

## IX. HUMAN ACHIEVEMENT IS VANITY

### Ecclesiastes 9:11-11:8

#### Introduction:

1. *Also I turned to see that under the sun (9:11-12)*
  - a. *The race [is] not to the swift (9:11a)*
  - b. *Nor the battle to the strong (9:11b)*
  - c. *Nor bread to the wise (9:11c)*
  - d. *Nor riches to the intelligent (9:11d)*
  - e. *Nor favor to the skillful (9:11e).*
2. *Because time and circumstance happen to all of them (9:11b); Also because man does not know his time.*
  - a. *Like fish that are taken in a bad net  
And like birds that are caught in a trap,*
  - b. *Just so the sons of men are trapped by a bad time  
When it falls on them suddenly (9:12).*

Solomon named a ninth aspect of life that is vanity. That aspect is human achievement or accomplishing a great success in some field of endeavor. No matter how great a person's success might be, he can never be sure of receiving a reward for it. Solomon had lived long enough to know that the one who achieves the greatest success is not always the one who receives the benefits from his success. The one who works the hardest is not always the one who receives the honor. The fastest runner does not always win the race. The strongest soldier does not always win the battle. The wisest person is not always the one who has the most to eat. The most intelligent person is not always the one who has the most riches. The most skillful worker is not always the one who gets the promotion.

The reason achievement and success do not guarantee reward is that many other factors beside a person's own efforts influence the outcome of his work. The timing of a person's achievements and the circumstances under which he accomplishes them often have as much to do with recognition or usefulness coming out of his efforts as the accomplishments themselves. The person who invented a much better way to make a saddle just before the automobile was invented received little benefit from his discovery because he came out with his invention at a time when saddles were going out of style. He was defeated by bad timing.

The person who opened a new clothing store just before a recession struck lost his business, and his knowledge of men's clothing was wasted because of economic circumstances over which he had not control. Sometimes a person can do his work perfectly, but the time when he does the work may be a time when no one needs what he has made or no one has the money to pay for it. Sometimes a person can put forth his best effort to grow a garden, but bad weather will destroy it before he can gather the fruit of his labors. Sometimes a person can be completely trustworthy in paying his bills, but the company for which he works closes down and he loses his job. He may be unable to pay for his house and car and lose them both through circumstances he could not avoid. Many times new and unfavorable circumstances fall on a person unexpectedly and suddenly deny him success in a venture he worked toward for a long time. He fails through happenings he could not foresee, and his dreams fade away in spite of his best efforts. Those instances are just a few examples of how time and circumstance have as much to do with the results of a person's work as his achievements and abilities. Therefore, one's achievements often turn out to be another vanity.

Solomon recognized that, because people are limited by the times in which they live and the circumstances into which they are born, they are often like fish caught in a fisherman's net or like

birds caught in a fowler's trap. They are trapped by their circumstances, and no amount of effort or achievement can change the times or overcome the circumstances that limit them. Their achievements commend them, but their circumstances defeat them.

Solomon explained many of the circumstances that can turn achievement into vanity by quoting a string of proverbs that deal that reality. When he wrote of the vanity of self-righteousness and the vanity of wisdom, he used proverbs to illustrate that

A. [A proverb about achievement that is defeated by forgetfulness]

*For example, I saw this wisdom under the sun, and it [was] significant to me (9:13-16).*

1. *[There was] a little city with a few men in it (9:14),*

a. *And a great king came against it and surrounded it and built against it great breastworks (9:14b).*

b. *And a poor wise man was found in it who delivered the city by his wisdom (9:15a).*

c. *And no one remembered that poor man (9:15b).*

2. *So I say wisdom is better than might (9:16),*

a. *Though the poor man's wisdom is despised (9:16b),*

b. *And his words are not heeded (9:16c).*

The first example Solomon gave of how achievement is defeated by time and circumstances was an incident he described like he knew about it personally. The experience Solomon recounted was a time when a small city was attacked by a powerful king and a poor man in the city devised a plan that rescued the city from their attacker. Yet after the crisis was over, no one remembered who had developed the plan that delivered them. His name was not honored in the annals of the city or spoken of by the citizens. People just went on with the interests of their lives and forgot about the achievement of the poor man who was responsible for their deliverance. Solomon obviously deplored the lack of appreciation on the part of that city, but he also cited it as an example of a sad reality that often occurs in the world. People become absorbed by the events of their present day and forget the achievements of former days, even though their present benefits are a result of those former days.

the best insights wise men can produce are inadequate vanities, not because they are not true but because they are not enough. In this section of his book, he used proverbs to show that the wise men repeatedly declared the vanity of human achievement. Some of the proverbs seem to indicate they were written by Solomon himself, because they are written in the first person. Others Solomon probably quoted from the writings of other wise men. They all illustrate various ways that a person's achievements can turn out to be vanity.

