

1. What illustration is used to show how folly ruins the reputation of the wise and honorable? How does this apply to our day-to-day conduct?
(vv. 1, Exo 30:34–35; ICo 5:1-9, Mat 5:13-16)
2. What is the significance of the right versus the left? When does the fool display his folly to everyone? (vv. 2-3)
3. How should one respond when the anger of the ruler rises against them?
(v. 4; 8:2-5; Pro 16:14; Rom 13:1-7)
4. What injustices did the Koheleth see coming from those in power?
(vv. 5-7; 9:11-12; Prov 19:10; 30:21–23)
5. What do the six illustrations in these verses say about the nature of life and how we should approach it? (vv. 8-11; 9:11-12)
6. How does Koheleth characterize the words from a wise man? The words and actions of a foolish man? (vv. 12-15; 5:1-3; Pro 16:23; 18:7; Jam 1:19-21)
7. How does the Koheleth contrast the woeful land with the blessed land? What are the differences? (vv. 16-19; Isa 5:11-13)
8. Why should one not curse the king nor the rich? (vv. 20; Phil 4:5)

Notes & Answers

(1) What illustration is used to show how folly ruins the reputation of the wise and honorable? How does this apply to our day-to-day conduct?

(vv. 1, Exo 30:34–35; 1Co 5:1-9, Mat 5:13-16)

An ointment created by blending different spices (Exod 30:34–35). The addition of something small, such as a dead fly, would ruin the perfume.¹

We must be careful that such wisdom as we have is not spoiled by apparently insignificant unwise behavior, just as dead flies in a pot of ointment may turn it into a foul-smelling mass²

Ecclesiastes 10:1 (ESV)

¹ Dead flies make the perfumer's ointment give off a stench;
so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor.

Exodus 30:34–35 (ESV)

³⁴ The LORD said to Moses, "Take sweet spices, stacte, and onycha, and galbanum, sweet spices with pure frankincense (of each shall there be an equal part), ³⁵ and make an incense blended as by the perfumer, seasoned with salt, pure and holy.

1 Corinthians 5:1–9 (ESV)

¹ It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. ² And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.

³ For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. ⁴ When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, ⁵ you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.

⁶ Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? ⁷ Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. ⁸ Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

⁹ I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—

¹ Barry, J. D., Mangum, D., Brown, D. R., Heiser, M. S., Custis, M., Ritzema, E., ... Bomar, D. (2012, 2016). [Faithlife Study Bible](#) (Ec 10:1). Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

² Wright, J. S. (1991). [Ecclesiastes](#). In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (Vol. 5, p. 1185). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

Matthew 5:13–16 (ESV)

¹³ “You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet.

¹⁴ “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

(2) What is the significance of the right versus the left? When does the fool display his folly to everyone? (vv. 2-3)

“Right” and “left” are natural symbols for the strong and good, on the one hand, and for the weak and bad, on the other hand.³ The right hand is more expert than the left.⁴

Even when the foolish tries to keep in the middle of the road, his encounters with normal people show him up for what he is.⁵

Ecclesiastes 10:2–3 (ESV)

² A wise man’s heart inclines him to the right,
but a fool’s heart to the left.

³ Even when the fool walks on the road, he lacks sense,
and he says to everyone that he is a fool.

³ Wright, J. S. (1991). [Ecclesiastes](#). In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (Vol. 5, p. 1185). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

⁴ Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1997). [Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible](#) (Vol. 1, p. 412). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

⁵ Wright, J. S. (1991). [Ecclesiastes](#). In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (Vol. 5, p. 1185). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

**(3) How should one respond when the anger of the ruler rises against them?
(v. 4; 8:2-5; Pro 16:14; Rom 13:1-7)**

Sometimes our encounters are with authorities. These may be tax officials, employers, or any “rulers” to whom we have to submit. If we clash with them, we should not walk out in a temper. Neither if we are at cross purposes with our supervisor should we resign at once. We should rather take an objective look at ourselves, and maybe we will find that we should apologize. Unwise people, however, lose their temper and suffer accordingly.⁶

Ecclesiastes 10:4 (ESV)

⁴ If the anger of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your place, for calmness will lay great offenses to rest.

