

Sunday March 7<sup>th</sup>, 2021

Ecclesiastes 10  
“Murphy’s Law?”

I suspect that many of you do not know that Laura’s maiden name is Murphy. If you go to Binbrook Ontario, you are bound to eventually meet a relative of Laura’s. One of the things that is a bit of her family’s lore is the perhaps unfortunate connection they have to “Murphy’s Law”. Murphy’s law for the uninitiated, is “a supposed law of nature, expressed in various humorous popular sayings, to the effect that anything that can go wrong will go wrong.”

This idea of Murphy’s law has led to all kinds of creative adaptations that speak to the application of the law. Here are just a few I found but there are hundreds. **The Law of Mechanical Repair** - After your hands become coated with grease, your nose will begin to itch and you'll have to go to the rest room. **Law of Gravity** - Any tool, when dropped, will roll to the least accessible corner. **Law of Probability** - The probability of being watched is directly proportional to the stupidity of your act. **Law of Random Numbers** - If you dial a wrong number, you never get a busy signal and someone always answers.

**Guy's Variation Rider** - If you change queues or traffic lanes, the one you were in will always move faster than the one you are in now. This also works in supermarkets and shops. **Law of the Bath** - When the body is fully immersed in water, the telephone rings. **Decree of Close Encounters** - The probability of meeting someone you know increases dramatically when you are with someone you don't want to be seen with. This is also the case if you are female and you have gone out with no makeup and wearing your worst clothes and with greasy hair.

**Law of Biomechanics** - The severity of the itch is inversely proportional to the reach. **Law of the Theatre** - At any event, the people whose seats are furthest from the aisle arrive last. **Murphy's Law of Lockers** - If there are only two people in a locker room, they will have adjacent lockers. **Law of Physical Surfaces** - The chances of an open-faced marmalade sandwich landing face down on a floor covering are directly correlated to the newness and cost of the carpet.

**Brown's Law of Physical Appearance** - If the shoe fits, it's ugly. **Wilson's Law of Commercial Marketing Strategy** - As soon as you find a product that you really like, they will stop making it. **Doctors' Law** - If you don't feel well, make an appointment to go to the doctor, by the time you get there you'll feel better. Don't make an appointment and you'll stay sick. **Will and Guy's Law** - If you don't save things on your computer you will, sooner rather than later, delete them.

How many of you found yourselves thinking, that even though these laws are supposed to be funny, they line up fairly closely to our experiences. We all have experienced Murphy’s Law. Ecclesiastes chapter 10 could easily be entitled Murphy’s law. Just look at some of the things the preacher writes about. Verse 8 really stands out. “Whoever digs a pit will fall into it; and whoever breaks through a wall will be bitten by a snake.”

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In reading Ecclesiastes 10, I was immediately drawn to an old saying that the venerable Scottish Poet Robert Burns penned.

“The best laid plans of mice and men” is actually from a Robert Burns poem about a mouse who had his nest destroyed by the poet, and the poet is writing this poem to apologize to the mouse about what he’s done. Burns point is that the destruction of the mouse’s nest, and so much of our activity in life is subject to powers and events we have no control over. Try our best to do the correct or right thing, and it can still blow up in our faces.

Then there is the saying that goes; “If you want to make God laugh tell him your plans.” Along that same line I bet you didn’t know the expression “a fly in the ointment” came from Ecclesiastes, did you? All the elegance, the beauty, the tastiness, the pride of any project can be ruined by something as simple, and small, as a fly. It’s like all those awful jokes about the patron in a restaurant, who calls the waiter over to point out there is a fly in his soup.

One of the best responses I’ve heard to the joke is a waiter who says "Please don't speak so loudly, sir or everyone will want one." What is interesting to me is that this little series of jokes is actually from something very old. The story of **the fly that fell into the soup** while it was cooking, is a very old Greek fable recorded in both verse and prose. In the legend; a fly, falls into a soup pot and the begins to reflect before drowning, "I have eaten, I have drunk, I have taken a bath; if I die, what do I care?"

