

Ecclesiastes 10:4-20

The Teacher's Call to True Wisdom

A. The Situation in which True Wisdom is Necessary

The Teacher wants to teach wisdom to God's oppressed church. Some people think that v. 4 is a recommendation to work together with the (oppressive) rules. That, however, is not correct. (cf. what was said in 8:1ff.) One must guard against bitterness and unjustified reactions, which easily develop because of the unwarranted wrath of the stranger ruler. Once one becomes bitter, he does not know his "place" [RSV] anymore; he revolts, etc. Therefore one is to remain at his post, however difficult that may be in a topsy turvy world (vv. 5-7).

Verses 16-20 describe the situation more closely, although they are somewhat inconcrete because of the exclamations, "woe to you" and "blessed are you". One can still interpret them in different ways. But the meaning in the concrete situation of the church is clear. Woe to the land, when your king is a child¹ (dependent on others who lack character), and your princes (higher officials) feast in the morning - at a time of day when they should be at work. Through sloth the roof of the government building collapses and through laziness (which always goes together with unbelief) the house of state leaks. The ruling world power obviously finds itself on the edge of the abyss.

Meanwhile, corruption continues unabated (v. 19b). Money makes the crooked straight. You can buy everything and do any mean thing with it. Through tips and bribes all crimes can be concealed (cf. 7:7). Yet the church may not curse the king or the enriched officials, not even privately (cf. 7:21). She must continue to acknowledge God, especially in bad times when walls have ears. The enemy might hear all that is said. Nevertheless, God is always present (cf. 8:2).

B. What this Wisdom Includes

We find the answer to this question in vv. 8-11, where The Teacher promotes care and thoughtfulness. He presupposes, then, that church members are ready to accept risks. Should something go wrong, the faithful temple-goer will know immediately that risks must be borne. It is for the honour of the service of the Lord that the temple-goer assumes the necessary risks, and it is for the honour of faithful church members that they accept these risks. Both carefulness *and* faithfulness with respect to the temple are important; not just one or the other (cf. Matthew 10:16). The theme of chapter 7:15-22 is expressed again at this point: wait for the proper time. That does not mean: do nothing for the time being. A faithful church devotes all her health and life to the service of the Lord. This implies that she work efficiently (v. 16) and does not waste energy; the axe must be sharpened on time. Wisdom helps one succeed; the practical understanding of life is a fruit of the fear of the Lord. The thought expressed in 1 Corinthians 15:58 is reflected here also: in the Lord our labour is not in vain. When evil has done its work, the damage

¹ *Ed. Note:* see alternate translation in NIV

cannot be undone (v. 11). The Teacher encourages God's people. They are able to see the wisdom of God, where man sees only crooked lines.

C. Folly Brings Curse, Wisdom Brings Blessing

The words of a wise man's mouth are gracious, but a fool is consumed by his own lips (cf. Proverbs 10:8; 12:13; 18:7). The fool just talks and builds castles in the air, even though he does not know anything about the future. And in the end everything comes to nothing. Verse 15 is probably a proverb. The fool does not know how to get to town; he is too stupid to accomplish anything despite all his toil. Some people see a reference to the temple city here. Indeed, that is what is intended; just as the wise man is the pious temple-goer, so the fool is the ungodly, whose work is broken by God. For the believer, all this is a stimulant to hand things over to God and at the same time to keep working bravely.

Questions

1. Is The Teacher enjoying the mishaps of others when he sees the house of state cave in? In this connection, what do you think about Revelation 18:20 ("rejoice over her")?
2. Show how work in God's kingdom brings all kinds of dangers and risks. Do you know how Paul spoke about that?
3. Besides believers, there are also unbelievers who devote their lives to "the good cause? What is the difference between them and believers?
4. Do you see any allusion to Genesis 3 in Ecclesiastes 10:11? Show that in Christ there is no such thing as an irreparable evil, a radical break.
5. Notice once again (see Outline 5) that The Teacher himself says that our labour is not in vain. The church does not have to wait until the New Testament for this (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:58), although it is true that The Teacher cannot illuminate this truth out of Christ's resurrection.
6. In connection with chapter 10:14, we may speak of futurism. What does this word mean? Futurists are concerned with the future, but they do not even know *what* is *really* happening in the world *today*. Knowing the situation of today, what are we able to tell about the future?

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