Ecclesiastes 8:2–5 (ESV)

² I say: Keep the king’s command, because of God’s oath to him. ³ Be not hasty to go from his presence. Do not take your stand in an evil cause, for he does whatever he pleases. ⁴ For the word of the king is supreme, and who may say to him, “What are you doing?” ⁵ Whoever keeps a command will know no evil thing, and the wise heart will know the proper time and the just way.

Proverbs 16:14 (ESV)

¹⁴ A king’s wrath is a messenger of death, and a wise man will appease it.

Romans 13:1–7 (ESV)

¹ Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. ² Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. ³ For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, ⁴ for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer. ⁵ Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience. ⁶ For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. ⁷ Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.

⁶ Wright, J. S. (1991). [Ecclesiastes](#). In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (Vol. 5, p. 1185). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

**(4) What injustices did the Koheleth see coming from those in power?
(vv. 5-7; 9:11-12; Prov 19:10; 30:21–23)**

Unfortunately, the <person> at the top is not always right. He too may lack wisdom and enjoy manipulating people and situations. He finds jobs for his supporters and enjoys humiliating anyone of influence (vv. 5–6). There are also many little manipulators in the world of business who have undeservedly risen to the top (v. 7).⁷

This again demonstrates that life under the sun does not fit into any equation.

Ecclesiastes 10:5–7 (ESV)

⁵ There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, as it were an error proceeding from the ruler: ⁶ folly is set in many high places, and the rich sit in a low place. ⁷ I have seen slaves on horses, and princes walking on the ground like slaves.

Ecclesiastes 9:11–12 (ESV)

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. ¹² 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 it suddenly falls upon them.

Proverbs 19:10 (ESV)

¹⁰ It is not fitting for a fool to live in luxury,
much less for a slave to rule over princes.

Proverbs 30:21–23 (ESV)

²¹ Under three things the earth trembles;
under four it cannot bear up:
²² a slave when he becomes king,
and a fool when he is filled with food;
²³ an unloved woman when she gets a husband,
and a maidservant when she displaces her mistress.

⁷ Wright, J. S. (1991). [Ecclesiastes](#). In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (Vol. 5, p. 1185). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

(5) What do the six illustrations in these verses say about the nature of life and how we should approach it? (vv. 8-11; 9:11-12)

These verses describe situations where time and chance (Eccles 9:11) negatively affect people. In each instance, normal day to day activities—digging a pit, tearing down a wall, breaking rocks, or cutting wood—are interrupted by some sort of accident, illustrating humanity’s limited ability to know or control future circumstances.⁸

Despite difficulties and risks, you cannot sit back to avoid facing them in the daily round of life. If you dig a hole in your garden, remember it is there when you go out at night. If you have to pull down an old wall, watch out for snakes (v. 8). You need stones and wood for building; then make sure that a boulder does not fall on you or a piece of wood fly in your face (v. 9). Whenever you decide to do a certain piece of work, you will find your task easier if you make proper preparations. Sharpen your ax before you chop wood (v. 10).⁹

This again demonstrates that life under the sun does not fit into any equation. We have to proceed with great care and be as prepared as we possibly can.

Ecclesiastes 10:8–11 (ESV)

- ⁸ He who digs a pit will fall into it,
and a serpent will bite him who breaks through a wall.
⁹ He who quarries stones is hurt by them,
and he who splits logs is endangered by them.
¹⁰ If the iron is blunt, and one does not sharpen the edge,
he must use more strength,
but wisdom helps one to succeed.
¹¹ If the serpent bites before it is charmed,
there is no advantage to the charmer.

Ecclesiastes 9:11–12 (ESV)

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. ¹² 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 it suddenly falls upon them.

⁸ Barry, J. D., Mangum, D., Brown, D. R., Heiser, M. S., Custis, M., Ritzema, E., ... Bomar, D. (2012, 2016). [Faithlife Study Bible](#) (Ec 10:8–9). Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

⁹ Wright, J. S. (1991). [Ecclesiastes](#). In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (Vol. 5, p. 1186). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

(6) How does Koheleth characterize the words from a wise man? The words and actions of a foolish man? (vv. 12-15; 5:1-3; Pro 16:23; 18:7; Jam 1:19-21)

Solomon began this passage by contrasting the words of a wise man with those of a fool; a wise man's words are gracious (or, better, "win him favor"; Prov. 13:15 ["favor"]; 22:1 ["esteemed"] make similar use of this Heb. word ḥēn), but a fool's words are self-destructive (i.e., they consume him).