Especially they forget the people who sacrificed to create the benefits they enjoy.

Solomon stated the conclusion he drew from the experience. He said it showed him that wisdom is better than physical power and might, because the poor man's wisdom achieved deliverance for the city when all the strength and weapons in the city could not. However, he said that the experience also showed him that the achievements of a poor man are seldom honored in the world. People receive the benefits of a poor man's service, but they soon forget the man because he is poor and not prominent in the city.

One circumstance that causes achievement to turn out to be vanity is that people so quickly forget the achievements of others, especially if that other person is poor.

**B.** [Proverbs about achievement that is defeated by sinners] (9:18-10:3)

1. *The words of the wise heard quietly [are better] than the shouting of a ruler to fools (9:17-10:20). Wisdom is better than weapons of war, But one sinner destroys much good (9:18).*
2. *Dead flies cause spiced oil to stink [and] to become rancid. A little folly [is] weightier than wisdom and honor (10:1).*
3. *A wise man's heart [leans] to the right, But a fool's heart [leans] to the left (10:2).*
4. *Even when the [fool] walks on the road, his mind has something missing; And he communicates to all he is a fool (10:3).*

Solomon's second example of how achievement is defeated by time and circumstances is that wise actions are often undone by foolish sinners. Solomon quoted four proverbs that supported his point. The first proverb clearly states that wise words spoken calmly to people who will listen are better than orders shouted by a ruler to people who are too foolish to hear. The proverb further declares that wise advice even accomplishes much more than weapons of war. However, it stresses that it only takes one sinner's foolish actions to tear down what wise diplomacy has accomplished.

The second proverb compares the damage dead flies do to perfume with the destruction foolish actions do to wise and honorable negotiations. Dead flies rot and putrefy and make the most fragrant of ointments stinky and useless. In the same way a little foolishness has greater influence than the words of wise and honorable men. Sadly, people are attracted to foolish jabber more easily than they are to wise advice. Far too many people refuse to listen to the wise words but are attracted by invitations to sin. Therefore, the wise actions of some are undone and made to be vanity by the sinfulness of others.

The third proverb points out that people respond more readily to the attractions of sin because their hearts are bent toward the left, that is, toward wrong. Sinfulness is the natural inclination of people unless God has changed their hearts and lives and turned them to the right. Therefore, good achievements have little chance of success because of the leftward leaning of people in the world.

The fourth proverb says foolish men can be seen even in the way they walk down the road. They show by their crazy actions that they are not paying attention to what they are doing. By acting irresponsibly, they are putting themselves and others in danger. Their public display of their innate foolishness and sinfulness demonstrates clearly that good achievements are constantly defeated by the open display of foolishness by people of the world.

All too often, the crazy actions of a foolish person undo the best efforts of a wise and honest man. Thus, the best actions of good men turn out to be wasted vanities.

**C.** [Proverbs about achievement that is defeated by unwise rulers] (10:4-7)

1. *If the anger of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your place; For soothing [words] put great sins to rest (10:4).*
2. *There is an evil that I have seen under the sun: Such as a mistake that goes forth from the face of the ruler (10:5-7).*
3. *The fool is placed in many high positions, And the rich sit in the low position (10:6).*
4. *I have seen slaves on horses And princes walking like slaves on the ground (10:7).*

Another example Solomon gave about how achievement is defeated by time and circumstance

is that foolish rulers often interfere with the wise actions of their subjects. The first proverb about

rulers that Solomon quoted gives advice about how to deal with an angry ruler. The proverb advises that the person should not rise up and respond in the same angry spirit. Instead he should answer the ruler with calm words. Calm words cause great fury to calm down. They even gain mercy and forgiveness for great wrongs. The reason that a person should deal with a ruler in that manner is that so many rulers act on impulse and emotion instead of on reason and principle. Their emotional impulses must be dealt with calmly or their anger will destroy a person's good achievements.

The second proverb states the problem more directly. It probably was written by Solomon himself, because it is spoken in the first person. Solomon said that one of the great evils he had encountered was when a ruler makes a mistake. He did not accuse the ruler of deliberate fraud or malfeasance, but even an honest mistake on the part of a ruler causes damage and harm to many of his subjects or to all of them. That damage interferes with the good and wise actions of his subjects and turns their wise achievements into vanity.

