

## Ecclesiastes 4:13-16

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/eccl/eccl-4/ecclesiastes-413-16/>

*People are eager and appreciative when wise leadership replaces foolish. But they soon take their improved circumstances for granted and wish for additional improvement.*

Solomon tells another story that addresses a subject which we know is close to his heart. In Chapter 2, Solomon referred to the woes of royal succession (see notes on 2:18-23). He certainly had a tough experience with his own succession ([1 Kings 1](#)), which is likely part of what drives his observation. (But apparently he didn't learn his lesson, for God chastised him with a rebellion against him at the end of his reign that ended in a Divided Kingdom ([1 Kings 11](#)). Unfortunately, Solomon didn't seem to take his own advice).

In this story, the realm welcomes as its new ruler—a *poor yet wise lad*. The dire need to replace an *old*, ineffective ruler—*who no longer knows how to receive instruction*—is revealed by the fact that the young replacement came from *prison* to become king, even though he was born *poor*. All *the living under the sun* throng to the side of the *lad* who replaces the king. *There was no end* to the number of people who submitted themselves to this ruler, hoping the replacement king would prove to be of benefit to the realm.

This story is working on a few levels. It is a *lad* vs. an *old* man. The words for each mean youth and elder, respectively. Then, there is the *poor* vs. the *king*. And then the *wise* vs. the *foolish*. And it seems that the attribute of being *wise* rises above the others.

In verse 14, when it says he has come *out of prison*, the phrase used is bayith'acar which literally means “depart from the oppressive dwelling.” The second word, acar, is most often translated as “house.” So, one could read this as a little oppressive house, a *prison*. It could also be taken metaphorically and refer to his poverty.

Either way, the *lad* has risen to the kingship through his wisdom and cunning. And Solomon assesses this as *better* than the doddering king who has lost his ability to receive advice. There is an important message embedded here for good leadership. Good leadership requires excellent listening. Good

leadership means seeking the right answer, rather than insisting on “being right.”

However, subsequent subjects *will not be happy with* the new king either. This likely goes back to the tendency of humans to compare. They love the new king while he is compared to the old and bad king. But eventually they want someone new and better. The second team quarterback is often more popular than the first team quarterback—until he becomes the starter.

The account of the struggle for kingship is a companion with Solomon’s observation of how the powerful tend to use their power to elevate themselves and oppress others. They use their power to serve their own ambition. This tendency makes living in community quite complex. We have a natural bent to mess it up. And, of course this is *vanity* (hebel).

Yet another cycle. This time a cycle of leadership. Once again, from a standpoint of human reason and experience, it is *vanity and striving after wind*.

#### **Biblical Text:**

<sup>13</sup> A poor yet wise lad is better than an old and foolish king who no longer knows *how to receive instruction*.<sup>14</sup> For he has come out of prison to become king, even though he was born poor in his kingdom. <sup>15</sup> I have seen all the living under the sun throng to the side of the second lad who replaces him. <sup>16</sup> There is no end to all the people, to all who were before them, and even the ones who will come later will not be happy with him, for this too is *vanity and striving after wind*.