



ECCLESIASTES 10:1-20

1 Dead flies make the perfumer's ointment give off a stench; so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor. 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. 4 If the anger of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your place, for calmness will lay great offenses to rest. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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.

STRUCTURE

- I. **Intro to Wisdom and Folly (1-3)**
 - a. A little folly corrupts wisdom's gain (1)
 - b. Wisdom and folly both lodge and flow from the heart (2)
 - c. Folly can't help but make itself conspicuous (3)

- II. **Wisdom Amid Foolish Government (4-7)**
 - a. Wisdom stays steady when rulers flare (4)
 - b. Wisdom discerns the tragedy of inverted leadership (5-7)

- III. **Wisdom and Folly in Everyday Activity (8-11)**
 - a. Wisdom refuses to plan harm (8)
 - b. Wisdom plans safety in labor (9)
 - c. Wisdom pauses when necessary (10)
 - d. Wisdom acts when necessary (11)

- IV. **Wisdom and Folly in Everyday Speech (12-15)**
 - a. The effect on oneself of wise and foolish speech (12)
 - b. The beginning and end of a fool running his mouth (13)
 - c. Arrogance is the engine that makes his mouth run (14)
 - d. Ignorance is the exhibit that his wearisome words display (15)

- V. **The National Effect of Wise and Foolish Government (16-20)**
 - a. Woe to the land ruled by folly (16)
 - b. Blessing upon the land ruled by wisdom (17)
 - c. The destructive folly of lazy leaders (18)
 - d. The life-giving blessing of material goods enjoyed wisely (19)
 - e. Wisdom avoids the danger of cursing foolish power (20)

GENERAL COMMENTARY:

The prior section concluded with a story of foolish kings and forgotten wisdom (9:13-18), and this section will continue the theme. Everyone lives under the shadow—or in the light—of government. Whether by wisdom or folly, rulers govern not just nations but our lived experience. Wisdom accepts this reality and navigates it carefully.

The first three verses introduce wisdom and folly, building upon the last verse of the prior section: "one sinner destroys much good" (9:18). A little fly—a little folly—destroys what wisdom took years to build (10:1). Wisdom is vulnerable, but valuable. We must cultivate this virtue in our hearts, lest folly mislead us (10:2), and also reveal us (10:3).

After introducing wisdom, Solomon again shines the spotlight on government. Folly too often rises to the top. It makes powerful men rage (10:4a) and promotes the unqualified (10:5-7). Wisdom discerns and calculates the safest response (10:4b).

The next two sections elaborate on wisdom and folly, but in a different setting: not the palace but in everyday life—actions and words (10:8-15).

In their actions, foolish people plan harm, only to suffer it (10:8). Where planning is wise—in dangerous work settings—fools make no plans for safety (10:9). In contrast, wisdom refuses to plan others' harm; it insists on planning for self-preservation (10:8-9). Wisdom also knows when to pause, and when to act, while fools invert the order and suffer for it (10:10-11).

Everyone suffers. Fools suffer the most.

In their speech, fools continue the destruction. While wise words earns favor, a foolish mouth consume the one who opens it (10:12). Yet he won't stop. Arrogance drives him to multiply words until madness and ignorance become manifest—to all but the fool—who only grows tired of his own show (10:13-15).

In the final section (10:16-20), Solomon returns to the theme of government, having clarified the nature of wisdom and folly. By concluding in this way, the Preacher raises the stakes: not just individuals, but entire nations, flourish or perish. Verses 16-17 pronounce a prophetic woe and beatitude on kingdoms ruled by foolish and wise leaders, respectively. Verses 18 and 19 provide contrast. Lazy indulgence tears kingdoms down, but the proper use of God's gifts—enjoyed by the wise—helps leaders and their populations endure the weight of vanity.

Solomon closes with an exhortation. Since folly typically rises to the top, verse 20 counsels the wise once more to navigate reality with pragmatism. Our temptation is to curse foolish leaders. But given their immense power, their narcissistic obsession with identifying dissenters, and the human tendency to forward gossip up the chain—wisdom shuts its mouth.

Folly speaks and perishes.

VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENTARY:

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

—This verse flows directly out of the cautionary tale that concluded the prior chapter (9:13-18). There we learned how a poor but wise man saved a city. His wisdom proved superior to the shouts and weaponry of a foolish king (9:16-18). But no one remembers him (9:15). The real-life parable closes poignantly: "one sinner destroys much good" (9:18). Wisdom saves, but folly erases its gain. Wisdom builds; sin bulldozes.

