



## Wisdom in the Traffic Patterns of Life

Ecclesiastes 10:4-15

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A Scottish church leader, pastor and author wrote these insightful words more than 100 years ago — and they still ring true:

“A wise life is made up of a multitude of small things; the little things of the hour and not the great things of the age fill up the life of a wise believer. Little words, not eloquent speeches; little deeds, not miracles or great battles won. It is not in one heroic effort, but through little things, that a life is wisely lived.”

This author was merely repeating in principle form the inspired wisdom of God’s word.

Since a wise life is truly made up of a multitude of small things, God graciously gives us advice for the common situations.

Now, it shouldn’t be a surprise that an old and experienced king named Solomon would give us insights related to the simplest things in life.

And here in Ecclesiastes chapter 10, God’s Spirit through Solomon’s own experiences is going to give us some great advice for traveling in what we could call the normal, routine traffic patterns of life.

Solomon is going to give us some down to earth, simple, clear, common sense advice for three routine situations.

**Responding wisely to people in authority who, frankly, aren’t as wise as you are**

Solomon effectively tells us how to handle an explosive temper tantrum at the office.

**Notice verse 4:**

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

*Ecclesiastes 10:4*

Let's refer to this as: *Misguided anger*

The Hebrew word here for ruler doesn't limit this context to kings, but to multiple levels of authorities.

In plain terms, your boss has blown his top. In fact, it might be a pattern. He's hothead, given to anger, which, Solomon writes is a signal that he's a self-centered sinner (Proverbs 29:22).

And he's done it again, and that's the last straw. You have had it. You are done. This job is not worth it.

And for the rest of your shift at work, you compose a resignation letter that resembles a blow torch. You can't wait to return fire with fire.

And maybe you're thinking — because you're a Christian — that you need a verse to write down at the bottom of that resignation letter that'll really smoke him.

You inadvertently turn to ***Ecclesiastes 10:4*** and Solomon writes, "do not leave your place — respond with calm self-control." That verse just won't work!

Actually, it is the verse to apply here. One author paraphrases this advice to read, "let your cool composure quiet down a hot temper."



Do you have a moment in your work career similar to what Stephen is describing here? How did you handle it?

Don't quit; don't leave your post; don't over-react to your boss' overreaction.

Stay cool.

I couldn't help but think of Rudyard Kipling's famous lines, composed 100 years ago, where an older man gives advice to a younger man. He writes:

If you can keep your head when all about you / Are losing theirs and blaming it on you / If you can wait and not be tired by waiting, / Or being lied about, [yet not respond] in lies, / Or being hated, [yet not] give way to hating, / You'll be a Man, my son!

In the normal traffic patterns of life, you are going to encounter misguided anger. When everyone around you is getting all steamed up, wisdom is revealed in the person who keeps a cool head and a calm spirit.

Now Solomon moves on to talk about misguided appointments.

**Notice verses 5:**

*There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, as it were an error proceeding from the ruler.*

*Ecclesiastes 10:5*

The word here for **evil** refers to something that is improper or unjust. And the word here for **error** refers to a thoughtless mistake — an administrative oversight.

And again, the Hebrew word for **ruler** can refer broadly to someone in authority.

**Now notice verse 6:**

*Folly is set in many high places, and the rich sit in a low place. I have seen slaves on horses, and princes walking on the ground like slaves.*

*Ecclesiastes 10:6-7*

We'll call these: Misguided appointments

Now in Solomon's day, ordinary citizens didn't own horses. Horses were reserved for political leaders, royalty or nobility.

Solomon isn't making the point here that rich people should be able to ride a horse and slaves must walk everywhere. What Solomon is doing here is describing a culture that has been turned upside down because of unwise appointments.

In other words, people have been promoted by the authorities who don't deserve it; somebody who deserves to ride instead of walk is still walking.

Those who should be promoted because they deserve it — represented as riding a horse — don't get the job; and somebody who doesn't belong on a horse gets put in the saddle.

This happens in every generation and in every segment of society and in every culture. Maybe it happens because of connections, or a little money under the table, or a friend of a friend, or even a little cheating on the resume.



Have you ever been snubbed for a position you knew you deserved? Did you respond out of frustration or with wisdom? What would be a proper way to handle that situation?

I read just last month that the Pakistan International Airlines, the nation's flagship airline, had to deactivate hundreds of planes upon discovering an elaborate cheating scandal. The news report revealed that 30 percent of their pilots were never qualified to fly but had cheated their way into the captain's chair. Of Pakistan's 860 pilots, 262 of them had paid someone to take their licensing exams for them. They didn't really know how to fly that plane.