It is a philosophical fable that could have come right out of Ecclesiastes. The Preacher is like the fly in the soup. He ponders the futility of struggling against the fate that all people are heading for. There is nothing you can do about your impending death, so we might as well eat and enjoy life. Might as well not twist your brain into knots trying to find some pattern to what is obviously the unfairness of life.

The entire book of Job is designed to get us to think about our perceived unfairness we see in life. Job’s three friends come and sit with him to supposedly console him and the trio are fully convinced that there must be something Job has done to offend God and bring about this calamity on his life. At the end of Job, God finally speaks, but never answers the question of why Job suffered. Instead, God points out that Job only sees the tiniest fraction of reality. Job is therefore, a fly in the soup.

All through this series on Ecclesiastes, I have been presenting not only scriptural ideas, but also philosophical ideas. I remind you that Ecclesiastes was almost certainly written as a teaching guide for nobility. As wisdom literature, it was designed to provoke questions and a wrestling with our ideas about life. I have come to understand that the Preacher has, in his writing, actually been describing a particular school of philosophical thought, that years ago at the University of Guelph I laboured to understand when I was an undergrad.

Although I studied philosophy to complete my bachelor’s degree, the reality is I understood very little of what I was reading or writing about. I was so confused most of the time trying to make heads or tails of complex questions. To the end that I actually took to going to the on-campus coffee shop, and buying senior or grad students a coffee so they could explain it to me. The best

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part of my degree program was actually the many naps I got reading this stuff. One of the most unusual schools of thought I ran across at U of Guelph, was “**Existential Nihilism**”.

Existential nihilism is the philosophical theory that life has no intrinsic meaning or value. With respect to the universe, existential nihilism suggests that a single human, or even the entire human species is: insignificant, without purpose, and unlikely to change in the totality of existence. We are all flies in the soup. According to the theory, each individual is an isolated being, born into the universe, and barred from knowing 'why'.

This is also much like the book of Job. The inherent meaninglessness of life is largely explored in the philosophical school of existentialism, where one can potentially create their own subjective 'meaning' or 'purpose'.” (Wikipedia)

Unfortunately, this branch of philosophy leads rather quickly to atheism. Many of those who write about existential nihilism are avowed atheists. In fact, I know of no philosophers or theologians who are Christians, who are also nihilists. So, what would we say about the Preacher? Well, we know he is not an atheist. All through Ecclesiastes, the Preacher attributes sovereignty of all things, and over all things, to God. Our preacher might say that “yes, God is sovereign, but we are not always kept in the loop about his plans.”

So, in the face of the unpredictability of life, the preacher concludes that we must do the best we can. We should avoid laziness as vs. 18 commends. Avoid gossip as vs. 20 says. But most of all avoid being a fool. Running through chapter 10 is the recognition that fools are easy to spot. They are like the fly in the ointment spoiling things and no matter how much wisdom they carry; it is meaningless with the little bit of wisdom they can carry. Also implied here is that the advice the preacher is giving is not rocket science.

Verse ten reminds us that when you are doing a task, even a menial one, the wise person prepares themselves for what lies ahead. In this case, if you are going to chop wood, you had better sharpen your axe, otherwise you will work doubly hard, for less result. I came across an apt illustration several years ago about a young man looking for work and he approach a foreman of a logging crew to inquire about a job.

“Let’s see what you can do. Take down this tree” the foreman said. So, the young man stepped forward and skillfully felled a great tree. The foreman was impressed and said, “You start Monday”. The week rolled by and they on Thursday the foreman approached the young man and said, “You can pick up your paycheck on the way out today”. Startled, the young man asked, “I thought you paid on Fridays.”

“Normally we do,” answered the foreman, “but we’re letting you go today because you have fallen behind. Our daily charts show you have dropped from first place Monday to last place on Wednesday.” “But I’m a hard worker,” the young man replied. “I arrive first, leave last, I’ve even worked through my coffee breaks!” The foreman sensing, he boy’s integrity thought for a moment and then asked, “have you been sharpening your axe?” The young man replied, “Well, no, sir. I’ve been working too hard to take the time.”

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I understand the enthusiasm and joy that comes from undertaking a project or getting onto the things we enjoy but we must be prepared, and tread carefully. Preparation, safety, caution: are all wise things when you undertake a task.

