

# OpenTheo

## May 24th: Ecclesiastes 10 & Acts 2:22-47

May 23, 2021



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The fly in the ointment. Peter's Pentecost sermon.

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## Transcript

Ecclesiastes chapter 10. Dead flies make the perfumer's ointment give off a stench, so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor. A wise man's heart inclines him to the right, but a fool's heart to the left.

Even when the fool walks on the road he lacks sense, and he says to everyone that he is a fool. If the anger of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your place, for calmness will lay greater fences to rest. There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, as it were an error proceeding from the ruler.

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

He who quarries stones is hurt by them, 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. If the serpent bites before it is charmed, there is no advantage to the charmer.

The words of a wise man's mouth win him favor, but the lips of a fool consume him. The beginning of the words of his mouth is foolishness, and the end of his talk is evil madness. A fool multiplies words, though no man knows what is to be, and who can tell him what will be after him.

The toil of a fool wearies him, for he does not know the way to the city. Woe to you, O land, when your king is a child, and your princes feast in the morning! 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. Through sloth the roof sinks in, and through indolence the house leaks.

Bread is made for laughter, and wine gladdens life, and money answers everything. 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. Ecclesiastes chapter 10 contains a selection of proverbs which perhaps most especially treat the way that wisdom itself operates in the realm of vapour, and is limited by it.

While being much to be preferred to folly, a little misfortune, error, accident, or intrusion of folly can undermine all of its achievements. The opening verse should be read along with the verse that precedes it at the end of chapter 9. Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good. Wisdom is implicitly compared to perfume, something that is delightful and good, and that has a scent that is quite distinctive.

In the sharpest contrast to wisdom, folly is like a dead fly, associated with impurity and the smell of putrefaction. However, one of the aspects of the vaporous character of life is that wisdom and folly are not equal and opposite. Wisdom can so easily be outweighed and overcome by just the littlest bit of folly, all of its efforts proving to be in vain.

The sharp contrast between wisdom and folly continues in verse 2. The wise man moves towards the right, the fool moves towards the left. They are polar opposites, and just as the smell of the fly announces its presence even when it cannot be seen, so the fool declares his folly in the way that he does everything. As Proverbs teaches on many occasions, the fool pours out folly.

He cannot help but express it. Indeed, there are few things that a fool more delights to express than his own folly. No matter how much he dishonours himself in the process, a fool is seldom that ashamed of his folly.

Wisdom is not always found in kings, and shrewd subordinates need to know how to deal

with foolish masters. In Ecclesiastes 8.3, the preacher had said, Be not hasty to go from his presence. Do not take your stand in an evil cause, for he does whatever he pleases.

Proverbs 25.15 encourages the use of careful speech to change the mind of the ruler. With patience a ruler may be persuaded, and a soft tongue will break a bone. The good subordinate responds to the anger of the ruler with calmness, and with wisdom and circumspect speech is able to turn the mind of the ruler round to his opinion.

His calm response will also soften the temper of the ruler. The wisdom literature is often alert to the mismatch between character and station. It is not a good thing to have weak people in positions of power.

While some might think that scripture generally delights in reversals, and sometimes it does, poor, vulnerable, subservient and weak people are generally ill-suited to exercise power. The ideal is that the ruler is wise, rich, personally powerful, and able to dominate. Weak and insecure people in power can easily turn to tyranny.

We might think about the paranoia of King Saul, who as a result of his sense of insecurity terrorized the whole land. When the rulers of a land are not rich and powerful, you will also have to deal with the danger of the rich and powerful people being elsewhere fomenting rebellion. Proverbs 30.21-23 also speaks about such a situation.

Under three things the earth trembles, under four it cannot bear up, a slave when he becomes king, and a fool when he is filled with food, an unloved woman when she gets a husband, and a maidservant when she displaces her mistress. Each of these situations speaks about someone who is poorly suited for a position of power, who gains it. The slave may be subservient and resentful, ill-suited for exercising the responsibilities of power.

The fool filled with food is emboldened in his folly. The unpleasant woman who gains a husband gains new authority and influence within the community, and the maidservant who displaces her mistress, presumably by committing adultery with her master, is someone who will use her new power according to her evil character. The notion of someone falling into their own pit or getting trapped in their own snare is a familiar one in the book of Proverbs.

