



Scripture Studies in Ecclesiastes

by Scott Sperling



*“Come now, let us reason together,
says the Lord...” – Isaiah 1:18*

SCRIPTURE STUDIES
IN
ECCLESIASTES

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**“Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and
knowledge of God!
How unsearchable his judgments,
and his paths beyond tracing out!
‘Who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his counselor?’
‘Who has ever given to God,
that God should repay them?’
For from him and through him
and for him are all things.
To him be the glory forever! Amen.”**

– Romans 11:33-36

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1 - INTRODUCTION TO ECCLESIASTES

Meaningless?

¹The words of the Teacher, son of David, king of Jerusalem:

² “Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher.
“Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.”

— Ecclesiastes 1:1-2

YOU WILL AGREE, this is a strange way to begin a book of the Bible: **“Meaningless! Meaningless!... Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.”** Wait a minute. Isn’t one of the chief purposes of the Bible to explain to us what the meaning of life is? Yet, here it says in black and white: **“Everything is meaningless.”** Hmmm.

To reconcile these things, we must learn the most important principle in Biblical interpretation: The writings of the Bible must be understood in the context in which they were intended. Whenever you face a difficulty or apparent contradiction in the Bible, you must search out, investigate, and understand the context in which the troubling passages are set. The context for the Book of Ecclesiastes is explicitly stated in verse 13 of chapter 1: **“I devoted myself to study and to explore *by wisdom* all that is done *under heaven*”** (emphasis mine). The Book of Ecclesiastes is the result of the author’s studies, as he explored **“by wisdom”** (that is, by human wisdom), all that is done **“under heaven”** (that is, in the world, on earth). Ecclesiastes is a very comprehensive

statement of human wisdom from the point of view of a man on earth.

In his investigations and explorations, Solomon (the author of Ecclesiastes) runs into much that is **“meaningless”**, as we shall see as we study this book. This may seem depressing at first, for it seems that every path the author takes ends with meaninglessness. But, in the end, Solomon does reach a path that leads to meaningfulness: **“Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil”** (Eccles. 12:13-14). In the New Testament (in I John 3:23), we are given a summary of the commandments of God, the keeping of which (as Solomon concludes) leads to meaningfulness: **“And this is His command: to believe in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ”** (which ensures a right relationship with God), **“and to love one another as He commanded us”** (which ensures a right relationship with fellow men).

Others have summarized the Book of Ecclesiastes well: “The scope of Ecclesiastes is to contrast the vanity of all mere human pursuits, when made the chief end, as contrasted with the real blessedness of true wisdom” [JFB, 16]. The purpose of Ecclesiastes “is to bring out into clear view the chief good—the true happiness of man, in what it does not consist—not in the wisdom, pleasures, honours, and riches of this world—in what it does consist—the enjoyment and service of God... Solomon’s is not to allure men to the pleasures of the world, but rather to deter them from such pleasures, and exhort them with a Divine eloquence to despise the world. After having disputed through the whole book against those who desire to satisfy themselves with such good, he at the close teaches them that happiness consisteth not in things of this kind, but in true

piety— and thus concludes, **‘Fear God, and keep His commandments; for this is the whole of man’** [Bridges, 12,15].

To understand that the Book of Ecclesiastes is written from a human point of view is crucial to the understanding of the book. If this is not understood properly, there are many passages in the book which truly sound strange and out of place for inclusion in an inspired book of the Bible. For example, the author writes: **“Do not be over-righteous, neither be overwise— why destroy yourself?”** (Eccl. 7:16). And also: **“A feast is made for laughter and wine makes life merry, but money is the answer for everything”** (Eccl. 10:19). These are strange verses to find in the Bible—until we realize that they are told from the viewpoint of worldly wisdom. From a worldly point of view, it is proper advice to not be **“overrighteous”**. And from a worldly point of view, yes, **“money is the answer for everything”**. That’s the problem with the world.

You see, for the most part, Solomon is not so much telling us how things should be, but how things are. He recounts what he has seen and experienced as he sought out **“wisdom”** and **“the scheme of things”** as they are **“under the sun”** (see Eccl. 7:25). Invariably, as Solomon follows worldly pursuits—worldly wisdom, worldly pleasures, worldly projects—he ends up in the same place: with an empty feeling, complaining that **“everything is meaningless!”** Yet, there is a purpose to Solomon’s ravings. **“He is demolishing to build”** [Kidner, 19]. In order to truly appreciate the wisdom of God and the wisdom of His plan, we must come to realize that the wisdom of men and the schemes of men lead to meaninglessness, to vanity.

Solomon’s discourse strikes a chord. **“The searching questions he has asked are those that life itself puts to us”** [Kidner, 19]. This is life from the world’s point of view. We

have all seen many of the things that Solomon has written about here. We have ourselves pondered these things and wondered at the perceived meaninglessness of life. Since these issues resonate in the lives of all of us, believers and non-believers, this book can be valuable as a gateway into the Bible for non-believers. Non-believers are interested in these things. Many are seeking an answer to the questions that Solomon raises. In this book, Solomon uses the thought processes of men, of the world's philosophers. Many non-believers throughout the ages have come to the same conclusions that Solomon has. Thus, the book of Ecclesiastes is important in this way: by its inclusion in the Bible, it shows us that God knows and understands the things men ponder about life. God knows and understands the hearts of men. He knows what they feel, what they think, what they ponder, what they seek to understand. God knows and understands that when men, by their wisdom, seek to find the meaning of life, they conclude that **“everything is meaningless”**.

And surely, God purposely designed life in this way. You see, God wants us to depend on Him for answers to the ultimate questions of life. When the philosophers of the world ponder and investigate and search out the scheme of things, they get nowhere. But when they give up, when they come to their end, when they kneel down in their despair and cry out, “God, if you are there, answer these things,”—then they begin to find meaning. Our God is not the god of the agnostics. The god of the agnostics, in the beginning, wound up the universe like a toy and let it run by itself. This is not our God. This is not a true picture of the living God. The god of the agnostics has left men to their own resources in seeking answers to ultimate questions, and their conclusion throughout the ages has been **“everything is meaningless.”** But the True and Living God has not left us alone to figure out these things for

ourselves. The Bible is a history of God's personal dealings with man on earth. God has not left us with meaninglessness, but has intervened on earth and has given us His own Word, the Word of God in the Bible, so that we may discover the true scheme of all things. Moreover, He Himself, in the supreme act of love in the universe—I say, He Himself has come down to earth in human form, in the body of Jesus Christ, and has testified to the truth of the Word of God in the Bible. The truth of Christ's testimony was confirmed by His signs and wonders, as well as (and especially) by His resurrection from the dead. Certainly, the One who has conquered death knows the meaning of life!

There are some who think that Ecclesiastes should not be part of the Bible. But on the contrary (as we have discussed here), Ecclesiastes is a very important book of the Bible. Again, the book of Ecclesiastes shows us that God understands the human condition. At the end of Ecclesiastes, the author states: **“[W]hat [Solomon] wrote was upright and true”** (Eccl. 12:10). As we read through Ecclesiastes, we will come to agree with this statement. Though at times he is cynical, though at times he is downright irreverent, Solomon very eloquently expresses the philosophical problems that we face here on earth. It is not God's will that we ignore these philosophical dilemmas—God knows very well that we will face them sooner or later—rather, it is His will that we face these things head on, so that through discovering the **“meaningless”**ness of life from man's point of view, we will be drawn to the meaningfulness of life from God's point of view. Indeed, this is why God has included these writings in His Word. As Solomon himself points out, the words in Ecclesiastes **“are like goads, their collected sayings like firmly embedded nails—given by one Shepherd”** (Eccl. 12:11). They are goads,

prodding us to seek true meaning of life from God. This is why our **“Shepherd”**, the Lord, has included this book in His Word.

2 - ECCLESIASTES 1:1-3

Solomon's Search for Meaning

¹ “The words of the Teacher, son of David, king of Jerusalem: ² “Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.” ³ What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun? is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.”

— Ecclesiastes 1:1-3

THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES begins: **“The words of the Teacher, son of David, king of Jerusalem”** (vs. 1). On the face of it, I think you’ll agree, it seems that the author is Solomon. Some commentators (most notably, Delitzsch) have argued that the language of Ecclesiastes does not fit the language of Solomon’s time, but others have refuted this by pointing out that the language of Ecclesiastes does not really fit later Hebrew either (see Kaiser, JFB, et. al.). I think that it was Solomon who wrote this book, for a number of reasons. First, since after Solomon’s reign, the nation of Israel split into two nations (see II Chron. 10-11; I Kings 12), so then verse 1 above, as well as verse 12 of chapter 1, describes only Solomon: he was the only **“son of David”** who was **“king over Israel in Jerusalem”** (vs. 12). Also, many passages in Ecclesiastes refer to events in or aspects of Solomon’s life and character: Solomon’s great projects as described in Eccl. 2:4-10 are chronicled in I Kings 4:27-32; 7:1-8; 9:17-19; 10:14-29; Solomon’s downfall following his chasing after women (see I

Kings 11:1-8) is reflected in Eccl. 7:26-28; Solomon's imparting of his wisdom and knowledge to others, as stated in Eccl. 12:9-10, can be found in I Kings 4:34; 10:2,8; et. al. Moreover, the goal of the **"Teacher"** in the book of Ecclesiastes, as stated many times and in many ways, is to **"study and explore by wisdom all that is done under the sun"** (Eccl. 1:13), and wisdom was also Solomon's great passion in life (see I Kings 3).

The words in Ecclesiastes are **"The words of the Teacher"**. The word translated here **"Teacher"** is also often translated as "Preacher". The verb form of the word (translated elsewhere as "assemble") is used when people are assembled to hear important teaching or an important announcement (see Ex. 35:1; Lev. 8:3; Deut. 4:10 for other uses of the word). So, the implication is that Solomon, the **"Teacher"**, has something important to say. And what does he have to say?: **"Meaningless! Meaningless!... Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless. What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun?"** (vs. 2-3). Is this the important teaching for which the **"Teacher"** has assembled us? This is far from uplifting. This is downright depressing! With these statements, the **"Teacher"** states the theme of the book of Ecclesiastes, by use of a *sweeping conclusion* and a *guiding question* [Hubbard, 43]. The *sweeping conclusion*: **"Meaningless! Meaningless!"** The *guiding question*: **"What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun?"** Most of the rest of the book consists of Solomon's search—by his wisdom, by human wisdom—for meaning. As we shall see, rather than **"meaning"**, Solomon finds **"meaningless"**ness at every turn.

This happens despite the fact that Solomon searches for meaning (seemingly) in all the right places. He searches for meaning through pursuit of wisdom, through pleasure, through

the undertaking of great projects, through hard work and achievement, through riches. Each of these things is pleasing to the eye, and a promising place to find meaning. I dare say that all of us desire more of each of these things in our lives. But Solomon, who had the power and the means to explore each of these things, far from finding his life enriched by these things, was left with a feeling of emptiness, a feeling that he had been merely chasing after the wind. “Earthly things look grand, till the trial has proved their vanity” [Bridges, 8].

Much of Solomon’s problem lies in the formation of his guiding question: **“What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun?”** Solomon’s was inherently a selfish pursuit. He was looking for some sort of **“gain”** for himself. This is the root of Solomon’s difficulty in finding meaning. Solomon’s definition of “meaning” was tied to **“gain”** for himself.

As we go through the book of Ecclesiastes, we will see that it is full of results and conclusions reached through worldly means. We will also find that, elsewhere in the Bible, God has addressed these matters and has given us godly alternatives to these worldly results and conclusions. Where Solomon’s search for meaning has resulted in a dead end, God elsewhere has pointed out the flaw in Solomon’s search, and has corrected the parameters of the search so that it can result in, not a dead end, but a new life.

For example, Jesus Himself points out the flaw of Solomon’s guiding question. Solomon asks: **“What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun?”**; but Jesus warns: **“What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?”** (Mark 8:36). The answer to life’s puzzle cannot be found through looking for **“gain”**; for you can **“gain”** the whole world, and yet **“forfeit [your] soul”**. And so, Solomon’s search for meaning was flawed from

the get-go, because his basis for meaning in life was measured in terms of **“gain”**. He asked from the start: **“What does man gain...?”** Jesus, alternatively, teaches that true meaning in life is found, not through **“gain”**, but through loss. Jesus teaches: **“For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for Me and for the gospel will save it”** (Mark 8:35). This is difficult teaching. For in our selfish, sin nature, we are inclined to seek **“gain”** for ourselves, not loss. In our sin nature, our natural inclination is to look for meaning in life through **“gain”**: through wisdom, through achievement, through labor, through riches, all for ourselves. But God has purposefully made the end of these roads **“meaningless”**ness. He has done this to steer us to glory. For if we could find meaning in life through human wisdom, through man’s achievement, through riches, through pleasure, then we would stop there. We would not go on to seek the glory that God has set aside for us. Paul teaches: **“For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the One who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God”** (Rom. 8:20-21). By the will of God, the **“creation was subjected to frustration”**. Thus, search for meaning in the world will necessarily lead to **“frustration”**. But God had a goal in subjecting the world to **“frustration”**. This was done **“in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.”** So, the **“frustration”**, the **“meaningless”**ness, was purposeful: through it we are meant to turn away from the world, and turn to God for meaning.

3 - ECCLESIASTES 1:4-10

All Things are Wearisome

- ⁴ Generations come and generations go,
but the earth remains forever.
- ⁵ The sun rises and the sun sets,
and hurries back to where it rises.
- ⁶ The wind blows to the south
and turns to the north;
Round and round it goes,
ever returning on its course.
- ⁷ All streams flow into the sea,
yet the sea is never full.
To the place the streams come from,
there they return again.
- ⁸ All things are wearisome,
more than one can say.
The eye never has enough of seeing,
nor the ear its fill of hearing.

— Ecclesiastes 1:4-8

AS WE HAVE NOTED in the previous studies in Ecclesiastes, this book is an account of Solomon's search, through human wisdom, for meaning in life. In verse two, Solomon summarized the result of his search: **“Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless!”** In verse 4, Solomon begins the substantiation of his conclusion. First, he points out that man's existence is fleeting, as compared to the perpetuity of nature: **“Generations come and generations go, but the earth**

remains forever” (vs. 4). Since we **“come”** and **“go”**, how could there be any lasting meaning for us here? “[T]hrough the earth abideth, yet, because man abides not on the earth to possess it, therefore his rest and happiness cannot be here” [Leighton, in Bridges, 11]. And then, even though **“the earth remains forever”**, it itself is not getting anywhere: **“The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises. The wind blows to the south and turns to the north; round and round it goes, ever returning on its course. All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. To the place the streams come from, there they return again”** (vss. 5–7). In the natural processes of the earth, there is much labor, but no results. The sun, the wind, the sea, just get back where they started. No progress is made. No goal is being neared. Just the same things over and over. Solomon sees this same monotony and lack of progress in the fleeting lives of people: **“All things are wearisome, more than one can say. The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing”** (vs. 8). Have you felt this same **“wearisome”**ness? You desire something; you strive to achieve it; you succeed; and then the next day you are bored with life, once again, and desire something else. We often say, “If I had such-and-such, then I’ll be happy.” God gives us “such-and-such”, and then, are we happy? No. The cycle begins again. **“The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing.”** The **“eye”** and the **“ear”** are relentless taskmasters: never satisfied, always asking for more. We must face this fact: there is no satisfaction in the things of the world.

