



# ECCLESIASTES

*Living an Earthly Life with a Divine Perspective*

“The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commands, because this applies to every person, for God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.”

*Ecclesiastes 12:13, 14*



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# Ecclesiastes

## *Living an Earthly Life with a Divine Perspective*

### **Purpose**

To teach us how to apply divine wisdom to daily life, to live with the end in mind

### **Summary**

The book of *Ecclesiastes* is a sobering commentary on the meaning of life from the wise-old Preacher. Solomon tackles life's mysteries in an effort to find true meaning and fulfillment. However, Solomon's comments are from an Old Testament human perspective, from "under the sun" and with a lack of divine revelation. It is only when we apply wisdom from "above the sun" (New Testament revelation) that we can make sense of life "under the sun." In the end, Solomon arrives at the proper conclusion, that a fulfilled life is found in recognizing God, His world, and one's place in it. Augustine wrote, "The Lord made us for Himself and our hearts will find no rest until they find Him."

### **Themes**

- **Vanity:** Used 37 times to describe the activities of human life, vanity is defined as "deficient, fruitless, pointless, or a waste of time." Finding fulfillment in life apart from God is vanity.
- **Under the Sun:** These three words tip us off to Solomon's vantage point. He is making observations about life from a human perspective, as naturalists or humanists would today. Therefore, many of his comments do not line up with biblical doctrine. Thus, we must be careful not to build our theology on this book, but look at it in light of all Scripture.
- **Judgment:** Because there is a "test" at the end of the "course," it should cause all students to pay attention to what really matters. God's judgment causes us to live with the end in mind.

### **Leading Ideas**

- From man's perspective, life is meaningless (1:1-11).
- Pursuing knowledge apart from God is a waste of time (1:12-18).
- It profits a man nothing to gain the whole world but to lose his soul (2:1-11).
- All men die, but all men do not truly live (2:12-17).
- The "collect and die" mentality is not of God; let us invest in God's work on earth (2:18-26).
- We should never allow the "bad" things in life to steal our joy of the good things (3:1-15).
- We can make sense of life with the full revelation of God's Word (3:16-4:3).
- Contentment is a key to a God-honoring life (4:4-16).
- Our fear of God should affect our communication with God (5:1-7).
- Don't chase the riches of life, but rather enjoy the richness of life (5:8-20).
- What our eyes see will never quench what our soul desires (6:1-12).
- Prosperity is not always good, and adversity is not always bad (7:1-14).
- Man will never find or achieve perfection in an imperfect world (7:15-29).
- God established government for the protection of men; we would be wise to obey (8:1-10).
- Fear God and remain faithful to Him, despite the overwhelming evil around us (8:11-9:1).
- From under the sun, death is the end; from above the sun, death is the beginning (9:2-12).
- Wisdom can do much good, all of which can be undone by one act of folly (9:13-10:15).
- Wisdom gives one an advantage in life but not immunity from life (10:16-11:6).
- Enjoy the light of youth, because the dark days of old age are coming (11:7-12:8).
- Live with the end in mind, knowing that we will answer to God for our deeds (12:9-14).

### **Penman**

It is generally believed that Solomon, "the Preacher," King of Israel, is the author. The book gets its name from the word *ekklesia*, referring to an assembly or *koheleth*, referring to the one who calls, gathers, or speaks to it.

### **Recipients**

The people of Israel, particularly the youth, even his own son (12:12)

### **Date Written**

In the latter years of Solomon's reign, approximately 930 BC

### **Special Features**

*Ecclesiastes* is one of five scrolls read on special Jewish occasions (along with *Ruth*, *Song of Solomon*, *Esther*, and *Lamentations*); *Ecclesiastes* is read on Pentecost.

The book of *Ecclesiastes* can be examined in large passages, as many verses are used to support one particular theme.

### **Key Verses**

*"The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commands, because this applies to every person, for God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil."*

*Ecclesiastes 12:13, 14*

<sup>1</sup> *The words of the Preacher, the son of David, King in Jerusalem:* <sup>2</sup> *“Vanity of vanities,” says the Preacher. Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.”* <sup>3</sup> *What advantage does man have in all his work which he does under the sun? <sup>4</sup> A generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. <sup>5</sup> The sun rises and the sun sets; and, hastening to its place, it rises there again. <sup>6</sup> Blowing toward the south, then turning to the north, the wind continues swirling along; and, on its circular courses, the wind returns. <sup>7</sup> All the rivers flow into the sea, yet the sea is not full; to the place where the rivers flow, there they flow again. <sup>8</sup> All things are wearisome; man is not able to tell it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor is the ear filled with hearing. <sup>9</sup> That which has been is that which will be, and that which has been done is that which will be done. <sup>10</sup> Is there anything of which one might say, “See this, it is new?” Already it has existed for ages before us. <sup>11</sup> There is no remembrance of earlier things, and of the later things which will occur. There will be no remembrance among those who will come later still.”*

### **Futility of Life**

*Genesis 3:17-19*

*Psalm 39:5, 6*

*Psalm 62:9; 144:4*

*Romans 8:20*

### **Leading Idea**

*From man’s perspective, life is meaningless.*

The opening passage of *Ecclesiastes* (v.1-11) is one of the most depressing, although accurate, depictions ever given of life on earth. It’s true that our planet is home to pleasurable experiences, interesting people, and breath-taking beauty, but human existence here is hard-fought, short-lived, and seemingly void of purpose. That is the sobering summary from the wise-old Preacher, who left behind, for the generations to follow, his commentary on the meaning of life.

Solomon is not a preacher as we know preachers, but rather he is the sage instructor (*kohleth*), who believes that he has much to say about this subject. It’s as if he gathers a congregation (*ekklesia*) and proclaims, “Listen to me, and I will tell you what I’ve learned in my time as King.” What’s interesting about his discovery is that, though he is both wise and wealthy, he finds “nothing new under the sun,” and, in the end, he offers no profound humanistic advice for how to live a satisfied life. Instead, Solomon admits his many failures and, then, reveals *the* simple sought-for “secret.”

However, before unveiling the good news, Solomon overwhelms his readers (or listeners) with the bad news. In short, he says, “All is vanity” (v.2). The term “vanity” comes from the root word “vain” or “wane,” from which we get the word “want.” If something is “waning,” it is diminishing or failing; and, if something is “wanting,” it is lacking or deficient. To put Solomon’s statement in modern terms, he would say, “All is empty or meaningless, or all is fruitless, worthless, or pointless.” He might even say, “All is a waste of time, or all is without substance, value, or importance.” If he were to print a bumper sticker, it would say, “Life stinks,” because nothing here satisfies him. All is wanting.

Before we judge the Preacher too harshly for his grim outlook on life, we must remember that his vantage point is from “under the sun.” Solomon is making observations about life from a human perspective, as atheists or naturalists would today. In a lot of ways, his book is similar to *Job*, in that much of what is written or said is from man’s warped view of life (i.e. Job’s friends) rather than God’s view. While both books are accurate, in the sense that what was actually said or written is captured in the text, many of the observations made by the men do not line up with biblical doctrine.

Thus, from a humanistic view, without God in the picture, Solomon’s assumptions are correct – life does appear pointless. He even asks the question, “What advantage does man have in all his work” (v.3). He points out that generations come and go (v.4) and comments that the earth remains unchanged (at this point in time, Solomon does not have the full revelation of God, therefore, he does not know that the earth will be destroyed, *2 Peter 3:10*). He goes on to describe the endless cycles of nature (v.5-7), the sun rising and setting every day, the wind blowing without end, the rivers constantly flowing. The earth, it seems, is an unstoppable machine that grinds human beings into dust. We are born, we race to nowhere on the treadmill of life, and, then, we die. That’s it. We work for money, so that we can buy food, so that we can get energy, so that we can go back to work. Such is life, a repeating history, a stuck record, an endless loop (v.9). “All is wearisome,” says Solomon (v.8a), a result of the curse of sin. Under the sun, nothing is new (v.10), nothing satisfies (v.8b), and nothing quenches our “thirst,” rather we live, we die, and then we are forgotten (v.11), just like the millions of people who came before us. Life goes on, and every person on earth is part of this *vain* tragedy.

Under the sun, all of man’s efforts are senseless. It’s only when we view life from above the sun, from God’s perspective, that it makes sense. Let us not be discouraged; though Solomon opens his book with a dark, oppressive commentary on our temporal existence, he will end it by offering God’s eternal perspective (*12:13,14*). Under the sun, all things seem purposeless; above the sun, all things are purposeful. Under the sun, all is wanting; above the sun, we shall not want (*Psalm 23:1; 107:9*).

<sup>12</sup>“I, the Preacher, have been over Israel in Jerusalem; <sup>13</sup>and, I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven. It is a grievous task which God has given to the sons of men to be afflicted with. <sup>14</sup>I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind. <sup>15</sup>What is crooked cannot be straightened and what is lacking cannot be counted. <sup>16</sup>I said to myself, ‘Behold, I have magnified and increased wisdom more than all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has observed a wealth of wisdom and knowledge.’ <sup>17</sup>I set my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly; I realized that this also is striving after wind, <sup>18</sup>because in much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge results in increasing pain.”

**True Wisdom**

*1 Kings 4:29; 5:12; 10:23  
Job 28:20, 28  
Psalm 1:1-3; 90:12; 104:24;  
Psalm 111:10; 127:1  
Proverbs 1:7; 2:6; 3:19  
Proverbs 9:10  
Isaiah 55:8  
Jeremiah 9:23  
Colossians 3:2  
2 Timothy 3:16, 17  
James 1:5; 3:15-17*

## Striving After Wind

*The Endless Pursuit of Knowledge*

### Leading Idea

*Pursuing knowledge apart from God is a waste of time.*

In my conversations with college students over the years, I’ve gotten the chance to talk to several who professed to be atheists. One in particular stands out in my mind. He was very a likable, intelligent, and articulate young man. I expressed to him that his view of the world was very grim and depressing (much like Solomon’s introduction, *1:1-11*). Since he believed that nature is self-existing and people are a result of evolutionary processes, his own existence, I told him, was accidental. “Does that bother you at all,” I asked, “that your life has no meaning, no value, or no purpose?” He said no, it did not bother him. I returned, “Then what gets you out of bed in the morning? What is there to be excited about?” Knowledge, he replied, to know that there is more to learn.

In a worldview that is void of God (i.e. the secular humanist, atheist, naturalist, Marxist), people will chase anything and everything “to secure” the good life. It is not unusual to run across intellectuals, those pursuing knowledge or wisdom; Solomon was no different. Somehow, endless study, constant learning, reading everything in print, and collecting degrees are a measure of success under the sun. Even Socrates said, “Knowledge is the only good, and ignorance the only evil”; but, to Solomon, it was a “grievous task that he was afflicted with” (*v.13*). In fact, he called his pursuit of knowledge “vanity” (a waste of time, *v.14*) and “striving after wind” (an impossible task), and this from the man who was wiser than all kings combined (*v.16*). Why was he so frustrated, I wonder?

Solomon came to the same conclusion that Nebuchadnezzar’s wise men did, when they were pressed to interpret one of his dreams (*Daniel 2:10, 11*); they quickly deduced that man does not (and cannot) know everything, and that some things are only for God to know. Solomon said it this way, “What is crooked cannot be straightened, and what is lacking cannot be counted” (*v.15*), meaning that there are mysteries in life that will never be solved by men, so why spend a lifetime attempting to solve them? There are puzzles and riddles that will never be unlocked by human ingenuity, so why waste so much energy trying to devise a key? Solomon recognized that the more he knew, the more that he didn’t know, which was demoralizing to someone seeking perfection by this path. Besides, what happens to all of the knowledge that one gains during a lifetime? Does it not vanish once a person dies? Solomon commented that there is much pain and grief in knowledge (*v.18*). Perhaps there is some validity to the statements that “ignorance is bliss” and that “what you don’t know won’t hurt you.”

