



ECCLESIASTES 9:11-18

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. 13 I have also seen this example of wisdom under the sun, and it seemed great to me. 14 There was a little city with few men in it, and a great king came against it and besieged it, building great siegeworks against it. 15 But there was found in it a poor, wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city. Yet no one remembered that poor man. 16 But I say that wisdom is better than might, though the poor man's wisdom is despised and his words are not heard. 17 The words of the wise heard in quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools. 18 Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.

STRUCTURE

- I. Life events suddenly ambush our expectation of reward (9:11-12)
 - a. Normal expectations fail us (9:11)
 - b. Sudden disruptions overtake us (9:12)
- II. Life events slowly erase our expectation of reward (9:13-15)
 - a. Quiet wisdom saves a city (9:13-15a)
 - b. Quiet vanity dissolves its reward (9:15b)
- III. Wisdom must be embraced, not for personal gain but objective good (9:16-18)
 - a. *The value of wisdom*: better than worldly strength and bluster
 - b. *The vulnerability of wisdom*: unheard and dismantled
 - c. Vanity erases wisdom's gain but not its objective good

GENERAL COMMENTARY:

In the prior section, Solomon expounded on the mystery of God's plan, showing how the only certainty of life is death. Paradoxically, internalizing death's reality does not suffocate joy; it fills our lungs with urgency to truly live. Here in 9:11-18, Solomon returns to the theme of mystery: Time, chance, and vanity overturn our expectations. Each one forces us to inquire how we live in a world that keeps surprising us.

The world surprises us in two ways: by sudden ambush or silent erasure. Sometimes death and calamity unexpectedly strike; at other times, people simply forget us. In either case, skill plus effort won't always yield the expected result. Life feels random. But there's a world of difference between *random* and *mysterious*. Nobody can "find out" God's plan (8:16), but neither do "chance" happenings escape His care. Even the outcomes we earn—outcomes that others less deserving sometimes enjoy—lie fully under the scope of God's plan. In a world cursed by sin and marked by vanity, life doesn't feel fair. But we take comfort in this: *There actually is a plan.*

And when life doesn't play by our rules, wisdom is still worth it. Tragedy disrupts our expectations (9:11-12), and people foil them (9:13-15, 18), leaving wisdom vulnerable—yet still unmistakably valuable. Better than worldly strength, wisdom can save a city. Even if wisdom leaves you poor and forgotten (9:11, 15), and even if sinners bulldoze what you built (9:18), wisdom is not a fiat currency. Like gold, it is objectively valuable. Wisdom must be embraced, not for personal gain—which never lasts—but for the goodness it produces and beauty it reflects. When we choose wisdom for its goodness rather than its payoff, our lives settle into the quiet groove of God's mysterious, beautiful plan.

VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENTARY:

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.

—Solomon returns to his dual theme about the mystery of God's plan and the certainty of death—that "same event" that happens to all (9:2). Having shown us how to live practically with such burdens—by celebrating life while it lasts!—he now deepens the burden.

—The burden is not just the mystery of life and certainty of death; it's how these converge. Death comes for all—and calamity too—but we know not when. And this subverts common sense. Normally, the fastest person wins; the strongest army conquers; the smartest earn money and favor. In fact, Proverbs reinforces some of these common-sense realities:

- Pr. 3:3-4: "So you [wise people] will find favor and good success in the sight of God and man."
- Pr. 3:16: "Long life is in her [wisdom's] right hand; in her left are riches and honor."
- Pr. 8:18: "Riches and honor are with me [wisdom], enduring wealth and righteousness."
- Proverbs 22:29: "Do you see a man skillful in his work? He will stand before kings."

—As we have discussed before, Solomon penned both Proverbs and Ecclesiastes; both belong to a genre called, "Wisdom Literature"—yet they hold wisdom in deliberate tension. Proverbs shows how God generally designed the world to work; Ecclesiastes illustrates what life feels like when life turns upside-down. Sometimes God disrupts His own system so we don't reduce Him to a formula: "so that man may not find out anything that comes after him" (3:11). This should drive us to "fear before Him" (3:14). But at other times, underneath God's sovereign plan, people commit injustices that subvert our expectations.