As stated earlier, in the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon reaches his conclusions through worldly means, and that, elsewhere in the Bible, God has addressed these same matters and has given us godly alternatives to Solomon’s worldly results and conclusions. This is the case here. Solomon found life

“wearisome” because he discovered that the **“eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing.”** The problem with Solomon’s tactic is that he was seeking satisfaction in the things of the world, in what his eye could see and ear could hear. In speaking to the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus addressed this: **“Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”** (John 4:13-14). God has purposefully made the things of this world unsatisfying so that we will seek the things above, so that we will thirst for the living water, the water that Jesus gives us. His water not only satisfies our thirst, but becomes in us a spring of living water, **“a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”**

Nothing New Under the Sun

- ⁹ What has been will be again,
 what has been done will be done again;
 there is nothing new under the sun.
- ¹⁰ Is there anything of which one can say,
 “Look! This is something new”?
 It was here already, long ago;
 it was here before our time.

— Ecclesiastes 1:9-10

Solomon also finds a parallel between our lives and the workings of the world, in that, in both, the same things happen over and over: **“What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.”** Oh yes, there are **“new”** inventions, **“new”** gadgets,

“new” toys, but there is nothing new of lasting importance: there is nothing new (from the viewpoint of human wisdom) that can shake Solomon’s conclusion that **“everything is meaningless.”** In man’s search for meaning, for spirituality, the same philosophical fads are rehashed over and over. “New” age thought is not really new, but is a compendium of elements from Hinduism and Zen Buddhism. As men search for new ways of looking at life, they stumble onto the same philosophical thoughts and arguments that have been pondered and hashed out for centuries. What they find may be novel to them, or hip and cool for a time, but it is not new: **“Is there anything of which one can say, ‘Look! This is something new?’ It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time.”** (vs. 10).

For some reason, we aren’t satisfied with the old. We feel we must find something **“new”**. We think: “There’s got to be something **‘new’**, that no one else has thought of, that brings satisfaction.” In their rebellious nature, young men feel they must reject what the old people are doing; they must reject the tried and true. But this rejection of the tried and true does not bring anything **“new”**. It just causes them to cover the same ground that the rebels of the past covered. ’Round and ’round they go, until they end up where Solomon did, saying, **“Meaningless! Meaningless!... There is nothing new under the sun.”**

But wait, there is an alternative, God’s alternative. We *can* find something new, but it comes from the old: We can find new-ness from the Old Rugged Cross. Through Jesus Christ, we ourselves can become **“new”**. We are promised: **“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!”** (II Cor. 5:17). Only He who created us in the first place can make anything **“new”**. And He has promised us **“new”** life through His Son, for through baptism

into Christ Jesus, we are buried with Him, **“in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a *new* life”** (Rom. 6:4). Do you want something new? Are you tired of the some old **“meaningless”** life? Turn to God. Trust in Jesus. Seek new life in Him. He will give your life **“new”**ness and meaning. He will press you into His service, giving your life purpose. May the Lord be praised!

4 - ECCLESIASTES 1:11-18

The Limits of Human Wisdom

¹¹ There is no remembrance of men of old,
and even those who are yet to come
will not be remembered by those who follow.

¹² I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem.¹³ I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven. What a heavy burden God has laid on men! ¹⁴ I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind. ¹⁵ What is twisted cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted. ¹⁶ I thought to myself, “Look, I have grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge.” ¹⁷ Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind. ¹⁸ For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.

— Ecclesiastes 1:11-18

IN THE PREVIOUS SECTIONS, Solomon wrote about what he saw as the meaninglessness of life around him. In this section, he begins to focus on his own life specifically, as he searches to find meaning in his own life. He begins with a general note concerning the lives of men: **“There is no remembrance of men of old, and even those who are yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow”** (vs.

11). Yes, we do remember Solomon (partly due to these very words that he wrote), but we have no remembrance, or even knowledge, of a vast, vast majority of people that have walked the earth. And so, if you are looking for meaning in life through fame or renown, such meaning, in the scheme of things, will be very fleeting at best. As the pages of time turn, the remembrance of even the most famous people grows dimmer and dimmer. The notable, and divine, exceptions to this rule are the men and women of the Bible. As a part of God's Word, they will always be remembered, for **"the word of our God stands forever"** (Isa. 40:8; I Pet. 1:25).

Our remembrance of Solomon through the ages is due to his reign in Israel, as well as his celebrated wisdom, about which he writes next: **"I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven"** (vss. 12–13). As king, Solomon's studies in wisdom were undertaken with the goal of trying to improve life as the ruler of the nation. The conclusion of these studies: **"What a heavy burden God has laid on men! I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them meaningless, a chasing after the wind. What is twisted cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted"** (vss. 13–15). Solomon realized that, despite all of his wisdom, and despite the power he had as king, he could not **"straighten"** what was **"twisted"**, he could not supply what was **"lacking"**. The burden on a man alone, trying to lead a nation by his own power, trying to **"straighten"** what is **"twisted"** and supply what is **"lacking"**, was indeed **"a heavy burden"**.

What Solomon did not immediately realize was that what is **"twisted"** in the world, and what is **"lacking"** in the world are due to the fall of man and the continuing sin of men. No man can remedy this. "The imperfection in the arrangements

of the world result from the fall. All attempts to rectify this imperfection without recognition of the fall of man are vain. The dislocated state of all creaturely things, subject as they are to vanity, is designed to bring us, in despair of bettering them, to take refuge in God" [JFB, 519]. Yes, **"what a heavy burden God has laid on men!"** But, Jesus invited: **"Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light"** (Matt. 11:28–30). Jesus demonstrated His ability to **"straighten"** what is **"twisted"** when He straightened the crippled woman who had been bent over for 18 years (see Luke 13:11–17), and when He straightened the shriveled hand so that it was completely restored (see Matt. 12:10–13). And Jesus has demonstrated that he can supply what is **"lacking"** through the lives of countless millions who have come to Him for fulfillment. As He promised the woman at the well: **"Everyone who drinks [the water of this world] will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst"** (John 4:13–14).

Solomon thought that human wisdom could solve all problems, so he set out to become the wisest man in the world: **"I thought to myself, 'Look, I have grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge'"** (vs. 16). But the more he understood wisdom, and the workings of the world, the more he understood the limits of human wisdom: **"Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind"** (vs. 17). Not only did Solomon discover that human wisdom could not solve all problems, he also learned

that there were drawbacks to being wise: **“For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief”** (vs. 18). As we study and become wiser in the ways of the world, we see how truly dark and lost the world is: **“With much wisdom comes much sorrow.”** As we learn history, or read about current events in the newspaper, we learn of the misery of fallen man: **“The more knowledge, the more grief.”** Indeed, the benefits of human wisdom are limited. Oh Lord, come quickly. Bring in Your kingdom, and do away with the misery of this fallen world. Save us by *Your* wisdom and power.

Solomon Tests Pleasure

¹ I thought in my heart, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.” But that also proved to be meaningless. ² “Laughter,” I said, “is foolish. And what does pleasure accomplish?” ³ I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly— my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do under heaven during the few days of their lives.

⁴ I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. ⁵ I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. ⁶ I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees. ⁷ I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. ⁸ I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired men and women singers, and a harem as well— the delights of the heart of man. ⁹ I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me.

¹⁰ I denied myself nothing my eyes desired;
I refused my heart no pleasure.
My heart took delight in all my work,
and this was the reward for all my labor.

**¹¹ Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done
and what I had toiled to achieve,
Everything was meaningless,
a chasing after the wind;
Nothing was gained under the sun.**

— Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

AFTER APPLYING HIMSELF to the study of wisdom, and finding that it **“too, is a chasing after the wind”** (1:17), and that, moreover, it brings **“much sorrow”** and **“grief”** (1:18), Solomon now turns to pleasure. He says: **“I thought in my heart, ‘Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good’”** (vs. 1). Note here that Solomon was speaking to his heart when he said **“I will test *you* with pleasure”**. Solomon was testing pleasure to see if it could give him inner fulfillment. Everyone knows that you can receive bodily enjoyment from pleasure. But Solomon knew that true meaning in life, and indeed complete happiness, is tied to inner fulfillment. Thus here, he tests pleasure to see if he can find, not just bodily enjoyment, but also inner fulfillment from pleasure.

Of all the methods of searching for fulfillment in life, as the seekers in the world try to find meaning to their existence, the seeking of pleasure is utilized the most, by far. It is to pleasure that men turn first. Madison Avenue knows this well. The theme of nearly all advertising concerns the fulfillment achieved through pleasure in the advertised product. Sadly, even Christians, just like those of the world, oftentimes search for fulfillment in the pleasures of this world, rather than turning to their own Lord. And dare I say, we *all* from time to time succumb to the search for fulfillment through pleasure. Let us see and learn from Solomon’s experiences in testing pleasure.

Lest we get the wrong idea from the very beginning, Solomon first gives us the conclusion he reached concerning his experiment in testing pleasure: **“But that also proved to be meaningless. ‘Laughter,’ I said, ‘is foolish. And what does pleasure accomplish?’”** (vs. 2). Solomon had good reason to state this conclusion before he detailed specifically his excursions in pleasure. It is very easy for us to get caught up in Solomon’s pleasurable experiences, to find ourselves envying him in his experiences. They appeal to our bodily appetites. And make no mistake: Solomon enjoyed himself while he tested pleasure. But in the end, there was only emptiness: **“‘Laughter,’ I said, ‘is foolish.’”** Pleasure brings momentary happiness, at the expense of a sense of emptiness (and often worse) the morning after. Quite often, even the memory of the pleasurable experiences are disturbing, even painful. Solomon realized this. He wrote in elsewhere: **“Even in laughter the heart may ache, and joy may end in grief”** (Prov. 14:13).

Solomon had the means and power to test all kinds of pleasurable experiences. He began with the most frivolous of pleasures: **“I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly—my mind still guiding me with wisdom”** (vs. 3). Even as he drank wine to cheer himself, Solomon realized that he was **“embracing folly.”** By the grace of God, Solomon’s **“mind still guided [him] with wisdom”**, as he sought to cheer himself with wine. He stayed in control. Many people lose control and become a slave to the wine, through alcoholism. God was faithful to His promise to Solomon to give him wisdom throughout his life (see I Kings 3:12).

Next, Solomon sought meaning through pleasure in a less obviously frivolous way: **“I wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do under heaven during the few days of their lives. I undertook great projects”** (vss. 3–4).

His projects were extensive and varied: building himself a great house, planting vineyards, installing gardens and parks, devising reservoirs to water groves of trees, buying slaves, raising livestock, amassing riches, acquiring a harem (vss. 4–8). Clearly, Solomon expended much effort on these projects: a lifetime of work. Admittedly, this is a more sophisticated way to seek meaning in life through pleasure than **“cheering himself with wine and embracing folly”**, but nonetheless, it was just another excursion into pleasure.

Note the many instances of the first-person in Solomon’s descriptions of his **“great projects”**: **“I... I... myself... I... my... me... I... myself... I... I... me... I... my... I... My... my... my... I... my... I...”** (vss. 4–11). Clearly, the unstated goal of Solomon’s **“projects”** was to please himself. And is not this the goal of all workaholics? They convince themselves that their work on **“great projects”** will bring meaning to their lives, when in actuality their true goal is pleasure for themselves: the true focus of their work is **“I... me... myself...”** They sacrifice so much time of their lives on their great **“projects”** for the accolades of men, and the right of being able to say: “Look what *I* have done.”

Solomon forthrightly states the positive effects of his search for meaning through his work: **“My heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward for all my labor”** (vs. 10). Solomon found enjoyment while he was at work on the projects, but this, and only this, **“was the reward for all [his] labor”**. The results, though he completed his great projects, were disappointing. In the end, there was an empty feeling: **“Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun”** (vs. 11). Solomon’s negative verdict supersedes his positive one. “When the joy palled on the taste,

nothing remained but the remembrance of labour without profit” [JFB, 517].

And so, Solomon experienced the same emptiness, whether he pursued frivolous pleasure, or pleasure through work on great projects. In both cases, Solomon was left saying, in effect: “There must be more to life than this.” This is the way of pleasure. It is unfulfilling. Pleasure is for the moment, at the cost of the future. We enjoy the moment of pleasure, but are left thirsty for more. When the moment is gone, all that is left is weariness and frustration. “Pleasure promises more than it can produce. Its advertising agency is better than its manufacturing department” [Hubbard, 77].

In and of themselves, there is nothing wrong with pleasurable experiences. Christians should enjoy life, enjoy God’s creation. In fact, Paul tells us that God **“richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment”** (I Tim. 6:17). The problem Solomon faced was that he was looking to pleasure as the end, pleasure as the provider of meaning in life. Such a view of pleasure leads, not to fulfillment, but to slavery: “If you live for pleasure alone, enjoyment will decrease unless the intensity of the pleasure increases. Then you reach a point of diminishing returns when there is little or no enjoyment at all, only bondage” [Wiersbe, 35].

There is an alternative, though, provided by God. Our Lord tells us: **“Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well”** (Matt. 6:33). Solomon’s priorities were backwards: he spent seven years building the temple, but thirteen years building his own palace (see I Kings 6:38–7:1). He should have sought, first and foremost, **“[God’s] kingdom”**. True enjoyment in life, true fulfillment in life, come from letting God **“richly provide us with everything for our enjoyment”**, not seeking them ourselves. Let God do the work! Let Him fill you

with the joy of the Lord! He invites us into His joy: **“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare... Seek the LORD while He may be found; call on Him while He is near”** (Isa. 55:1-2,6). He promises: **“Delight yourself in the LORD and He will give you the desires of your heart”** (Psalms 37:4).

6 - ECCLESIASTES 2:12-26

Wisdom, Folly, and Death

¹² Then I turned my thoughts to consider wisdom,
and also madness and folly.

What more can the king's successor do
than what has already been done?

¹³ I saw that wisdom is better than folly,
just as light is better than darkness.

¹⁴ The wise man has eyes in his head,
while the fool walks in the darkness;

But I came to realize
that the same fate overtakes them both.

¹⁵ Then I thought in my heart,
“The fate of the fool will overtake me also.
What then do I gain by being wise?”

I said in my heart,
“This too is meaningless.”

¹⁶ For the wise man, like the fool,
will not be long remembered;
in days to come both will be forgotten.

Like the fool, the wise man too must die!

¹⁷ So I hated life, because the work that is done under
the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a
chasing after the wind.

— Ecclesiastes 2:12-17

EARLIER, Solomon had “devoted [himself] to study and
explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven” (Eccl.

