

# Qoheleth 5 – The Tragedy of the Fool The Joy of the Wise

John Atkinson

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July 2007

## Title

**Reading: Qoheleth 2:14-19**

## INTRODUCTION

During our series on Qoheleth we looked at the idea of wisdom and the wise. **We saw how** the beginning of wisdom was the “*fear of God*” and that wisdom involved having a perspective of the world that was from “*above the sun*” not limited to “*under the sun*”.

There are several uncomplimentary words which appear approximately **360** times throughout the Old and New Testaments to describe unwise and ungodly people. The words are especially predominant in the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament of which Qoheleth is a part. **Persons who** do not possess godly wisdom are called "fools"; their behavior is described as "folly." The picture which emerges from the biblical material is quite simple: folly is the opposite of wisdom, and a fool is the opposite of a wise person.

Sometimes we learn in a deeper or different way about something when we look at the antithesis – it’s opposite. Today I want to look at “the tragedy of the fool.” We will see what God has to say in the Scriptures about the fool.

Probably the most arresting statement in Scripture about the fool is

## **Psalm 14:1**

The fool has said in his heart, “There is no God.”

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**The three Heb.** words translated “fool” all focus on moral rather than mental deficiencies.<sup>1</sup>

*‘Ev-eel* אַוֵּיל pictures the fool as insolent or rebellious, quick-tempered and reckless.

*Kesil* כֶּסִּיל pictures him as obstinate and unwilling to learn or do what is right.

*nabal* נָבָל, the word used in this verse (**Psalm 14:1**) which portrays a person closed to God and to Biblical morality.

The Psalm should not to be understood in the strict sense in which we use the term atheist, that is, one who simply denies the existence of a God.

You heard about the couple who divorced over irreconcilable religious differences. She was an atheist and he was an agnostic. They couldn't agree which religion not to bring the kids up in.

There is more than one form of denial of God.

1. **There** are some who have denied the existence of God - atheists.

2. **There** are others who, without absolutely denying the Divine existence, deny his providence; that is, they acknowledge a Being of infinite power, etc., but they give him nothing to do, and no world to govern.

3. **There** are others, and they are the majority, who while they profess to acknowledge the existence of God and His providence in the

world, but they deny them in their heart, and live as if they believed there was no God either to punish or reward.

### Fools in the Bible

There are many examples of fools in the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament but I want to focus on one from each to give you an idea of the character of the fool.

The first example is from the Hebrew Scriptures is

#### **Nabal. (נָבָל) 1 Samuel 25 : 1-38**

While in exile during the reign of Saul, David heard that a wealthy farmer called Nabal was shearing his sheep. This was a traditional time of hospitality, and so he sent ten of his men with the request that Nabal should provide David's force with hospitality on a feast-day in return for the protection David had given his shepherds and flocks by his presence in the area.

Nabal, whose aggressive and foolish response matched his name.

(1 Samuel 25:25), When asked for hospitality he replied with insults.

"Who is this David? Who is this son of Jesse? Many servants are breaking away from their masters these days.

Why should I take my bread and water, and the meat I have slaughtered for my shearers, and give it to men coming from who knows where?"

In this case Nabal's foolishness is thoughtless, self-centered, and consequently indifferent to God and His commands.

What a contrast to the wisdom shown by his wife Abigail.

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David and 400 men marched toward his home to teach him some manners. **Qoheleth 4:5** describes this kind of arrogant stupidity; *“The fool folds his hands and ruins himself.”*

When Abigail heard of the messengers' visit she arranged for food and wine to be sent on ahead and went to meet David. This prevented David from committing the crime of blood guilt (murder) upon Nabal. Abigail uses a particular word to describe her husband. The NIV translates it “wicked man” (**1 Samuel 25:25**). The word is בְּלִיַּעַל *Belial*, which means “without profit” or “worthless”. In the New Testament it is found only in **2 Cor 6:15**, where it is used as a name for Satan, the personification of all that is “worthless. On her return Abigail found her husband drunk. The following day Nabal suffered a paralytic stroke on hearing of his wife's action, and he died about 10 days later.

