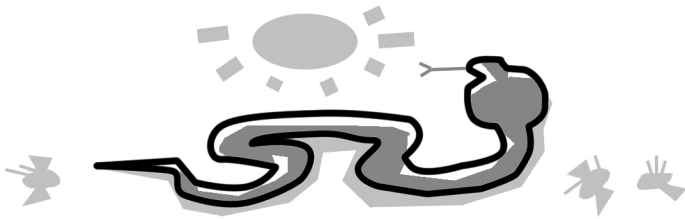


Dead Flies *and* Snake Charmers: More Life Under *the* Sun



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Ecclesiastes 10.*

Memory Text: “Dead flies putrefy the perfumer’s ointment, and cause it to give off a foul odor; so does a little folly to one respected for wisdom and honor” (*Ecclesiastes 10:1, NKJV*).

By this time, as far as we are in *Ecclesiastes*, it should be clear that it’s difficult to find a unified flow of thought. That doesn’t mean there aren’t unified thoughts; it’s just not easy to find the flow of those thoughts; that is, it doesn’t progress from one thought to another and to another in any kind of systematic flow. At least, it doesn’t seem to.

Nevertheless, important ideas and thoughts are there, all well worth our study, especially when studied in comparison with the rest of the Bible.

This week’s lesson also could have been titled “Thoughts, Words, Actions,” for it deals with all three. Solomon talks about our thoughts, he talks about our words, and he talks about our actions, though not exactly in that order. Of course, in one sense, if you cover thoughts, words, and actions, there’s isn’t much left, is there?

With his powerful poetic style, Solomon gives us more to ponder. Though we have to work our way through the thoughts of this chapter, when we do we can see that there’s a lot of meat here, a lot of practical wisdom that would do us all well to heed carefully.

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 17.*

Dead Flies

Ecclesiastes 10:1 really needs to be read along with Ecclesiastes 9:18, at least the last clause. Though not saying exactly the same thing, Ecclesiastes 9:18 helps clarify the principle found in 10:1, which is—no matter how much good one does, a stupid mistake can so spoil it all.

Last week we talked a little about how in this life we have to make the choices that will, in the end, determine our eternal destiny. But many times our choices also have much more immediate consequences. How often someone can, in a weak and unguarded moment, make a choice that brings sudden and painful consequences. What makes these events even more tragic is that so often those who make those wrong choices can be “good” people, faithful and honorable souls who, as we all do, slip and fall. In one sense the more honorable, exalted, and esteemed the person is, the more responsibility upon that person to weigh his or her decisions carefully.

Below are a few biblical examples of good folk making bad choices. What caused these people to stumble, and what were the results of their folly?

Gen. 3:6

Exod. 32:1-4

2 Sam. 11:1-4

A man works many years for the Lord only to, in a weak moment, make a mistake, perhaps a moral fall, and then—suddenly—his ministry is, if not ruined, then certainly damaged. Whether right or not, this harsh consequence is a reality, one that should cause us all, regardless of our position, to walk carefully and circumspectly. In all the biblical accounts listed above, the Lord obviously forgave these people; how much more so should we, then, forgive those who have violated a sacred trust. But forgiveness doesn’t automatically mean that the damage is undone; most times it isn’t. How easily a few dead flies can stink up a whole jar of scented oil!

Whoever you are, whatever your position in the church, think about the negative consequences that could occur if you were to violate a trust. Watch and pray before you act!

The Fool's Heart

Ecclesiastes 10:2 is, obviously, poetic language depicting the difference between the heart (mind) of a wise person and of a foolish one. The imagery of left and right hand is found in various places in the Bible, with the right side considered the side of honor, power, and favor. After all, Jesus Himself talks about, when He returns, sitting “on the right hand of power” (*Matt. 26:64; see also Matt. 25:31-34, Acts 7:55*). In contrast, the left side was considered the side of evil and misfortune. In fact, the Latin word for left hand, *sinistra*, forms the basis for the English word *sinister*. Even today in some countries children who show a proclivity toward writing with their left hand are made to use their right instead.

Keeping these points in mind, what is Solomon saying in Ecclesiastes 10:2?

Because the heart was considered the center of all thoughts, emotions, and plans (*Gen. 6:5, Exod. 25:2, 1 Sam. 16:7*), Solomon's point is simply that the wise person guards the thoughts, the feelings, and the motives, while the foolish person doesn't. This verse shows how important it is that we keep control over what goes on inside us, because what's inside sooner or later becomes manifest on the outside.