Keep in mind that the pursuit of knowledge is not wrong in itself; neither is acquiring wisdom a waste of time, when it is acquired in its proper form and in the proper fashion. What are the proper form and fashion to acquire wisdom and knowledge? Human learning from human observations alone is not wisdom at all, but foolishness; it’s like interpreting a painting without the painter or explaining a song without the song-writer. In order to understand creation (i.e. science), one should ask the Creator. If one is to wrestle with the laws of nature, then perhaps he should consult the Law Giver. In order to comprehend the meaning of life (i.e. philosophy, sociology), one should look to the Giver of life. “God gives wisdom to men” (*Proverbs 2:6a*), and “it is reverence to or fear of God that is the beginning of wisdom” (*9:10*), so perhaps a pursuit of knowledge or wisdom should start with Him. That would be seeking wisdom in its proper form. Since the Lord is the giver of wisdom, and “out of His mouth (His Word) come knowledge and understanding” (*2:6b*), the proper fashion for seeking wisdom is not through empirical data or scientific research but by divine revelation, the Bible. It is Scripture, wisdom from above the sun, that helps men make sense of the knowledge that they accrue under the sun.

Knowledge, for the sake of knowledge alone, stirs up pride in human ability (*1 Cor. 8:1*); the purpose of knowledge is to glorify God, not to explain away His existence. Socrates did get one thing right when he said, “The only true wisdom is knowing that you know nothing.” The pursuit of knowledge, apart from God, is just another satanic ploy to keep men distracted from the real meaning of life.

<sup>1</sup> I said to myself, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself.” Behold, it too was futility.

<sup>2</sup> I said of laughter, “It is madness,” of pleasure, “What does it accomplish?” <sup>3</sup> I explored how to stimulate my body with wine, while my mind was guiding me wisely, and how to take hold of folly, until I could see what good there is for the sons of men to do the few years of their lives. <sup>4</sup> I enlarged my works. I built houses for myself. I planted vineyards for myself. <sup>5</sup> I made gardens and parks for myself and I planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. <sup>6</sup> I made ponds of water for myself, from which to irrigate a forest of growing trees. <sup>7</sup> I bought slaves. I possessed flocks and herds larger than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. <sup>8</sup> I collected for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I provided for myself singers and the pleasures of men – many concubines. <sup>9</sup> I became great and increased more than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. My wisdom also stood by me. <sup>10</sup> All that my eyes desired, I did not refuse them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart was pleased because of all my labor and this was my reward.

<sup>11</sup> Thus, I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and, behold, all was vanity and striving after wind, and there was no profit under the sun.

## A Heaven of Our Own Making

*The Failure of Pleasure and Possessions*

### Leading Idea

*It profits a man nothing to gain the whole world yet to lose his soul.*

If there is ever a passage of Scripture for the times in which we live, it is this one. The “American Dream” provided the freedom to produce and prosper, but the devil, with his age-old lure of greed, has distorted it to become the endless pursuit of pleasures and possessions. Today, Americans have access to more than any people on the planet, at any time in history, and, yet, they squander their lives for things that can never bring lasting fulfillment. Such was the experiment of Solomon (v.1). After intellectualism failed him, he turned to hedonism (pleasure-seeking) and materialism (greedily acquiring possessions), in hopes that one or, perhaps, both of them would bring him true happiness.

Merry-making is nothing new, but it somehow continues to deceive men, who believe that they can laugh, drink, self-indulge (v.9), and party their troubles away. These vices offer a way “to escape” problems, but in reality, the problems are only forgotten not resolved. Thus, they hold more parties, drink more alcohol (v.3), and have more sex and “fun,” hoping that their troubles will vanish; but, all they really do is create more trouble. This madness is an example of the “Law of Diminishing Returns”; in pursuing this unreasonable path, it takes more and more to quench desires. When one vice does not satisfy a man, he proceeds to more of the same or to another vice altogether; he feverishly feeds his desires until, finally, he reaches his limit, never finding satisfaction in anything. This cycle is the perfect illustration of insanity – to continue doing the same thing but expecting different results. Solomon says (v.2), “This is madness. What does it accomplish?”

Just as our society is addicted to hedonism, so is it infatuated with materialism, the endless pursuit of stuff. However, just as its pernicious partner does not deliver, neither does materialism provide lasting fulfillment; it takes more and more to suppress one’s hunger. Thus, Solomon attempts to get his hands on everything that he could (v.4-10, also *1 Kings 4-10*). He had to have it all, until he acquired more than anyone else (v.9). “All that my eyes desired,” he wrote, “I did not refuse them” (v.10); yet, he admitted that it was like chasing the wind. He found no profit in it at all (v.11).

How can the richest man in the world, with all of the riches of the world, say that materialism offers no profit? The answer is found in the definition of “profit,” which is comprised of two words, “pro” (meaning forward) and “facio” (meaning to drive). In other words, to profit means to drive forward, to advance, to improve, or to gain advantage. Solomon says that, in acquiring all of the world’s wealth, he found no advantage, nothing that improved his life. Jesus said it this way, in the parable of the farmer and his barns (*Matthew 16:26*), “What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?” Under the sun, money may have some advantage, but above the sun, in God’s perspective, money gets us nowhere. Why? Because nothing on this earth can purchase the soul; no amount of money or possessions can pay the price for a place in heaven. Materialism is temporal; the soul is eternal. No temporal object can be exchanged for an eternal object, though, sadly, many exchange their souls for temporal pursuits. To this foolishness, God says (*Isaiah 55:2*), “Why spend money for what is not bread and wages for what does not satisfy?”

Keep in mind, there is nothing wrong with enjoying moral pleasures or modest possessions, but attempting to fashion a heaven on earth is a futile endeavor. You can take nothing with you in death; besides, all of your possessions will one day end up in a junk pile anyway. Life is not about getting but giving, not about being served but serving, and not about pleasing self but pleasing God. It is “in God’s presence that we find fullness of joy, and it is at His right hand that we find pleasures forever” (*Psalms 16:11*). Why chase after stagnant cesspools and cisterns, when we can drink from the fountain of life? “To live is Christ,” said Paul (*Phil. 1:21*); that is true life. “To die is gain”; that is true profit!

<sup>12</sup> So I turned to consider wisdom, madness, and folly; for what will the man do who will come after the king except what has already been done? <sup>13</sup> I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness. <sup>14</sup> The wise man's eye is in his head, but the fool walks in darkness, yet I know that one fate befalls them both. <sup>15</sup> Then I said to myself, "As is the fate of the fool, so it will befall me. Why then have I been extremely wise? This too is vanity." <sup>16</sup> For there is no lasting remembrance of the wise man as with the fool, inasmuch as in the coming day, all will be forgotten, and how the wise man and the fool alike die! <sup>17</sup> So I hated life; for the work which had been done under the sun was grievous to me, because everything is futility and striving after wind.

**Death**

Genesis 2:17; 3:8; 5:5  
Romans 5:12; 6:23  
Matthew 27:50  
Hebrews 2:9; 9:27  
1 Corinthians 15:55  
Revelation 21:4

# The Great Equalizer

*The Reality of Death*

## Leading Idea

*All men die, but all men do not truly live.*

During Solomon's investigation of what would bring him the most satisfaction in life, he pauses and considers a subject that both frustrates and grieves him – the subject of death. In his deliberations, he poses some very sobering questions:

- If the one that comes after me will only do what I've already done, then why live? (v.12)
- If everyone dies, then why does it matter what one does while he is living? (v.13-15)
- If everyone is forgotten after death, then why do anything in life? (v.16)
- If death equalizes and erases all that we've done in life, then why live?

Solomon could see that on the temporal stage, wisdom had its advantages over foolishness. "I saw that wisdom excels folly," he said, but he also recognized that death was the end of both (v.13, 14). Thus, he despaired, because of the realization that he was wasting his time pursuing wisdom, when he really could just enjoy himself, like the fool (v.15).

It is a fact; there is a 100% chance that you will die. Death is the great equalizer. In time, death, the grim reaper, will catch us all. Without divine intervention, no man can escape it. It is a law of life that all things must die, including you. Though your life may be celebrated at your funeral, in a short amount of time, your face and memory will be forgotten. Why, because everyone who is alive to remember you will die as well. Everything that you accumulated in life will be passed on to another in death. You will take nothing with you; all stand at death's door empty-handed. All that you accomplished ends here, all that you were doing stops, and all that you hoped to do will not be done. These thoughts troubled Solomon, so much so that he hated life (v.17). If death equalizes and erases all that we've done in life, he thought, then why live at all?

From under the sun (human perspective), death does seem intimidating and final, but from above the sun (God's perspective), death is neither intimidating nor final. So then, what is the purpose of death? Death is simply a moment of separation; physical death is a separation of the body from the soul, and spiritual death is a separation of the soul from God's eternal grace. Death exists as a consequence of man's sin; thus, every person is destined to experience physical death, because every person is a sinner. Even Christ experienced physical death on the cross, not because of His own sin, mind you, but because He chose to take the place of sinners, therefore making a way for our forgiveness and redemption. However, Christ did not remain dead, but rather He defeated death in His resurrection. Death is now a fallen foe, and Christ has the keys to eternal life. Because Christ defeated death, we too can defeat death through Him. Though we may experience physical death, we will not experience spiritual death, but rather we will live with the Lord forever. Thus, physical death is only the door through which Christians must pass, in order to enter the next life, eternal life with Christ (*John 3:16*).

So back to Solomon's question; if death equalizes and erases all that we've done in life, then why live? We've already seen that death is a result of our sin, so life is our brief opportunity to accept the gracious gift of salvation through Christ. It is our chance to receive God's pardon from the second death, spiritual death. Once we die (and all men will), God's offer ends and His judgment begins. Those who accept Christ in life are called to live for Him and to do good works, so that others may come to know Him as well (*Matt. 5:16*). We live to be God's witnesses in this world (*Matt. 28:19, 20*), to tell as many as possible about the reality of both deaths and the gracious gift of eternal life. For the believer, death is not the end, but the beginning, and our life is our chance to lead others to new life. All of us are given one shot on earth; what we do here is in our hands. Yes, all that is done for selfish, sinful reasons will be forgotten forever; only what is done for Christ will last and matter in eternity.

<sup>18</sup> Thus, I hated all the fruit of my labor which I had labored under the sun, for I must leave it to the man who will come after me; <sup>19</sup> and, who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the fruit of my labor for which I have labored by acting wisely under the sun. This too is vanity. <sup>20</sup> Therefore, I completely despaired of all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun. <sup>21</sup> When there is a man who has labored with wisdom, knowledge, and skill, then he gives his legacy to one who has not labored with them, this too is vanity and a great evil. <sup>22</sup> For what does a man get in all his labor and in his striving with which he labors under the sun? <sup>23</sup> Because all his days his task is painful and grievous; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is vanity. <sup>24</sup> There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good. This I have seen is from the hand of God, <sup>25</sup> for who can eat and who can have enjoyment without Him? <sup>26</sup> For to a person who is good in His sight He has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, while to the sinner, He has given the task of gathering and collecting, so that he may give to one who is good in God's sight. This too is vanity and striving after wind.

## A Worthy Inheritance

*Collecting vs. Investing*

### Leading Idea

*The “collect and die” mentality is not of God; rather, let us invest in God’s work on earth.*

Solomon closes this chapter, and a lengthy investigation into what makes men “happy” (1:1-2:17), with a note of disappointment. He has considered the future, that is after he is gone, and it has grieved him deeply, not so much that he will die, but that all that he has worked for will be given to someone else (v.18). When he considers the son who will receive the kingdom upon his death, Rehoboam, he gets the sense that his entire life and all his labor will be for naught. Perhaps because of Rehoboam’s personality, apathy, attitude, immoral habits, and poor character, Solomon recognizes that he is handing over his life’s fortune to a fool (v.19). History confirms Solomon’s fears (1 Kings 12-14), as Rehoboam unwisely squandered his father’s estate. In fact, much of Solomon’s kingdom was given to one of his servants, Jeroboam, after it was divided, and he also acted foolishly in his stead.

