

The Bonfire of the Vanities
“What Were You Thinking?”
Ecclesiastes 9:13-10:20

Introduction

- [Slide #1] Kyle McGill and I were best friends before we could walk. For the first six or seven years of my life we pretty much did everything together. And, believe it or not, we were always getting into trouble. Like the time I was at his house and I took one of the kitchen knives and began carving up the paneling in the living room. Or the time we had the brilliant idea of throwing rocks at passing cars. His aim was better than mine. My dad’s aim on my butt was perfect.
- When I was about seven years old Kyle’s family moved away to Michigan. I remember really hurting over that. Our families would stay in touch off and on, and years later, when I was in junior high, I had the chance to visit Kyle and his family in Columbus, Ohio. The promise of a fun-filled reunion turned out to be a nightmare of a weekend. Take some boyhood mischief, add a few adolescent hormones and a dose of peer pressure and you get some really stupid choices; the kind of stupid choices you end up regretting for the rest of your life.
- The nightmare began when we decided to sneak out of Kyle’s house after dark and join up with one of his older neighborhood friends. I’ll spare you the gory blow by blow details except to say that the night involved toilet paper, crayons on automotive paint, shaving cream and gas tanks, garden hoses and flooded basements, followed by a police chase through the neighborhood as the night cap.
- The next day when my parents picked me up, my chin was fastened to my neck—couldn’t even look them in the eyes. They only had four words for me. “What were you thinking?” To tell you the truth I was asking myself that same question. I definitely made life much harder for myself because of what I did that night.
- I wish I could stand before you and tell you that was the only time I’ve ever done anything stupid.
- Have you ever wondered why so many people, even really smart people, do really stupid things? I’m not talking stupid things like the hunter in Arizona who shot himself in the leg and then fired his rifle to attract help only to have the bullet ricochet into his other leg. Or the New York boxer who psyched himself up for a match by smacking himself in the face, breaking his nose so that the fight had to be called off. I’m not talking about that kind of stupid.
- I’m talking about the conscious, willful stupid choices we all make to the detriment of our reputations, our careers, our families. Stupid choices with serious consequences. Stupid things that make an already difficult life even more difficult. The kind of choices we make that we end up regretting. The “what were you thinking” choices.

Transition

Ecclesiastes 9:13-10:20 is the chapter of stupid choices. Our tour guide, the Teacher, looks at the world around him and everywhere he turns, all he sees is a world lacking common sense.

The Teacher sees what [Will Rogers](#) saw when he said, “Common sense isn't as common as it used to be.”¹ All the Teachers sees are people complicating life, making life harder for themselves because of their stupid, idiotic choices. And his wisdom for us is this...[Slide #2]

Proposition

- **Life without God is meaninglessly harder than life with Him**
- In case you've joined this tour of Ecclesiastes late in the game let me summarize for you where we've come from, what this book is about. This book Ecclesiastes summarizes the words of a guy named Qoheleth, or as his name is translated in English, *the Teacher*.
- Like all of us, the Teacher's experience of life is less than it should be. Life is hard. Life is filled with pain and suffering and inequality and frustration and death. Basically life blows. And so the Teacher wants to know the answer to this important question. What do you live for? Where, if anywhere, in this life under the sun, on this earth can meaning and purpose and fulfillment be found? Or does all of life basically rot?
- This book is the story of his exhaustive search for something worth living for. And so if it can be done, the Teacher does it. He tests things for the meaning and fulfillment factor. He pursues pleasure. He pursues work. He pursues sex. He pursues money. He pursues possessions. You name it, he does it. And the conclusion he draws from his experience is that none of these things are capable of giving meaning to life. All these things he's tried—they're meaningless. They're vanities. They're chasing after the wind. They're not worth pursuing. In fact, pursuing them makes life harder, more complicated.
- Which brings us back to Ecclesiastes 9. [Ecclesiastes 9:13-10:20](#) is the Teacher's way of showing us how we make life more complicated, harder than it already is by choosing to live life without God and apart from him instead of hand in hand with him. **Life without God is meaninglessly harder than life with God.**

Transition

Look at [Ecclesiastes 9:13](#). The Teacher begins to make his case by telling a story. Listen to what he says. [Ecclesiastes 9:13-10:1](#).

