



Search the Scriptures

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Of the order of things and consequences

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Ecclesiastes 10:8-10

Having set before us the folly and disorder of affairs in civil life, the Word of God turns to a series of natural or organic connections. The intent is that we should contemplate them, discern the reality of things, and by that reflection point us to the way of wisdom and warn us against folly. We need, therefore, to consider the illustrations in their natural context first.

“He that diggeth a pit shall fall into it; and whoso breaketh an hedge, a serpent shall bite him. Whoso removeth stones shall be hurt therewith; and he that cleaveth wood shall be endangered thereby” (Eccl. 10:8, 9).

On the foreground is the person and then his activity, the “whoso” of the text.

The person digging a pit is by that very activity the one most likely to slip and fall into the pit or be injured by a cave-in during its excavation. Similarly, poisonous snakes hide in the thick underbrush to ambush their prey. The one clearing brush or cutting down a hedge, which may be used as a fence, is engaged in a dangerous project: “a serpent shall bite him.” The same is true for the one removing stones, whether clearing a field or removing his neighbor’s landmark; his activity endangers himself physically, whether by dropping stones on himself or some other aspect of the toil he is engaged in. The cutting of wood with an axe is a potential source of self-injury, whether from the axe, flying wood chips,

or something slipping in the process. All of these things are the reality of life and set forth the dangers of someone engaging in these projects in physical terms.

Solomon has said this before in Proverbs, “whoso diggeth a pit shall fall therein; and he that rolleth a stone, it will return upon him” (Prov. 26:27). It is also used figuratively: “whoso causeth the righteous to go astray in an evil way, he shall fall himself into his own pit: but the upright shall have good things in possession” (Prov. 28:10). It is used in the Psalms of the consequence of an evil plot and God’s judgment upon the wicked: “He made a pit, and digged it, and is fallen into the ditch which he made” (Ps. 7:15; see also Ps. 35:7; Ps. 57:6). The hedge is used as a barrier, a defense and protection for the field. It is used figuratively to describe God’s protection of His church, which is then broken down in His judgment upon a people who have departed in the way of sin (Ps. 80:12; Ps. 89:40). Here the figurative idea is that of breaking through a hedge, similar to the thief and hireling of John 10.

While Scripture uses these activities in a variety of figurative senses, we must not overlook the natural point. Even in things under the sun, physically, the way of folly is manifested in carelessness or heedlessness of man in such activities. The natural inclination of man is to go about such activities with the pride of heart that says, “I can do this; others may be injured, but not me.” Man is so often revealed as a fool even in such natural

activities. He denies that there may be consequences to what he is doing. God has joined together the things of this world with boundaries, such as gravity or other elements of physical laws, which shape our activities in doing them. God has made, sustains, and upholds both the things that are made and what we call natural laws governing them. This reality under the sun is God's work of upholding and governing the universe. It is not a matter of a mere organic process, which the heathen call karma, but God's work. Attributing it to the creation as a mere mechanical process, is idolatry and a denial of the Creator and Sustainer of all things.

We need to contemplate this description carefully. That there is a connection between man's activities and consequences, that there is cause and effect, is a work of God undergirding the creation. Moreover, that there is danger and physical harm in them is not a matter of accident, as we so often speak of it, but a certain judgment of God, the working of His curse, in the creation by which all things wear away, are corrupted, and lead to death. Thorns and thistles grow, weeds multiply, under the judgment of God upon us in a fallen world (Gen. 3:18).

The folly of sin leads us to the notion that we control them. When the consequences follow, we label them mistakes or accidents. They were, after all, unintentional or so we would describe them. Yet this is not the whole picture, for it is sin in fallen man that ignores God and the boundaries He has set and maintains. It is the carelessness of foolish, sinful man who, heedless, does himself an injury or injures others. It belongs to the working of God's curse in the creation that it is so. It is in that connection that we pray for God's fatherly care and provision in our activities, for we know that without His blessing they will not profit us. The fool, heedless of this reality and of God its author, passes on in sin and is punished.

While it is this physical reality that is on the foreground here in Ecclesiastes, the Word of God in many passages, as was noted, also takes up these pictures and uses them in a variety of figurative senses to describe man's willful activity of sin and God's judgment upon him. Man digs a pit for his neighbor to ensnare him with guile, to rob and to kill. He breaks down a hedge, the barrier fence, that he may break through and steal. Out of covetousness, he moves the stone, the landmark of his neighbor, to take what is not his. If the physical activity is subject to God's judgment and the working of curse upon the ground, how much more that which is described as wickedness in the figurative application. If God's judgment is manifested in these activities physically, how much greater is that judgment on the fool who thinks he will escape it when he walks in these sins

described by the figurative picture. He will fall into the pit he devised for others and, as he breaks through the hedge, a serpent will bite him.

Pursuing the figurative application of these figures further will lead us away from the point of the text being made here, that God sets the bounds of man's life in such a way that our activity always stands within the bounds He has set. The way of wisdom is the way of discernment of those boundaries and a walk in submission to them. He has said of the fool, "Yea, also when he walketh by the way, his wisdom faileth him..." (Eccl. 10:3). The fool strives with those boundaries in sin and rebellion. The judgment of God upon him is not immediately apparent as he digs his pit and keeps digging. His wisdom is self-confidence in himself and his own will. God is not in his thoughts. We read a similar idea in James, "Go to now, ye that say, To day or tomorrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain: Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow, For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away" (James 4:13, 14).

The text in Ecclesiastes makes the application of this in this way: "**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**" (Eccl. 10:10). The description is clear: a dull axe does not cut; the way of wisdom is to sharpen it. The idea of "direct" in the original is a successful or fruitful outcome.

This requires discernment and thought. The one who does not sharpen his axe wastes his strength. He is striving with the order of things under the sun. He is being foolish. This is more than the practical wisdom needed in earthly things, though that is included. Sin is foolishness. It is without direction and strives with God who confronts man on every side with His presence and government. The fool spends himself in his folly and does not truly prosper. He is adrift in the world without God, without true knowledge and understanding. He is in darkness. That darkness makes him as dull-witted as the dull axe.

Wisdom in the fear of God gives direction and therefore profit under the sun. It works a fruitful walk that is successful in its outcome for good. That good is both the prospering of our earthly way, which is in harmony with God's design, and profitable spiritually. It yields both contentment with our daily bread, and our rejoicing in the Lord who gives it. This belongs to the better portion of the child of God in his days under the sun who walks in the light. The man who seeks God's care and blessing in his activities seeks also discernment in the needs of life.