

Supplemental Notes:

*The Book
of
Ecclesiastes*

Chuck Missler

Acknowledgments

These speaking notes have been assembled from personal notes and related materials which, in turn, had been compiled from a number of classic and contemporary commentaries and other sources detailed in the bibliography, as well as other articles and publications of Koinonia House. While we have attempted to include relevant endnotes and other references, we apologize for any errors or oversights.

Complete recordings of the sessions, as well as supporting diagrams, maps, etc., are also available in various audiovisual formats from the publisher.

Audio Listing

Ecclesiastes 1

Introduction. “Is Life Worth Living?” Vanity or Victory? The Cycles of Life.

Ecclesiastes 2

The Futility of Wealth. The Certainty of Death. Yet, Enjoy Life!

Ecclesiastes 3 - 4

Look up. Look within. Look ahead. Look around. Enjoy Life!

Ecclesiastes 5 - 6

Don’t Rob the Lord. Don’t Rob Others. Don’t Rob Yourself.

Ecclesiastes 7 - 8

Wisdom Makes Life Better and Helps Us See Life Clearly. The Problem of Evil.

Ecclesiastes 9 - 10

Meeting Your Last Enemy: Death. The Danger of Folly.

Ecclesiastes 11 - 12

Life Is an Adventure: Live by Faith. Life Is a Gift: Enjoy It.

Ecclesiastes: Conclusion

Life Is a School: Learn your Lessons. Life Is a Stewardship: Fear God. Conclusion.

Session 1

The Book of Ecclesiastes Is Life Worth Living?

So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.

Psalm 90:12

Introduction

“Vanity of vanities,” lamented Solomon, “all is vanity!” Solomon liked that word, “vanity”; he used it 38 times in Ecclesiastes as he wrote about life “under the sun.” The word means “emptiness, futility; a vapor that vanishes quickly and leaves nothing behind.” From the human point of view, life (“under the sun”) does appear futile; and it is easy for us to get pessimistic.

The Jewish writer Sholom Aleichem once described life as “a blister on top of a tumor, and a boil on top of that.” You can almost *feel* that definition!

The American poet Carl Sandburg compared life to “an onion—you peel it off one layer at a time, and sometimes you weep.”

And British playwright George Bernard Shaw said that life was “a series of inspired follies.”

Dr. Edward Teller once suggested to me: “A pessimist is one who is right, but doesn’t enjoy it. An optimist is one who thinks that life is uncertain.” Then, he admonished, “It’s our duty to be an optimist, because then we, at least, try!” (It has also been quipped that a pessimist is simply the one who has more information. . .)

Vanity or Victory?

What a relief to turn from these pessimistic views and hear Jesus Christ say,

I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly...

John 10:10

Or to read Paul’s majestic declaration,

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.

1 Cor 15:58

Life is “not in vain” if it is lived according to the will of God, and that is what Solomon teaches in this neglected and often misunderstood book.

Hermeneutic Approach

Ecclesiastes is unlike any other Old Testament book, and has no parallel in other literature of the Biblical world. Ecclesiastes is a philosophical discourse. But it is more. Ecclesiastes makes no claim to bring man a word from God. Instead the writer specifically states that he includes only what he can determine by his own reason, and limits himself to data that is available “under the sun.” (The doctrine of inspiration, however, assures us that this book conveys the message that God intended that we should receive but, as we will see, it does *not* guarantee that all Solomon’s statements are true!)

Different kinds of Biblical literature must be understood within the framework of their purpose and form. Poetic expression, for instance, should not be taken in the same way as a carefully reasoned teaching paragraph in a New Testament epistle. In order to understand any passage of Scripture, it is important to define its purpose and frame of reference. We need to remember this when we approach the Book of Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes is different from any other book of the Bible. While it is included in the category of “wisdom literature” (with Job and Proverbs), it remains unique. “Wisdom literature” is universal in its scope; it does not dwell on the covenant, the election of Israel, redemption, prophecy, sacred history, or the temple. Its focus is on man the creature, his life on earth, and the inscrutability of God and His ways.

Ecclesiastes goes beyond the other wisdom literature to emphasize the fact that human life and human goals, *as ends in themselves and apart from God*, are futile and meaningless.

The Author

Nowhere in this book did the author give his name, but the descriptions he gave of himself and his experiences would indicate that the writer was King Solomon. (There have been critics to attack this assumption, but they have been largely discredited).

He called himself “son of David” and “king in Jerusalem” (1:1, 12), and he claimed to have great wealth and wisdom (2:1–11, and 1:13; Cf. 1 Kgs 4:20–34 and 10:1ff). In response to Solomon’s humble prayer, God promised him both wisdom and wealth (1 Kgs 3:3–15); and He kept His promise.

Twelve times in Ecclesiastes the author mentioned “the king,” and he made frequent references to the problems of “official bureaucracy” (4:1–3; 5:8; 8:11; 10:6–7). Keep in mind that Solomon ruled over a great nation that required a large standing army and extensive government agencies. He carried on many costly building projects and lived in luxury at court (1 Kgs 9:10–28 and 10:1ff; 2 Chr 1:13–17). Somebody had to manage all this national splendor, and somebody had to pay for it!

Solomon solved the problem by ignoring the original boundaries of the twelve tribes of Israel and dividing the nation into twelve “tax districts,” each one managed by an overseer (1 Kgs 4:7–19). In time, the whole system became oppressive and corrupt; after Solomon died, the people begged for relief (2 Chr 10). As you study Ecclesiastes, you will sense this background of exploitation and oppression.

Background

King Solomon began his reign as a humble servant of the Lord, seeking God’s wisdom and help (1 Kgs 3:5–15). But Solomon’s strength was also his weakness. Solomon tended to trust in his wisdom rather than in the guidelines given in God’s Word. As he grew older, his heart turned away from Jehovah to the false gods of the many wives he had taken from foreign lands (1 Kgs 11:1ff). *In fact, many of the things Solomon did that seemed to bring glory to Israel were actually contrary to the Word of God.*

Deuteronomy looked ahead to the future monarchy and said,

...the king moreover, must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself or make the people return to Egypt to get more of them. ... He must not take

many wives, or his heart will be led astray. He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold.

Deut 17:14-20

David had followed these injunctions. He did take several wives, but nothing like Solomon’s multiplication (700 wives and 300 concubines!). These marriages were motivated primarily by politics, not love, as Solomon sought alliances with the nations around Israel. (David had established a policy of cutting the tendons of enemy war horses so they could not be used in battle, and refused to build a chariot-based military establishment.)

But Solomon reasoned that these were prudent policies. He failed to see the danger in each—that foreign wives might entice him from wholly following God, and that by becoming a military superpower he might trust his might rather than God.

No amount of money or authority could stop the silent ripening of divine judgment. The famous Scottish preacher Alexander Whyte said,

...the secret worm...was gnawing all the time in the royal staff upon which Solomon leaned.

The king’s latter years were miserable because God removed His hand of blessing (1 Kgs 11) and maintained Solomon’s throne only because of His promise to David:

Since this is your attitude and you have not kept My covenant and My decrees, which I commanded you, I will most certainly tear the kingdom away from you and give it to one of your subordinates. Nevertheless, for the sake of David your father, I will not do it during your lifetime. I will tear it out of the hand of your son. Yet I will not tear the whole kingdom from him, but will give him one tribe for the sake of David My servant and for the sake of Jerusalem, which I have chosen.

1 Kings 11:9–13

After Solomon’s death, the nation divided and the house of David was left with but two tribes, Judah and Benjamin. It is interesting to contrast the reigns of David and Solomon:

David could be viewed critically: his adultery and murder (and indeed, the sword never left his house). Yet God consistently, throughout the entire Bible, extols David above all others. “He was a man after God’s own heart.”

Solomon would seem to be an ideal—from man’s perspective. However, notice that NT allusions to Solomon were always somewhat derisive: Cf. Mt6:29; 12:42; Lk. 11:31; 12:27.

Solomon probably wrote Proverbs (Prov 1:1; 1 Kgs 4:32) and the Song of Solomon (1:1) during the years he faithfully walked with God;

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight.

Proverbs 3:5–6

He wrote Proverbs from the viewpoint of a wise teacher (1:1–6), and Song of Solomon from the viewpoint of a royal lover (3:7–11); but when he wrote Ecclesiastes, he called himself “the Preacher” (1:1, 2, 12; 7:27; 12:8–10). Near the end of his life, he wrote Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes appears to be the kind of book a person would write near the close of life, reflecting on life’s experiences and the painful lessons learned.

There is no record whether King Solomon ever repented and turned to the Lord, but from his message in Ecclesiastes it would seem that he did.

The Title

The Hebrew word is קהלת *Koheleth* and is the title given to an official speaker who calls an assembly (see 1 Kings 8:1). The Greek word for “assembly” is ἐκκλησία *ekklesia*, and thus the LXX gives us the English title of the book, Ecclesiastes.

But the Preacher did more than call an assembly and give an oration. The word *Koheleth* carries with it the idea of *debating*, not so much with the listeners as with himself. He would present a topic, discuss it from many viewpoints, and then come to a practical conclusion. Ecclesiastes may appear to be a random collection of miscellaneous ideas about a variety of topics, but Solomon assures us that what he wrote was orderly (12:9).

Relevance for Today?

Among other things, Solomon saw
injustice to the poor (4:1–3),
crooked politics (5:8),
incompetent leaders (10:6–7),
guilty people allowed to commit more crime (8:11),

materialism (5:10), and
a desire for “the good old days” (7:10).

It sounds relevant for us, too, doesn’t it?

Solomon has put the key to Ecclesiastes right at the front door:

Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity. What profit hath a man of all his labor which he taketh under the sun?

Eccl 1:2–3

Just in case we missed it, he also put the same key at the back door (12:8). But don’t assume he is cynical or pessimistic: that would miss his real point! Whether he considers his wealth, his works, his wisdom, or his world, Solomon comes to the same sad appraisal: all is “vanity and vexation of spirit” (2:11). However, this is *not his final conclusion*, nor is it the only message that he has for his readers. We will discover more about that later.

Vocabulary

“Vanity of vanities.” We have already noted that Solomon used the word “vanity” 38 times in this book. It is the Hebrew word הֶבֶל *hevel*, meaning “emptiness, futility, vapor.” Whatever disappears quickly, leaves nothing behind and does not satisfy is *hevel*, vanity.

“Under the sun.” (29X) and with it the phrase “under heaven” (1:13; 2:3; 3:1). It defines the outlook of the writer as he looks at life from a *human* perspective and nothing from beyond this space-time universe is considered. He applies his own wisdom and experience to the complex human situation and tries to make some sense out of life.

Solomon wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (12:10–11; 2 Tim 3:16), so what he wrote was what God wanted His people to have. But as we study, we must keep Solomon’s viewpoint in mind: he is examining life “under the sun.”

In his *Unfolding Message of the Bible*, G. Campbell Morgan perfectly summarizes Solomon’s outlook:

This man had been living through all these experiences under the sun, concerned with nothing above the sun...until there came a moment in which

he had seen the whole of life. And there was something over the sun. It is only as a man takes account of that which is over the sun as well as that which is under the sun that things under the sun are seen in their true light.¹

Another related key phrase appears seven times and reflects the same limitation: Solomon said, “I thought in my heart” or “thought to myself” in reaching his conclusions. His methodology was empirical, but the data he gathered was evaluated by the standard of his own intelligence.

Profit. The Hebrew word יִתְרוֹן *yithron*, usually translated “profit,” is used 10X in Ecclesiastes (1:3; 2:11, 13 [excellerth]; 3:9; 5:9, 16; 7:12 [excellency]; 10:10, 11 [better]). It may be translated “surplus, advantage, gain.” The word “profit” is just the opposite of “vanity.” Solomon asks, “In the light of all the puzzles and problems of life, what is the advantage of living? Is there any gain?”

Labor. At least eleven different Hebrew words are translated “labor” in our Authorized Version, and this one is עֲמַל *amal*, used 23 times in Ecclesiastes. It means “to toil to the point of exhaustion and yet experience little or no fulfillment in your work.” It carries with it the ideas of grief, misery, frustration, and weariness. Looked at only “under the sun,” a person’s daily work might seem to be futile and burdensome, but the Christian believer can always claim 1 Corinthians 15:58 and labor gladly in the will of God, knowing his labor is “not in vain in the Lord.”

Man. This is the familiar Hebrew word אָדָם *adam* (Genesis 1:26; 2:7, 19) and refers to man as made from the ground (אֲדָמָה *adamah* in the Hebrew: Genesis 2:7; 3:19). Of course, man is made in the image of God; but he came from the earth and returns to the earth after death. Solomon used the word 49 times as he examined “man under the sun.”

These are the basic words found in the opening verses of Ecclesiastes, but there are a few more key words that we need to consider.

Evil. This word (רָע *ra’*) is used 31 times and in the KJV is also translated “sore” (1:13; 4:8), “hurt” (5:13; 8:9), “mischievous” (10:13), “grievous” (2:17), “adversity” (7:14), “wickedness” (7:15), and “misery” (8:6). It is the opposite of “good” and covers a multitude of things: pain, sorrow, hard circumstances, and distress. It is one of King Solomon’s favorite words for describing life as he sees it “under the sun.”

Joy. In spite of his painful encounters with the world and its problems, Solomon does not recommend either pessimism or cynicism. Rather, he admonishes us to be realistic about life, accept God’s gifts and enjoy them (2:24; 3:12–15, 22; 5:18–20; 8:15; 9:7–10; 11:9–10). After all, God gives to us “richly all things to enjoy” (1 Tim 6:17). Words related to joy (enjoy, rejoice, etc.) are used at least 17 times in Ecclesiastes. Solomon does *not* say, “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you die!” Instead, he advises us to trust God and enjoy what we *do* have rather than complain about what we *don’t* have. Life is short and life is difficult, so make the most of it while you can.

Wisdom. Since it is one of the Old Testament “wisdom books,” Ecclesiastes would have something to say about both wisdom and folly. There are at least 32 references to “fools” and “folly” and at least 54 to “wisdom.” King Solomon was the wisest of men (1 Kgs 4:31) and he applied this wisdom as he sought to understand the purpose of life “under the sun.” The Preacher sought to be a philosopher, but in the end, he had to conclude, “Fear God, and keep His commandments” (12:13).

God. Solomon mentions God 40 times and always uses אֱלֹהִים “*Elohim*” and never יְהוָה “Yehovah” or “YHWH.” *Elohim* (“God” in the English Bible) is the Mighty God, the glorious God of creation who exercises sovereign power. YHWH (“LORD” in the English Bible) is the God of the covenant, the God of revelation who is eternally self-existent and yet graciously relates Himself to sinful man. Since Solomon is dealing exclusively with what he sees “under the sun,” he uses *Elohim*.

Ecclesiastes 1

1] The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

As with other wisdom literature in the Old Testament (e.g., Prov 30:1; 31:1; cf. Prov 1:6; 22:17; 24:23) the author of Ecclesiastes identified this book as his own.

“In Jerusalem”: specified, as contrasted to David, who reigned both in Hebron and Jerusalem; whereas Solomon reigned only in Jerusalem.

“King of Israel in Jerusalem,” implies that he reigned over *Israel and Judah combined*; whereas David, at Hebron, reigned only over *Judah*, and not, until he was settled in Jerusalem, over both Israel and Judah.

2] Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all *is* vanity.

After identifying himself as the author, Solomon declared most emphatically that everything is futile or meaningless.

Five times in this one verse he used הֶבֶל *hevel*, the Hebrew word for “meaningless.” Four of those times are in a twofold repetition of a Hebrew superlative construction, which the KJV renders “Vanity of vanities” and the NIV renders “Meaningless! Meaningless! and Utterly meaningless!” This same key phrase is at the close, Cf. 12:8.

Opening Poem

In support of his theme, Solomon argued first in broad general terms that it is impossible for human efforts to have permanent value. He did this in a poem on the ceaseless rounds of generations (v. 4) and of nature (vv. 5-7), introduced by a rhetorical question (v. 3) and followed by a poetic conclusion (vv. 8-11).

3] What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?

The term “gain” (יִתְרוֹן), unique to the Book Ecclesiastes, occurs 7 times (1:3; 2:11 [“gained”], 13 [“is better”]; 3:9; 5:9 [“profits”], 16; 10:10 [not trans. in the NIV]). “Gain” refers literally to what is left over (a gain or a profit) or metaphorically to what is advantageous or of benefit. Though some things have relative advantage over others (e.g., light over darkness and wisdom over folly; 2:13), Solomon affirmed at the outset that people gain no ultimate advantage or profit from all their toil.

By the phrase “under the sun” he meant “down here on the earth.” He used this phrase repeatedly (29 times) throughout the book, often in connection with man’s toil.

The Cycles of Life

Whenever you use phrases like “life cycle,” or “the wheel of fortune,” or “come full circle,” you are joining Solomon and a host of others in taking a *cyclical* view of life and nature. But this “cyclical” view of life was a burden to Solomon. For if life is only part of a great cycle over which we have no control, is life worth living? If this cycle is repeated season after season, century after century, why are we unable to understand it and explain it?

Solomon pondered these questions as he looked at the cycle of life “under the sun,” and he came to three bleak conclusions:

- 1) nothing is changed (1:4–7);
- 2) nothing is new (1:8–11); and
- 3) nothing is understood (1:12–18).

1. Nothing Is Changed

Solomon approached the problem empirically and examined the “wheel of nature” around him: the earth, the sun, the wind, and the water. (These are suggestive of Aristotle’s classic “elements” of earth, air, fire, and water.) He was struck by the fact that generations of people came and went while the things of nature remained. There was “change” all around, yet nothing really changed. Everything was only part of the “wheel of nature” and contributed to the monotony of life. So, Solomon asked, “Is life worth living?” Solomon presents four pieces of evidence to prove that nothing really changes.

- The earth (v. 4).
- The sun (v. 5).
- The wind (v. 6).
- The sea (v. 7).

So, whether we look at the earth or the heavens, the winds or the waters, we come to the same conclusion: nature does not change. No wonder Solomon cites the monotony of life as his first argument to prove that life is not worth living (1:4–11).

[All of this is true only if you look at life “under the sun” and leave God out of the picture. Then the world becomes a *closed system* that is uniform, predictable, unchangeable. It becomes a world where there are no answers to prayer and no miracles, for nothing can interrupt the cycle of nature. If there is a God in this kind of a world, He cannot act on our behalf because He is imprisoned within the “laws of nature” that cannot be suspended.]

However, God *does* break into nature to do great and wonderful things! He does hear and answer prayer and work on behalf of His people:

- He held the sun in place so Joshua could finish an important battle (Josh 10:6–14).
- He moved the sun back as a sign to King Hezekiah (Isa 38:1–8).
- He opened the Red Sea and the Jordan River for Israel (Ex 14; Josh 3–4).

- He “turned off” the rain for Elijah (1 Kgs 17) and then “turned it on” again (Jas 5:17–18).
- He calmed the wind and the waves for the disciples (Mk 4:35–41), and in the future, will use the forces of nature to bring terror and judgment to people on the earth (see Rev 6ff).

When, by faith, you receive Jesus Christ as your Savior, and God becomes your Heavenly Father, you no longer live in a “closed system” of endless monotonous cycles. You can gladly sing, “This is my Father’s world!” and know that He will meet your every need as you trust Him (Mt 6:25–34). Christians live in this world as pilgrims, not prisoners, and therefore they are joyful and confident.

- 4] *One* generation passeth away, and *another* generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever.

The Hebrew uses participles here—one generation *is always passing* off the scene, and another is always arriving. Man is born merely to be caught up in the tide; and then to pass away. But in contrast, “the earth abideth forever,” a participle again being used to express continuance.

Man, who was made from earth, is short-lived and dies, but the material from which he was fashioned continues to remain. This wearisome repetition is also seen in the “sun” (1:5), the “wind” (1:6), and the “streams” (1:7).

- 5] The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place where he arose.

We move now from the cycle of birth and death on earth to the cycle of day and night in the heavens. “As sure as the world!” is replaced by “As certain as night follows day!” Solomon pictures the sun rising in the east and “panting” (literal translation) its way across the sky in pursuit of the western horizon. But what does it accomplish by this daily journey? To what purpose is all this motion and heat? As far as the heavens are concerned, one day is just like another, and the heavens remain the same.

- 6] The wind goeth toward the south, and turneth about unto the north; it whirleth about continually, and the wind returneth again according to his circuits.

From the visible east-west movement of the sun, Solomon turned to the invisible north-south movement of the wind. He was not giving a lecture on the physics of wind. Rather, he was stating that the wind is in constant motion, following “circuits” that man cannot fully understand or chart.

“The wind blows where it wishes,” our Lord said to Nicodemus, “and you...cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes” (Jn 3:8, NKJV).

Solomon’s point is this: the wind is constantly moving and changing directions, and yet it is still—the wind! We hear it and feel it, and we see what it does, but over the centuries, the wind has not changed its cycles or circuits. Man comes and goes, but the changeless wind goes on forever.

[The very fact that there are established “circuits” for the wind is a relatively recent discovery of contemporary meteorology!]

- 7] All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea *is* not full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again.

From ancient times to about A.D. 1400, the concept of the hydrologic cycle was speculated on by many: The poet Homer (about 1000 B.C.) and the philosophers Thales, Plato, and Aristotle in Greece; Lucretius, Seneca, and Pliny in Rome; et al. Most of these philosophical conjectures were erroneous from a scientific point of view: the Greek philosopher Anaxagoras of Clazomenae (500-428 B.C.) believed the sun lifts water from the sea into the atmosphere, from which it falls as rain and rainwater is then collected in underground reservoirs that feed the river flows.

Solomon described here the “water cycle” that helps to sustain life on our planet. Scientists tell us that, at any given time, 97 percent of all the water on earth is in the oceans; and only .0001 percent is in the atmosphere, available for rain. (That’s enough for about ten days of rain.) The cooperation of the sun and the wind makes possible the evaporation and movement of moisture, and this keeps the water “circulating.”

Job fills in the missing piece of the puzzle:

For he maketh small the drops of water: they pour down rain according to the vapour thereof: Which the clouds do drop and distil upon man abundantly.

Job 36:27, 28

We take these perspectives for granted. However, it was the Greek philosopher Theophrastus (372-287 B.C.), who is credited with correctly describing the hydrologic cycle operating in the atmosphere of evapo-

ration and condensation. And it was the Roman architect and engineer Marcus Vitruvius, who lived about the time of Christ, who, by studying the works of Theophrastus, then extended and conceived the now generally accepted theories of the hydrologic cycle.²

The harmony of the Biblical record, in anticipation of contemporary science, and its complete freedom from prevailing errors, is one of the most astonishing discoveries awaiting the diligent inquirer!

And so Solomon notes that the sea never changes. The rivers and the rains pour water into the seas, but they never “fill up”; the seas remain the same.

From the human point of view, nothing seems more permanent and durable than the planet on which we live. When we say that something is “as sure as the world,” we are echoing Solomon’s confidence in the permanence of planet Earth. With all of its diversity, nature is uniform enough in its operation that we can discover its “laws” and put them to work for us. In fact, it is this “dependability” that is the basis for modern science.

Nature is permanent, but man is transient, a mere pilgrim on earth. His pilgrimage is a brief one, for death finally claims him. At the very beginning of his book, Solomon introduced a topic frequently mentioned in Ecclesiastes: the brevity of life and the certainty of death. Individuals and families come and go, nations and empires rise and fall, but nothing changes, for the world remains the same.

Thomas Carlyle called history “a mighty drama, enacted upon the theater of time, with suns for lamps and eternity for a background.” Solomon would add that the costumes and sets may occasionally change, but the actors and the script remain pretty much the same; and that’s as sure as the world.

2. Nothing Is New

If nothing changes, then it is reasonable to conclude that nothing in this world is new. Yet, let us examine this specious premise:

The technology from Solomon to George Washington: Communication by foot messenger; travel at the speed of horseback, and clothed by an agrarian economy.

Today: We communicate at the speed of light; we travel at the speed of sound; and we design the very molecules that clothe us.

After all, we are surrounded by, *and dependent on*, a multitude of marvels that modern science has provided for us—everything from telephones to pacemakers and miracle drugs. How could anybody who watched Neil Armstrong walk on the moon agree with Solomon that nothing is new under the sun?

In his discussion, Solomon stopped being a scientist and became rather a historian. Let’s follow the steps in his reasoning.

- 8] All things *are* full of labour; man cannot utter *it*: the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.

All things “are full of labour.” The phrase, full of labour, is better translated, “all things are wearisome,” a reference to the fact that all things in life are monotonous and futile, that no matter where one looks in nature, he finds the same tiresome, ceaseless round of activity. It is impossible to put into words the futility of it all. It never brings real satisfaction to the eye or the ear of man.

Man wants something new. Why? Because everything in this world ultimately brings weariness, and people long for something to distract them or deliver them. They are like the Athenians in Paul’s day, spending their time “in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing” (Acts 17:21). But even while they are speaking, seeing, and hearing these “new things,” they are still dissatisfied with life and will do almost anything to find some escape. Of course, the entertainment industry is grateful for this human hunger for novelty and takes advantage of it at great profit.

[In Ecclesiastes 3:11, Solomon will explain why men and women are not satisfied with life: God has put “eternity in their heart” (NIV, NASB, NKJV) and nobody can find peace and satisfaction apart from Him. “Thou hast made us for Thyself,” prayed St. Augustine, “and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.” The eye cannot be satisfied until it sees the hand of God, and the ear cannot be satisfied until it hears the voice of God. We must respond by faith to our Lord’s invitation, “Come unto me...and I will give you rest” (Mt 11:28).]

- 9] The thing that hath been, it *is that* which shall be; and that which is done *is that* which shall be done: and *there is* no new *thing* under the sun.

Dr. H.A. Ironside, the famous pastor of Chicago's Moody church, used to say, "If it's new, it's not true; and if it's true, it's not new."

Whatever is new is simply a recombination of the old. Man cannot "create" anything new because man is the creature, not the Creator. "That which hath been is now, and that which is to be hath already been" (3:15).

Thomas Alva Edison, one of the world's greatest inventors, said that his inventions were only "bringing out the secrets of nature and applying them for the happiness of mankind." [Only God can create new things, and he begins by making sinners "new creatures" when they trust Jesus Christ to save them (2 Cor 5:17). Then they can walk "in newness of life" (Rom 6:4), sing a "new song" (Ps 40:3), and enter into God's presence by a "new and living way" (Heb 10:20). One day, they will enjoy "a new heaven and a new earth" (Rev 21:1) when God says, "Behold, I make all things new" (Rev 21:5).]

10] Is there *any* thing whereof it may be said, See, this *is* new? it hath been already of old time, which was before us.

Why We Think Things are New

11] *There is* no remembrance of former *things*; neither shall there be *any* remembrance of *things* that are to come with *those* that shall come after.

