

“A Backwards World”

Ecclesiastes 9:11-18

American culture has known its fair share of people who have come along and done wild and crazy things to get some attention. You often see their likes on shows like America’s Got Talent or some other big stage. There is no shortage of people who are willing to make themselves look like complete fools to have their 15 minutes of fame.

You’ve probably never heard the name ‘Plennie Wingo.’ In the early days of Depression-era America, Plennie Wingo was a man who was determined to earn some fame and fortune for himself by walking backwards across the world. He had been hard hit by the Great Depression, and when the local bank took his small restaurant in Abilene, Texas, he found himself penniless and with nowhere left to turn. After a few months of struggling to feed his family, Plennie Wingo decided it was time to do something out of the ordinary, something that he hoped would resurrect the spirit of optimism that he had lost. He came up with the crazy idea of walking around the world backwards.

Wingo figured he would cash in with endorsements and pledges from local businesses. He would sell postcards of himself. The press and publicity would be priceless, and he would write a book! Equipped only with a cane and a pair of glasses that sported small side mirrors, Wingo set out east from Fort Worth on April 15, 1931.

Now he unfortunately didn’t make it around the whole world. He made it to Boston and then sailed for Hamburg, Germany. But after ‘retrograding’ through Central and Eastern Europe, he was detained at the Turkish border. So Wingo came home and settled for walking backwards across America. Starting from Santa Monica on August 13, 1932, he made it to Fort Worth two-and-a-half months later. Altogether, Wingo had backwalked for “one year, six months, nine

days, four hours, and twelve minutes,” logging more than 5,000 miles. In the end he made all of four dollars, wore out 12 pairs of shoes and, while on the road, was sued by his wife for divorce. In 1976, he was a guest on Johnny Carson’s Tonight Show. And when asked why he did it all, here’s what he said:

“With the whole world going backwards, maybe the only way to see it was to turn around.”

Have you ever felt like you were living in a backwards world, a world where things seemed upside down and opposite from the way that they ought to be? Here in Ecclesiastes, I imagine that Solomon felt this way when he talked about life under the sun. In spite of all his wisdom and knowledge, he still couldn’t figure out why things happened the way that they did; Ecclesiastes is his journal.

While it is certainly true that we need wisdom to navigate the challenges, it is also true that wisdom doesn’t guarantee a pain-free life. A lot of people make the mistake of thinking that wisdom will deliver them from life’s pressures and struggles, but it doesn’t. Even the wise and godly still live in a world that is backwards, a world that is broken and marred by the effects of the fall.

God’s wisdom will lead you into joy and peace in the midst of life’s pressures, not in the absence of them. That is the message of Ecclesiastes. The Preacher tells us here in chapter 9 that in a backwards world, three things are true.

1. Life is UNPREDICTABLE (9:11)

“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.”

In the first half of chapter 9, Solomon has considered the inevitability of death. Now in the last half, he considers the unpredictability of life. It’s his way of saying that life is like a box of chocolates—you never know what you’re going to get!

We have a general idea of what is in store, but none of us can predict what is just around the bend.

Proverbs 27:1—“Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring.”

I read about a man in Connecticut by the name of Don Peters who bought two lottery tickets on November 1, 2008. He had done this every day for the previous 20 years. As it turned out, one of those tickets was worth \$10 million. Now before you think that's great, you need to know that he wasn't as lucky as you might think. On the very same afternoon he won the jackpot, he had a massive heart attack that claimed his life.

Because life is unpredictable, wisdom realizes that I must never boast in my plans. Something out of the blue can always happen and turn my plans upside down. Notice in verse 11 how the Preacher describes the backwards, unpredictable nature of life under the sun. He says:

- The swiftest aren't always rewarded

Under the sun, he noticed that the race is not always to the swift. You can be the best athlete on the field, and still come in second or third place.

- The strongest aren't always renowned

Under the sun, Solomon saw that the battle wasn't always to the strong. The one with the biggest arsenal or the most troops doesn't always come out on top.

- The smartest aren't always remembered

Under the sun, the Preacher pointed out that bread didn't always go to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge. The very ones that you would expect to be winners sometimes turn out to be losers.

Conventional wisdom looks at all of this and says, “The fastest wins the race, the strongest secures the victory, and the smartest gets ahead.” But conventional wisdom often forgets that we live in a very backwards world, a world that is fallen and impacted by the effects of sin.

Notice how Solomon takes all of this into consideration and says, “Time and chance happen to them all.” The word ‘time’ there refers to the seasons of life. It is his way of once again confronting us with the frustration of life in a fallen world. Ordinarily, we would expect things to go well for the one who has strong ability. But the Preacher tells us here that having speed, strength, or smarts is no real guarantee of success because time is always working against us. Those who place their confidence in their speed, strength, or smarts will come up disappointed.

