



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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Lessons from Mike Black

Ecclesiastes 10:8-20

Lesson 13 Of 16

2007-08

“The Sovereignty of God Down To The Smallest Details”

TRANSCRIPT

We are in the Book of Ecclesiastes, and we are in the tenth chapter, starting with verse 8; and we will get through the end of chapter 10 tonight. My notes are rather lengthy this evening, so I will forgo reading the text at this time. But I am going to ask you to mark four passages that I think will supplement our study tonight. These Scriptures of interest are in Psalm 46, Proverbs 10, John 3, and John 19.

Our text tonight falls into three distinct parts. First, verses 8-11: *God is sovereign over our affairs*. Second, verses 12-15: Here our Teacher changes topics and has *a discussion on fools*. And finally, in versus 16-20, we have three separate subjects which I will explain when we get to that juncture. But suffice to say, we have much to cover, so we'll get right to it. Let's bow before the Lord of the Word for His blessing tonight, shall we?

Father, thank you for the opportunity to come together to study the Scriptures with one mind and one heart and one purpose; that we might come away with skill and with wisdom to live this life ‘under the sun’. Allow us to be careful in all of our affairs so that we might add glory to You and live productive lives unto You until You take us home. So, we pray to that end that the Scriptures might minister to us and encourage us and build us up.

We pray for our families that are not with us here tonight. We pray that You will bless them and that You will minister to them; husbands, wives, children, and

grandchildren: We pray Your richest blessing upon them. Father, thank you for the families that you have given us. And we pray that you will continue to strengthen them, keep them in good health, as we live our life under the providence of God.

Now Lord, bless the Chapel; bless the elders and the deacons. Bless all of the gifted teachers that are here. Prosper them in every way so that everything that is done would be pleasing and honoring to You in every way.

And now, bless our time in the Scriptures with this very 'powerful mind': this man who is thinking far beyond us and is so insightful about life. We ask, O God, for clear vision to see, and open ears to hear, that we might profit from our time together. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

It happened just this way, this past summer (8-1-2007), at six o'clock. Bumper to bumper traffic: Minneapolis, Minnesota. There were these cars and these trucks, and they were crossing this river on a bridge when suddenly the bridge simply went out from under them. Now think about that. I thought the great danger in driving was losing control of your automobile. I thought the great danger in driving was some drunk hitting you broadside, going over from his lane to your lane. But let's consider, on this occasion, people were driving in their lanes, under the speed limit, no chance of anyone hitting them, when the unexplainable happened. Suddenly the road that they were on went out from under them.

The next morning, after the people had time to digest this tragic situation, a news conference was held at the bridge. All the notables from the State of Minnesota were there. Everyone of significance gave a short word to put this tragedy into perspective. But there was one voice that I will not forget. It was the newly elected junior senator from Minnesota. And this lady, in my opinion, said the most ridiculous thing. She said, and I quote, "Bridges are not supposed to fail.", end quote. And then she assured everyone that she had already been on the phone with her colleagues, Senators Reed, Durbin, and Schumer, and that they had pledged their complete support. I thought to myself, "What are they going to do? Put on overalls, and a hard hat, and join

in the construction?" "Bridges," she said, "are not supposed to fail." Then she assured everyone that she was going to meet with Patty Murray, and she was going to get to the bottom of this.

Then it struck me: When you have no theology, you have no paradigm of logic to explain a tragedy or evil. Someone or something 'under the sun' must be blamed and held accountable. I wonder what the President of the United States was doing at six PM that day. Or how about the General Secretary of the United Nations? Where was he? Were they thinking about something? Well, certainly it wasn't as important as that one bridge. They were obviously off and distracted. Somewhere, someone must be accountable. In effect, it must be someone's fault 'under the sun.'