—That's why these two books must be read together. Proverbs forms your habits; Ecclesiastes reforms your expectations.

—Ecclesiastes "stress-tests" the character formulae of Proverbs. Proverbs shows how wisdom normally yields favor, wealth, and longevity. Ecclesiastes highlights that "normally" does not mean "always." This is why Ecclesiastes so emphasizes God's sovereignty.

—"the race is not to the swift": Fast people almost always win races. But the British record-holder Derek Redmond famously snapped his hamstring during his 400m race in the '92 Olympics, only to limp across the finish with his father's help—an iconic scene. Another example is Steve Prefontaine, who held every distance record from 2,000m to 10,000m before his fatal car accident at age 24. He died alone on the road in the middle of the night.

—"nor the battle to the strong":

- The stronger army almost always wins. But Solomon concludes with a parable illustrating the opposite. A "great king... besieged" a village, but "wisdom"—not strength—saved the city.
- One is reminded of Gideon's army of 300 defeating the Midianites who covered the land like locusts. God advised a strategic illusion: convincing the enemy they were outnumbered—by cloak of darkness, scattered torches, manufactured noise, and the help of God. The Midianites turned on themselves, then fled.
- Another illustration: Napoleon conquered Europe and invaded Russia with 600,000 troops, seizing Moscow—but then Winter hit. He lost 80% of his army. Napoleon took Europe, but January took Napoleon.

—"nor bread to the wise":

- Wise people almost always provide for themselves. Throughout Proverbs, wisdom is characterized by hard work (10:4; 12:11; 13:4), planning (21:5; 20:18), stewardship (27:23–24; 6:6–8), and foresight (22:3; 27:12). Nine times out of ten, these produce results. Ecclesiastes highlights the other 10%. Famine, mass lay-offs, military invasions, pandemics, and injustices disrupt wisdom's typical yield.
- Proverbs promises bread to the wise:
 - 20:13: "Love not sleep, lest you come to poverty; open your eyes, and you will have **plenty of bread**."
 - 28:19: "Whoever works his land will have **plenty of bread**, but he who follows worthless pursuits will have plenty of poverty."
- Again, Proverbs teaches us the character-consequence matrix by which the world *generally* operates. The "Protestant work-ethic" was a real thing—applying the wisdom of Proverbs generates wealth—in

most cases. But Ecclesiastes reminds us that we can't reduce God to a formula. Time and chance happen to all. Wisdom requires us to read Proverbs and Ecclesiastes together.

—"nor riches to the intelligent": Smart people almost always gain wealth. Elon Musk would not have earned his fortune without the brain God gave him. All the forces I just named (famine, mass layoffs, military invasions, etc.) apply here too. Moreover, sometimes very intelligent people lack the wisdom that turns brain power into financial prosperity.

—"favor to those with knowledge": Again, in the parable that follows, the wise man saves a city, but people forget him—because he's poor. Even though hard-won knowledge typically gets honored in workplaces and high places, the world's value system can subvert that. The world loves money—not wisdom. Poor people with great brains often go unnoticed.

—"but time and chance happen to them all":