In Proverbs 26.27 for instance, Whoever digs a pit will fall into it, and a stone will come back on him who starts it rolling. The wicked who seek to trap others end up being trapped themselves. He who lives by the sword will die by the sword.

However, in Ecclesiastes 10 a slightly different point seems to be made. The person who falls into the pit that he has dug is here connected with the person who suffers a serpent bite as a result of breaking through a wall, or the person who is injured in the course of quarrying or forestry. These are inherently dangerous occupations, and a slight slip of

awareness, or a bit of carelessness or incaution can lead to great injury.

The person engaging in the toil of life clearly needs wisdom, but wisdom is walking a tightrope. A minor misstep or accident can lead to ruin, and no matter how great our wisdom and skill, it cannot account for or master all possible eventualities. This too is part of the vapour.

In verse 10 we have an example of the benefit of wisdom in toil. The person who sharpens the edge of his iron axe is able to work far more effectively. Likewise, the person who acts with wisdom can spare himself a great deal of toil.

However, even with wisdom and skill, our toil can easily come to ruin. The preacher illustrates this with the work of the wise snake charmer. This figure deploys considerable skill in a dangerous endeavour.

In this regard, he has much in common with the person who is trying to master the vaporous character of life. Like the serpent, the vaporous character of life is dangerous and has a mind of its own as it were. It should be treated with respect and caution, and only a fool would complacently regard himself as its master.

The vicious serpent that must be tamed might relate quite nicely to the verses that follow concerning the tongue of the fool. The tongue itself is like a serpent, and the fool has never truly mastered it. Just as the careless snake charmer gets bitten by his serpent, so the lips of a fool consume him.

He speaks boldly and presumptuously, and because he is speaking light and airy words, he multiplies them exceedingly. They pour out profusely from his mouth, never having been weighed by his heart. The fool is worn out by his toil.

What is the toil in question? Daniel Frederick suggests that it's his speaking, that which comes most naturally to the fool, and what he has been doing in the preceding verses. Craig Bartholomew argues that it's his work more generally, since he lacks wisdom, skill, and competence, the most basic tasks exact of him far more effort than they do of anyone who applies that bit of wisdom to them. Indeed, this fool is so incompetent that he does not even know the way to the city.

Commentators differ on what this means. Is the city the place of business? Is knowing the way to the city just an example of basic competence? Or is the city being thought of as the place of counsel? I'm inclined to think of the city here as the place of business. The fool exhausts himself by wandering aimlessly, because he does not know the way to his destination.

A little wisdom applied to that task would save him a lot of misery. Verses 16-17 return to the theme of the mismatch between character and status, which the preacher spoke of earlier in this chapter in verses 5-7. It is not a good thing to be ruled over by children.

In the notion of bossiness, for instance, we recognise the mismatch between the child's desire to exercise authority and their actual capacity and aptitude to represent and exercise it in a positive form. In Isaiah chapter 3, being ruled over by children is presented as a judgment upon the land. Verses 4 and 5 of that chapter.

In Ecclesiastes chapter 10, the particular feature of the child that seems to be picked out is the fact that their character has not been formed. They desire instant gratification, and so they feast in the morning, rather than waiting to feast at the proper time. In Proverbs chapter 31, King Lemuel's mother warned him about the danger of being given to drink and to feasting as a king.

There is a right time to feasting. There is a right and good time to enjoy the blessings of the realm. Indeed, feasts celebrated at the proper time can strengthen a people.

Joyous celebration and festivity is one of the forces that brings people together, and so feasts can be forces for strength. But the person who is given to feasts will squander a great deal of wealth. This should probably be connected to verses 18 and 19, which speak about the danger of the sloth and indolence that lead to the roof leaking.

The person who is always feasting will end up having nothing. The joy and gladness of a good feast of bread and wine are positive things, but everything has its cost, and money must be sufficient for all such pleasures. Where it is not, ruin is near at hand.

The ideal king is the son of the nobility, someone who has been raised with an aristocratic background, who is familiar with and able to exercise money and power, who has a formation of character sufficient to fill the office. When faced with wicked, unjust, or oppressive rulers, it can be very tempting to curse them. Exodus chapter 22, verse 28 commands us not to do so.