How does Ecclesiastes 10:3 reveal the point made in the paragraph above?

Verse 3 fits perfectly with verse 2. The fool's “wisdom,” which is on his left side, eventually exposes him to others as a fool. In other words, sooner or later the corruption of your heart will become clear to others because you will, sooner or later, follow the inclinations of your heart. How important, then, to get control of our hearts! If we have them under control, the rest of our body will follow.

Suppose you are struggling with wrong thoughts. What does Deuteronomy 30:6 say, and what hope does it offer? How does Philippians 4:6-8 offer us practical advice on how to have that promise fulfilled?

More Evil

Solomon here continues with more platitudes and sayings. Verses 4-7, though presenting some difficulty, seem to be talking about the question touched on earlier in the book, that of injustice and unfairness in this life.

What are some of the injustice and unfairness that he talks about in these verses? What are some other examples that you can think of?

“In the time of Solomon only the privileged rode upon horses or mules (2 Sam. 18:9; 1 Kings 1:38; 2 Chron. 25:28; Esther 6:8; Jer. 17:25); men of lower degree used asses for this purpose. In early Israelite history even kings and princes rode on asses or mules (Judges 5:10; 10:4; cf. 1 Kings 1:33).”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 1098.

Though most of us might not have a problem with a few rich sitting in “a low place,” the point is that things aren’t always as expected: Folly wins great dignity and wealth a low spot. Or, in other contexts, faithful people suffer, evil prospers, and so forth. Maybe this theme is repeated in Ecclesiastes because the problem is so universal. Whatever the reason, we can’t allow these things to work against our faith and trust in God. This is just all part of what it means to live in a fallen world.

What role do we have in working to alleviate the injustices and inequities that we see? Is it just enough to say, “Well, that’s what it means to live in a fallen world,” or are we to work for justice, equity, and fairness? And, if so, how are we to do it? In what ways would our activism be different from the world’s? See Isa. 58:6, 7; Matt. 26:52; John 18:36; 2 Cor. 10:4; Rev. 13:10.

The Snake Charmer

Ecclesiastes 10:8-11 is a sequence of short proverbs dealing with various aspects of life. What points can you make from them?

These are difficult texts; many commentators see different things in them. Following the lead of *The SDA Bible Commentary*, we can discern the following ideas here.

Verse 8 seems to be talking about what happens when we are vindictive, when we plan evil against someone. The pit that we dug for someone else we end up falling into (*Pss. 7:15; 57:6; Prov. 26:27; see also Esther 9:23, 25*). The same idea is found in the part about the “hedge” (wall); when you tear down someone else’s wall, you can get bitten by a snake that lodges there.

Though the exact meaning of verse 9 is debated, Solomon simply could be saying that even when you do good things, bad consequences could arise from them. This could fit in with his general pessimism.

Verse 10 is pretty clear. If you are using a dull knife, your work will be much harder. How much more profitable to sharpen it beforehand. In the same way, wisdom, i.e., thoughtful preparation before you undertake anything, would be to your advantage. “The Christian should seek and make use of the finest tools of spiritual craftsmanship for the task of character construction. Effort alone is insufficient; there must be knowledge as well as zeal (see Rom. 10:2).”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 1098.

Verse 11 says, basically, that if the snake bites the charmer before it’s charmed, then there’s no sense in him trying to charm it. The meaning, perhaps, is best seen in the last part of the verse, about the uselessness of a babbler. Charming a snake after it bites you (such as a viper, whose bite is deadly) is as meaningless and useless as someone who babbles.

Go back over the day’s lesson. Which of these points makes the most sense or speaks the clearest to you? What lessons can you learn from it that you should apply to yourself? Are you vindictive? Do you babble too much? How much time do you spend preparing yourself spiritually for whatever trials the day brings?

The Fool's Lips

The rest of Ecclesiastes 10 (*vss. 10-20*) touches on various themes, but for today we'll focus on verses 12-14 and 20, in which the emphasis is on the use of our words. How careful we must be with what we say!

Compare the lips of the wise and a fool, as depicted in verse 12. What point is being made? See *Ps. 45:2, Prov. 22:11, Luke 4:22*.