Nothing could have demoralized Solomon more than to think that he had wasted his time on earth (v.20, 21). Why had he worked so hard? Why had he accumulated so much? Why had he pushed himself to succeed and even excel, if, in the end, all that he had achieved would be squandered? He pushed himself to his limits physically, mentally, and emotionally, he scheduled every minute of every day “to move the ball forward,” and he endured many sleepless nights because of stress and anxiety (v.22, 23), all to “get ahead”; and, yet, all that he had done was gather and collect, so that another, who had not worked a day in his life, nor who would appreciate what was given to him, could foolishly throw it all away. What sense does that make, to live life in this way?

It does not make sense to live life this way, but again, we must remember that Solomon is attempting to find happiness “under the sun,” from the human perspective, without God in the picture; the result is utter despair. His predicament would be similar to our modern atheists, humanists, secularists, naturalists, and Marxists. Without God in the picture, their existence is an accident and their lives meaningless. The illusion of happiness is found in the here and now; the temporal fleeting moment is all that they have, so their philosophy becomes “get all you can while you can.” In essence, their worldview only produces a “collect and die” mentality (v.26). But, is that the true meaning of life – to collect and die? Not when we view life from above the sun, from God’s perspective.

Solomon used the word “legacy” (v.21) to describe what it was that he was passing on to his successors. The word “legacy” literally means “to send, to give, or to bequeath” something for future generations. In the Old Testament, people referred to their legacy as a “birthright”; today, we might use the term “heritage” or “inheritance.” What is a worthy inheritance anyway? What is a lasting legacy? Is it money, property, possessions, or any physical object? In God’s economy, from above the sun, the answer is no. While there is nothing wrong with handing down keepsakes or family treasures, or even bequeathing some money to help with the difficulties of life, these items do not comprise a lasting legacy or worthy inheritance. A great sum of money will only create dependence and laziness in the hearts of those who receive it; they are likely to trust in their newfound wealth rather than God. Besides, it is through struggle that men become more conformed to the image of Christ, not through ease and convenience. Helping to establish one’s financial future, then, is not such a good idea after all. Rather than greedily collect and die, Christians should give away their belongings and invest their fortunes for the purpose of the Gospel, for eternal reward (1 Cor. 15:58). The best legacy that we can leave is an example of a true Christian, a spiritual inheritance, and wise godly counsel for life.

Work and property are gifts of God (v.24, 25); enjoy them both. However, work and property are not to be the means of our soul’s satisfaction or the meaning of life. We must view them both through God’s eyes and use them for His glory. Rather than selfishly collect for ourselves, let us invest what we have in the ongoing work of Christ on earth, while there is still time.

<sup>1</sup> There is an appointed time for everything, a time for every event under heaven: <sup>2</sup> a time to give birth, a time to die; a time to plant, a time to uproot what is planted; <sup>3</sup> a time to kill, a time to heal; a time to tear down, a time build up; <sup>4</sup> a time to weep, a time to laugh; a time to mourn, a time to dance; <sup>5</sup> a time to throw stones, a time to gather stones; a time to embrace, a time to shun embracing; <sup>6</sup> a time to search, a time to give up as lost; a time to keep, a time to throw away; <sup>7</sup> a time to tear apart, a time to sew; a time to be silent, a time to speak; <sup>8</sup> a time to love, a time to hate; a time for war, a time for peace. <sup>9</sup> What profit is there from that in which one toils? <sup>10</sup> I have seen the task which God has given man to occupy him. <sup>11</sup> He has made everything appropriate in its time. He also set eternity in man's heart, so that he will not find out the work God has done from beginning to end. <sup>12</sup> I know that there is nothing better for him than to rejoice and do good in one's lifetime; <sup>13</sup> that every man who eats and drinks sees good in all his labor – it is the gift of God. <sup>14</sup> I know that everything God does will remain forever; there is nothing to add to it, nothing to take from it, for God has so worked that men should fear Him. <sup>15</sup> That which is has been already, and that which will be has already been; God seeks what has passed by.

## Redeeming the Time

*Enjoying the Simple Things in Life*

### Leading Idea

*We should not allow the bad things in life to steal the joy of the good things.*

[Note: I have edited this passage, without altering its meaning, to make it fit the space in the margin.]

Solomon has already admitted that life is worthless without God, which was the conclusion to his investigation (*Chapters 1, 2*); but, now he delves into the problems that he observes in life, even when God is in the picture. Here is one of the reasons why I appreciate this book specifically, but also the Bible generally; neither one glosses over the ugly parts of life, in order to make it look like something that it's not. Life is full of good times, yes, but it also has its not-so-good times, and Solomon does not skirt these issues, but he rather wrestles with them (i.e. death, weeping, loss, war). Unfortunately, there are those people who misrepresent God and Christianity by promising that the life of a believer is all sunshine and roses; but, no serious observer of humanity will agree that those claims align with reality. Even with God in the picture, life is full of downers and difficulties. That is the King's dilemma.

Solomon lists fourteen positive events that he observes in life (*v.1-8*), but then he counters them with fourteen negative events, as if to say, for every up there is a down. Such is this adventure that he calls time, a repeating pattern of good and bad, an endless cycle of recurring history. While civilization has seemingly "advanced" (i.e. technology, inventions, standard of living), every generation of mankind, from the beginning until now, has experienced the same waves of change. It's as if humanity is strapped to a never-ending roller coaster (*v.15*); in time, everyone experiences thrills and spills.

One might get the idea, when viewing life in this way (from under the sun), that there is no point to it. Since there is a negative for every positive, all experiences ultimately cancel out, and the result is zero. Thus, Solomon asks the question, "What profit is there from that in which one toils?" (*v.9*) Today's fatalist might say it like this, "If God has already set these things in motion, and we cannot change them, why do anything at all? Nothing matters. What good is it to build up, if, in time, things are going to be torn down? What good is it to gather, if, in time, all will be scattered? What good is it to dance, if tomorrow we mourn? What good is it to be born, if, in time, we only die? Isn't life under the sun, then, just a waste of time?" From under the sun, yes; but what about the view from above the sun?

While Solomon does point out the fact that life is full of dichotomies, he also notes that God has ordained all things and that they are appropriate in their time (*v.10, 11*). Though God may not have initiated all things (i.e. death), but rather some are a result of sin, God has allowed them and even uses them for our good (*Gen. 50:20; Rom. 8:28*). Despite the repetitive ruin that our shortcomings have caused, God has also allowed some of the good things of life to remain (i.e. birth, laughter, love). It is only by the grace of God that we still get to enjoy anything in this fallen world. Thus, Solomon makes a point to emphasize that we should enjoy the parts that we can while we can (*v.13*). In other words, we should never allow the bad things in life to steal our joy of the good things. We should never make enjoyment of life the meaning of life, yet we should enjoy the gifts that God has bestowed on earth.

It is important to note that though our bodies may be stuck in time, our souls are not. Though man is a material being, there are aspects of his nature that are immaterial, like his soul. Solomon says that God has put "eternity in our hearts"; though life is rough, we know instinctively that our time on earth is not all there is, that our death is not the end, but there is more life to come, eternal life. Though we may have to endure the roller coaster of life, we know that this is not our home. We know that somewhere, outside of the restraints of space and natural law, there is a place that is timeless. We know that in that place, the actions of all men small and great will be judged and our use of time will be evaluated (*12:14*). It is that truth that causes us to fear God and prepare for that day (*v.14*). Therefore, with time on our hands and eternity in our hearts, let us now live with the end in mind.

<sup>16</sup>Furthermore, I have seen under the sun that in the place of justice there is wickedness, and in the place of righteousness there is wickedness. <sup>17</sup>I said to myself, "God will judge both the righteous and the wicked," for a time for every matter and for every deed is there. <sup>18</sup>I said to myself, "God has surely tested men in order for them to see that they are but beasts." <sup>19</sup>For the fate of men and the fate of beasts is the same. As one dies so dies the other; indeed, they all have the same breath, and there is no advantage for man over beast, for all is vanity. <sup>20</sup>All go to the same place. All came from the dust, and all return to the dust. <sup>21</sup>Who knows that the breath of man ascends upward and the breath of the beast descends downward to the earth? <sup>22</sup>I have seen that nothing is better than that man should be happy in his activities, for that is his lot. For who will bring him to see what will occur after him?

<sup>1</sup>Then I looked again at all the acts of oppression which were being done under the sun, and, I saw the tears of the oppressed and that they had no one to comfort them; on the side of their oppressors was power, but they had no one to comfort them. <sup>2</sup>So I congratulated the dead more than the living. <sup>3</sup>But better off than both of them is the one who has never existed, who has never seen the evil activity that is done under the sun.

## Mysteries and Madness

*Putting Together the Puzzle of Life*

### Leading Idea

*We can make sense of life with the full revelation of God's Word.*

[Note: I have edited this passage, without altering its meaning, to make it fit the space in the margin.]

Solomon continues his observations of life in this passage; though he believes that there is a God, he takes note of several of life's mysteries – injustice, wickedness, human frailty, and oppression. By doing so, he tries to reconcile what he knows about God with what he observes on earth. Keep in mind, at this time, God has not revealed Himself to the same degree that He has today. Those living in the Old Testament did not have a full revelation of who God was, what He was like, and what He was accomplishing on earth; those living in the New Testament have a much better understanding (though some things are still cloudy). Therefore, men like Solomon lived in a fog, when it came to comprehending the enigmas of human existence. Since that is true (that revelation of God was limited), we must not form any doctrines upon Solomon's narrow reasoning. Remember, his vantage point is from under the sun, from his impaired human perspective. We must always check what one says against the whole counsel of Scripture and avoid establishing beliefs on one verse or passage alone. With that in mind, notice that Solomon writes, "I said to myself" or "I have seen" (3:17, 18, 22; 4:1). He does not write, "This is what God has revealed to me."

The first mysteries that Solomon documents are those of injustice and wickedness (3:16, 17). He observes that these things exist in places where justice and righteousness are supposed to be. In other words, he was aware of corruption, to such a degree that the good guys were suffering and the bad guys were profiting. It's hard to watch a system in which crooked people succeed, while those people who follow the rules are abused, but such is life in a fallen world. Crooked business is caused by crooked people. Wherever there are sinners, there is sin; the most frustrating part of it all, to Solomon, was that the bad guys were getting away with it. Not knowing what happens after life, he assumed that God would judge all men for their deeds. On this measure, Solomon was correct. Though the wicked seem to prosper, there will be a day of reckoning. God is just and He will call all men to account for their actions (Heb. 9:27; 2 Cor. 5:10; 1 John 4:17). We must remember, even though we may not see God's justice in our lifetime, this does not mean that justice will never be served.

The second mystery that Solomon mentions is that of human frailty (3:18-21). It appears to him that life is just as brief and fragile for humans as it is for animals. "The fate of men and the fate of beasts is the same," he says. "All go to the same place -- dust. There is no advantage for man over beast." In this assessment, Solomon is partially correct. From under the sun, it is clear that all living things cease to exist, and, yes, they return to dust; however, does this observation give support to the idea that men are animals or that animals are equal to or superior to men? Not at all, and this is the point that Solomon misses. Yes, both men and animals share many things, but it is man who has the advantage over beasts. Among many other aspects, man was created in the image of God, he is a moral creature, knowing right and wrong, he is able to reason, and his soul is eternal. We have no indication from Scripture that animals are eternal, but we have countless indications that man will live forever in one way or another. Thus, when Solomon says, "Who knows that the breath of man ascends and the breath of beasts descends," he is mistaken. We do know, because God has revealed this knowledge to us since then (Luke 16:22b, 23; 2 Cor. 5:8; Phil. 1:23; 3:20, 21; 1 Thess. 4:16, 17; Rev. 20:12-14).