You shall not revile God, nor curse a ruler of your people. In verse 20, we are also warned against cursing the rich in our bedroom. The preacher may be referring to more than just people who exercise official authority, but also to people who exercise power in other ways.

The advice may be less about the moral command of Exodus chapter 22, and more about the prudence with which we should deal with powerful people. The chapter began with a very small creature, a fly in the ointment. It also ends with a very small winged creature, the little bird or other flying thing that might bring our words to the king or the rich man.

We often fancy that we have more power over our words than we actually do. A careless word once uttered can end up in all sorts of places where we never intended it to go. People eavesdrop, people betray confidences, and carelessly uttered secrets can return to bite the speaker.

Our desire for catharsis in the face of misrule and injustice can tempt us to unwise utterances that can make our situations much worse. The wise person must be circumspect in his speech and guard his lips, and no more so than when dealing with the rich and powerful. A question to consider, can you think of examples of the imbalance between wisdom and folly that the preacher describes in this chapter? Acts chapter 2 verses 22 to 47 Men of Israel, hear these words.

Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know. This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.

For David says concerning him, I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand, that I may not be shaken. Therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced. My flesh also will dwell in hope, for you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One see corruption.

You have made known to me the paths of life, you will make me full of gladness with your presence. Brothers, I may say to you with confidence about the patriarch David, that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne, he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption.

This Jesus God raised up, and of that we are all witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.

Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him, both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified. Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, Brothers, what shall we do? And Peter said to them, Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, for the promises for you and for your children, and for all who are afar off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself. And with many other words he bore witness, and continued to exhort them, saying, Save yourselves from this crooked generation.

So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And all came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.

And all who believed were together, and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings, and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together, and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God, and having favor with all the people.

And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. On the day of Pentecost, in Acts chapter 2, Peter preaches to the crowd that has gathered to see the spectacle of the disciples speaking in tongues. He declares the fact of Jesus of Nazareth's ministry, divinely attested with mighty works, wonders and signs, his death divinely appointed by the determined plan and foreknowledge of God, and his resurrection divinely accomplished, as it was not possible for death to hold him.

In Jesus, God has bared his arm, he has demonstrated his power in miracles and great deeds, through his ability to use the actions of his adversaries to achieve his own ends, and through the impotence of the grave to arrest him. The very thing that the Jewish leaders presumed would destroy Jesus, was the divinely intended means of his victory, determined by God in every particular beforehand. Peter quotes Psalm 16 verses 8 to 11, where David provides testimony for Peter's claim that Jesus is the Messiah.

These verses are also used by Paul in his sermon in Acts 13. Acts 13 verses 26 to 39 has pretty much the same pattern as Peter's Pentecost sermon. These provide two examples of the preaching of the early church and how important these themes were within it.

Psalm 16, like many other passages used in the New Testament as witnesses to Jesus, is one that seems strange to us, it seems like an over-reading of the text by Peter. However, such a way of reading was not unique to Christians, and some Jewish readings understood the meaning of the text to refer to the Messiah, who would rise from David. Such an understanding emerges quite naturally from the promise of the Davidic covenant in 2 Samuel chapter 7 verses 12 to 16.

When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son.

When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men. But my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me.

Your throne shall be established forever. The underlying themes are clear here. David would descend to his grave and lie with his fathers, but David the dynasty, coming from his own body, would be raised up and endure forever.

In Jesus, the son of David, David is raised up as a dynasty and as a body. Isaiah speaks of this in chapter 11 verses 1 to 10, speaking of a time when the Davidic dynasty, which has seemingly perished beyond all hope of return, buried in the grave of exile, would be raised up and would flourish. or decide disputes by what his ears hear.

But with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth. And he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins.

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the whole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den.

They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain. For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples, of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious.

The bold statements of Psalm 16 are but weakly fulfilled in the deliverances of David's own life. David seems to be speaking of rescue from a far more terrible foe. If David the individual is the only subject of Psalm 16, then it is all very anticlimactic.

For all of its bold words, David lies in the grave. Yet when we read the psalm more closely, we might get a hint that it is about something much greater. It's about the body of the king in the fuller sense, about the dynasty arising from him, about the beautiful inheritance that God has determined for him.