We all know stories of someone who undertook some activity without adequate preparation, and paid a terrible price. I know I've narrowly avoided a disaster or two but having to act quickly because I forgot to prepare. For example: one of my first ventures out fishing at my brother-in-law's resort, I decided to troll my line behind the boat and see what I might catch. I almost immediately hooked into a very nice walleye; my favourite game fish.

As I was bringing it to the boat, I realized I did not bring a net, and no sooner realized this than the fish got off my hook. I was not prepared. I catch so few nice fish that I now make sure that I have not one but two nets in the boat, ready to go. This lack of preparation is reminiscent of the Darwin Awards I mentioned a few weeks back. Wisdom is not the exclusive purview of the rich, or powerful.

The poor and marginalized can also exercise wisdom just as the elites among us can exercise foolishness. Deciding whether someone is wise or foolish cannot be determined by how someone looks, whether they drive the best cars, or who their friends are?

There are countless stories of misjudging the ideas or opportunities people are offering, simply because we judge them and not their wisdom. Most of you will remember the late Steve Jobs and his associate Steve Wozniak who created a personal computer called the Macintosh. Eventually their company became Apple and is not worth billions. What most people don't know is that Jobs and Wozniak offered their invention to someone else first.

Jobs is quoted as saying, "So we went to Atari and said, 'Hey, we've got this amazing thing, even built with some of your parts, and what do you think about funding us? Or we'll just give it to you. We just want to do it. Pay our salary, we'll work for you' And they said, 'No.' So, we went to Hewlett-Packard, and they said, 'Hey, we don't need you. You haven't got through college yet.'" (Bathroom Reader-Plunges into History, p. 74)

History has proven how foolishness, trumped wisdom, in those two companies, by underestimating these two very bright men. Atari by the way no longer exists, as it eventually went bankrupt. The lesson the Preacher is trying to impart to us is that we never know where wisdom is going to come from. "Out of the mouths of babes", the Psalmist wrote in Psalm 8. Even small children can express wisdom from their unique perspective.

God can speak to our hearts from anyone, or even, surprisingly, anything. One of the oddest stories in scripture is in Numbers 22, about a Moabite king named Balak, who was at war with Israel. Balak was losing badly because a prophet named Balaam was feeding the Israelite's God given information on where the Moabite troops were and how to defeat them. Balak decided to turn the tables on Israel and he sent for Balaam.

Balaam, who was an Israelite, was wanted by Balak because he wanted Balaam to go and curse the Israelites. Balak thought if Balaam cursed the Israelites, surely the fortunes of war would turn in Balak's favour. God, though, told Balaam not to go and meet with Balak, but Balaam went

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anyway. On his way to the meeting, a sword wielding angel appears in his path. Appearing not to Balaam, but his donkey. The donkey, therefore, refused to go any further.

Three times the donkey saw the angel, and out of fear refused to travel any further. Because Balaam could not see the angel, three times the beast of burden stopped, Balaam struck his donkey, eventually threatening the donkey's life. Do you know what happened next in the story? The donkey actually spoke, chastising Balaam for beating him. Then Balaam's eyes were opened and he saw the angel and he understood and refused to go to Balak.

Many years ago, according to Jerry White, there was a comic strip entitled "Moon Mullins" which Chuck's father read to him every Sunday morning. One of the main characters in the comic strip was a guy named Willie. In one strip he's slumped in front of the television set with a coffee cup resting on his pot belly as he flicks his cigar ashes into his cup. He says to his wife, "You're awfully quiet this morning, Mamie."

And she says in return, "Willie, I've decided to let your conscience be your guide on your day off." The next scene has Willie surrounded by a lawnmower and an edger and a hoe and a shovel and he is frantically washing the windows and muttering to himself, "Every time I listen to that dumb thing, I end up ruining my relaxin." (The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart, p117) We like to say, "Let your conscience be your guide", but I trust that God is guiding my conscience"

Maybe when we face a challenge or a struggle, God is trying to get our attention. To get us to change course or simply stop whatever we are doing. You see, in the end we are never truly under Murphy's Law, but we are always under God's law of grace.