Main Points

- *I also saw under the sun this example of wisdom that greatly impressed me: 14 There was once a small city with only a few people in it. And a powerful king came against it, surrounded it and built huge siegeworks against it.* The teacher sees something done right in this world. Something that greatly impresses him. This small city is attacked by a powerful king. Notice the emphasis on the disparity between the city and its people and the attacking king and his army. Small city, few people. Powerful king, huge army, huge engines of war. Odds aren't good.
- What impressed the Teacher? The outcome of the fight and the reason for it. [Verse 15](#). *Now there lived in that city a man poor but wise, and he saved the city by his wisdom. But nobody remembered that poor man. 16 So I said, "Wisdom is better than strength."* This poor, ill-resourced, uneducated man, who has nothing but wisdom, saves the city from something

¹ Will Rogers, *Christian Reader*, Vol. 33, no. 1.

which could not be accomplished by strength alone. And this causes the Teacher to conclude something remarkable. *Wisdom is better than strength.* Better to be wise than strong.

- You'd think this guy who saved the city would receive some kind of accolade; a pat on the back maybe? Think again. Nothing. Even worse. [Verse 16](#). *But the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are no longer heeded.* The wisdom that saved the city, that spared the city from difficulty and hardship and suffering and death is despised and rejected.
- You know what? Everyday this same story is played out a million times over as people willingly choose to complicate life, to make life harder by foolishly rejecting God's wisdom for how to live. Instead of doing things God's way we choose to do things in our own strength, our own way. Instead of heeding the wisdom that could spare us and free us and save us we despise that wisdom. The result? People compound the experience of futility and meaninglessness of this life by making things even harder. **Life without God is meaninglessly harder than life with God.**
- And all the Teacher can say is [verse 17](#). Look at the text. *The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouts of a ruler of fools. 18 Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good. As dead flies give perfume a bad smell, so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor.*
- Failing to choose the right thing, the best thing, the prudent thing, even if it's something small and insignificant, is a big deal. Because that small thing has the ability to destroy much more than is seemingly possible.² *A little folly outweighs wisdom and honor.* So much, too much of the good that there is in this life under the sun is quickly undone by our stupid, "what were you thinking" choices. Our small mistakes, our poor choices more quickly complicate life than our ability to undo what we've done. Life is hard. Life is filled with pain and suffering and inequality and frustration and death. Basically life blows. Why make it even harder? [[Slide #3](#)] Better to listen to wisdom and counsel beforehand than to try to clean the flies out of the ointment after the fact.
- See. Here's the deal. God's commands, his counsel, his advice, his way of doing things are always for our benefit. They're for our good. They are there to protect us, to spare us from bringing unneeded, unnecessary grief to this already difficult life. This is why you find passages like [Proverbs 1:20-33](#); this lengthy warning against rejecting God's wisdom.
- *Wisdom calls aloud in the street, she raises her voice in the public squares; 21 at the head of the noisy streets she cries out, in the gateways of the city she makes her speech: 22 "How long will you simple ones love your simple ways? How long will mockers delight in mockery and fools hate knowledge? 23 If you had responded to my rebuke, I would have poured out my heart to you and made my thoughts known to you. 24 But since you rejected me when I called and no one gave heed when I stretched out my hand, 25 since you ignored all my advice and would not accept my rebuke, 26 I in turn will laugh at your disaster; I will mock when calamity overtakes you-- 27 when calamity overtakes you like a storm, when disaster sweeps over you like a whirlwind, when distress and trouble overwhelm you.*
- *28 "Then they will call to me but I will not answer; they will look for me but will not find me. 29 Since they hated knowledge and did not choose to fear the LORD, 30 since they would not accept my advice and spurned my rebuke, 31 they will eat the fruit of their ways and be filled*

² Longman, p. 236.

with the fruit of their schemes. 32 For the waywardness of the simple will kill them, and the complacency of fools will destroy them; 33 but whoever listens to me will live in safety and be at ease, without fear of harm."

- So much difficulty and pain and frustration in this life under the sun can be overcome simply by listening and heeding God's wisdom for how to do things. **Life without God is meaninglessly harder than life with Him.**

Transition

In the language of the Bible, the name for the type of person who needlessly makes life more difficult by rejecting God's teaching and instruction is *fool*.