1:13). He saw to it that he **“increased in wisdom more than anyone who [had] ruled over Jerusalem before [him]”** (1:16). But he discovered that **“with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge the more grief”** (1:18). And so next, he tried to find fulfillment through pleasure, saying to his heart: **“Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good”** (2:1). But he discovered that **“that also proved to be meaningless”**, saying: **“Laughter... is foolish”** (2:2). And so, having tested wisdom and folly separately, Solomon, in this section, compares the two: **“Then I turned my thoughts to consider wisdom, and also madness and folly”** (vs. 1). He has found each to be deficient, but is one better than the other?

In studying these things, Solomon has covered a wide range of activities, so he asks rhetorically: **“What more can the king’s successor do than what has already been done?”** (vs. 12). He is, in effect, saying, “Look, I have tried all of these things, and learned from them. Why don’t you learn from what I have learned, instead of repeating my mistakes?” None of us will ever have the same means and opportunity to test all of the things that Solomon tested. He was, at times, the wisest of the wise, as well as the most foolish of fools. The book of Ecclesiastes is Solomon’s analysis of his life as he looked back on it. We would do well to learn from this analysis, rather than make the same mistakes he did. In any case, mercifully, very few of us have the time or means to stumble as Solomon did. “God mercifully spares His children the sad experiment[s] which Solomon made, by denying them the goods which they often desire” [JFB, 519].

Concerning wisdom versus folly, Solomon at first found an advantage in wisdom: **“I saw that wisdom is better than folly, just as light is better than darkness. The wise man has eyes in his head, while the fool walks in the darkness”**

(vs. 13–14). To be wise is to live in an en**“light”**ened state. The wise man **“has eyes in his head”**, in that he has the ability to see and understand the things of life, as well as to look ahead and to prepare for, to some extent, what will happen in the future.

Ironically, this ability of Solomon, the wise man, led to his ability to also understand the ultimate futility of human wisdom: **“...but I came to realize that the same fate overtakes them both. Then I thought in my heart, ‘The fate of the fool will overtake me also. What then do I gain by being wise?’ I said in my heart, ‘This too is meaningless.’ For the wise man, like the fool, will not be long remembered; in days to come both will be forgotten. Like the fool, the wise man too must die!”** (vss. 14–16). When one takes death into account, everything changes. Death not only destroys life, but also destroys any advantage of wisdom over folly. Wisdom’s profit is temporary.

Solomon came to this realization when he stopped thinking of death abstractly (as if it were someone else’s problem), but realized that, yes, the specter of death was upon him too: **“The fate of the fool will overtake *me* also.”** Death became, for Solomon, a much more critical consideration in his argument when he faced the fact that death would also overtake him. And indeed, all philosophers must address the problem of death. The meaning of life is tightly intertwined with the meaning of death. If it is determined that our actions in life affect our fate after death, only a fool would choose to ignore the eternal consequences of his actions.

Solomon responded to the reality that death overtakes the wise man as well as the fool: **“So I hated life”** (vs. 17). But wait, Mr. Philosopher, you are supposed to guide us to meaning in life, guide us to fulfillment in life, but now you say you **“hate life”**! A philosopher may consider himself a failure if the result

of his life work is that life is meaningless and that death destroys all. If this is his conclusion, then he has not solved life's most difficult problem: the problem of death. The root of Solomon's hatred of life at this point was the fact that he could not, by human wisdom alone, solve the problem of death.

Paul tells us as much: **“For since in the wisdom of God, the world through its wisdom did not know Him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe”** (I Cor. 1:21). In fact, Paul points out that human wisdom can actually be a barrier to conquering death: **“If any one of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a ‘fool’ so that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God’s sight”** (I Cor. 3:18–19). And conversely, **“the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing”** (I Cor. 1:18). But though the gospel, and Christianity in general, are **“foolishness”** to the “wise” of the world, the Christian philosophy is a resounding success by the objective standards of the science of philosophy, because it explains adequately and accurately all the thorny problems of life. It gives answers to our existence, gives purpose for our lives, and most importantly, in this context, solves the problem of death, by providing us, sinful man, a way to be reconciled to our Maker. Jesus stated: **“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die”** (John 11:25). Through belief in Jesus Christ, God has provided a way for the wise in Christ to differ from the fool in death. Solomon concluded, **“Like the fool, the wise man too must die!”** (vs. 16), but Solomon didn't have the whole picture. The wise in Christ do not have to die the second death (see Rev. 20:6). The fate of the wise in Christ is eternal life in the presence of our

God and Father, and His son Jesus Christ. May the Lord be praised!

The Fruits of Labor

¹⁸ I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. ¹⁹ And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the work into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless. ²⁰ So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. ²¹ For a man may do his work with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then he must leave all he owns to someone who has not worked for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune. ²² What does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labors under the sun? ²³ All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is meaningless.

²⁴ A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, ²⁵ for without Him, who can eat or find enjoyment? ²⁶ To the man who pleases Him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner He gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

— Ecclesiastes 2:18-26

SOLOMON'S CONFRONTATION with his own mortality had also tainted in his mind the value of his life's work. Solomon pointed out three problems with his working so hard in life. First, he could not keep the results of his labor: **"I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must**

leave them to the one who comes after me. And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the work into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless” (vss. 18–19). Second, those who would receive the fruits of his labor did not deserve them: **“So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. For a man may do his work with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then he must leave all he owns to someone who has not worked for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune”** (vss. 20–21). Third, he himself, the toiler, could not fully enjoy the fruits of his labor: **“What does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labors under the sun? All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is meaningless”** (vs. 22). To Solomon, the results of his labor, the great projects, became merely monuments to futility, massive reminders of how he wasted his life.

As I see it, there were two problems with the way that Solomon labored, both of which led to his frustration concerning the fruits of his labor. First, the goal of his labor was to store up treasures for himself on earth. Jesus told a parable that directly speaks to Solomon’s situation:

Someone in the crowd said to [Jesus], “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.”

Jesus replied, “Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?”

Then He said to them, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”

And He told them this parable: “The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to

himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.'

"Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry."'"

"But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?'

"This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich towards God" (Luke 12:13-21).

The destiny of those who labor to store up earthly possessions for themselves is frustration and dissatisfaction. On the other hand, those who seek to store up treasures in heaven, have an eternity in heaven in which to enjoy the fruits of their labor. Jesus advises: **"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal"** (Matt. 6:19–20).

The second problem with the way that Solomon labored was that he fell under the spell of the myth of the self-made man. Solomon entirely attributed the success of his labor to his own abilities, rather than realizing that God was the provider of everything he had. Moses told the people of God: **"You may say to yourself, 'My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.' But remember the Lord your God, for it is He who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms His covenant, which He swore to your forefathers, as it is today"** (Deut. 8:17-18). Look at your life. What do you have that God has not given

you? What have you obtained in your life for which God has not given you the talents and abilities to obtain? When we truly realize this, our frustration over what we cannot enjoy turns into joy for the great blessings God has given us; our regret is replaced by praise to the Lord.

Solomon began to realize that contentment in life can only come from God: **“A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without Him, who can eat or find enjoyment?”** (vss. 24–25). Solomon realized that man cannot find contentment from the fruits of his labor unless God enables him. Solomon’s problem, which led to his hatred of life, stemmed from the fact that he was trying to get too much out of the mere things of life, more than they could give. He sought fulfillment, as well as enjoyment, from the things of the world.

Solomon’s realization that man cannot find enjoyment on his own seems (to me) to be a grudging consolation for him. He says: **“To the man who pleases, Him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner He gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God”** (vs. 26). Then he quickly adds: **“This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.”** It seems that Solomon would rather be a selfmade man. He would rather that fulfillment come through his own resources, than depend upon God for it. If fulfillment could be gained through worldly possessions, this would be fine and well for Solomon, but what about those who have meager resources. Should they be denied fulfillment in life? God purposefully made man so that the things of this world will not satisfy him. He wants us to be restless until we come to Him for fulfillment. And so, rich or poor, strong or weak, renowned or humble, we

all can find meaning and fulfillment in our lives, through a relationship with the Maker of the Universe.

7 - ECCLESIASTES 3:1-11

A Time for Everything

- ¹ There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity under heaven:
² A time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to uproot,
³ a time to kill and a time to heal,
a time to tear down and a time to build,
⁴ a time to weep and a time to laugh,
a time to mourn and a time to dance,
⁵ a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,
a time to embrace and a time to refrain,
⁶ a time to search and a time to give up,
a time to keep and a time to throw away,
⁷ a time to tear and a time to mend,
a time to be silent and a time to speak,
⁸ a time to love and a time to hate,
a time for war and a time for peace.

⁹ What does the worker gain from his toil? ¹⁰ I have seen the burden God has laid on men.

¹¹ He has made everything beautiful in its time.

— Ecclesiastes 3:1-11

PREVIOUSLY HAVING CONCLUDED that “**everything is meaningless**” from the standpoint of human wisdom (see Eccl. 2:23), Solomon began to consider that God has a direct and active role in man’s existence and subsistence. Solomon observed: “**A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is**

from the hand of God, for without Him, who can eat or find enjoyment?” (Eccl. 2:24–25). Here in chapter 3, Solomon continues to explore God’s role in man’s journey through life. Solomon notes that God has ordained things such that: **“There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven”** (vs. 1). Solomon then goes on to list specifically the **“activities”** for which there is a **“time”** and **“season”** (see vs. 2–8). The word **“time”** used in verse 1 denotes a “fixed” or “appointed” time (see Ezra 10:14 and Esth. 9:27,31 for other uses of the same word) [Bridges, 48]. Thus, Solomon is implying that God has ordained that each of us experience these things at their fixed and appointed time. We are not muddling about through the experiences of life at the mercy of blind chance, but rather according to the purposeful plan of a loving, caring God. “Solomon boldly argues the thesis that every action of man can be traced to its ultimate source, an all-embracing plan that is administered by God” [Kaiser, 60].

As stated, Solomon goes on to list specifically the **“activities”** for which there is a **“time”** and **“season”**. These are the things of life. This is all of life summarized. He gives fourteen pairs of contrasts, grouped into seven pairs of pairs. In the Bible, the number seven often symbolizes completeness, and so here, we have in these seven pairs of pairs of activities, all of life summarized completely. Look at your life. Are you not in the midst of two, three, four of these activities right now?

In his list, Solomon begins appropriately with life and death, which are the overriding activities of our existence: **“A time to be born and a time to die”** (vs. 2). “The very minute of everyone’s entry into this world, whether it be timely or [premature]; and likewise of their departure out of it by death, whether natural or violent, is from eternity fixed, and cannot fall out sooner or later than God hath appointed” [Nisbet, 130]. David says, speaking to God: **“All the days ordained for me**

were written in Your book before one of them came to be” (Ps. 139:16). And Job: **“Man’s days are determined; You have decreed the number of his months and have set limits he cannot exceed”** (Job 14:5–6). And so, indeed, our times are in God’s hands (see Ps. 31:15).

Now, we all are very conscious of the fact that we experienced **“a time to be born”**. In fact, every year we celebrate our birthdays. But we should all be equally conscious of the fact that for each and every one of us, there will come **“a time to die”**. The reason we should be conscious of this is that the most important decision in life has to do with our **“time to die”**. We must all be careful of how we prepare for the afterlife, for the implications of how we prepare for the afterlife have eternal consequences. We are taught that **“man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment”** (Heb. 9:27). Thus, each and every one of us should make sure he is prepared for that judgment. Now, if a man were sinless, if he always perfectly and unerringly lived his life in a way that pleased his Creator, he would not have to worry about the judgment that occurs after our **“time to die”**. But for the rest of us, for we who have not always lived up to God’s standards, we who have not always lived in a way that pleases God, we must worry about the judgment. For we who have not always pleased God in this life will, in justice, stand condemned in the judgment. But wait! God in His great mercy has provided a way for us to escape condemnation in the judgment, through a decision we make in this life. God sent His Son into this world. His Son lived a perfect life, unerringly pleasing to God, so His Son was not Himself under condemnation. God in His mercy to us allowed His Son to accept the condemnation that we deserve. God’s Son died for us, so that, if we accept this gift of a sacrificial death, we may escape condemnation when we face the judgment. For this reason, we all must be conscious of our

“time to die”, in order that we may be prepared to face it without condemnation. We must accept from God the gift of His Son, Jesus Christ. We must believe that **“God so loved the world, that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life”** (John 3:16).

Solomon continues: **“...a time to plant and a time to uproot”** (vs. 2). Since Solomon in these verses is speaking of all of life, I believe that this statement speaks of more than planting crops for harvesting, but rather speaks of the great movements of our lives, of the times we decide to **“plant”** ourselves and settle to live someplace. The times of **“planting”** are very important, for they determine the environment in which we and our families will live. Thus, the decisions concerning when and where we will **“plant”** ourselves, and for that matter, when we will **“uproot”**, must be made with fervent appeals to God’s guidance, for such decisions greatly affect the course of our lives. There is also **“a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build”** (vs. 3). The word **“kill”** does not denote “murder”, but rather justified killing. Yes, God has ordained that there is **“a time to kill”**. There are times of war that are ordained by God. Then also, there are times when a society must put to death as a punishment those who have murdered.

There is also **“a time to heal”**. Of course, we should all do what we can to **“heal”** those who are sick around us. But since this statement is in opposition to **“a time to kill”**, I believe that Solomon is in effect saying, “There is a time when we should seek to heal, even when we would be justified to kill.” In other words, there are times when, instead of going to war (though we may be justified to do so), we should seek to heal the relationship between countries so as to avoid war. Then also, there are times when, though a murderer deserves to die,

we should show mercy. Such decisions, of course, require great wisdom and discernment. Again, appeals to God's guidance in such matters are greatly needful.

Just as there is a time to kill and heal, so also there is **“a time to tear down and a time to build”** (vs. 3). This can speak of projects that are built and torn down. It can also speak of tearing down and building as applying to relationships. In context, I believe that the latter is what Solomon is referring to. He has just said there is a time to kill (as in a war), but there is a time when we should render a punishment short of killing (**“to tear down”**). Then also, there is a time to **“build”** a cooperative relationship.

Speaking more personally, Solomon notes that there is **“a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance”** (vs. 4). We all, in this fallen world, endure times of sadness; we all (thankfully) enjoy times of gladness. Solomon notes that these times of sadness and happiness come in degrees. At times we **“weep”**, but in times of great sadness we **“mourn”**. At times we **“laugh”**, but in times of great joy, we **“dance”**.

There is also **“a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them, a time to embrace and a time to refrain”** (vs. 5). The first pair here seems to refer to different sorts of toil. When it was time to prepare for planting crops, stones in the soil would be scattered, thrown away from the area where the crops were to be planted. Then, when it was time to construct a building, stones would be gathered as building materials. The second pair refers to acts of love: **“...a time to embrace and a time to refrain.”** There are appropriate times to express love, and there are definitely times to have self-control and to realize that there is **“a time to refrain”** from embracing.