Another mystery that Solomon addresses is that of oppression (4:1), the fact that so many people are suffering, while "there is no one to comfort them." Solomon suggests that it is "better to die than to live; in fact, it is better not to be born" (4:2, 3). Here, on every point, Solomon is absolutely wrong. We know, because of God's complete Word, that He is the Great Comforter, and with Him in the picture, no one has cause to despair. Life is precious, no matter how difficult it is. It is a gift of God, and through Him, one can find joy, no matter what oppressive circumstances he may face.

<sup>4</sup>I have seen that every labor which is done is the result of rivalry between a man and his neighbor. This is vanity and striving after wind. <sup>5</sup>The fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh. <sup>6</sup>One hand full of rest is better than two fists full of labor and striving after wind. <sup>7</sup>I looked again at vanity under the sun. <sup>8</sup>There was a man without a dependent, having neither a son nor a brother, yet there was no end to his labor. Indeed, his eyes were not satisfied with riches and he never asked, "For whom am I laboring and depriving myself of pleasure?" This is vanity and a grievous task. <sup>9</sup>Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. <sup>10</sup>For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion, but woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up. <sup>11</sup>If two lie down together, then they keep warm, but how can one be warm alone? <sup>12</sup>If one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart. <sup>13</sup>A poor yet wise lad is better than an old, foolish king, who no longer receives instruction. <sup>14</sup>For he has come out of prison to become king, though he was born poor. <sup>15</sup>I have seen all the living throng to the side of the second lad who replaces him. <sup>16</sup>There is no end to all the people, and even the ones who will come later will not be happy with him.

## A Handful of Rest

*Learning to Be Content*

### Leading Idea

*Contentment is a key to a God-honoring life.*

[Note: I have edited this passage, without altering its meaning, to make it fit the space in the margin.]

In this passage, Solomon continues pointing out some of the mysteries of life, as he had done with injustice (3:16, 17), human frailty (3:18-21), and oppression (4:1). He will now consider rivalry or competition (v.4-6), lonely labor (v.7-12), and popularity (v.13-16). Though he considers these issues from "under the sun," in his human perspective, he does offer some wise counsel.

First, Solomon tackles the issue of unhealthy human rivalry, as a means of inspiration behind the world of business (v.4). It is important to note here that Solomon is not questioning the concept of healthy, good-spirited competition, which is the fuel behind a free-market economy. Competition between businesses (vs. a monopoly) will always produce a better product at a lower cost to the customer. Solomon is addressing one of the harmful motives behind unhealthy competition, which is envy; we know this to be true because of his solution (v.6). But, before we consider Solomon's wisdom, let's first discuss the origin and danger of envy.

Every person has an acute awareness of fairness. In fact, it is a fetish, an unreasonable desire. Our fairness fetish, which is part of the package of sin (Satan transferred his fetish to man), causes us to look around and compare ourselves to others. When we compare ourselves to others, we are sure to notice all the ways in which they are better off than we are. "The grass is always greener on the other side," and so we complain, thinking that is not fair. When we compare ourselves to others, that's when we are tempted to covet, but covetousness leads us down a dangerous, ungodly path. Wanting what others have leads us to believe that what they have makes them better than us (a lie); that is jealousy. Jealousy is a fear of losing superiority to someone. When we are jealous, we tend to allow the worst to surface; and, if jealousy lingers, it leads to envy. While jealousy is a feeling, envy is an action. Envy leads us to hurt someone in some way (gossip, slander, silence, insult, etc.). Satan wants us to fall for this unhealthy trap as often as possible. In order to nip envy in the bud, we must avoid covetousness (Exodus 20:17; 1 Timothy 6:6); but, in order to steer clear of covetousness, we must not compare ourselves to others. That requires a great deal of contentment, being happy or satisfied with what you have or don't have, what you can do or can't do. Thus, Solomon offers good advice when he says, "a handful of rest is better than two handfuls of labor" (v.6); simply put, be content with what God has given you and avoid worry, greed, and "workaholism."

Next, Solomon considers someone who is addicted to work and, yet, who has no one for whom or with whom he is working (v.7, 8). So often work can become an idol and lead us to sacrifice time and people to worship it. Thus, Solomon offers wise counsel, as he suggests that people are more important than projects, and, thus, the lives of people are our most sound investment. Solomon points out the advantages of companionship: more can be accomplished (v.9), one can help and encourage the other (v.10, 11), and both can look out for each other (v.12). Since people are the only eternal objects of our physical world, it makes sense that they become a priority in our lives; people must always take precedence to our projects. God created us for companionship, not to be alone (Genesis 2:18).

Finally, Solomon mentions the changing winds of popularity (v.13-16). It is unfortunate that humans have such a desire to please people, when they can be so fickle and flakey. Consider for a moment all of the fads, movies, music, politicians, athletes, etc. that were popular for a time and, then, have been forgotten. Fame is only for a moment and popularity a wave that eventually must crash. More than pleasing people, we should focus on pleasing the Lord, making sure that we have a good name with Him. While people are the only eternal objects in our physical world, they are never to be our standard for living. People live in a state of constant change; it is God who is changeless (Malachi 3:6).

## Let Your Words Be Few

*How We Speak to God*

<sup>1</sup>Guard your steps as you go to the house of God and draw near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools; for they do not know they are doing evil. <sup>2</sup>Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought to bring up a matter in the presence of God. For God is in heaven and you are on the earth; therefore, let your words be few. <sup>3</sup>For the dream comes through much effort and the voice of a fool through many words. <sup>4</sup>When you make a vow to God, do not be late in paying it; for He takes no delight in fools. Pay what you vow! <sup>5</sup>It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. <sup>6</sup>Do not let your speech cause you to sin and do not say in the presence of the messenger of God that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry on account of your voice and destroy the work of your hands? <sup>7</sup>For in many dreams and in many words, there is emptiness. Rather, fear God.

### **Fear of God**

*Exodus 1:17, 21*

*Deuteronomy 6:1-24; 8:6*

*Joshua 24:14*

*Nehemiah 5:15*

*Job 1:1*

*Psalms 96:4*

*Proverbs 9:10*

*Daniel 5:22, 23*

*2 Corinthians 7:1*

*1 Peter 2:17*

### **Leading Idea**

*Our fear of God should affect our communication with God.*

After pointing out that life is difficult and mysterious, even with God in the picture (3:1-4:16), Solomon warns those who would openly voice their complaints and opinions to Him. “Guard your steps,” he says, “as you go to the house of God” (v.1). Though talking to God did not require going to the temple in Jerusalem, it was believed that being in that place was like being in the presence of God; and, whatever was said there would certainly be heard by the Lord (read Solomon’s prayer in *1 Kings* 8:27-52). Thus, while the temple was the place where God heard every word (even though we know that He can hear everything everywhere), it was a place that required tremendous caution.

The motive behind Solomon’s warnings is the fear of God. What does it mean to fear God? It can mean “to be afraid of” or “to have the utmost reverence or respect for.” In the case of our relationship with God, both definitions apply. For example, if we were standing trial in a court of law, we would experience both types of fear: first, because of the respect of the system of law and the process of a trial and, second, because we understand that the judge and jury have the authority to pass sentence against us. In a place like that, where anything and everything we say can be used against us, we would choose our words carefully. How much more, then, should we fear the God of heaven and earth, the One who made all things (when we’ve made nothing), the One who holds all things in the palm of His hands (when we control nothing), including our future, the One who makes our hearts beat and who gives us the breath of life (when we are so frail and fragile), the One who knows all things and can do all things (when we are so finite and powerless)? God sees everything that we do, He hears everything that we say, and He knows all that we think. How can we not fear His power and presence?

A healthy fear of God should affect our communication with God, the things that we say and the manner in which we say them. Solomon offers several suggestions in this area:

- *Listen more than you speak.* Offering non-stop, opinionated, self-centered nonsense in the presence of God is the “sacrifice of fools” (v.1). It does not honor Him or help you. Be guilty of remaining silent in His presence, but not guilty of spouting folly.
- *When you do speak, let your words be few.* Address the Lord in humility, understanding who you are in comparison with who He is. See yourself through His eyes. You are a peasant, the lowliest of the low, speaking to the King. He is in heaven, while you are on earth (v.2). A daydreamer does not live in reality; neither does a fool who does not mind his words (v.3, 7).
- *The few words that you do speak to God should be respectful.* You must never call into question God’s character or actions, for who are you to stand in judgment of Him? God is holy, all good, and all that He is and does is righteous. To charge Him with wrongdoing is sin. Rather than complain against God, ask for patience, faith, and understanding.
- *It is not advisable to make a promise to God.* We have been known to make vows or promises to God when we find ourselves in precarious predicaments. The problem is that we say things in those moments that we do not carefully consider and have no intention to fulfill. We must remember that we are speaking to the One who always keeps His word. Thus, when we vow something that we cannot or will not do, we are inviting His displeasure and anger (4-6).

Develop a healthy fear of God in your life. When you speak to Him, imagine yourself standing before His throne. What would you say there and how would you say it? I guarantee that it would be in a tone that is humble and respectful.

<sup>8</sup>If you see oppression of the poor and denial of justice, do not be shocked, for one official watches another, and there are higher officials over them. <sup>9</sup>After all, a king who cultivates the field is an advantage to the land. <sup>10</sup>He who loves money will not be satisfied. <sup>11</sup>When good things increase, those who consume them increase. What is the advantage to their owners except to look on? <sup>12</sup>The sleep of the working man is pleasant; but the full stomach of the rich man does not allow him to sleep. <sup>13</sup>There is an evil which I have seen: riches being hoarded by their owner to his hurt. <sup>14</sup>When those riches were lost through a bad investment and he had a son, and there was nothing to support him. <sup>15</sup>As he had come naked from his mother's womb, so will he return. He will take nothing that he can carry. <sup>16</sup>Exactly as a man is born, thus will he die. What is the advantage to him who toils for the wind? <sup>17</sup>Throughout his life he eats in darkness with vexation, sickness, and anger. <sup>18</sup>Here is what I have seen to be good: to enjoy the few years which God has given him, for this is his reward. <sup>19</sup>As for every man to whom God has given riches, he has empowered him to rejoice in his labor: this is the gift of God. <sup>20</sup>For he will not consider the years of his life, because God keeps him occupied with the gladness of his heart.

## The Richness of Life

*Chasing the Pot of Gold*

### Leading Idea

*Don't chase the riches of life but rather enjoy the richness of life.*

[Note: I have edited this passage, without altering its meaning, to make it fit the space in the margin.]

Solomon has just addressed the foolishness of complaining to God and, instead, cautioned his readers to watch their words in His presence (5:1-7). He now transitions into dispelling some of the major complaints that people have about life in general – lack of justice and lack of money.

First, regarding “oppression of the poor and denial of justice” (v.8a), Solomon says “do not be shocked.” Fallen, selfish men will always seek to oppress others; that should be no surprise. Those in power will, more often than not, be corrupted by the power they hold and use it to their advantage. However, the oppressed should take comfort in two things:

- Oppressors cannot rule alone, for they must have advisors or assistants, who will in turn keep oppressors accountable and possibly even compete for their power (v.8b).
- Even oppressors need the oppressed to survive (v.9). The King makes his living from the toil of the peasants. Evidently, there is some discrepancy about the translation of this verse. I'm not convinced that the NASB has the right meaning. In my research, it seems that Solomon is saying that the King himself is served by the field, meaning that he must protect the peasants, to some degree, in order to gain the reward from their labor. In other words, the system only works if King and peasant work together, and, thus, ongoing, violent oppression only hurts the oppressor in the long run.

The second complaint that Solomon addresses is our seeming lack of money. NEWSFLASH: We will never have “enough” money! Satan has rigged the system, so that once we make money our goal, the “right” amount can never be attained (v.10). We will never be satisfied with what we make and so we will always want more. When we make more money, our standard of living expands and, thus, our cost of living expands. In other words, when we have more money, we live like we have more money which drives our pursuit of more money. Solomon says it this way, “When good things increase, those who consume them increase.” We wonder why we cannot make ends meet (v.11), even though we are not poor; we cannot seem to make enough. But, it's not the amount of income that we have; it is how we define what is “enough” money.