My Christian friends, I offer to you the life of one of the greatest men to ever grace this planet. He towers among mere mortals. His name was Job. And in one day, his bridge collapsed. And on it he had all of his children, all of his physical assets, his wealth, his possessions, even his own health. And the difference between this man, Job, and the new junior senator from Minnesota is that he had the ability to interpret what had happened to him. Despite all of his unbelievable personal disaster 'under the sun', he said, '...the LORD gave, and the LORD took away. Blessed be the name of the LORD'. (Job 1:21). What do you do when your bridge goes out from under you? Well, let's look together at Psalm 46.

For the director of music. Of the Sons of Korah. According to *alamoth*. A song.

God is our refuge and strength,
an ever-present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give
way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,
though its waters roar and foam
and the mountains quake with their surging.

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy place where the Most High dwells.
God is within her, she will not fall;
God will help her at break of day.

The Sovereignty of God Down To The Smallest Details by Mike Black
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Nations are in an uproar, kingdoms fall;
he lifts his voice, the earth melts.
The LORD Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress. *Selah*
Psalm 46:1-7

The point of the verses of the Psalm that we just read is that our God is the 'lender of last resort'. Whatever else in heaven and earth fails or falls, He is sovereign; *down to the smallest details of life*. Now I bring this up because, if you don't have a theology that accounts for the sovereignty of God, and an all-encompassing Providence, this life, this reality 'under the sun', will leave you flat, discouraged, disappointed, and without answers.

Couple of years ago I had a friend that was on a hunting trip in Africa when suddenly his group was charged by an elephant. His guide, who was his close friend, was mauled and killed in a matter of seconds. My friend's testimony to me: "I just started praying, and I kept praying, all day, all night, and into the next day." You see, my friend knew, that despite the horror of this awful event, that God was sovereign. He knew that God was in control of everything— And if you don't start there; this reality is nothing but a mass of confusion and doubt. And this message is continued in the four proverbs that are in Ecclesiastes 10, verses 8-11, and proclaimed by our Teacher.

The first, verse 8: "Whoever digs a pit may fall into it; whoever breaks through a wall may be bitten by a snake." In the world; this life 'under the sun'; the Christian is left vulnerable because we don't play by the same rules of ordinary men. While others speak whatever is convenient for the moment, we must always tell the truth. When others are looking after themselves (and themselves only), we, on the other hand, must be concerned about not only our affairs, but the affairs of others as well. We are always conscious of God's watchfulness over everything in our life; and we know that God will not let us get away with things that the common and ordinary people get away with every day. Therefore, we take a verse like Ecclesiastes 10:8 very seriously: A warning that life is controlled by the sovereignty of God and His all controlling Providence.

The theme of the verse (vs8) is 'divine retribution'. The enemy of the upright man unjustly makes a trap. Yet God sees to it that he, not the upright, falls into it. This is the clear teaching of the Word of God. And here are two more examples: Psalm 7: 15-16: "He who digs a hole and scoops it out falls into the pit he has made. The trouble he causes recoils on himself; his violence comes down on his own head." And Psalm 37: 14-15. "The wicked draw the sword and bend the bow to bring down the poor and needy, to slay those whose ways are upright. But their swords will pierce their own hearts, and their bows will be broken."

Now let's consider that for a moment. That's clearly what the Word of God says, but let's think about that. Well, we have mighty Pharaoh, ruler of all Egypt, the most powerful nation on the face of the earth. And at the beginning of Exodus he sets forth a new policy: 'We're going to drown all the male babies of the Israelites.' But instead it was he and his war charioteers, all male, that were drowned. Drowned by the LORD. And how about Haman? He built gallows for Mordecai many feet in the air; for he was going to make a great public display of it. But it was Haman (not Mordecai), who was put on his own gallows and hung in a display of humiliation. And then they thought they would do Daniel in. So they put him in the lions' den for a night: And that would be the end of having to deal with him. But in the lions' den, the animals didn't even so much as give Daniel a 'sniff': And when Daniel's enemies were put into the same pit, they were devoured instantly.