“Chance”—*word refers to something we encounter on the path of life; a circumstance or situation over which we have no control*

As time works against us, ‘chance’ overtakes us. The word doesn’t refer to fate but an occurrence, something that happens to us in life. Literally, Solomon is saying that the problem is time and an incident. Even the swiftest sprinter can trip up and fall. Even the strongest soldier can make a wrong move. Even the smartest student can fail to see something coming.

Psalm 33:16-17—“The king is not saved by his great army; a warrior is not delivered by his great strength. The war horse is a false hope for salvation, and by its great might it cannot rescue.”

Psalm 147:10-11—“His delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor His pleasure in the legs of a man, but the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear Him, in those who hope in His steadfast love.”

Because life is so unpredictable, I need to place my trust in something that is solid. Conventional wisdom says that salvation comes through strength that relies upon self-effort but gospel wisdom says that it comes through a weakness that renounces all self-effort.

2. Trouble is UNFORESEEN (9:12)

“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.”

In a backwards world, not only is life unpredictable, but notice also how Solomon says trouble is unforeseen. We are all subject to time and chance, which means that our circumstances can change on the turn of a dime.

Who knows when trouble will arrive on the scene and wreak havoc on all of our plans?

It is hidden

“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...”

The fish and the birds are caught before they know it. If they had realized they were headed for a disaster, they would have gone in the opposite direction. But by the time the hidden trap was sprung, it was too late. The idea here is that none of us can anticipate the time of trouble. Like fish taken in a net, or birds caught in a snare, hidden trouble has a way of happening. We never see it coming and it always catches us off guard.

It is sudden

“...so the children of man are snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them.”

You never know when trouble is just around the corner, and it can happen suddenly. You can be in the prime of life and feel like you're on top when suddenly a pain in your body turns out to be an advanced stage of cancer. Or, you can be in the best financial position of your life when suddenly the markets crash and your savings are gone. Or, you can make a quick trip to Wal-Mart to pick up a few things on a slow Saturday morning when suddenly you find yourself the random target of a crazed gunman. We saw this very thing happen yesterday in El Paso, Texas. It is yet one more horrifying example of life in a backwards world.

James 4:13-15—“Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit’—yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.’”

Now that doesn't mean that we stop making plans. It simply means that all of our planning is done out of humility that ultimately bows to divine sovereignty. Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the Lord's will that prevails!

In a backwards world, life is unpredictable and trouble is unforeseen. That's why the Word of God tells us to expect the unexpected. When the day of trouble comes, we should not be surprised. No matter how gifted you are, no matter how prepared you are, and no matter how many advantages you've had in life up to this point, the time will come when you too will face trouble head-on.

Have you ever heard the open candor of someone who has just experienced the unforeseen? “I never thought it would happen to me.” People lose their jobs all the time, just not me. People get cancer all the time, just not me. People lose loved ones all the time, just not me. I never thought it could happen to me. Yet trouble sooner or later finds you.

Job 14:1-2—“Man who is born of a woman is few of days and full of trouble. He comes out like a flower and withers; he flees like a shadow and continues not.”

Someone says, “Alright, I get that life is unpredictable and trouble is unforeseen. So what do I do about it?” How do I live with the uncertainty that something bad could come my way any time? For some, it is a cause for constant fear and worry. Others take a different approach.

Philip Ryken—*“...some people are tempted to give up and to think there is nothing we can do except resign ourselves to our fate. If the race does not go to the swift, then why run at all? If the battle is not won by the strong, then why prepare for war? If getting smart will not get you more money, then why bother to develop your mind? Since it all comes down to chance anyway, fatalism might appear to be the only honest option.”*

Time and chance happens to all, but the wisdom of God realizes that it is always subject to His will. We live with faith that understand our lives are not in the hands of fate, but in the hands of God. Everything is under His wise and sovereign control.

In a backwards world, life is unpredictable and trouble is unforeseen. Notice one final truth that the Preacher gives.

3. Wisdom is UNDERVALUED (9:13-18)

“I have also seen this example of wisdom under the sun, and it seemed great to me. 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. 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. But I say that wisdom is better than might, though the poor man’s wisdom is despised and his words are not heard. The words of

the wise heard in quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools.

Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.”

Life is unpredictable, trouble is unforeseen, and disaster can strike when we least expect it. He then makes the point that there is a wisdom that can handle it, but it is a wisdom that is often ignored and undervalued.