Chasing money is never advantageous; it causes many problems: greed (v.10), people wanting handouts (v.11), restlessness and stress (v.12), temptation to hoard (v.13), trusting in a temporal object that can be taken away at any time (v.14-16), vexation (frustration), sickness, and anger (v.17), just to name a few. So then, what is the answer to the problem of money? It is in how we define “enough.” What is enough money? Paul tells Timothy that if we have food and covering, with these we should be content (1 Timothy 6:6-10, 17-19). What, then, are we to do with the rest of our money? Use it to bless others. God gives to us generously so that we can give to others generously, in His name. Money is temporal; we will leave it all behind in death; so then, why not use it for God's glory while we can?

Solomon closes this section with some personal comments about what he believes is most important. In essence, he advises not to chase riches in life but enjoy the richness of life, the small gifts of God that are all around us (v.18-20). It is not what we can get out of life that brings us pleasure, but rather the pleasures of life itself are gifts from God. Satan continually distracts us with the “pot of gold at the end of the rainbow,” while we miss the gold coins lying on the ground all around us. In other words, don't let what you don't have ruin the joy of what you do have. The one who is content with God's gifts will be occupied with gladness (v.20). He won't even realize what he doesn't have.

<sup>1</sup>There is an evil which I have seen; it is prevalent — <sup>2</sup>a man to whom God has given riches and honor so that his soul lacks nothing; yet, God has not empowered him to eat from them, for a foreigner enjoys them. This is vanity and a severe affliction. <sup>3</sup>If a man fathers a hundred children and lives many years, but his soul is not satisfied and he does not have a proper burial, then, I say, “Better the miscarriage than he, <sup>4</sup>for its name is covered in obscurity. <sup>5</sup>It never sees the sun and it never knows anything; it is better off. <sup>6</sup>If the other man lives a thousand years twice and does not enjoy good things, do not all go to one place?” <sup>7</sup>A man’s labor is for his mouth, yet the appetite is not satisfied. <sup>8</sup>For what advantage does the wise man have over the fool? What advantage does the poor man have, knowing how to walk before the living? <sup>9</sup>What the eyes see is better than what the soul desires. This is striving after wind. <sup>10</sup>Whatever exists has already been named, and it is known what man is; for he cannot dispute with Him who is stronger than he is. <sup>11</sup>For there are many words which increase futility. What is the advantage to a man? <sup>12</sup>For who knows what is good for a man during his few years of futile life? He will spend them like a shadow. Who can tell him what comes after him?

## What Man Is

*What Man Needs*

### Leading Idea

*What our eyes see will never quench what our soul desires.*

[Note: I have edited this passage, without altering its meaning, to make it fit the space in the margin.]

Solomon continues to vent his frustration over the injustices of life. His particular focus is the man who has it all and, yet, still remains discontent (v.1, 2), perhaps because he is that man. He is writing in the latter stages of his life, looking back at the fleeting years and wondering what the purpose has been of all his fruitless pursuits.

Over the course of the next two chapters (6:1-7:14), Solomon will address two key issues that we face in life – prosperity and adversity. Why do bad things happen to good people? This question usually prompts three false assumptions: 1) that there are “good” people; 2) that prosperity is always good; 3) and, that adversity is always bad. However, Solomon will make a case against these assumptions and, instead, demonstrate that “good” people do not exist, prosperity is not always good (6:1-12) and adversity is not always bad (7:1-14). We constantly pray for God to bless (or prosper) us, but is that really what we should pray? Is prosperity always the answer? Does it always have positive results?

As an example, Solomon dwells on the fate of the miser, the one who greedily pursues wealth, hoards it, and never enjoys the good things of life. At the end of his time on earth, his wealth does no good but to go to strangers, perhaps because he has no family or friends. Solomon considers this life to be a waste of time, “vanity and a severe affliction” (v.2b). In his case, his entire estate would be divided up between his ignorant son, Rehoboam, and one of his foolish servants, Jeroboam. Both men would quickly squander their vast inheritance, thus proving Solomon’s point. He even goes so far as to compare this man to a stillborn baby. Both go to the same place – death -- but, at least, the stillborn baby does not have to experience a fruitless life. In essence, Solomon is suggesting that it is better to have never been born than to live life in this way. Even if a man has a thousand children or lives to be two thousand years old, if he does not enjoy life, by discovering its true purpose, then why live at all (v.3-6). Do not all men end up as dust in the ground?

Perhaps the best illustration to describe this mystery is man’s need for food (v.7, 8). A person works to make money, so that he can buy food and keep from starving; and, yet, though he feeds himself in the morning, he will be hungry again by evening. The same principle applies to all of life; there is nothing under the sun (on earth) that can satisfy us; it may quell our “needs” or desires temporarily, but we will soon be “hungry” again. Somehow, we’ve been fooled into believing that “what our eyes see will quench what our souls desire”; but Solomon says that is like “striving after wind” (v.9). Our souls were not created to be satisfied by anything under the sun, but rather our souls can only be satisfied by their Creator. Only the One above the sun can truly meet our needs under the sun.

Such is the world in which we live. Man is fallen, the system that surrounds us is broken, all is a mess, and nothing is going to change. Because of our rebellion to God, He has decreed this state of affairs as our consequence. “Whatever exists has already been; it is known what we are, and we cannot dispute with God about it (v.10, 11). To complain to Him would be another futile endeavor, because nothing will change. Life on earth, as a result of sin, has already been decreed; God has set all things into motion. No man will ever discover something new to satisfy him, and no man will ever successfully change the system (v.12). Why, because a fallen creature cannot undo a fallen creation. Only a man who is not fallen can restore the one who is fallen; only one who is unbroken can fix a world that is broken. Praise God that He did not leave us in such a state as Solomon describes, but that He chose to provide a way of escape from this terrible tragedy. That way out is only through His Son, Jesus Christ. He is the unbroken One who can (and already has) provided the way to satisfy our broken souls. A life without Him is, indeed, a waste of time.

<sup>1</sup>A good name is better than ointment; the day of one's death is better than the day of one's birth. <sup>2</sup>It is better to go to a house of mourning than to a house of feasting, because that is the end of every man, and the living takes it to heart. <sup>3</sup>Sorrow is better than laughter, for when a face is sad a heart may be happy. <sup>4</sup>The mind of the wise is in the house of mourning, while the mind of fools is in the house of pleasure. <sup>5</sup>It is better to listen to the rebuke of a wise man than to the song of fools. <sup>6</sup>For as the crackling of thorn bushes under a pot, so is the laughter of the fool; this too is futility. <sup>7</sup>For oppression makes a wise man mad, and a bribe corrupts the heart. <sup>8</sup>The end of a matter is better than its beginning; patience of spirit is better than haughtiness. <sup>9</sup>Do not be eager to be angry, for anger resides in the bosom of fools. <sup>10</sup>Do not say, "Why is it that the former days were better? For it is not from wisdom that you ask this." <sup>11</sup>Wisdom along with an inheritance is good and an advantage to those who see the sun. <sup>12</sup>For wisdom is protection, just as money, but the advantage of knowledge is that it preserves its possessors. <sup>13</sup>Consider the work of God, for who is able to straighten what He has bent? <sup>14</sup>In the day of prosperity be happy, but, in the day of adversity consider — God has made them both, so that man will not discover what will be after him.

## Good and Better

*God's Perspective on Adversity*

### Leading Idea

*Prosperity is not always good and adversity is not always bad.*

[Note: I have edited this passage, without altering its meaning, to make it fit the space in the margin.]

Solomon ends the previous chapter (6:12) with a question: "Who knows what is good for a man during the few years of his futile life?" We tend to answer that question with "prosperity, health, wealth, possessions, positions, power, family, love, etc." What Solomon suggests may surprise us, for his observations are opposite our ambitions. What is always best for us is not what we would prefer. His comments are similar to the book of *Proverbs*, where he sets two things side by side (i.e. wisdom and foolishness) and proves why one is superior to the other. In this particular passage (7:1-14), Solomon contrasts what is "good" and what is "better" in life.

- A good name is better than ointment.
- The day of death is better than the day of birth.
- It's better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting.
- Sorrow is better than laughter.
- It's better to listen to rebuke than songs.
- The end of a matter is better than the beginning.
- Patience is better than haughtiness.
- Wisdom and knowledge are better than money.

Ointment in the Old Testament is like perfume or cologne today; it is costly but fragrant. People wear it to make an impression on those around them. However, Solomon notes that a good name, meaning one's character and integrity, is better (v.1a). Impressing people with one's internal qualities (who you are) is better than impressing people by external means (appearance or smell). Internal qualities refer to character; but, note what Solomon suggests builds your character more than anything – adversity.

In Solomon's experience, he admits that adversity is a better teacher than prosperity. Death, suffering, sorrow, and rebuke provide better learning opportunities than do celebration, songs, and laughter (v.1b-6). People are more apt to think about their lives at a funeral than at a birth or a wedding. Suffering and sorrow help to refine beliefs, what is important in life and in whom we place their trust. While there is nothing wrong with having fun at parties, they offer little in the area of life training.

In the next several verses (v.7-14), Solomon offers more keen observations in this area. He notes that corruption and bribes provoke the wise man to action (v.7). He says that the end of a matter is better than the beginning (v.8a), because one can reflect upon the experience (adversity) and learn from it. He notes that patience, dealing with adversity, is better than pride (v.8b), which is a lesson not often learned by those who are young. He mentions the danger of anger (v.9), a topic on which he writes extensively in *Proverbs*; while it is not a sin to get angry, anger readily opens the door to sin. It is in anger that we most often lose our senses, become most self-centered, make irrational decisions, and hurt the ones we love. Self-control is a wiser choice. Solomon also advises us not to dwell in the past (v.10-12), but to learn to deal with the adversity of change, even if it's for the worse, for wisdom (knowledge) is better than money in that it "preserves the life of its possessor." What one learns from life's adversity is more valuable to pass on to future generations than just financial means.

Adversity is a better teacher than prosperity; we tend to learn more quickly under its tutelage. Yet, how often do we pray for God to send us adversity? Never. Thus, Solomon closes with this admonition, "In the day of prosperity be happy, but in the day of adversity consider — God made them both (v.13, 14). It is true, our times of ease are good, but our times of trial are better.

<sup>15</sup> I've seen everything during my life of futility; there's a righteous man who perishes, a wicked man who prolongs his life. <sup>16</sup> Do not be excessively righteous; do not be overly wise. Why should you ruin yourself? <sup>17</sup> Do not be excessively wicked; do not be a fool. Why should you die before your time? <sup>18</sup> It is good that you grasp one thing and not let go of the other; for the one who fears God comes forth with both. <sup>19</sup> Wisdom strengthens a wise man more than ten rulers in a city. <sup>20</sup> There is not a righteous man on earth who continually does good, who never sins. <sup>21</sup> Do not take seriously words which are spoken; you will not hear your servant cursing you. <sup>22</sup> For you have many times cursed others. <sup>23</sup> I said, "I will be wise," but it was far from me. <sup>24</sup> What has been is remote and mysterious. Who can discover it? <sup>25</sup> I directed my mind to know, to seek wisdom, an explanation, to know the evil of folly, the folly of madness. <sup>26</sup> I discovered more bitter than death the woman whose heart is snares and nets, whose hands are chains. One who is pleasing to God will escape, but the sinner will be captured. <sup>27</sup> I have discovered this...., <sup>28</sup> I've found one man among a thousand, but I have not found a woman among all these. <sup>29</sup> God made men upright, but they have sought many devices.

## Seeking Perfection

### *Finding Imperfection*

#### **Leading Idea**

*Man will never find or achieve perfection in an imperfect world.*

[Note: I have edited this passage, without altering its meaning, to make it fit the space in the margin.]

