

Ecclesiastes 9:11–18 | “Don’t Trust Your Calculations”

Preached on August 30, 2026 by Pastor Matt Brown

You can turn in your Bibles this morning to Ecclesiastes 9:11–18, as we continue our study in this book, filled with wisdom. *[pauseeeee]*

Does anyone here feel like you are good at math? *[pauseeee]*

I would say that I was kind of average when it came to math when I was in school—definitely not an expert or whizz, like some. *[pauseee]*

Now when you do math, you have to make calculations.

So if *this* is the math question, then I need to do *this process* to get the answer. *[pauseee]*

Now since I wasn’t super good at math, I often didn’t trust my calculations because I would regularly discover that my calculations were wrong. *[pause]*

Well the passage that we are looking at today shows us that we can’t trust our calculations about life. *[pause]*

Life is not a math problem, where as long as you do the right process, then you’ll always get the same answer.

No, life doesn’t work like that, it’s much more *unpredictable*. *[pauseeee]*

We sometimes act like life is a math problem. *[pause]*

We think, “If I plug in this action right here, then I’ll get this result over there.”

So people imagine that if only they go to college and get good grades, then they’ll get a good-paying job and be set for their career. *[pause]*

They suppose that if they just put in the time and work, then their life will be prosperous, comfortable, and easy. *[pauseeee]*

This is also true for some people when it comes to their faith...

They assume that if they just go to church, read their Bible, pray everyday, then God will bless them with a life free of trials and tribulations. *[pauseee]*

Do you see how we could start to view life as a math problem? *[pauseeee]*

Our world is constantly making the promise that, “If you just do this, you will get that.”

And this is why there are mounds of books on the bookstore shelves promising to give you “the keys to success.” *[pause]*

They say, “These 5 habits will make you wealthy,” or, “Just follow this plan, and you’ll lose 30 pounds by summer.” *[pause]*

It could be things like, “Here is the one secret to a happy marriage,” or, “Do this, and your kids will turn out great.”

But think about what happens to people who trust these keys, secrets, or steps—they often end up disappointed. *[pause]*

They did the key, they did the thing, they established the habit, but it didn’t work how they expected. *[pause]*

Now they think that they just didn’t find the *right* key. *[pause]*

Going back to the math illustration—they think that they simply put in the wrong number, and so now they need to find the right one, *and then* they’ll get the result that they were looking for. *[pause]*

This is why you will find people constantly looking for the next key, the next trick, the next secret.

It’s because they are approaching life like a math problem that they just need to calculate correctly by finding the right numbers that add up to “success.” *[pause]*

But what Solomon shows us in this passage is that...

I. Life is unpredictable, it doesn’t always work how we expect.

Listen as I READ the passage for you. *[READ 11–18]*

Solomon teaches us about how life works, and how it works is that it’s unpredictable. *[pause]*

In verses 11–12, we see this truth explained, as he says that the race is not always to the swift, the battle to the strong, and so on...

Life doesn’t always work how you expect. *[pause]*

Our world is big on science and the scientific method, and so that has influenced us.

So when we think about things, we tend to have a cause-and-effect mindset. *[pause]*

We think, “If I do this, then this will happen,”—I throw the ball up, it comes down.

I take this specific medicine for this problem, and it relieves it. *[pause]*

This is how much of science is done: they observe something that happens repeatedly, and then make a conclusion.

But Solomon dismantles that mindset, for he shows us that life doesn't always work according to set rules. *[pauseeee]*

While we might try to frame things as absolute rules, life is much more unpredictable than that...

The fastest person doesn't always win the race, and it makes me think of the classic fable of the tortoise and the hare. *[pause]*

Likewise in a battle, the strongest isn't always victorious.

We have all seen or heard of the underdog team triumphing over the favorite, who was predicted to win the game. *[pauseeee]*

Bread and riches do not automatically go to the wise and intelligent, either.

All you have to do is to think of the opposite, and you know this is true. *[pause]*

Some of the people who have the least common sense are the wealthiest, most powerful people there are. *[pause]*

They can't seem to put together a coherent sentence or run anything, yet they are wealthy. *[pauseeee]*

Lastly, favor doesn't always go to those with knowledge.

The most popular and famous people aren't those with knowledge, that's for sure. *[pause]*

There are some times where you are wondering, "Wait, why and how did *that* person become so liked and well-known?" *[pause]*

Many are famous for being famous, not famous for being great at something. *[pauseeeee]*

Life doesn't always work according to set rules, but exceptions happen all the time...