- D. [Proverbs about achievement that is defeated by unexpected accidents] (Eccl. 10:8-20)
1. *One digging a pit might fall into it (10:8a),*
  2. *And one breaking up a wall, a snake might bite him (10:8b).*
  3. *One pulling up stones might be hurt by them (10:9),*
  4. *One splitting logs might be endangered by them (10:9b-10);*
    - a. *If the blade is dull and he does not sharpen the edge, then he must put forth strength (10:10a),*
    - b. *But a preference for succeeding [is to use] wisdom (10:10b).*
  5. *If the snake bites when [it is] not charmed, then [being] the charmer has no benefit (10:11).*

A fourth example Solomon gave of how time and circumstance can defeat a person's achievements was that unexpected accidents can destroy a person's ability to exercise his abilities. The five statements that are given in this verse can be considered to be five proverbs, or they can be considered to be five parts of one proverb. Either way, they give five instances in which accidents can occur unexpectedly and interfere with or destroy a person's ability to achieve his goals.

One instance is that a person who is digging a ditch can fall into it and injure himself. The second instance is that a person who is breaking up a wall, either to replace it with something else or to repair

The third proverb expresses the sad reality that foolish and sinful people all too often are placed in high positions, while accomplished and able men who had proved their abilities by gaining riches for themselves are relegated to insignificant positions. Power often determines a person's position, rather than ability or success. The result is inadequate rulership that brings harm to everyone.

The fourth proverb also describes Solomon's personal observations. He said he had seen men who had been slaves riding on horses, while men who had been princes were made to walk on the ground and in chains like slaves. He had seen such sights when a conqueror invaded a land and imprisoned its ruler, while he exalted unworthy men who had ingratiated themselves to them.

Rightful leaders often are rejected and unworthy men exalted to satisfy the ambitions of people who want only to empower and exalt themselves. Thus, good and worthy achievements are turned into vanity by sinful and unwise rulers.

it, could be bitten by a snake hiding along the wall. The third instance is that a person pulling up stones, probably to clear a field, could drop one of the stones on his foot and cripple himself, or his straining could cause a hernia and turn him into an invalid.

The fourth instance is that a person splitting wood for a fireplace could be damaged either by the axe or by a flying piece of one of the logs. The damage could even be permanent. Solomon elaborated a bit on that possibility by saying that the man splitting the wood might increase the danger by failing to sharpen his ax. In that case, he would have to work harder to split the wood, which would

increase the possibility of his damaging himself, either by overexertion or by having less control over the wood.

The fifth instance is that a snake charmer might try to handle his snakes without charming them and get bitten, which might result in his death. Thus, it did him no good to have the ability to charm snakes, because he neglected to use the skills he had.

**E. [Proverbs about human achievement that is defeated by foolish thoughts and ideas] (10:12-17)**

- 1. *Words from a wise mouth [obtain] favor,  
But lips of a fool swallow him up (10:12).***
  - a. *The first word from his mouth is foolishness,  
And the last one from his mouth is evil craziness (10:13).***
  - b. *Yet a fool multiplies words when the man does not know what will be,  
And what will come after him, who may tell him (10:14)?***
- 2. *Labor of a fool wears him out  
So that he does not know how to get to town (10:15).***
- 3. *Woe to you, O land, when your king [is] a child and your princes feast in the morning (10:16).  
Happy are you, O land, when your king is a son of a free man and your princes feast at the appointed  
time for strength and not for drunkenness (10:17).***

A fifth example of how circumstances can destroy achievement is when a person's thoughts and ideas are foolish and self-defeating. The first proverb Solomon quoted to illustrate that point says that a person who speaks wise words is honored by others, but a person who speaks flippant thoughtless words gets eaten up by the words he speaks. The person who speaks silly foolish words not only loses the respect of others, he destroys his own self by his flighty and false ideas. Sadly a foolish person does not know how to speak words that make good sense. From the first word he speaks to the last, he spouts foolishness. Yet, he keeps talking about subjects he does not understand without realizing how much harm he is doing to himself. And who can slow his talking down enough to tell him he is not making any sense? The person with foolish ideas actually tends to do a lot of speaking, because he feels compelled to try to convince people he knows what he is talking about. However, his many words only cause people to have less respect for him and cause him to continue pursuing his unproductive ideas.

The second proverb says that a foolish person has to work so hard that, when he is finished, he does not have the strength or ability to go into town.

Those five instances plus many other possible accidents can happen to a person and injure him to the extent that he is unable to use his skills and abilities for the rest of his life. Many people have similar experiences and spend their remaining days regretting that their skills are wasted and have become vanities.

The reason he has to work so hard is that his foolish ideas about how to do the job make him have to work much longer and harder than he should.