*Using a merism, a figure of speech in which polar opposites are chosen to indicate totality (cf. examples in Ecc. 3:2–8), Solomon characterized a fool's speech as foolish and wicked madness both **at the beginning** and **at the end** (i.e., from start to finish). Though such is true of a fool's speech, he continues to multiply words (cf. 5:3; 6:11), oblivious to the fact that **no one knows** the future, **what is coming** in days ahead and **what will happen after** death. Besides being ignorant of the future, a fool is also ignorant of the most obvious; **he does not know the way to town** (cf. 10:3). This is a proverbial expression for extreme ignorance like the modern proverb, "He doesn't know enough to come in out of the rain." This is why a fool finds his work such a chore (it **wearies him**).¹⁰*

Ecclesiastes 10:12–15 (ESV)

¹² The words of a wise man's mouth win him favor,
but the lips of a fool consume him.

¹³ The beginning of the words of his mouth is foolishness,
and the end of his talk is evil madness.

¹⁴ A fool multiplies words,
though no man knows what is to be,
and who can tell him what will be after him?

¹⁵ The toil of a fool wearies him,
for he does not know the way to the city.

Ecclesiastes 5:1–3 (ESV)

¹ Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they are doing evil. ² Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few. ³ For a dream comes with much business, and a fool's voice with many words.

Proverbs 16:23 (ESV)

²³ The heart of the wise makes his speech judicious
and adds persuasiveness to his lips.

¹⁰ Glenn, D. R. (1985). [Ecclesiastes](#). In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 1, p. 1002). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

Proverbs 18:7 (ESV)

⁷ A fool's mouth is his ruin,
and his lips are a snare to his soul.

James 1:19–21 (ESV)

¹⁹ Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰ for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. ²¹ Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

(7) How does the Koheleth contrast the woeful land with the blessed land? What are the differences? (vv. 16-19; Isa 5:11-13)

The fate of a nation depends on the quality of its leadership. Foolish rulers who live self-indulgent lives often neglect the needs of their subjects, whereas rulers who exercise proper self-restraint can greatly benefit their nations¹¹

Ecclesiastes 10:16–19 (ESV)

¹⁶ Woe to you, O land, when your king is a child,
and your princes feast in the morning!
¹⁷ Happy are you, O land, when your king is the son of the nobility,
and your princes feast at the proper time,
for strength, and not for drunkenness!
¹⁸ Through sloth the roof sinks in,
and through indolence the house leaks.
¹⁹ Bread is made for laughter,
and wine gladdens life,
and money answers everything.

Isaiah 5:11–13 (ESV)

¹¹ Woe to those who rise early in the morning,
that they may run after strong drink,
who tarry late into the evening
as wine inflames them!
¹² They have lyre and harp,
tambourine and flute and wine at their feasts,
but they do not regard the deeds of the LORD,
or see the work of his hands.
¹³ Therefore my people go into exile

¹¹ Barry, J. D., Mangum, D., Brown, D. R., Heiser, M. S., Custis, M., Ritzema, E., ... Bomar, D. (2012, 2016). [Faithlife Study Bible](#) (Ec 10:16). Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

for lack of knowledge;
their honored men go hungry,
and their multitude is parched with thirst.

(8) Why should one not curse the king nor the rich? (vv. 20; Phil 4:5)

When all is said and done, the average citizen must retain some respect for authority. The Teacher does not distinguish between good and bad leaders; he has spoken of both, and probably his advice here includes both. How far would he draw the line regarding bad authorities? He has just criticized them in the same strong terms that the prophets use. Since this verse speaks of wishing someone ill in the privacy of one's own home, it is a warning that malice toward the powers that be may lead to ultimate confrontation with them. If there is something wrong in your town or in the place where you work, you must either keep totally silent or be prepared for your proper criticisms to come to the ears of those at the top.¹²

Ecclesiastes 10:20 (ESV)

²⁰ Even in your thoughts, do not curse the king,
nor in your bedroom curse the rich,
for a bird of the air will carry your voice,
or some winged creature tell the matter.

Philippians 4:5 (ESV)

⁵ Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand;

¹² Wright, J. S. (1991). [Ecclesiastes](#). In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (Vol. 5, p. 1188). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.