Talk about the wrong person on the horse — how about the wrong person flying the plane.

Solomon now moves to a second area where wisdom is needed in very practical terms:

## Preparing for dangerous assignments

Solomon is going to mention 5 assignments – notice **verse 8**:

*He who digs a pit will fall into it, and a serpent will bite him who breaks through a wall.*

*Ecclesiastes 10:8*

Solomon is essentially saying: take precautions — *Be protective*.

Now keep in mind that the verbs in this list are to be understood as possibilities, not predictions. This isn't always going to happen, but it could happen.

You are digging a pit and you need to put something up that reminds you where the edge of that pit is located.

OSCEA wasn't created yet. There's no yellow tape and hard hats and warning signs around that pit. So, the wise worker will protect himself from danger.

***The last part of verse 8 brings up another danger:***

*A serpent will bite him who breaks through a wall.*

*Ecclesiastes 10:8b*

So, be patient

In the Near East, loose rocks were used to create a typical wall or fence. Snakes love all those crevices, so don't just jump

in there. Be patient enough to survey the fence and look for danger hidden in the dark crevices.

The third assignment **appears in verse 9**:

*He who quarries stones is hurt by them.*

*Ecclesiastes 10:9a*

The advice here is to *be perceptive*

Think ahead.

This reminded me of playing that little board game with our grandson called Booby Trap where all these little plastic things are scrunched together in a spring loaded board, and if you pull out the wrong piece the trap springs and pieces go flying everywhere — which is his favorite part!

Or the game called Jenga, where moving one block of wood will affect other blocks in that tower of wooden blocks.

That's the principle here; you need to be perceptive enough to know what will happen to the surrounding rock when you chisel out the one you are working on.

***Verse 9, the latter part brings up another dangerous assignment:***

*And he who splits logs is endangered by them. If the iron is blunt, and one does not sharpen the edge, he must use more strength. But wisdom helps one to succeed.*

*Ecclesiastes 10:9b-10*

The counsel here is to *be prepared*.

If you haven't sharpened that ax, you are not prepared for the job. Which means you will have to swing that much harder.

Which means if that ax glances off the wood, which is more likely when you are swinging with all your might, and you hit your leg, you are in dangerous trouble.

So be patient enough to prepare for the job.



What are some areas in your life where patience is required? How do you work to improve how patient you are?

Solomon tacks on one more dangerous assignment before wrapping this section up. He adds *in verse 11*:

*If the serpent bites before it is charmed, there is no advantage to the charmer.*

*Ecclesiastes 10:11*

The advice here is to be punctual or prompt.

Snake charmers were common entertainers in Solomon's day, and today in some parts of the world. I have watched a young snake charmer in India playing his flute and swaying as the snake swayed in rhythm from its wicker basket.

Snakes have no external ears; they pick up sound waves primarily through the bony structure of the head.

Evidently, the snake charmer in Solomon's illustration is in a hurry to gather his money before the snake is charmed, or properly returned to its basket.

This is an issue of timing. Of being prompt; punctual; on time. As for Solomon, being on time for a snake charmer was vital to surviving.

So, in these 5 dangerous assignments, Solomon is encouraging us to take wisdom to work. He effectively says, "Look, I've seen one situation after another in the work world. The average person doesn't show up with wisdom; they are not perceptive, or patient, or prepared or protective; the quickest job and the lowest bidder is the name of the game."

I read recently that a library in Boston commemorated the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of what has been called The Great Molasses Flood.

On January 15, 1919, an enormous steel vat — 50 feet high and 240 feet around — containing 2.3 million gallons of processed molasses suddenly burst open. Waves of thick molasses, 30 feet high, raced like tidal waves through town, destroying buildings, crushing freight cars, wagons, automobiles and drowning 21 people.

An investigation revealed that this company had simply ignored the warning

signs where this tank was leaking molasses; they refused to take precautions and halt production and over the years they simply repainted the tank to match the color of leaking molasses.

Maybe that's where we got the expression, let's just paint over it, rather than do the job well.

Let's hope nobody notices a poor job; let's hope the paychecks keep coming in even though we're just painting over the problem instead of fixing them.

So, work wisely, and glorify God in every assignment!



What does it look like to glorify God in your work?

Now Solomon introduces us to a third routine traffic pattern of life where wisdom needs to show up.

Not only do we need wisdom in responding to difficult leaders

Not only do we need wisdom in preparing for dangerous assignments.

Thirdly, we need wisdom in:

### Guarding Daily Conversations

Solomon describes in detail the words of a foolish person.