Solomon obviously had no use for foolish gibberish. We must remember that Solomon's words in the Book of Ecclesiastes were inspired by God, so God also has no use for careless jabbering. A person who talks without studying or without basing his ideas on valid experience will have many unexpected problems and unnecessary accidents that will cause him to miss many opportunities to achieve something useful or cause his achievements to be wasted.

The third proverb speaks of the tragedy of being ruled by foolish rulers. Foolish rulers not only damage themselves but their subjects as well. Solomon described foolish rulers as feasting in the morning when they should be working for the good of their nation and their people. They act like children and spend their mornings eating and drinking instead of concentrating on the work of the day. Wise rulers are strikingly different. Their character shows they came from a line of men who have earned their right to be free. They eat their meals at regular hours not for drunkenness, but for

nourishment, so they can have strength for their responsibilities. They are wise and good rulers, but those who use their rulership positions to satisfy their own desires and pleasures suffer all kinds of

accidents and set-backs that damage both themselves and their subjects

Accepting foolish ideas is another of the circumstances that destroy a person's achievements.

F. [Proverbs about human achievement being defeated by foolish actions] (10:18-20)

1. ***Through laziness the roof caves in, and through idle hands the house leaks (10:18).  
(1) They make bread for laughter, and wine gladdens lives,  
(2) And money solves everything (10:19).***
2. ***Even in your thought do not curse the king, and in your bedrooms do not curse the rich,  
For the bird of the heavens will carry the statement, or the possessor of wings will make the  
word known (10:20).***

A sixth example of circumstances that can destroy a person's ability to achieve is a carefree approach to life. The first proverb Solomon used to emphasize that point says that a lazy person's property soon decays. The roof of his house falls in and leaks. Instead of concentrating on those important needs, such a person gives attention to frivolities and having a good time. He does not eat food for nourishment, but for entertainment. He does not drink fresh juices to strengthen his body, but fermented wine for boisterous laughter. He is not interested in money so he can provide for his family but uses it to buy his way out of the troubles he brings on himself. His careless way of living destroy any opportunities he might have to achieve something meaningful and causes to vanish away any achievements he does accomplish.

The second proverb indicates that a carefree person is not only careless about his responsibilities but also about the way he talks about others.

Thoughtless words of criticism can bring resentments that destroy any opportunity a person might have to advance his station in life. The proverb especially cautions against speaking carelessly about powerful or rich people. It says a person should not allow himself even to think harsh and critical thoughts about the rich and the powerful. When someone thinks those thoughts, he will soon speak them; and when he speaks them, they will not remain private. Even if he speaks unkind words in the privacy of his bedroom, they will spread as if a bird on the windowsill heard them and carried them to the one about whom he spoke. He will receive serious repercussions from words he spoke only in careless jest.

Another circumstance that can cause a person to miss his opportunity to achieve or lose the benefit of what he has achieved is to be careless in his actions and in his speech.

G. [Proverbs about human achievement that is defeated by the uncertainties of life] (11:1-8b)

1. ***Throw your bread on the face of the waters, because after many days you might find it (11:1).  
Give a portion to seven, or even to eight, because you do not know what evil might come to be on  
the earth (11:2).***
  - a. ***If the clouds are full of rain,  
They might empty themselves on the earth (11:3a).***
  - b. ***And if a tree falls on the earth to the south or the north,  
The place where the tree falls there it will lie (11:3b).***

2. *The one watching the wind will not plant,  
And the one looking at the clouds will not harvest (11:4).*
  - a. *Just as you do not know the path of the wind, or things like bones in the full womb (11:5a)  
Just so you do not know the work of God, who makes everything (11:5b).*
  - b. *In the morning, plant your seed,  
And at evening do not hold back your hand (11:6),  
(1) Because you do not know if this will prosper or that (11:6b).  
(2) Or if both alike will do well (11:6c).*
3. *Light is pleasant,  
And to the eyes it is good to see the sunlight (11:7-8),*
  - a. *So if a man lives many years,  
Let him enjoy all of them (11:8),*
  - b. *But let him remember  
The days of darkness because they will be many (11:8b).*

Solomon's seventh example of how circumstances can effect a person's achievement in life is the uncertainties of life. He quoted three extended proverbs to illustrate that point. Taken together the proverbs emphasize that a person should carry out his responsibilities without having to know the result that will come, because life is so insecure he can never know what the outcome of his efforts will be. A person should work hard at his responsibilities even though he does not know what the result will be, because he does know that if he shirks his responsibilities the results will not be good.

The first proverb deals with the uncertainty of the results that will come from giving to those in need. A person should not hold back from helping someone in need just because he does not know what good it will do. He should not give, expecting to gain from it. He should do it because he hopes good will come of it, without having to have a guarantee in advance.