There is no remembrance of former things. This gives the reason for the "nothing new" of verse 10, and probably is best translated "former men." Man is plagued not only by his inability to accomplish anything worth while, but also by the realization that even the memory of his efforts is soon forgotten. This is the complete answer to the question in verse 3, "What profit hath a man?" He gains nothing, not even a memory of his struggle. The world of nature is futile; human activity is also futile.

The answer is simple: we have poor memories and we don't read the minutes of the previous meeting. (See 2:16, 4:16, and 9:5.) It has well been said that the ancients have stolen all of our best ideas, and this is painfully true. Solomon wrote, of course, about the basic principles of life and not about methods. As the familiar couplet puts it:

*Methods are many, principles are few;
Methods always change, principles never do.*

The ancient thinkers knew this. The Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius wrote:

They that come after us will see nothing new, and they who went before us saw nothing more than we have seen.

The only people who really think they have seen something new are those whose experience is limited or whose vision can't penetrate beneath the surface of things. Because something is recent, they think it is new; they mistake novelty for originality.

Next Solomon argued that what is observable in the rounds of nature is also true of all human endeavor. Nothing happens or is done that is really new (v. 9). Things are only *apparently* new (v. 10a) because people do not recollect former actions, events, and accomplishments (vv. 10b-11).

History teaches us that man learns nothing from history.

Georg Wilhelm Friederich Hegel

As several commentators note, Solomon did not intend by this to deny human creativity but to deny the complete *newness* of people's accomplishments.

[For example, man's journey to the moon and the discovery of America, though different, were both explorations of distant places, involving adventure and risk. And the invention of dynamite and of the atomic bomb shared the element of discovering an "explosive." The distinctive, of course, is that we are escalating the scale within the boundaries of our restricted environment!]

Thus what is true in the realm of nature—the constant repetition of previous accomplishments—is, for Solomon, true of the activity of people and is included in the observation that all things produce only indescribable weariness and lack of satisfaction (all things are wearisome, v. 8).

The futility of human achievement will be empirically demonstrated by Solomon in the next several chapters. This long section is united by the repetition of the phrase "meaningless, a chasing after the wind." Apart from its occurrence at 4:4 where it seems to introduce a new section, this formula stands near the end of each of several sections and announces Solomon's verdict on the value of :

human achievement (1:12-15),
human wisdom (1:16-18; 2:12-17),
pleasure-seeking (2:1-11),
and toil or labor (2:18-6:9).

3. Nothing Is Understood

12] I the Preacher was king over Israel in Jerusalem.

The historian now becomes the philosopher as Solomon tells how he went about searching for the answer to the problem that vexed him. As the king of Israel, he had all the resources necessary for “experimenting” with different solutions to see what it was that made life worth living. In the laboratory of life, he experimented with enjoying various physical pleasures (2:1–3), accomplishing great and costly works (2:4–6), and accumulating great possessions (2:7–10) only to discover that all of it was only “vanity and grasping for the wind” (v. 14, NKJV).

But before launching into his experiments, however, Solomon took time to try to think the matter through. He was the wisest of all men and he applied that God-given wisdom to the problem. He devoted his mind wholly to the matter to get to the root of it (“seek”) and to explore it from all sides (“search”).

Life Is Tough, But It Is the Gift of God

13] And I gave my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all *things* that are done under heaven: this sore travail hath God given to the sons of man to be exercised therewith.

He described life as a “sore travail” (“grievous task,” NKJV) that only fatigues you (“may be exercised,” NKJV). Of course, when God first gave life to man, the world had not been cursed because of sin (Gen 3:14ff). Since the Fall of man, “the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs” (Rom 8:22, NKJV); this is one reason why life is so difficult. One day, when our Lord returns, creation will be delivered from this bondage.

[Here I am, created in the image of God and saved by the grace of God, and I complain about even the little annoyances of life. One day, I will be like the Lord Jesus Christ; for that reason alone, I should be singing God’s praises!]

Life Doesn’t Get Easier if You try to run Away from It

14] I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all *is* vanity and vexation of spirit.

All the works that are done “under the sun” never truly satisfy the heart. They are but “vanity and grasping for the wind” (v. 14, NKJV). “Vexation of spirit”: The better translation is striving after wind or feeding upon wind, a reference to the aimlessness and futility of human activity, for one can never lay hold of real satisfaction.

Both the workaholic and the alcoholic are running away from reality and living on substitutes, and one day the bubble of illusion will burst. We only make life harder when we try to escape. Instead of running away from life, we should run to God and let Him make life worth living.

The ultimate door of escape is suicide, and Solomon will have something to say about man’s desire for death. Some specialists claim that 40,000 persons commit suicide in the United States annually, and an estimated 400,000 make the attempt.

But once you have *chosen to live* and have rightly rejected suicide as an option, then you must choose *how* you are going to live. Will it be by faith in yourself and what you can do, or by faith in the Lord?

Not Everything Can Be Changed

15] *That which is* crooked cannot be made straight: and that which is wanting cannot be numbered.

It is likely that Solomon, who was an expert on proverbs (1 Kgs 4:32), quoted a popular saying here in order to make his point. (He makes a similar statement in 7:13.)

If we spend all our time and energy trying to straighten out everything that is twisted, we will have nothing left with which to live our lives! In short, Solomon is saying, “The past can’t always be changed, and it is foolish to fret over what you might have done.” Ken Taylor paraphrases verse 15, “What is wrong cannot be righted; it is water over the dam; and there is no use thinking of what might have been” (TLB).

For of all the sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these: “it might have been!”

John Greenleaf Wittier

God grant be the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference!

Reinhold Niebuhr

We must remind ourselves, that God has the power to straighten out what is twisted and supply what is lacking. He cannot change the past, but He can change the way that the past affects us. For the lost sinner, the past is a heavy anchor that drags him down; but for the child of God, the past—even with its sins and mistakes—is a rudder that guides him forward. Faith makes the difference.

Solomon was looking at these problems from a vantage point “under the sun,” and that’s why they seemed unsolvable. When He was ministering here on earth, our Lord often straightened out that which was twisted and provided that which was lacking (Lk 13:11–17; Mt 12:10–13, 15:29–39; Jn 6:1–13). Man cannot do this by his own wisdom or power, but “with God nothing shall be impossible” (Lk 1:37).

Wisdom and Experience will not Solve every Problem

- 16] I communed with mine own heart, saying, Lo, I am come to great estate, and have gotten more wisdom than all *they* that have been before me in Jerusalem: yea, my heart had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.
- 17] And I gave my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly: I perceived that this also is vexation of spirit.

“To know wisdom”: He sought to determine the standard for what was wise and what was foolish, not merely to see both sides of the question.

- 18] For in much wisdom *is* much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.

Those who go through life living on explanations will always be unhappy for at least two reasons.

- 1) This side of heaven, there are no explanations for some things that happen, and God is not obligated to explain them anyway. (In fact, even if He did, we might not understand them!)
- 2) God has ordained that His people live by *promises* and not by explanations, by faith and not by sight. “Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed” (Jn 20:29).

If anybody was equipped to solve the difficult problems of life and tell us what life was all about, Solomon was that person. He was the wisest

of men, and people came from all over to hear his wisdom (1 Kgs 4:29–34). His wealth was beyond calculation so that he had the resources available to do just about anything he wanted to do. He even experienced “madness and folly” (the absurd, the opposite of wisdom) in his quest for the right answers. Nothing was too hard for him.

But these advantages didn’t enable Solomon to find all the answers he was seeking. In fact, his great wisdom only *added* to his difficulties; for wisdom and knowledge increase sorrow and grief. (“The pessimist is the one with more information.”) People who never ponder the problems of life, who live innocently day after day, never feel the pain of wrestling with God in seeking to understand His ways. The more we seek knowledge and wisdom, the more ignorant we know we are.

All of this goes back to the Garden of Eden and Satan’s offer to Eve that, if she ate of the fruit, she would have the experiential knowledge of good and evil (Gen 3). When Adam and Eve sinned, they did get an experiential knowledge of good and evil; but, since they were alienated from God, this knowledge only *added* to their sorrows. It has been that way with man ever since. Whether it be jet planes, insecticides, or television, each advance in human knowledge and achievement only creates a new set of problems for society.

For some people, life may be monotonous and meaningless, but it doesn’t have to be. For the Christian believer, life is an open door, not a closed circle; there are daily experiences of new blessings from the Lord. True, we can’t explain everything; but life is not built on explanations: it’s built on promises—and we have plenty of promises in God’s Word!

- The scientist tells us that the world is a closed system and nothing is changed.
- The historian tells us that life is a closed book and nothing is new.
- The philosopher tells us that life is a deep problem and nothing is understood.
- But Jesus Christ is “the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:24), and He has miraculously broken into history to bring new life to all who trust Him.

If you are “living in circles,” then turn your life over to Him.

* * *

Study Questions

(For the diligent student.)

- 1) Name the “Wisdom” books of the Bible.
- 2) Explain the word “vanity.” Give current examples.
- 3) Summarize Solomon’s tentative view of life in his opening remarks.
- 4) Contrast the use of *Elohim* and *Yehovah* in the Bible. Why did Solomon use the term he did in this book?

Discussion Questions

(“Where two people agree, one is redundant.”)

- 1) Is everything in the Bible true? How do we tell?
- 2) Why was Solomon so pessimistic? Did he have cause?
- 3) Discuss the role of “profit” in our society. Is it good? Or bad?
- 4) How can we reconcile Solomon’s cry that there is “nothing new under the sun,” with the astonishing technological advances of our times?

Research Projects

(For the truly dedicated.)

- 1) Contrast the reigns of David and Solomon.
- 2) Explore examples of the distinctive use of *Yehovah* and *Elohim* in the Bible.

Preparation for Next Session:

Chapter 2: The Secrets of Pleasure. Read the next several chapters.

Notes:

1. Morgan, p. 229.
2. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Vol 20, p.770.

Session 2 Ecclesiastes 2

Chapter 1:

The monotony of life (1:4–11)
The vanity of wisdom (1:12–18)

Chapter 2:

The futility of wealth (2:1–11)
The certainty of death (2:12–23)
[Yet, Enjoy life (2:24-26)!]

His intellectual faculties having failed to satisfy him, Solomon turned to pleasure as a possible source of complete satisfaction. He provided himself with wine, women, and song, with luxuries and buildings and gardens. And although these brought him pleasures for the moment, they also brought him no enduring satisfaction, for he was always seeking something new to do.

In the great laboratory of life, he experimented with one thing after another, always applying the wisdom that God had given him (vv. 3, 9).

In this chapter, Solomon recorded three stages in his experiments as he searched for a satisfying meaning to life.

1. He Tested Life (2:1–11)

Solomon had the means and the authority to do just about anything his heart desired. He decided to test his own heart to see how he would respond to two very common experiences of life:

enjoyment(1–3)and **employment**(4–11).

Enjoyment (2:1–3)

- 1] I said in mine heart, Go to now, I will prove thee with mirth, therefore enjoy pleasure: and, behold, this also is vanity.
- 2] I said of laughter, It is mad: and of mirth, What doeth it?

- 3] I sought in mine heart to give myself unto wine, yet acquainting mine heart with wisdom; and to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was that good for the sons of men, which they should do under the heaven all the days of their life.

The idea here is not that he went about acquiring more wisdom. The phrase is better translated, *my heart (mind) conducting itself in wisdom*. Solomon did not blindly grasp at life's pleasures, but rather he conducted his search for satisfaction with thoroughness and care.

The Hebrew people rightly believed that God made man to enjoy the blessings of His creation (Ps. 104, and note 1 Tim. 6:17). The harvest season was a joyful time for them as they reaped the blessings of God on their labor. At the conclusion of his book, Solomon admonished his readers to enjoy God's blessings during the years of their youth, before old age arrived and the body began to fall apart (12:1 ff).

(Eight times in Ecclesiastes, Solomon used the Hebrew word meaning "pleasure," so it is obvious that he did not consider God a celestial spoilsport who watched closely to make certain nobody was having a good time!)

Solomon specifically mentioned wine and laughter as two sources of pleasure used in his experiment. It takes very little imagination to see the king in his splendid banquet hall (1 Kgs 10:21), eating choice food (1 Kgs 4:22–23), drinking the very best wine, and watching the most gifted entertainers (2:8b). But when the party was over and King Solomon examined his heart, it was still *dissatisfied* and empty: Pleasure and mirth were only vanity, like so many soap bubbles that quickly burst and left nothing behind. Perhaps many of the king's servants envied Solomon and wished to change places with him, but the king was unhappy. He wrote:

Even in laughter the heart is sorrowful, and the end of that mirth is heaviness.

Proverbs 14:13

Today's world is pleasure-mad. Millions of people will pay almost any amount of money to "buy experiences" and temporarily escape the burdens of life. While there is nothing wrong with innocent fun, the person who builds his or her life only on seeking pleasure is bound to be disappointed in the end. Why? For one thing, pleasure seeking usually becomes a selfish endeavor; and selfishness destroys true joy. People who live for pleasure often exploit others to get what they want,

and they end up with broken relationships as well as empty hearts. People are more important than things and thrills. We are to be channels, not reservoirs; *the greatest joy comes when we share God's pleasures with others*. The most satisfying careers are those involved in providing real help to others.

The Law of Diminishing Returns

If you live for pleasure alone, enjoyment will decrease unless the intensity of the pleasure increases. Then you reach a point of diminishing returns when there is little or no enjoyment at all, only bondage.

For example, the more that people drink, the less enjoyment they get out of it. This means they must have more drinks and stronger drinks in order to have pleasure; the sad result is desire without satisfaction.

Instead of alcohol, substitute drugs, gambling, sex, money, fame, or any other pursuit, and the principle will hold true: when pleasure alone is the center of life, the result will ultimately be disappointment, frustration, and emptiness.

There is a third reason why pleasure alone can never bring satisfaction: it appeals to only part of the person and *ignores the total being*. This is the major difference between shallow "entertainment" and true "enjoyment," for when the whole person is involved, there will be both enjoyment and enrichment. Entertainment has its place, but we must keep in mind that it only helps us to escape life temporarily. True pleasure not only brings delight, but it also builds character by *enriching* the total person.

Employment (2:4–11).

Next, Solomon got involved in all kinds of projects, hoping to discover something that would make life worth living.

- 4] I made me great works; I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards;
- 5] I made me gardens and orchards, and I planted trees in them of all kind of fruits:
- 6] I made me pools of water, to water therewith the wood that bringeth forth trees:

He started with *great works* (4–6), including houses (1 Kgs 7), cities (2 Chr 8:4–6), gardens, vineyards, orchards and forests (1 Kgs 4:33), and the water systems needed to service them.

[Of course, Solomon also supervised the construction of the temple (1 Kings 5ff), one of the greatest buildings of the ancient world.]

- 7] I got me servants and maidens, and had servants born in my house; also I had great possessions of great and small cattle above all that were in Jerusalem before me:

He not only had works, but he also had workers. He might have added that he “drafted” 30,000 Jewish men to work on various projects (1 Kgs 5:13–18). He had two kinds of slaves: those he purchased and those born in his household. His father David had conscripted the strangers in the land (1 Chr 22:2), but Solomon drafted his own people, and the people resented it (see 1 Kgs 12).

- 8] I gathered me also silver and gold, and the peculiar treasure of kings and of the provinces: I gat me men singers and women singers, and the delights of the sons of men, as musical instruments, and that of all sorts.

Solomon accumulated wealth, in flocks and herds (1 Kgs 8:63) as well as gold and silver (1 Kgs 4:21 and 10:1ff). He was the wealthiest and wisest man in the whole world, yet he was unhappy because activity alone does not bring lasting pleasure.

- 9] So I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem: also my wisdom remained with me.
10] And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them, I withheld not my heart from any joy; for my heart rejoiced in all my labour: and this was my portion of all my labour.
11] Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun.

Literally, *Then I turned (to consider)*: he stopped in the midst of his sensuous indulgence to take stock of the results. And he concluded that although a certain amount of good can be gained from pleasure, it yields no permanent gain; it is a vexation of spirit”: or better, they are as useless as “chasing after the wind;” a graphic picture of effort expended with no results gained. Solomon used this phrase nine times, all in the first half of the book (1:14, 17; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6, 16; 6:9).

There can be joy in the doing of great projects, but what happens when the task is finished? Solomon found delight in all his labor (2:10); but afterward, when he considered all his works, he saw only “vanity and vexation of spirit” (2:11).

The journey was a pleasure, but the destination brought frustration.

Success is full of promise until men get it, and then it is a last-year's nest from which the birds have flown.

Henry Ward Beecher

We must not conclude that Solomon was condemning work itself, because work is a blessing from God. Adam had work to do in the Garden even before he sinned.

And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the Garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it.

Genesis 2:15

In the Book of Proverbs, Solomon exalted diligence and condemned laziness; for he knew that any honest employment can be done to the glory of God.

Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.

1 Cor 10:31

But work alone cannot satisfy the human heart, no matter how successful that work may be.

Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? and your labour for that which satisfieth not? hearken diligently unto me, and eat ye that which is good, and let your soul delight itself in fatness.

Isaiah 55:2

This helps us to understand why many achievers are unhappy people.

Achievement: the death of endeavor and the birth of disgust.

Ambrose Bierce

The overachiever is often a person who is trying to escape himself or herself by becoming a workaholic, and this only results in disappointment. When workaholics retire, they often feel useless and sometimes die from decompression and lack of meaningful activity. Solomon tested life, and his heart said, “Vanity!”

2. The Certainty of Death (2:12–23)

He considered his wisdom (2:12–17)

- 12] And I turned myself to behold wisdom, and madness, and folly: for what *can* the man *do* that cometh after the king? *even* that which hath been already done.

“I turned myself to behold” simply means, “I considered things from another viewpoint.”

He made a comparison between wisdom and folly, and admitted that wisdom has certain uses in that it keeps one from unnecessary suffering. But the gain is only temporary, for both the wise man and the fool die and are forgotten. What he did was to look at his wisdom (12–17) and his wealth (18–23) in light of the certainty of death. What good is it to be wise and wealthy if you are going to die and leave everything behind?

The certainty of death is a topic Solomon frequently mentioned in Ecclesiastes (1:4; 2:14–17; 3:18–20; 5:15–16; 6:6; 8:8; 9:2–3, 12; 12:7–8). He could not easily avoid the subject as he looked at life “under the sun,” for death is one of the obvious facts of life. The French essayist wrote:

Philosophy is no other thing than for a man to prepare himself to death.

Montaigne

[*Only that person is prepared to live who is prepared to die.*]

Since both the wise man and the fool will die, what is the value of wisdom? For one thing, we can leave our wisdom for the guidance of the next generation; but how can we be sure they will value it or follow it?

“What can the man do that cometh after the king?” suggests that it is folly for successive generations to make the same “experiments” (and mistakes) when they can learn from their forefathers; but they do it just the same! [Alan Bloom’s experience... *The Closing of the American Mind.*]

There is nothing new under the sun (1:9); they can only repeat what we have already done.

- 13] Then I saw that wisdom excelleth folly, as far as light excelleth darkness.

In spite of the fact that all men must die, wisdom is still of greater value than folly. They are as different as night and day! The wise man sees that death is coming and lives accordingly, while the fool walks in darkness and is caught unprepared.

However, being prepared for death does not necessarily relieve Solomon of his burden about life; for it takes a person a long time to learn how to live, and then life ends. All of this seems so futile.

- 14] The wise man’s eyes *are* in his head; but the fool walketh in darkness: and I myself perceived also that one event happeneth to them all.

The wise man can at least see what lies ahead of him, and can choose the path that will give him the most happiness; while the fool must grope his way, getting his happiness by chance. But the advantage is not for long, for **one fate comes to all** (RSV).

- 15] Then said I in my heart, As it happeneth to the fool, so it happeneth even to me; and why was I then more wise? Then I said in my heart, that this also *is* vanity.
16] For *there is* no remembrance of the wise more than of the fool for ever; seeing that which now *is* in the days to come shall all be forgotten. And how dieth the wise *man?* as the fool.

Both the wise man and the fool die, and both the wise man and the fool are forgotten.

Solomon’s fame has remained (1 Kgs 4:29–34; Mt 6:28–30); but most “famous” people who have died are rarely mentioned in ordinary conversation, although their biographies are found in the encyclopedias. (Although I notice that some of these biographies get smaller from edition to edition!)

- 17] Therefore I hated life; because the work that is wrought under the sun *is* grievous unto me: for all *is* vanity and vexation of spirit.

“I hate life and yet I am afraid to die!” said the French humanist Voltaire; Solomon would agree with him.

Life seemed irrational and futile to Solomon, and yet it was still better than death. We might paraphrase his statement, “Therefore, I was disgusted with life!”

[The healthy Christian believer certainly would not hate life, no matter how difficult the circumstances might be. It is true that some great men have wanted to die, such as Job (Job 3:21–7:15), Moses (Num 11:15), Elijah (1 Kgs 19:4), and Jonah (Jonah 4:3), but we must not take these special instances as examples for us to follow. All of these men finally changed their minds.]

The Christian should “love life,” seeking to put the most into it and getting the most out of it, to the glory of God.

For he that will love life, and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips that they speak no guile:

1 Peter 3:10, quoted from Ps. 34:12ff

We may not enjoy everything in life, or be able to explain everything about life, but we live by promises and not by explanations, and we know that our “labor is not in vain in the Lord:”

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.

1 Cor 15:58

He considered his wealth (2:18–23). Not only was Solomon frustrated with life, but he was dissatisfied with the wealth that was the result of his toil. Of course, Solomon was born wealthy, and great wealth came to him because he was the king. But he was looking at life “under the sun” and speaking for the “common people” who were listening to his discussion. He gave three reasons why he was disgusted with wealth.

First, you can’t keep it .

- 18] Yea, I hated all my labour which I had taken under the sun: because I should leave it unto the man that shall be after me.

He was disgusted not only with life, but also with toil, for he saw that it is useless. The day would come when Solomon would die and leave everything to his successor. Someday he must leave all the results of his diligent work to someone who might be careless, or perhaps to one who had done nothing to deserve them.

A Jewish proverb says, “There are no pockets in shrouds.”

This reminds us of our Lord’s warning in the Parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12:13–21) and Paul’s words in 1 Timothy 6:7–10.

Money is a medium of exchange. Unless it is spent, it can do little or nothing for you. You can’t eat money, but you can use it to buy food. It will not keep you warm, but it will purchase fuel.

A writer in *The Wall Street Journal* called money “an article which may be used as a universal passport to everywhere except heaven, and as a universal provider of everything except happiness.”

However, you and I are *stewards* of our wealth; God is the Provider (Deut 8:18) and the Owner, and we have the privilege of enjoying it and using it for His glory. One day we will have to give an account of what we have done with His generous gifts. While we cannot take wealth with us when we die, we can “send it ahead” as we use it today according to God’s will (Lk 16:1-12).

Second, we can’t protect it.

- 19] And who knoweth whether he shall be a wise *man* or a fool? yet shall he have rule over all my labour wherein I have laboured, and wherein I have shewed myself wise under the sun. This *is* also vanity.

It’s bad enough that we must leave our wealth behind, but even worse that we might leave it to somebody who will waste it! Suppose he or she is a fool and tears down everything we have built up? Solomon didn’t know it at the time, but his son Rehoboam would do that very thing (1 Kgs 11:41–12:24).

- 20] Therefore I went about to cause my heart to despair of all the labour which I took under the sun.

Better translated, *I turned about*. The verb is used of the physical action of turning the body. It speaks here of a traveler who turns around to view the road he has walked. The verb in verses 11 and 12 was different; it speaks of mental turning. Solomon’s response was to walk about and simply resign himself (“despair”) to the facts of life and death. What he saw when he turned caused him to despair of all the labor which he had done, for he felt that the road he had traveled had not been worth the effort and discomfort it required.

As the rustic preacher said, “We all must learn to cooperate with the inevitable!

Third, we can’t enjoy it as we should .

- 21] For there is a man whose labour *is* in wisdom, and in knowledge, and in equity; yet to a man that hath not laboured therein shall he leave it *for* his portion. This also *is* vanity and a great evil.

“A man that hath not laboured therein”: Not only might the heir be a fool, but there was the distressing possibility that the wealth for which he had labored so carefully might fall into the hands of one who, never having worked for it, would not prize it highly and would squander it.

If all we do is think about our wealth and worry about what will happen to it, we will make our lives miserable. We do all the work and then leave the wealth to somebody who didn’t even work for it. It all seems so futile.

22] For what hath man of all his labour, and of the vexation of his heart, wherein he hath laboured under the sun?

“What does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labors under the sun?” (NIV)

23] For all his days *are* sorrows, and his travail grief; yea, his heart taketh not rest in the night. This is also vanity.

At this point, Solomon appears to be very pessimistic, but he doesn’t remain that way very long. In a step of faith he reaches the third stage in his experiment.

3. He Accepted Life (2:24–26)

Enjoy Life While You Can. This is the first of six “conclusions” in Ecclesiastes, each of which emphasizes the importance of accepting life as God’s gift and enjoying it in God’s will (3:12–15, 22; 5:18–20; 8:15; 9:7–10; 11:9–10).

Solomon is *not* advocating “Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die!” That is the philosophy of fatalism not faith. Rather, he is saying, “Thank God for what you do have, and enjoy it to the glory of God.” Paul gave his approval to this attitude when he exhorted us to trust “in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy” (1 Tim. 6:17, NKJV).

24] *There is* nothing better for a man, *than* that he should eat and drink, and *that* he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour. This also I saw, that it *was* from the hand of God.

“...from the hand of God”: The will of God is that man should get his pleasure from eating, drinking, and working. Since it appears to Solomon that under God’s providence this is the highest man can enjoy, he recommends taking life where one finds it.

Solomon made it clear that not only were the blessings from God, but even the *enjoyment of the blessings* was God’s gift to us. He considered it “evil” if a person had all the blessings of life from God but could not enjoy them (6:1–5).

It is easy to see why the Jewish people read Ecclesiastes at the Feast of Tabernacles, for Tabernacles is their great time of thanksgiving and rejoicing for God’s abundant provision of their needs.

25] For who can eat, or who else can hasten *hereunto*, more than I?

“...more than I?” The AV implies the idea, “Who can prove this by experience better than I?” But perhaps the best way to read the verse, in light of context, is with the Greek version, *apart from Him* (that is, God). The translation of v. 25 in the King James Version is somewhat awkward; the New American Standard Bible is better: “For who can eat and who can have enjoyment without Him?”

The farmer who prayed at the table, “Thanks for food and for good digestion” knew what Solomon was writing about.

26] For *God* giveth to a man that *is* good in his sight wisdom, and knowledge, and joy: but to the sinner he giveth travail, to gather and to heap up, that he may give to *him that is* good before God. This also *is* vanity and vexation of spirit.

“To a man that is good in his sight:” Solomon is not giving a moral judgment here, for the word good merely means “one whom God takes a fancy to,” while the sinner is one with whom God is displeased.