Solomon continues to answer his own question from the end of the last chapter (6:12), "What is good in this life?" He has already spent the first half of this chapter (7:1-14) providing counsel from his observations. Again, this section looks similar to his words in the book of *Proverbs*. He opens with a facetious saying, "I've seen everything during my life" (v.15a). Of course, it is impossible to see everything, but it is Solomon's way of saying that he's witnessed a great deal of life.

The Preacher highlights one of the great mysteries of life and then offers some confusing advice. His observation is that good guys often die prematurely and bad guys live to a ripe old age (v.15b). His advice, which, evidently, is quite controversial among scholars, is, at first glance, questionable: "Don't be excessively righteous or excessively wicked" (v.16, 17). Solomon's seems to suggest that we should land somewhere in the middle, avoid both extremes, and shoot for mediocrity. I must admit, at first, this interpretation seems appropriate, but it does not fit with the context of the passage or the book.

We must consider three elements when deciphering this advice. First, God promises the people of Israel to reward obedience and punish disobedience. Second, in order "to ensure" God's blessings, some Jews went too far in their righteousness and became over-zealous in their piety (i.e. Pharisees); in their efforts to become overly righteous, they became self-righteous, prideful, and repugnant in God's view. Third, one must understand that God's blessings are not always immediate; His rewards for our obedience do not come in our timing, as we think they should, but in His timing. Conversely, punishment for disobedience or wickedness is not always swift. Thus, when we see the wicked prosper, it discourages obedience and encourages wickedness.

Rather than get carried away with one extreme or the other, Solomon advises to fear God (v.18), trust Him at His Word, and continue to live the way that He prescribes – moral but humble – for that is the beginning of wisdom (*Prov. 9:10*); and, the wise man is better than ten city officials (v.19).

After Solomon cautions against being overly righteous, he makes another observation, that there is not one man who is completely righteous (v.20). Of course, we know that this claim is true, for sin is a disease that everyone carries, and it is handed down from one generation to the next. Because of sin, Solomon suggests not taking too seriously what others say, because their words are tainted by it (v.21); however, if we were honest, we would admit that sin has also tainted our own words (v.22).

To continue his line of thought regarding sin, Solomon notes that he has observed his own shortcomings. Though he has dedicated his life to the pursuit of wisdom, he has discovered that wisdom is not always within reach (v.23-25); there are some things that cannot be known by finite man. In his search for perfection, Solomon discovered that no one fits that description. Perfection simply cannot be attained in an imperfect world. Only one man in a thousand is upright (v.27-29), but even he falls short of the glory of God (*Romans 3:10, 23*). Only Christ attains the standard of perfection and that for the purpose of redeeming the rest of us (2 *Corinthians 5:21*).

At the end of this passage, it seems that Solomon takes a shot at women (v.26-29), stating that he's never found one that is righteous. I don't believe that this is a chauvinistic stab at the opposite sex. Keep in mind that women were Solomon's weakness; he wrote about them extensively in *Proverbs* (5:3-6; 6:24-28). It seems that Solomon was a womanizer and the women that he pursued were not commendable at all, so it should not surprise us that he never found a rose among the weeds. In my mind, he is making the case that a godly woman is a gift of God, a rare jewel (*Proverbs 31*).

<sup>1</sup>Who is like the wise man and who knows the interpretation of a matter? A man's wisdom illumines him and causes his stern face to beam.  
<sup>2</sup>I say, "Keep the command of the king because of the oath before God."  
<sup>3</sup>Do not be in a hurry to leave him. Do not join in an evil matter, for he will do whatever he pleases."  
<sup>4</sup>Since the word of the king is authoritative, who will say to him, "What are you doing?"  
<sup>5</sup>He who keeps a royal command experiences no trouble, for a wise heart knows the proper time and procedure.  
<sup>6</sup>For there is a proper time and procedure for every delight, though a man's trouble is heavy upon him.  
<sup>7</sup>If no one knows what will happen, who can tell him when it will happen?  
<sup>8</sup>No man has authority to restrain the wind with the wind, or authority over the day of death; and there is no discharge in the time of war, and evil will not deliver those who practice it.  
<sup>9</sup>All this I have seen and applied my mind to every deed that has been done under the sun wherein a man has exercised authority over another man to his hurt.  
<sup>10</sup>So then, I have seen the wicked buried, those who used to go in and out of the holy place, and they are soon forgotten in the city. This too is futility.

**God & Government**

Ex. 1:15-22; Dan. 3, 6  
 Jn. 19:10, 11; Acts 5:17-32  
 Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:13-15

**Leading Idea**

*God established government for the protection of men; we would be wise to obey.*

Solomon continues to answer the question, "Who knows what is good for a man during his lifetime" (6:12). He offers advice from his own observations, much like he did in the book of *Proverbs*. While much of his counsel stems from his own experiences, most of it is worth contemplating.

While he discovered that pursuing knowledge alone, in order to attain happiness, did not satisfy the desires of his soul, he still highly recommends wisdom. Much of his counsel is filled with encouragement to be a wise person, rather than a fool (7:11, 12, 19). Again, in this passage (8:1-9), he begins with his admiration of wise men (v.1). "A man's wisdom illumines him and causes his stern face to beam." Solomon observes that wise men stand out from others; they are obvious; but, remember, he has also noted that true wisdom comes from God (*Proverbs* 2:6), by viewing life from his perspective, not man's perspective. Wisdom should never be a source of human pride but a reminder to thank God for His wonderful gift (*James* 1:5).

In the next several verses (v.2-9), Solomon considers how a wise man should relate to his rulers, to those in authority over him, particularly the King. He even considers what to do when a King's commands are difficult or controversial. Should wise men oppose Kings at every turn or constantly threaten to topple their seat of power? Or should wise men remain loyal no matter what the cost?

Notice that Solomon opens his editorial with the words, "I say" (v.2). It is important to remember that *Ecclesiastes* is written from Solomon's perspective. Although he was indeed wiser than the average man, he was not God. Therefore, it is always important to evaluate what Solomon suggests with what God commands. It is a good idea to weigh one passage of Scripture with the whole of the Bible. Never value one verse or passage over the authority of the rest, but rather make sure to check what one author writes against the combined wave of others. It is that type of mistake – standing on one verse -- that practice introduces error into the church and deceives people. However, in this case, Solomon's advice is admirable and accurate with the rest of what the Bible says regarding our relationship with rulers.

First, Solomon recommends that men "keep the command of the king, because of the oath before God." Scholars disagree whether this oath refers to the King or the people or both, but it makes no difference. All authority is from God, and anyone who wields authority on earth does so with God's permission; thus, all rulers are accountable to Him for how they govern. Likewise, all those under authority are commanded to respect their rulers, as unto God, knowing that they exist for their protection. Therefore, Solomon suggests that wise men are "not in a hurry to leave" the King or "join in an evil matter," perhaps to assassinate or overthrow him (v.3-5, 10). Resisting authority because of light or transient disagreements is not advisable. If everyone resisted authority when they disagreed, then the world would dissolve in chaos. Living in a constant state of rebellion to authority is neither wise nor moral; that sort of behavior compromises God's divine system of order.

However, the question that cannot be ignored is this: Is there ever a time to rebel against a King's authority and/or remove him from power? Solomon suggests that there is (v.5, 6) – "there is a proper time and procedure" – and the Bible supports him. If a ruler demands that his subjects do anything against the commands of God, therefore acting against Him rather than with Him, people are obligated to obey God rather than men. God established government to protect men not to abuse them (v.9); when government neglects its duties, it may be resisted, altered, or abolished with God's support. Knowing when to do this is oftentimes mysterious, because no one knows what will happen in the future (v.7, 8). But, we can be assured that rulers who practice evil will be held accountable for their actions, at times by men but most certainly by God.

<sup>11</sup>Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed quickly, the hearts of men are given fully to do evil.

<sup>12</sup>Although a sinner does evil a hundred times and may lengthen his life, still I know that it will be well for those who fear God, who fear Him openly.

<sup>13</sup>But it will not be well for the evil man and he will not lengthen his days like a shadow, because he does not fear God.

<sup>14</sup>There is futility which is done on the earth, that; there are righteous men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked. On the other hand, there are evil men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I say that this too is futility. <sup>15</sup>So I commended pleasure, for there is nothing good for a man except to eat and to drink and to be merry, and this will stand by him throughout the days of his life which God has given him. <sup>16</sup>When I gave my heart to know wisdom and to see the task which has been done on the earth, <sup>17</sup>and I saw every work of God; I concluded that man cannot discover the work which has been done under the sun. Even though man should seek laboriously, he will not discover; and though the wise man should say, "I know," he cannot discover. <sup>9:1</sup>I have taken all this to heart and explain it that righteous men and their deeds are in the hand of God. Man does not know whether it will be love or hate; anything awaits him.

## Poise Under Pressure

*Keeping Your Faith in the Fire*

### Leading Idea

*Fear God and remain faithful to Him, despite the overwhelming evil that surrounds us.*

[Note: I have edited this passage, without altering its meaning, to make it fit the space in the margin.]

In the first half of this chapter (8:1-10), Solomon considered the wisdom of remaining loyal to one's rulers, even though he may not always agree with their policies. He suggests that it is better not to make trouble and enjoy the King's protection than to scheme of ways to take matters into one's own hands every time there is a problem. Only in extreme cases, should a ruler's power be undermined or overthrown; otherwise, one should endure the ups and downs of his rule. In the second half of this chapter (8:11-9:1), Solomon continues the idea of faithfulness under fire, as he examines again the suffering of the righteous and the success of the wicked. In a day when it seems that the wicked prosper, one might assume that it's best to throw up his hands and quit. Why even try to live a righteous life, when righteousness is only met with hardship and persecution?

Before we consider how a Christian should live in the midst of so much injustice and oppression, we must first remember some key truths. First, we live in a fallen world; sin has ruined everything. Second, the thoughts of man's heart are only evil continually (*Genesis 6:5*); because of his sinful nature, unregenerate men are naturally bent towards wickedness and debauchery. If it were not for the grace of God, there would be no good in the world at all. In other words, the relentless evil that surrounds us is only natural to the broken state precipitated by man's rebellion to God (*Genesis 3*). Third, for a time, Satan has been given power to perpetuate evil in this world (*2 Cor. 4:3, 4; 1 John 5:19*). He was the mastermind of man's break from God, he is the superintendent of all activities contrary to God's ways, and his world system, which is no surprise, glorifies evil continually. Having said that, let's look at Solomon's observations.

The Preacher first notes that a sluggish justice system only encourages the evildoer (*v.11*); no doubt, Satan and his minions consistently hinder the process to make evil look appealing. The Preacher also notes that, while the wicked seem to prosper, the righteous seem to fail (*v.14*); likewise, Satan would never want righteous living to look rewarding, but rather he would want to discourage men from the pursuit of it. Certainly in a system like this, one who tries to do what's right by God would get discouraged. Though Solomon tried to figure it out, his efforts were in vain (*v.16-9:1*). It is not for men to know the reasons why God allows things to happen; His purposes, in large part, are a mystery to us. However, is that to be a cause of despair? Not at all.

Though the puzzle of evil's existence may never be solved by the minds of men, the people of God should never despair. That is the meaning of poise, "a weight" that holds us down and keeps us grounded, when everything inside of us says to panic! We should not allow that which we do not know to undo that which we do know. First, we know that God is sovereign; He is in control and nothing takes Him by surprise. Second, we know that God is good; everything that He does stems from His goodness, therefore, all that takes place on earth, no matter how evil, must have a good purpose. Third, through Scripture, we know God's will and ways for our lives; though they are opposite of the way that the world lives, we are called to be obedient to His Word (*v.12, 13*). Fourth, we know that all men are accountable to God for their deeds, and one day they will stand before Him to give an answer. Even though justice may not be served here on earth, that does not mean that justice will never be served; evildoers will pay for their actions, either in this life and/or the next. "Therefore, be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil. Do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is" (*Ephesians 5:15, 16*). Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time, we shall reap if we do not grow weary (*1 Corinthians 15:58*); rather, let us be steadfast, overcoming the world and enduring to the end (*1 John 5:4, 5*). Let us remain poised under pressure; let us be faithful to God in the midst of the fire among us (*Daniel 3*).