That fast person loses, that strong guy is defeated, that wise person is not rewarded, nor is that intelligent person favored. *[pauseeee]*

We expect a certain outcome to happen when situations occur, but it's not always the case. *[pauseeeee]*

These examples also show us that the world doesn't work according to merit. *[pause]*

The hardest working person isn't always rewarded at the workplace.

The brilliant person who comes up with a plan isn't always recognized, but someone else gets the credit. *[pause]*

These types of situations can cause us to get frustrated because we feel the inherent injustice of life in this fallen world.

And something in us thinks, “This isn’t right!” but Solomon reminds us, “This is life, it doesn’t always work the way you expect.” [pauseeee]

Some of you are acting like we are in an idyllic world, but you need to understand that we are not in Eden anymore. [pause]

No longer live in a dream world, but live in light of the world that we are in—life is unpredictable. [pauseeeee]

Our world claims that, “If you just work hard, you’ll get what you’re dreaming of.”

They say that anything is yours, if you put your mind to it.

But listen up: you are NOT the master of your own soul, for you are NOT in ultimate control of your life. [pauseeee]

You could train your hardest to be the fastest or strongest and *still lose*. [pause]

You could read more books than anyone else, take a million classes, and go through hundreds of training sessions and still not be promoted, wealthy, or famous. [pauseee]

Once again, Ecclesiastes is shouting to us: “You are not in control!” [pauseeeee]

To drive this point home, Solomon tells us that “time and chance happen to them all.” [pause]

Remember back in chapter 3 where it told us that there’s a time for everything and it went through various seasons?

Well that’s life: there are various times and seasons, and most of them are out of our control. [pauseeee]

Now the word ‘chance’ here doesn’t imply that the world is completely out of control, for Solomon has consistently shown us that God is in control of life.¹ [pause]

Instead, the word ‘chance’ here is viewing life from *our* viewpoint, not God’s.

It’s a word that highlights circumstances that are unpredicted by us, and so *appear* to have no cause or purpose that we can grasp.² [pauseeee]

¹ Just two examples among many are found in Ecclesiastes 7:14, 9:1.

² Even our English definitions of “chance” can have this meaning. “Something that happens unpredictably without discernible human intention or observable cause.” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/chance>. Accessed Aug. 25, 2026.

We do not control every aspect of life, rather, situations happen *to us*—as Solomon makes clear, “man does not know his time.” *[pauseee]*

No one knows nor controls what will happen to them in the future...

We are like an animal suddenly caught in a trap, for tragedy strikes at the least likely time, and we experience misery. *[pauseeee]*

You don’t know your future...

You could suddenly get cancer, you could experience some disaster and lose everything. *[pause]*

You don’t know how many years you will live upon this earth.

You certainly can’t guarantee what you will experience, step-by-step—life is unpredictable! *[pauseeee]*

As we move on in this passage, we see this truth exemplified in verses 13–15. *[pause]*

Solomon gives a story that encapsulates how life doesn’t work how we expect it to. *[pause]*

First, we see that the battle doesn’t always go to the strong. *[pause]*

Here is this little city up against a great king. *[pause]*

It’s implied that this great king has a great army, for they build up these great siegeworks against the town. *[pauseee]*

Hearing this scenario, one would expect that little city to be easily and utterly defeated. *[pause]*

If there were military experts and analysts in that day, *no one* would have predicted what would eventually happen. *[pause]*

It’s not like this is an evenly matched contest, but the city is miniscule compared to the king and his might.

Yet through the wisdom of a poor man, the town is rescued, and lives to tell the tale. *[pauseeee]*

It’s an unlikely rescue accomplished by an unlikely man. *[pause]*

That story illustrates how the battle doesn’t always go to the bigger and stronger, but notice how else this story exemplifies Solomon’s point. *[pause]*

It’s displayed in how the poor, wise man is treated after he saves the town. *[pause]*

He singlehandedly comes up with a plan that saves the city, and yet no one remembers him!

The very person who led the town to survive is ignored and forgotten. *[pause]*

It's not like he did one small feat among hundreds of bigger ones.

No, for this is probably the most extreme, biggest event in the history of the town, and they disregard the person who saved them. *[pauseee]*

Not to mention, remember that this city has only a few people in it.