The important thing is that we seek to please the Lord and trust Him to meet every need. God wants to give us wisdom, knowledge, and joy; these three gifts enable us to appreciate God’s blessings and take pleasure in them.

It is not enough to possess “things”; we must also possess the kind of character that enables us to use “things” wisely and enjoy them properly.

Not so with the sinner. (The Hebrew word means “to fall short, to miss the mark.”) The sinner may heap up all kinds of riches, but he can never truly enjoy them because he has left God out of his life. In fact, his riches may finally end up going to the righteous. This is not always the case, but God does make it happen that:

...the wealth of the sinner is laid up for the just...

Prov 13:22

(At their exodus from Egypt, the Israelites spoiled their Egyptian masters (Ex 3:22; 12:36), and throughout Jewish history their armies took great spoil in their many conquests. In fact, much of the wealth that went into the temple came from David's military exploits.)

Again, it is "vanity and vexation of spirit" ("meaningless, a chasing after wind," NIV) for the sinner to heap up riches and yet ignore God. Apart from God, there can be no true enjoyment of blessings or enrichment of life. It is good to have the things that money can buy, *provided* you don't lose the things that money can't buy.

This completes the first section of Ecclesiastes—*The Problem Declared*. Solomon has presented four arguments that seem to prove that life is really not worth living:

the monotony of life (1:4–11),
the vanity of wisdom (1:12–18),
the futility of wealth (2:1–11), and
the certainty of death (2:12–23).

His argument appears to be true *if* you look at life "under the sun," that is, only from the human point of view. But when you bring God into the picture, everything changes! (Note that God is not mentioned from 1:14 to 2:23.)

Life and death, wisdom and wealth, are all in His hands; He wants us to enjoy His blessings and please His heart. If we rejoice in the gifts, but forget the Giver, then we are ungrateful idolaters.

In the next eight chapters, Solomon will consider each of these four arguments and *refute them*. At the end of each argument he will say, "Enjoy life and be thankful to God!" In his discussions, he will face honestly the trials and injustices of life, the things that make us cry out, "Why, Lord?"

But Solomon is not a shallow optimist wearing rose-tinted glasses, nor is he a skeptical pessimist wearing blinders. Rather, he takes a balanced view of life and death and helps us look at both from God's eternal perspective.

"Life isn't like a book," says Chuck Colson, founder of Prison Fellowship ministry. "Life isn't logical, or sensible, or orderly. Life is a mess most of the time. And theology must be lived in the midst of that mess."

Solomon will provide us with that theology.

As Warren Wiersbe emphasizes, "It's up to us to live it—and *be satisfied!*"

* * *

Study Questions

(For the diligent student.)

- 1) What are the four principle frustrations ("vanities") that Solomon highlights in the first two chapters?
- 2) What are three factors that contribute to the "Law of Diminishing Returns" regarding pleasure?
- 3) What was Solomon's disappointment with employment and projects as a means of fulfillment?
- 4) What was Solomon's dissatisfactions with wealth?
- 5) How did the certainty of death influence Solomon's admonitions?

Discussion Questions

("Where two people agree, one is redundant.")

- 1) What is Solomon's attitude toward Pleasure?
- 2) Discuss the appropriate role of pleasures in life.
- 3) Discuss the limitations of a career as a means toward significance.

Research Projects

(For the truly dedicated.)

Study the distinctions between heart, mind, soul and spirit. Cf. Deut 6:4,5

Preparation for Next Session:

Read Chapters 3 & 4.

Session 3 Ecclesiastes 3 - 4

Warren Wiersbe suggests that we ponder these quotations from two famous professors:

1) “Why shouldn’t things be largely absurd, futile, and transitory? They are so, and we are so, and they and we go very well together.” That’s from philosopher George Santayana, who taught at Harvard from 1889 to 1912.

2) “There is no reason to suppose that a man’s life has any more meaning than the life of the humblest insect that crawls from one annihilation to another.” That was written by Joseph Wood Krutch, professor of English at Columbia University from 1937 to 1952.

Both of these men were brilliant in their fields, but most of us would not agree with what they wrote. We believe that something grander is involved in human life than mere transitory existence. We are *not* like insects. Surely Dr. Krutch knew that insects have *life cycles*, but men and women have *histories*. One bee is pretty much like another bee, but people are unique and no two stories are the same. You can write *The Life of the Bee*, but you can’t write *The Life of the Man* or *The Life of the Woman*.

If we as individuals are not unique, then we are not important; if we are not important, then life has no meaning. If life has no meaning, life isn’t worth living. We might as well follow the Epicurean philosophy: “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.”

Solomon had presented four arguments proving that life was nothing but grasping broken soap bubbles and chasing after the wind. But he was too wise a man to let his own arguments go unchallenged, so in Ecclesiastes 3–10, he reexamined each of them carefully. His first argument was *the monotony of life* (1:4–11), and he examined it in Ecclesiastes 3:1–5:9. He discovered four factors that must be considered before you can say that life is monotonous and meaningless.

First, he saw something *above* man, a God who was in control of time and who balanced life’s experiences (3:1–8). Then he saw something *within* man that linked him to God—eternity in his heart (3:9–14). Third, Solomon saw something *ahead of* man—the certainty of death (3:15–22). Finally, he saw something *around* man—the problems and burdens of life (4:1–5:9).

So, The Preacher asked his listeners to look up, to look within, to look ahead, and to look around, and to take into consideration time, eternity, death, and suffering. These are the four factors God uses to keep our lives from becoming monotonous and meaningless.

[Incidentally, I have drawn upon over a dozen sources in preparing for these sessions, but I have relied most heavily upon Warren Wiersbe’s *Be Satisfied* as the most incisive and useful. See our Bibliography for a complete listing.]

The monotony of life (3:1–5:9)

1. Look up (3:1–8)
 2. Look within (3:9–14)
 3. Look ahead (3:15–22)
 4. Look around (4:1–5:9)
- Enjoy life* (3:12–15, 22)

Ecclesiastes 3

1. Look Up: God Orders Time (3:1–8)

You don’t have to be a philosopher or a scientist to know that “times and seasons” are a regular part of life, no matter where you live. Were it not for the dependability of God-ordained “natural laws,” both science and daily life would be chaotic, if not impossible.

Not only are there times and seasons in this world, but there is also an overruling providence in our lives. From before our birth to the moment of our death, God is accomplishing His divine purposes, even though we may not always understand what He is doing.

I must confess that Nan and I have really come to enjoy the seasons of the year. (That’s surprising, since we were raised in Southern California, where the climate is relatively uniform throughout the year.) But we really enjoy the poetry and the changes each season brings.

In fourteen statements, Solomon affirmed that God is at work in our individual lives, seeking to accomplish His will. All of these events come from God and they are good *in their time*. The inference is plain: if we cooperate with God's timing, life will not be meaningless. Everything will be "beautiful in His time" (v. 11), even the most difficult experiences of life.

- 1] To every *thing there is* a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:

Solomon followed his general statement with a poem on 14 opposites, each of which happens in its time. The fact that Solomon utilized polar opposites in a multiple of seven and began his list with birth and death is highly significant.

The number seven suggests the idea of completeness and the use of polar opposites—a well-known poetical device called merism—suggests totality (cf. Ps. 139:2-3).

- 2] A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up *that which is* planted;

Birth and Death

Things like abortion, birth control, mercy killing, and surrogate parenthood make it look as though man is in control of birth and death, but Solomon said otherwise.

Psalms 139:13–16 states that God so wove us in the womb that our genetic structure is perfect for the work He has prepared for us to do (Eph 2:10). We may foolishly hasten our death, but we cannot prevent it when our time comes, unless God so wills it (Isa 38). "All the days ordained for me were written in Your book" (Ps 139:16, NIV).

Planting and Plucking

Being an agricultural people, the Jews appreciated the seasons. In fact, their religious calendar was based on the agricultural year (Lev 23). Men may plow and sow, but only God can give the increase (Ps 65:9–13).

"Plucking" may refer either to reaping or to pulling up unproductive plants. A successful farmer knows that nature works for him only if he works with nature. This is also the secret of a successful life: learn God's principles and cooperate with them.

- 3] A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;

Killing and Healing

This probably refers not to war (v. 8) or self-defense, but to the results of sickness and plague in the land (1 Sam 2:6). God permits some to die while others are healed. This does not imply that we should refuse medical aid, for God can use both means and miracles to accomplish His purposes (Cf. Josh 10; Isa 38; et al).

- 4] A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

[The movie *Footloose* celebrated this with the plot about an overly strict preacher and teenagers' desire to express themselves through dance.]

- 5] A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

Casting Away Stones and Gathering Stones

Israel is indeed a rocky land and farmers must clear their fields before they can plow and plant. If you wanted to hurt an enemy, you filled up his field with stones (2 Kgs 3:19, 25).

People also gathered stones for building walls and houses. Stones are neither good nor bad; it all depends on what you do with them. If your enemy fills your land with rocks, don't throw them back. Build something out of them!

[Gathering stones on the walk down the Mt. of Olives...]

Embracing and Refraining from Embracing

People from various ethnic backgrounds openly show their affections, kissing and hugging when they meet and when they part. So, you could paraphrase this, "A time to say hello and a time to say good-bye." This might also refer to the relationship of a husband and wife (Lev 15:19–31; and see 1 Cor 7:5).

- 6] A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away;

"A time to search and a time to give it up for lost" is another translation. The Biblical authority for garage sales! A time to keep and a time to clean

house! [Kenny Rogers' counsel: "A time to hold them; and a time to fold them; a time to walk away; and a time to run!"]

- 7] A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

This probably refers to the Jewish practice of tearing one's garments during a time of grief or repentance (2 Sam 13:31; Ezra 9:5). God expects us to sorrow during bereavement, but not like unbelievers (1 Thess 4:13–18). There comes a time when we must get out the needle and thread and start sewing things up!

- 8] A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.

Are God's people allowed to hate? The fact that the next phrase mentions "war and peace" suggests that Solomon may have had the nation primarily in mind. However, there are some things that even Christians ought to hate (2 Chr 19:2; Ps 97:10; Prov 6:16–19; Rev 2:6, 15).

Life is something like a doctor's prescription: taken alone, the ingredients might kill you; but properly blended, they bring healing. God is sovereignly in control and has a time and a purpose for everything. This is not fatalism, nor does it rob us of freedom or responsibility. It is the wise providence of a loving Father Who does all things well and promises to make everything work for good (Rom 8:28).

2. Look Within: Eternity is in Your Heart (3:9–14)

Solomon adjusted his sights and no longer looked at life *only* "under the sun." He brought God into the picture and this gave him a new perspective.

- 9] What profit hath he that worketh in that wherein he laboureth?

He repeated the opening question of 1:3, "Is all this labor really worth it?" In the light of "new evidence," Solomon gave three answers to the question.

- 10] I have seen the travail, which God hath given to the sons of men to be exercised in it.

First, *man's life is a gift from God.* In view of the travail that we experience from day to day, life may seem like a strange gift, but it is God's gift just the same. We "exercise" ourselves in trying to explain life's

enigmas, but we don't always succeed. If we believingly accept life as a gift, and thank God for it, we will have a better attitude toward the burdens that come our way. If we grudgingly accept life as a burden, then we will miss the gifts that come our way. Outlook helps to determine outcome.

- 11] He hath made every *thing* beautiful in his time: also he hath set the world in their heart, so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end.

Second, *man's life is linked to eternity.* Man was created in the image of God, and was given dominion over creation (Gen 1:26–28); therefore, he is different from the rest of creation.

"the world," עולם *olam*: eternity, long duration, antiquity, futurity, for ever, ever, everlasting, evermore, continuous existence, perpetual, everlasting, indefinite or unending future. Thus, man has "eternity in his heart" and is linked to heaven.

This explains why nobody (including Solomon) can be satisfied with his or her endeavors and achievements, or is able to explain the enigmas of life (1:12–2:11). God accomplishes His purposes in His time, but it will not be until we enter eternity that we will begin to comprehend His total plan.

- 12] I know that *there is* no good in them, but for *a man* to rejoice, and to do good in his life.

Third, *man's life can be enjoyable now* (vv. 12–14). The Preacher hinted at this in 2:24 and was careful to say that this enjoyment of life is the gift of God (see 3:13, 6:2, and 1 Tim 6:17). "The enjoyment of life" is an important theme in Ecclesiastes and is mentioned in each of the four sections of chapters 3–10.

Solomon is encouraging not pagan hedonism, but rather the practice of enjoying God's gifts as the fruit of one's labor, no matter how difficult life may be. Life may appear to be transitory, but whatever God does is forever, so when we live for Him and let Him have His way, life is meaningful and manageable. Instead of complaining about what we don't have, let's enjoy what we do have and thank God for it.

- 13] And also that every man should eat and drink, and enjoy the good of all his labour, *it is* the gift of God.

However, we must note that Solomon is not saying, “Don’t worry—be happy!” He is promoting faith in God, *not* “faith in faith” or “pie in the sky by and by.” Faith is only as good as the *object* of faith, and the greatest object of faith is the Lord. He can be trusted.

How can life be meaningless and monotonous for you when God has made you a part of His eternal plan? You are not an insignificant insect, crawling from one sad annihilation to another. If you have trusted Jesus Christ, you are a child of God being prepared for an eternal home (Jn 14:1–6; 2 Cor 4). The Puritan pastor Thomas Watson said:

Eternity to the godly is a day that has no sunset; eternity to the wicked is a night that has no sunrise.

- 14] I know that, whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever: nothing can be put to it, nor any thing taken from it: and God doeth *it*, that *men* should fear before him.

The proper attitude for us is the fear of the Lord, which is not the cringing of a slave before a cruel master, but the submission of an obedient child to a loving parent. (See 5:7, 7:18, 8:12–13, and 12:13.) If we fear God, we need not fear anything else for He is in control.

3. Look Ahead: Death Is Coming to All (3:15–22)

Solomon already mentioned the certainty of death in 2:12–23, and he will bring the subject up several times before he ends his book (4:8; 5:15–16; 6:6; 8:8; 9:2–3, 12; 12:7–8). Life, death, time, and eternity: these are the fundamental “ingredients” that make up our brief experience in this world, and they must not be ignored.

- 15] That which hath been is now; and that which is to be hath already been; and God requireth that which is past.

Verse 15 helps us recall 1:9–11 and gives us the assurance that God is in control of the “cycle of life.” The past seems to repeat itself so that “there is no new thing under the sun” (1:9), *but God can break into history and do what He pleases*. His many miracles are evidence that the “cycle” is a pattern and not a prison.

God is a Creator that is not only transcendent, but can—and has—entered his creation! His own Son broke into human life through a miraculous birth. He then died on a cross and rose again, thus

conquering the “life-death cycle.” Because Jesus Christ broke the “vicious circle,” He can make us a part of a new creation that overcomes time and death (2 Cor 5:17–21).

Solomon added a new thought here: “...and God will call the past to account” (v. 15, NIV). Scholars have a difficult time agreeing on the translation of this phrase. It literally says “God seeks what hurries along.” Solomon seems to say that time goes by swiftly and gets away from us; but God keeps track of it and will, at the end of time, call into account what we have done with time (12:14). This ties in with verses 16–17 where Solomon witnessed the injustices of his day and wondered why divine judgment was delayed.

- 16] And moreover I saw under the sun the place of judgment, *that* wickedness was there; and the place of righteousness, *that* iniquity was there.
17] I said in mine heart, God shall judge the righteous and the wicked: for *there is* a time there for every purpose and for every work.

“How can God be in control when there is so much evil in our world, with the wicked prospering in their sin and the righteous suffering in their obedience?”

Solomon was not the first to raise that question, nor will he be the last. But once again, he comforted himself with two assurances: God has a time for everything, including judgment (see 8:6, 11); and, God is working out His eternal purposes in and through the deeds of men, even the deeds of the wicked.

- 18] I said in mine heart concerning the estate of the sons of men, that God might manifest them, and that they might see that they themselves are beasts.

Yes, God will judge when history has run its course, *but God is judging now*. In the experiences of life, God is testing man.

The word is “manifest”: *בָּרַר* *barar* “to purify, select, polish, choose, purge, cleanse or make bright, test or prove; to sift, to winnow.”

God is revealing what man is really like; He is sifting man. For, when man leaves God out of his life, he becomes like an animal. (See Ps 32:9; Prov 7; 2 Pet 2:19–20.) He lives like a beast and dies like a beast.

- 19] For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast: for all *is* vanity.

We must be careful not to misinterpret verses 19–20 and draw the erroneous conclusion that there is no difference between men and animals. Solomon merely pointed out that men and beasts have two things in common: they both die and their bodies return to the dust (Gen 2:7; 3:19).

Being made in the image of God, man has a definite advantage over animals as far as life is concerned; but when it comes to the fact of death, man has no special advantage: he, too, turns to dust. Of course, people who are saved through faith in Christ will one day be resurrected to have glorified bodies suitable for the new heavenly home (1 Cor 15:35ff).

- 20] All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again.
21] Who knoweth the spirit of man that goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast that goeth downward to the earth?

The Bible says that death occurs when the spirit leaves the body (James 2:26, and see Gen 35:18 and Lk 8:55). In verse 21, Solomon indicates that men and animals do *not* have the same experience at death, even though they both turn to dust after death. Man’s spirit goes to God (see 12:7), while the spirit of a beast simply ceases to exist. You find a similar contrast expressed in Psalm 49.

[I must apologize to you pet lovers. My daughter Lisa pointed out that there must be horses in heaven, because our Lord comes riding one! I pointed out to her that there must be cats in heaven, too. Where else would they get the strings for the harps?]

- 22] Wherefore I perceive that *there is* nothing better, than that a man should rejoice in his own works; for that *is* his portion: for who shall bring him to see what shall be after him?

Solomon closed this section by reminding us again to accept life from God’s hand and enjoy it while we can. Nobody knows what the future holds; and even if we did know, we can’t return to life after we have died and start to enjoy it again. (See 6:12, 7:14, 9:3.) Knowing that God is in sovereign control of life (3:1), we can submit to Him and be at peace.

Faith learns to live with seeming inconsistencies and absurdities, *for we live by promises and not by explanations*. We can’t explain life, but we must experience life, either enduring it or enjoying it. Solomon calls us to accept life, enjoy it a day at a time, and be satisfied. *We must never be satisfied with ourselves*, but we must be satisfied with what God gives

to us in this life. If we grow in character and godliness, and if we live by faith, then we will be able to say with Paul, “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances” (Phil 4:11, NIV).

Ecclesiastes 4

When Solomon first examined life “under the sun,” his viewpoint was detached and philosophical (1:4–11); his conclusion was that life was meaningless and monotonous. But when he examined the question again, he went to where people really lived and discovered that life was not that simple. As he observed real people in real situations, the king had to deal with some painful facts, like life and death, time and eternity, and the final judgment.

In this chapter, Solomon recorded his observations from visiting four different places and watching several people go through a variety of experiences. His conclusion was that life is *anything but monotonous*, for we have no idea what problems may come to us on any given day. No wonder he wrote, “Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth” (Prov. 27:1, NKJV).

1. In the Courtroom (4:1–3)

- 1] So I returned, and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun: and behold the tears of *such as were* oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors *there was* power; but they had no comforter.

POLITICS, n. “A strife of interests masquerading as a contest of principles. The conduct of public affairs for private advantage.”
— Ambrose Bierce

The nation of Israel had an adequate judicial system (Ex 18:13–27; Deut 17:19), based on divine Law, but the system could be corrupted just like anything else (5:8). Moses warned officials to judge honestly and fairly (Lev 19:15; Deut 1:17), and both the prophet and the psalmist lashed out against social injustice (Ps 82; Isa 56:1; 59:1ff; Amos 1–2). Solomon had been a wise and just king (1 Kgs 3:16–28), but it was impossible for him to guarantee the integrity of every officer in his government.

Solomon went into a courtroom to watch a trial, and there he saw innocent people being oppressed by power-hungry officials. The victims wept, but their tears did no good. Nobody stood with them to

comfort or assist them. The oppressors had all the power and their victims were helpless to protest or ask for redress. [The movie, *The Verdict*, starring Paul Newman against a corrupt court in Boston is one of the examples. *The Insider* is another. Our own experience is also similar...]

The American orator Daniel Webster once called justice “the ligament which holds civilized beings and...nations together.” The “body politic” in Solomon’s day—as ours—had many a torn ligament!

- 2] Wherefore I praised the dead which are already dead more than the living which are yet alive.
- 3] Yea, better *is he* than both they, which hath not yet been, who hath not seen the evil work that is done under the sun.

The king witnessed three tragedies: (1) oppression and exploitation in the halls of justice; (2) pain and sorrow in the lives of innocent people; and (3) unconcern on the part of those who could have brought comfort.

So devastated was Solomon by what he saw that he decided it was better to be dead than to be alive and oppressed. In fact, one was better off if never having been born at all. Then one would never have to see the evil works of sinful man.

Why didn’t Solomon do something about this injustice? After all, he was the king. Alas, even the king couldn’t do a great deal to solve the problem. For once Solomon started to interfere with his government and reorganize things, he would only create new problems and reveal more corruption.

This is not to suggest that we today should despair of cleaning out political corruption. As Christian citizens, we must pray for all in authority (1 Tim 2:1–6) and do what we can to see that just laws are passed and fairly enforced. But it’s doubtful that a huge administrative body like the one in Israel would ever be free of corruption, or that a “crusader” could much improve the situation.

Edward Gibbon, celebrated author of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, said that political corruption was “the most infallible symptom of constitutional liberty.”

Perhaps he was right; for where there is freedom to obey, there is also freedom to disobey. Some of Solomon’s officials decided they were

above the law, and the innocent suffered. In our system of government, we have an allegiance to the rule of law rather than to any individual. [Unless there is a return to accountability, the legacy of the previous administration—arguably the most criminal in recent history—the seeds of our own destruction have been sown...]

2. In the Marketplace (4:4–8)

Disgusted with what he saw in the “halls of justice,” the king went down to the marketplace to watch the various laborers at work. Surely he would not be disappointed there, for honest toil is a gift from God. Even Adam had work to do in the Garden (Gen 2:15), and our Lord was a carpenter when He was here on earth (Mk 6:3). Solomon considered four different kinds of men.

- 4] Again, I considered all travail, and every right work, that for this a man is envied of his neighbour. This *is* also vanity and vexation of spirit.

The industrious man. It was natural for Solomon first to find a laborer who was working hard. For, after all, had not the king extolled the virtues of hard work in the Book of Proverbs? The man was not only busy, but he was skillful in his work and competent in all he did. He had mastered the techniques of his trade.

So much for the worker’s *hands*; what about his *heart*? It was here that Solomon had his next disappointment. The only reason these people perfected their skills and worked hard at their jobs was to compete with others and make more money than their neighbors. The purpose of their work was not to produce beautiful or useful products, or to help people, but to stay ahead of the competition and survive in the battle for bread. God did not put the “selfishness factor” into human labor; it’s the result of sin in the human heart. We covet what others have; we not only want to have those things, but we want to go beyond and have even more. Covetousness, competition, and envy often go together. Competition is not sinful of itself, but when “being first” is more important than being honest, there will be trouble. Traditional rivalry between teams or schools can be a helpful thing, but when rivalry turns into riots, sin has entered the scene.

- 5] The fool foldeth his hands together, and eateth his own flesh.

The idle man (vv. 5–6). Solomon moved from one extreme to the other and began to study a man who had no ambition at all. Perhaps the king

could learn about life by examining the antithesis, the way scientists study cold to better understand heat.

It must have been difficult for him to watch an idle man, because Solomon had no sympathy for lazy people who sat all day with folded hands and did nothing. (See Prov 18:9, 19:15, 24:30–34.) Solomon learned nothing he didn't already know: laziness is a slow comfortable path toward self-destruction. It may be pleasant to sleep late every morning and not have to go to work, but it's unpleasant not to have money to buy the necessities of life.

And as you sleep, poverty creeps upon you like a robber and destroys you; want attacks you in full armor.

Prov 6:10–11, TLB

Paul stated it bluntly:

If any would not work, neither should he eat.

2 Thess 3:10

The industrious man was motivated by competition and caught in the rat race of life. He had no leisure time. The idle man was motivated by pleasure and was headed for ruin. He had no productive time. Is there no middle way between these two extremes? Of course there is.

- 6] Better *is* an handful *with* quietness, than both the hands full *with* travail and vexation of spirit.

The integrated man. Here was a man whose life was balanced: he was productive in his work, but he was also careful to take time for quietness. He did not run the rat race, but neither did he try to run away from the normal responsibilities of life.

A 1989 Harris survey revealed that the amount of leisure time enjoyed by the average American had shrunk 37 percent from 1973. This suggests that fewer people know how to keep life in balance. They are caught in the rat race and don't know how to escape.

Why have both hands full of profit if that profit costs you your peace of mind and possibly your health? Better to have gain in one hand and quietness in the other. When a heart is controlled by envy and rivalry, life becomes one battle after another (James 3:13–4:4, and see Prov 15:16). Paul's instructions about money in 1 Tim 6 is applicable here, especially verse 6, "But godliness with contentment is great gain."

The industrious man thinks that money will bring him peace, but he has no time to enjoy it. The idle man thinks that doing nothing will bring him peace, but his life-style only destroys him. The integrated man enjoys both his labor and the fruit of his labor and balances toil with rest. You can take what you want from life, *but you must pay for it.*

- 7] Then I returned, and I saw vanity under the sun.
8] There is one *alone*, and *there is* not a second; yea, he hath neither child nor brother: yet *is there* no end of all his labour; neither is his eye satisfied with riches; neither *saith he*, For whom do I labour, and bereave my soul of good? This *is* also vanity, yea, it *is* a sore travail.

The independent man. Then Solomon noticed a solitary man, very hard at work, so he went to question him. The king discovered that the man had no relatives or partners to help him in his business, nor did he desire any help. He wanted all the profit for himself. But he was so busy, he had no time to enjoy his profits. And, if he died, he had no family to inherit his wealth. In other words, all his labor was in vain.

The Greek philosopher Socrates said, "The unexamined life is not worth living." But the independent man never stopped long enough to ask himself: "For whom am I working so hard? Why am I robbing myself of the enjoyments of life just to amass more and more money?" The industrious man was at least providing employment for people, and the idle man was enjoying some leisure, but the independent man was helping neither the economy nor himself.

Solomon's conclusion was, "This too is meaningless—a miserable business!" (v. 8, NIV) God wants us to labor, but to labor in the right spirit and for the right reasons. Blessed are the balanced!

3. On the Highway (4:9–12)

Solomon's experience with the independent man caused him to consider the importance of friendship and the value of people doing things together. He may have recalled the Jewish proverb, "A friendless man is like a left hand bereft of the right." Perhaps he watched some pilgrims on the highway and drew the conclusion, "Two are better than one."