Knowing that God had promised him an everlasting kingdom, his psalm of praise spoke of something beyond merely the ways in which God delivered him from death on occasions in his own life. It glorified God for his assurance of a dynasty arising from him that would not be ended by death, a dynasty secured in the raised body of Christ, the body of the son of David, also the political body of a people that participate in his life. We see this in Romans 1, verses 1-4.

Paul, the servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, concerning his son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the son of God in power according to the spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead. The grave eventually swallows all kingdoms and empires, yet in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the kingdom of David is raised, and a king who has conquered death itself is set on the throne. Jesus may have been raised from the dead, but that presents the



obvious question of where he is now.

From resurrection, then, Peter turns to the ascension. Jesus was exalted to God's right hand, and the events of Pentecost are an initial demonstration and proof of the fact that Jesus is at God's right hand. Jesus pours out his spirit with dramatic phenomena that are evident to onlookers.

As the multitude witness men and women speaking under divine inspiration in languages not their own, it is evident that something remarkable has happened. The spirit is confirming the message of the ascension. The spirit is also the promised spirit, promised in the scriptures in places like Joel 2, which Peter has just quoted.

It is also promised in passages like Ezekiel 36, verses 25 to 28. It's also promised in the book of Romans, and it's promised in the ministry of John the Baptist in Luke 3, verses 16 to 17. John answered them all, saying, The spirit was also promised by Jesus himself.

In Acts 1, verse 8, The ascension is a fulfillment of the words of Psalm 110, verse 1, the most frequently quoted verse from the Old Testament in the entirety of the New. The Lord says to my Lord, sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool. Once again, the words of David are being quoted.

Once again, they cannot refer to David himself, but to refer to some greater person to whom David himself bears witness. In Luke, chapter 20, verses 41 to 44, Jesus himself had tested the scribes with this verse. But he said to them, How can they say that the Christ is David's son? For David himself says in the book of Psalms, The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.

David thus calls him Lord, so how is he his son? A careful reading of the Psalms will reveal that Jesus is the fulfillment of the promises concerning David's kingdom. In light of all of this, the situation of the heroes can be seen in its true horror. They had crucified the very one that God had made Lord and Messiah.

Their response is one of great concern. They ask the apostles and disciples whether there is anything that they can do to escape the judgment that surely awaits them. Peter charges them to repent and be baptized, promising that they will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit if they do so.

John's baptism had been a baptism for repentance in anticipation of the future gift of the Spirit. Now baptism and the gift of the Spirit are offered together. Those baptized now are being plugged into the community of Pentecost, being made part of a new community that is the temple of the Holy Spirit.

This baptism is administered in the name of Jesus Christ, by his authority and into union with him. It would seal to all who responded to the message of the apostles in faith and repentance, the forgiveness of their sins. The gift of the Spirit given here is not spiritual

gifts, but the single gift of the personal presence of the Spirit within us, both individually and communally, a presence that is ministered for the building up of the church in the exercise of his manifold gifts in mutual service.

Peter alludes to Old Testament scripture in speaking about the extent of the promise. Isaiah chapter 57 verse 19 and Joel chapter 2 verse 32, a verse located immediately after those that he quoted in his sermon. Peter had earlier spoken about the way that those who called upon the name of the Lord would be saved, referring to Christ.

Now he speaks about God calling people. God's call is the effective summons of the proclamation of God's kingdom, the gospel message, which assembles people to him. This is addressed not merely to the house of Israel, but also to people afar off, both Jews of the dispersion and Gentiles.

In context, Peter's reference to the promise being for them and for their children is most immediately a reference to the house of Israel. However, many have seen in this a suggestion borne out elsewhere in Acts. The gospel message does not address us merely as detached individuals, but as members of households and peoples, whose response to the word is at once collective and individual.

The children of those who respond favorably are implicated in their parents' response, which they in their turn are expected increasingly to internalize as they mature. Peter charges his hearers to act, expressing the severity of the situation and the urgency of their response. He describes them as members of a crooked generation, much as Christ himself had in passages like Luke 9 verse 41 and 11 verse 29.