The proverb about throwing bread on the waters has puzzled interpreters through the years. Three major suggestions concerning its meaning have been offered. One is that a person should make investments in overseas trade, because he might make a profit. That suggestion is ingenious, but it is completely out of context with the subject Solomon was discussing. A second suggestion is that a person should feed the fish in the rivers and ponds, because he might be able to catch them for food when they are bigger. The idea may be true, but it seems simplistic and irrelevant. The third

suggestion is that a person should give to the needy, because someone likely will return the favor to him when he is in need. This suggestion is based on the idea that many had in Solomon's day and that many have today that giving to the needy is as useless as throwing bread into a river, where it is completely wasted. Giving food to people in need often does seem to be as useless as throwing bread into the river, because the people who are helped seldom return the favor and because they often have to be helped again. If this explanation is correct, Solomon was suggesting that a person should give to the needy without knowing the results, because it might inspire others to give him help if he ever is in need. This suggestion is the most plausible explanation of the proverb, especially in the light of the next sentence in the proverb. However, Solomon's point in quoting the proverb was to point to the uncertainty of obtaining good results from help that a person gives to others.

The parallel statement in the proverb definitely relates to generous giving. It advises a person to give to seven others, even to eight. To the Israelites seven was a number that suggested completeness. Giving to seven meant giving to as many needy people as possible. Giving to eight meant giving sacrificially, beyond one's ability or beyond what is easy and comfortable for a person to give. The proverb says the reason a person should give generously is because he does not know what tragedy might happen to him. Some unforeseen circumstance might arise that would cause him to be in need. If that should happen, he would be in the

best position to ask for help if he helped others when he could.

The proverb mentions some unexpected circumstances that can cause a person to be in need. One is heavy rainfall that can flood the person's house and cause him to experience a great loss. Such circumstances occur at places where they have never happened before. Clouds often contain astonishing amounts of moisture, and weather conditions can cause the clouds to drop that moisture all at once. Ten, fifteen, even twenty inches of rain have fallen unexpectedly in a few hours' time, and few locations can stand such a massive influx of water without severe flooding. A person can never know when that disaster might come to him.

Another unexpected circumstance that suddenly can cause a person to be in need is the possibility that a tree might fall on him or on his house. Trees can provide steady shelter when they are healthy and well rooted, but they can be extremely devastating when they become diseased or when a high wind blows them down. Trees are extremely heavy. When they fall, no one can control where they fall. Where they fall, they fall. If a tree falls on a person or on his property, it does great damage. He may suddenly be in need, when only a few moments before he thought he had all the resources he needed.

When a person considers the possibility of these and other sudden tragedies, he should be generous with others who have tragedies, because he can never know when a tragedy might strike him. All of those uncertainties fill life with vanities.

The second proverb deals with the uncertainty of the weather. Just as a person cannot know the

outcome of giving to those in need, a farmer cannot know the outcome of his planting seed in his field. He must not wait on the weather to do his work, because he can never know what the weather will be. A farmer will never get his crop planted or his harvest brought in if he puts off planting or harvesting until he knows for sure the weather is favorable. The same is true of every other kind of work. No one can know what events life will bring, so a person should do his work because it is the right thing for him to do and not wait until he knows what the results will be.

The proverb says that the events that occur in life are the work of God. No one can understand what makes bones grow in the womb of a pregnant woman. Just as surely, no one can predict or explain God's work in every other aspect of life. A person can never know if one effort or the other will succeed or if both will succeed. Therefore, he should do the work that needs to be done every day and leave the result to God. Unless God blesses a person's efforts, all his labor is an uncertainty and a vanity.

The third proverb deals with the uncertainty of how long good fortune may last. The proverb says a person should enjoy the blessings of sunlight as long as it is shining on his life, because he never knows how long it will continue to shine. What he does know is that days of darkness are going to come and that everyone has many dark days in his life. Not knowing when one's days of light and joy may turn to darkness turns even the blessings of life into uncertain vanities.

If a person wants something certain in life, he must not look to his life and work. The only real certainty is God. All else is vanity.

***Conclusion: Everything that comes [is] vanity (11:8c)!***

Solomon closed this section of his book in the same way that he closed every other section, with an anguished cry that this aspect of life also is vanity. He said that what will come as a result of a person's efforts is uncertain, and he can never know how long the good that comes will last. Therefore,

everything that comes to a person in life as a result of all of his work and achievement is as changing and as uncertain as the wind. Therefore, human achievement, no matter what it is, is vanity. Everyone needs to seek for something more certain in life than his own achievements.