Concerning material possessions, Solomon notes that there is **“a time to search and a time to give up, a time to**

keep and a time to throw away” (vs. 6). It seems we have more problems knowing when to **“give up”** and **“throw away”**, than when to **“search”** and **“keep”**. We always seem to be **“searching”** after some material desire. And when we gain these desires, we are very loathe to depart with them (just look in your garage and closets). We must also cultivate the ability to know when to **“give up”** seeking the things of this world, and to know what things are not worth **“searching”** for in the first place. We must also know when to **“throw away”** things that are spiritually, as well as physically, harmful to us. Many times our material wants and possessions interfere with our relationship with God. When this happens, it is time to **“give up”** and **“throw away”**.

Next, Solomon seems to speak of interpersonal relationships: **“...a time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak”** (vs. 7). Volumes could be written on the second pair of this set. “Great wisdom is required to know when, as well as what to speak” [Bridges, 61]. Most of us, it seems, have problems knowing when to **“be silent”**. Then again, we must also take care that we are not silent when we should speak. There are times that “all the Lord’s people ought to observe, and make use of, wherein they cannot without sin be silent, as when they are called to give a testimony to known truth (see I Pet. 3:15), when they see their brother sin and have opportunity to rebuke him (see Lev. 19:17), when they see him in affliction and standing in need of a word of comfort from them (see I Thess. 4:18), and when those that have a call to speak publicly to the Lord’s people are born down (see Mal. 3:16), and especially there are times of speaking to and instructing of those under their charge (Deut. 6:7). The Lord is to be depended upon for light to discern these particular seasons, and for the matter and manner of speaking in them (see Prov. 16:1)” [Nisbet, 146].

Finally, there is a **“time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace”** (vs. 8). The first pair concerns the deepest individual feelings, the second pair, the most extreme public actions. Note, as there is a **“time to love”**, there is also **“a time to hate”**. For the Christian, this hatred should not be a hatred felt towards individuals, as it is a hatred expressed for sinful actions. We, as God’s people, should hate sin. The Psalmist exhorts: **“Let those who love the Lord hate evil”** (Ps. 97:10). Then also, there are times when “we will be called to carry ourselves, even toward those of our nearest relations as if we did hate them; to wit, by forsaking them for Christ when we cannot enjoy Him and them both.” For Jesus spoke of the cost of being a disciple: **“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple”** (Luke 14:26).

Having summarized the events of men’s lives, Solomon next compares the human point of view with the heavenly point of view. First, when speaking from the human point of view, Solomon recalls words he wrote earlier in the book, when he was looking at all of life from the point of view of human wisdom: **“What does the worker gain from his toil?”** (vs. 9, recall also Eccl. 1:3), **“I have seen the burden God has laid on men”** (vs. 10, recall also Eccl. 1:13). And he is right. From a strictly human point of view, as men strive to find meaning in the things of the world, the contrasts and cycles of life that men endure are frustrating. But Solomon realizes that there is more than this world, and a deeper wisdom than human wisdom. When Solomon by inspiration of the Holy Spirit steps outside the human realm and reflects on the big picture, he realizes that **“[God] has made everything beautiful in its time”** (vs. 11). The **“meaninglessness”** of life from the human point of view has become **“beauty”** when God’s plans

and purposes are considered. Oh Lord, may we have the discernment to see life from Your point of view, and may we have the wisdom to recognize the beauty of Your plans and purposes as You work through our lives.

The Limits of Human Wisdom

¹¹ He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end. ¹² I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live. ¹³ That everyone may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all his toil—this is the gift of God.

¹⁴ I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that men will revere Him. ¹⁵ Whatever is has already been, and what will be has been before; and God will call the past to account. ¹⁶ And I saw something else under the sun: In the place of judgment—wickedness was there; in the place of justice—wickedness was there. ¹⁷ I thought in my heart, “God will bring to judgment both the righteous and the wicked, for there will be a time for every activity, a time for every deed.”

¹⁸ I also thought, “As for men, God tests them so that they may see that they are like the animals. ¹⁹ Man's fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; man has no advantage over the animal. Everything is meaningless. ²⁰ All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return. ²¹ Who knows if the spirit of man rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?” ²² So I saw that there is nothing better for a man than to enjoy his work, because that is

his lot. For who can bring him to see what will happen after him?

— Ecclesiastes 3:11-22

IN THE PREVIOUS STUDY, Eccl. 3:1–11, Solomon enumerated the events and activities of life, each of which has its time and season under heaven. At the end, Solomon contrasted the human viewpoint with the heavenly point of view concerning the activities of life. From the viewpoint of human wisdom, Solomon asked, as he had earlier in the book, **“What does the worker gain from his toil?”**, and then noted, **“I have seen the burden God has laid on men”** (Eccl. 3:9–10). But then, from the heavenly point of view, Solomon noted, as we see at the beginning of the passage above: **“He has made everything beautiful in its time.”** (vs. 11). Solomon goes on: **“He has also set eternity in the hearts of men”** (vs. 11). God has given men reasoning abilities far beyond those of any other creature on earth. Man has the ability to look beyond the drudgery of individual activities in life, and to deduce that there is an overriding purpose to what goes on. This **“eternity in [his] heart”** gives man “a deep seated desire, a compulsive drive (because man is made in the image of God) to appreciate the beauty of creation (on an aesthetic level); to know the character, composition, and meaning of the world (on an academic and philosophical level); and to discern its purpose and destiny (on a theological level)... Man has an inborn inquisitiveness and capacity to learn how everything in his experience can be integrated to make a whole” [Kaiser, 66]. Man realizes that there is more than just “here and now”, but that there is an eternal purpose. Yes, God has **“set eternity in the hearts of men; yet”** (as Solomon continues) **“they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end”** (vs. 11). Though we have a sense that there is an eternal purpose,

we, in our fallen state, **“cannot fathom”** the workings of God in their entirety: in our fallen state, we cannot take full advantage of the reasoning abilities we have been given. Despite the **“eternity in our hearts”**, we still are not able to comprehend, in their full beauty, the great plans and purposes of God.

Though we cannot understand His purposes fully, we can still have faith that He is in control, and that He will bring about His purposes. Such a faith can, and should, lead to contentment in life. Solomon notes: **“I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live. That everyone may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all his toil—this is the gift of God”** (vss. 12–13). Contentment with what God has given us is the key to happiness in life. Paul teaches that **“godliness with contentment is great gain”** (I Tim. 6:6). Why do we strive for things beyond what God wants us to have? Do we not believe that God is doing what is best for us? And since He does what is best for us, He must at times, for our own good, withhold from us things we desire. There are two ways we can respond to this. We can become angry with God, and cry out, “Why can’t I have what I want?” Or, we can accept that God knows what is best in the great scheme of things, accept that we **“cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end”**, and be content with all the great blessings He does give us: **“This is the gift of God.”**

To not be content with what God wills for us is foolish, because to fight against God is futile, as Solomon notes: **“I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that men will revere Him”** (vs. 14). In contrast to man’s futile labors (see Eccl. 2:17), what God does **“will endure forever.”** This realization should turn us to God.

“God does it so that men will revere Him.” It only makes sense to seek the favor of the One who is in control.

From the complete sovereignty of God, we can infer a complete consistency and determinism of His laws, both physical and moral: **“Whatever is has already been, and what will be has been before; and God will call the past to account”** (vs. 15). “The government of God is not to be changed, and does not change; His creative as well as His moral ordering of the world produces with the same laws the same phenomena” [K&D, 264]. This is the basis of science, the consistency of God’s physical laws: **“Whatever is has already been, and what will be has been before.”** The same cause produces the same effect. All elements of technology depend on the consistency and determinism of God’s physical laws. And just as God’s physical laws are consistent and enduring, so His moral laws will not pass away: **“...and God will call the past to account.”** There is a difference, though. Violations of God’s physical laws have an immediate consequence: if you jump off a building, you *will* hit the ground. However, because of God’s longsuffering mercy, violations of God’s moral laws at times go unpunished. But be assured, this situation will not last forever: **“God will call the past to account.”**

Solomon notes by observation that the consequences of violating God’s moral law are suspended in many cases: **“And I saw something else under the sun: In the place of judgment—wickedness was there; in the place of justice—wickedness was there”** (vs. 16). Yet because **“everything God does will endure forever”** (vs. 14), Solomon concludes: **“God will bring to judgment both the righteous and the wicked, for there will be a time for every activity, a time for every deed”** (vs. 17). God will balance the scales. In the end, God will make things right. **“There will be a time”** when God’s perfect justice will be fulfilled. As mentioned, it is in

God's mercy that He forestalls immediate judgment for wrongs committed. If God's judgment was instantaneous, there would be no room for repentance, no place for grace.

As for Solomon, he did not see the complete manifestation of God's grace. He lived long before the instrument of God's grace, Jesus Christ, came into the world. And so Solomon concluded that the certain eventuality of the fulfillment of God's justice means doom for man: **“As for men, God tests them so that they may see that they are like the animals. Man's fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; man has no advantage over the animal. Everything is meaningless. All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return. Who knows if the spirit of man rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?”** (vss. 18–21). Solomon assumed that because God's justice will triumph, there is no hope for man. Though created as a superior being to animals, though God had **“set eternity in the hearts of men”** (vs. 11), man rebelled against God, and brought himself down, through his rebellion, to the level of the animals. So Solomon concluded that **“man's fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both.”** Solomon desired a better conclusion. He appealed for one. He asked, **“Who knows if the spirit of man rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?”** Solomon could not find a way that, given the fact that **“God will call the past to account”**, man's fate could be any better than the animals, because, frankly, man deserves no better fate than to **“return to dust”**. But where Solomon failed, God succeeded. God in His great wisdom and mercy devised a way that the spirit of sinful man could **“rise upward”**, yet God's justice be intact. God sent His Son to take the penalty for man's rebellion against God, in order that man may be

cleansed of his sins and be reconciled to God. Man's fate is *not* like that of the animals. Through Jesus Christ, the spirit of man **“rises upward.”**

9 - ECCLESIASTES 4:1-8

No Comforter

¹ Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun: I saw the tears of the oppressed—and they have no comforter; power was on the side of their oppressors—and they have no comforter. And I declared that the dead, who had already died, are happier than the ² living, who are still alive. ³ But better than both is he who has not yet been, who has not seen the evil that is done under the sun.

— Ecclesiastes 4:1-3

AT THE END of the previous chapter, Solomon had just concluded: **“So I saw that there is nothing better for a man than to enjoy his work, because that is his lot. For who can bring him to see what will happen after him?”** (Eccl. 3:22). Here in this chapter, Solomon begins to look at some of the details and difficulties that man faces in attempting to **“enjoy his work”**. First, Solomon observed oppression: **“Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun: I saw the tears of the oppressed—and they have no comforter; power was on the side of their oppressors—and they have no comforter”** (vs. 1). It is a sad, but true, fact of life, that many who have power, take advantage of their power to oppress those without power. The nation of Israel, of course, had an adequate judicial system, based on the Law of God, which should have prevented such oppression,

had godly men administered it faithfully. But, sadly, oppression still occurred.

Solomon emphasizes the bitterest aspect of the oppression: **“...and they have no comforter; ...and they have no comforter.”** They not only were oppressed, but there was no one who took up their case and gave them comfort. We who are in Christ will never be without a comforter. One of Jesus’ most precious promises to His disciples was: **“And I will pray the Father, and He shall give you another Comforter, that He may abide with you forever”** (John 14:16, KJV). The **“Comforter”** promised to us is the Holy Spirit (see John 14:26). The Holy Spirit is with us, leading us, guiding us through any adversity that we may face in this fallen world.

To Solomon, to live through such oppression with no comforter, or to even witness such oppression, was worse than death: **“And I declared that the dead, who had already died, are happier than the living, who are still alive. But better than both is he who has not yet been, who has not seen the evil that is done under the sun”** (vss. 2-3). To those without a comforter, this may well be true. In Solomon’s time, the gift of our Comforter, the Holy Spirit, had not yet been given to the people, and so, indeed, the evil that men perpetrated upon other men could be unbearable. And also, for those in the world today without the gift of the Holy Spirit (who is given to all God’s children), the oppression of men can be unbearable. The onus is upon us, who have the Comforter, to ourselves be comforters to the oppressed who do not have the Comforter. May the comfort of the Holy Spirit overflow out of our lives upon those who need His comfort: that they, through the comfort we give, may find life bearable; that they themselves may seek the comfort of the Holy Spirit by turning to the Lord Jesus Christ as their Savior.

Man's Labor

⁴ And I saw that all labor and all achievement spring from man's envy of his neighbor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. ⁵ The fool folds his hands and ruins himself. ⁶ Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind.

⁷ Again I saw something meaningless under the sun: ⁸ There was a man all alone; he had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth. "For whom am I toiling," he asked, "and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?" This too is meaningless—a miserable business!

— Ecclesiastes 4:4-8

THE FIRST OBSTACLE to man **"enjoying his work"** that Solomon noted was the oppression by other men. The second obstacle, which Solomon notes here, concerns the motives for men working: **"And I saw that all labor and all achievement spring from man's envy of his neighbor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind"** (vs. 4). Man's motivation for work, as witnessed by Solomon, springs not from his desire to improve society, but from his envy of his neighbor. With such an evil motivation, how could man, with a clear conscience, **"enjoy his work"** (3:22). With such a motivation for work, Solomon realized that a man could never find peace and tranquility in his life. The envy of one's neighbor can never be satiated. One can never win the game of "keeping-up-with-the- Joneses". Such a motive makes one's work **"meaningless, a chasing after the wind"** (vs. 4).

This is not to say that we should not work, for, as Solomon points out, **"a fool folds his hands and ruins himself"** (vs.

5). We must work, of course. To not work, to **“fold [one’s] hands”**, is to **“ruin [oneself]”**. The King James Version gives a more literal translation of this verse: **“The fool foldeth his hands together, and eateth his own flesh.”** Laziness is self-destructive, a form of self-cannibalism.

Solomon recommends moderation in work as a way to tranquility in life: **“Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind”** (vs. 6). Tranquility comes from contentment with **“one handful”**; it is the chasing after **“two handfuls”** that costs tranquility. Solomon gives an example of a workaholic, chasing after **“two handfuls”**, with no other goal: **“Again I saw something meaningless under the sun: There was a man all alone; he had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil yet his eyes were not content with his wealth. ‘For whom am I toiling,’ he asked, ‘and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?’ This too is meaningless— a miserable business”** (vs. 7-8). The key to this man’s misery was that **“his eyes were not content with his wealth.”** “He hath enough for his back, his calling, the decency of his state and condition; but he hath not enough for *his eye*.” The key to tranquility is to be content with what you have, with the lot God has given you. And the key to contentment is to stifle the insatiable desire of the eyes.