The word translated “gracious” in the first part of the verse is the same word for *grace* (“Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord” [*Gen. 6:8*]); grace is unmerited favor; that is, we don't get the punishment we deserve. That's the essence of salvation: We are not getting the punishment we deserve (Jesus took it upon Himself instead). In contrast, the words of the fool cause him to be swallowed, a word used in various instances to depict sinners being punished (*Exod. 15:12, Num. 16:32, Jer. 51:34, Lam. 2:5*).

Read Ecclesiastes 10:13. How does this verse amplify what was said in the previous one?

How often we dismiss someone as “all talk, no action.” Many times, however, talk leads to action, because talk reflects what's in the heart. It would be bad enough if the fool did nothing but talk; sadly, that's not always the case. No wonder we are admonished all through the Bible to watch our words.

Look at verse 20. What's the wisdom there?

The bottom line: A wise person will be careful with how he or she chooses his or her words; a fool, on the other hand, will speak words that will, one way or another, bring unnecessary pain and sorrow.

Think about a time when unnecessary words you spoke caused you trouble. What lessons did you learn? What advice could you give to someone who hasn't yet learned to control the tongue?

Further Study: Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 323; *Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 337; *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 2, p. 302.

“It is a law of nature that our thoughts and feelings are encouraged and strengthened as we give them utterance. While words express thoughts, it is also true that thoughts follow words. If we would give more expression to our faith, rejoice more in the blessings that we know we have—the great mercy and love of God—we should have more faith and greater joy. No tongue can express, no finite mind can conceive, the blessing that results from appreciating the goodness and love of God. Even on earth we may have joy as a wellspring, never failing, because fed by the streams that flow from the throne of God.”—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, pp. 251–253.

“The words we utter today will go on echoing when time shall be no more. The deeds done today are transferred to the books of heaven, just as the features are transferred by the artist onto the polished plate. They will determine our destiny for eternity, for bliss or eternal loss and agonizing remorse.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers*, pp. 429, 430.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Think about the power of words—the good they can do or the evil they can do. As a class, talk about whatever practical things we can do to help each other understand how important it is that we carefully guard our words. For instance, who can give personal examples of lessons they have learned regarding the power of words? As a class, try to come up with a list of practical suggestions, simple and basic principles that could guide us in how we use our words.
- 2 Because our thoughts are so important, what can you do as a class to help the young people in your church make the right choices regarding the things they read or watch? Why is it so important that we be careful about what we put into our minds?
- 3 As a class, talk about the issue of anyone who has violated a sacred trust. How have we as a church dealt with such people? What principles should guide us in these cases? How do we show mercy and grace toward those who fall while, at the same time, protecting the flock from those who have violated the trust put in them?

Bright Light of God

by MATSEPO LAURA LEBONA

I was sickly as a child living in Lesotho, a tiny country in southern Africa. When I began having strange dreams, the village witch doctors told my parents that a strong spirit lived in me. Although my family members were Christians, they feared that I would die if I did not follow the spirit. So, I went to study with a witch doctor. But what I learned from the witch doctor was contrary to everything I had learned about God. I remembered that the Ten Commandments teach us to honor God only. I could not bring myself to kneel and pray to insects and snakes. Nevertheless, I stayed and learned to “prophesy” people’s future.

I married a good man, but still I had no peace. God kept a glimmer of truth alive in my heart. When at night the spirit tried to choke me, I called out to Jesus. I prayed that if it was God’s will, He would free me from the spirits. God answered my prayer, and the spirit left me. But my husband began suffering the same symptoms I had suffered.

My in-laws gave me no peace, so my husband and I left their home and moved to South Africa. There I met some Adventists who shared their knowledge of God and helped us understand what the Bible says about spirits. Things became clearer for us. I began attending the Adventist church and answered God’s call to “come unto Me.”

I read *Steps to Christ* to my husband and tried to help him understand God’s will. Often during this time Satan tried to overpower me and draw me back into the life we had left. But I would cry out, “Save me, Lord Jesus.” And Jesus saved me. My husband and I were baptized.

We returned to Lesotho and shared what we had learned with our families and neighbors. It is difficult, because no Adventist believers live in our community. People remember that I once prophesied and had a spirit in me. “How can you be a Christian when you were once possessed by a spirit?” they asked. To make matters more difficult, there are no Adventists in our village, and people think we have joined a cult. Please pray for us, for there is much work to do here in this battlefield. There are many held by Satan who must come to Christ.



MATSEPO LAURA LEBONA shares her faith in her homeland of Lesotho.