

The Poor Man's Wisdom

Ecclesiastes 9: 11 – 17ⁱ

“Where shall I go from your Spirit?”

Sinclair Ferguson wrote that Solomon,

The Pundit was a man of wide experience. He was also a man with strong appetites. Not for him the half-hearted search for truth! He was prepared to try anything; yet he was invariably disappointed. Nothing in the world seemed to deliver what it promised.ⁱⁱ

This was the experience of one who, as we have seen, had it all in human terms. God had given him wisdom, power, fame, and wealth. He had been blessed beyond measure and lived a life that was the envy of all who knew of him. Still, in the midst of this life, he saw

¹¹ ...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... Ecclesiastes 9:11 (ESV)

And why? Because

¹¹ ...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. Ecclesiastes 9:11–12 (ESV)

Wealth, fame, power, and wisdom—none of these give us the capacity to control time, as Solomon made clear in chapter 8, verse 8:

⁸ No man has power to retain the spirit, or power over the day of death... Ecclesiastes 8:8 (ESV)

And as to those things that we perceive as “chance”? Chapter 8, verses 16 and 17:

¹⁶ When I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how neither day nor night do one's eyes see sleep, ¹⁷ then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out. Ecclesiastes 8:16–17 (ESV)

So, what we perceive as chance is really “all the work of God”. At the beginning of chapter 9 the teacher had written:

¹ But all this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God... Ecclesiastes 9:1 (ESV)

“All things, in fact, come to us not by chance but from His fatherly hand,”ⁱⁱⁱ but since we are finite and limited by sin even in our ability to perceive, we do not understand, and we certainly cannot control the providence of God. But regarding Solomon, with whom we have this in common, Sinclair Ferguson continued:

...even at his cynical low points he had fleeting moments of illumination penetrating the darkness of his world. He was like a man lost in a labyrinth pursuing beams of light in the hope that one of them would lead him out into the rays of the sun. Life is like that for

everyone—even the committed agnostic and atheist.^{iv}

As his father, David, had set down in Psalm 139, verses 7 – 12:

⁷ Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? ⁸ If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! ⁹ If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, ¹⁰ even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me. ¹¹ If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night,” ¹² even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you. Psalm 139:7–12 (ESV)

Wisdom Under the Sun

Even so, Solomon encountered one of those moments right in the midst of relating how

¹² ...the children of man are snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them...
Ecclesiastes 9:12 (ESV)

Chapter 9, Verses 13 – 15:

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. Ecclesiastes 9:13–15 (ESV)

Of course, we have no record of the exact historical event to which he referred. It may have been something from one of the campaigns in which Solomon himself was the “great king”, and certainly examples could be found in Scripture and history that correspond to the description. Regardless, there’s a principle here. Having assured us that “the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong”, Solomon wants us to understand that even wisdom is not always recognized or valued according to its true worth, and we know this. We know this from our own experiences in this world under the sun. And we know it because, as Sinclair Ferguson has written, “The words read almost like a prophecy.”

Whose name most naturally comes to mind when we hear of a poor man, full of wisdom, who became a savior but whose life and teaching have been neglected and rejected? Instinctively we think of Jesus...

wrote the commentator, and certainly we should, because if there is a prime example of what is described for us in Ecclesiastes 9, 13 – 15, it would be Him.

The Folly of What We Preach

Paul wrote in 1st Corinthians 1:

²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom... 1 Corinthians 1:21 (ESV)

(this too being under the purview of His providence)

...it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. 1 Corinthians 1:21

(ESV)

And this is interesting, because Paul is saying that what we believe and what we preach will be perceived as foolishness by the world. And of course it will,

²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles... 1 Corinthians 1: 22–23 (ESV)

So, Christ himself is foolishness—folly to the gentiles (to the nations)—and why wouldn't He be? Think of the message that we proclaim and how this must sound to a world that has embraced some stunted concept of “god as you perceive him to be”, or has rejected the notion altogether.

People are busy running about from here to there, going to school, conducting business, falling in love, doing all of those things that people do with or without some notion of a higher power. Maybe, there is a vague sense of dread—a vague sense that there has to be more to life than this. Maybe, like Solomon (and Kerry Livgren), they have some idea that “all we are is dust in the wind...”^v or maybe they don't.

Either way, we come to them and say that the answer to the vague sense of dread that they either feel or don't feel, is found in an itinerant Jewish Rabbi, who having been conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary, suffered, was crucified, died, and was buried, He descended to hell and on the third day he rose again from the dead, ascended to heaven, and is now seated at the right hand of God, from whence he will come to judge the living and the dead. Then we ask, in the words of the old Evangelism Explosion program, “Does this make sense to you?” And, of course, it often does not.

¹⁸ For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 1 Corinthians 1:18 (ESV)

And this is His plan. This is how it has been since the beginning, and it's a feature, not a bug.

¹⁹ For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” 1 Corinthians 1:19 (ESV)

In other words, the man who is wise according to worldly standards will not be saved by his worldly wisdom, the mighty will not be saved by their might, nor the rich by their wealth.

²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. 1 Corinthians 1:25 (ESV)

So, while some demand signs and others seek the wisdom of this age,

²³ ...we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 1 Corinthians 1:21–24 (ESV)

The Wisdom of God's Word

See, the city is under siege. People today are living and dying in their sin, as people always

have, and

¹⁸ ...the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. Romans 1:18 (ESV)

For,

²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. Romans 1:22–23 (ESV)

But this is the grace of God revealed to us in Scripture—the Word (the wisdom) of God became flesh and lived among us. He who was rich became poor. He who was with God in the beginning, and indeed was God, Jesus Christ,

⁶ ...did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Philippians 2:6–8 (ESV)

And while

¹⁸ ...the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing...to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 1 Corinthians 1:18 (ESV)

Indeed,

²⁴ ...to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ [is] the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. 1 Corinthians 1:24–25 (ESV)

One author has written,

Sin is folly, because it is disobedience to and rebellion against the will of the One who has made us, loves us, sustains us and will finally [judge] us. What could be more foolish than that?^{vi}

Well, the ultimate foolishness would be to ignore or to forget that God is saving His people through the blood of His Son, Jesus Christ. He is the one who

⁹ ...though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich. 2 Corinthians 8:9 (ESV)

not rich in the things of this world, but rich in grace; rich in peace; rich in the wisdom and power of God by which we are saved if by His grace we have turned from sin and self, and trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ.

So, turn to Him. Pray to Him. Call upon His name, acknowledging Him as Lord—Lord of Heaven and Earth, and Lord of your life. As Peter said in Acts 2, verse 38:

³⁸ “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness

of your sins...” Acts 2:38 (ESV)

If this is not a description of your faith, then please come and talk to me, and if it is, then do not commit the folly of forgetting the Son of Man, Jesus Christ, by whom God is delivering His people. Rather, profess your faith and join with the people of God everywhere, calling all who will listen to trust in Christ our Savior. In Him “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”^{vii}

Glory to His name!

-
- i All Scripture citations, unless otherwise noted, *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016).
 - ii Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Pundit's Folly* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1995) 49.
 - iii The Heidelberg Catechism, X.27, *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions* (Grand Rapids, MI: CRC Publications, 1987) 21.
 - iv Ferguson, *The Pundit's Folly*, 49.
 - v Kerry Livgren, “Dust in the Wind”, <https://www.lyrics.com/lyric/19471285/Kansas>
 - vi Ferguson, *The Pundit's Folly*, 64.
 - vii Colossians 2:3