The response to Peter's message was dramatic and remarkable. Three thousand people responded. As three thousand had been killed at Sinai, now three thousand are brought to new life.

Those who responded to his word were baptized and devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles, the fellowship of the church, to prayer and to the breaking of bread. In this description we see all of the core elements of the life of the church. Baptism, leading into a life under the apostolic teaching, fellowship with each other in the body of Christ, most notably in the celebration of the Eucharist, and prayer together.

The baptism of such a large number of people wouldn't have been unreasonable given the very large number of pools within the city of Jerusalem, although I really don't think that we need to presume that all of the baptisms occurred in that single day. The people respond with a sense of fear and awe. It is clear that God is doing something remarkable in their midst, and this is further demonstrated by the many wonders and signs that are being done through the apostles confirming their message.

The original feast of Pentecost, like the year of Jubilee, had concerns of economic justice

near its heart. In Leviticus chapter 23, verses 21 to 22, Israel was directed to celebrate the Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost, in a way that has special regard for the poor of the land. In a similar way, Deuteronomy chapter 16, verses 10 to 12, underlines the importance of the Feast of Pentecost as a time where the poor were especially recognised.

Pentecost was also a sort of mini-jubilee. Jubilee was the time when all of the poor of the land were restored to their ancestral properties. The life of the early Jerusalem church, where things were held in common, and rich and poor alike shared in the goodness of God's gifts, was something of a fulfilment of this.

As we read further, it seems that this wasn't a denial of private property, so much as a community of common concern. In having all things in common, they acted like a large or extended family, where individuals might have their own private property, which they were free to dispose of as they wished, but many resources were voluntarily pooled or mutually provided at the points where they were most needed. We should also note the power of selling property in Jerusalem as a prophetic symbol.

Jesus had foretold the destruction of Jerusalem within a generation, so his followers liquidated their property. When thousands of people, in a city of likely well under 100,000 people, did this, the population in general would sit up and start to pay attention. Jerusalem, we must remember, was also uniquely positioned as a city, as a site of frequent pilgrimage for Jews and proselytes, and also a city uniquely situated as a meeting place of East and West, North and South.

There were probably 2 to 4 million Jews outside of Palestine at the time, with only about 1 million within it. The death and resurrection of Christ, and now Pentecost, had occurred around the time of pilgrimage festivals, during which time Jerusalem's population would have swollen with visitors for the feasts. At such times, Jerusalem could be like a dandelion clock, from which new doctrines and movements could fly to all corners of the empire on the four winds of heaven.

The early church's practice seemed to have involved regular attendance of the temple, which provided lots of room for congregating as a group, along with meetings in private houses. Later in Acts 5, verse 12, we see that the disciples regularly met together in the precincts of the temple, in Solomon's portico, which was on the eastern side of the outer court of the temple. Perhaps this location was chosen not merely for reasons of practicality, but also as the site from which the waters of the Spirit were expected to flow, according to the prophecy of Ezekiel, chapter 47, verses 1 to 2. Common meals had been an important theme throughout the Gospel of Luke, and now in the book of Acts, they also retain importance, although an importance that is shaped by new events.

After the resurrection, Jesus had demonstrated that he was alive to his disciples by sharing meals with them. While we typically think of the celebration of the supper in the

light of the Last Supper as a memorial of Christ's death, we must also recognize the importance of the breaking of bread as a way in which Christ demonstrated that he was alive. The celebration of shared meals, of which the breaking of bread was a central element, recalled Christ's presentation of himself as alive to the disciples in the joyful resurrection feasts, those shared meals that occurred between the resurrection and the ascension.

All of this might also make us think of the appropriate character of the covenant people in relationship to the Lord and to their neighbours, in places like Deuteronomy, chapter 26. They are a community of joy, of thanksgiving, contentment, generosity, at peace with and honoured by all around. In Luke's Gospel, we have a number of formulaic descriptions of the growth of John the Baptist and Jesus as young children.

These follow the pattern of 1 Samuel. Now we can see an example of a corresponding expression for the growth of the Church, which might also recall Old Testament descriptions of the multiplication of Israel's population. A question to consider, how might the early Jerusalem churches' approach to their shared meals and their sharing of possessions be a response to the teaching and example of Christ as it is described in the Gospel of Luke?