Wisdom exemplified

You'll notice in verse 13 that the Preacher tells the story of something he had seen firsthand under the sun. He tells of 'a little city with few men in it.' It was the type of place that we'd refer to as a 'one horse' town. It was the type of town that didn't even have a McDonalds if you catch my drift. When you punched in the coordinates on Google maps, it didn't even show up. At some point, a powerful king came against this little town with vast army and laid siege to it. The inhabitants of the city were vastly outnumbered and outgunned, and it would seem that all hope was lost.

However, there happened to be a poor, wise man in this little town. By his wisdom, Solomon says that he delivered the city from its troubles. Now, after such a turn of events, you would think that he would be celebrated. You would think that the poor wise man would at least be given a statue in his honor in the town square. Maybe a banquet held in his honor, or maybe a position of recognition by the townspeople. Maybe they'd make him mayor. But that's not what happened. Notice in verse 15 that Solomon says, "No one remembered the poor man." By wisdom he delivered the city, but his wisdom was undervalued and he was forgotten.

Some have even suggested that you can interpret this as the man's wisdom being totally rejected by the city. The idea is that the wise man 'could have' delivered it, his wisdom would have led to their salvation, but none of the people

paid attention to him. Verse 17 seems to suggest that a ruler with a loud mouth got all the attention.

God's wisdom is what humanity so desperately needs in a backwards world, yet His wisdom goes unheeded and is popularly rejected. Jesus talked about this very thing:

Matthew 7:13-14—“Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”

Wisdom prioritized

Even though God's wisdom is forgotten and rejected, it is still better than man's strength. Look at verses 16-17:

“But I say that wisdom is better than might, though the poor man's wisdom is despised and his words are not heard. The words of the wise heard in quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools.”

We're prone to put our confidence in man's weapons than in God's wisdom. Wisdom is better, though it often goes despised by the world. Ray Stedman says the “insights of Scripture—heard in the inner self, quietly, before God alone—are more effective in solving problems than worldly rhetoric or propaganda, better than the ideas of prominent opinion maker who says things that are popular but are contrary to Scripture.” The loudest voices that get quoted, retweeted, and captioned the most aren't always the wisest voices. Those who have the most followers aren't always those who should be followed. But in a backwards world, this is most often the case.

Let me tell you something—there is more wisdom coming from forgotten pulpits and unknown preachers this morning than you'll find being broadcast on all the

major news networks. The irony of our time is seen in the contrast between the professor in a classroom searching for wisdom and the janitor down the hall who has had it all along. The loudest voices are not always the wisest voices. The most popular ideas are not always the wisest ideas. And just because someone has the microphone doesn't mean that he has something to say. The upside down backwards world we live in gives the microphone to those who really shouldn't have it.

Look at verse 18—*“Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.”*

That's the story of man's history, isn't it? We live in a world that is backwards from the way it ought to be because of Adam's sin. Through one man, sin entered the world, and death through sin. And on and on it goes.

Wisdom applied

How then should we live in a world that is backwards, a world in which all of us are subject to time and chance? How do we live in a world in which life is so unpredictable, trouble is unforeseen, and wisdom is undervalued? For starters, you need to know that the world will never applaud the wisdom of God. The creature is in rebellion toward the Creator. God's wisdom will always be out of step with man's wisdom because it points out its error and exposes its illusions. God's wisdom humbles man's world and turns it on its head.

1 Corinthians 1:25—“For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.”

The story that the Preacher tells of a wise man who saved a city by his wisdom serves as a fitting analogy of Jesus Christ. Though He was rich, He became poor for our sake. Throughout His ministry in the city of man, the Son of God had

nowhere to lay His head. And yet by His wisdom, He delivered the city of fallen humanity.

Isaiah 52:13—“Behold, My Servant shall act wisely; He shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted...so shall He sprinkle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of Him.”

Isaiah 53:11—“...by His knowledge shall my Righteous Servant make many to be accounted righteous, and He shall bear their iniquities.”

In Adam, one sinner had destroyed much good. Satan had come against the city of man with all the powers of hell and death. But Jesus delivered us, not with the aid of any army, but all by Himself. And He did through means of something that appears foolish to the world, something that seems so backwards to conventional thinking. Jesus saved the city of lost humanity by dying on a rugged cross and then rising again from the grave!

Now, the wisest decision that you will ever make in life is to surrender your life to Him, to trust Him for salvation, to place all of your faith and confidence in Him.

How can I truly be wise in a backwards world?

- Trust in Jesus Christ for salvation
- Ask God for His wisdom on a daily basis

“Father, we need Your wisdom! We can never put our confidence in our speed, strength, or smarts. May we look to Christ alone when facing life in a backwards world. In His name, Amen.”