<sup>2</sup> *It is the same for all. There is one fate for the righteous and the wicked, the good, the clean and the unclean, the man who offers a sacrifice and the one who doesn't. As the good man is, so is the sinner; as the swearer is, so is the one afraid to swear.* <sup>3</sup> *This is evil, that there is one fate for all. The hearts of men are full of evil and insanity. Afterwards they go to the dead.* <sup>4</sup> *For whoever is joined with the living, there is hope; a live dog is better than a dead lion.* <sup>5</sup> *The living know they will die; the dead do not know anything, nor have they a reward, for their memory is forgotten.* <sup>6</sup> *Their love, hate, and zeal have perished; they no longer have a share in all that is done.* <sup>7</sup> *Eat your bread in happiness; drink wine with a cheerful heart; God approves your works.* <sup>8</sup> *Let your clothes be white; let not oil be lacking on your head.* <sup>9</sup> *Enjoy life with the woman you love, which He has given to you; this is your reward.* <sup>10</sup> *What your hand finds to do, do it with all your might; for there is no activity, planning, knowledge, or wisdom where you are going (Sheol).* <sup>11</sup> *The race is not to the swift, the battle to the warriors, the bread to the wise, wealth to the discerning, favor to men of ability; for time and chance overtake them all.* <sup>12</sup> *Man does not know his time: like fish caught in a net and birds trapped in a snare, men are ensnared a time that suddenly falls on them.*

## The End or the Beginning?

*The Reality of Death*

### Leading Idea

*From under the sun, death is the end; from above the sun, death is the beginning.*

[Note: I have edited this passage, without altering its meaning, to make it fit the space in the margin.]

Death, or the grave (Sheol, *v.11*), seems to be a preoccupation for Solomon. He cannot shake the thought that all men die, no matter how they live. “As the fate of the fool,” he said, “it will also befall me. The wise man and the fool die alike” (*2:15, 16*). Later, he wrote, “The fate of men and the fate of beasts is the same. As one dies, so dies the other. There is no advantage for man over beast, for all go to the same place” (*3:19, 20*). He continued, “Just as man has come naked from his mother’s womb, so shall he return. He will take nothing from the fruit of his labor. Exactly as he is born, thus will he die” (*5:15, 16*). He continues his disappointment in this passage (*9:2-12*), railing against the unfairness of death. “This is an evil, that there is one fate for all” (*v.2a, 3*).

It is true, in one sense, that there is one fate for all people. Everyone will die (*v.12*). That’s why death is known as “the Great Equalizer.” But, why does death exist? Physical death is the result of sin (*Gen. 2:17; Rom. 6:23a*); and, all are subject to death, because all have sinned (*Rom. 5:12*). Death is a reminder of our human frailty; it keeps before us the fact that something is dreadfully wrong down here, that we live in a broken, dysfunctional world. The Bible describes death as a “separation.” Physical death separates us from our loved ones in life; spiritual death separates us from God in eternity. Perhaps it’s the separation that causes us to avoid death at all costs. Self-preservation seems to be programmed into our system. If given the choice, we want to live (*v.4-6*).

People fear death for many reasons. Perhaps it’s because we don’t know when or how it will happen (*v.12*). Perhaps it’s because we fear losing control or we fear losing a life or people that we enjoy. Perhaps it’s because we fear the unknown, what will happen after we die. Everyone must come to that “wall,” but not knowing what is on the other side is a thought that many cannot entertain.

However, is death an evil (*v.3*), as Solomon suggests? Or, is the reality of death a blessing? The answer to that question is determined by one’s perspective of life. To the one who views life from “under the sun,” death is the end of all things (*v.10*); but, to the one who views life from “above the sun,” death is not the end but the beginning. One person, Jesus Christ, has gone to that “wall,” gone through to the other side, and come back to tell us what to expect. He alone possesses the authority and knowledge to tell everyone the truth about death. His resurrection makes Him the only expert on what happens after death. According to Him, there is an after-life, it consists of two different places (heaven and hell), and there is only one way to ensure that we will have a positive experience – salvation in Him alone (*Mark 12:26, 27; John 3:16; 14:1-6*). Thus, because of Christ, death has no sting and the grave has no victory (*1 Cor. 15:55*). His followers need not fear death, because it is only the door through which we pass to be with Him (*2 Cor. 5:8; Phil. 1:23*). In that sense, death is not something to dread at all. In fact, death is a grace of God, in that we are not stuck in this sinful world for eternity.

So then, now that we know how to view death, how do we view life? Certainly, we are to enjoy the good gifts that God has given us in this fallen world – food, friends, family, work, love, etc. (*v.7-9*). However, the time that we have here, not knowing how long it is, is our chance to do two things: accept Christ’s gift of salvation for ourselves and share that gift with others. The one thing that we will not be able to do in heaven is share the Gospel. At that point, it will be too late. Therefore, while there is still time, we must understand our life’s mission – to know God and to make Him known. Thus, when it is our time to die, we will be able to look back at a life well spent.

## **Ecclesiastes 9:13-10:15**

<sup>9:13</sup> This I came to see as wisdom and it impressed me. <sup>14</sup> There was a small city and a king constructed siege works against it. <sup>15</sup> But a poor wise man delivered the city by his wisdom. Yet no one remembered him. <sup>16</sup> I say, "Wisdom is better than strength." But the wisdom of the poor man is despised; his words are not heeded. <sup>17</sup> The quiet words of the wise are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools. <sup>18</sup> Wisdom is better than weapons, but one sinner destroys much good. <sup>10:1</sup> Dead flies make a perfumer's oil stink, so is foolishness weightier than wisdom and honor. <sup>2</sup> A wise man's heart directs him toward the right; the foolish man's heart directs him toward the left. <sup>3</sup> Even when the fool walks, his sense is lacking and he demonstrates that he is a fool. <sup>4</sup> If the ruler's temper rises, do not abandon your position; composure allays great offenses. <sup>5</sup> There is an evil I have seen, an error which goes forth from the ruler; <sup>6</sup> folly is set in many exalted places while rich men sit in humble places. <sup>7</sup> I have seen slaves riding on horses and princes walking like slaves. <sup>8</sup> He who digs a pit may fall into it; a serpent may bite him who breaks through a wall. <sup>9</sup> He who quarries stones may be hurt; he who splits logs may be endangered. <sup>10</sup> If the axe is dull, then he must exert more strength. Wisdom has the advantage of success. <sup>11</sup> If the serpent bites before being charmed, there is no profit for the charmer. <sup>12</sup> Words from the wise man are gracious, but the lips of a fool consume him; <sup>13</sup> the beginning of his talking is folly; the end is madness. <sup>14</sup> Yet the fool multiplies words. No man knows what will happen, and who can tell him what will come? <sup>15</sup> The toil of a fool so wearies him that he does not even know how to go to a city.

## Wisdom Undone

*The Destructiveness of Folly*

### Leading Idea

*Wisdom can do much good, all of which can be undone by one act of folly.*

[Note: I have edited this passage, without altering its meaning, to make it fit the space in the margin.]

It is no secret that Solomon admires wisdom. He was blessed by God with a great deal of it, he demonstrated it in nearly all areas of his life, and he wrote about it extensively in the book of *Proverbs*. We could easily say that the pursuit of wisdom is Solomon's favorite subject. Thus, before he begins to wrap up the book of *Ecclesiastes*, he spends a little more time extolling the virtue of wisdom, as he contrasts the wise man and the fool.

Certainly wisdom can achieve much good and is worth pursuing (9:17; 10:2), but Solomon observes in life that wisdom is not always king. It can be toppled and its power unraveled. All of the benefits that wisdom provides can be undone by folly. While a life of foolishness is not exonerated by an act of wisdom, a life of wisdom can be destroyed by one act of indiscretion. Likewise, Solomon notes, that a group of fools can be saved by one wise man (9:13-16), but the advance of wise men can be undone by one fool. Solomon says it this way, "Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good. Just as dead flies make a perfumer's oil stink, so is foolishness weightier than wisdom and honor" (9:18; 10:1).

Wisdom has its advantages, Solomon says (9:16; 10:2, 4, 10), just as folly has its drawbacks (10:3, 12-15). However, wisdom is not always rewarded and folly is not always punished. Sometimes the fool is promoted, while the wise man is overlooked (10:5-7). Also, things do not always go the way of the wise; their smarts do not always ensure a smooth path (10:8, 9), a reminder that just because we make wise decisions, that does not guarantee the best outcome. Life has a way of unfairly repaying evil for good and good for evil. Remember, sin has soured the system; nothing works as it should.

While this passage is long, it is fairly straight-forward. However, I find it personally very challenging for two reasons. First, because of what Christ has done for me, given His life that I may live, it is my desire to offer my earthly life to Him, as a "sweet aroma," unstained by the immorality of the world (*Ephesians* 5:1-3). However, I know that my new nature is trapped in the old sinful body and that I have many "flies," displeasing impurities, which I must remove to "smell" as I should. I understand that Christ has made me whole and that I am a new creature in His eyes, but in the life that I still have left on earth, I desire to be pleasing to Him, and through the process of sanctification (working out my salvation), I wish to "lay aside every encumbrance and the sin that so easily besets me" (*Hebrews* 12:1, 2). When I was first saved, the "flies" in my life were big and easily noticeable, but now, though they are still present (we will never be sinless), they are more difficult to identify.

The second challenge I find in this passage is that though I have surrendered my life to Christ and strive to be an example to others, I must continue to fight to the end. I must endure and finish the race well. I've seen too many Christians, who were "good" people, go down in flames, because of one foolish decision. Though they have retained their salvation, they have destroyed their testimony before men. Living the Christian life is not easy; in fact, it is a constant struggle. Our spiritual enemy is crafty, he's relentless, and he's patient. He will wait an entire lifetime, only to tear down all that we have built up. We cannot afford to take a day off and fall into temptation (as David did with Bathsheba). We must be vigilant to keep a look out, knowing that he is like a lion seeking someone to devour (*1 Peter* 5:8). We must maintain our spiritual disciplines, allow ourselves to be accountable to other believers, and have the courage to target and eliminate sin by the power of the Holy Spirit.

*10:16 Woe to you, O land, whose king is a lad and whose princes feast in the morning. <sup>17</sup> Blessed are you, whose king is of nobility and whose princes eat at the appropriate time, for strength and not for drunkenness. <sup>18</sup> Through indolence the rafters sag; through slackness the house leaks. <sup>19</sup> Men prepare a meal for enjoyment; wine makes life merry, and money is the answer to everything. <sup>20</sup> In your bedchamber, do not curse a king, and in your sleeping rooms do not curse a rich man, for a bird of the heavens will carry the sound and make the matter known.*

*11:1 Cast your bread on the surface of the waters, for you will find it after many days. <sup>2</sup> Divide your portion to seven or eight, for you do not know what misfortune may occur. <sup>3</sup> If the clouds are full, they pour out rain; and whether a tree falls toward the south or north, wherever the tree falls, there it lies. <sup>4</sup> He who watches the wind will not sow; he who looks at the clouds will not reap. <sup>5</sup> Just as you do not know the path of the wind and how bones are formed in the womb of the pregnant woman, so you do not know the activity of God who makes all things. <sup>6</sup> Sow your seed in the morning and do not be idle in the evening, for you do not know whether morning or evening sowing will succeed, or whether both of them alike will be good.*

## Convenience & Chaos

*Be Prepared for Life's Unpredictability*

### Leading Idea

*Wisdom gives one an advantage in life, but it does not give him immunity from life.*

[Note: I have edited this passage, without altering its meaning, to make it fit the space in the margin.]

Solomon continues to sing the praises of wisdom (9:13-10:15). “Wisdom is better than strength,” he wrote (10:16a). “Wisdom is better than weapons of war” (10:18a); and, “Wisdom has the advantage of giving success” (10:10c).