—The opening proverb in 10:1 expands the thought using perfume and flies to make the point. The fragrance of perfume must be carefully concocted. Its material is gathered and mixed before it is enjoyed. Like every work of wisdom, the process is slow, but the reward is pleasant. It is also vulnerable. Just like one sinner bulldozes what wisdom builds, dead flies kill wisdom's fragrance. Nobody planned the fly infestation. They just quietly dropped in—disrupted. Folly does this. It's always harder to build than to destroy, to birth than to kill.

—The last half of the proverb interprets the first. Flies are little, and "a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor." Wisdom fills the atmosphere with a pleasant fragrance, universally enjoyed. But fools and sinners make it all a big stink.

—The verse encourages wisdom while also cautioning us: protect it. A little fly, a little folly, a little choice—destroys what took years to build.

—Kidner: "it takes far less to ruin something than to create it."

—The rest of the chapter highlights the advantage of wisdom, despite its vulnerability to folly.

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.*

—Verses 2-3 continue the general teaching about wisdom's advantage. Future verses envision how it operates: in the setting of a monarchy (vv. 4-7), in actions undertaken (vv. 8-11), and in words spoken (vv. 12-15). The section concludes by resuming the theme of monarchy (vv. 16-20). But then the stakes are higher: Entire nations are destroyed.

—"A wise man's heart inclines him... but a fool's heart...":

- Wisdom is not just a deliberate choice; it is an inclination of the heart. Wise people lean into wisdom. They cherish it like gold.
- This does not suggest the absence of a sinful nature. We all “by nature” crave sin (Eph. 2:1-3). But wise people have a competing desire: for righteousness.
- Likewise, foolishness is not just a deliberate choice; it is an inclination of the heart. Foolish people lean into folly. They cherish it like gold.
- Proverbs about the desires of the wise/righteous vs. fool/wicked:
 - Pr. 10:23: “Doing wrong is like a joke to a fool, but **wisdom is pleasure** to a man of understanding.”
 - Pr. 11:23: “The **desire of the righteous** ends only in good; the expectation of the wicked in wrath.”
 - Pr. 12:12: “Whoever is **wicked covets** the spoil of evildoers, but the root of the righteous bears fruit.”
 - Pr. 15:21: “**Folly is joy** to him who lacks sense, but a man of understanding walks straight ahead.”
 - Pr. 18:2: “A **fool takes no pleasure** in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion.”
 - Pr. 21:10: “The soul of the **wicked desires** evil; his neighbor finds no mercy in his eyes.”
- These verses confront us with a question: What does your soul delight in most? Even the wise have competing desires. But do we have a practical reflex toward wisdom and holiness? Do we lean into wisdom’s slow and patient process of building—things, projects, value? Or do we overwhelmingly crave the quick fix?

—“to the right... to the left”:

- The right hand throughout Scripture is the place of strength and honor. Christ is seated at the right hand of God. He separates the sheep and goats—the saved and unsaved—to the right and to the left: to glory and shame.
- The wise person’s heart inclines toward the place of strength and honor. Toward blessing the world with the fragrance of life (10:1). The foolish person’s heart inclines toward weak-willed ease—toward shame. It is the fly in the ointment.

—“Even when the fool walks on the road”: In the most mundane of daily duties...

—“he lacks sense, and everyone says he is a fool”: He manifests the folly of his heart. That which dwells in us comes out of us. The fool can’t help but speak foolishly. In a daily activity as simple as walking down the road, his folly is conspicuous—to all but himself.

—Verses 2-3 encourage heart cultivation. It is not enough to do the right thing; we must feel and seek and crave the right things. This transformation is slow. Wisdom always is. It comes as we walk in friendship with God and wise people—wisdom rubs off (Pr. 13:20).

—Verses 2-3 also encourage discernment. Pay attention to the fool as he walks down the road. His folly is plain, but you must open your eyes. This is not rocket science. Simple observation is enough. Watch the way of the wise and the fool. It motivates wise living.

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

—In these verses, as often occurs in Ecclesiastes, Solomon turns to government. Few (if any?) live independently of it. The actions and attitudes of our political leaders affect us all. Wisdom knows how to navigate its complexities.