It's not like he accidentally got lost in the millions of people there are, but even though it's only a handful of people, they don't remember him. *[pause]*

This is truly astonishing. *[pauseeeee]*

This story demonstrates that not only does the battle not always go to the strong, but favor and recognition don't always go to the wise. *[pause]*

That poor, wise man deserved recognition for what he did, but received *none*. *[pause]*

Once the city was saved, this guy was pushed to the side, forgotten, and disregarded, and this shows that you could work hard, and not get the recognition or promotion you deserve. *[pauseee]*

A person who takes care of their body, eating healthy and working out everyday, could die from a sudden illness.

Life doesn't always work according to set rules, and we are not in control of it. *[pauseee]*

We must get this in our minds, or else we are going to be continually frustrated and downcast by life's curveballs. *[pauseee]*

This unpredictability of life leads us to trust our unchanging God. *[pause]*

Though I don't have the world in my hands, I know whose hands it's in.

And so we are led to look away from ourselves and to the Lord. *[pauseee]*

Do you let the unpredictability of life push you to God or away from Him? *[pause]*

Let's start saying, "Lord, I don't know why this is happening, but I know that You are sovereign, so please help me to trust Your wisdom and power." *[pauseeeee]*

The truth is that God often works wonders through unlikely, unexpected ways. *[pause]*

Who would have assumed that the holy, omnipotent God would stoop so low as to save rebels such as us? *[pause]*

Who would have predicted that God would take on flesh and dwell among us?³

³ A reference to John 1:14.

Who would have guessed that the perfect Son of God would die an excruciating death on the cross in humiliation and shame to accomplish a victory that only He could do? *[pauseeee]*

And who would expect Him to use such lowly people as us in His grand and glorious mission in the world? *[pause]*

Life doesn't always work in the ways that we expect, but that's a good thing because God's ways are so much better than our own. *[pause]*

Left to our own measly wisdom and power, we would ruin everything.

But in God's control and wisdom and power, He works all things together for good,⁴ no matter how confusing they may seem to us. *[pauseeeee]*

So far this morning, we saw that life doesn't always work how we expect, but that's not all that we see in this passage, for we also see that...

II. Wisdom is vital, even if it doesn't bring us what we expect.

When you go on a long journey, there are vital things that you need. *[pause]*

You need some sort of transportation to get you there, you need clothes packed, and things like that. *[pauseeee]*

On a camping trip, you need a tent, food, and other essential items.

Well Solomon shows us that on the journey of life, there is something vital that you will need and it's *wisdom*. *[pauseeee]*

We see this especially in the story of the poor, wise man, who delivered the little city from destruction. *[pause]*

Without wisdom, they would have been doomed, so it was wisdom that made all of the difference. *[pauseeee]*

In verse 16, we are told that "wisdom is better than might," and verse 18 declares that "wisdom is better than weapons of war." *[pauseeee]*

So many people think that they just need more strength or better tools and *that* will be the key to success. *[pause]*

Some are so obsessed with bigger muscles, bigger guns, or some other thing like that, but the Bible is clear: wisdom is better than *all of that*. *[pauseeeee]*

How many people see wisdom as better than those things? *[pause]*

⁴ A reference to Romans 8:28.

Amidst all of the things that you *think* you need, how often do you say, “I need more wisdom”?
[pauseeee]

In this story, it wasn’t the might of the king and his army that won the day, but the wisdom of the poor man. [pauseeee]

Do you see the importance of living by wisdom? [pause]

Do you truly see it as “better”? [pause]

When you ask God for things, is wisdom ever on the list? [pause]

If it’s on the list, how low on the list is it? [pauseeee]

Not only is wisdom better than might, but in verse 17, we are told that, “The words of the wise heard in quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools.” [pauseeee]

Wisdom doesn’t always attract attention, as it’s not always the thing that gets the books deals, or likes, or fame. [pause]

It usually doesn’t get the recognition it deserves.

And this is why some of the wisest people are the relatively *unknown* people, for it’s not as “flashy” as folly. [pauseeee]

It’s quiet compared to the loud opinions of fools that attract everyone’s attention. [pause]

Wisdom is silent, yet powerful, while folly is loud, yet weak. [pauseeee]

Look at social media—it’s the posts that are said in an unwise, brash way that get the attention, while a solid post, written with wisdom, is disregarded. [pauseee]

I’ve seen multiple authors, where it’s like, “How did *they* get a book deal?”

While I see so many others who have such better, wiser, deeper things to say, and they are overlooked. [pauseeee]

Look at our politicians...