The Advantages of Fellowship

- ⁹ Two are better than one,
because they have a good return for their labor:
¹⁰ If either of them falls down,
one can help the other up.
But pity anyone who falls
and has no one to help them up.
¹¹ Also, if two lie down together,
they will keep warm.
But how can one keep warm alone?
¹² Though one may be overpowered,
two can defend themselves.
A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

— Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

SOLOMON, in the previous section, related a story about **“a man all alone”** who had **“neither son nor brother”** (Eccl. 4:8). This man was working himself to death, with no heirs to enjoy his wealth. He was greedy and lonely. He himself didn’t even understand why he did what he was doing. He lamented: **“For whom am I toiling?”** Solomon concluded: **“This too is meaningless—a miserable business!”** (Eccl. 4:8). That episode about a **“man all alone”** leads to Solomon’s next subject: **“Two are better than one”** (Eccl. 4:9). Very early in the history of man, God declared: **“It is not good for the man to be alone”** (Gen. 2:18). “If it was **‘not good’** in Paradise, much less is it in a wilderness world” [Bridges, 90]. “Ties of union, marriage, friendship, religious communion, are better

than the selfish solitariness of the miser” [JFB, 523]. Fellowship would have greatly solved the problem of greed and loneliness related in Solomon’s previous episode. If the man were not all alone, others would have been benefiting from his work, so his toil would not have been merely an exercise of greed. And also, his toil would not have seemed futile, since others would have also enjoyed the fruits of his labor.

Solomon, here in Eccl. 4:9–16, points out other advantages that are a natural result of fellowship. First, **“two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work”** (vs. 9). There are very few endeavors in life that are performed more efficiently with one hand than with two. In nearly everything we do, we must ask at one time or another, “Hey! Could you give me a hand with this?”, or even, “Hey! Can I bounce an idea off you?...” One receives support, encouragement, ideas, an extra hand from a partner.

Then also, **“if one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!”** (vs. 10). We can take this literally, as two who are journeying upon a road; we can also apply this to our spiritual life: **“If one falls down, his friend can help him up.”** In our spiritual journey, also, **“two are better than one”**. When we are tempted, we can receive from a godly friend the strength to overcome temptation; when we stumble, we can receive the rebuke of a godly friend to get us back on track. When Jesus sent His disciples out, He sent them **“two by two”** (see Luke 10:1). There is a special power in the prayers of two together, for Jesus promised: **“Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them”** (Matt. 18:18–19).

There is also in fellowship physical protection from the elements: **“Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone?”** (vs. 11). I’m reminded in this verse about Jack London’s great Klondike stories. Two who would travel together had more than twice the chance of survival in the frozen north. The two would sleep under the same blanket to keep warm. Also, the presence of two would keep the wolves away at night. We, in our heated houses, forget about this advantage of companionship. However, the final advantage in fellowship mentioned here does hit home: **“Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken”** (vs. 12). It is a wicked world out there. There is safety in numbers. Two can walk in safety where one alone would be open to attack. A bond of three together is all the more stronger. So, indeed, we see the wisdom of God in advocating fellowship with one another.

The Meaninglessness of Power and Fame

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

— Ecclesiastes 4:13-16

IN THIS SECTION, Solomon tells a story about a king and his successor. Through this story, Solomon addresses something else that men believe will give them a happy, fulfilled life: power and fame. As when Solomon addressed human wisdom (1:11–18), frivolous pleasure (2:1–3), achievement through great projects (2:4–11), and human toil (2:18–26), Solomon finds that power does not bring happiness and fulfillment, but rather is **“meaningless, a chasing after the wind”** (vs. 16).

Solomon begins by setting the value of wisdom over the value of age and power: **“Better a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer knows how to take warning”** (vs. 13). Solomon here states the importance of staying level-headed when put in a position of power. In essence, Solomon is warning us that “Power corrupts”. The suggestion is that at one time, the **“old”** and **“foolish”** king would take the advice of the wise, but now, after being in power for a while, he **“no longer knows how to take warning”**. Though not explicit, Solomon implies that calamity will follow the loss of wisdom through the seduction of power. It is better

to stay **“poor but wise”**, than to become **“an old but foolish king”**. Solomon, in this matter, could speak from experience. He himself was a wise young king, who became **“old but foolish”**, and **“no longer knew how to take warning.”** After the dedication of the Temple, God promised Solomon:

“As for you, if you walk before me in integrity of heart and uprightness, as David your father did, and do all I command and observe my decrees and laws, I will establish your royal throne over Israel for ever, as I promised David your father when I said, ‘You shall never fail to have a man on the throne of Israel.’ But if you or your sons turn away from me and do not observe the commands and decrees I have given you and go off to serve other gods and worship them, then I will cut off Israel from the land I have given them and will reject this temple I have consecrated for my Name. Israel will then become a byword and an object of ridicule among all peoples” (1 Kings 9:4–7).

Tragically for Solomon, he failed to keep his part of the bargain:

“As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father had been. He followed Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites. So Solomon did evil in the eyes of the Lord; he did not follow the Lord completely, as David his father had done” (1 Kings 11:4–6).

The result of Solomon’s turning from the True and Living God to false gods was calamity for Solomon. The Lord told Solomon:

“So the Lord said to Solomon, ‘Since this is your attitude and you have not kept my covenant and my decrees, which I commanded you, I will most certainly tear the kingdom away from you and give it to one of your subordinates. Nevertheless, for the sake of David your father, I will not do it during your lifetime. I will tear it out of the hand of your son’ (I Kings 11:11–12).

And so, Solomon became the **“old, but foolish king who no longer knows how to take warning.”** In addition to ignoring the Lord’s warning at the dedication of the Temple, Solomon ignored a warning in the Law of God that specifically spoke to his situation: **“King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh’s daughter —Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites. They were from nations about which the Lord had told the Israelites, ‘You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods.’ Nevertheless, Solomon held fast to them in love” (I Kings 11:1–2; see also Ex. 34:16; Deut. 7:3–4).**

The seduction of sin led to Solomon’s loss of wisdom. The absolute power that he held as king of Israel gave him the opportunity to practice his sin unhindered. As he practiced his sin unhindered, he no doubt started to believe that he was invincible, that his sin would not lead to dire circumstances because, after all, he was the King of Israel, chosen by God. But sin always has dire consequences; and continued sin will always lead to disaster.

Those who are in a position of power are especially susceptible to falling into sin. Their pride, fed by power, often leads them to ignore warnings against sin. Since they are in positions of power, they can do what they want: sin is accessible to them. Brother, sister, if you are in a position of power, make

a special effort to humble yourself before the Lord, and pray fervently that He keep you from temptation, for you are especially susceptible to sin.

Solomon next addresses what happens when the **“poor but wise youth”** himself becomes a king: **“The youth may have come from prison to the kingship, or he may have been born in poverty within his kingdom. I saw that all who lived and walked under the sun followed the youth, the king’s successor. There was no end to all the people who were before them. But those who came later were not pleased with the successor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind”** (vss. 14–16). Having concluded that power without wisdom was worthless, Solomon also makes a case that power even with wisdom is **“meaningless, a chasing after the wind.”** The wise youth begins his career from the humblest of beginnings, coming from **“prison to the kingship”** (reminiscent of Joseph), or from **“poverty”**. At first, **“all who lived and walked under the sun followed the youth, the king’s successor”** (vs. 15). At first, the youth’s subjects admired his wisdom, especially given his humble beginnings. But in the end, demonstrating that the accolades of the populous are fleeting, **“those who came later were not pleased with the successor.”** In the end, kingly power, even with wisdom, is not enough to keep the allegiance of fickle men. The young wise man went “the way of the old king, not necessarily for his faults, but simply as time and familiarity, and the restlessness of men, make him no longer interesting. He has reached a pinnacle of human glory, only to be stranded there. It is yet another of our human anticlimaxes and ultimately empty achievements” [Kidner, 52]. Today’s hero is tomorrow’s bum. Even kingly power, with wisdom, does not yield lasting happiness and satisfaction. Solomon rightly concludes: **“This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.”**

In fact, even the King of Kings, the Lord of Glory, did not receive lasting respect from fickle men. When He walked the earth, He too came from poverty to the Kingship. He was respected as a wise Teacher,... for a while. He treated all He met with love. He healed multitudes. He performed miraculous signs to prove He was worthy of Kingship, sanctioned by the Father. And yet the masses chose to put Him to death. Even then, He defeated death, rose from the dead to sit at the right hand of glory. He forgave His adversaries, even those who put Him to death, and now offers the gift of salvation to all men. And do people honor Him as king? Do they praise Him and thank Him for all He has done for us? Do they seek to live as He teaches they should live? Do they serve Him as Lord?

Reverence for God

¹ Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong. ² Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few. ³ As a dream comes when there are many cares, so the speech of a fool when there are many words.

⁴ When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. ⁵ It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it. ⁶ Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. And do not protest to the temple messenger, “My vow was a mistake.” Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands? ⁷ Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. Therefore stand in awe of God.

— Ecclesiastes 5:1-7

SOLOMON ENDED the previous chapter with a story about the fickleness of men in their allegiance to their kings. In this section, Solomon warns against such fickleness regarding our relationship with God, as he speaks on the reverence due God. Solomon starts with a warning against meaningless worship: **“Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong”** (vs. 1). Solomon, of course, supervised the construction of the house of God. He also

apparently watched and noted the behavior of those who went there to worship. He found that some were robbing God of the reverence and honor that He deserves. Their hearts and/or minds were not taking part in their worship: their bodies were merely going through the motions. This was **“the sacrifice of fools”**. They did not even understand that they were **“doing wrong”**. They thought that bodily going through the motions of worship was enough. They felt they deserved a pat on the back for their **“sacrifice of fools”**.

Solomon advises to **“Guard your steps when you go to the house of God.”** Do not go frivolously; make sure your heart is prepared. Make sure you understand properly what the worship of God means: **“Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools.”** An accurate understanding of the things of God is crucial for effectual worship. Many remain unaffected at worship services because they do not truly understand the things of God and thus, are unable to contemplate who God is and are unable to appreciate all that God has done for them. **“Go near to listen”**, so that you may hear of the righteousness and holiness of God. **“Go near to listen”**, so that you may hear of the power and majesty of God. **“Go near to listen”**, so that you may know and understand the love of God. He has given His Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins, so that we may dwell with Him in paradise. Oh, the love of God! Meditate upon His love, and your worship of Him will thrive.

Secondly, Solomon warns against carelessness while praying: **“Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few. As a dream comes when there are many cares, so the speech of a fool when there are many words”** (vss. 2–3). When we pray, we must remember who we are praying to—the Lord of

the Universe—and show Him the reverence He deserves. As Jesus taught: **“When you pray, do not keep babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words”** (Matt. 6:7). Some would think that they are being holy if they repeat the Lord’s prayer over and over and over, but to do so is to **“babble like pagans”**. To do so is also to insult the intelligence of God, for what intelligent being would delight in the endless repetition of a rote prayer. An abundance of words does not make up for a lack of devotion.

Also, our prayers should not be impromptu utterances of just anything that comes into our heads. Instead, they should be heart-felt, well-chosen words. It is right and proper to pause and meditate during prayer, and to listen to the Holy Spirit as He speaks to our hearts what we ought to pray (see Rom. 8:26–27). **“Do not be quick with your mouth”** to utter foolish prayers for worldly desires, but listen to what the Spirit would have you pray. Hastily uttered prayers are, at best, a waste of time, and at worst, they can lead to a lack of faith that God answers our prayers. James teaches us that unanswered prayers are our own fault: **“You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with the wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures”** (James 4:2–3). “How much of our own spirit mingles with our intercourse with God!... Whence all thy waverings in prayer— thy discomfort after prayer—conscious of having dealt with God, yet not prevailed? Is it not this? The mind has thought and lips have moved—without the Spirit. Better be silent altogether, than run [through the] motions” [Bridges, 101–102]. We must remember, as Solomon reminds us, that **“God is in heaven and [we] are on earth”** (vs. 2). He can see through our frivolousness. We must carefully weigh our words when we, frail **“earth”**ly creatures that we are, approach our Father in heaven.

Lastly, Solomon warns against rash vows: **“When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it. Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. And do not protest to the temple messenger, ‘My vow was a mistake.’ Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands? Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. Therefore stand in awe of God”** (vss. 4–7). God, in His Law, does not require His people to make vows. God has, however, provided His people with rules concerning vows in order to give them the opportunity to express their devotion to Him through vows, if they feel led to do so: **“If you make a vow to the Lord your God, do not be slow to pay it, for the Lord your God will certainly demand it of you and you will be guilty of sin. But if you refrain from making a vow, you will not be guilty. Whatever your lips utter you must be sure to do, because you made your vow freely to the Lord your God with your own mouth”** (Deut. 23:21–23).

Many people make vows when they are in dire straits, or undergoing extreme trials. They pray to God, “Oh Lord, if you get me out of this, I will do such and such...” This is an improper use of vows. By making a vow in such a situation, they are implying that God needs to be *paid* in order to answer prayers. Thus, they are misunderstanding and misrepresenting the love of God, and the care that He has for His people. Vows are to be made to God under no sense of duress, so that they may be made **“freely to the Lord your God with your own mouth.”**

Under no circumstances should you make a vow to God that you cannot or will not carry out. Unfulfilled vows are detrimental to one’s spiritual growth, as well as being unlawful. Through unfulfilled vows, “the soul is rather ensnared than

helped, and the enemy gains an advantage even in the very posture of resistance” [Bridges, 106]. So, vows to God should be very rarely made. “We have burdens and infirmities enough pressing upon us. Let us be careful that we do not rashly or needlessly multiply them... For are we not bound by direct, sacred, and constraining obligation to consecrate to the Lord *all* that we are—*all* that we have—*all* that we can do— independent of an extra bond?” [Bridges, 106]. Solomon teaches: **“When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it”** (vs. 4). The dedication to a vow usually diminishes with time. It is best to fulfill a vow without delay. Delaying will not help the situation: the vow will not go away. To make a vow that you do not fulfill is foolish and, in Solomon’s words: **“[God] has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow”** (vs. 4). Of course, **“it is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it”** (vs. 5). Often, an unfulfilled vow is yet another instance of our loose lips getting us into trouble. Solomon warns: **“Do not let your mouth lead you into sin”** (vs. 6). Then, he says that making excuses will not get us out of our vow: **“And do not protest to the temple messenger, ‘My vow was a mistake’”** (vs. 6). Many do a similar thing today. They make a rash vow to God, and later regret it. Then, they visit their pastor and want him to find some loophole in God’s law to get them out of fulfilling their vow. They themselves do not want to bear the responsibility of not fulfilling their vow; they want their pastor to tell them they do not have to fulfill it. This is wrong. Fulfill your vow.

In conclusion, Solomon gives a remedy to making the aforementioned mistakes concerning our relationship to God. The remedy to these things is a living faith: **“Therefore stand in awe of God”** (vs. 7). Forget not that God is the Supreme Lord of the Universe, the Creator of the Universe, who is all-wise, all-knowing, all-righteous, and all holy. He alone is worthy

of our praise. Needless to say, He deserves the utmost respect and reverence. To be aware of these things is the first step in practicing the right and proper worship of God.

Governmental Corruption

⁸ If you see the poor oppressed in a district, and justice and rights denied, do not be surprised at such things; for one official is eyed by a higher one, and over them both are others higher still. ⁹ The increase from the land is taken by all; the king himself profits from the fields.