—“if the anger of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your place...”:

- Wisdom doesn’t storm out from a king’s presence. Solomon already explored this theme in 8:2-5. Characteristically, the Preacher circles back. He teaches wisdom through repetition—the only way it breaks through.
- Even if they’re foolish, kings hold power. Wisdom takes this into account. They calculate their response rather than acting impulsively.

—“for calmness will lay great offenses to rest”: Wisdom is calm. In the context of power, wisdom overcomes not by superior force or argumentation, but by patience.

—“evil... error proceeding from the ruler”:

- Solomon’s encouragement to the wise does not suppose that kings are always reasonable. Their “anger” (v. 4) may be entirely unjustified. Still, be patient.
- This verse sets up the inversion of proper hierarchies in vv. 6-7.

—“folly... high places... rich... low place... slaves on horses... princes... like slaves”:

- In a properly ordered society, folly should occupy the lowest position. Those trained and skilled in managing wealth should oversee government spending. Those educated in the ways of royalty should conference with the king.
- In a disordered society, fools sit on thrones, sluggards advise the king, and those most prepared, most educated, most qualified—beg for bread.
- The inversion of proper hierarchy flows from the “evil... error” of foolish leaders. They promote their friends over the wise. They dole out positions to the highest bidder.
- We are reminded of Rehoboam, Solomon’s son, who rejected the experienced royal counselors of his father’s generation. He chose his reckless friends. Their advice divided the kingdom of Israel for centuries to come.
- We are also reminded of Isaiah’s prophecy of judgment Isa. 3:4-6: *“And I will make boys their princes, and infants shall rule over them. And the people will oppress one another, every one his fellow and every one his neighbor; the youth will be insolent to the elder, and the despised to the honorable. For a man will take hold of his brother in the house of his father, saying: “You have a cloak; you shall be our leader, and this heap of ruins shall be under your rule.”*
- One of God’s judgments on a land is foolish leadership. “boys” and “infants” speaks figuratively of adults who never grew up. The foolish leaders reflect their populace. In verse 6, the foolish population essentially says, “Hey, random guy, you should lead us!” Therefore, “the people will oppress one another, everyone his fellow...”
- These verses do not imply that wealth equals wisdom or that poverty equals folly. Solomon has already showcased wisdom among the poor (4:13; 9:15). And history agrees: Josiah was a literal child, yet a truly wise and righteous king. Solomon’s aim is larger—he’s exposing a world where justice, competence, and qualifications are subverted at the top, where the deserving are buried low and the unfit are crowned high. Wisdom can rise from anywhere; the tragedy is when folly rises to the throne and drags a nation with it.

—Since Solomon’s audience is made up of ordinary people, not monarchs, he’s not giving a civics lesson on fixing org charts. He’s giving a survival manual for the wise. Power structures will disappoint you. The world promotes those least qualified. Wisdom doesn’t rage against this reality or naively expect better; it adjusts its expectations. It holds a map called, “the real world,” and navigates accordingly.

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.

—This section departs from the palace and turns to everyday circumstances. The theme of wisdom unites the settings. It guides our attitudes and actions in every sphere.

—“He who digs a pit will fall into it”:

- Proverbs about falling into your own pit:
 - Pr. 22:14: “The mouth of forbidden women is a deep pit; he with whom the LORD is angry will fall into it.”
 - Pr. 26:27: “Whoever digs a pit will fall into it, and a stone will come back on him who starts it rolling.”
 - Pr. 28:10: “Whoever misleads the upright into an evil way will fall into his own pit, but the blameless will have a goodly inheritance.”
- In Pr. 22:14, the “deep pit” is the adulteress. Falling into the pit is not literal; it is a metaphor for moral collapse. This can be seen in each example.

- In Pr. 26:27, the context (vv. 23-28) is about evil deeds that boomerang—foolish schemes that become self-executing judgments. The person's action (digging a pit, rolling a stone) backfires. Folly always does.
- In 28:10, misleading the upright in an evil way is equivalent to digging a pit, and the consequence of this folly is falling into that pit.
- In sum, digging a pit that you fall into speaks of foolish action that backfires. Our modern equivalent is: "He dug his own grave," or "He made a rod for his own back." In an effort to harm others, folly destroy itself.

—"a serpent will bite him who breaks through a wall": This is a parallel proverb that carries the same meaning. To break through a wall is to violate another's property, probably to steal. The effort backfires—proverbially, as a snakebite.

