

a poor wise man

Ecclesiastes 9:11-18

9:11 I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all. **9:12** For man also knoweth not his time: as the fishes that are taken in an evil net, and as the birds that are caught in the snare; so are the sons of men snared in an evil time, when it falleth suddenly upon them.

9:13 This wisdom have I seen also under the sun, and it seemed great unto me:

9:14 There was a little city, and few men within it; and there came a great king against it, and besieged it, and built great bulwarks against it: **9:15** Now there was found in it a poor wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city; yet no man remembered that same poor man.

9:16 Then said I, Wisdom is better than strength: nevertheless the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are not heard. **9:17** The words of wise men are heard in quiet more than the cry [shouting] of him that ruleth among fools. **9:18** Wisdom is better than weapons of war: but one sinner destroyeth much good.

Ecclesiastes 10:1-10

10:1 Dead flies cause the ointment of the apothecary to send forth a stinking savour: so doth a little folly him that is in reputation for wisdom and honour.

10:2 A wise man's heart is at his right hand; but a fool's heart at his left. **10:3** Yea also, when he that is a fool walketh

by the way, his wisdom faileth him, and he saith to every one that he is a fool.

10:4 If the spirit of the ruler rise up against thee, leave not thy place; for yielding pacieth great offences. **10:5** There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, as an error which proceedeth from the ruler: **10:6** Folly is set in great dignity, and the rich sit in low place.

10:7 I have seen servants upon horses, and princes walking as servants upon the earth.

10:8 He that diggeth a pit shall fall into it; and whoso breaketh an hedge, a serpent shall bite him. **10:9** Whoso removeth stones shall be hurt therewith; and he that cleaveth wood shall be endangered thereby. **10:10** If the iron be blunt, and he do not whet the edge, then must he put to more strength: but wisdom is profitable to direct.

Contradictions in the Bible?

Unbelievers claim that there are many contradictions in the Bible. Most of these can be easily explained. In the Book of Ecclesiastes, however, there are many lines which seem to contradict each other. Many of these lines are about wisdom.

For instance, wisdom is said to be profitable in general in 10:10. Yet, often it is not profitable in every way. The poor wise man in 9:15-16 provides an example of this. His wisdom saved his small city from a great king; yet, he himself was soon forgotten.

negatives

Because the poor-wise-man story is so short (only three or four verses), there are many things about the main character and what he did that we do not know. Yet, the only question that really needs to be answered is, “What does the poor-wise-man story illustrate?” Expressed differently, we need to know the purpose of the illustration.

Since “wisdom” and “wise” are key terms in 9:13-10:10, the story and what follows are obviously intended to teach some thing about the value of wisdom. The corresponding negative terms, “folly” and “fools” are often mentioned as well.

Like life itself, there are many paradoxes in Ecclesiastes, and some of the most important of these concern wisdom. The lines in the B section below are about this. Paradoxical points about wisdom make it difficult to determine the exact purpose of the poor-wise-man story. (Probably there is more than one purpose.)

There is another difficulty as well. Wisdom and the good life are closely associated with the fear of the Lord in many passages. (See Pro. 1:7,29, 19:23, 23:17, Ecc. 3:14, 5:7, 8:12-13, and 12:13-14.) Yet, this is not clearly seen in the poor-wise-man story.

Mark the points below as correct (C), incorrect (X), or partly correct (▲).

A	<input type="checkbox"/> There are some difficulties with the poor-wise-man story.
A-1	<input type="checkbox"/> The poor wise man was not a real person.
A-2	<input type="checkbox"/> God is never mentioned in the story (9:13-15).
A-3	<input type="checkbox"/> The poor man’s wisdom is not explained (9:15-10:1).
A-4	<input type="checkbox"/> God is not even mentioned in the context (9:9-10:10).
B	<input type="checkbox"/> Some of the teaching on wisdom (in 9:10-10:10) is paradoxical.
B-1	<input type="checkbox"/> The poor wise man was listened to at first but forgotten later.
B-2	<input type="checkbox"/> Wisdom saved the city, but it did not help the wise man himself.
B-3	<input type="checkbox"/> If the poor wise man was truly wise, he would not have been poor.
B-4	<input type="checkbox"/> The wise should be heard, but they do not shout like fools (9:17).
B-5	<input type="checkbox"/> Wisdom is better than weapons, but folly weakens it (9:18-10:1).
B-6	<input type="checkbox"/> The wise work hard (9:10), but hard work is dangerous (10:8-9).
B-7	<input type="checkbox"/> Wisdom leads to success some of the time (9:11,16, 10:7,10).
B-8	<input type="checkbox"/> There are contradictions in Ecclesiastes (9:9-11, 11:9, 12:14).
B-9	<input type="checkbox"/> Chance (bad luck) often makes wisdom ineffective (9:11).

positives

There are a number of easily seen positives in the poor-wise-man story itself (9:13-15), (See the C lines below.) but probably the biggest positive of all is how both the story and the followup (9:16-10:10) are in line with reality. (See the D lines.) Thus, the story is a true story in the sense that it correctly depicts life in this world as it truly is.