— Ecclesiastes 5:8-9

EARLIER in the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon noted: **“So I saw that there is nothing better for a man than to enjoy his work, because that is his lot”** (Eccl. 3:22). Solomon concluded that a man could be happy in life if he was able to **“enjoy his work.”** Then Solomon proceeded to look at some obstacles preventing a man from enjoying his work. Here he points out another one: **“If you see the poor oppressed in a district, and justice and rights denied, do not be surprised at such things; for one official is eyed by a higher one, and over them both are others higher still. The increase from the land is taken by all; the king himself profits from the fields”** (vss. 8–9). An obstacle to man enjoying his work is when he sees the fruits of his labor stolen by corrupt officials: it is the **“king”** and **“all”** the corrupt officials under him that **“profit from the fields.”**

In noting this, Solomon, who understands the nature of man, tells us: **“Do not be surprised at such things”** (vs. 8). Solomon spent his life observing life, and so Solomon knew

that man is sinful. Thus, he knew that the sinful nature of those in positions of power would lead, in many cases, to abuse of that power. It has been well said that “Power tends to corrupt; and absolute power corrupts absolutely” [Lord Acton]. We have seen this borne out many times in history, and we continue to see it borne out in our day and age, and so, we should **“not be surprised at such things.”**

Such corruption occurs despite administrative efforts to curb the corruption: **“For one official is eyed by a higher one, and over them both are others higher still. The increase from the land is taken by all; the king himself profits from the fields”** (vss. 8–9). One would think that governmental corruption would be limited when **“one official is eyed by a higher one.”** They should be watching over each other, stopping corruption. Instead they are covering up for each other, even outdoing each other in corruption. This corruption goes right up the ladder to the top, for **“the king himself profits from the fields.”** The corruption would certainly be an obstacle for us in enjoying our work, for we see the fruits of our work taken by those who don’t deserve it.

The Love of Money

¹⁰ **Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income. This too is meaningless.** ¹¹ **As goods increase, so do those who consume them. And what benefit are they to the owner except to feast his eyes on them?** ¹² **The sleep of a laborer is sweet, whether he eats little or much, but the abundance of a rich man permits him no sleep.**

— Ecclesiastes 5:10-12

SOLOMON NOTES in another obstacle to us enjoying our work: **“Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income. This too is meaningless”** (vs. 10). Solomon here is dispelling a popular myth concerning money: the myth that wealth brings satisfaction in life. This is simply not true. Rather, wealth is often accompanied by the love of money, and the love of money invariably leads to dissatisfaction, no matter how much money one has: **“Whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income.”** This should come as no surprise. Look at your life. Are you ever **“satisfied with your income”**? Don’t you always want more and more? You think that you will be satisfied if you could just get that raise. You get that raise. Are you satisfied? No. You start looking ahead to the next raise. “Human desire outruns acquisitions, no matter how large the acquisitions may be” [Kaiser, 76]. Think of the many times you have heard of famous, “rich” celebrities going bankrupt because they owe millions more than they can pay. You think, “How could he have gone bankrupt? He had so much money!” The celebrity thought that the next million he spent would bring happiness, fulfillment and satisfaction. Instead, it brought the desire to acquire more possessions, and in the end, brought

ruin. “The tempter may paint a brilliant prospect of happiness. But fact and experience prove, that *he that loveth silver* or any worldly *abundance* will be satisfied neither with the possession, nor *with the increase*. The appetite is created—not satisfied. The *vanity* of this disease is coveting what does not satisfy when we have it” [Bridges, 113].

Now, having said this, let me point out that money and wealth in themselves are not evil. It is the love of money that is evil, that brings ruin and misery. Abraham was very rich, but his wealth did not bring misery. David was also rich, but his wealth did not cause him to stumble, for he found satisfaction in God, not wealth. David wrote: **“You are my portion, Lord”** (Ps. 119:57). David did not desire more money, more possessions. Rather, he wrote: **“One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek Him in His temple”** (Psalms 27:4). Paul did not write, “Money is the root of all evil,” though many erroneously cite the verse that way. Rather, he wrote: **“People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For *the love* of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs”** (I Tim. 6:9–10). For those who love money, money becomes their god. “Long after their basic needs are met, they crave for more. Long after they have the permanent security they seek, they strive for more. Long after they have all the luxuries they covet, they itch for more.” [Hubbard, 139]. “If anything is worse than the addiction money brings, it is the emptiness it leaves. Man, with eternity in his heart, needs better nourishment than this” [Kidner, 56].

Solomon goes on to point out that wealth, rather than solving all problems, brings its own set of problems. First, **“As goods increase, so do those who consume them. And what benefit are they to the owner except to feast his eyes on them?”** (vs. 11). The wealthy have no shortage of those who are willing to spend their money for them. Wealth is a people magnet, attracting human parasites. It saddens me to see a variation of this principal at work even within the church. It seems that those in the church who have money get invited to more gatherings, have more people in the church who seek their friendship, have no shortage of those willing to pray for their needs, etc., while those with humble means are slighted in these areas. This should not be. All should feel welcome in church, not just the wealthy. All should be able find friendship, fellowship, not just those who have lots of money. All should be able to find brothers and sisters who will pray for them, bear their burdens, not just those who have worldly riches.

Solomon enumerates yet another problem that wealth brings: **“The sleep of a laborer is sweet, whether he eats little or much, but the abundance of a rich man permits him no sleep”** (vs. 12). There is no better sleeping pill than a hard, honest day’s work. Wealth brings with it baggage that tends to get in the way of a good night’s sleep: anxiety concerning keeping the riches, worries about being robbed, constant ruminating on how to get more riches, etc. “Grandeur often pays a nightly penance for the triumph of the day” [Cecil, cited in Bridges, 116]. A sure sign of the love of money is sleeplessness due to concerns that wealth brings.

No Satisfaction in Wealth

¹³ I have seen a grievous evil under the sun: wealth hoarded to the harm of its owner,¹⁴ or wealth lost through some misfortune, so that when he has a son there is nothing left for him. ¹⁵ Naked a man comes from his mother's womb, and as he comes, so he departs. He takes nothing from his labor that he can carry in his hand. ¹⁶ This too is a grievous evil: As a man comes, so he departs, and what does he gain, since he toils for the wind? ¹⁷ All his days he eats in darkness, with great frustration, affliction and anger.

¹⁸ Then I realized that it is good and proper for a man to eat and drink, and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given him—for this is his lot. ¹⁹ Moreover, when God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work—this is a gift of God. ²⁰ He seldom reflects on the days of his life, because God keeps him occupied with gladness of heart.

— Ecclesiastes 5:13-20

IN THE PREVIOUS SECTION, Solomon wrote about the love of money and how those who love money are never satisfied. Here, Solomon points out that wealth is not only unsatisfying, but it is also temporary: certainly not lasting beyond the grave; often, disappearing long before the grave. Solomon shows this by relating some examples from real life that he has seen: **“I**

have seen a grievous evil under the sun: wealth hoarded to the harm of its owner, or wealth lost through some misfortune, so that when he has a son there is nothing left for him. Naked a man comes from his mother's womb, and as he comes, so he departs. He takes nothing from his labor that he can carry in his hand" (vss. 13–15).

Solomon here gives us three examples from real life that touch on the fleeting nature of wealth. In the first, a man, who realizes that wealth is fleeting, ruins his own life by **"hoarding"** his wealth. In the second, the wealth is not hoarded, but the wealth is **"lost through some misfortune."** By juxtaposing these two examples, Solomon points out a dilemma: the realization that wealth is fleeting leads us to hoard wealth, but hoarding wealth is nearly always done to the harm of its owner; but, on the other hand, if we do not guard our wealth, we stand a chance of losing it through some misfortune. If money and wealth are the focus of your life, and the center of your happiness, you can't win!

In the third example, Solomon points out that all this concern about money and wealth is kind of futile, because one's worldly wealth never lasts beyond the grave: **"Naked a man comes from his mother's womb, and as he comes, so he departs. He takes nothing from his labor that he can carry in his hand"** (vs. 15). Indeed, envying the wealthy of this world is shortsighted, as the Psalmist points out: **"Do not be overawed when a man grows rich, when the splendor of his house increases; for he will take nothing with him when he dies, his splendor will not descend with him"** (Ps. 49:16–17). Solomon ponders this: **"This too is a grievous evil: As a man comes, so he departs, and what does he gain, since he toils for the wind? All his days he eats in darkness, with great frustration, affliction and anger"** (vss. 16–17). Indeed, if you are living for money, if to gain wealth is the

central goal of your life, then certainly you are **“toiling for the wind”**. You will certainly **“eat in darkness”**, because you will not realize the harm your love of money is causing, you will be blind to the futility of striving after wealth. Thus, you will experience **“great frustration, affliction and anger.”**

But there is another way, as Solomon points out: **“Then I realized that it is good and proper for a man to eat and drink, and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given him—for this is his lot. Moreover, when God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work—this is a gift of God. He seldom reflects on the days of his life, because God keeps him occupied with gladness of heart”** (vss. 18–20). Instead of striving after more and more wealth, be satisfied with the lot God has given you, **“find satisfaction in [your] toilsome labor”**. Solomon realizes here, and we also should realize this, that it is God who enables a man to **“enjoy [his wealth and possessions], to accept his lot and be happy in his work—this is a gift of God.”** Though Solomon may seem grim in the book of Ecclesiastes (because he often points out what is futile in life), he does also touch on what is **“good and proper”** in life. And when he points out what is **“good and proper”**, when he speaks of finding satisfaction in life, when he talks of finding happiness, God is named as the source. The world sees things differently. The prevailing view of the world is that possessions and wealth bring happiness, and God brings gloom and melancholy. “There is a school among us who are fond of describing religion by its sorrows, and who forget, or seem to forget, their overbalancing joys” [Bridges, 119]. The world is wrong. As Solomon has pointed out in this and the previous chapter, wealth and possessions can be a source of great misery. They become a source of misery when we look at

them as the means to fulfillment in life. When we do this, they become our god. To focus on the gifts of God, rather than on God the Giver, is idolatry. God, of course, hates idolatry, and so it only makes sense that God will not enable a man to find happiness and fulfillment in his idolatry.

Now, do not misapply these teachings. The way to fulfillment is not necessarily to throw all of your possessions away and live in a state of poverty, for a poor man can revere possessions as an idol as easily as a rich man. No, the answer is to get your eyes off of your possessions and to direct them to God. The goal of your life should not be to make more money, to get more possessions. To do this is to follow an idol. Rather, the goal of your life should be to follow God's will for you life, and be content with what He has given you. God may direct your life in a path that leads to wealth. Praise the Lord for this, and thank Him for the gifts He gives. God may direct your life so that you lead a humble life. Praise the Lord for this, too, for wealth and possessions are sources of great temptation, and catalysts for strife. "[Wealth and possessions] are always a temptation. So often a rise in the world is declension or apostasy from God. It is only when they are consecrated to God, and laid out in the service of our fellow-creatures—that they become a blessing" [Bridges, 118]. "If we focus more on the gifts than the Giver, we are guilty of idolatry. If we accept His gifts, but complain about them, we are guilty of ingratitude. If we hoard His gifts and will not share them with others, we are guilty of indulgence. But if we yield to His will and use what He gives us for His glory, then we can enjoy life and be satisfied." [Wiersbe, 71]. Oh, that we too could live like the content man Solomon describes: **"He seldom reflects on the days of his life, because God keeps him occupied with gladness of heart"** (vs. 20).

14 - ECCLESIASTES 6:1-12

The Unhappy Wealthy Man

¹ I have seen another evil under the sun, and it weighs heavily on men: ² God gives a man wealth, possessions and honor, so that he lacks nothing his heart desires, but God does not enable him to enjoy them, and a stranger enjoys them instead. This is meaningless, a grievous evil. ³ A man may have a hundred children and live many years; yet no matter how long he lives, if he cannot enjoy his prosperity and does not receive proper burial, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he. ⁴ It comes without meaning, it departs in darkness, and in darkness its name is shrouded. ⁵ Though it never saw the sun or knew anything, it has more rest than does that man—⁶even if he lives a thousand years twice over but fails to enjoy his prosperity. Do not all go to the same place?

— Ecclesiastes 6:1-6

SOLOMON HAS BEEN WRITING, in the last few sections, about the inability of material things, in themselves, to bring satisfaction in life. He ended the previous section by telling us that it is God who enables us to enjoy our lot in life. And when God enables us to do so, then we can live a happy, fulfilled life. Solomon described such a man's life: **“He seldom reflects on the days of his life, because God keeps him occupied with gladness of heart”** (Eccl. 5:20). Solomon here gives us an example of the opposite case: **“I have seen another evil under the sun, and it weighs heavily on men: God gives a man wealth, possessions, and honor, so that he lacks**

nothing his heart desires, but God does not enable him to enjoy them, and a stranger enjoys them instead. This is meaningless, a grievous evil” (vss. 1–2). I believe that all of us have seen examples of this. We read in a newspaper or magazine of someone who has **“wealth, possessions, and honor”**, and yet we read of how miserable his life is. “‘Never judge a book by its cover,’ goes the old saying, and men should never get confused about the true state of others’ affairs by looking merely at their outward welfare. A man may possess wealth, honor, numerous children, long life, and virtually every outward good that anyone could possibly imagine; yet he can still be a very broken, dissatisfied, and unhappy person” [Kaiser, 80]. We see in our day and age the same thing that Solomon saw thousands of years ago. And such cases have been occurring countless times over and over in the intervening years. Why then do we still think that **“wealth, honor and possessions”** will bring us happiness?

Solomon elaborates on the futility of the life in his example: **“A man may have a hundred children and live many years; yet no matter how long he lives, if he cannot enjoy his prosperity and does not receive proper burial, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he. It comes without meaning, it departs in darkness, and in darkness its name is shrouded. Though it never saw the sun or knew anything, it has more rest than does that man—even if he lives a thousand years twice over but fails to enjoy his prosperity. Do not all go to the same place?”** (vss. 3–6). Solomon argues that this wealthy, powerful man, even if he enjoys one of the greatest blessings of those in his culture—even if he has a **“hundred children”**— he would have been better off never having been born, and worse than that, he would have been better off if he had been stillborn. The crux of Solomon’s argument is clear: what good are **“wealth,**

possessions, honor, prosperity, a hundred children” if you aren’t given the ability to enjoy them? “Despite the complete absence of identity and utter lack of experience of life, the stillborn has a huge advantage over the shattered man—the advantage of ‘rest’ or even ‘pleasure’ as the rabbis sometimes translated the word. To feel nothing, know nothing, experience nothing, [Solomon] deems preferable to the vexing pain of missing out on all the things that bring satisfaction” [Hubbard, 153]. And yet, how many of us envy the man with **“wealth, possessions and honor”**, and pray to be like him? Should we not rather pray that God enable us to enjoy our lot?