It is clear; Solomon cherishes wisdom. It has been the focus of his life, to figure out “the system” and find a way “to beat it.” However, he has come to the realization that wisdom does not always guarantee easy living. Wisdom, in his estimation, certainly gives one an advantage in life, but wisdom does not give him immunity from life. Life is mysterious and unpredictable. Every person on earth experiences difficulty; no one is exempt from pain, heartache, or hardship. Thus, wisdom advises to be prepared for both convenience and chaos; that truth is the emphasis of this passage (10:16-11:6).

First, Solomon addresses the fact that there will always be both fit and unfit rulers. It is a blessing to be under the authority of a wise and noble king (10:17), but it is assured that, at some point, a foolish king will sit on the throne (10:16, 18, 19). His laziness and neglect will ruin the country, and, yet, he will feast as if nothing is wrong, claiming all that is necessary is more money (which he will collect with taxes). The wise man knows how to live during the reign of both men.

For example, the wise man knows not to utter complaints, to whisper gossip, or to slander the name of the king, because somehow (perhaps by way of the “little birdie”) his thoughts and words will be made public and ruin him (10:20). The wise man knows to be generous with his money, so that perhaps it will come back to him generously on a day when he needs it (11:1). The wise man also understands the fact that the economy will not be stable forever, that there will be highs and lows; thus, he will diversify his wealth, so that he can withstand economic downturns or depressions (11:2).

Life has a way of blessing us one day and blasting us the next. None of us knows what a day has in store, so we must be prepared for anything. As Solomon puts it, “You do not know the activity of God” (11:5c). The clouds pour rain when they want (11:3a), the trees fall when and where they wish (11:3b), and the wind blows where it likes (11:5a), and we can’t control or understand any of it, but we must be ready for all of it. Thus, Solomon suggests that we sow seed at all times, rather than wait for the perfect time, because the perfect time may never come. “He who watches the wind will not sow; and, he who looks at the clouds will not reap” (11:4). We must do what we can while we can, not knowing what God has in store for us (11:6).

It is true, life can be convenient for a spell, and, then, it can turn on a dime and become chaotic. It seems that all goes well financially for a bit, and, then, a string of events occurs that depletes one’s savings or incurs great debt. One can be healthy for a good stretch of time and, then, suddenly fall ill for years, perhaps even terminally. One can work his entire life at a job and, then, without notice, be let go and find himself without income. What are we to do with this inconsistency and unpredictability? Resist the urge to panic, knowing that God is in control, but take steps to practice wisdom and be prepared for both occasions.

Though the wise are not immune from life’s hardships, they can be inoculated for it. People take steps while they are healthy, like get shots for polio, pox, or the flu, so that in the event of an outbreak of these diseases, they themselves are protected. While we enjoy the convenient times of life, it is best to prepare ourselves for the chaotic times that we know are just around the bend.

## **Ecclesiastes 11:7-12:8**

<sup>11:7</sup> *The light is pleasant; it is good for the eyes to see the sun. <sup>8</sup> Indeed, if a man should live many years, let him rejoice in them all; let him remember the days of darkness, for they will be many. Everything that is to come will be futility.*

<sup>9</sup> *Rejoice, young man, during your childhood, and let your heart be pleasant during the days of young manhood. Follow the impulses of your heart and the desires of your eyes, yet know that God will bring you to judgment for all these things. <sup>10</sup> Remove grief and anger from your heart and put away pain from your body, because childhood and the prime of life are fleeting.*

<sup>12:1</sup> *Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near when you will say, "I have no delight in them"; <sup>2</sup> before the sun and the light, the moon and the stars are darkened, and clouds return after the rain; <sup>3</sup> in the day that the watchmen of the house tremble, and mighty men stoop, the grinding ones stand idle because they are few, and those who look through windows grow dim; <sup>4</sup> and the doors on the street are shut as the sound of the grinding mill is low, and one will arise at the sound of the bird, and all the daughters of song will sing softly. <sup>5</sup> Men are afraid of a high place and of terrors on the road; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags himself along, and the caperberry is ineffective. For man goes to his eternal home while mourners go about in the street. <sup>6</sup> Remember Him before the silver cord is broken and the golden bowl is crushed, the pitcher by the well is shattered and the wheel at the cistern is crushed; <sup>7</sup> then the dust will return to the earth, and the spirit will return to God who gave it. <sup>8</sup> "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher. "All is vanity."*

# Live While You Are Dying

*The Brevity of Life*

## **Leading Idea**

*Enjoy the light of life while you are young, because the dark days of old age are coming.*

[Note: I have edited this passage, without altering its meaning, to make it fit the space in the margin.]

As the book of *Ecclesiastes* draws to a close, Solomon transitions from sharing his wisdom and observations (6:12-11:6) to formulating conclusions; but, before he offers his best advice, he reminds us, once again, of the brevity of life (11:7-12:7). The Preacher is at the end of his time on earth; his youth is a distant memory, even his young and median adult years are long gone. He is now an old man and having to endure the debilitating process of watching and accepting his body breaking down.

In the first two verses (v.11:7, 8), Solomon uses light as a symbol for youth, and, he uses darkness as a symbol for old age. When he says that "light is pleasant but the days of darkness are many," he is reflecting on his time as a young and old man. Enjoy the light while you can, he says, because what happens in the darkness is only futile "wasting away" (v.8). He repeats the same sentiment in the next verse (v.9a), when he reminds his readers to chase their dreams early in life, because time and old age will prevent them, from becoming reality.

However, while encouraging those who are young to "follow the impulses of their hearts," Solomon reminds them to honor God in the process. We should take advantage of our youth and do the things that only the young can do, but not at the expense of dishonoring the Lord or ruining our testimony. "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth" (12:1), for "God will bring you to judgment for all these things" (11:9b), a truth that we will explore in depth at the close of the book (v.12, 13). In essence, his admonition is to follow your heart's desire but not as a heathen or pagan, but with God in mind. Discover what it is that He wants you to do and do it with all your heart.

Solomon also encourages his readers not to waste their lives in anger or grief (11:10), not to allow circumstances to steal the joys of living. "Let your heart be pleasant during the days of young manhood" (11:9:b), for why would you spend your good days upset, unhappy, or bitter, when "evil" days are coming when you will "have no delight" (12:1b)? We've all known people who seem to become more snippy and unpleasant as they grow old; the more tired and run down they become, and the more frustrated and sore they are, it is natural that they would be grumpier. Solomon's point is why waste your younger days with a bad attitude when that's what you have to look forward to?

What follows next is a depressing list of all the curses old people have to endure (12:2-6), before they finally "return to the dust" (12:7). Rather than state them plainly, Solomon uses metaphors, some meanings of which are difficult to interpret. For example, the coming of old age is described as "the sun, the light, the moon, and the stars being darkened, and the clouds returning after the rain" (v.2). Other examples include "the watchmen of the house tremble" (hands, v.3), "mighty men stoop" (self-explanatory), "the grinding ones stand idle because they are few" (teeth), "those who look through windows grow dim" (eyes), and "the doors on the street are shut" (ears, v.4). Older people "rise at the sound of a bird," they are often afraid (v.5), their almond tree blossoms (white hair), they drag themselves along like the injured grasshopper, and the caperberry is ineffective (their sex drive disappears). It is difficult to know all of the analogies (i.e. v.6), but it is clear that Solomon is describing the final stages of life and the body's preparation for death (v.7, 8).

Because of sin, the end of life on earth is nothing to look forward to; it was man's rebellion to God that initiated the dying process. However, because of Christ, we can look forward to eternal life and a glorified body, one that will be free from all physical ailments and inadequacies. But, until that day comes, when we will live with Him, let us, with all the days and strength that we have left, strive to live for Him while we are dying.

<sup>9</sup>In addition to being a wise man, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge; and, he pondered, searched out, and arranged many proverbs. <sup>10</sup>The Preacher sought to find delightful words and to write words of truth correctly. <sup>11</sup>The words of wise men are like goads, and masters of these collections are like well-driven nails; they are given by one Shepherd. <sup>12</sup>But, beyond this, my son, be warned: the writing of many books is endless, and excessive devotion to books is wearying to the body. <sup>13</sup>The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep his commandments, because this applies to every person. <sup>14</sup>For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.

**Judgment to Come**

Romans 2:6; 8:1, 2  
Romans 14:10-12  
1 Corinthians 9:4-27  
2 Corinthians 5:10  
2 Timothy 2:5; 4:8  
Hebrews 9:27  
James 1:12  
Revelation 2:23; 22:12  
Revelation 20:11-15

## Goads and Nails

*Solomon's Conclusion*

### Leading Idea

*We should live with the end in mind, knowing that we will answer to God for our deeds.*

After a lifetime of chasing genuine wisdom, which included years of investigating the many paths that boast man's "happiness" and many months of observing and pondering the mysteries of life, Solomon has come to the end of his journey and is ready to pen his conclusions. Though he has literally wasted a lifetime in this pursuit, he has deduced all of his experiences to a common denominator. Thus, we have in this passage, the culmination of his research and the legacy that will survive his time on earth.

Before he unveils his final admonition, Solomon makes a point to assure his readers that he has put forth his best effort in this venture; and, in doing so, he has "pondered, searched out, and arranged many proverbs" (v.9, 10, no doubt referring to this book and the book of *Proverbs*), the fruit of all his labor. In his opinion, proverbs, or words from the wise, are like "goads and nails" (v.11), a reference to the tools of a shepherd. A goad was a long, pointy stick that shepherds used to prod their sheep and keep them in line or in the fold; and, nails refer to pegs that were used to hold down one's tent. In essence, Solomon says that heeding the words of the wise will protect a person from foolish behavior and provide stability in an otherwise chaotic life.

In the same verse (v.11c), there is a reference to "one Shepherd," by whom all these words of wisdom are given. The New American Standard translation capitalized this word, possibly signifying that it refers to God. It is true that all Scripture is given by God, but this reference is more than likely pointing to Solomon. He is mentioning the value of proverbs and wise words, by using shepherd metaphors, so it is a better fit that he would refer to himself as the "one shepherd," the giver of these proverbs. However, he digresses quickly, by reminding his readers that the writing and reading of many words is endless, when all you really need to know is what he is about to share.

Solomon's grand conclusion is "to fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person" (v.13). These words might surprise us, who live in the Church Age of the New Testament, but we must remember that he lived in the Old Testament, under the Law; and, this conclusion, is the summation of the Old Testament era – love God first and foremost, and demonstrate that love by obeying His commandments and statutes (*Deut. 6:1-18*). In the Church Age, we might summarize Solomon's words this way: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength; and, love your neighbor as yourself" (*Mark 12:30, 31*). We should not conclude by this statement that moralism (following God's rules) is the meaning of life. Since we live after Christ's coming, we know that He is the meaning and fulfillment of life, that salvation in Him alone is the answer to all life's problems, and that we are to live a life worthy of Him. That life is lived, not out of fear of God, but from a love for God, for what He has done for us on the cross, redeeming us from sin.

I love that Solomon ends with a reminder of the judgment to come (v.14). Although he did not have the details, he knew enough to write that God would keep all men accountable to their actions, which is true. Because of the New Testament writers, we know that there will be two judgments – the Great White Throne judgment for unbelievers, and the Bema Seat Judgment for believers, one to destine men to God's eternal wrath in hell and the other to reward (or withhold rewards from) men for their works.

As followers of Christ, we need not fear the Great White Throne Judgment, for we will not be in attendance; however, we should be concerned about the Bema Seat Judgment, for there our lives, after salvation, will be evaluated. Sin will not be the issue, for it has been forgiven, but rather our stewardship of Christ's gift will be. That day, when we stand before Christ, and answer to Him, should be like a goad and nails in our lives. Without accountability, men's passions and ambitions cannot be kept in check. Thus, the judgment to come should cause us to live today with the end in mind.