- "time" reminds us especially of Ecclesiastes 3, where God appoints the times and seasons. Whether by speed or strength or wisdom or intelligence or knowledge—we cannot control our destiny. We are the helpless subjects of sovereign seasonality.
- "chance":
 - Translated "misfortune" in 1 Kgs 5:4: "But now the LORD my God has secured me rest on every side; there is neither adversary nor **misfortune**."
 - Almost all translations render the word in Eccl. 9:11 as "chance," with the one outlier being the LSB: "misfortune". *The Theological Wordbook of the OT* explains how the word typically means to meet, encounter, strike, or come into contact with. It can refer to physical contact, being struck, killed, overtaken, intercepted, or running into something suddenly.
 - Although "chance" works as a translation, we should not interpret it to mean "blind chance"—as if God was caught off-guard, or as if catastrophes somehow fell outside His sovereign plan. Remember the allusion to Ecclesiastes 3, where God appoints the times and seasons.
 - To God, nothing is "by chance", but to mortals living under the sun—life feels that way. You draw the short straw, the black bean, the Old Maid. Solomon is depicting how reality feels when it collides with expectations. He reinforces his point about human helplessness in 9:12.
 - Gibson: "The word 'chance' here is a bad translation; it's literally: 'time and happenings happen to all.' In other words, situations arise, circumstances change, and unforeseen events occur."
 - Kaiser: "The second subject of the sentence, 'events,' is not to be rendered 'chance.' The word (Hebrew *pega*) simply means an 'occurrence' and comes from the verb 'to meet' (cf. 1 Kgs. 5:4). It is true, however, that the 'occurrence,' or 'event,' is usually an evil occurrence."
 - We might paraphrase Solomon by saying, "but God's appointed times and seasons occasionally blindside us, subverting normal expectations."
- In light of the prior section about death (9:2-6), the disruption of "time and chance" includes untimely death—but shouldn't be limited to it because: (1) The image of fish in a net and birds in a snare emphasizes the sudden and unexpected nature of disruption, but neither results in immediate death, and—more convincingly, (2) The parable of a poor man's wisdom yielding forgottenness and continued poverty does not involve death. It's a fitting illustration of "nor bread to the wise" in 9:11.
- One might push back that fish in a net and birds in a snare are taken to be killed—so death is implied. Granted. Death is in view. But if 9:12 highlights how sudden calamity overtakes, the parable of 9:13ff widens our lens. The poor man is not killed; he is quietly erased. One picture shows how swiftly life can be taken. The other reveals how slowly life's reward can be taken. Together, they teach that "time and chance" do not only ambush us; they also dissolve our expected reward—quietly, slowly, and no less tragically.

—"For man does not know his time":

- The language of nets, snares, and sudden overtaking leans toward death as its primary referent. But 9:13ff nuances it. You can evade the snare and still lose your reward. Thus "time and chance" are not only the forces that can suddenly take your life; they are, secondarily, the slow and uncontrollable seasons that quietly dissolve the rewards you expected wisdom, strength, and skill to secure.

- Bartholamew: “He does not comment on the sort of evil he has in mind, but we have a good idea of the range of possibilities from his earlier discussions: poverty, oppression, injustice, corruption, loneliness, and so on.”

—“Like fish are taken in an evil net, and like birds that are caught in a snare”: The net is not a “moral” evil here but an “experiential” evil. Death and calamity fit that same category. Solomon is emphasizing the “suddenly” of life’s unpredictable outcomes.

—“children of man are snared at an evil time”:

- Fish and birds are not smart enough to discern traps. Mortals are not wise enough to predict disaster. Life is inherently unpredictable.
- Is God like a fisherman trying to catch and kill us? Solomon’s rhetoric makes it appear so—and it’s intentional. Not to suggest God’s heart is evil (a point he repeatedly resists) but to amplify human helplessness in a “vaporous” world.

13 I have also seen this example of wisdom under the sun, and it seemed great to me. 14 There was a little city with few men in it, and a great king came against it and besieged it, building great siegeworks against it. 15 But there was found in it a poor, wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city. Yet no one remembered that poor man.

—This section presents a parable that closely parallels the parable Ecclesiastes 4.

- 4:13-16: A poor but wise youth replaces an old foolish king, wins fame, but ends forgotten.
- 9:13-16: A poor but wise man delivers a city by wisdom, but is quickly forgotten.

—Why does Solomon tell two similar parables?

- Both parables convey the same essential points:
 - Wisdom is found in unlikely places (among the poor).
 - Wisdom achieves something real (ch. 4-ascension; ch. 9-deliverance).
 - Whether quickly or slowly, vanity erases the benefits of wisdom.
 - Yet, wisdom is still better (4:13: “Better was a poor and wise youth”; 9:17-18: “The words of the wise heard in quiet are better... Wisdom is better”).
- Both parables involve the same images: poverty, wisdom, kings.
- Solomon tells two parables because one was not enough to break our illusions. In Ecclesiastes 4, wisdom lifts a poor youth into power, only for vanity to delete his legacy; in Ecclesiastes 9, wisdom rescues an entire city, only for the man to be forgotten immediately. One rises and is forgotten; the other saves and is forgotten. Together, they prove that no form of success can outrun vanity. Both parables teach the same truths from different angles: wisdom is found in unlikely places, it achieves something real, and yet the benefits of wisdom—whether fame or favor—are fragile and fleeting. YET—Solomon insists in both cases, “Better was the poor and wise youth,” and “Wisdom is better than weapons of war.” This is why the second story “seemed great” to him. Not because it ends triumphantly, but because it exposes the truth we often ignore: wisdom can be righteous, powerful, and effective—and still be erased by time and chance.