Now notice also in our text (vs8), the second clause, 'the serpent', (in the NIV *snake*): God will make sure it is carefully placed and not to be missed by him who deviously breaches a wall. Isn't it amazing all the times criminals are caught by the smallest of details? Just like a small snake in a wall.

In Oklahoma City, when we had the bombing of the Federal Building, a great tragedy, we had no real description of who or what we were looking for. Was it 1 person; 10 people? Were they in a car; a bus? We had nothing. And if that bomber would have just taken a road out of the northwest side of the city ... You see, Oklahoma City is not like Dallas that has miles and miles of shopping centers in all directions. But

when Oklahoma City is finished...it's prairie. If he would have just taken one of those roads, and gone off toward Colorado, no one would have caught him. But he didn't do that: He went up I-35, straight toward Kansas and got stopped 80 miles south of the Kansas border: Because he didn't have a license plate on his car. Such a small, insignificant thing. Smart enough to build a bomb: Not smart enough to get away. Caught by *the smallest of details*.

Verse 9. This all-wise Providence 'under the sun' can also injure us in our chosen professions. Here notice, it is the stone cutter and the logger. They're injured by fragments of the stone and wood, respectively. And we see this as well with professional athletes being injured and carried off the field. You see, 'under the sun' we can also be injured in our profession. But here is what we need to remember: *It's not random; it's Providence*. So, we look to God even in an event like this as well.

Verse 10. Here's what we are going to do in our work. We are going to be as industrious as possible. So, we sharpen the edge of the ax. And if you'll do that, you won't have to swing as hard. We use the cliché, 'work smarter, not harder'. I think our friend with the powerful mind would like that.

Question: How is it that we display our belief in the sovereign hand of God over all the affairs of our lives? Answer: By being diligent, by working hard, by trusting God; and in everything we do, humanly speaking, we try to be as effective as we possibly can be. And we need to do that because we are the only 'Bible' that people are reading. They are watching us.

Verse 11. There are limits to one's industry. Snake charming is a mysterious occupation that calls for, let's say, a certain expertise. The point of the proverb; a charmer needs to work his skill before the snake bites. In the ancient world a snake bite was fatal. Why did the snake bite him? Is it due to lack of preparation or discounting the ability of the snake; his speed, his quick strike capabilities? Or was it overconfidence of the charmer? We simply don't know. But the point of the proverb: In this life we must be alert, we must be prodigious when it comes to our occupation. We can't, and don't,

expect God to bless laziness. We trust His sovereignty, and therefore we're diligent and alert, always, in every situation.

Take a big-league ball player. In less than a second, less than a second, they have to make a decision...Are they going to swing or not? And then, if you watch closely, at the end of every pitch, they'll step back out of the batter's box and re-tighten their batting gloves. What's that all about? Well, it shows that they're focused, they're prepared, and they have everything perfectly in place to make the most of their opportunity. Now that's real skill: That's wisdom for living.

So, for the young person who spends countless hours studying the material that they'll likely forget; don't be disturbed by it. Don't let it bother you for it is all part of the process that God is using to train you; and all of us. I think of attorneys and accountants with years of experience that go into their ability to structure a merger or to perform an acquisition of another company. It is their decisions that can mean a lot of money or a lot of liability in the future. Every *detail* is so important. But the truth is that we work as if everything is dependent on us when we know that ultimately, everything is in God's power and under God's control; *down to the smallest of details*.