Concluding his argument with a forceful point, Solomon asks the rhetorical question: **“Do not all go to the same place?”** (vs. 6). As we have mentioned numerous times in our study of Ecclesiastes, Solomon throughout this book argues from a worldly point of view, as he seeks to find fulfillment and meaning in life. Eventually, all discussions concerning meaning and fulfillment in life must consider the afterlife. Death must always rear its head, because life itself is so fleeting. The worldly man believes that death brings nothingness. For him, there is no afterlife. And so, in Solomon’s argument, the stillborn child is better off than the unfulfilled wealthy man, because the stillborn child goes directly to nothingness, while the unfulfilled wealthy man must suffer in life, and then die. His wealth does not do him any good in life, and it certainly will not do him any good in death. As Paul teaches: **“For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it”** (I Tim. 6:7).

The main mistake of the unfulfilled wealthy man is that he seeks fulfillment and meaning in this world alone. He “misunderstands the fact that the earthly life has its chief end beyond itself; [his] failing to penetrate to the inward fountain of true happiness, which is independent of the outward lot,

makes exaggerated and ungrateful demands on the earthly life” [Keil & Delitzsch, 307]. God does not enable him to enjoy his wealth, because he is so occupied with his material things that he gives no heed to God. For true fulfillment in life, for true happiness in life, he needs to follow the advice of Jesus: **“Seek first [God’s] kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well”** (Matt. 6:33).

Concluding Statements

⁷ All man’s efforts are for his mouth, yet his appetite is never satisfied. ⁸ What advantage has a wise man over a fool? What does a poor man gain by knowing how to conduct himself before others? ⁹ Better what the eye sees than the roving of the appetite. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. ¹⁰ Whatever exists has already been named, and what man is has been known; no man can contend with one who is stronger than he. ¹¹ The more the words, the less the meaning, and how does that profit anyone? ¹² For who knows what is good for a man in life, during the few and meaningless days he passes through like a shadow? Who can tell him what will happen under the sun after he is gone?

— Ecclesiastes 6:7-12

THE FIRST SIX CHAPTERS of Ecclesiastes contain a running discussion by Solomon concerning meaning and fulfillment in life. These verses conclude this discussion with a series of statements and rhetorical questions that touch on what Solomon has found in the course of this discussion. Solomon’s conclusion is that he has found no conclusion. Using man’s

wisdom, Solomon could not discover the answer to finding meaning in life. At every turn was **“meaningless”**ness.

Seeking material riches did not provide fulfillment: **“All man’s efforts are for his mouth, yet his appetite is never satisfied”** (vs. 7). Seeking wisdom did not provide fulfillment: **“What advantage has a wise man over a fool? What does a poor man gain by knowing how to conduct himself before others?”** (vs. 8). Even if we focus on what we have, rather than getting carried away with our desires, though this is **“better”**, we remain unfulfilled: **“Better what the eye sees than the roving of the appetite. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind”** (vs. 9).

Solomon is spent. His argument has run its course. The answers are beyond him. **“Whatever exists has already been named, and what man is has been known; no man can contend with one who is stronger than he”** (vs. 10). He has found no benefit from his musings: **“The more the words, the less the meaning, and how does that profit anyone?”** (vs. 11).

The lesson Solomon has learned is that man, through his wisdom alone, cannot find the answers to meaning and fulfillment in life. **“For who knows what is good for a man in life, during the few and meaningless days he passes through like a shadow?”** (vs. 12). The answers must come from someone outside of life. Death nullifies any worldly advantage. The briefness of life, as compared to eternity, makes any worldly advantage meaningless. Any meaning found in life, therefore, must necessarily be connected to finding answers concerning what is beyond this life: **“Who can tell him what will happen under the sun after he is gone?”** (vs. 12). The One who has eternity in His hands, is also the One who can tell us **“what is good for a man in life.”** For what we do in this brief life, affects our destiny in eternity. If we ignore in this

life the Lord of the Universe, who holds eternity in His hands, He will ignore us in eternity. On the other hand, if we seek Him in this life, seek to do His will in this life, seek to obey His commands in this life, He will not only give us fulfillment and meaning in this life, He will bring us into a glorious eternity in His presence after this life is concluded. May the Lord be praised!

15 - ECCLESIASTES 7:1-12

What is Better in Life?

¹ A good name is better than fine perfume, and the day of death better than the day of birth. ² It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of every man; the living should take this to heart.

³ Sorrow is better than laughter, because a sad face is good for the heart. ⁴ The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure.

⁵ It is better to heed a wise man's rebuke than to listen to the song of fools. ⁶ Like the crackling of thorns under the pot, so is the laughter of fools. This too is meaningless.

⁷ Extortion turns a wise man into a fool, and a bribe corrupts the heart. ⁸ The end of a matter is better than its beginning, and patience is better than pride.

⁹ Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools.

¹⁰ Do not say, "Why were the old days better than these?" For it is not wise to ask such questions.

¹¹ Wisdom, like an inheritance, is a good thing and benefits those who see the sun. ¹² Wisdom is a shelter as money is a shelter, but the advantage of knowledge is this: that wisdom preserves the life of its possessor.

— Ecclesiastes 7:1-12

AT THE END of the previous chapter, Solomon concluded his running discussion in which he sought (using human

wisdom) meaning and fulfillment in life. He concluded the discussion with some rhetorical questions that highlighted the frustration he faced in searching for fulfillment in life. One of the questions was: **“For who knows what is good for a man in life, during the few and meaningless days he passes through like a shadow?”** (Eccl. 6:12). Beginning with this chapter, it is as if Solomon is setting out to answer that question. Much of the chapter consists of proverbs, many of which speak of what is **“better”** in life.

Solomon begins: **“A good name is better than fine perfume, and the day of death better than the day of birth. It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of every man; the living should take this to heart”** (vss. 1–2). The first verse starts off with a typical proverb, but ends surprisingly. We all can see how **“a good name is better than fine perfume”**, but are we all ready to say **“the day of death [is] better than the day of birth”**? And then also, what do these two halves of the proverb have to do with each other? Moreover, I would not have been ready to admit, at first, that **“it is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting.”** These sayings certainly are difficult to accept, even paradoxical. **“But the paradoxes of the Bible open out valuable truths”** [Bridges, 135].

Fortunately for us, at the end of verse 2, Solomon sheds some light on the reason for his observations: **“For death is the destiny of every man; the living should take this to heart.”** Ah! The **“house of mourning”** is more beneficial than **“the house of feasting”** because of what it can teach us, if we **“take to heart”** that **“death is the destiny of every man.”** The **“house of mourning”**, the mortuary, causes us to set our mind on the frailty of our lives, and our certain, eventual death. To ponder our frailty, to ponder our certain death, to ponder

the possibility of existing after death forces us to ponder our relationship with the One who holds eternity in His hand: our Maker. David prayed, and we should: **“Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain the heart of wisdom”** (Ps. 90:12). Solomon is advising us to “look death in the face and learn from it” [Wiersbe, 85]. Learn that you must make peace with God. Learn that without God’s acceptance of you, the day of death will be horrible. Or, alternatively, learn that with God’s acceptance, **“the day of death”** indeed can be **“better than the day of birth.”** For those who have made peace with God, this proverb of Solomon’s is literally true, in every way. And how does one make peace with God? There is but one way, and that is through acceptance of the sacrifice that His Son made for us. As Paul teaches, **“We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand”** (Rom. 5:1–2). And then, when we have peace with God, we have **“a good name”** before Him. Our name is written in the Lamb’s Book of Life, so it is certainly easy now to say, **“A good name is better than fine perfume, and the day of death better than the day of birth.”** The aroma of a fine perfume lasts for but a moment; a good name lasts forever. The pleasures of the house of feasting last for but a moment; the glories of life after death in the presence of our heavenly Father last for an eternity.

Now that we understand verses 1 and 2, we have more of a chance of understanding the next verses: **“Sorrow is better than laughter, because a sad face is good for the heart. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure”** (vss. 3–4). Sorrow is better in that it causes one to ponder the crucial issues of life, causes us to look beyond this life for a better one. “But where is the heart of the fool? —where he can try to forget himself—

gratify his corrupt taste—get rid of unwelcome thoughts—put away God and eternity—all reality blotted out of his mind...” [Bridges, 139]. In the Beatitudes, Jesus teaches essentially the same thing that Solomon is teaching: **“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted”** (Matt. 5:3 – 4). We mourn in this life, so that we may get to the time and place where the **“days of sorrow will end”** (Isa. 60:20), where **“there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things [will have] passed away”** (Rev. 21:4).

Solomon continues proverbializing on the unpleasant things in life: **“It is better to heed a wise man’s rebuke than to listen to the song of fools. Like the crackling of thorns under the pot, so is the laughter of fools. This too is meaningless”** (vss. 5–6). There are few things that seem worse at the time than being rebuked by someone. One feels embarrassed; one is left speechless. One quickly, usually futilely, tries to defend oneself. But Solomon reminds us that the **“rebuke”** of a wise man is, indeed, a good thing. In order for it to be good, we must, of course, take it to heart, learn from it, try to change for the better. On the other hand, what makes us feel better than flattery thrown our direction? It makes our day. We go home and tell our spouses about it. But Solomon warns us to consider the source. We must make sure that we are not dancing to the **“song of fools.”** Solomon points out that flattery from a fool is the worst sort of meaningless din: **“Like the crackling of thorns under the pot, so is the laughter of fools. This too is meaningless.”** The loud **“crackling of thorns under the pot”** provide no nourishment whatsoever.

Solomon next turns to the value of patience: **“Extortion turns a wise man into a fool, and a bribe corrupts the heart. The end of a matter is better than its beginning, and**

patience is better than pride” (vss. 7–8). Many people go for the get-rich-quick scheme, often compromising their integrity through **“extortion”** and **“bribery”**. They do this because they are too impatient to let God work out His perfect will for them. For the one who trusts in God, **“the end of a matter is better than its beginning”**, for **“we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose”** (Rom. 8:28). “Let the Lord take His own course, as certainly He will. Trust Him for the end in His own time and way” [Bridges, 145]. A sign of the foolish impatience that trusts not in the Lord is a quick temper. So Solomon admonishes: **“Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools”** (vs. 9). Another sign of such foolish impatience is to blame one’s problems on external circumstances: **“Do not say, ‘Why were the old days better than these?’ For it is not wise to ask such questions”** (vs. 10). Longing for the “good old days” is almost always accompanied by “giving up”. To blame one’s problems on the times one is living in is a substitute for action. One says, in effect, “There’s nothing I can do about it anyway. I don’t live in the good old days.”

Next, in recounting what is **“better”**, Solomon returns once again to the value of wisdom: **“Wisdom, like an inheritance, is a good thing and benefits those who see the sun. Wisdom is a shelter as money is a shelter, but the advantage of knowledge is this: that wisdom preserves the life of its possessor”** (vss. 11–12). Those who expect a large **“inheritance”** value it with great anticipation. Solomon says that we should value **“wisdom”** in the same way, for **“wisdom”** helps us here and now, it **“benefits those who see the sun.”** And true wisdom not only benefits us in this life, but also **“preserves the life of its possessor”** beyond this life. John speaks of such a knowledge: **“We know that the Son of God**

has come, and has given us understanding, so that we may know Him who is true. And we are in Him who is true—even in His Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God, and eternal life.” (I John 5:20). The knowledge of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was sacrificed for our sins, can bring us eternal life, for **“He is the true God, and eternal life.”** Amen.

The Crooked Things in Life

¹³ Consider what God has done: Who can straighten what he has made crooked? ¹⁴ When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider: God has made the one as well as the other. Therefore, a man cannot discover anything about his future.

¹⁵ In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these: a righteous man perishing in his righteousness, and a wicked man living long in his wickedness. ¹⁶ Do not be over-righteous, neither be overwise—why destroy yourself? ¹⁷ Do not be overwicked, and do not be a fool—why die before your time? ¹⁸ It is good to grasp the one and not let go of the other. The man who fears God will avoid all [extremes].

¹⁹ Wisdom makes one wise man more powerful than ten rulers in a city. ²⁰ There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins. ²¹ Do not pay attention to every word people say, or you may hear your servant cursing you— ²² for you know in your heart that many times you yourself have cursed others.

— Ecclesiastes 7:13-22

SOLOMON CONTINUES with his proverbs, as he speaks on “what is good for a man in life” (see Eccl. 6:12). Here he advises: “Consider what God has done: Who can straighten what He has made crooked? When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider: God has made the one as well as the other. Therefore, a man

cannot discover anything about his future” (vss. 13–14). Solomon asks us now to stop, and **“consider what God has done.”** Solomon wants us to ponder what we have seen in life, ponder what he has told us about life, and realize that, by golly, we don’t understand everything that’s going on. Moreover, concerning the things that we see in life that don’t make sense, we can’t do anything about them: **“Who can straighten what He has made crooked?”**

From our point of view, there are many **“crooked”** things in life, things beyond our understanding. Most of the things we consider **“crooked”** have to do with adversity of some sort or another (we don’t seem to complain much when good things happen to us that are beyond our understanding...). Who has not thought life **“crooked”** when “bad things happen to good people”? Who has not thought life **“crooked”** when “innocent” children suffer? We have all heard questions asked (even possibly asked by ourselves) of the form: How could a loving God let such and such happen? Yes, life, from our point of view, can be **“crooked”**.

But does this mean that God is evil? Because we do not understand everything that happens in life, does this mean that God has failed? Of course not. I find it arrogant that some people think that it should be possible to know and understand everything that God does. How can we, mortal and sinful man, expect to understand everything that God does? Why should God be expected to give account to us for all that He does? Remember this: God is God, and man is man. As Paul said, **“Who are you, O man, to talk back to God?”** (Rom. 9:20). We will never, in our mortal bodies, understand all that God has done, much less **“straighten”** it.

Because of this uncertainty, because of our lack of understanding about life, **“a man cannot discover anything about his future”** (vs. 14). Be careful when you plan. Do not

set everything in concrete, for **“crooked”** things happen that can destroy your plans. James warns us against being too presumptuous concerning the future: **“Now listen, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.’ Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, ‘If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.’ As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil”** (James 4:13-16). Depend on the **“Lord’s will”**. Always search, minute by minute, for the **“Lord’s will”**.

Solomon advises: **“When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider: God has made the one as well as the other”** (vs. 14). There is nothing wrong with being happy when God gives us good times. We “should enjoy them—not wantonly, or selfishly, but as opportunities of glorifying Him, and doing good to our fellow creatures” [Bridges, 156]. **“But when times are bad, consider: God has made the one as well as the other”** (vs. 14). As Job put it: **“Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?”** (Job 2:10). God has His reasons for allowing us to endure trouble, though we may view trouble as what is **“crooked”** in life. Look back, and you will realize that the troubles you have experienced have been valuable for your spiritual growth, “not only as our school of discipline, but as the test of our improvement in this school. For if prosperity doth best discover vices, adversity doth best discover virtue” [Bridges, 157]. It is worth remembering that God sends both good times and bad times: both are signs of His love. How, you may ask, are bad times a sign of His love? The writer of Hebrews teaches us: **“Endure hardship as discipline. God is treating you as sons... Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they**

thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in His holiness” (Heb. 12:7,10). Every loving parent knows that discipline springs from love.

