

## Ecclesiastes

### Lecture 18

By [Rev. Kevin Chiarot](#)

Solomon is winding up his grim journey and we are entering the homestretch. But he has a few more sober reflections on the vapor. First, in vv. 11 and 12, time and chance, second, in vv. 13-18, wisdom's fragility.

#### I. Time and Chance

First, then, time and chance. We could call this point, cleaning up a popular bumper sticker, unpredictable stuff happens. So, once again, the theme is the illusion of human control. Outcomes are never certain and guaranteed. History is mischievous. Here the Preacher sees five areas where time and chance subvert the predicted and normal outcome.

First: the race is not to the swift. Think of the tortoise and the hare. Or, the American Olympic athlete, Lolo Jones, who was the world's fastest 100M women's hurdler. She was the favorite to win the Gold in the 2008 games in Beijing. She tripped on the second to last hurdle and finished seventh. Races are not predictable; they don't always go to the swift.

Second: the battle is not to the strong. Robert McNamara, the US secretary of defense, repeatedly assured us that the war in Vietnam was going well and we would succeed. Goliath loses to David with some frequency. Buster Douglas knocks out Mike Tyson against 42 to 1 odds.

Third: bread doesn't always go to the wise. The wise here probably means teachers, or the word could mean artisans. In either case it's not easy to see that teachers and artists don't always get the compensation they deserve. Markets don't always reward wisdom.

Fourth: riches don't go to the intelligent. Markets often reward nitwits. Think of the music industry or reality TV. Or think of Congress or the UN. Harry Truman rightly said "The world is run by 'C' students." And there's probably some grade-inflation going on there. At a political dinner in NYC before the 2000 election, George W. Bush, a "C" student, noticed that Bill Buckley was in the audience. He said: I see that Bill Buckley is here tonight. Bill and I have a lot in common. We both went to Yale. He wrote a book at Yale: titled *God and Man at Yale*. I read a

book at Yale. He started the conservative party; I started a few parties of my own.

Now, Buckley was far from poor, but riches and power frequently go to the mediocre. Sometimes the intelligent can't see riches staring them in the face. IBM owned the computer market in the 60, 70 and early 80. From the top of the market to the low-end. We were the world's pre-eminent chip, software and systems company. Yet, our executives completely missed the coming Personal Computer revolution. We decided we would make

Fifth: favor doesn't go to those with knowledge, or to the skillful. Our elites regularly heap praise on writers and artists whose only skill is to be transgressive or subversive of beauty, goodness and truth. Meanwhile, the world is full of unappreciated and undiscovered genius. Knowledge often meets with oblivion, not favor. If it wasn't for Mendelssohn you probably would never have heard of Bach. How many Bach's in every field there must be.

The preacher's point is summed up at the end of v.11: time and chance happen to them all. Chance here is not a pagan concept. It simply means an unforeseen event. Accidents, disasters, historical irony and twisted fates. And they happen to the swift, the strong, the wise, the intelligent and the skillful.

Three things we should note about time and chance.

First, it is unpredictable. You see that at the beginning of v.12. Man does not know his time. He doesn't know when the hour of death, or disaster, or crisis will be thrust upon him. The French actor and playwright, Moliere, was performing the title role of his own drama entitled *The Hypochondriac*. He was seized by a coughing fit, but the malady wasn't imaginary. He died hours later. Man doesn't know his time. It's unpredictable.

Second, time and chance are inescapable. Like fish that are taken in an evil or cruel net, and like birds that are caught in a snare, so the children of men are snared at an evil time. Time and chance will hunt you down. Neither the fish nor the birds have any chance of escape. They never see it coming. Neither do the children of men. We are simply snared by events.

Finally, time and chance are abrupt. The text says, at the end of v.12 – suddenly it falls upon them. No one gets any warning, any time to prepare. In 2008 a man in CT named Don Peters bought a winning lottery ticket for 10 million dollars. Just as he had bought tickets for twenty years. He wasn't very lucky though – he died of a heart attack on the day he purchased the ticket. Snared in a cruel net.

## **II. Wisdom and Its Fragility**

Our second point, then, is wisdom and its fragility. Beginning in v.13 he gives us an example of wisdom which he apparently witnessed. He says at the end of v.13 that it made a great impression on him. There was a little city with few men in it, and a great king came against it and built siegeworks against it. The word for siegeworks here is “nets” the same word used of the capture of fish in v.12. The city is about to be snared by time and chance. But Solomon has just told us that the battle does not always go to the strong. So he is going to invert, as he often does, the wisdom he just gave us in vv. 11 and 12. Verse 15 says: but there was a poor, wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city. We are not told how he did it, but clearly he spoke and communicated his wisdom to those in charge.