[Golden Plover example: This tiny bird migrates from Alaska to Hawaii annually. It gains 70 grams to its normal 130 grams to make the 88 hour journey; but even so, it would crash into the sea after only 72 hours, if it tried to go it alone: By flying *in formation*, it picks up over 20% efficiency, and has 6.8 grams allowance for head winds!]

- 9] Two *are* better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour.

Two are certainly better than one when it comes to *working* because two workers can get more done. Even when they divide the profits, they still get a better return for their efforts than if they had worked alone. Also, it's much easier to do difficult jobs together because one can be an encouragement to the other.

- 10] For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him *that is* alone when he falleth; for *he hath* not another to help him up.

Two are better when it comes to *walking*. Roads and paths in Palestine were not paved or even leveled, and there were many hidden rocks in the fields. It was not uncommon for even the most experienced traveler to stumble and fall, perhaps break a bone, or even fall into a hidden pit (Ex 21:33–34).

How wonderful to have a friend who can help you up (or out). But if this applies to our *physical* falls, how much more does it apply to those times when we stumble in our *spiritual* walk and need restoration (Gal 6: 1–2)? How grateful we should be for Christian friends who help us walk straight.

- 11] Again, if two lie together, then they have heat: but how can one be warm *alone*?

Two are better than one when it comes to *warmth*. Two travelers camping out, or even staying in the courtyard of a public inn, would feel the cold of the night and need one another's warmth for comfort. The only way to be "warm alone" is to carry extra blankets and add to your load.

- 12] And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

Finally, two are better than one when it comes to their *watchcare*, especially at night. "Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves" (v. 12, NIV). It was dangerous for anyone to travel alone, day or night; most people traveled in groups for fellowship and for safety. Even David was grateful for a friend who stepped in and saved the king's life (2 Sam 21:15–17).

Solomon started with the number *one* (v. 8), then moved to *two* (v. 9), and then closed with *three* (v. 12). This is typical of Hebrew literature (Prov 6:16; Amos 1:3, 6, 9, etc.). One cord could be broken easily; two cords would require more strength; but three cords woven together could not

be easily broken. [This is especially true of marriage: the two, with God in the middle!]

4. In the Palace (4:13–16)

This is Solomon's fourth "better" statement (4:3, 6, 9), introducing a story that teaches two truths: the instability of political power and the fickleness of popularity.

The king in the story had at one time heeded his counselors' advice and ruled wisely, but when he got old, he refused to listen to them. The problem was more than pride and senility. He was probably surrounded by a collection of "parasites" who flattered him, isolated him from reality, and took from him all they could get.

This often happens to weak leaders who are more concerned about themselves than about their people. [This can happen in churches, which lack an "objective function" to ensure accountability and correction.]

- 13] Better *is* a poor and a wise child than an old and foolish king, who will no more be admonished.
14] For out of prison he cometh to reign; whereas also *he that is* born in his kingdom becometh poor.

There is a hero in the story, a wise youth who is in prison. Perhaps he was there because he tried to help the king and the king resented it. Or maybe somebody in the court lied about the youth. (That's what happened to Joseph. See Gen 39.) At any rate, the youth got out of prison and became king. Everybody cheered the underdog and rejoiced that the nation at last had wise leadership.

Consider now what this story says: the young man was born poor, but he became rich. The old king was rich but it didn't make him any wiser, so he might just as well have been poor. The young man was in prison, but he got out and took the throne. The old king was imprisoned in his stupidity (and within his circle of sycophants) and lost his throne. So far, the moral of the story is: wealth and position are no guarantee of success, and poverty and seeming failure are no barriers to achievement. The key is wisdom.

- 15] I considered all the living which walk under the sun, with the second child that shall stand up in his stead.

But the story goes on. Apparently the young man got out of prison and took the throne because of popular demand. “I have seen all the living under the sun throning to the side of the second lad who replaces him” [the old king]

v.15, NASB

It looked like the new young king had it made, but alas, his popularity didn't last. “He can become the leader of millions of people, and be very popular. But, then, the younger generation grows up around him and rejects him!”

v.16, TLB

The new crowd deposed the king and appointed somebody else.

- 16] *There is no end of all the people, even of all that have been before them: they also that come after shall not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and vexation of spirit.*

Once again, Solomon drew the same conclusion: it is all “vanity and vexation of spirit” (see vv. 4 and 8). No matter where Solomon went, no matter what aspect of life he studied, he learned an important lesson from the Lord. When he looked up, he saw that God was in control of life and balanced its varied experiences (3:1–8). When he looked within, he saw that man was made for eternity and that God would make all things beautiful in their time (3:9–14). When he looked ahead, he saw the last enemy, death.

Then as he looked around (4:1–16), he understood that life is complex, difficult, and not easy to explain. One thing is sure: no matter where you look, you see trials and problems and people who could use some encouragement.

However, Solomon was not cynical about life. Nowhere does he tell us to get out of the race and retreat to some safe and comfortable corner of the world where nothing can bother us. Life does not stand still. Life comes at us full speed, without warning, and we must stand up and take it and, with God's help, make the most of it.

If this chapter teaches us anything, it is that we need one another because “two are better than one.” Yes, there are some advantages to an independent life, but there are also disadvantages, and we discover them painfully as we get older.

The chapter also emphasizes balance in life. “Better is a handful with quietness than both hands full, together with toil and grasping for the wind”

v.6, NKJV

It's good to have the things that money can buy, provided you don't lose the things that money can't buy. What is it really costing you *in terms of life* to get the things that are important to you? How much of the permanent are you sacrificing to get your hands on the temporary? To quote the words of Jesus:

For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?

Mark 8:36–37

* * *

Study Questions

(For the diligent student.)

- 1) Birth and death are not human accidents; they are divine appointments, for God is in control. Summarize Gen 29:31–30:24; 33:5; Josh 24:3; 1 Sam 1:9–20; Ps 113:9; 127; Jer 1:4–5; Lk 1:5–25; Gal 1:15; 4:4.
- 2) List the four rebuttals to Solomon's previous indictment of the monotony of life.
- 3) How did Solomon find significance in one's profession or career?
- 4) What four kinds of men did Solomon contrast in the marketplace? Explain each.
- 5) How does the certainty of death impact Solomon's frustrations and “vanities?”

Discussion Questions

(“Where two people agree, one is redundant.”)

- 1) Can a career be satisfying? Justify your answers.
- 2) How does Solomon encourage ventures?
- 3) How does the certainty of death impact your plans and future expectations?

4) Will there be animals in heaven? What about our pets?

Research Projects

(For the truly dedicated.)

Define and distinguish the 1st and 2nd deaths in Scripture.

Preparation for Next Session:

Read Chapters 5 & 6: Values.

Session 4 Ecclesiastes 5 & 6

Values

Solomon couldn't discuss "life under the sun" and ignore money! "When your outgo exceeds your income, your upkeep will be your downfall." The wealthy King Solomon knew something about money. Some of this wisdom he shared in the Book of Proverbs, and some he included here in Ecclesiastes.

But he goes beyond the subject of mere money and deals with the *values* of life, the things that really count. After all, there is more than one way to be rich and more than one way to be poor. In this chapter, Solomon issues **three warnings** that relate to the values of life.

1. Don't Rob the Lord (5:1–7)

Solomon had visited the courtroom, the marketplace, the highway, and the palace. Now he paid a visit to the temple, that magnificent building (whose construction he had supervised!)

He watched the worshipers come and go, praising God, praying, sacrificing, and making vows. He noted that many of them were not at all sincere in their worship, *and they left the sacred precincts in worse spiritual condition than when they had entered.*

What was their sin? They were robbing God of the reverence and honor that He deserved. Their acts of worship were perfunctory, insincere, and hypocritical. [Does that pinch any of us?]

1] Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools: for they consider not that they do evil.

"Keep thy foot!" means "Watch your step!" *The worship of God is the highest ministry of the church and must come from devoted hearts and yielded wills.* For God's people to participate in public worship while harboring unconfessed sin is to ask for God's rebuke and judgment (Isa 1:10–20; Amos 5; Ps 50).

Solomon touched on several aspects of worship, the first of which was *the offering of sacrifices* (v. 1). God's people today don't offer animals to the Lord as in Old Testament times, because Jesus Christ has fulfilled all the sacrifices in His death on the cross (Heb 10:1–14). But as the priests of God, believers today offer up spiritual sacrifices through Him:

- our bodies (Rom 12:1–2);
- people won to the Savior (Rom 15:16);
- money (Phil 4:18);
- praise and good works (Heb 13:15–16);
- a broken heart (Ps 51:17); and
- our prayers of faith (Ps 141:1–2).

Sacrifices are not substitutes for obedience, as King Saul found out when he tried to cover up his disobedience with pious promises (1 Sam 15:12–23). Offerings in the hands without obedient faith in the heart become "the sacrifice of fools," because *only a fool thinks he can deceive God.*

2] Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter *any* thing before God: for God *is* in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few.

Then Solomon issued a warning about *careless praying* (vv. 2–3). Prayer is serious business. Like marriage, "it must not be entered into lightly or carelessly, but soberly and in the fear of God."

If you and I were privileged to bring our needs and requests to the White House or to Buckingham Palace, we would prepare our words carefully and exhibit proper behavior. How much more important it is when we come to the throne of Almighty God. Yet, there is so much flippant praying done by people who seem to know nothing about the fear of the Lord.

When you pray, watch out for both *hasty words* and *too many words* (Mt 6:7). The secret of acceptable praying is a prepared heart (Ps 141:1–2), because the mouth speaks what the heart contains (Mt 12:34–37). If we pray only to impress people, we will not get through to God.

In prayer, it is better to have a heart without words, than words without a heart.

John Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*

Have you ever noticed that the secretary to a top executive never goes into his office without a note pad? *She knows that she should always be ready for an assignment!* [Do you pray without a note pad at your elbow?]

- 3] For a dream cometh through the multitude of business; and a fool's voice is known by multitude of words.

Seest thou a man that is hasty in his words? there is more hope of a fool than of him.

Prov 29:20

It is not the length of our prayers, but the strength of our prayers, that makes the difference.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon

- 4] When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for *he hath* no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed.

Solomon's third admonition had to do with *making vows to the Lord* (vv. 4–7). God did not require His people to make vows in order to be accepted by Him, but the opportunity was there for them to express their devotion if they felt led to do so (see Num 30; Deut 23:21–23; Acts 18:18).

Nowhere in the Old Testament do we find the making of vows regarded as a religious duty (Deut 23:22), but the fulfilling of a vow given was considered as a sacred and binding duty (Deut 23:21–23; Judg 11:35; Eccl 5:4; compare Ps 22:25; 66:13; 76:11; 116:18).

A vow was as binding as an oath, and therefore to be kept to the letter; and it was not to be lightly made (Prov 20:25).

A father could veto a daughter's vow, and a husband a wife's. If a husband did not veto a wife's vow, and then caused her to break it, the sin was his and not hers (Num 30).

It seems that vows were considered binding only when actually uttered (Deut 23:23). Persons, including one's self, animals, land and other possessions, could be vowed, but all these could be redeemed with money, which money was to be estimated by the priest, except in the case of a clean animal. In the case of land, houses and unclean animals a fifth part of the estimated value was to be added to make up the redemption money. In the case of land the sum was greater or smaller as the coming year of Jubilee was far off or near (Lev 27, *passim*). Nothing which was by nature holy could be made the object of a vow, e.g. firstlings, tithes, etc. (Lev 27:26,28,30); and, on the other hand, an abomination, e.g. the hire of a prostitute, could not be made the object of a vow (Deut 23:18). In Mal 1:14 the offering of what was of less value than what had been vowed is vigorously condemned.

In the New Testament Jesus refers to vows only to condemn the abuse of them (Mt 15:4–6; Mk 7:10–13). In Acts 18:18 (compare Acts 21:23,24) Paul desires to show his Jewish brethren that he is willing to keep the forms of Jewish piety so long as they do not clash with his Christian conscience (compare 1 Cor 9:21).

- 5] Better *is it* that thou shouldst not vow, than that thou shouldst vow and not pay.
6] Suffer not thy mouth to cause thy flesh to sin; neither say thou before the angel, that it *was* an error: wherefore should God be angry at thy voice, and destroy the work of thine hands?

The second sin was making the vow but delaying to keep it, hoping you could get out of it. When the priest ["angel" = messenger] came to collect the promised sacrifice or gift, the person would say, "Please forget about my vow! It was a mistake!"

God hears what we say and holds us to our promises, unless they were so foolish that He could only dismiss them. Many times in my pastoral ministry I have heard sick people make promises to God as they asked for healing, only to see those promises forgotten when they recovered.

- 7] For in the multitude of dreams and many words *there are* also *divers* vanities: but fear thou God.

People make empty vows because they live in a religious "dream world"; they think that *words* are the same as *deeds* (v. 7). Their worship is not serious, so their words are not dependable. They enjoy the "good feelings" that come when they make their promises to God, but they do

themselves more harm than good. They like to “dream” about fulfilling their vows, but they never get around to doing it. They practice a make-believe religion that neither glorifies God nor builds Christian character.

I will go into thy house with burnt offerings; I will pay thee my vows, which my lips have uttered, and my mouth hath spoken, when I was in trouble.

Psalm 66:13–14

In the Soviet Union they said, “We pretend to work; they pretend to pay us.” One might consider a possible parallel: “We pretend to pray; God pretends to bless us.”

When we rob the Lord of the worship and honor due to Him, we are also robbing ourselves of the spiritual blessings He bestows on those who “worship Him in spirit and in truth” (Jn 4:24).

2. Don't Rob Others (5:8–9)

- 8] If thou seest the oppression of the poor, and violent perverting of judgment and justice in a province, marvel not at the matter: for *he that is* higher than the highest regardeth; and *there be* higher than they.

Solomon leaves the temple and takes us to the city hall where he again witnesses corrupt politicians oppressing the poor (3:16–17; 4:1–3). The government officials violated the law by using their authority to help themselves and not to serve others, a practice condemned by Moses (Lev 19:15; Deut 24:17).

“Marvel not at the matter.” The remarkable thing is that Solomon wrote, “Don't be surprised at this!” He certainly did not approve of their unlawful practices, but he knew too much about the human heart to expect anything different from the complicated bureaucracy in Israel.

The NIV translation of verse 8 gives a vivid description of the situation: “One official is eyed by a higher one, and over them both are others higher still.” Instead of the poor man getting a fair hearing, “the matter is lost in red tape and bureaucracy” (v. 8, TLB), and the various officials pocket the money that should have gone to the innocent poor man.

- 9] Moreover the profit of the earth is for all: the king *himself* is served by the field.

Verse 9 is difficult and major translations do not agree. The general idea seems to be that in spite of corruption in the bureaucracy, it is better to

have organized government, and a king over the land, than to have anarchy. A few dishonest people may profit from corrupt practices, but *everybody* benefits from organized authority. Of course, the ideal is to have a government that is both honest and efficient, but man's heart being what it is, the temptation to dishonest gain is always there.

Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Lord Acton to Bishop Mandell Creighton, 1887

Solomon's investigation bears this out.

3. Don't Rob Yourself (5:10–20)

Solomon had already discussed “the futility of wealth” in 2:1–11, and some of his ideas are repeated here. What he did in this section was demolish several of the myths that people hold about wealth. Because they hold to these illusions, they rob themselves of the blessings God has for them.

- 10] He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with increase: this *is* also vanity.

Wealth brings satisfaction? Some people treat money as though it were a god: They love it, make sacrifices for it, and think that it can do anything. Their minds are filled with thoughts about it; their lives are controlled by getting it and guarding it; and when they have it, they experience a great sense of security.

How often we hear people say, “Well, money may not be the number one thing in life, but it's way ahead of whatever is number two!”

The person who loves money cannot be satisfied no matter how much is in the bank account—because the human heart was made to be satisfied only by God (3:11). Jesus warned:

Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth.

Luke 12:15

First “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.”

For the love of money is the root of all [kinds of] evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.

1 Tim 6:10

- 11] When goods increase, they are increased that eat them: and what good *is there* to the owners thereof, saving the beholding *of them* with their eyes.

There is no escaping the fact that we need a certain amount of money in order to live in this world, but money *of itself* is not the magic “cure-all” for every problem. In fact, an increase in wealth usually creates new problems that we never even knew existed before. Solomon mentioned one: relatives and friends start showing up and enjoying our hospitality. All we can do is watch them eat up our wealth. Or perhaps it is the tax agent who visits us and decides that we owe the government more money.

John Wesley, cofounder of the Methodist Church, told his people, “Make all you can, save all you can, give all you can.” Wesley himself could have been a very wealthy man, but he chose to live simply and give generously. [A friend of mine on Wall Street said, “Chuck, if your biggest problem is a money problem, you’re in great shape!”]

- 12] The sleep of a labouring man *is* sweet, whether he eat little or much: but the abundance of the rich will not suffer him to sleep.

“The man who works hard sleeps well whether he eats little or much, but the rich must worry and suffer insomnia” (v. 12 TLB)

Wealth brings peace of mind? Solomon said that possessing wealth is no guarantee that your nerves will be calm and your sleep sound. According to him, the common laborer sleeps better than the rich man. The suggestion seems to be that the rich man ate too much and was kept awake all night by an upset stomach. But surely Solomon had something greater in mind than that. More than one preacher has mentioned John D. Rockefeller in his sermons as an example of a man whose life was almost ruined by wealth.

At the age of fifty-three, Rockefeller was the world’s only billionaire, earning about a million dollars a week. But he was a sick man who lived on crackers and milk and could not sleep because of worry. When he started giving his money away, his health changed radically and he lived to celebrate his ninety-eighth birthday! Yes, it’s good to have the things that money can buy, provided you don’t lose the things that money can’t buy.

- 13] There is a sore evil *which* I have seen under the sun, *namely*, riches kept for the owners thereof to their hurt.

Wealth provides security? The picture here is of two rich men. One hoarded all his wealth and ruined himself by becoming a miser. The other man made some unsound investments and lost his wealth. He was right back where he started from and had no estate to leave to his son. He spent the rest of his days in the darkness of discouragement and defeat, and he did not enjoy life. Like all of us, he brought nothing into the world at birth, and he took nothing out of the world at death (see Job 1:21; Ps 49:17; 1 Tim 6:7).

- 14] But those riches perish by evil travail: and he begetteth a son, and *there is* nothing in his hand.
15] As he came forth of his mother’s womb, naked shall he return to go as he came, and shall take nothing of his labour, which he may carry away in his hand.
16] And this also *is* a sore evil, *that* in all points as he came, so shall he go: and what profit hath he that hath laboured for the wind?
17] All his days also he eateth in darkness, and *he hath* much sorrow and wrath with his sickness.

This account makes us think of our Lord’s parable about the Rich Fool (Lk 12:13–21). The man thought all his problems were solved when he became rich, but immediately he was faced with providing bigger barns for his wealth. He thought he was safe and secure for years to come, but that night he died! His money provided no security whatsoever. Keep in mind that Solomon was advocating neither poverty nor riches, because both have their problems.

Two things have I required of thee; deny me them not before I die: Remove far from me vanity and lies: give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me: [“convenient”: Heb. “of my allowance”] Lest I be full, and deny thee, and say, Who is the LORD? or lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God in vain.

Prov 30:7–9

- 18] Behold *that* which I have seen: *it is* good and comely *for one* to eat and to drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labour that he taketh under the sun all the days of his life, which God giveth him: for *it is* his portion.

In the closing verses of the chapter, he affirmed once again the importance of accepting our station in life and enjoying the blessings that God gives to us. The thing that is “good and comely” is to labor faithfully, enjoy the good things of life, and accept it all as the gracious gift of God. Solomon gave us this wise counsel before in 2:24, 3:12–13, and 3:22, and he will repeat it at least three more times before he ends his “sermon.”

- 19] Every man also to whom God hath given riches and wealth, and hath given him power to eat thereof, and to take his portion, and to rejoice in his labour; this *is* the gift of God.

There are three ways to get wealth: we can work for it, we can steal it, or we can receive it as a gift (see Eph 4:28). Solomon saw the blessings of life as God's gift to those who work and who accept that work as the favor of God.

“To enjoy your work and to accept your lot in life—that is indeed a gift from God” (v. 19 TLB)

- 20] For he shall not much remember the days of his life; because God answereth *him* in the joy of his heart.

Solomon added another important thought: the ability to *enjoy* life's blessings is *also* a gift from God. Solomon will expand on this thought in the next chapter and point out the unhappiness of people who possess wealth but are not able to enjoy it. We thank God for food, but we should also thank Him for healthy taste buds and a digestive system that functions correctly. [I am continually astonished at the incredible intricacy of our digestive system and its harmony with nature around us. This is a system design challenge far exceeding any that man has attempted to simulate.]

Verse 20 may mean that the person who rejoices in God's daily blessings will never have regrets. “The person who does that will not need to look back with sorrow on his past, for God gives him joy” (v. 20, TLB).

The time to start storing up happy memories is *now*. “So teach us to number our nanoseconds [days], that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom” (Ps 90:12, Missler paraphrase)

People who are thankful to God “will not dwell overmuch upon the passing years,” as the *New English Bible* translates verse 20. They will take each day as it comes and use it to serve the Lord. In chapter 6, Solomon will conclude his discussion of “the futility of wealth.”

He could have chosen as his text:

But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.

Matthew 6:33

The important thing is that we love the Lord, accept the lot He assigns us, and enjoy the blessings He graciously bestows. If we focus more on the gifts than on the Giver, we are guilty of idolatry. If we accept His gifts, but complain about them, we are guilty of ingratitude. If we hoard His gifts and will not share them with others, we are guilty of indulgence.

But if we yield to His will and use what He gives us for His glory, then we can enjoy life and be satisfied.

Ecclesiastes 6

Is life a dead-end street? Sometimes it seems to be, especially when we don't reach our goals or when we reach our goals but don't feel fulfilled in our achievement. More than one person in the Bible became so discouraged with life that he either wanted to die or wished he had never been born. This includes:

Moses (Num 11:15),
Elijah (1 Kgs 19:4),
Job (3:21; 7:15),
Jeremiah (8:3; 15:10), and
Jonah (4:3).

Even the great apostle Paul despaired of life during a particularly tough time in his life (2 Cor 1:8–11). Perhaps the basic problem is that life confronts us with too many mysteries we can't fathom and too many puzzles we can't solve. For life to be truly satisfying, it has to make sense. When it doesn't make sense, we get frustrated. If people can't see a purpose in life, especially when they go through deep suffering, they start to question God and even wonder if life is worthwhile.

In Ecclesiastes 6, Solomon discussed three of life's mysteries:
riches without enjoyment (1–6),
labor without satisfaction (7–9), and
questions without answers (10–12).

1. Riches Without Enjoyment (6:1–6)

- 1] There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, and it *is* common among men:
- 2] A man to whom God hath given riches, wealth, and honour, so that he wanteth nothing for his soul of all that he desireth, yet God giveth him not power to eat thereof, but a stranger eateth it: this *is* vanity, and it *is* an evil disease.

What a seeming tragedy it is to have all the resources for a satisfying life and yet not be able to enjoy them for one reason or another. More than one person has worked hard and looked forward to a comfortable retirement only to have a heart attack and become either an invalid or a statistic. Or perhaps the peace of retirement is shattered by a crisis in the family that begins to drain both money and strength. Why do bad things happen to good people?

Solomon mentioned this subject in 5:19 and hinted at it in 3:13. To him, it was a basic principle that nobody can truly enjoy the gifts of God apart from the God who gives the gifts. To enjoy the gifts without the Giver is idolatry, and this can never satisfy the human heart. Enjoyment *without* God is merely entertainment, and it doesn't satisfy. But enjoyment *with* God is enrichment and it brings true joy and satisfaction.

Verse 2 may describe a hypothetical situation, or it might have happened to somebody Solomon knew. The fact that God gave Solomon riches, wealth, and honor (2 Chr 1:11) made the account even more meaningful to him. How fortunate a person would be to lack nothing, but how miserable if he or she could not enjoy the blessings of life.

What would prevent this person from enjoying life? Perhaps trouble in the home (Prov 15:16–17; 17:1), or illness, or even death (Lk 12:20). The person described in verse 2 had no heir, so a stranger acquired the estate and enjoyed it. It all seems so futile. What is Solomon saying to us?

“Enjoy the blessings of God now and thank Him for all of them.”

Don't *plan* to live—start living now. *Carpe diem!* Be satisfied with what He gives you and use it all for His glory.

- 3] If a man beget an hundred *children*, and live many years, so that the days of his years be many, and his soul be not filled with good, and also *that* he have no burial; I say, *that* an untimely birth *is* better than he.
- 4] For he cometh in with vanity, and departeth in darkness, and his name shall be covered with darkness.
- 5] Moreover he hath not seen the sun, nor known *any thing*: this hath more rest than the other.
- 6] Yea, though he live a thousand years twice *told*, yet hath he seen no good: do not all go to one place?

Verses 3–6 surely deal with a hypothetical case, because nobody lives for two thousand years, and no monogamous marriage is likely to produce a hundred children. (Solomon's son Rehoboam had eighty-

eight children, but he had eighteen wives and sixty concubines—like father, like son. See 2 Chr 11:21.)

Solomon was obviously exaggerating here in order to make his point: no matter how much you possess, if you don't possess the power to enjoy it, you might just as well never have been born.

Here is a man with abundant resources and a large family, both of which, to an Old Testament Jew, were marks of God's special favor. But his family does not love him, for when he died, he was not lamented. That's the meaning of “he has no burial” (see Jer 22:18–19). His relatives stayed around him only to use his money (5:11), and they wondered when the old man would die. When he finally did die, his surviving relatives could hardly wait for the reading of the will.

The rich man was really poor. For some reason, perhaps sickness, he couldn't enjoy his money. And he couldn't enjoy his large family because there was no love in the home. They didn't even weep when the man died. Solomon's conclusion was that it were better for this man had he never been born, or that he had been stillborn (see Job 3).

Among the Jews at that time, a stillborn child was not always given a name. That way, it would not be remembered. It was felt that this would encourage the parents to get over their sorrow much faster.

“It [the child] comes without meaning, it departs in darkness, and in darkness its name is shrouded” (v. 4, NIV)

Some would argue that existence is better than nonexistence and a difficult life better than no life at all. Solomon might agree with them, for “a living dog is better than a dead lion” (9:4).

But the problem Solomon faced was not whether existence is better than nonexistence, but whether there is any purpose behind the whole seemingly unbalanced scheme of things. As he examined life “under the sun,” he could find no reason why a person should be given riches and yet be deprived of the power to enjoy them.

The ability to enjoy life comes from within. It is a matter of character and not circumstances.

I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content,
Philippians 4:11

The Greek word *autarkes*, translated “content,” carries the idea of “self-contained, adequate, needing nothing from the outside.” Paul carried *within* all the resources needed for facing life courageously and triumphing over difficulties.

I can do all things through Christ who strengtheneth me.