Now to verses 12-15 and his *discussion on fools*. Here is a collection of proverbs that specifically denigrate '*folly*'. These are similar to some of the truths in the Book of Proverbs itself and I want to show you that. Turn with me to the tenth chapter of the Book of Proverbs: Proverbs, chapter 10, and we will begin at verse 8. "The wise in heart accept commands, but a chattering fool comes to ruin." And again, in that same chapter, verse 21, "The lips of the righteous nourish many, but fools die for lack of judgment." And over a few chapters to chapter 15. Turn over there, and I'll show you another: Chapter 15 and verse 2. "The tongue of the wise commends knowledge, but the mouth of the fool gushes folly." Now turn three more chapters over, and here we are in Proverbs chapter 18, and verse 7: "A fool's mouth is his undoing, and his lips are a snare to his soul." The reason I wanted to point those proverbs out is that '*words*' are a mainstay in wisdom literature. The point is, if you will listen close enough and long

enough to a man's 'words', you will know whether he is wise or a fool. They'll tell you in their conversation.

Our 'man with the powerful mind' begins this section by comparing speech, right here in vs 12. Notice, one brings favor and one brings harm: 'The mouth of the wise brings favor in contrast to the fool's words that', notice your text, "swallow him." (The NIV: '*consumed*'). The verb here, '*to swallow*', means to be 'engulfed'. By the fool's speech, he reveals his entire inner attitude; for his words are ill-judged, ill-timed, and just simply wrong-headed.

Here is your example of such speech and it comes from the Lord Jesus Himself. Matthew Chapter 12, verses 34-37. Just listen to the opinion of our Lord regarding the words of the so-called 'righteous'. He says, "You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him." But now listen to this scary fact from Christ. He says (vs36), "But I tell you, men will have to give an account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned." Ladies and gentlemen, the Lord Jesus said that your words can send you to hell.

Next, verse 13: 'The beginning of the words of his mouth are folly, but the end of the words of his mouth are wicked madness...' Now, what we have here is a *merism*. It is the extreme: The beginning of something and the end of something. And what it tells us is that we can apply *the same* for everything in between. For example: We say, "He works from sunrise to sunset", and we know what we mean by that merism, don't we: That he works all day long. Observe here that the fool's speech starts as *inane*; (Literally, the NIV here is '*folly*'), but the end is '*insanity*'. In other words, applying the *merism*, his wicked talk never stops; he never shuts up; and it only gets worse.

Verse 14: 'The fool is like a fire hydrant: He goes on and on and on, mostly about things he doesn't know anything about' (The NIV: The fool "...*multiplies words*"). Now observe carefully his subject matter: 'What is going to happen?' This the great gulf

between his words and the words of the wise. Because if there is one thing that our 'man with the powerful mind' has repeatedly set forth, it is that: 'No one knows what is going to happen'. Ecclesiastes chapter 6, in verse 12b: "...Who can tell him what will happen under the sun after he is gone?" Ecclesiastes 7:14c: "...a man cannot discover anything about his future." And finally, chapter 8, in verse 7: "Since no man knows the future, who can tell him what is to come?" So, when you see someone speaking with certainty regarding the future, (*and 'put it down'*): It is the fool's tongue at work. Why? Because he leaves out of his equation the sovereignty of God. "Now listen...", says James (4:13f), "...you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why you don't even know," he says, "what will happen tomorrow.": This is the fool's attitude, you see. But really your life is in the hands of the sovereign God and every breath you take is by His marvelous pleasure.

Just think, if you lived in Omaha, Nebraska and your wife said to you, "Would you run over to the mall and pick up that package?" And there you are, standing in the mall, waiting to get a package. And suddenly, the last thought you have is hearing a gun shot, and you're standing in the midst of Christ. This isn't the streets of Baghdad. This is a mall in Omaha, Nebraska. This isn't warfare, this is the Christmas season. God is sovereign. A comfort for the wise—And the scariest fact 'under the sun' for those who don't know Him.

Verse 15. The final 'book' on the fool: He gets the simplest things in life wrong. He's basically a lost soul 'under the sun' and makes matters needlessly difficult for himself: Because he's a fool. Notice the metaphor here—'He doesn't even know what street he is on in order to get home'. Because of his needless toil he must go out of his way to seek his destination.