Here, as opposed to earlier, it is a very good thing that the battle doesn't go to the strong, nor the race to the swift. But if you think the Preacher wants to comfort us by this inversion, you are wrong. Because he is now going to invert his inversion. This is what wisdom must do in a twisted world. It must say A, then it must say not A, then, in a different setting, it must say A again. There are very few principles or axioms that can be applied without reference to the actual situation on the ground.

So this battle did not go to the strong and that is a good thing. But neither did bread or favor or riches go to the wise and intelligent commoner – and that points up the fragility of wisdom. At the end of v.15 we are told: Yet no one remembered the wise man. No favor for the wise. Joseph knew this bitter forgetfulness after he interpreted the dreams of two political prisoners. Shakespeare said nothing is so bitter as benefits forgot. But it clashes with what the Preacher knows from his tradition. Proverbs says the memory of the righteous is blessed, but the memory of the wicked will rot – here the opposite seems to occur. Character doesn't always determine consequences. Wisdom is fragile. Three illustrations of its fragility follow.

First, wisdom is despised for its source. Verse 16: But I say that wisdom is better than might – as the illustration of the small city just demonstrated – brains are better than brawn, wisdom is better than might, but the poor man's wisdom is despised and his words are not heard.

You'd expect the preacher to say the opposite here. He just told us that a poor man's wisdom WAS heard and that DID avert disaster. But he's not celebrating. He's inverting the inversion of the success of the poor man's wisdom. He's telling us that the story he just told is a rarity, an anomaly. That's why it made such an impression on him. The normal situation is that the poor man's wisdom is despised. After all, he's nobody. He's poor after all, how wise can he be? Men are regularly despised because they don't have the right credentials, the right social connections, or sufficient economic standing. Can anything good come out of Nazareth?

Second, wisdom is overwhelmed by force, verse 17: the words of the wise heard in quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools. Wise men speak calmly. He who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding. Wisdom speaks softly and it doesn't carry a big stick. And thus wise words are best heard in quietness. But rulers often shout wisdom down. Remember in 1960 the Soviet Leader, Nikita Khrushchev, at the UN, pounding first his fist and then his shoe on the table while another delegate spoke. In addition to the ruler's clamor, the text says he surrounds himself with fools. So where wisdom isn't overwhelmed by the ruler, it will be excluded by his advisors.

Third, and finally, wisdom is easily subverted. Wisdom is better than weapons of war. We saw this in the story of the poor wise man, and we saw it in v.16. Wisdom is superior to military might. Some trust in chariots, some trust in the Pentagon, but we will remember the name of the Lord our God. But as before, Solomon cannot commend without qualification. He is long done with simplistic appraisals. I wouldn't want to say his karma ran over his dogma. But I would want to say that careful attention to reality itself should nuance and refine your dogmatism.

So, wisdom is better than predator drones, but – here comes the qualification: one sinner destroys much good. Here we see the fragile character of wisdom vividly. The nature of the fallen world is deeply biased against wisdom. Evil infects the good, much more virulently, and more easily, than good transforms evil. Paul says: Bad company corrupts good morals. He doesn't say good morals transform bad company. The nature of the world is biased toward the efficacy of evil and folly. A little leaven leavens the whole lump. The surrounding dough doesn't transform the leaven. The playing field is not level. Wisdom is easily overthrown. Its position is ALWAYS precarious. One, just one sinner, destroys MUCH, a whole lot, of good.

So, we have two closely connected lessons in this text. Time and chance happen to us all. Man does not know his time. And, because of this, wisdom is fragile. But notice, Solomon does not counsel fatalism or despair here. I know your probably thinking – he doesn't? No, he doesn't. He cites an example of wisdom which saved a city. And though there are deep and important qualifications, he commends wisdom three times: in verse 16, verse 17, and verse 18.

Wisdom is mighty, it is better than the bombast of kings; it excels all the weapons of war. But it is, like Him who was Wisdom incarnate, mighty in its weakness, mighty in its gentleness, mighty in its vulnerability to violence and political machinations. Wisdom takes this fragile shape here, subject to time and evil events, because fully nuanced wisdom comes as the Lord's despised and rejected servant, put to death at the hands of evil men. The battle goes to Him who was crucified in weakness.

Thus, wisdom knows that, though it does not appear to be so, it excels folly as light excels darkness. It knows the time and chance which befalls it are still God's times. Thus, wisdom, in all her fragility, smiles at the future. In the fullness of time, she will be vindicated by her children. Amen.

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