Philippians 4:13

The 2,000-year-old man and the stillborn baby both ended up in the same place—the grave. Once again, the Preacher confronted his listeners with the certainty of death and the futility of life without God. He was preparing them for “the conclusion of the matter” when he would wrap up the sermon and encourage them to trust God (11:9–12:14).

2. Labor Without Satisfaction (6:7–9)

Solomon had spoken about the rich man; now he discusses the situation of the poor man. Rich and poor alike labor to stay alive. We must either produce food or earn money to buy it. The rich man can let his money work for him, but the poor man has to use his muscles if he and his family are going to eat. But even after all this labor, the appetite of neither one is fully satisfied.

- 7] All the labour of man *is* for his mouth, and yet the appetite is not filled.

Why does a person eat? So that he can add years to his life. But what good is it for me to add years to my life *if I don't add life to my years?*

Wiersbe: “I’m like the birds that I watch in the backyard. They spend all their waking hours either looking for food or escaping from enemies. (We have cats in our neighborhood.) These birds are not really *living*; they are only *existing*. Yet they are fulfilling the purposes for which the Creator made them—and they even sing about it!”

Solomon is not suggesting that it’s wrong either to work or to eat. Many people enjoy doing both. But if life consists *only* in working and eating, then we are being controlled by our appetites and that almost puts us on the same level as animals. As far as nature is concerned, self-preservation may be the first law of life, but we who are made in the image of God must live for something higher (Jn 12:20–28).

In the new creation (2 Cor 5:17), self-preservation may well be the first law of death (Mk 8:34–38).

- 8] For what hath the wise more than the fool? what hath the poor, that knoweth to walk before the living?

Both questions in verse 8 are answered by “None!” If all you do is live to satisfy your appetite, then the wise man has no advantage over the fool, nor does the poor man have any advantage trying to better his situation and learning to get along with the rich. Solomon is not belittling either education or self-improvement. He is only saying that these things of themselves cannot make life richer. We must have something greater for which to live.

A century ago, when the United States was starting to experience prosperity and expansion, the American naturalist Henry David Thoreau warned that men were devising “improved means to unimproved ends.” He should see our world today. We can send messages around the world in seconds, but do we have anything significant to say? We can transmit pictures even from the moon, but our TV screens are stained with violence, sex, cheap advertising, and even cheaper entertainment.

- 9] Better *is* the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the desire: this *is* also vanity and vexation of spirit.

Verse 9 is Solomon’s version of the familiar saying, “A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.” This proverb has been around for a long time. The Greek biographer Plutarch (46–120) wrote, “He is a fool who lets slip a bird in the hand for a bird in the bush.”

Solomon is saying, “It’s better to have little and really enjoy it than to dream about much and never attain it.” Dreams have a way of becoming nightmares if we don’t come to grips with reality.

Is Solomon telling us that it’s wrong to dream great dreams or have a burning ambition to accomplish something in life? Of course not, but we must take care that our ambition is motivated by the glory of God and not the praise of men. We must want to serve others and not promote ourselves. If we think our achievements will automatically bring satisfaction, we are wrong. True satisfaction comes when we do the will of God from the heart (Eph 6:6). “My food,” said Jesus, “is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to accomplish His work” (John 4:34, NASB).

Yes, in the will of God there can be riches with enjoyment and labor with satisfaction. But we must accept His plan for our lives, receive His gifts gratefully, and enjoy each day as He enables us. “Thou wilt show me the

path of life. In thy presence is fullness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore” (Ps 16:11).

3. Questions Without Answers (6:10–12)

Thus far, Solomon has said that life is a dead-end street for two kinds of people: those who have riches but no enjoyment and those who labor but have no satisfaction. But he has tried to point out that true happiness is not the automatic result of making a good living; it is the blessed by-product of making a good life. If you devote your life only to the pursuit of happiness, you will be miserable; however, if you devote your life to doing God’s will, you will find happiness as well.

The British essayist and poet Joseph Addison (1672–1718) wrote, “The grand essentials to happiness in this life are something to do, someone to love, and something to hope for.” Addison probably didn’t have Christianity in mind when he wrote that, but we have all three in Jesus Christ!

The Preacher was not finished. He knew that life was also a dead-end street for a third kind of person—the person who required answers to all of life’s questions. Solomon was not condemning honest inquiry, because Ecclesiastes is the record of his own investigation into the meaning of life. Rather, Solomon was saying, “There are some questions about life that nobody can answer. But our ignorance must not be used as an excuse for skepticism or unbelief. Instead, our ignorance should encourage us to have faith in God. After all, we don’t live on explanations; we live on promises.”

It’s been my experience in pastoral ministry that most explanations don’t solve personal problems or make people feel better. When the physician explains an X-ray to a patient, his explanation doesn’t bring healing, although it is certainly an essential step toward recovery. Suffering Job kept arguing with God and demanding an explanation for his plight. God never did answer his questions, because knowledge in the mind does not guarantee healing for the heart. That comes only when we put faith in the promises of God.

Without going into great detail, in verses 10–12 Solomon touches on five questions that people often ask.

- 10] That which hath been is named already, and it is known that it *is* man: neither may he contend with him that is mightier than he.

Since “what’s going to be is going to be,” why bother to make decisions? Isn’t it all predestined anyway? “Whatever exists has already been named, and what man is has been known” (v. 10a, NIV).

To the Jewish mind, giving a name to something is the same as fixing its character and stating what the thing really is. During the time of creation, God named the things that He made; and nobody changed those designations. “Light” is “light” and not “darkness”; “day” is “day” and not “night.” (See Isa 5:20.)

Our name is “man”—Adam, “from the earth” (Gen 2:7). Nobody can change that: we came from the earth and we will return to the earth (Gen 3:19). “Man” by any other name would still be “man,” made from the dust and eventually returning to the dust. The fact that God has named everything does not mean that our world is a prison and we have no freedom to act. Certainly God can accomplish His divine purposes with or without our cooperation, but He invites us to work with Him. We cooperate with God as we accept the “names” He has given to things: sin is sin; obedience is obedience; truth is truth. If we alter these names, we move into a world of illusion and lose touch with reality. This is where many people are living today.

We are free to decide and choose our world, *but we are not free to change the consequences*. If we choose a world of illusion, we start living on substitutes, and there can be no satisfaction in a world of substitutes. “And this is eternal life, that they may know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent” (Jn 17:3, NASB). “And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding, in order that we might know Him who is true, and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life” (1 Jn 5:20, NASB).

Why disagree with God? We can’t oppose Him and win, can we? “...neither may he contend with him that is mightier than he” (v. 10b). The word translated “contend” also means “dispute.” Solomon seems to say, “It just doesn’t pay to argue with God or to fight God. This is the way life is, so just accept it and let God have His way. You can’t win, and even if you do think you win, you ultimately lose.”

But this is a negative view of the will of God. It gives the impression that God’s will is a difficult and painful thing that should be avoided at all cost. Jesus said that God’s will was the food that nourished and satisfied Him (Jn 4:32–34). It was meat, not medicine. The will of God comes from the heart of God and is an expression of the love of God. (See Ps 33:11.) What

God wills for us is best for us, because He knows far more about us than we do.

Why would anyone want to have his or her “own way” just for the privilege of exercising “freedom”? Insisting on having our own way isn’t freedom at all; it’s the worst kind of bondage. In fact, the most terrible judgment we could experience in this life would be to have God “give us up” and let us have our own way (Rom 1:24, 26, 28).

God is free to act as He sees best. He is not a prisoner of His attributes, His creation, or His eternal purposes. You and I may not understand how God exercises His freedom, but it isn’t necessary for us to know all. Our greatest freedom comes when we are lovingly lost in the will of God. Our Father in heaven doesn’t feel threatened when we question Him, debate with Him, or even wrestle with Him, so long as we love His will and want to please Him.

- 11] Seeing there be many things that increase vanity, what *is* man the better?

What do we accomplish with all these words? Does talking about it solve the problem? (v. 11). In fact, there are times when it seems like the more we discuss a subject, the less we really understand it. Words don’t always bring light; sometimes they produce clouds and even darkness.

“The more the words, the less the meaning”(v. 11, NIV). But this is where we need the Word of God and the wisdom He alone can give us. If some discussions appear useless and produce “vanity,” there are other times when conversation leads us closer to the truth and to the Lord.

- 12] For who knoweth what *is* good for man in *this* life, all the days of his vain life which he spendeth as a shadow? for who can tell a man what shall be after him under the sun? [“all...”: Heb. “the number of the days of the life of his vanity.”] ***Who knows what is good for us?*** (v. 12). God does! And wise is the person who takes time to listen to what God has to say. Yes, life may seem to be fleeting and illusive, like a soap bubble (“vain”) or a shadow, but “he who does the will of God abides forever” (1 Jn 2:17, NKJV).

Does anybody know what’s coming next? (v. 12b). In spite of what the astrologers, prophets, and fortune tellers claim, nobody knows the future except God. It is futile to speculate. God gives us enough information to encourage us, but He does not cater to idle curiosity. One thing is sure: death is coming, and we had better make the best use of our present opportunities. That is one of the major themes in Ecclesiastes.

Solomon has now discussed two of his arguments that life is not worth living:

the monotony of life (3:1–5:9) and the futility of wealth (5:10–6:12).

He has discovered that life “under the sun” can indeed be monotonous and empty, but it need not be *if we include God in our lives*.

Life is God’s gift to us, and we must accept what He gives us and enjoy it while we can (3:12–15, 22; 5:18–20).

Next, Solomon will next take up his third argument, the vanity of man’s wisdom (Chapters 7 & 8), and discuss whether or not wisdom can make life any better. Though wisdom can’t explain all the problems or answer all the questions, it is still a valuable ally on the journey of life.

Study Questions

(For the diligent student.)

- 1) How can a man rob God? (Mal 3:10ff)
- 2) How can a person leave the Temple (or church) in worse shape than when he came in?
- 3) List six people who sought death as an alternative, and why they despaired.
- 4) How did Solomon refute his two concerns about the monotony of life and the futility of wealth?

Discussion Questions

(“Where two people agree, one is redundant.”)

- 1) Discuss the possibilities (and probabilities) of “careless praying.”
- 2) Discuss the dangers of “empty vows.”
- 3) Discuss the uses God has for money.

Research Projects

(For the truly dedicated.)

List the various purposes God has for money. Use examples from Scripture.

Preparation for Next Session:

Read Chapters 7 & 8. Also, Proverbs 8.

Session 5 Ecclesiastes 7 & 8

Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College

Alas, regardless of their doom,
The little victims play!
No sense have they of ills to come,
Nor care beyond today.
Yet ah! why should they know their fate?
Since sorrow never comes too late,
And happiness too swiftly flies.
Thought would destroy their paradise.
No more; where ignorance is bliss,
'Tis folly to be wise.

— Thomas Gray

His conclusion was logical: at that stage in life, it is better to be ignorant and happy, because there will be plenty of time later to experience the sorrows that knowledge may bring. Solomon had come to a similar conclusion when he argued in 1:12–18 that wisdom did not make life worth living.

For in much wisdom is much grief, and he that increaseth knowledge, increaseth sorrow.

Ecclesiastes 1:18

But then the king took a second look at the problem and modified his views. In Ecclesiastes 7 and 8, he discussed the importance of wisdom in life.

“Wisdom” is found 14 times in these two chapters.

He concluded that, although wisdom can't explain all of life's mysteries, it can make at least three positive contributions to our lives:

Ecclesiastes 7

1. Wisdom Can Make Life Better (7:1–10)

[“Better” is a key word: 11X.] Sorrow is better than laughter (7:1–4).

- 1] A good name *is* better than precious ointment; and the day of death than the day of one's birth.

If given the choice, most people would rather go to a birthday party than to a funeral; but Solomon questioned it. Why? Because sorrow can do more good for the heart than laughter can. (The word “heart” is used 4 times in 4 verses.)

Solomon was certainly not a morose man with a gloomy lifestyle: After all, it was King Solomon who wrote Proverbs 15:13, 15; 17:22—and the Song of Solomon! Laughter can be like medicine that heals the broken heart, but sorrow can be like nourishing food that strengthens the inner person. There is “a time to laugh” (Eccl 3:4). It takes both for a balanced life, but few people realize this.

Let's begin with Solomon's bizarre statement that the day of one's death is better than the day of one's birth (v. 1). This generalization must not be divorced from his opening statement that a person's good reputation (name) is like a fragrant perfume. (There is a play on words here: “name” is *shem* in the Hebrew and “ointment” is *shemen*. He used the same image in 10:1 and also in Song of Solomon 1:3.)

Solomon was not contrasting *birth* and *death*, nor was he suggesting that it is better to die than to be born, because you can't die unless you have been born. He was contrasting two significant days in human experience: the day a person receives his or her name and the day when that name shows up in the obituary column. The life lived between those two events will determine whether that name leaves behind a lovely fragrance or a foul stench.

If a person dies with a good name, his or her reputation is sealed and the family need not worry. In that sense, the day of one's death is better than the day of one's birth. The life is over and the reputation is settled. (Solomon assumed that there were no hidden scandals.)

“Every man has three names,” says an ancient adage; “one his father and mother gave him, one others call him, and one he acquires himself.”

The memory of the just is blessed, but the name of the wicked shall rot.

Prov 10:7; Cf. Prov 22:1

Mary of Bethany anointed the Lord Jesus with expensive perfume and its fragrance filled the house. Jesus told her that her name would be honored throughout the world, and it is. On the other hand, Judas sold the Lord Jesus into the hands of the enemy; and his name is generally despised (Mk 14:1–11).

When Judas was born, he was given the good name “Judah,” which means “praise.” It belonged to the royal tribe in Israel. By the time Judas died, he had turned that honorable name into something shameful.

- 2] *It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting: for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to his heart.*

In verses 2–4, Solomon advised the people to look death in the face and learn from it. He did not say that we should be *preoccupied* with death, because that could be abnormal. But there is the danger that we try to avoid confrontations with the reality of death and, as a result, not take life as seriously as we should.

So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom

Ps 90:12

- 3] Sorrow *is* better than laughter: for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better.

He is asking for balance. The Hebrew word for “laughter” can mean “the laughter of derision or scorn.” While there is a place for healthy humor in life, we must beware of the frivolous laughter that is often found in “the house of mirth” (v. 4).

- 4] The heart of the wise *is* in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools *is* in the house of mirth.

When people jest about death, for example, it is usually evidence that they are afraid of it and not prepared to meet it. They are running away. Rebuke is better than praise (7:5–6).

- 5] *It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise, than for a man to hear the song of fools.*
6] For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so *is* the laughter of the fool: this also *is* vanity.

King Solomon compared the praise of fools to the burning thorns in a campfire: you hear a lot of noise, but you don’t get much lasting good. Again, Solomon used a play on words (*homophones*) in the Hebrew:

“song” is שיר *shir*, “pot” is סיר *sir*, and “thorns” is סיריִם; *sirim*.

If we allow it, a wise person’s rebuke will accomplish far more in our lives than will the flattery of fools. Solomon may have learned this truth from his father (Ps 141:5), and he certainly emphasized it when he wrote the Book of Proverbs (10:17; 12:1; 15:5; 17:10; 25:12; 27:5, 17; 29:1, 15). The “long haul” is better than the shortcut (7:7–9). Beware of “easy” routes; they often become expensive detours that are difficult and painful. (“I don’t have the time to be in a hurry.”)

- 7] Surely oppression maketh a wise man mad; and a gift destroyeth the heart.

Bribery appears to be a quick way to get things done (v. 7), but it only turns a wise man into a fool and encourages the corruption already in the human heart. Far better that we wait patiently and humbly for God to work out His will than that we get angry and demand our own way (v. 8). See also Proverbs 14:17, 16:32, and James 1:19.

- 8] Better *is* the end of a thing than the beginning thereof: *and* the patient in spirit *is* better than the proud in spirit.

The beginning of sin leads to a terrible end—death (James 1:13–15), but if God is at the beginning of what we do, He will see to it that we reach the ending successfully (Phil 1:6; Heb 12:2).

Good beginnings will usually mean good endings. The Prodigal Son started with happiness and wealth, but ended with suffering and poverty (Lk 15:11–24). Joseph began as a slave but ended up a sovereign! God always saves “the best wine” until the last (Jn 2:10), but Satan starts with his “best” and then leads the sinner into suffering and perhaps even death. The Christian believer can claim Romans 8:28 because he knows that God is at work in the world, accomplishing His purposes. (Do you stop to ask for directions, or do you bluff your way through ambiguity?)

- 9] Be not hasty in thy spirit to be angry: for anger resteth in the bosom of fools.

Today is Better than Yesterday (7:10)

- 10] Say not thou, What is *the cause* that the former days were better than these? for thou dost not enquire wisely concerning this.

“The good old days”: often, the combination of a bad memory and a good imagination.

When the foundation was laid for the second temple, the old men wept for “the good old days” and the young men sang because the work had begun (Ezra 3:12–13). Yesterday is past and cannot be changed, and tomorrow may not come; so make the most of today.

“*Carpe diem!*” (“Seize the day!”)

Roman poet Horace

Yesterday is but a memory. Tomorrow, only a speculation. Today is palpable, tangible, and filled with *accountable* opportunity.

While you are dreaming of the future or regretting the past, the present, which is all you have, slips from you and is gone.

The Victorian essayist Hilaire Belloc

2. Wisdom Helps Us See Life Clearly (7:11–18)

Maturity requires balance.

- 11] Wisdom *is* good with an inheritance: and *by it there is* profit to them that see the sun.
12] For wisdom *is* a defence, *and* money *is* a defence: but the excellency of knowledge *is, that* wisdom giveth life to them that have it. [“defence”: Heb. “shadow”]

Wisdom is better than a generous inheritance. Money can lose its value, or be stolen; but true wisdom keeps its value and cannot be lost, unless we become fools and abandon it deliberately. Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach him to fish, and you feed him for life.

The person who has wealth but lacks wisdom will only waste his fortune, but the person who has wisdom will know how to get and use wealth. Have you ever noticed what they call “second generation money”?

We should be grateful for the rich treasure of wisdom we have inherited from the past, and we should be ashamed of ourselves that we too often ignore it or disobey it.

Providence (7:13)

- 13] Consider the work of God: for who can make *that* straight, which he hath made crooked?

“Serenity Prayer”: O God, give us serenity to accept what cannot be changed, courage to change the things we can, and wisdom to know the difference.

Reinhold Niebuhr, 1934

Adversity and Prosperity (7:14)

- 14] In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of adversity consider: God also hath set the one over against the other, to the end that man should find nothing after him.

Wisdom gives us perspective so that we aren’t discouraged when times are difficult or arrogant when things are going well. It takes a good deal of spirituality to be able to accept prosperity as well as adversity, for often prosperity does greater damage (Phil 4:10–13).

Job reminded his wife of this truth when she told him to curse God and die: “What? Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil [trouble]?” (2:10) Earlier, Job had said, “The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord” (1:21).

So the Lord balances the blessings in our hands with burdens on our backs. That helps to keep us steady, and as we yield to Him, He can even turn the burdens into blessings. Job’s friends were wrong: they tried to use an old road map to guide Job on a new journey, and the map didn’t fit.

No matter how much experience we have in the Christian life, or how many books we read, we must still walk by faith.

Righteousness and Sin (7:15–18)

- 15] All *things* have I seen in the days of my vanity: there is a just *man* that perisheth in his righteousness, and there is a wicked *man* that prolongeth *his life* in his wickedness.

If there is one problem in life that demands a mature perspective, it is “Why do the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper?” The good die

young while the wicked seem to enjoy long lives, and this seems contrary to the justice of God and the Word of God. Didn't God tell the people that the obedient would live long (Ex 20:12; Deut 4:40) and the disobedient would perish? (Deut 4:25–26; Ps 55:23)

- 1) God did promise to bless Israel in their land if they obeyed His law, but He has not given those same promises to believers today under the new covenant.

Prosperity is the blessing of the Old Testament; adversity is the blessing of the New.

Francis Bacon (1561–1626)

Our Lord's opening words in the Sermon on the Mount were not "Blessed are the rich in substance" but "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (Mt 5:3, and see Lk 6:20).

- 2) The wicked appear to prosper *only if you take the short view of things*. This was the lesson Asaph recorded in Psalm 73 and that Paul reinforced in Romans 8:18 and 2 Corinthians 4:16–18.

"They have their reward" (Mt 6:2, 5, 16), and that reward is all they will ever get. They may gain the whole world, but they lose their own souls. This is the fate of all who follow their example and sacrifice the eternal for the temporal.

- 16] Be not righteous over much; neither make thyself over wise: why shouldest thou destroy thyself?
- 17] Be not over much wicked, neither be thou foolish: why shouldest thou die before thy time?

Verses 16–18 have been misunderstood by those who say that Solomon was teaching "moderation" in everyday life: don't be too righteous, but don't be too great a sinner. "Play it safe!" say these cautious philosophers, but this is not what Solomon wrote.

In the Hebrew text, the verbs in verse 16 carry the idea of reflexive action. Solomon said to the people, "Don't claim to be righteous and don't claim to be wise." In other words, he was warning them against *self-righteousness and the pride that comes when we think we have "arrived" and know it all*.

Solomon made it clear in verse 20 that there are no righteous people, so he cannot be referring to true righteousness. He was condemning the

self-righteousness of the hypocrite and the false wisdom of the proud, and he warned that these sins led to destruction and death.

- 18] *It is good that thou shouldest take hold of this; yea, also from this withdraw not thine hand: for he that feareth God shall come forth of them all.*

Verse 18 balances the warning: we should take hold of true righteousness and should not withdraw from true wisdom, and the way to do it is to walk in the fear of God.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Proverbs 9:10

Jesus Christ is to the believer "wisdom and righteousness" (1 Cor 1:30), so God's people need not "manufacture" these blessings themselves.

3. Wisdom Helps Us Face Life Stronger (7:19–29)

- 19] Wisdom strengtheneth the wise more than ten mighty *men* which are in the city.

The wise person fears the Lord and therefore does not fear anyone or anything else (Ps 112). He walks with the Lord and has the adequacy necessary to face the challenges of life, including war (see 9:13–18).

- 20] For *there is* not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not.

What are some of the problems in life that we must face and overcome? Number one on the list is *sin*, because nobody on earth is sinless (v. 20, and note 1 Kgs 8:46). We are all guilty of both sins of omission ("doeth good") and sins of commission ("sinneth not").

[Romans: none righteous. Sin no longer reigns.]

If we walk in the fear of God and follow His wisdom, we will be able to detect and defeat the wicked one when he comes to tempt us. Wisdom will guide us and guard us in our daily walk.

- 21] Also take no heed unto all words that are spoken; lest thou hear thy servant curse thee:
- 22] For oftentimes also thine own heart knoweth that thou thyself likewise hast cursed others.

Another problem we face is *what people say about us*. See Psalm 38 and Matthew 7:1–3.

Management by hearsay? Cf. Mt18:15-17.

- 23] All this have I proved by wisdom: I said, I will be wise; but it *was* far from me.
24] That which is far off, and exceeding deep, who can find it out?
25] I applied mine heart to know, and to search, and to seek out wisdom, and the reason *of things*, and to know the wickedness of folly, even of foolishness *and* madness:

A third problem is *our inability to grasp the meaning of all that God is doing in this world* (vv. 23–25, and see 3:11 and 8:17). Even Solomon with all his God-given wisdom could not understand all that exists, how God manages it, and what purposes He has in mind. He searched for the “reason [scheme] of things” but found no final answers to all his questions.

He who knows, and knows not that he knows, is asleep; wake him.

He who knows not, and knows that he knows not, is a student; teach him.

He who knows not, and knows not that he knows not, is a fool; shun him.

He who knows, and knows that he knows, is wise; follow him.

Persian proverb

- 26] And I find more bitter than death the woman, whose heart *is* snares and nets, *and* her hands *as* bands: whoso pleaseth God shall escape from her; but the sinner shall be taken by her.

Finally, the wise person must deal with *the sinfulness of humanity in general* (vv. 26–29). Solomon began with the sinful woman, the prostitute who traps men and leads them to death (v. 26, and see Prov 2:16–19; 5:3–6; 6:24–26; and 7:5–27). Solomon himself had been snared by many foreign women who enticed him away from the Lord and into the worship of heathen gods (1 Kgs 11:3–8).

Women are the measure of weakness in a man.

- 27] Behold, this have I found, saith the preacher, *counting* one by one, to find out the account:

“counting...”: or, weighing one thing after another, to find out the reason; reckoning

- 28] Which yet my soul seeketh, but I find not: one man among a thousand have I found; but a woman among all those have I not found.

Solomon concluded that the whole human race was bound by sin and one man in a thousand was wise—and not one woman! (The number

1,000 is significant in the light of 1 Kgs 11:3.) 700 wives + 300 concubines! We must not think that Solomon rated women as less intelligent than men, because this is not the case. He spoke highly of women in Proverbs (12:4; 14:1; 18:22; 19:14; and 31:10ff), Ecclesiastes (9:9), and certainly in the Song of Solomon.

In the Book of Proverbs, Solomon even pictured God’s wisdom as a beautiful woman (1:20ff; 8:1ff; 9:1ff). But keep in mind that women in that day had neither the freedom nor the status that they have today, and it would be unusual for a woman to have learning equal to that of a man.

It was considered a judgment of God for women to rule over the land (Isa 3:12, but remember Miriam and Deborah, two women who had great leadership ability).

- 29] Lo, this only have I found, that God hath made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions.

God made man (Adam) upright, but Adam disobeyed God and fell and now all men are sinners who seek out many clever inventions. Created in the image of God, man has the ability to understand and harness the forces God put into nature, but he doesn’t always use this ability in constructive ways.

Each forward step in science seems to open up a Pandora’s box of new problems for the world, until we now find ourselves with the problems of polluted air and water and depleted natural resources. Man has used his abilities to devise alluring forms of sin that are destroying individuals and nations. Yes, there are many snares and temptations in this evil world, but the person with godly wisdom will have the power to overcome (Romans 6).

Solomon has made his point: wisdom can make our lives better and clearer and stronger. We may not fully understand all that God is doing, but we will have enough wisdom to live for the good of others and the glory of God.

Ecclesiastes 8

Wickedness

The Problem of Evil

As King Solomon continued to investigate the value of wisdom, he came face to face with the problem of evil in the world, a problem that no thinking person can honestly avoid. It is not *unbelief* that creates this problem, but *faith*. If there is no God, then we have nobody to blame but ourselves (or fate) for what happens in the world. But if we believe in a good and loving God, we must face the difficult question of why there is so much suffering in the world. Does God know about it and yet not care? Or does He know and care but lack the power to do anything about it?

Some people ponder this question and end up becoming either agnostics or atheists, but in so doing, they create a whole new problem: “Where does all the *good* come from in the world?” It’s difficult to believe that matter *alone* produced the beautiful and enjoyable things we have in our world, even in the midst of so much evil.

