church, we are not to focus on the programs that are offered, we are not to focus on a dynamic preacher, but we are to focus on the actual words that are spoken. We are to listen to the wise man.

IV. As we come near the end of this passage, there is at least one more lesson for us to consider, and that is: When it comes to wisdom, we find here at the end that SIN CAN RUIN IT ALL. In other words, WISDOM IS FRAGILE, WISDOM IS VULNERABLE.

And like Solomon, we will not spend much time on the negative aspect of this lesson, but we do need to remind each other that one sin can damage a lot of wisdom; one sin can take down an entire congregation; one sin can ruin someone's reputation and influence for years, if not forever. As Solomon says at the end of verse 18, "***...one sinner destroys much good.***" From our own personal experience, we know that the consequences of sin are almost never confined to the person who sins, we would like to think so, but sin has a tendency to spread. Both Paul and Jesus compare sin to the yeast that spreads throughout the whole lump of dough. I use yeast in one of my favorite biscuit recipes—it only takes a small amount to change the entire recipe. In the same way, one person may sin, and that person may think, "**Well, that's none of any body else's business.**" But that is not true. Our behavior has an effect on other people.

We think about the sin of Achan in the opening chapters of the book of Joshua. The people were fighting their way into the Promised Land. They had conquered the city of Jericho with no trouble at all, but Achan secretly took a few small items that God had told them not to take. He covered it up, but as you know, the next battle did not go well. The Israelites should have won, but they lost in a big way, and it all went back to Achan. The people were humiliated. Thirty-six soldiers lost their lives. The Israelites were brought down and discouraged. The sin of one man among 2-3 million brought an entire nation to its knees. Achan and his entire family were then put to death, and all of this goes back to one sin. One sin can undo a lot of wisdom.

We think about the sin between David and Bathsheba. David looked down from the roof of the palace and saw a woman bathing. How many sins today can be traced back to immodest clothing? Well, David looked and he lusted. He could have argued that that was a private matter. But we know better. That one sin of lust led to adultery, and jealousy, and murder. The child died, the nation was disgraced, and David's family had all kinds of trouble from that point on, proving that one sin has a tendency to grow.

We can think back to our years in high school. There are some people who might have been pretty smart, they might have had good grades, but we remember them for maybe that one stupid thing they did. I remember one day as school was letting out, there were hundreds of people rushing through the halls, and one girl threw up and then slipped in it. And you know, twenty years later, that is the only thing I can remember about that girl! In fact, that is one of the few things I can even remember from high school! I mean, it was vivid—it was burned into my memory! She might

have been a good student, she might have been a good person, but she will forever be remembered as the girl who got sick and then slipped and fell in it. And perhaps in a slightly similar way, one sin can cancel out a lot of wisdom. There is a value to wisdom, but we should also realize that one sin can do a lot of damage.

Conclusion:

As we close our thoughts on this brief passage, as we close our thoughts on this unappreciated wise man who saved many people, is there another wise Man who saved many people who comes to mind? Another poor man who through His wisdom saved others but was then ignored by the world? As was read for us from **1 Corinthians 1** in our Scripture reading this morning, ***“...the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”*** Those in the world do not appreciate the wisdom of the cross. Most people do not appreciate the poor wise man who saved the city, but most people are looking for something big and amazing. And yet Paul tells us that Jesus is, ***“the wisdom of God.”*** In His great wisdom, God saw fit to save the world by offering His only Son as a sacrifice for our sins. Do we appreciate the wisdom of that plan? Will we join the world in forgetting about the poor wise man, or will we honor Him as we should? ***“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9).***

The Bible teaches that we must turn away from sin, that we must allow ourselves to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of our sins, and that we must then do the best that we can to live the Christian life. If you have any questions, please talk with a member of this congregation sometime today. If you are already a Christian but need the prayers of this congregation to help you make it through some difficult situation, please let us know about that. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, please let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: church@fourlakescoc.org