### Jesus and the Fool - Luke 12:13-21

Here was a man who believed he was in control of his life. He mistook surplus for success. More important he substituted success for faithfulness. There are three foolish rich men in the gospels. The Rich Young Man who made a Fool's choice. **Mark 10:17-23**. The Rich Fool (**Lk 12:13-21**), and the Rich man who died a Fool. **Luke 16:19**. These men were all successful on one level but notice that they are all nameless – an indication of the

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meaninglessness of their lives. In the final example even the poor man is named –Lazarus – but these foolish men left no legacy.

What was the Rich Fool's folly?

**Vs 17-19** He was the beginning and end of his life. His own horizon.

He was the object of all his plans. You know what they say about self-made men – they are usually an example of unskilled labour!

He made three fatal mistakes;

He mistook his body for his soul

He mistook himself for God

He mistook time for eternity

"Now look at yourself. You have a brain. It is in one world. Your heart is in another. And your hands often end up involved in something completely foreign to both of them. Wisdom is the unity of mind, heart and body. The mind is the seat of judgement. The heart is the seat of the will and inclination and the body is the instrument through which we express this unity.

When you live a life of mind first and then heart and liver (actions), you are a king over your lower self and are wise. This is a gift of the Holy Spirit and it's called "*self control*". It is gained through ongoing co-operation with the Holy Spirit.

The rabbis teach that the Hebrew word for King (melech – מלך) is an acronym for this truth.

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The hierarchy of holy behaviour is firstly through thought, (using our mind), then emotions and only then can we properly move into action.

**In Hebrew**, the acronym for “moach” (mind), “lev” (heart/emotions), and “kaved” (liver, the symbol of action/behavior) is MeLeCh, King.

By operating in light of this wise progression we achieve the regal identity and dignity of a king.

**Frequently**, we change or reverse the order of the letters.

When your heart rules, and your mind constantly has to save you from your intended actions you become **a Lemech**. A lemech – לִמְךָ (a foolish person), puts his/her emotions ahead of their minds, leading to unnecessary words, but their minds are before their actions so they survive.

**Then there** is **the Kalem** (hopeless or worthless person). Our lusts lead. For example, we desire someone else’s money, or we are lazy and seek to avoid performing a moral duty, we then arouse our heart to love that path and we employ our mind to rationalize and justify misbehaviour.

You say, “He did not need that money anyway, I will put it to better use than he would have,” or “The responsibility will be taken by someone else, I can safely ignore it.”

In these instances our “livers” were really first, followed by the heart and then the mind. The first letters of *Kaved*, *Lev*, *Moach*, (the

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reversed order) spell *Kalem*, which means embarrassment, shame, and death. A life in which lusts rule inevitably ends with the unholy trinity of embarrassment, shame, and death. This is how the fools we have looked at lived.

**The Unity of Mind Heart and Body = Wisdom**

"When a Jewish man puts on tefillin at the beginning of the day, he symbolizes the connection of head, heart and hands with the leather straps - all to work as one, with one intent. And then when he goes out to meet the world, all his actions find harmony in a single coordinated purpose."

No wonder Jesus said that the person who calls his brother a "fool" is himself in danger of hellfire. **Matthew 5:22**. This was serious charge which could be compared to murder.

Elements of wisdom and folly evident in the Hebrew Scriptures were clearly in the mind of Paul when he asked, "has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?" (**1 Cor. 1:20b**). In fact, it is possible that a certain kind of wisdom can actually turn out to be folly.

In **Matthew 7:26**

**But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand.**

**Matt 25:2,3** (foolish virgins)

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**Romans 2:20** (teachers who practice what they teach)

"Folly" is used synonymously with "*experiential wisdom*." Wisdom based only on human intellect and experiences without considering God is folly.

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<sup>1</sup> Cohen, A. 1968 The Psalms. London. Soncino Press.