—In both cases, folly schemes for profit and suffers ruin.

—"He who quarries stones is hurt by them, and he who splits logs is endangered by them":

- Verses 8 and 9 both address danger, but from different angles. Verse 8 focuses on the danger of calculating harm; verse 9 highlights the peril of calculating... nothing.
- In other words, verse 9 is about the danger of not thinking about danger. It is a different kind of folly. Verse 8 is the folly of evil schemes; verse 9 is the folly of naivete. Verse 8 is the folly of engineered harm; verse 9 is the folly of uncalculated risk. This person swings a hammer without watching his thumb.
- Wisdom avoids the wrong kind of calculation—how to harm others.
- Wisdom engages the right kind of calculation—how to protect oneself.

—"If the iron is blunt, and one does not sharpen the edge, he must use more strength, but wisdom helps one to succeed."

- If verses 8-9 show us how to protect ourselves, verse 10 reveals how to succeed. Wisdom achieves both. Folly achieves neither.
- Folly keeps hacking away with a dull axe. It says, "I don't have time to sharpen it"—and wastes time, as well as energy, swinging.
- Wisdom is inherently patient. It has no problem pausing to sharpen the axe. The fool observes him and scoffs. He thinks, "I don't need to sharpen the axe, I'll just swing harder." Despite pausing, the wise man finishes two hours earlier.
- Wisdom succeeds by doing the little, annoying tasks that unlock efficiency.
- The dull axe demands more muscle; the sharp axe delivers more success.
- Folly assumes strength can replace preparation; wisdom proves that preparation multiplies strength.
- As we would say, "Work smarter, not harder."

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

- This proverb is similar to the last in that it deals with matters of timing. In verse 10, wisdom pauses. In verse 11, wisdom acts promptly. There is a time for each, and wisdom knows the difference.
- Solomon is not commenting on whether snake charming is a wise endeavor. He assumes people do it and that it yields profit.
- But it doesn't yield profit if you get bit before busting out your flute. A skill applied too late loses its advantage.
- The proverb uses humor to underscore irony: the snake-charmer has genuine skill, but he deploys it after the bite, still sporting fresh fang marks. The fool becomes a laughingstock. Wisdom moves early. When action waits until the crisis bites, you've already lost the advantage. At this point, you're just managing fallout.
- Procrastination is folly. Other proverbs that teach the same idea:
 - Pr. 12:24: "The hand of the diligent will rule, while the slothful will be put to forced labor."
 - Pr. 13:4: "The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing, while the soul of the diligent is richly supplied."
 - Pr. 20:4: "The sluggard does not plow in the autumn; he will seek at harvest and have nothing."
- Adapted analysis from Kaiser:

- *Situation*: Digging pits. *Danger*: Falling into pits
- *Situation*: Breaking down walls. *Danger*: Being snake bit
- *Situation*: Quarrying stones. *Danger*: Being hurt by stones
- *Situation*: Splitting logs. *Danger*: Exhaustion
- *Situation*: Charming snakes. *Danger*: Being snake bit.
- In each case, Solomon presents a situation and its associated danger, which wisdom avoids: through righteousness, through pausing to resharpen, through carefulness, and through prompt action.

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.

—From the palace to everyday activities, Solomon now turns to everyday speech—a favorite topic of Wisdom Literature. Words reveal who you are. Wisdom and folly speak with different **words** (Pr. 18:21; Pr. 12:18), **tones** (Pr. 15:1; Pr. 16:24), **timing** (Pr. 25:11; Pr. 15:23), **frequency** (Pr. 29:20; Pr. 10:19), and **outcomes** (Pr. 12:13–14; Pr. 13:3).

—“win him favor... consume him”:

- The wise man’s speech win favor—how? By pacifying anger (Pr. 15:1), providing sweet counsel (16:24), healing the wounded (12:18), *etc.*
- The fool’s speech consumes him—how? By stirring up conflict (15:1), by necessitating painful correction (14:3), by hanging himself with the rope his mouth braided (12:13).
- In both cases, the focus of verse 12 is on both *source* and *outcome*.
 - The source of wise and foolish speech is wise and foolish people.
 - The outcome of wise and foolish speech is favor and ruin.