—“I have also seen”: This phrase captures Wisdom Literature’s observational style. As a new observation, it represents a rhetorical pivot—a shift from “time and chance” as sudden to disaster to “time and chance” as a slow unraveling. “also” links both sides of the pivot beneath a single theological roof: God is in control; we are not; expectations are upended.

—“it seemed great to me”: What follows doesn’t seem great. But posited in Wisdom Literature’s observational style, he essentially states, “This doesn’t seem like a huge deal, but it has greater significance than you realize.”

—“little city”: This emphasizes why we might overlook the significance of the parable. Solomon sees in this “little” city and “poor” man—wisdom.

—“found in it a poor, wise man”: The word “found” highlights that wisdom appears in unlikely places. This pattern reaches its highest expression in Jesus: born in a manger, raised in Nazareth, crucified with criminals—yet He “became to us wisdom from God” (1 Cor. 1:30).

—For comments about how this parable exemplifies the statements about “time and chance”, see above commentary on 9:11-12.

16 But I say that wisdom is better than might, though the poor man's wisdom is despised and his words are not heard. 17 The words of the wise heard in quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools. 18 Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.

—“But... wisdom is better than might... word of the wise heard in quiet are better... Wisdom is better than weapons...”:

- Wisdom won't conquer vanity. It yields success—sometimes for you (ch. 4), sometimes for others (ch. 9)—but only temporarily. In the end, even wisdom succumbs to vanity. And yet! It's still better to live wisely.
- Solomon compares wisdom favorably against “might”, against “the shouting of a ruler”, and against “weapons of war”. Each one is exemplified in the prior parable where wisdom conquered the might of a great king and all his military weapons.
- Wisdom is better—not because it outruns vanity, but because it achieves objective goodness: personal gain (ch. 4) and public victory (ch. 9).

—Despite wisdom's superiority, it does not appear superior. This “great” story about a “little” city and a “poor” man seems insignificant. Wisdom spoken “in quiet” appears inferior to the chest-thumping, saber-rattling, “shouting of a ruler”. Wisdom clothes itself in such humility that few acknowledge it. If we want to live wisely, we must embrace the kind of wisdom that wins without the promise of a prize.

—This ties directly back to “The race is not to the swift...”—and all the superlatives that typically secure favor (9:11). Solomon is urging us to choose wisdom for the right reasons. Choose it not as a pathway to lasting “gain”—which is impossible under the sun—but as an outflow of fearing the Lord. Wisdom blesses the very world that refuses to remember who blessed it. If this troubles us too much, perhaps we're living for the “gain” of recognition—and this is not wisdom. Wisdom prefers objective good over personal acclaim.

—Kidner: “We should learn not to count on anything as fleeting as public gratitude.”

—“but one sinner destroys much good”:

- This verse operates as a hinge that ties less to what came before than to what comes after (10:1: “Dead flies make the perfumer's ointment give off a stench; so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor.”).
- So how does it relate to what came before? While this line clearly prepares the way for chapter 10, it also resolves the tension left hanging by the parable. The poor man's wisdom truly saves the city—but Solomon now explains why that salvation does not secure lasting good: because one sinner can undo what wisdom built. Wisdom builds; sin bulldozes. The issue is not merely that wisdom goes unrewarded; it is that goodness itself remains fragile in a fallen world. In this way, Solomon also completes his “time and chance” theme from 9:11–12: sometimes what overtakes us is not accident, weather, or misfortune, but moral rebellion itself. One sinner becomes an instrument of disruption, showing that outcomes remain vulnerable not only to fate but to injustice.

—Kidner: “The last two verses (17-18) give an extra thrust to the parable by showing first how valuable and then how vulnerable is wisdom. We are left with more than a suspicion that in human politics the last word will regularly go to the loud voice of verse 17 or the cold steel of verse 18. Seldom to truth, seldom to merit.”