



[Ecclesiastes 4:13-16](#)

(13) Better a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer knows how to take warning. (14) The youth may have come from prison to the kingship, or he may have been born in poverty within his kingdom. (15) I saw that all who lived and walked under the sun followed the youth, the king's successor. (16) There was no end to all the people who were before them. But those who came later were not pleased with the successor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

New International Version

The story flow is translated in a choppy manner, but it goes like this: A young man born without wealth, who even spent time in prison, unexpectedly rises to power. As a young king, he listens well and rules well, but in old age, he becomes proud, losing his throne to a younger man. By this time, the kingdom was large and powerful, but Solomon forecasts that the new king's fame will not last long. He, too, can expect to lose his office, and the people who formerly cheered for him will cease appreciating him.

Solomon does not dwell on why the original king became hardened to his counselors' advice. Nevertheless, he closed his ears to their advice, and his rule ended in some degree of disgrace. Solomon gives the impression that he thought the original king foolish because he lost the support of those who originally helped him to power and the nation to prosperity.

The overall subjects of these four verses are a subtle warning about [pride](#), and more obviously, the instability of political power and the fickleness of popularity. He makes the point in the last part of verse 16 that the younger man who replaced the original king will in turn discover history repeating itself, and his career will run much the same course as the man who preceded him. He will find that the time will come when the citizens no longer accept him either, and he will be removed from his leadership position and replaced by another.

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Therefore, one must understand that public life contains a significant downside that can render life turbulent. Fame is fleeting, and everybody is expendable. A second, related lesson shows a cause of the instability: The public is fickle. Because of the self-centeredness of human nature, most people operate toward their leaders on the principle that “I believe you were good in the past, but what have you done for *me* lately?”

One of the items Solomon describes here touches to some degree on the frequent changes of leadership that our election system produces. Each administration begins with the citizens hopeful for its success, but by the time the next election occurs, those hopes are largely forgotten. Each election gives the citizenry an opportunity to express their accusations, creating, at times, significant emotional, social, and economic disturbances in the culture, as people vent their dissatisfaction with the current administration. During the next election, the nation endures the same process, but rarely does anything change for the better in its quality of life. Instead, history overwhelmingly shows that matters of quality of life, which involve morality to a significant degree, grow worse. The public quickly forgets that previous elections changed little or nothing.

Solomon may have had Joseph, son of [Jacob](#), and his experiences in Egypt in mind as his illustration. One can draw parallels from elements of Joseph's life in Egypt, during which he spent time in prison (Genesis 41). At Pharaoh's command, he was released from prison and placed in authority over the entire nation ([Genesis 41:37-46](#)). He received great acclaim because of his leadership during the difficult circumstances of the famine. However, the final note of his story is what Solomon writes, “Yet those who come afterward will not rejoice in him.” [Moses](#) states in [Exodus 1:8](#), “Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.” We know this affected the plight of the Israelites, or [God](#) would not have acknowledged it.

— John W. Ritenbaugh

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