Other people solve the problem by saying that evil is only an illusion and we shouldn’t worry about it, or that God is in the process of “evolving” and can’t do much about the tragedies of life. They assure us that God will get stronger and things will improve as the process of evolution goes on.

Solomon didn’t deny the existence of God or the reality of evil, nor did he limit the power of God. Solomon solved the problem of evil by affirming these factors *and seeing them in their proper perspective*. We must not forget that one major source of evil in this world is fallen man and his “many devices,” both good and evil, that have helped to create problems of one kind or another (7:29, NASB).

Solomon explored the problem of evil in the world by examining three key areas of life.

1. Authority (8:1–9)

Beginning with Nimrod (Gen 10:8–9) and continuing over the centuries through Pharaoh, Sennacherib, Nebuchadnezzar, Darius, the Caesars,

and the latest petty dictator, millions of good people have been oppressed in one way or another by bad rulers. The Jews often suffered at the hands of foreign oppressors, and Solomon himself had been guilty of putting his own people under a heavy yoke of bondage (1 Kgs 4:7–28; 12:1ff).

[Nimrod may return in “The Assyrian” who is to be the final ruler on the Planet Earth before the Lord comes (Micah 5:5,6; Isaiah 10:....; et al.)]

Keep in mind that Eastern rulers in that day held the power of life and death in their hands and often used that power capriciously. They were not elected by the people nor were they answerable to them. Some leaders ruled as benevolent dictators, but for the most part rulers in the ancient East were tyrannical despots who permitted nothing to stand in the way of fulfilling their desires.

- 1] Who *is* as the wise *man*? and who knoweth the interpretation of a thing? a man’s wisdom maketh his face to shine, and the boldness of his face shall be changed.

Solomon described an officer in the royal court, a man who had to carry out the orders of a despotic ruler. The officer had wisdom; in fact, it showed on his face (v. 1, and see Neh 2:1ff and Prov 15:13).

Suppose the king commanded the servant to do something evil, something that the servant did not want to do? What should the servant do? Here is where wisdom comes to his aid. His wisdom told him that there were four possible approaches he could take to this problem.

- 2] I *counsel thee* to keep the king’s commandment, and *that* in regard of the oath of God.

Disobedience. But Solomon’s admonition was, “Keep the king’s commandment.” Why? To begin with, the officer must be true to his oath of allegiance to the king and to God, who is the source of all authority in this world (Rom 13). To disobey orders would mean breaking his promise to the ruler and to God, and that has serious consequences.

- 3] Be not hasty to go out of his sight: stand not in an evil thing; for he doeth whatsoever pleaseth him.
- 4] Where the word of a king *is*, *there is* power: and who may say unto him, What doest thou?

The king’s word would have more power than the word of his servant and was bound to prevail, even if the king had to eliminate the opposi-

tion. Nobody could safely question the ruler's decisions because "the king can do no wrong." There was no law that could find the king guilty.

- 5] Whoso keepeth the commandment shall feel no evil thing: and a wise man's heart discerneth both time and judgment.

Third, the officer should obey orders so that he might avoid punishment (v. 5a). After all, his disobedience could lead to his death. Paul used a similar argument in Romans 13:3–4.

- 6] Because to every purpose there is time and judgment, therefore the misery of man *is* great upon him.

Discernment (vv. 5b-6). The wise servant understands that "time and judgment [procedure, NASB]" must be considered in everything we do, because it takes discernment to know the right procedure for the right time. The impulsive person who overreacts and storms out of the room (v. 3) is probably only making the problem worse. Wisdom helps us understand people and situations and to figure out the right thing to do at the right time. "The wise heart will know the proper time and procedure" (v. 5b, NIV).

This is illustrated beautifully in the lives of several Old Testament believers. Joseph didn't impulsively reveal to his brothers who he was, because he wanted to be sure their hearts were right with their father and their God. Once he heard them confess their sins, Joseph knew it was the right time to identify himself. His handling of this delicate matter was a masterpiece of wisdom (see Gen 43–45).

Nehemiah was burdened to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, but he was not sure the king would release him for the task (Neh 1–2). He waited and watched and prayed, knowing that God would one day open the way for him. When the opportune hour came, Nehemiah was ready and the king granted him his request. Nehemiah knew how to discern "time and procedure."

A prisoner of war in a Gentile land, Daniel refused to eat the unclean food set before him, but he didn't make a big scene about it. Instead, he exercised gentleness and wisdom by suggesting that the guards permit the Jews to experiment with a different diet. The plan worked and Daniel and his friends not only kept themselves ceremonially clean, but they were promoted in the king's court (see Dan 1).

The apostles exercised spiritual discernment when they were arrested and persecuted (Acts 4–5). They showed respect toward those in authority even though the religious leaders were prejudiced and acted illegally. The apostles were even willing to suffer for their faith and the Lord honored them.

- 7] For he knoweth not that which shall be: for who can tell him when it shall be?

We all have enough misery, so why add to it? Furthermore, since nobody can predict the future, we don't know how the king will respond to our decisions.

- 8] *There is* no man that hath power over the spirit to retain the spirit; neither *hath he* power in the day of death: and *there is* no discharge in *that* war; neither shall wickedness deliver those that are given to it.

One thing is sure: a day is coming when wickedness will be judged, and even kings will not escape. Nobody can control the wind or prevent the day of his death ("wind" and "spirit" are the same word in the Hebrew), and nobody can get discharged from the army when a war is on. Likewise, nobody can stop the inexorable working of God's law,

Whatever a man sows, that he will also reap.

Gal 6:7, NKJV

Be sure your sin will find you out.

Num 32:23

Alternatives

Desertion (v. 3a) and **Defiance** (v. 3b). "Do not stand up for a bad cause" (NIV) can mean "Don't promote the king's evil plan" or "Don't get involved in a plan to overthrow the king." I prefer the second interpretation because it goes right along with the first admonition in verse 3.

The officer rushes from the king's presence, finds others who are opposed to the king's plans, and with them begins to plot against the crown. Solomon did not approve of this approach.

Is there ever a place for "civil disobedience" in the life of the believer? Do law-abiding citizens have the right to resist authority when they feel the law is not just? Thomas Jefferson wrote, "Resistance to tyrants is obedience to God." Was he right?

When it comes to matters of conscience and the law, devoted believers have pretty much agreed with Peter: “We ought to obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). Christian prisoners and martyrs down through the ages testify to the courage of conscience and the importance of standing up for what is right. This doesn’t mean we can resist the law on every minor matter that disturbs us, but it does mean we have the obligation to obey our conscience. How we express our disagreement with the authorities demands wisdom and grace; this is where the fourth possibility comes in.

- 9] All this have I seen, and applied my heart unto every work that is done under the sun: *there is* a time wherein one man ruleth over another to his own hurt.

We have the options of disobeying, running away, defying orders, and even fighting back. But before we act, we must first exercise wisdom and seek to discern the right “time and procedure.” It’s not easy to be a consistent Christian in this complicated evil world, but we can ask for the wisdom of God and receive it by faith (James 1:5; 3:17–18).

2. Inequity (8:10–14)

- 10] And so I saw the wicked buried, who had come and gone from the place of the holy, and they were forgotten in the city where they had so done: *this is* also vanity.

In verse 10, Solomon reported on a funeral he had attended. The deceased was a man who had frequented the temple (“the place of the holy”) and had received much praise from the people, but he had not lived a godly life. Yet he was given a magnificent funeral, with an eloquent eulogy, while the truly godly people of the city were ignored and forgotten.

- 11] Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil.

As he reflected on the matter, Solomon realized that the deceased man had continued in his sin because he thought he was getting away with it (v. 11). God is indeed longsuffering toward sinners and doesn’t always judge sin immediately (2 Peter 3:1–12). However, God’s mercy must not be used as an excuse for man’s rebellion.

- 12] Though a sinner do evil an hundred times, and his *days* be prolonged, yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before him:

Solomon concluded that the wicked will eventually be judged and the righteous will be rewarded (vv. 12–13), so it is better to fear the Lord and live a godly life. The evil man may live longer than the godly man. He may appear to get away with sin after sin, but the day of judgment will come and the wicked man will not escape.

It is wisdom that points the way; for “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov 9:10).

- 13] But it shall not be well with the wicked, neither shall he prolong *his days*, *which are* as a shadow; because he feareth not before God.

No matter how long or full the wicked man’s life may seem to be, it is only prolonged like a shadow and has no substance. In fact, the shadows get longer as the sun is setting. Solomon may be suggesting that the long life of the wicked man is but a prelude to eternal darkness. What good is a long life if it is only a shadow going into the blackness of darkness forever (Jude 13)?

- 14] There is a vanity which is done upon the earth; that there be just *men*, unto whom it happeneth according to the work of the wicked; again, there be wicked *men*, to whom it happeneth according to the work of the righteous: I said that this also *is* vanity.

Solomon summarized his concern in verse 14: “righteous men who get what the wicked deserve, and wicked men who get what the righteous deserve” (NIV). In spite of good laws and fine people who seek to enforce them, there is more injustice in this world than we care to admit. A Spanish proverb says, “Laws, like the spider’s web, catch the fly and let the hawks go free.” According to famous trial lawyer F. Lee Bailey, “In America, an acquittal doesn’t mean you’re innocent; it means you beat the rap.” Poet Robert Frost defined a jury as “twelve persons chosen to decide who has the better lawyer.”

Until Jesus Christ sets up His righteous kingdom, there will always be injustices in our world. It is one of the “vanities” of life, and we must accept it without becoming pessimistic or cynical.

3. Mystery (8:15–17)

- 15] Then I commended mirth, because a man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry: for that shall abide with him of his labour the days of his life, which God giveth him under the sun.

For the fourth time, Solomon told his congregation to enjoy life and delight in the fruit of their labors (v. 15; see 2:24; 3:12–15; and 5:18–20). Remember, this admonition is not the foolish “eat, drink, and be merry” philosophy of the unbelieving hedonist. Rather, it is the positive “faith outlook” of God’s children who accept life as God’s special gift and know that He gives us “all things richly to enjoy” (1 Tim 6:17). Instead of complaining about what we don’t have, we give thanks for what we do have and enjoy it.

- 16] When I applied mine heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done upon the earth: (for also *there is that* neither day nor night seeth sleep with his eyes:)
- 17] Then I beheld all the work of God, that a man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun: because though a man labour to seek *it* out, yet he shall not find *it*; yea further; though a wise *man* think to know *it*, yet shall he not be able to find *it*.

Solomon came to the conclusion that “man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun” (Cf. 3:11; 7:14, 24, 27–28). Perhaps we can solve a puzzle here and there, but no man or woman can comprehend the totality of things or explain all that God is doing.

The person who has to know everything, or who thinks he knows everything, is destined for disappointment in this world. Historian Will Durant surveyed human history in his multi-volume *Story of Civilization* and came to the conclusion that “our knowledge is a receding mirage in an expanding desert of ignorance.” Of course, this fact must not be used as an excuse for stupidity.

The secret things belong unto the Lord our God; but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.

Deut 29:29

God doesn’t expect us to know the unknowable, but He does expect us to learn all that we can:

It is the glory of God to conceal a thing: but the honour of kings is to search out a matter.

Proverbs 25:2

...and obey what He teaches us. In fact, the more we obey, the more He will teach us (John 7:17). A confession of ignorance is the first step toward true knowledge.

And if anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know.

1 Cor 8:2, NKJV

Not ignorance, but ignorance of ignorance, is the death of knowledge.

Alfred North Whitehead

If there were no obscurity, man would not feel his corruption; if there were no light, man could not hope for a cure. Thus it is not only right but useful for us that God should be partly concealed and partly revealed, since it is equally dangerous for man to know God without knowing his own wretchedness as to know his wretchedness without knowing God.

Blaise Pascal, *Pensees* (#446)

Conclusion

This ends Solomon’s reexamination of “the vanity of wisdom” (1:12–18). Instead of rejecting wisdom, the king concluded that wisdom is important to the person who wants to get the most out of life. While wisdom can’t explain every mystery or solve every problem, it can help us exercise discernment in our decisions.

“Yes, there is a time and a way for everything” (8:6, TLB), and the wise person knows what to do at just the right time.

* * *

Next: Meeting our last enemy.

Addenda:

An Exceedingly Painful Sin

What sin is exceedingly painful? A well-qualified candidate is *Gossip!* It is, in its most formal form, a violation of “Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.”¹

However, even in its more subtle forms, gossip is probably accountable for more personal pain and suffering than most of us have any appreciation of. Gossip is a form of betrayal! Common and casual, yet it is hurtful beyond our reckoning. Quietly, behind the flurry of daily priorities, its venom does its silent work, undermining confidences, betraying relationships, spreading unseen injustices, invisibly promoting misunderstandings and distrust.

The Scripture has much to say about gossip:

Thou shalt not go up and down as a talebearer among thy people: neither shalt thou stand against the blood of thy neighbour: I am the Lord.

Leviticus 19:16

A talebearer revealeth secrets: but he that is of a faithful spirit concealeth the matter.

Proverbs 11:13

The words of a talebearer are as wounds, and they go down into the innermost parts of the belly.

Proverbs 18:8; 26:22

He that goeth about as a talebearer revealeth secrets: therefore meddle not with him that flattereth with his lips.

Proverbs 20:19

Where no wood is, there the fire goeth out: so where there is no talebearer, the strife ceaseth.

Proverbs 26:20

As coals are to burning coals, and wood to fire; so is a contentious man to kindle strife.

Proverbs 26:21

Our Lord's Example:

Let him who is without sin cast the first stone....

John 8:7

Personal

Our own personal troubles at the beginning of this decade included bankruptcy, earthquakes, and relocating from our family roots. But the most *pain*—which still endures from the traumas of those difficult years—came from the libel and slander that was promoted (or tolerated) by a few of our “Christian” friends.

Most of us can probably relate to similar experiences. It's disturbing to note how many of us have been injured—deeply—by gossip and by those who accepted, without checking, negative or derogatory innuendos whispered behind our backs.

In contrast, we have also received the indescribable encouragement, on a number of occasions, from the reaction of several radio talk show hosts

(and also on Internet traffic over various controversies) by those who rebutted aspersions about us—without even needing to “check.” Praise God for such examples!

A Mischievous Anecdote

As many of you know, Walter Martin was a close friend; my partner and I were the ones who brought him and his Christian Research Institute to the West Coast, and we served on his board during those early years.

During an interval prior to a board meeting, Walter came up to me, with that mischievous grin of his, and began, “You know what Chuck Smith said at his service the other night....”

I stopped him mid-sentence and asked, “Wait a minute, Walter. What was Chuck's response when you questioned him on this? For *I know you are far too Scriptural in your Christian walk to pass something on without first having reviewed it with him*. What was his response when you reviewed this with him?”

Walter winced. He knew I had caught him and that I wasn't going to let go. (I was just being mischievous—I had caught him in an unguarded moment and couldn't resist tweaking him a little.) Several of the others present began enjoying this rare opportunity as much as I was.

He smiled, but as a child with his hand caught in a cookie jar, and rebutted, “I can see I'm going to have trouble with you, too.”

We all chuckled and continued, yet not letting Walter disclose the apparent faux pas that he had been so anxious to share.

(Those were such precious years. It was unusual to catch Walter in such a misstep. He was a dear friend—a legend in his time. We all miss him terribly.)

An Apocryphal Story

Three pastors were meeting privately to share their innermost confidences and to pray for one another with respect to their major weaknesses and personal stumbling blocks.

The first frankly confessed to his two conferrers that he had a serious problem with lust. He shared with them a number of ways that he found

himself in compromising situations and told how he was frequently stumbling in this area. He asked them for special prayer in dealing with this weakness.

The second, encouraged by this display of candor, admitted that he, too, had a problem, but with money. He found that he just couldn't resist skimming occasionally, and was guilty of a number of indiscretions regarding this weakness. He confessed his need for better stewardship and asked for prayer.

The third pastor then reluctantly responded, "I must confess I appreciate the remarkable candor of both of you. My weakness is gossip, and I can hardly wait to get out of here!"

A "Christian" Subterfuge

You have probably also witnessed the following hallway murmur: "I don't want to gossip. However, in order that you might pray more specifically for _____, let me share with you the latest...."

Isn't this just a rather transparent cloak for gossip? As you know, a secret is something you tell one person at a time. And a rumor is a favorite weapon of the assassins of character.

True Friendship

What is true friendship? A relationship that *doesn't* require explanations. One that gives us the assurance of receiving the benefit of the doubt. A friend is one who is loyal and shuns any form of betrayal. We know, of course, that none of *you* are guilty of these abuses; these suggestions have been offered to help you counsel your needy friends. (Right?)

A Poem:

"I Hear It Said"²

Last night my friend—he says he is my friend—
Came in and questioned me. "I hear it said
You have done this and that. I come to ask
Are these things true?" A glint was in his eye
Of small distrust. His words were crisp & hot.
He measured me with anger, and flung down
A little heap of facts had come to him.

"I hear it said you have done this and that."
Suppose I have? And are you not my friend?
And are you not my friend enough to say,
"If it were true, there would be reason in it.
And if I cannot know the how and why,
Still I can trust you, waiting for a word.
Or for no word, if no word ever come!"

Is friendship just a thing of afternoons,
Of pleasuring one's friend and one's dear self—
Greed for sedate approval of his pace,
Suspicion if he take one little turn
Upon the rod, one flight into the air,
And has not sought you for your Yea or Nay!
No. Friendship is not so. I am my own.

And howsoever near my friend may draw
Unto my soul, there is a legend hung
Above a certain straight and narrow way
Says, "Dear my friend, ye may not enter here!"
I would the time has come—as it has not—
When men shall rise and say, "He is my friend.
He has done this? And what is that to me!"

Think you I have a check upon his head,
Or cast a guiding rein across his neck?
I am his friend. And for that cause I walk
Not overclose beside him, leaving still
Space for his silences, and space for mine."

—Barbara Young

A related topic is the lack of accountability within the Body of Christ (and its sinister cousin, management by hearsay). I have been asked by a number of abused pastors to publish a Briefing Package on Matthew 18:

- 15] Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him **alone**: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother.
- 16] But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of **two or three witnesses** every word may be established.
- 17] And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it **unto the church**: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.

Matthew 18:15-17

Study Questions

(For the diligent student.)

- 1) Under what conditions is it “folly to be wise”?
- 2) How does Solomon’s view of wisdom in these chapters contrast with his view in Chapter 1?
- 3) How is sorrow better than laughter?
- 4) How is rebuke better than praise?
- 5) What are the four options you have when a superior instructs you to do something evil?

Discussion Questions

(“Where two people agree, one is redundant.”)

- 1) Discuss the role of evil in the world. How do you reconcile the existence of God with the existence of evil?
- 2) What is the most painful sin?

Research Projects

(For the truly dedicated.)

Make an inventory of disasters in the Bible caused by spreading falsehoods.

Preparation for Next Session:

Read Chapters 9 and 10. Also 1 Corinthians 15.

Notes:

1. Exodus 20:16.
2. “I Hear It Said,” by Barbara Young, *Best Loved Poems of the American People*, Doubleday, NY, 1936.

Session 6 Ecclesiastes 9 & 10

1. Meeting Your Last Enemy: Death

This is not the first time the subject of death has come into Solomon’s discourse, nor will it be the last. (Cf. 1:4; 2:14–17; 3:18–20; 4:8; 5:15–16; 6:6; 8:8; 12:1–7.) In this chapter, Solomon drew two conclusions:

- death is unavoidable (1–10) and
- life is unpredictable (11–18).

I’m not afraid to die; I just don’t want to be there when it happens.

Woody Allen

But each of us *will* be there when it happens because there is no escaping death when your time has come. Death is not an accident, it’s an appointment (Heb 9:27), a destiny that nobody but God can cancel or change. [Walter McRea’s “poem” on “reincarnation” has been included as a frivolous, yet humorous, addenda.]

After all, the only way to be prepared to live is to be prepared to die. Death is a fact of life, and Solomon examined many facets of life so that he might understand God’s pattern for satisfied living.

Robert E. Lee’s last words were, “Let the tent be struck!” Unless Jesus Christ returns and takes us to heaven, we will one day “strike our tent” (2 Cor 5:1–8) and leave the battlefield for a better land. We must be ready. The person who treats death lightly may fear death the most. If we take life seriously—and we should—then we can’t treat death flippantly.

- 1] For all this I considered in my heart even to declare all this, that the righteous, and the wise, and their works, *are* in the hand of God: no man knoweth either love or hatred *by* all *that is* before them.

Only God knows our future, whether it will bring blessing (“love”) or sorrow (“hatred”). Solomon was not suggesting that we are passive actors in a cosmic drama, following an unchangeable script handed to us by an uncaring director. Throughout this book, Solomon has emphasized our freedom of discernment and decision. But only God

knows what the future hold for us and what will happen tomorrow because of the decisions we make today.

- 2] All *things come* alike to all: *there is* one event to the righteous, and to the wicked; to the good and to the clean, and to the unclean; to him that sacrificeth, and to him that sacrificeth not: as *is* the good, so *is* the sinner; *and* he that sweareth, as *he* that feareth an oath.

We share a common destiny on earth—death and the grave—but *we do not share a common destiny in eternity*. For that reason, everybody must honestly face “the last enemy” (1 Cor 15:26) and decide how to deal with it. Christians have trusted Jesus Christ to save them from sin and death; so, as far as they are concerned, “the last enemy” has been defeated (Rom 6:23; Jn 11:25–26; 1 Thess 4:13–18; 1 Cor 15:51–58). Unbelievers don’t have that confidence and are unprepared to die.

How people deal with the reality of death reveals itself in the way they deal with the realities of life. Solomon pointed out three possible responses that people make to the ever-present fear of death.

Escape (v. 3)

Endurance (vv. 4–6)

Enjoyment (vv. 7–10)

Escape

- 3] This *is* an evil among all *things* that are done under the sun, that *there is* one event unto all: yea, also the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness *is* in their heart while they live, and after that *they go* to the dead.

The fact of death and the fear of death will either bring out the best in people or the worst in people; and too often it is the worst. When death comes to a family, it doesn’t *create* problems; it *reveals* them. Many ministers and funeral directors have witnessed the “X-ray” power of death and bereavement as it reveals the hearts of people. In facing the death of others, we are confronted with our own death, and many people just can’t handle it. It also can be one of the most profound and effective opportunities to bear witness to the reality of Jesus Christ. [Cf. *Faith in the Night Seasons...*]

Endurance (vv. 4–6)

- 4] For to him that is joined to all the living there is hope: for a living dog is better than a dead lion.

When confronted by the stern fact of death, many people just grit their teeth, square their shoulders and endure. They hold on to that ancient motto, “Where there’s life, there’s hope!” (That’s a good paraphrase of v. 4.)

That motto goes as far back as the third century B.C. It’s part of a conversation between two farmers who are featured in a poem by the Greek poet Theokritos.

“Console yourself, dear Battos,” says Korydon. “Things may be better tomorrow. While there’s life there’s hope. Only the dead have none.”¹

- 5] For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not any thing, neither have they any more a reward; for the memory of them is forgotten.

The Christian believer has “a living hope,” not a “dead” hope, because the Saviour is alive and has conquered death (1 Pet 1:3–5; 2 Tim 1:10). A hope that can be destroyed by death is a false hope and must be abandoned.

What Solomon wrote about the dead can be “reversed” and applied to the living. The dead do not know what is happening on earth, but the living know and can respond to it. The dead cannot add anything to their reward or their reputation, but the living can.

The end of opportunity: The dead cannot relate to people on earth by loving, hating, or envying, but the living can. Solomon was emphasizing the importance of seizing opportunities while we live, rather than blindly hoping for something better in the future, because death will end our opportunities on this earth.

- 6] Also their love, and their hatred, and their envy, is now perished; neither have they any more a portion for ever in any *thing* that is done under the sun.

Enjoyment (vv. 7–10)

This has been one of Solomon’s recurring themes (2:24; 3:12–15, 22; 5:18–20; 8:15), and he will bring it up again (11:9–10).

Enjoy Your Meals (v. 7)

- 7] Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart; for God now accepteth thy works.

His admonition “Go thy way!” means: “Don’t sit around and brood! Get up and live!” Yes, death is coming, but God gives us good gifts to enjoy so enjoy them!

King Solomon sat down to a daily feast (1 Kgs 4:22–23), but there is evidence that he didn’t always enjoy it:

Better a meal of vegetables where there is love than a fattened calf with hatred.

Prov 15:17, NIV

Better a dry crust with peace and quiet than a house full of feasting, with strife.

Prov 17:1, NIV

Enjoy Every Occasion (v. 8)

8] Let thy garments be always white; and let thy head lack no ointment.

They wore their white garments as a symbol of joy and anointed themselves with expensive perfumes instead of the usual olive oil. These occasions were few, so everybody made the most of them. But Solomon advised the people to wear white garments *always* and to anoint themselves *always* with special perfume. We must not express our thanksgiving and joy only when we are celebrating special events.

Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!

Phil 4:4, NKJV

9] Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity, which he hath given thee under the sun, all the days of thy vanity: for that *is* thy portion in *this* life, and in thy labour which thou takest under the sun.

Solomon didn’t urge us to join the “fast track” and start searching for exotic pleasures in far away places. Instead, he listed some of the common experiences of home life:

- happy leisurely meals (v. 7),
- joyful family celebrations (v. 8),
- a faithful, loving marriage (v. 9), and
- hard work (v. 10).

What a contrast to modern society’s formula for happiness:

- fast food and a full schedule,
- the addictive pursuit of everything new,

- “live-in marriages,” and
- shortcuts guaranteed to help you avoid work ...but still get rich quick.

In recent years, there are many voices which have united to call us back to the traditional values of life. Some people are getting tired of the emptiness of living on substitutes. They want something more substantial than the “right” labels on their clothes and the “right” names to drop at the “right” places. Like the younger brother in our Lord’s parable (Lk 15:11–24), they have discovered that everything that’s really important is back home at the Father’s house.

10] Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do *it* with thy might; for *there is* no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.

Enjoy Your Work (v. 10)

The Jewish people looked upon work, not as a curse, but as a stewardship from God. Even their rabbis learned a trade (Paul was a tent maker) and reminded them, “He who does not teach a son to work, teaches him to steal.” Paul wrote, “If any would not work, neither should he eat” (2 Thess 3:10).

“Do it with all your might” (NASB) suggests two things: Do your very best, and do it while you still have strength.

And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him.

Colossians 3:17

The things that make up employment in this life will not be present in the grave (*sheol*, the realm of the dead), so make the most of your opportunities now. One day our works will be judged, and we want to receive a reward for His glory (1 Cor 3:10ff; Col 3:23–25). If we fear God and walk by faith we will not try to escape or merely endure life. We will enjoy life and receive it happily as a gift from the Lord.

2. Life Is Unpredictable (9:11–18)

11] I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race *is* not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.