He begins by giving us a description of wise words — **notice the first part of verse 12:**

*The words of a wise man's mouth win him favor.*

*Ecclesiastes 10:12a*

You could translate this phrase: the words of a wise man's mouth are grace.

They are gracious, appropriate words.

Now in contrast, Solomon makes four statements about the words of a foolish person.

First their words are destructive

**Notice verse 12, the latter part:**

*The lips of a fool consume him.*

*Ecclesiastes 10:12b*

Literally, the lips of a fool swallow him up; you could translate it — a fool falls into his own mouth.

That might be the background to our expression today of someone putting their foot in their mouth. In other words, you begin to consume yourself by foolish talking.

Secondly; their words are devious.

**Notice verse 13:**

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

*Ecclesiastes 10:13*

The idea here is picked up by the apostle Paul in **Titus 1:10** where he talks about the unruly vain talkers. He's describing false leaders and teachers who are unaccountable; they will not recognize authority, certainly not the authority of God.

And their words lead to anarchy — evil madness — they don't lead people to live wisely, but to live wickedly.

Thirdly, their words are delusional.

**Verse 14:**

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

*Ecclesiastes 10:14*

They multiply words. In other words, they don't know when to stop talking.

And Solomon highlights the fact that they love to talk about the future. Whether it's a global disaster on the horizon, the future of world economies, or technologies, or the future of their own business plans, their own physical health and successes — they talk like they have the future all figured out.

This reminds me of a wildly successful farmer recorded in Luke's Gospel and chapter 12 who said "I've had one bumper crop after another; I will tear down my barns and build larger ones to handle my wealth. I can finally say to myself, 'You have done well. You have it

made — so take it easy and have the time of your life.' But God said to him, 'Foolish talker — tonight you will die.'"

He planned for everything in his future but the inevitable future of dying.

The wisest thing you could ever do about the future is entrust it to God.

The wisest thing you could ever say about your future, that you can know with confidence, is that you believe the gospel; you have spoken those all-important words of faith and trust in Jesus Christ and you have asked Him to forgive your sin and write your name into the Book of Life.

Those are the wisest words you will ever speak. They will take you to Heaven.

Now the words of a foolish person are destructive, devious, delusional and they are, fourthly:

Their words are distracting.

**Notice verse 15:**

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

*Ecclesiastes 10:15*

In this context, a foolish person is so busy talking about themselves that he gets lost and cannot find his way to the city.

Roads in those days were well marked; a traveler could find his way easily enough.

One Old Testament scholar believes this was a proverbial expression during the

days of Solomon, referring to a person so distracted by their talking that they could not find their way home.

If I could summarize our study through chapter 10 thus far, I would give you three simple principles of application.

Let's boil it down to just a few statements:

First, pay attention to the smallest temptations.

Solomon began this chapter by reminding us that just a few dead insects could ruin an entire bottle of perfume. So too, can a little sin ruin a reputation; so be careful! Watch your walk — pay attention to the smallest temptation.

Secondly, pay attention to the simplest details.

*Watch your work.*

Take wisdom to work with you. Don't paint over poor work; prepare. Think it through and ask the Lord for wisdom while you're at work.

Your work is more than a paycheck. In fact, the most important thing you take home from work is not your paycheck.

The most important thing you take home from work is yourself.

So, watch your walk; watch your work.

Thirdly, pay attention to the shortest conversations

*Watch your words.*

Guard even the smallest word. Let even the smallest word be a word of grace.

I was reading one pastor who illustrated this point with a lady in his congregation who was a kindergarten teacher.

It snowed a lot there in Illinois, and snowsuits were standard equipment.

One afternoon, after a long day, she helped one of the little boys into his snowsuit. It was one of those infernal kind with snaps and buttons and laces. It just didn't fit him very well — it was too small, and it took her 10 minutes to squeeze him into it.

Finally, when she finished, he looked up at her and meekly said, "This isn't my snowsuit."

She didn't say anything; the words that came to her mind were not words of grace. And by the way, kindergarten teachers deserve medals of honor anyway! So, she pushed and pulled and untied and unsnapped and finally got him out of that suit.

And he looked up again and said to her, "This is my sister's snowsuit. And my mother said I could wear it today."

If I had been that teacher, there would be one less kid on planet earth!

So how do you respond when life happens?

Remember earlier that Scottish pastor and author I quoted? He essentially summarized our study thus far in Ecclesiastes chapter 10:



“A wise life is made up of a multitude of small things; little words, not eloquent speeches. It is not in one heroic effort, but through little things, that a life is wisely lived.”

That’s another way of saying, wisdom is to be demonstrated out there in the routine, traffic patterns of life.

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