This is a very clear and concise picture of the world that goes on around us every day. One may be very good with numbers or his ability to think. He has a capacity to put his hands in the chest cavity and work on the heart or to stand before an audience in a courtroom and leave the jurors spellbound in his argumentation. But

listen to him about life's philosophy and/or spiritual matters, and you will see what a total dunce he is.

Now, to our last section, verses 16-20: And it is broken down into three separate thoughts. The first (vs 16-17): *The question of the king, good and bad*. Secondly (vs18-19): *Miscellaneous wisdom*. And finally (vs20): *Advice concerning the king*.

Verse 16, "Woe to you, O land, whose king was a servant and whose princes feast in the morning." Very instructive here. This was the very verse that Dan Duncan would always quote whenever there was a discussion of the conflict with Iraq. 'A *servant*' was, in effect, the resume of Saddam Hussein. What an awful man he was: Cruel and murderous—living in fabulous palaces while the land suffered in poverty.

Verse 17: Observe the word "*Blessed*", indicating God's favor comes with a certain type of personality: A David; a Josiah; a man who loves God; a man who fears God; a man who desires to conduct his affairs according to His word. 'A wise man cares very much about the way a country is governed'. Those aren't my words. Those are the words of Derek Kidner, the Cambridge scholar. The point of our 'man with the powerful mind': A wrong leader over a country; that country is in trouble. Just survey history and you'll see that theme over and over and over again. The words, "*noble birth*", presuppose training, discipline, and influence that comes down from the top. Here to this point are David's words, along that line, to Solomon (who we have understood to be the 'man with the powerful mind'). I Kings 2:2&3: Listen to these words from David to his son, 'Be strong. Show yourself a man.' Now that's a father to his son if I ever heard it: "So be strong, show yourself a man, and observe what the LORD your God requires: Walk in His ways and keep His decrees and commands, His laws and requirements...". What this tells us is that we better be very thoughtful come next November: Because the tenor of our Teacher's counsel here is for leadership that is serious and with self-control. The leader at the top must be a leader who sets the proper moral tone; for the King's influence reaches to those who are around him (Notice the princes mentioned in verses 16 and 17).

Edwin Meese and Michael Deaver, both made much of the fact that President Ronald Reagan always wore a coat and tie when he entered the oval office. And he did it for both terms without any exceptions. Their explanation was that as far as President Reagan was concerned, this was the place of serious business, and it was for reverence in the office and of the office that he conducted himself with that form of dress.

In verse 17c, our Teacher warns us about leaders without any sense of dignity or wisdom; for they will be soft and decadent. This past summer, one of our political parties attended a homosexual convention; and all of their candidates showed up. Without exception, every one of them pledged their support and their political power to that group of citizens. Think about that. Think about that in light of the fact that the Word of God, the wisdom literature of God, says: "Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people" (Prov 14:34, NIV).

Finally, regarding verse 17: Let's observe that this verse is a *beatitude* (not a *woe* like verse 16). This is what a right leader brings: May God grant our America, in the years to come, *blessings* under right leadership. But remember this; whatever the case, God is sovereign over the affairs of men.

Now verses 18 and 19: *Miscellaneous wisdom*. Verse 18. 'Due to laziness the roof sags. Due to inactivity, the house leaks.' Verse 19. 'One makes a feast for laughter, wine makes life even merrier, but money is the answer for everything'. From our Teacher, verse 18 warns us about laziness. People who are not taught to work and to produce, end up a disaster. In the Book of Proverbs, lazy people are simply called *fools*. As the people of God, we are to be 'as diligent as ants' (Prov 6:6). Verse 18 seems to be straightforward enough; but verse 19 seems to be leading us into confusion. On the surface it would seem to be promoting eating, drinking, buying, and selling to find real satisfaction in this life: 'This where real enjoyment takes place under the sun'.