Our *abilities* are no guarantee of success (vv. 11–12). While it is generally true that the fastest runners win the races, the strongest soldiers win the battles, and the smartest and most skillful workers win the best jobs, it is also true that these same gifted people can fail miserably because of factors out of their control.

The successful person knows how to make the most of “time and procedure” (8:5), but only the Lord can control “time and chance” (v. 11).

The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the LORD.
Prov 16:33

There are two concepts in mathematics that cannot be actually found in our physical reality: infinity and randomness. Infinity eludes us in both the macrocosm and the microcosm: 20th century science has determined that the universe is finite(!) and quantum physics tells us that particles below a specific size “lack locality.” Randomness is now attacked by Chaos Theory in mathematics.

Solomon already affirmed that God has a time for everything (3:1–8), a purpose to be fulfilled in that time (8:6), and “something beautiful” to come out of it in the end (3:11). Of course, Christians don’t depend on such things as “luck” or “chance,” because their confidence is in the loving providence of God. A dedicated Christian doesn’t carry a rabbit’s foot or trust in lucky days or numbers.

- 12] For man also knoweth not his time: as the fishes that are taken in an evil net, and as the birds that are caught in the snare; so *are* the sons of men snared in an evil time, when it falleth suddenly upon them.

Who knows when trouble will arrive on the scene and wreck all our great plans?

The best laid plans of mice and men gang aft aglé (often go awry).
Robert Burns

When they least expect it, fish are caught in the net and birds are caught in the trap. So men, too, are snared in “evil times,” sudden events that are beyond their control. That’s why Solomon will admonish diversification in your investments (11:2). That’s also why we should take to heart the admonition against boasting (James 4:13–17).

Opportunities are no Guarantee of Success (vv. 13–18)

- 13] This wisdom have I seen also under the sun, and it *seemed* great unto me:
14] *There was* a little city, and few men within it; and there came a great king against it, and besieged it, and built great bulwarks against it:
15] Now there was found in it a poor wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city; yet no man remembered that same poor man.

It is not clear whether the wise man actually delivered the city, or whether he could have saved it, and was asked but did not heed. I lean toward the second explanation because it fits in better with verses 16–18. (The Hebrew allows for the translation “could have”). The little city was besieged and the wise man could have delivered it, but nobody paid any attention to him.

No good deed will go unpunished.

- 16] Then said I, Wisdom *is* better than strength: nevertheless the poor man’s wisdom *is* despised, and his words are not heard.
17] The words of wise *men are* heard in quiet more than the cry of him that ruleth among fools.

Verse 17 suggests that a ruler with a loud mouth got all of the attention and led the people into defeat. The wise man spoke quietly and was ignored. He had the opportunity for greatness but was frustrated by one loud ignorant man.

- 18] Wisdom *is* better than weapons of war: but one sinner destroyeth much good.

This truth is illustrated throughout the whole of Scripture,

- Adam and his disobedience to God (Gen 3; Rom 5).
- Achan sinned and brought defeat on the army of Israel (Josh 7).
- David’s sin brought trouble to Israel (2 Sam 24), and
- The revolt of Absalom led the nation into a civil war (2 Sam 15ff).

Since death is unavoidable and life is unpredictable, the only course we can safely take is to yield ourselves into the hands of God and walk by faith in His Word. We don’t live by explanations; we live by promises. We don’t depend on luck but on the providential working of our loving Father as we trust His promises and obey His will.

As we walk by faith, we need not fear our “last enemy,” because Jesus Christ has conquered death. “Fear not; I am the first and the last; I am

He that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore” (Rev 1:17–18). Because He is alive, and we live in Him, we *don’t* look at life and say, “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity!”

Instead, we echo the confidence expressed by the Apostle Paul:

But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.

1 Cor 15:57–58, NKJV

Ecclesiastes 10 The Danger of Folly

(The word “folly” is used nine times in this chapter.)

- 1] Dead flies cause the ointment of the apothecary to send forth a stinking savour: *so doth* a little folly him that is in reputation for wisdom *and* honour.

Solomon had already compared a good name to fragrant perfume (7:1), so he used the image again. What dead flies are to perfume, folly is to the reputation of the wise person. The conclusion is logical: Wise people will stay away from folly!

“One ‘whoops’ can erase 50 ‘atta-boys’!”

- 2] A wise man’s heart *is* at his right hand; but a fool’s heart at his left.

[Sounds like a partisan political statement against the left!]

- 3] Yea also, when he that is a fool walketh by the way, his wisdom faileth *him*, and he saith to every one *that* he *is* a fool.

“His wisdom”: Heb. “his heart.”

The physical organ has nothing to do with wisdom or folly: Solomon was referring to the center of one’s life, the “master control” within us that governs “the issues of life” (Prov 4:23).

In the ancient world, the right hand was the place of power and honor, while the left hand represented weakness and rejection (Mt 25:33, 41). Many people considered the left side to be “unlucky.” (The English

word “sinister” comes from a Latin word that means “on the left hand”; as does the French “gauche.”)

[The sculptor Rodin is also a consistent case in point. It is often overlooked that his famed pair of hands called “The Cathedral” involves two *right* hands!]

Since the fool doesn’t have wisdom in his heart, he gravitates toward that which is wrong (the left) and gets into trouble (see 2:14). People try to correct him, but he refuses to listen, and this tells everybody that he is a fool. Having laid down the principle, Solomon then applied it to four different “fools.”

1. The Foolish Ruler (10:4–7)

If there is one person who needs wisdom, it is the ruler of a nation. When God asked Solomon what gift he especially wanted, the king asked for wisdom (1 Kgs 3:3–28).

Lyndon B. Johnson said, “A president’s hardest task is not to *do* what’s right, but to *know* what’s right.”

It’s tragic that in today’s educational environment, there is a denial of any standard of “rightness”: Value relativism destroys any incentive to learn. [Cf. Alan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind*.]

- 4] If the spirit of the ruler rise up against thee, leave not thy place; for yielding pacifieth great offences.

If a ruler is *proud*, he may say and do foolish things that cause him to lose the respect of his associates. The picture here is of a proud ruler who easily becomes angry and takes out his anger on the attendants around him. If a man has no control over himself, how can he hope to have control over his people?

He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city.

Prov 16:32, NKJV

Whoever has no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down, without walls.

Prov 25:28, NKJV

It isn't necessary for his servants to act like fools! In fact, that's the worse thing they can do (8:3). Far better that they control themselves, stay right where they are and seek to bring peace.

Through patience a ruler can be persuaded, and a gentle tongue can break a bone.

Prov 25:15, NIV

A king's wrath is a messenger of death, but a wise man will appease it.

Prov 16:14, NIV

To be sure, there is a righteous anger that sometimes needs to be displayed (Eph 4:26), but not everything we call "righteous indignation" is really "righteous." It is so easy to give vent to jealousy and malice by disguising them as holy zeal for God.

Not every religious crusader is motivated by love for God or obedience to the Word. His or her zeal could be a mask that is covering hidden anger or jealousy.

- 5] There is an evil *which* I have seen under the sun, as an error *which* proceedeth from the ruler:
6] Folly is set in great dignity, and the rich sit in low place.

"in great...": Heb. "in great heights."

But if a ruler is too *pliable*, he is also a fool (vv. 5–7). If he lacks character and courage, he will put fools in the high offices and qualified people in the low offices. The servants will ride on horses while the noblemen will walk (see Prov 19:10 and 30:21–22). If a ruler has incompetent people advising him, he is almost certain to govern the nation unwisely.

Solomon's son Rehoboam was proud and unyielding, and this led to the division of the kingdom (1 Kgs 12:1–24). Instead of following the advice of the wise counselors, he listened to his youthful friends. He made the elders walk and he put the young men on the horses.

The best rulers (and leaders) are men and women who are tough-minded but tenderhearted, who put the best people on the horses and don't apologize for it.

- 7] I have seen servants upon horses, and princes walking as servants upon the earth.

2. Foolish Workers (10:8–11)

Commentators are not agreed on what Solomon's point is in this graphic section. Was he saying that every job has its occupational hazards? If so, what lesson was he teaching, and why did he take so much space to illustrate the obvious?

His theme is *folly*, and he certainly was not teaching that hard work is foolish because you might get injured! Throughout the book, Solomon emphasized the importance of honest labor and the joys it can bring. Why would he contradict that message?

Warren Wiersbe suggests Solomon was describing people who attempted to do their work and suffered *because they were foolish*. One man dug a pit, perhaps a well or a place for storing grain, but fell into the pit himself. Why? Because he lacked wisdom and failed to take proper precautions. Frequently Scripture uses this as a picture of just retribution, but that doesn't seem to be the lesson here. (See Ps 7:15; 9:15–16; 10:2; 35:8; 57:6; Prov 26:27; 28:10.)

- 8] He that diggeth a pit shall fall into it; and whoso breaketh an hedge, a serpent shall bite him.

Another man broke through a hedge [wall, fence], perhaps while remodeling his house, and a serpent bit him. Serpents often found their way into hidden crevices and corners, and the man should have been more careful. He was overconfident and did not look ahead.

- 9] Whoso removeth stones shall be hurt therewith; *and* he that cleaveth wood shall be endangered thereby.

Verse 9 takes us to the quarries and the forests, where careless workers are injured cutting stones and splitting logs.

- 10] If the iron be blunt, and he do not whet the edge, then must he put to more strength: but wisdom *is* profitable to direct.

Verse 10 pictures a foolish worker *par excellence*: a man who tried to split wood with a dull ax. The wise worker will pause in his labors and sharpen it.

"Don't work harder—work smarter!"

11] Surely the serpent will bite without enchantment; and a babbler is no better.

“...a babbler”: Heb. “the master of the tongue.”

Snake charmers were common as entertainers in that day (v. 11, and see Ps 58:4–5 and Jer 8:17). Snakes have no external ears; they pick up sound waves primarily through the bone structure of the head. More than the music played by the charmer, it is the man’s disciplined actions (swaying and “staring”) that hold the snake’s attention and keep the serpent under control. It is indeed an art.

Solomon described a performer who was bitten by the snake before the man had opportunity to “charm” it. Beside risking his life, the charmer could not collect any money from the spectators (see v. 11, NIV). They would only laugh at him. He was a fool because he rushed and acted as though the snake were charmed. He wanted to collect his money in a hurry and move to another location. The more “shows” he put on, the bigger his income. Instead, he made no money at all.

Some charmers had a mongoose available that “caught” the snake just at the right time and “saved” the man from being bitten. If for some reason the mongoose missed his cue, the serpent might attack the charmer, and that would be the end of the show. Either way, the man was foolish.

The common denominator among these “foolish workers” seems to be presumption. They were overconfident and ended up either hurting themselves or making their job harder.

3. Foolish Talkers (10:12–15)

In the Book of Proverbs, Solomon had much to say about the speech of fools. In this paragraph, he pointed out 4 characteristics of their words.

1. Destructive Words

12] The words of a wise man’s mouth *are* gracious; but the lips of a fool will swallow up himself.

The wise person will speak gracious words that are suited to the listeners and the occasion (Prov 10:32; 25:11). Whether in personal conversation or public ministry, our Lord always knew the right thing to say at the right time (Isa 50:4). We should try to emulate Him. But the fool blurts out whatever is on his mind and doesn’t stop to consider who might be hurt

by it. In the end, it is the fool himself who is hurt the most: “a fool is consumed by his own lips” (Ecc 10:12, NIV).

In Scripture, destructive words are compared to

- weapons of war (Prov 25:18),
- a fire (James 3:5–6), and
- a poisonous beast (James 3:7–8).

We may try to hurt others with our lies, slander, and angry words, but we are really hurting ourselves the most.

He who guards his mouth preserves his life, but he who opens wide his lips shall have destruction.

Prov 13:3, NKJV

Whoever guards his mouth and tongue keeps his soul from troubles.

Prov. 21:23, NKJV

2. Unreasonable words (v. 13)

13] The beginning of the words of his mouth *is* foolishness: and the end of his talk *is* mischievous madness.

“The beginning of his talking is folly, and the end of it is wicked madness” (NASB). What he says doesn’t make sense. And the longer he talks, the crazier it becomes. He would be better off to keep quiet, because all that he says only lets everybody know that he is a fool (5:3). Paul called these people “unruly and vain talkers” (Titus 1:10), which J.B. Phillips translates “who will not recognize authority, who talk nonsense” (PH).

3. Uncontrolled Words (v. 14)

14] A fool also is full of words: a man cannot tell what shall be; and what shall be after him, who can tell him?

“...is full...”: Heb. multiplieth words. The fool is “full of words” without realizing that he is saying nothing.

In the multitude of words, sin is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is wise.

Prov 10:19, NKJV

The person who can control his or her tongue is able to discipline the entire body (James 3:1–2). Jesus said, “But let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes’ and

your 'No' be 'No.' For whatever is more than this is from the evil one" (Mt 5:37, NKJV).

- Indifference (v. 19).
- Indiscretion (v. 20).

4. Boastful Words (14b-15).

15] The labour of the foolish wearieth every one of them, because he knoweth not how to go to the city.

Foolish people talk about the future as though they either know all about it or are in control of what will happen.

Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth.

Prov 27:1, NKJV

Solomon continually emphasized man's ignorance of the future (3:22; 6:12; 8:7; 9:12), a truth that wise people receive but fools reject (Cf. James 4:13–17).

There is a bit of humor here: The fool boasts about his future plans and wearies people with his talk, but he can't even find the way to the city. In Bible times, the roads to the cities were well-marked so that any traveler could find his way, but the fool is so busy talking about the future that he loses his way in the present; i.e., "He's so dumb, he couldn't learn the route to run an elevator."

4. Foolish Officers (10:16–20)

"I divide my officers into four classes: the brilliant, the stupid, the industrious, and the lazy. Those that are brilliant and industrious are fitted for the highest staff positions. Work can also be found for the stupid and lazy. Those who are brilliant and lazy have the requisite nerve for the highest command positions. But those who are stupid and industrious represent a danger and must be removed at all costs!"

(Napoleon's Officer)

Solomon has already described foolish rulers. Now he exposes the folly of the officers who work under those rulers, the bureaucrats who were a part of the machinery of the kingdom. He gave four characteristics of these foolish men:

- Indulgence (vv. 16–17)
- Incompetence (v. 18).

1. Indulgence (vv. 16–17)

16] Woe to thee, O land, when thy king *is* a child, and thy princes eat in the morning!

If the king is immature, the people he gathers around him will reflect that immaturity and take advantage of it. But if he is a true nobleman, he will surround himself with noble officers who will put the good of the country first. Real leaders use their authority to build the nation, while mere officeholders use the nation to build their authority. They use public funds for their own selfish purposes, throwing parties and having a good time.

It is a judgment of God when a people are given immature leaders (Isa 3:1–5)! This can happen to a nation or to a local church. The term "elder" (Titus 1:5ff) implies maturity and experience in the Christian life, and it is wrong for a believer to be thrust into leadership too soon (1 Tim 3:6). Age is no guarantee of maturity (1 Cor 3:1–4; Heb 5:11–14), and youth sometimes outstrips its elders in spiritual zeal.

The *New International Version* translates verse 16, "Woe to you, O land whose king was a servant." The suggestion is that this servant became king with the help of his friends (cf. 4:13–14). Now he was obligated to give them all jobs so he could remain on the throne. In spite of their selfish and expensive indulgence, these hirelings could not be dismissed, because the king's security depended on them. To the victor belong the spoils!

17] Blessed *art* thou, O land, when thy king *is* the son of nobles, and thy princes eat in due season, for strength, and not for drunkenness!

2. Incompetence (v. 18)

18] By much slothfulness the building decayeth; and through idleness of the hands the house droppeth through.

These foolish officers are so busy with enjoyment that they have no time for employment, and both the buildings and the organization start to fall apart.

He also who is slothful in his work is brother to him that is a great waster.

Prov 18:9

(This sounds like a comment on unions...)

There is a difference between those who *use* an office and those who merely *hold* an office (1 Tim 3:10). Immature people enjoy the privileges and ignore the responsibilities, while mature people see the responsibilities as privileges and use them to help others.

A friend of mine says that every man who takes office in Washington either grows or swells; when I give a man an office, I watch him carefully to see whether he is swelling or growing.

Woodrow Wilson

3. Indifference (v. 19)

19] A feast is made for laughter, and wine maketh merry: but money answereth all things.

“...maketh...”: Heb. “maketh glad the life.”

This verse declares the personal philosophy of the foolish officers: Eat all you can, enjoy all you can, and get all you can. They are totally indifferent to the responsibilities of their office or the needs of the people. In recent years, various developing nations have seen how easy it is for unscrupulous leaders to steal government funds in order to build their own kingdoms. This is tragically true among some religious organizations!

For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.

1 Tim 6:10, NKJV

The prophet Amos cried out against the wicked rulers of his day who trampled on the heads of the poor and treated them like the dust of the earth (Amos 2:7, and see 4:1; 5:11–12).

4. Indiscretion (v. 20)

20] Curse not the king, no not in thy thought; and curse not the rich in thy bedchamber: for a bird of the air shall carry the voice, and that which hath wings shall tell the matter.

“...thought”: or, “conscience.”

The familiar saying “A little bird told me” probably originated from this verse.

You can imagine a group of these officers having a party in one of their private rooms and, instead of toasting the king, they are cursing [“making light of”] him. Of course, they wouldn’t do this if any of the king’s friends were present, but they were sure that the company would faithfully keep the secret. Alas, somebody told the king what was said, and this gave him reason to punish them or dismiss them from their offices. [A secret is something you tell one person at a time!]

Even if we can’t respect the person in the office, we must respect the office (Rom 13:1–7; 1 Pet 2:13–17).

You shall not revile God, nor curse a ruler of your people.

Ex 22:28

These hirelings were certainly indiscreet when they cursed the king, for they should have known that one of their number would use this event either to intimidate his friends or to ingratiate himself with the ruler.

A statesman asks, “What is best for my country?”

A politician asks, “What is best for my party?”

But a mere officeholder, a hireling, asks, “What is safest and most profitable for me?”

This completes Solomon’s review of his fourth argument that life is not worth living, “the certainty of death” (2:12–23). He has concluded that life is indeed worth living, even though death is unavoidable (9:1–10) and life is unpredictable (9:11–18). What we must do is avoid folly (ch. 10) and live by the wisdom of God.

This also concludes the second part of his discourse. He has reviewed the four arguments presented in Chapters 1 and 2, and has decided that life was really worth living after all.

The best thing we can do is to trust God, do our work, accept what God sends us, and enjoy each day of our lives to the glory of God (3:12–15, 22; 5:18–20; 8:15; 9:7–10).

All that now remains for Solomon is to conclude his discourse with a practical application, and this he does in chapters 11 and 12. He will bring together all the various strands of truth that he has woven into his sermon, and he will show us what God expects us to do if we are to “be satisfied,” (which is what Warren Wiersbe calls his commentary on Ecclesiastes.)

Addenda:

Reincarnation

“What is reincarnation?”
a cowboy asked his friend.
It starts, his old pal told him,
when your life comes to an end.
They comb your hair, wash your neck,
and clean your fingernails,
and put you in a padded box
away from life’s travails.

Now the box and you goes in the hole
that’s been dug in the ground.
Reincarnation starts in when
you’re planted ‘neath that mound.
Them clods melt down just like the box
and you who is inside.
And that is when you begin
your transformation ride.

And in awhile the grass will grow
upon your render’d mound
Till someday upon that spot,
a lonely flower is found.
And then a horse may wander by
and graze upon that flower
That once was you and now has become
your vegetated bower.

And now the flower the horse done eat
along with his other feed
‘Makes bone and fat and muscle,
essential to the steed.
But there’s a part that he can’t use
and so it just passes through
And there it lies upon the ground,
this thing that once was you.

And if, perchance, I should pass by
and see this on the ground
I’ll stop awhile and ponder at

this object that I’ve found.
And I’ll think about reincarnation
and life and death and such
But I’ll come away concludin’
—why, you ain’t changed all that much.

—Wallace McRea

Study Questions

(For the diligent student.)

- 1) Where is there a rebuttal of reincarnation in the Scriptures?
- 2) What are three responses Solomon suggests result from a fear of death?
- 3) What does Solomon suggest about enjoyment? Where should we find it?
- 4) List four characteristics of words from foolish talkers.
- 5) List four characteristics of foolish men.

Discussion Questions

(“Where two people agree, one is redundant.”)

- 1) It has been suggested that there are two concepts in mathematics that cannot be actually found in our physical reality: infinity, and randomness. Discuss your own views. How does this insight impact your understanding of the Bible?
- 2) How can life be monotonous and unpredictable at the same time? Explain.
- 3) How can “value relativism” destroy an incentive toward learning?

Research Projects

(For the truly dedicated.)

- 1) How does the insights of modern physics (hyperspaces; quantum physics; etc.) time impact one’s hermeneutics? One’s eschatology?

Preparation for Next Session:

Read the remaining chapters—11 & 12—and outline a summary of the book.

Notes:

1. Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Satisfied*, Ecc 9:1, Victor Books, Wheaton, IL, 1996 c1990.

Session 7 Ecclesiastes 11 & 12 “Is Life Worth Living?”

That was the question Solomon raised when he began this discourse that we call Ecclesiastes. After experimenting and investigating “life under the sun,” he initially concluded, “No, life is *not* worth living!” He gave four arguments to support his conclusion:

- the monotony of life,
- the vanity of wisdom,
- the futility of wealth, and
- the certainty of death.

Being a wise man, Solomon then reviewed his arguments and this time brought God into the picture. What a difference it makes! He realized that life was not monotonous but filled with challenging situations from God, each in its own time and each for its own purpose. He also learned that wealth could be enjoyed and employed to the glory of God.

Though man’s wisdom couldn’t explain everything, Solomon concluded that it was better to follow God’s wisdom than to practice man’s folly. As for the certainty of death, there is no way to escape it; and it ought to motivate us to enjoy life now and make the most of the opportunities God gives us. Now Solomon was ready for his conclusion and personal application. He now presents *four pictures of life* and attaches to each picture a practical admonition for his readers to heed:

Life is an **ADVENTURE**—live by faith (11:1–6)

Life is a **GIFT**—enjoy it (11:7–12:8)

Life is a **SCHOOL**—learn your lessons (12:9–12)

Life is a **STEWARDSHIP**—fear God (12:13–14)

These four pictures parallel the four arguments that Solomon had earlier wrestled with throughout the book. Life is not monotonous; rather, it is an adventure of faith that is anything but predictable or tedious.

Yes, death is certain, but life is a gift from God and He wants us to enjoy it. Are there questions we can’t answer and problems we can’t solve? Don’t despair. God teaches us His truth as we advance in “the school of life,” and He will give us wisdom enough to make sensible decisions. Finally, as far as wealth is concerned, all of life is a stewardship from God; *and one day He will call us to give an account*. Therefore, “fear God, and keep His commandments” (12:13).

Life Is an Adventure: Live by Faith (11:1–6)

[My experience through the Naval Academy (and following) gave me an appetite for adventure that I’ve never lost. . .the Air Force. . .The “missile gap” years. . .Reconnaissance satellites of the early 60’s. . . the strategic think days. . . computer networks of the mid-60’s. . . the merger mania of the 70’s. . .the personal computers of the 80’s. . . and the pursuit of God’s plan for each of us is the greatest adventure of all!]

- 1] Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days.

“...upon...”: Heb. “upon the face of the waters.”

“Cast thy bread upon the waters” may be paraphrased, “Send out your grain in ships.” Solomon himself was involved in various kinds of trade, so it was natural for him to use this illustration (1 Kgs 10:15, 22).

Risk Management

It would be months before the ships would return with their precious cargo; but when they did, the merchant’s faith and patience would be rewarded. A great deal of faith is required, because neither the merchant nor the farmer can control the circumstances. The ships might hit a reef, meet a storm, or be attacked by pirates and the cargo lost. Bad weather, blight, or insects might destroy the crop, and a farmer’s labor would be in vain.

However, if the merchant and the farmer waited until the circumstances were ideal, they would never get anything done! Life has a certain amount of risk to it, and that’s where faith comes in. A turtle doesn’t get

anywhere until he sticks his neck out! Remember Jonathan and his armor bearer! The Lord's work is the ultimate venture!

- 2] Give a portion to seven, and also to eight; for thou knowest not what evil shall be upon the earth.

Here Solomon gives us profoundly significant advice that can grow (and preserve) our fortunes! Prudent and diligent investment is major responsibility for the believer:

But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel.

1 Timothy 5:8

(That's strong language for Paul to use!)

"For you do not know" is a key phrase in this section (vv. 2, 5, 6). Man is ignorant of the future, but he must not allow his ignorance to make him so fearful that he becomes either careless or paralyzed. On the contrary, not knowing the future should make us more careful in what we plan and what we do. In other words, "Don't put all your eggs in one basket." Decision Theory: a mixed strategy is best.

Asset Allocation

Diversify your investments. Not just 7 or 8 stocks: but 7 or 8 different kinds of investments. Common categories include:

- Equities (stocks);
- Bonds (debts; fixed rate of return)
- Government securities (Lower returns, less risk)
- Real Estate (secure, but lack of liquidity)
- Notes Receivable (mortgages, trust deeds, etc.)
- Tangibles (gold, silver, etc.)
- Derivatives (options, futures, etc.)
- Speculative specialties (numismatics, antiques, etc)

There are many tools to manage risk: diversification, insurance, options (defensively as well as aggressively), etc. But it takes study and preparation.

Each category offers a diverse spectrum of risk/reward ratios, safety, liquidity, etc.

Addenda:

The Basic Vortex Strategy

Concerning basic financial planning, we feel that your strategy should be to prepare for a coming storm.

A prudent man foreseeeth the evil, and hideth himself, but the simple pass on and are punished.

Proverbs 27:12

When the weather is fair and seemingly calm, it is the perfect time to clear the decks, reduce excess baggage, repair any deficiencies, reexamine and repair our spiritual armor, and get better prepared in every way—spiritually, financially, and physically—for the challenges which you know are coming.

1. Lower Your Cost of Living

Respond creatively to careful analysis of your real priorities. Keep it simple—it's not easy, but essential for any real freedom. (Your critical "budget" isn't your dollars: it is your *time*. Time is your most *inelastic* supply.)

2. Get Out of Personal Debt

Debt is a presumption on the future and contrary to God's plan for your life. With the incremental cash flow from Step 1, reduce, and eventually eliminate, personal unsecured debt.

3. Guard Your Liquidity (Mobility)

This requires diligence. Avoid excessive commitments that cloud your freedom of action.

4. Learn the *Supernatural* Basis of Stewardship

What is the Biblical basis for financial stewardship? God reveals at least four purposes for money in the Scriptures:

1. Provision 1 Kings 17:4

God uses our finances

to establish daily dependence on Him (Mt 6:11);
to deepen our love for Him (Col 2:10; Jn 15:5);
to develop a spirit of gratefulness in us and
to teach us to live within our means (1 Tim 6:6); and, to help us enjoy
our possessions (Heb 13:5).