Ecclesiastes repeatedly shows that reality is often not simple. So most, but not all, of the paradoxical B lines on the previous page are correct. Because practical wisdom is not a simple subject, seemingly conflicting things can be said about it and yet still be true.

Most, but not all, of the D lines below are correct. Some are much like lines about paradoxes on the previous page worksheet. (Compare lines D-2 and B-5 for instance.) Lines D-1 and D-8 are also interesting to compare. Much of Ecclesiastes is based on visible observations that Solomon had made. Thus, his perspective was often worldly.

The final line, D-9, is without doubt one of the most important. The poor wise man—and the rest of Ecclesiastes for that matter—can not be rightly understood without the light provided by the way Solomon concluded his often-baffling book with its many paradoxes.

Mark the points below as correct (C), incorrect (X), or partly correct (▲).

C	() There are some simple positive aspects to the story.
C-1	() The great king was defeated by just one wise man (9:15).
C-2	() The poor wise man was not killed or harmed (9:15).
C-3	() The story is short and easy to understand.
C-4	() The entire small city was spared (9:15).
D	() The story (9:13-15) and the after-story (9:16-10:1) are realistic.
D-1	() They are based on observation (9:13).
D-2	() They show that wisdom is better than force.
D-3	() They show that life in this world is often unfair.
D-4	() They show that people should fight against injustice.
D-5	() They show that the poor are often despised (Pro. 14:20).
D-6	() They show that wisdom is not really so important after all.
D-7	() There are clear warnings against sin (9:18) and folly (10:1).
D-8	() God was not mentioned in 9:11-10:10 because He is invisible.
D-9	() The great “after-story” for the whole Book is found in 11:9-12:14.

conclusions

worksheet answers

Strictly speaking, the poor wise man was not a real person (A-1), but the story is realistic because it was based on careful observation (D-1). Likewise, the poor man’s wisdom is not carefully defined, but it is contrasted with sinful ways in 9:18 and folly in 10:1 (A-3).

For the most part, God is not directly mentioned in the context, but the Giver of life appears as a pronoun (“He”) in 9:9 (A-4). The reference to sin in 9:18 implies God’s existence, but the line about “chance” in 9:11 shows that in chapter nine Solomon was mainly concerned with what could be directly observed in the visible world (D-8). At the end of the book he focused on the Lord and judgement. Line D-9 is correct.

The poor are often despised (D-5) because many wrongly believe that they are all stupid, lazy, or fools (B-3). In contrast, Jesus showed that the rich are often the real fools (Lk. 12:13-21).

The contradictions in Ecclesiastes (B-8) are mostly just differences in perspective. Outward observation alone, for instance, can lead to belief in chance (B-9), but at the end of the book Solomon affirms his belief in divine justice.

Finally, the author of Ecclesiastes did not call for an uprising against injustice (10:7, D-4) nor reject wisdom because its benefits are limited (9:11,18, 10:1,10, D-6).

So what?

The poor-wise-man story is somewhat difficult to understand (C-3) because life “under the sun,” with its many paradoxes and pervasive vanity, is difficult to understand. Wisdom leads to success some of the time (B-7) and in some ways, but not all of the time nor in every way.

It is far better to quietly listen to wise words than to listen to loudly proclaimed foolishness (9:17, B-4). Likewise, It is better to have a ready supply of wisdom than to depend on weapons of war (9:18, B-5). The poor wise man served his city well and was all that was needed to overcome a great king (C-1). All of this is true, yet it is not the whole story. Without God—who is barely mentioned in the context—wisdom has its limits.

The main purpose of the poor-wise-man story and the followup teaching seems to be to show that wisdom is powerful but limited. Even in victory, it can be quickly forgotten or undermined by sin and folly.

Solomon sought wisdom to rule better and to pass on to others (1:12-13), but he found much sorrow and vanity in the process (1:13-18). The poor-wise-man story closely links these two. Wisdom brought deliverance, but it was despised.

That said, Solomon’s main conclusion is at the end, in 11:9-12:14 (D-9). Despite the vanity and limitations, God still holds us responsible for our lives.

applications

Apply the points which you believe are most important or seem most needful.

Four horizontal lines for writing applications, with the top line highlighted in yellow.