If we were honest, we would admit that they aren’t the wisest people that we could have put forward. [pause]

This is because wisdom is quieter, calmer, and not a showy, in-your-face kind of thing. [pauseeee]

The poor, wise man was not remembered and he was despised probably because he wasn’t as appealing to people as a ruler or rich man. [pause]

It's the loud, outgoing, charismatic, rich, popular person with no wisdom, who gets noticed way more often than a quieter person, full of wisdom. *[pauseeee]*

Solomon is reminding us not to be hoodwinked by flash, but to remember that wisdom is better. *[pause]*

Pierce through all of the noise, and perceive the value of wisdom behind it. *[pause]*

Don't discount what's quiet because it's quiet, but see wisdom for what it is: immensely valuable.

But also realize that this value can be easily ruined by one person, for as verse 18 says, "one sinner destroys much good." *[pauseeeee]*

What are you attracted to? Only the loud things, or do you seek what's wise and true? *[pause]*

Let's not join in with what the world values, but let's remember what God values, for he tells us here that 'wisdom is better.' *[pause]*

Do you believe that? *[pauseeeee]*

Realize the value of wisdom and use it, but understand that it doesn't always bring you what you expect. *[pause]*

Like the world not working the way we expect, so wisdom doesn't receive what we expect. *[pauseee]*

The poor, wise man didn't get the recognition he deserved, but was forgotten, as they no longer heeded his wisdom after the crisis was averted. *[pause]*

You would think that they would have appreciated him and looked to him from then on, knowing what he brought to the table, but they didn't care.

To them, he was just some poor guy off the street, as they devalued him and his wisdom. *[pauseeee]*

Know this—using wisdom in this world doesn't always mean that you will be recognized for it. *[pause]*

You may not even get *any* attention at all.

Like that poor, wise man, you may be unappreciated, forgotten, and disregarded, even after doing so much for others. *[pauseee]*

Wisdom doesn't mean that your life situations will all turn out glorious, for people will not always heed it or value it.

But you can also know this: wisdom is 'better' no matter what, according to God. *[pauseeee]*

Don't discard wisdom due to it being undervalued by others, but see its unchanging value.
[pause]

What's most important is what God says about it. [pauseeee]

This passage shows us that life doesn't always work how we expect, nor does wisdom always bring us what we expect, but...

We are responsible for doing what's wise and right, not for controlling what happens when we do.

You can't predict or control what is to come, but that doesn't mean that you are to sit back and do nothing...

God calls us to do what's right and live wisely, even if we can't control the future. [pauseee]

That poor, wise man didn't know for sure if his wisdom would rescue the city, but that didn't stop him from using it. [pause]

He could have thought, "What good is it? It probably won't even work."

Yet he knew that he needed to exercise wisdom, no matter what the outcome would be. [pauseee]

Also, though the poor, wise man didn't get the recognition he deserved, he did what was right, and God knows what he did, and now even we know about it! [pause]

While you can't predict what the results will be when you do what's right and wise, the right thing is always the right thing. [pauseeee]

So at the workplace, do the right, wise thing, even if you don't know what the outcome may be.
[pause]

There may be some negative consequences, as others don't like what you did, but don't let that hinder you from doing what's right. [pauseeee]

When you need to have a hard conversation with a family member, do the right, wise thing, even though you don't know how they will respond. [pause]

They may very well get angry, but wisdom isn't to be avoided, due to the potential response.
[pauseeee]

As a church, we are going to need to stand upon God's Word, and do what's right and wise, even though more and more people look down upon it.

But let's do what's right, even if we lose favor with others. [pauseeee]

Though you do something that God approves, you may very well not get the recognition that you deserve, like that poor, wise man. [pause]

Some people won't remember the good you do.

Some will despise your wisdom and act like *you* are the bad guy, but that doesn't mean that we back down. *[pauseeee]*

You can't control the results of what you do, but don't let that discourage you—do what's right and wise, and leave it in God's hands. *[pauseeeee]*

Jesus Christ always did His Father's will. *[pause]*

He perfectly did what was right and wise, and just look at how He was treated by others. *[pause]*

Many ignored Him, many despised Him, and many did not heed His words.

Yet His right and wise actions were infinitely and eternally valuable, and 'better' than anything, because they secured salvation for us. *[pauseeee]*

Through Him, the One (who to many people) seemed unlikely to save, we have been delivered from sin and death.

And even now, "The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."⁵ *[pauseeeee]*

Don't trust your calculations of life, but trust God's Word, and leave the results to Him.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 1:18.