Now the translation is difficult because there are any number of meanings that come from these different words. But here I like the explanation of the thorough conservative Kidner, whom I mentioned previously. He says this, "It's not that 'everything has its price'; but rather it's 'every gift has its use'." This is consistent with

what the Teacher's view of life is all about. Ecclesiastes 3:1; "A time for"—everything. The point of verse 19 then is, 'spend time enjoying your life, because it's very short'. Just consider how much time you have already spent. This is a call to enjoy the life that God has given you, and to use it for His purpose and your purpose.

In Luke 16:9, our Lord says regarding money, 'Use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourself that, when it is gone,' (subtly implying that you'll be gone with it), 'you'll be welcomed into eternal dwellings.' (repeating) 'Use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourself so that when it is gone, you'll be welcomed into eternal dwellings.' The word '*gone*' really promotes the life of faith. See, when you invest in the 'kingdom under the sun', you have got nothing to show for your investment. Nothing. But that's what trusting the sovereignty of God means. That's where the rubber meets the road.

Now verse 20 and some final comments concerning the king: "Do not revile the king even in your thoughts, or curse the rich in your bedroom, because a bird of the air may carry your words, and a bird on the wing may report what you say." As we have learned from our Teacher, the king is a man of power. He is to be respected and appreciated for that power. And in our society, 'men of means' in a capitalistic economy carry the same kind of weight; because the rich can do like the king. They can do whatever they want under the law. Here we are advised not to speak against the king anywhere; particularly in private. Notice; "... in your bedroom..." or even so much as 'the secret recesses of your mind': And that's good counsel. Why? Because what you think may come out of your mouth and someone might hear it. Our 'man with the powerful mind' says, 'A bird might carry the message.' Back in the ancient Near East, to speak ill of the king, well, that could cost you your life. So, this is a warning.

Now today, in our modern America, we consider speaking ill of our leaders as open sport: But I think we ought to take this verse seriously. For those of us who follow Christ, let us consider a different way of thinking. And that's why I hold out these two verses from the Gospel of John that I want you to see. The first is John 3:27. The door had been left open for 'the baptizer' to make some critical remark concerning our Lord Himself. After all, you were the one that baptized Him; and now look, His crowds are

bigger than yours. But instead look what the baptizer says, "...A man can receive only what is given to him from heaven." The key words there are *receive* and *given*; implying that people with power and pull are really passive. 'What they have, has been granted to them by Providence'. And isn't that exactly what Christ told Pilate? Now look at your second passage, John 19:11, and isn't that exactly what Christ tells Pilate right here? He says, "...You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above..."

This is the way we need to think about our leaders. This is the way we need to think about the rich and powerful in our day. They have been *given* gifts. And oh, my friends, they will be held accountable for every dollar and for every use of that power.

Well I've gone too long, so let me quickly conclude. The Christian life is not the life invested in negative influence. We are not to be noted for our criticisms; but rather our lives, and particularly our speech which should be that of grace and kindness. We seek to build men up, not tear them down. We don't like to recount people's faults. That's not what we're about. Most importantly, though, we are people that believe in the sovereignty of God. He rules, and He controls all of our lives; *down to the smallest of details*. Now that's what I believe; and I think what the Bible teaches very clearly.

Over 30 years ago I had an opportunity to engage a fellow seminarian in just such a discourse. He didn't share my view regarding God's sovereignty; and he said to me, "Mike, if I took your position, that would make me a robot." And my reply to him was, "Oh, that I were the Lord's robot. Then I would never offend Him, and I would never harm myself." But I'm not His robot. I am flawed, and I am foul. I'm a man who desperately needs forgiveness and grace; and I need it every single day.

Now, one could say, "Well, if you actually believe that, Mike, how do you know that you're going to be saved?" That I can answer: 'I have the greatest assurance and the greatest confidence because my trust is in Christ; in His righteousness and not my own. I know that He is *able* and *fitted*; and I understand His promises to me; immutable promises that will never fail; and promises that will get me home.

Because you see, my God is sovereign, *down to the smallest of details*.

(End of Audio)