—“beginning... is foolishness... end... is evil madness”:

- Solomon contrasts the start and finish of a fool’s speech. When he starts talking, it’s bad. But the end is embarrassing, even ruinous.
- The Hebrew word for “madness” (*hōlēlā*) is a derivative noun built on the participial form of the verb *hālal*—which, in most contexts, means “praise.” Strange.
- In the *Theological Wordbook of the OT*, the root word *hālal* can have three primary meanings: (1) to shine, (2) to praise, (3) to be insane.
- I can see how the first two fit within the same semantic family. “shine” and “praise” draw attention to something glorious—a beautiful, emanating source. But how does “insane” or “madness” fit within the semantic range of “shine” and “praise”?
 - The answer is irony by inversion. If shining and praise magnify light and glory, then irrationality magnifies attention the same way, but in the opposite direction. Praise shines upward; madness shines sideways.
 - This fits well with 10:13. When a fool starts talking, we discern his folly. But when he doesn’t shut up, words spew fire and folly becomes madness.
 - Like a beam of light pointing back to its source, and like praise lifting its hands to heaven—unrestrained speech places madness on a pedestal.
- The madman’s speech is long-winded, self-exalting, loud, grandiose—and self-sabotaging. He relishes being the center of attention, not realizing that people feel awe—not at his majesty—but at his madness. His own spotlight torches him.

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

- Verse 13 previewed this one by highlighting “the beginning” and “the end” of a fool’s speech. He talks so much, we can break his speech down like we do a novel. There’s a beginning, a middle, and an end.
- Here in verse 14, Solomon expands the thought. The fool’s multiplied words not only spotlight his own madness, but its theological center: he thinks he is God. God alone “knows what is to be” and “no man” does. God alone “can tell him what will be after him”—an allusion to God’s speech, which alone

conveys omniscience. The fool talks like he owns tomorrow; Solomon reminds him he doesn't even own today.

- This clarifies even more the semantic range of *hālal*—at once, meaning praise and insanity, with context deciding. The madman thinks he is God. He boasts in his own wisdom, though he has none. His own knowledge, though he is wrong. Praise boasts in God's wisdom, strength, and glory. Madness self-exalts, and self-destructs.
- This ties back with the theme of Ecclesiastes. Solomon is shattering our illusion of control. Ever since Eve reached to "be like God"—we've been reaching ever since. We brag like we're all-powerful. We draw attention like we're all-glorious. We forecast like a weatherman without radar.
- Solomon says, "Nope. You're not powerful, you're finite. You're not glorious, you're dust and rib. And you don't know the future. You might die tomorrow."

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

- "toil" is broader than speech, but it includes speech. That's the context. The madman works very hard, with many words, to convince you he's great.
- His long speeches don't just weary listeners. They weary his own self. Pretending you are God is an exhausting endeavor.
- Isaiah says, "In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength" (Isa. 30:15). The prophet teaches that faith is quietness of soul. Wisdom Literature teaches that wisdom is quietness of speech. When your soul is quiet, so is your mouth. When a storm rages in you, noise proceeds from you.
- "for he does not know the way to the city":
 - The one who boasts of knowledge doesn't just fail the test of omniscience about the future (v. 14); his ignorance extends to the most basic knowledge.
 - Verses 14-15 connect not just over the theme of folly but ignorance. Fools multiply words that presume *knowledge* (v. 14), yet they know *nothing* (v. 15).
 - To "not know the way to the city" is similar to the idiom, "He can't find his way out of a paper bag." Imagine such a man boasting about knowledge.
 - Kidner creates his own equivalent: "he would get lost... even if you put him on an escalator."

—The palace reveals folly in rulers; the workplace reveals folly in labor; and the mouth reveals folly in everyone who has convinced themselves they are worthy of praise.

—This section cautions us toward verbal restraint. Words reveal the heart.

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. 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.

—This section returns to the theme of monarchy. The flow has been: Intro to wisdom (vv. 1-3)→wisdom in the setting of a monarchy (vv. 4-7)→wisdom in actions undertaken (vv. 8-11)→wisdom in words spoken (vv. 12-15)→wisdom weighed on a national scale (vv. 16-20).

—"Woe to you... Happy are you": Wisdom Literature doesn't typically pronounce prophetic blessings and curses like this. Their presence amplifies the grave consequences of folly and the glorious blessing of wisdom when applied to kings and nations.