- In the world of the Bible the fool is someone who cannot follow directions, is a blabbermouth, makes elaborate plans for the future, procrastinates, shows poor judgment and on and on and on. The rest of chapter 10 is this photo album of the life of the fool; little snapshots of the way the fool operates.
- This chapter conjures up in my mind a picture of the Teacher standing up to say something like this about the fool. [Slide #4] "Congratulations, you're an idiot." The Teacher's not saying we're idiots. What he's trying to say in this chapter is that the way of the fool is idiotic. The way of the fool is senseless.
- Follow along with what the Teacher says. **Verse 2.** *The heart of the wise inclines to the right, but the heart of the fool to the left. 3 Even as he walks along the road, the fool lacks sense and shows everyone how stupid he is.*
- *If a ruler's anger rises against you, do not leave your post; calmness can lay great errors to rest.* The thought being, the fool doesn't stay calm. The fool complicates things by losing his cool.
- **Verse 5.** *There is an evil I have seen under the sun, the sort of error that arises from a ruler: 6 Fools are put in many high positions, while the rich occupy the low ones. 7 I have seen slaves on horseback, while princes go on foot like slaves.*
- **Verse 8.** *Whoever digs a pit may fall into it; whoever breaks through a wall may be bitten by a snake. 9 Whoever quarries stones may be injured by them; whoever splits logs may be endangered by them. 10 If the ax is dull and its edge unsharpened, more strength is needed but skill will bring success. 11 If a snake bites before it is charmed, there is no profit for the charmer.*
- All these things, falling into a pit, being injured while quarrying stone or splitting logs, exercising more manpower than is necessary by using a dull ax, a snake biting before it can be charmed, this collage of images when viewed from afar show the picture of a person who makes things needlessly difficult by some kind of foolish choice.
- **Verse 12.** *Words from a wise man's mouth are gracious, but a fool is consumed by his own lips. 13 At the beginning his words are folly; at the end they are wicked madness-- 14 and the fool multiplies words. No one knows what is coming-- who can tell him what will happen after him?* All of us have had the experience of complicating life, life getting more complex, more difficult because of something we've said. The folly of misspoken words is graphic here. *The fool is consumed by his own lips.*

- Verse 15. *A fool's work wears him; he does not know the way to town.* That phrase “the way to town” is a figure of speech. It’s like saying a person doesn’t know when to come in out of the rain. The point is the fool’s behavior; the way of a fool is incomprehensibly dumb at times.
- Verse 16. *Woe to you, O land whose king was a servant and whose princes feast in the morning. 17 Blessed are you, O land whose king is of noble birth and whose princes eat at a proper time-- for strength and not for drunkenness.*
- *18 If a man is lazy, the rafters sag; if his hands are idle, the house leaks. 19 A feast is made for laughter, and wine makes life merry, but money is the answer for everything.*
- *20 Do not revile the king even in your thoughts, or curse the rich in your bedroom, because a bird of the air may carry your words, and a bird on the wing may report what you say.* Again, the fool has no control over his tongue so that what’s said, even in private, ends up coming back to haunt him.
- Have you ever wondered why so many people, even really smart people, do really stupid things? Sin makes people stupid. The Teacher wants us to see that the “what were you thinking” moments in life are meant to drive us to God. [Slide #5] **The stupidity of sin is meant to drive us to God.**
- The point of all that the Teacher is trying to say is that life is hard. The experience of life, for all of us, is one of pain and suffering and oppression and absurdity and inequality and frustration and death. Why go it alone, without God? Why make this life even harder than it is. Because left to ourselves, without God, apart from him and his wisdom, all we get for ourselves are a lot of stupid, idiotic, detrimental choices.
- If heaped up around you are piles and piles of consequences that continue to stink up your life week after week, month after month, maybe it’s time to stop stepping in the piles. Maybe its time to confess your inability to navigate life on your own and ask for help through the mine field. Life doesn’t have to be the way it is. By God’s grace, with his help and direction, he can spare all of us from a lot of needless crap.
- If we would just turn to him. And listen to him. *My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you, 2 turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding, 3 and if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, 4 and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, 5 then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God.*
- *6 For the LORD gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding. 7 He holds victory in store for the upright, he is a shield to those whose walk is blameless, 8 for he guards the course of the just and protects the way of his faithful ones. 9 Then you will understand what is right and just and fair--every good path. 10 For wisdom will enter your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul. 11 Discretion will protect you, and understanding will guard you.³*

³ Proverbs 2:1-11

Conclusion

- I wish I could stand before you and tell you I've never rejected God's counsel, that I've never done anything stupid. The greatest news in the world is that there is One who is able to undo the worst messes we get ourselves into. There is One, **Joel 2:25**, who can *repay you for the years the locusts have eaten*. God can make up for a lot of lost time, and a lot of poor choices. His grace, through Christ, is sufficiently deep enough and his mercy is exceedingly wide enough for all—if we'd just come. **Life without God is meaninglessly harder than life with Him**. Open your heart to him this morning. Let's pray.