2. Direction 1 Kings 17:7

The Lord uses our financial situation

to build our faith and vision and
to determine who is the Lord of our life (1 Tim 6:17); to protect us
from harmful items (1 Tim 6:9); to teach us patience (Rom 5:3; Jas
1:3,4); and, to help us concentrate on true riches (Phil 3:7,8).

3. Fellowship 1 Kings 17:9

God desires us to use our finances

to unite Christians (2 Cor 8:14);
to demonstrate the mark of a Christian (Titus 2:4);
to initiate spontaneous thanksgiving (2 Cor 9:11); and, to multiply
the potential for giving (2 Cor 9:6).

4. Demonstration Jas 5:17

Money is used in our lives

to demonstrate God's power
to cause Christians to trust Him (1 Kgs 18:21-40);
to mock the false gods of our age and
to purify our lives and motives (Ps 66:18);
to bring non-Christians to salvation (Acts 5:12-14); and, to glorify
God (Ps 50:15).

The Tithe

Why tithe?

It acknowledges the Creator's rights—The Tenth of all is His;
it is the antidote for greed and covetousness;
it is a test of our faith and
it is the solution to every financial problem!

5. Put on the Whole Armor of God (Eph 6:10-18)

A review of our near horizon reveals that it's more important than ever
to:

- gird your loins with Truth;
- put on the Breastplate of Righteousness and
- the Shoes of Preparation of the Gospel;
- hold out the Shield of Faith;
- wear the Helmet of Salvation and
- carry the Sword of the Spirit
—and don't forget the Heavy Artillery: Prayer!

[Cf. Our briefing package, *Armor in the Age of Deceit.*]

* * *

The Farmer (vv. 3–6)

Daniel Webster called farmers “the founders of civilization,” and Thomas Jefferson said they were “the chosen people of God.” Farming has never been easy work, and this was especially true in the Holy Land in Bible days. The Jews tilled a rocky soil, and they depended on the early and latter rains to nourish their seed. Nobody can predict the weather, let alone control it, and the farmer is very much at the mercy of nature.

- 3] If the clouds be full of rain, they empty *themselves* upon the earth: and if the tree fall toward the south, or toward the north, in the place where the tree falleth, there it shall be.

Verse 3 contrasts the clouds with the tree. Clouds are always changing. They come and go, and the farmer hopes they will spill their precious water on his fields. Trees are somewhat permanent. They stand in the same place, unless a storm topples them; and then they lie there and rot. The past [the tree] cannot be changed, but the present [the clouds] is available to us, and we must seize each opportunity.

Wall Street: “New day, new deal.”

- 4] He that observeth the wind shall not sow; and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap.

But don't sit around waiting for ideal circumstances. The wind is never right for the sower and the clouds are never right for the reaper. If you are looking for an excuse for doing nothing, you can always find one. Billy Sunday said that an excuse was “the skin of a reason stuffed with a lie.” Life is an adventure and often we must launch out by faith, even when the circumstances seem adverse.

On Wall Street: “Buy when there’s blood in the streets.”

Baron Rothschild

“Bull markets always climb a wall of worry...”

- 5] As thou knowest not what *is* the way of the spirit, *nor* how the bones *do grow* in the womb of her that is with child: even so thou knowest not the works of God who maketh all.

Just as nobody knows “the way of the wind” (v. 5, NKJV, and see John 3:8) or how the fetus is formed in the womb (Ps 139:14–15), so nobody knows the works of God in His creation. [A new baby remains as God’s greatest miracle...]

God has a time and a purpose for everything (3:1–11), and we must live by faith in His Word.

- 6] In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand: for thou knowest not whether shall prosper, either this or that, or whether they both *shall be* alike good.

“...shall prosper”: Heb. “shall be right.” Therefore, use each day wisely. Get up early and sow your seed, and work hard until evening. Do the job at hand and “redeem the time” (Eph 5:15–17), trusting God to bless at least some of the tasks you have accomplished.

Life is an adventure of faith, and each of us is like a merchant, investing today in that which will pay dividends tomorrow. We are like the farmer, sowing various kinds of seeds in different soils, trusting God for the harvest (Gal 6:8–9; Ps 126:5–6; Hos 10:12).

If we worried about the wind toppling a tree over on us, or the clouds drenching us with rain, we would never accomplish anything. Just as the merchant sends out more than one ship, and the farmer works more than one crop, spread your efforts on more than one project.

Of course, there is no formula for success, except, perhaps, an unconditional acceptance of life and what it brings.

Arthur Rubinstein

Life Is a Gift: Enjoy It (11:7–12:8)

This is Solomon’s sixth and final admonition that we accept life as a gift and learn to enjoy all that God shares with us (see 2:24; 3:12–15, 22; 5:18–

20; 8:15; 9:7–10). In order to do this, we must obey three instructions:

Rejoice(11:7–9),
Remove(11:10), and
Remember(12:1–8).

Rejoice

- 7] Truly the light *is* sweet, and a pleasant *thing it is* for the eyes to behold the sun:
8] But if a man live many years, *and* rejoice in them all; yet let him remember the days of darkness; for they shall be many. All that cometh *is* vanity.

Solomon especially instructed the young people to take advantage of the days of youth before the “days of darkness” would arrive. He was not suggesting that young people have no problems or that older people have no joys. He was simply making a generalization that youth is the time for enjoyment, before the problems of old age start to reveal themselves.

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may, Old Time is still a-flying, And this same flower that smiles today, Tomorrow will be dying.

Robert Herrick

- 9] Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes: but know thou, that for all these *things* God will bring thee into judgment.

Young people have to watch their hearts and their eyes, because either or both can lead them into sin (Num 15:39; Prov 4:23; Mt 5:27–30).

“Walk in the ways of your heart” (NKJV) is not an encouragement to go on a youthful fling and satisfy the sinful desires within (Jer 17:9; Mk 7:20–23). It is rather a reminder for young people to enjoy the special pleasures that belong to youth and can never be experienced again in quite the same way.

Caveat: Solomon’s warning is evidence that he doesn’t have sinful pleasures in mind: “God will bring you into judgment.”

God does give us “all things richly to enjoy” (1 Tim 6:17), but it is always wrong to enjoy the pleasures of sin. The young person who enjoys life in the will of God will have nothing to worry about when the Lord returns.

Remove

- 10] Therefore remove sorrow from thy heart, and put away evil from thy flesh: for childhood and youth *are* vanity.

Privileges must be balanced by personal responsibilities. Young people must put anxiety out of their hearts (Mt 6:24–34) and evil away from their flesh (2 Cor 7:1).

The word translated “sorrow” means “vexation, inner pain, anxiety.” If we are living in the will of God, we will have the peace of God in our hearts (Phil 4:6–9). The sins of the flesh only destroy the body and can bring eternal judgment to the soul.

The phrase “childhood and youth are vanity” does not mean that these stages in life are unimportant and a waste of time. Quite the opposite is true! The best way to have a happy adult life and a contented old age is to get a good start early in life and avoid the things that will bring trouble later on. Young people who take care of their minds and bodies, avoid the destructive sins of the flesh, and build good habits of health and holiness have a better chance for happy adult years than those who “sow their wild oats” and pray for a crop failure.

The phrase means “childhood and youth are transient.” These precious years go by so quickly, and we must not waste our opportunities for preparing for the future.

The Hebrew word translated “youth” can mean “the dawning” or “blackness of hair” (as opposed to gray hair). Youth is indeed the time of “dawning”; and before we know it, the sun will start to set. Therefore, make the most of those “dawning years,” because you will never see them again.

Youthful sins lay a foundation for aged sorrows.

Charles Spurgeon

Ecclesiastes 12

Remember (12:1–8).

This third instruction means more than “think about God.” It means “pay attention to, consider with the intention of obeying.”

It is Solomon’s version of Matthew 6:33, “But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness” (NKJV). How easy it is to neglect the Lord when you are caught up in the enjoyments and opportunities of youth.

- 1] Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them;
2] While the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars, be not darkened, nor the clouds return after the rain:

We know that dark days (11:8) and difficult [evil] days (12:1) are coming, so we had better lay a good spiritual foundation as early in life as possible. During our youthful years, the sky is bright (11:7); but the time will come when there will be darkness and one storm after another.

We should pray that “*the lessons [we are experiencing] not be wasted!*”

The Aging of a House

Verses 3–7 give us one of the most imaginative descriptions of old age and death found anywhere in literature. Students don’t agree on all the details of interpretation, but most of them do see here a picture of a house that is falling apart and finally turns to dust.

A dwelling place is one Biblical metaphor for the human body (Job 4:19; 2 Cor 5:1–2 [a tent]; 2 Peter 1:13 [a tent]), and taking down a house or tent is a picture of death.

- 3] In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble, and the strong men shall bow themselves, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look out of the windows be darkened,

“...the grinders...”: or, “the grinders fail, because they grind little.”

keepers of the house—Your arms and hands tremble.

strong men—Your legs, knees, and shoulders weaken and you walk bent over.

grinders—You start to lose your teeth.

windows—Your vision begins to deteriorate.

- 4] And the doors shall be shut in the streets, when the sound of the grinding is low, and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird, and all the daughters of music shall be brought low;

doors—Either your hearing starts to fail, or you close your mouth because you’ve lost your teeth.

grinding—You can’t chew your food, or your ears can’t pick up the sounds outdoors.

rise up—You wake up with the birds early each morning, and wish you could sleep longer.

music—Your voice starts to quaver and weaken.

- 5] Also *when* they shall be afraid of *that which is* high, and fears *shall be* in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail: because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets:

afraid—You are terrified of heights and afraid of falling while you walk down the street.

almond tree—If you have any hair left, it turns white, like almond blossoms.

grasshopper—You just drag yourself along, like a grasshopper at the close of the summer season.

desire—You lose your appetite, or perhaps your sexual desire.

long home—You go to your eternal [long] home and people mourn your death.

- 6] Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern.

This describes a golden bowl—a lamp—hanging from the ceiling on a silver chain. The chain breaks and the bowl breaks. The fragile “cord of life” is snapped and the light of life goes out. Only wealthy people could have such costly lamps, so Solomon may be hinting that death is no respecter of persons.

The verse also pictures a well with a windlass for bringing up a pitcher filled with water. One day the wheel breaks, the pitcher is shattered, and the end comes. The fountain of water was an ancient image for life (Ps 36:8–9; Rev 21:6). When the machinery of life stops working, the water of life stops flowing. The heart stops pumping, the blood stops circulating, and death has come.

- 7] Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.

The spirit leaves the body (James 2:26; Lk 23:46; Acts 7:59), the body begins to decay, and eventually it turns to dust.

- 8] Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher; all *is* vanity.

For the last time in his discourse, the Preacher said, “Vanity of vanities...all is vanity.”

The book closes where it began (1:2), emphasizing the emptiness of life without God. When you look at life “under the sun,” everything does seem vain; but when you know Jesus Christ as your Saviour, “your labor is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Cor. 15:58).

Next Session: Remainder of Chapter 12. Review and Conclusion of the Book.

Study Questions

(For the diligent student.)

- 1) Contrast Solomon’s attitudes in the first several chapters with his reexamination in later chapters regarding:
 - The monotony of life;
 - The vanity of wisdom;
 - The futility of wealth; and
 - The certainty of death.
- 2) What is the main reason for diversifying your investment portfolio?
- 3) List the five steps of the “Vortex Strategy.”
- 4) List ten purposes which God may use your financial situation to accomplish.
- 5) List the seven elements of the Armor of God, and explain each of them.

Discussion Questions

(“Where two people agree, one is redundant.”)

- 1) Discuss the appropriate role of forecasting and prediction in modern business. Contrast this with the Biblical injunctions to “take no thought for the morrow,” etc.
- 2) If “the lot is in the lap of the Lord” (Prov 16:33), are the circumstances we encounter predetermined? If so, what role do our own decisions

play? Do we really have free will, or are the outcomes predetermined?

Research Projects

(For the truly dedicated.)

- 1) Explore the role of tithing:
 - Before the law was given;
 - As practiced in Mosaic Judaism;
 - In the New Testament;
 - And today.

Preparation for Next Session:

Review the 12 chapters, and contrast Solomon's introductory attitudes with his later conclusions.

* * *

Session 8

Review: "Is life worth living?"

That was the question Solomon raised when he began this discourse that we call Ecclesiastes. After experimenting and investigating "life under the sun," he initially concluded, "No, life is *not* worth living!" He gave four arguments to support his conclusion:

the monotony of life,
the vanity of wisdom,
the futility of wealth, and
the certainty of death.

Being a wise man, Solomon then reviewed his arguments and this time brought God into the picture. What a difference that makes! He realized that life was not monotonous but filled with challenging situations from God, each in its own time and each for its own purpose.

Though man's wisdom couldn't explain everything, Solomon concluded that it was better to follow God's wisdom than to practice man's folly. He also learned that wealth could be enjoyed and employed to the

glory of God. As for the certainty of death, there is no way to escape it; and it ought to motivate us to enjoy life now and make the most of the opportunities God gives us.

Now Solomon was ready for his conclusion and personal application. He then now presented *four pictures of life* and attached to each picture a practical admonition for his readers to heed:

Life is an **ADVENTURE**—live by faith (11:1–6)
Life is a **GIFT**—enjoy it (11:7–12:8)
Life is a **SCHOOL**—learn your lessons (12:9–12)
Life is a **STEWARDSHIP**—fear God (12:13–14)

These four pictures parallel the four arguments that Solomon had earlier wrestled with throughout the book.

Chapter 12:6-8 (Review)

- 6] Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern.
- 7] Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.
- 8] Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher; all *is* vanity.

For the last time in his discourse, the Preacher said, "Vanity of vanities...all is vanity." The book closes where it began (1:2), emphasizing the emptiness of life without God.

When you look at life "under the sun," everything does seem vain; but when you know Jesus Christ as your Saviour, "your labor is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Cor 15:58).

Chapter 12:9-14

Life Is a School: Learn your Lessons (12:9–12)

Someone has said that life is like a school, except that sometimes you don't know what the lessons are until you have *failed the examination!*

One of our prayers should be, "*Don't let the lessons be wasted.*" It's better to learn them the first time so that they don't have to be repeated.

God teaches us primarily from His Word; but He also teaches us through creation, history, and the various experiences of life. Solomon, “the preacher,” explained the characteristics of his own work as a teacher of God’s truth:

- 9] And moreover, because the preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yea, he gave good heed, and sought out, *and* set in order many proverbs.

His teaching was *wise*; for Solomon was the wisest of men (1 Kgs 3:3–28). The king studied and explored many subjects, and some of his conclusions he wrote down in proverbs.

His teaching was also *orderly*. After studying a matter, he weighed his conclusions carefully, and then arranged them in an orderly fashion. We may not always fully understand the pattern behind his arrangement, but it is there just the same.

- 10] The preacher sought to find out acceptable words: and *that which* was written was upright, *even* words of truth.

“...acceptable...”: Heb. “words of delight.”

Solomon sought to be *careful* in his teaching, so he used “acceptable words.” This means “pleasing” or “gracious” words (10:12) that would win the attention of his listeners and readers. However, at no time did he dilute his message or flatter his congregation. He always used *upright words of truth*. (See Prov 8:6–11.) Like our Lord Jesus Christ, the king was able to combine “grace and truth” (Jn 1:17; Lk 4:16–32).

- 11] The words of the wise *are* as goads, and as nails fastened *by* the masters of assemblies, *which* are given from one shepherd.

Solomon claimed that his words were *inspired*, given by God, the One Shepherd. His works were included in the Septuagint Version (the Greek translation of the Old Testament completed three centuries *before* the Gospel period and which became the Scriptures for the early Christians).

Inspiration was the special miracle ministry of the Holy Spirit that enabled men of God to write the Word of God as God wanted it written, complete and without error (2 Tim 3:16–17; 2 Pet 1:20–21).

[See our briefing package, *How We Got Our Bible* for a review of essential background about our sacred text.]

He compared his words to “goads” and “nails” (v. 11), both of which are necessary if people are to learn God’s truth. The “goads” prod the people to pay attention and to pursue truth, while the “nails” give them something on which to hang what they have learned. (Cf. Isa 22:23–25, where “nail” refers to the Word of God Himself.)

Good teaching requires both: the students must be motivated to study and the instructors must be able to “nail things down” so that the lessons make sense.

- 12] And further, by these, my son, be admonished: of making many books *there is* no end; and much study *is* a weariness of the flesh.

On the surface, verse 12 seems to be a negative view of learning; but such is not the case. The statement is a warning to the student not to go beyond what God has written in His Word. Indeed, there are many books; and studying them can be a wearisome chore. But don’t permit man’s books to rob you of God’s wisdom. “Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them [the words of the wise]” (v. 12, NIV).

These “nails” are sure and you can depend on them. Don’t test God’s truth by the “many books” written by men, even those with elaborate seminary degrees; test all men’s books by the truth of God’s Word.

Our textbook is the Bible, and the Holy Spirit is our Teacher (Jn 14:26; 15:26; 16:12–15). The Spirit can use gifted human teachers to instruct us, but He longs to teach us personally from His Word (Ps 119:97–104). There are always new lessons to learn and new examinations to face as we seek to grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Saviour (2 Peter 3:18).

Life Is a Stewardship: Fear God (12:13–14)

Our lives are a manifestation of what we think about God. We don’t own our lives, because life is the gift of God (Acts 17:24–28). We are stewards of our lives, and one day we must give an account to God of what we have done with His gift. Some people are only spending their lives; others are wasting their lives; a few are investing their lives.

The measure of a life, after all, is not its duration but its donation.

Corrie ten Boom

If our lives are to count, we must fulfill three obligations:

Fear God (v.13);
Keep His Commandments (v.13);
Prepare for Final Judgment (v.14).

- 13] Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this *is* the whole *duty* of man.

or, “The end of the matter, even all that hath been heard, is Fear God.”

Ecclesiastes ends where the Book of Proverbs begins (Prov 1:7), with an admonition for us to fear the Lord. (See 3:14; 5:7; 7:18; and 8:12–13.)

The “fear of the Lord” is that attitude of reverence and awe that His people show to Him because they love Him and respect His power and His greatness.

The person who fears the Lord will pay attention to His Word and obey it. He or she will not tempt the Lord by deliberately disobeying or by “playing with sin.”

An unholy fear makes people run away from God, but a holy fear brings them to their knees in loving submission to God.

The remarkable thing about fearing God, is that, when you fear God, you fear nothing else; whereas, if you do not fear God, you fear everything else.

Oswald Chambers

The prophet Isaiah says it perfectly:

Sanctify the LORD of hosts himself; and let him be your fear, and let him be your dread.

Isaiah 8:13

The psalmist describes such a man in Psalm 112.

Keep His Commandments

God created life and He alone knows how it should be managed. He wrote the “manual of instructions” and wise is the person who reads and obeys.

“When all else fails, read the instructions!”

The fear of the Lord must result in obedient living, otherwise that “fear” is only a sham. The dedicated believer will want to spend time daily in Scripture, getting to know the Father better and discovering His will.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.

Prov 1:7

The last phrase in verse 13 can be translated “this is the end of man” (i.e., his purpose in life), or “this is for all men.”

Campbell Morgan suggests “this is the whole of man.” He writes in *The Unfolding Message of the Bible*, “Man, in his entirety, must begin with God; the whole of man, the fear of God” (p. 228).

When Solomon looked at life “under the sun,” everything was fragmented and he could see no pattern. But when he looked at life *from God’s point of view*, everything came together into one whole. If man wants to have wholeness, he must begin with God.

Prepare for Final Judgment

- 14] For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether *it be* good, or whether *it be* evil.

“God shall judge the righteous and the wicked” (3:17). “But know that for all these God will bring you into judgment” (11:9, NKJV).

Man may seem to get away with sin (8:11), but their sins will eventually be exposed and judged righteously. Those who have not trusted the Lord Jesus Christ will be doomed forever.

“The eternity of punishment is a thought which crushes the heart,” said Charles Spurgeon. “The Lord God is slow to anger, but when he is once aroused to it, as he will be against those who finally reject his Son, he will put forth all his omnipotence to crush his enemies.”

Six times in his discourse, Solomon told us to enjoy life while we can; but at no time did he advise us to enjoy sin. The joys of the present depend on the security of the future. If you know Jesus Christ as your Saviour, then your sins have already been judged on the cross; and “there is therefore now no condemnation to them who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1 and see Jn 5:24).

But if you die having never trusted Christ, you will face judgment at His throne and be lost forever (Rev 20:11–15).

Is life worth living? Yes, *if you are truly alive through faith in Jesus Christ*. Then you can be satisfied, no matter what God may permit to come to your life.

He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.

1 Jn 5:12, NKJV

These 66 books, penned by over 40 authors, are an integrated whole: don't take any part of them out of the context of the *entirety*! The difference between the Old and the New Testament is the difference between the man who said "There is nothing new under the sun" and the God who says "Behold, I make all things new."

[Of all the commentaries consulted in this review, clearly the most relevant and useful was that of Warren Wiersbe. His perspective and his concluding remarks are right on the mark:]

If you have never trusted Jesus Christ as your Saviour, then this book urges you to do so without delay. Why? Because no matter how much wealth, education, or social prestige you may have, life without God is futile. You are only "chasing after the wind" if you expect to find satisfaction and personal fulfillment in the things of the world. Jesus raised the challenge:

For what shall it profit a man, if he should gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?

Mark 8:36

Solomon experienced life and discovered that there was no lasting satisfaction in possessions, pleasures, power, or prestige. He had everything, yet his life was empty! There is no need for you and me to repeat these experiments.

Let's accept Solomon's conclusions and avoid the heartache and pain that must be endured when you experiment in the laboratory of life. These experiments are costly and one of them could prove fatal.

When you belong to the family of God through faith in the Son of God, life is not monotonous: it is a daily adventure that builds character and

enables you to serve others to the glory of God. Instead of making decisions on the basis of the vain wisdom of this world, you will have God's wisdom available to you (James 1:5). As far as wealth and pleasure are concerned, God gives to us "richly all things to enjoy" (1 Tim 6:17).

The blessing of the Lord makes one rich, and He adds no sorrow with it.
Prov 10:22, NKJV

The wealth and pleasures of the world do not satisfy, and the quest for power and position is futile. In Jesus Christ we have all that we need for life and death, time and eternity.

If there is one truth that Solomon emphasizes in this book, it is the certainty of death. No matter what Solomon enjoyed or accomplished, the frightening shadow of death was always hovering over him.

But Jesus Christ *has defeated death* and is "the resurrection and the life" (Jn 11:25). The victory of His resurrection means that our "labor is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Cor 15:58).

If you don't know Jesus Christ as your Saviour, then all that you work for and live for will ultimately perish; and you will perish too. But faith in Jesus Christ brings you the gift of eternal life and the privilege of serving Him and investing your years in that which is eternal.

So, the first message of Ecclesiastes is: turn from the futility of sin and the world, and put your faith in Jesus Christ (Jn 3:16; Eph 2:8–10). But if you are a believer in Jesus Christ and have received the gift of eternal life, then Solomon asks you, "Are you living for the Lord or for the things of the world?"

Remember, Solomon knew God and was greatly blessed by Him, yet he turned from the Lord and went his own way. No wonder he became pessimistic and skeptical as he looked at life! He didn't have God's perspective because he wasn't living for God's purposes.

More than one professed Christian has followed Solomon's bad example and started living for the things of this world. Paul wrote about one of his associates in ministry,

Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world.

2 Tim 4:10

The Apostle John warned,

Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world.

1 Jn 2:15

James also admonished us to keep ourselves “unspotted from the world” (1:27).

When you start living for the world instead of for the will of God, you begin to look at life from the wrong perspective: “under the sun” and not “above the sun.”

Instead of seeking those things which are above (Col 3:1ff), you start majoring on the things that are below. This wrong vision soon causes you to adopt wrong values and you stop living for the eternal. The result is disappointment and defeat; the only remedy is repentance and confession of sin. Remember the Christian’s “Bar of Soap”: 1 John 1:9.

Ecclesiastes also contains a message for the faithful believer who wants to serve the Lord and have a fulfilled life in Jesus Christ.

Solomon says, “Don’t bury your head in the sand and pretend that problems don’t exist. They do! Face life honestly, but look at life from God’s perspective. Man’s philosophies will fail you. Use your God-given wisdom, but don’t expect to solve every problem or answer every question. The important thing is to obey God’s will and enjoy all that He gives you. Remember, death is coming—so, be prepared!”

Perhaps this message is best summarized in the prayer of Moses:

So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.

Ps 90:12

The popular American novelist Peter De Vries suggested, “Life is a crowded superhighway with bewildering cloverleaf exits on which a man is liable to find himself speeding back in the direction he came.”

That need not happen to you! King Solomon has already explored the road exhaustively and given us a dependable map to follow. And if we follow God’s Word, we will be more than satisfied.

Are you ready for the journey?

Study Questions

(For the diligent student.)

- 1) What four initial arguments in Chapters 1 and 2 were refuted by Solomon’s reconsideration in Chapters 3-12?
- 2) How was each refuted?
- 3) List ten “vanities” encountered in Solomon’s arguments.
- 4) In what way is the Word of God like a “nail” in 12:11? (Cf. Isaiah 22:23-25)

Discussion Questions

(“Where two people agree, one is redundant.”)

- 1) Were Solomon’s perspectives relevant to today’s world?
- 2) Did Solomon’s perspectives impact *your* life? How? Give examples.
- 3) Did any insights from the New Testament modify or amplify the perspectives which emerge from this book?
- 4) Do you expect to meet him in heaven?

Research Projects

(For the truly dedicated.)

- 1) Trace Solomon’s spiritual history from his early years through his apostasy. Examine each of the allusions to him in the New Testament.
- 2) The only reference in the Old Testament to the infamous “666” are the two to his annual salary (1 Kgs 10:14; 2 Chr 9:14). Is this a “pointer” of some kind? Is there a link suggested here?

Where to go from here:

Some suggestions: Continue with a study of the *Song of Songs* to gain another perspective of this remarkable man.

Or, review *Learn the Bible in 24 Hours* to establish a more strategic perspective.

Notes:

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About The Cover Design

(on the tape cassette volumes)

The “Front” cover:

The Greek border: “I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty (Revelation 1:8).” The center design element symbolizes the Word of God Incarnate, illuminated by the Holy Spirit.

The “Back” cover: (the “front” to the Jewish reader)

The Hebrew border: “Hear O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord: and thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might (from the Sh’ma, Deut 6:4-5).”

The center design represents the Burning Bush, made up of Hebrew letters which proclaim “the Eternal One cannot lie.”

The Spine:

The spine includes a Menorah from the Old Testament, a Maranatha Dove suggesting the New Testament, and the Koinonia House logo at the base.



Koinonia House

P.O. Box D
Coeur d'Alene Idaho
83816-0347
(208) 773-6310
www.khouse.org

ISBN 1-57821-203-0