—"when your king is a child... princes feast in the morning":

- The immature king recalls the "evil...error" of a disordered society from verses 5-7. Kings should be wise and mature, not infantile.
- The "princes" that "feast in the morning" recalls that same disorder. In verse 7, true princes live in squalor. The king promotes the unqualified. They lack the moral capacity to eat and drink "for strength, and not for drunkenness" (v. 17).
- An orderly society is a moral one. The inverted hierarchy of a foolish empire reflects its upside-down morals. They trickle down to the entire "land".

—"king is the son of nobility":

- Solomon's own father was not a conventional "son of nobility." Israel's first king, Saul, assumed his dynasty was destiny, grooming Jonathan for succession. It was not to be (1 Sam. 13:13–14). God bypassed pedigree to crown qualification, choosing David—the shepherd, the musician, the giant-slayer, the man forged by affliction (1 Sam. 16:11–13). Solomon's proverbs align with the same principle: leadership belongs to the formed, not the entitled (Pr. 16:32; Pr. 22:29).
- Here, Solomon speaks in generalities. Those best equipped for statecraft are often those formed by long preparation, education, and responsibility, like "sons of nobility." He is not critiquing wise outliers—David, or the poor and wise youth who rose to the throne (Eccl. 4:13–16), or the sage who delivered a city and was forgotten (Eccl. 9:15). He is targeting something else: the elevation of unformed, unqualified fools who inherit influence without formation. The tragedy isn't uncommon exceptions—it's the common pattern of unqualified promotion (Pr. 29:2; Is. 3:12 echoes the same collapse). Wisdom can rise from anywhere, but folly should never rise at all. When fools ascend, nations sink.

—Kidner: "Verses 16 and 17 remind us of the influence that seeps down from the men at the top, to set the tone of a whole community. It can be true of the smallest units as well as the largest."

—"sloth... roof sinks in... indolence... house leaks":

- Verses 16-17 and 20 all speak directly to a nation's government. Contextually, verses 18-19 (about laziness and proper enjoyment of blessing) are also about government.
- Lazy leaders make the house—the nation—fall into ruin.

—"Bread/laughter... wine/gladdens... money answers everything":

- This verse qualifies Solomon's critique of gluttonous leaders, and it makes sense that he would do so. So much of Ecclesiastes is about enjoying material blessings as gifts from God's hand. He refuses to let us misunderstand. The problem is not with feasting and wealth but with their improper use.
- Solomon himself experienced their improper use and called them "vanity" (Eccl. 2).
- If we feast at the right time (not "in the morning") and in the right way ("for strength and not for drunkenness", v. 17; for joy and provision, v. 19), we can receive material benefits as blessings from God.
- An entire nation suffers when its leaders misuse God's blessings. Bread, wine, and money kill kingdoms as surely as foreign armies. Immorality invades nations from within.
 - Will and Ariel Durant (on the fall of Rome): "A great civilization is not conquered from without until it has destroyed itself from within."
 - Ancient thinkers like Aristotle, Cicero, and Seneca spoke of nations with the analogy of a human life cycle —birth, growth, maturity, decline, and death. Societies thrive in their "prime" when governed by virtue, prudence, and discipline, but they enter "old age" when those structures give way to indulgence, internal fracture, civic arrogance, and ungoverned speech. For Aristotle, a polity's strength was tied to its moral habits. For Cicero, nations die when justice erodes and self-interest replaces duty. For Seneca, collapse begins when rulers lose command of themselves
 - A leader who can't rule himself will eventually ruin his state.
- The two most difficult to receive for many evangelicals is that "wine gladdens life" and "money is the answer for everything." Many Scriptures warn of the dangers of both. Solomon is not ignorant of them, as Ecclesiastes often teaches. But there is a danger on two sides: not just self-indulgence but self-righteousness (Eccl. 7:15-18). Wine gladdens life, but only if we don't abuse it. Money provides many answers—provision, pleasure, advancement—but only if we refuse to serve it.

—"Even in your thoughts, do not curse the king... [or] the rich":

- The reason is practical. What you dwell on, you will speak about. Powerful people will hear what you said and harm you.
- Why does Solomon say this here? When a nation sinks on account of godless leadership, people grumble. Foolish leaders will not take this in stride (cf. 7:21-22). Wisdom knows how to conduct itself not just in everyday life (vv. 8-15) but in times of national crisis (v. 20). Wisdom guards itself by guarding the tongue.