Solomon himself points out something **“crooked”** in life that he has seen: **“In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these: a righteous man perishing in his righteousness, and a wicked man living long in his wickedness. Do not be overrighteous, neither be overwise— why destroy yourself? Do not be overwicked, and do not be a fool—why die before your time? It is good to grasp the one and not let go of the other. The man who fears God will avoid all [extremes]”** (vss. 15– 18). This, at first glance, is a very strange passage to find in the Bible. We are not often advised to avoid being **“over-righteous”** and **“overwise”**. However, we must infer that Solomon is not speaking of godly righteousness or godly wisdom, for he concludes his point by saying, **“The man who fears God will avoid”** these things. Then also, a few verses later, he points out, **“There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins”** (vs. 20). We must remember that in this book, Solomon is speaking from a worldly point of view. And so, here too, Solomon is speaking of worldly **“righteousness”** and worldly **“wisdom”**. A tip off that he is speaking in this passage from a worldly point of view is the way he introduces these points: **“In this meaningless life of mine...”** (vs. 15). Solomon complains here that he sees the worldly **“righteous”** perish, while the wicked live long. So he gives some worldly advice: **“Do not be over-righteous, neither be overwise— why destroy yourself?”**

In the Bible, we find examples of those who are **“over-righteous”**. For instance, we see the Pharisees denying the hungry disciples food that they gleaned on the Sabbath (see Matt. 12:1–8); we see the Pharisees trying to accuse Jesus for

healing on the Sabbath (see Luke 6:7ff; Luke 14:1ff). These are cases of “over-righteousness”. The Pharisees, in an attempt to look “religious”, rebuke those who are doing what is right in God’s eyes. “There cannot be over much of the righteousness which is by faith. But there is over much of the righteousness that consists in punctiliousness as to external ordinances, when these are substituted for **‘the weightier matters of the law—judgment, mercy, faith, and the love of God’** (see Matt. 23:23; Luke 11:42)” [JFB, 530]. Charles Bridges eloquently summarizes what Solomon is saying: “Avoid all affectation or high pretensions to superior wisdom. Guard against that opinionative confidence, which seems to lay down the law, and critically finds fault with every judgment differing from our own” [Bridges, 164].

Solomon continues with some words concerning his favorite subject, wisdom: **“Wisdom makes one wise man more powerful than ten rulers in a city. There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins. Do not pay attention to every word people say, or you may hear your servant cursing you—for you know in your heart that many times you yourself have cursed others”** (vss. 19–22). Solomon here places the value of wisdom as greater than wealth, strength and power, for **“wisdom makes one wise man more powerful than ten rulers in a city.”** He goes on to point out a couple of cases where he finds a lack of wisdom. First, **“There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins.”** Sin is always a case of failing to put godly wisdom into practice. We sin when we knowingly go against God’s Word. We all sin, and so there is in all of us much room for improvement concerning putting into practice of godly wisdom. In fact, this is the wisdom we most lack, and thus most need: godly wisdom.

Second, Solomon finds a lack of wisdom in people who get upset at what others say. So, Solomon advises: **“Do not pay attention to every word people say, or you may hear your servant cursing you—for you know in your heart that many times you yourself have cursed others.”** Solomon advises us to show wisdom by turning a deaf ear to what others say about us: **“Do not pay attention...”** Solomon is essentially saying: “Look. We all say stupid things at unguarded moments. Therefore, show some forgiveness for those who say stupid things about you.” And if you cannot turn a deaf ear to what others are saying about you, do not hold it against them. Rather, apply what they say as constructive criticism. “Therefore, instead of cherishing a bitter feeling against the agents who cause our sufferings, we ought to regard them as the instruments in the hands of the loving Father who corrects us; then it becomes, by God’s Spirit, easy for us to love them and pray for them whilst they despitefully use us.” [JFB, 531].

Obstacles to Wisdom

²³ All this I tested by wisdom and I said, “I am determined to be wise”—but this was beyond me. ²⁴ Whatever wisdom may be, it is far off and most profound—who can discover it? ²⁵ So I turned my mind to understand, to investigate and to search out wisdom and the scheme of things and to understand the stupidity of wickedness and the madness of folly.

²⁶ I find more bitter than death the woman who is a snare, whose heart is a trap and whose hands are chains. The man who pleases God will escape her, but the sinner she will ensnare.

²⁷ “Look,” says the Teacher, “this is what I have discovered: Adding one thing to another to discover the scheme of things— ²⁸ while I was still searching but not finding—I found one [upright] man among a thousand, but not one [upright] woman among them all. ²⁹ This only have I found: God made mankind upright, but men have gone in search of many schemes.”

— Ecclesiastes 7:23-29

IN THE PREVIOUS SECTION, Solomon talked about the “crooked” things in life, things he did not understand. Solomon realized that God was in control even of the “crooked” things. He said: **“Consider what God has done: Who can straighten what He has made crooked?”** These “crooked” things in life that God has ordained made Solomon aware of the shortcomings of his own reasoning ability. Here

he says: **“All this I tested by wisdom and I said, ‘I am determined to be wise’—but this was beyond me. Whatever wisdom may be, it is far off and most profound—who can discover it?”** (vss. 23–24). But Solomon does not give up. For a philosopher to say that wisdom is **“beyond”** him is a grand admission of failure. So Solomon redoubles his effort to understand these things, to attain wisdom by his own reasonings: **“So I turned my mind to understand, to investigate and to search out wisdom and the scheme of things and to understand the stupidity of wickedness and the madness of folly”** (vs. 25). Solomon resolves to use every tool at his disposal: to **“understand”**, to **“investigate”**, to **“search out”**.

In his renewed attempt to overcome the shortcomings of his wisdom, Solomon looks first at an obstacle to being wise: **“I find more bitter than death the woman who is a snare, whose heart is a trap and whose hands are chains. The man who pleases God will escape her, but the sinner she will ensnare”** (vs. 26). One of the biggest obstacles to wisdom is to fall into sexual sin. It blinds one’s heart and mind to truth. It turns one’s heart away from God, hardening it to the things of God. As Solomon points out, sexual sin is a **“snare”** and a **“trap”**, not easily relinquishing its victim.

Now, in this area, Solomon would have done well to practice what he preached. Solomon stumbled into a state of sexual gluttony, of sorts, which led him away from the Lord and thus, away from true wisdom: **“King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh’s daughter—Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites. They were from nations about which the Lord had told the Israelites, ‘You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods.’ Nevertheless, Solomon held fast to them in love. He had**

seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray. As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father had been. He followed Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites. So Solomon did evil in the eyes of the Lord; he did not follow the Lord completely, as David his father had done” (I Kings 11:1–6).

One of the best ways to avoid sexual sin is to cultivate a strong relationship with God, and to spend one’s time in service to God. Solomon intimates this: **“The man who pleases God will escape her, but the sinner she will ensnare”** (vs. 26).

Continuing in his redoubled effort to find true wisdom, Solomon deduces why men cannot by human endeavors achieve true wisdom: **“‘Look,’ says the Teacher, ‘this is what I have discovered: Adding one thing to another to discover the scheme of things—while I was still searching but not finding—I found one upright man among a thousand, but not one upright woman among them all. This only have I found: God made mankind upright, but men have gone in search of many schemes”** (vss. 27–29). Solomon reflects on his search for wisdom, and the people he had personally met in his life. He remembers only **“one upright man”** among them, and no upright women. Note, Solomon is not here making a general statement concerning the morality of women. He is merely reflecting on his own life and the people he has met. Of them all, men and women, he remembers only one whom he could call **“upright”**. In truth, there has been only one truly **“upright man”** in all of human history. This one upright man was also the most wise of all who

walked the earth, because He perfectly put into practice the will of God. This man was, of course, Jesus Christ.

Jesus is a proof of the point that Solomon is trying to make here. Solomon has deduced that men cannot be truly wise because they have strayed from God and the righteousness of God. As Solomon notes: **“This only have I found: God made mankind upright, but men have gone in search of many schemes”** (vs. 29). The woes of man, the troubles we face, the injustice we see day by day, can be traced to the fact that **“men have gone in search of many schemes.”** They reject the righteousness and morality of God, and run from Him, though He **“made mankind upright.”** The problems in the world, what is **“crooked”** in the world, are not due to “divine injustice”, but to “human perverseness” [Hubbard, 178]. God has blessed men with the supreme reasoning abilities of all the creatures on earth, but rather than using this ability to glorify God, **“men have gone in search of many schemes.”** “Created in the image of God, man has the ability to understand and harness the forces of God put into nature, but he doesn’t always use this ability in constructive ways” [Wiersbe, 93]. Unfortunately, men are very inventive in coming up with ways to sin, in figuring out ways to be destructive.

Obedience to Authority

¹ Who is like the wise man? Who knows the explanation of things? Wisdom brightens a man's face and changes its hard appearance.

² Obey the king's command, I say, because you took an oath before God. ³ Do not be in a hurry to leave the king's presence. Do not stand up for a bad cause, for he will do whatever he pleases. ⁴ Since a king's word is supreme, who can say to him, "What are you doing?" ⁵ Whoever obeys his command will come to no harm, and the wise heart will know the proper time and procedure. ⁶ For there is a proper time and procedure for every matter, though a man's misery weighs heavily upon him.

⁷ Since no man knows the future, who can tell him what is to come? ⁸ No man has power over the wind to contain it; so no one has power over the day of his death. As no one is discharged in time of war, so wickedness will not release those who practice it.

⁹ All this I saw, as I applied my mind to everything done under the sun. There is a time when a man lords it over others to his own hurt. ¹⁰ Then too, I saw the wicked buried—those who used to come and go from the holy place and receive praise in the city where they did this. This too is meaningless.

— Ecclesiastes 8:1-10

THIS CHAPTER BEGINS with Solomon again pointing out a benefit of wisdom: **“Who is like the wise man? Who knows the explanation of things? Wisdom brightens a man's face**

and changes its hard appearance” (vs. 1). True wisdom, godly wisdom, can even benefit physical appearance. Sin often hardens the face as well as the heart, bringing lines of sadness, despair, guilt and worry. But wisdom **“brightens a man’s face and changes its hard appearance.”** Look into the eyes of one who is wise in Christ, and see the joy and peace.

Solomon goes on with his proverbial teachings by giving wise advice concerning obedience to authority: **“Obey the king’s command, I say, because you took an oath before God”** (vs. 2). Solomon advises us to **“obey the king’s command”**, and then he gives us a reason to do so: **“... because you took an oath before God.”** We all here in America pledge allegiance to our country daily in grade school, and, no doubt, I imagine that such oaths are performed in most countries. We are commanded over and over in the Bible to fulfill our oaths. In this instance, Solomon tells us to fulfill our oaths by obeying the king’s command.

Moreover, one of our Christian duties is to obey the laws of the land. Paul told us: **“Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established”** (Rom. 13:1; see also Titus 3:1; I Pet. 2:13–18). Governments are instruments of God, instruments that He uses to keep peace in a sinful world.

Solomon goes on to give practical advice concerning obedience to authority: **“Do not be in a hurry to leave the king’s presence. Do not stand up for a bad cause, for he will do whatever he pleases. Since a king’s word is supreme, who can say to him, ‘What are you doing?’ Whoever obeys his command will come to no harm, and the wise heart will know the proper time and procedure. For there is a proper time and procedure for every matter, though a man’s misery weighs heavily upon him”** (vss. 3–6). Solomon’s comments, taken literally, are directed to those

who have personal dealings with **“the king”**. Few of us live in countries that have kings; even fewer (if any) have personal access to the king. We may, however, apply these words of advice of Solomon to our dealings with any authority figures: whether it be our parents, our bosses, our local government officials, etc. With this in mind, let’s look at Solomon’s advice, taking special notice of how his advice applies to the boss/employee relationship.

First Solomon says: **“Do not be in a hurry to leave the king’s presence.”** In other words, when in the presence of those in authority, listen to what they have to say, hear them out, and do not be anxious to leave their presence for fear of being given marching orders. Don’t avoid the boss for fear that you will be given work to do! On the contrary, do your part to enlist yourself to help solve the boss’s problems.

Solomon also advises: **“Do not stand up for a bad cause, for he will do whatever he pleases.”** Though it is not improper to voice to the boss your opinion concerning the way that you think things should be done, there comes a time when, once the boss has decided on a plan, it is wise to support that plan, **“for he will do whatever he pleases.”** Any opposition to the boss should be voiced tactfully and respectfully, for **“who can say to him, ‘What are you doing?’”** To continue persistently in rebellion against the wishes of the boss is foolish, and can lead to dire consequences. On the other hand, **“whoever obeys his command will come to no harm.”**

We would do well to follow this advice of Solomon, provided that the commands of the authorities are not in contradiction to the commands of the highest authority, that is, God. As Peter said: **“We must obey God rather than men!”** (Acts 5:29). I believe that Solomon is speaking of times of disobedience in his next, enigmatic words: **“...and the wise heart will know the proper time and procedure. For there**

is a proper time and procedure for every matter, though a man's misery weighs heavily upon him" (vs. 5–6). Yes, on rare occasions, **"there is a proper time and procedure"** to disobey the command of authority, but any such disobedience must be done with serious thought, and only at the **"proper time"**, and with full acceptance of the result of such actions. If you disobey your boss, be willing to accept the consequences of getting fired. If you disobey governmental authority, be willing to accept the consequences of getting thrown in jail. In the Bible, the godly people who disobeyed governing authorities—such as Daniel, Peter and Paul—did so with an attitude of respectful opposition. When they were arrested for their disobedience, they accepted their punishment, even prayed for their captors, trusting their ultimate fate to the hands of God.

Though, in general, we are to **"obey the king's command"**, and though the king has authority to **"do whatever he pleases"**, yet his powers are limited: **"Since no man knows the future, who can tell him what is to come?"** (vs. 7). The king is limited in his foresight. He cannot be certain what the consequences of his actions will be. Because of this limitation placed upon the king and, indeed, everyone, we can safely say that nobody is perfect.

The king is also limited by his mortality: **"No man has power over the wind to contain it; so no one has power over the day of his death"** (vs. 8). For Solomon, the fact that **"no one has power over the day of his death"** also implies that a higher being does have power over the day of death. This, in turn, implies that everyone will be held accountable for their actions on earth. As Solomon put it: **"As no one is discharged in time of war, so wickedness will not release those who practice it"** (vs. 8). Death is not an escape from judgment for evil done in this life. On the other side of death's door, you

won't be able to say: "Whew! I got away with that!" On the contrary, after death comes the judgment. As Paul stated: **"For we all must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad"** (II Cor. 5:10).

Which is not to say that in this life there will be no dire P 9 4 consequences for a king's wickedness. Solomon notes: **"There is a time when a man lords it over others to his own hurt"** (vs. 9). Power is dangerous. It can lead to so many sins. And while, as noted, these sins have eternal consequences, a life of sin can also make life on earth miserable. Sadly, many in the world revere those who live a life of sin. Solomon saw this, and did not understand it: **"Then too, I saw the wicked buried—those who used to come and go from the holy place and receive praise in the city where they did this. This too is meaningless."** (vs. 10). These men were not only wicked but hypocritical. Though they practiced wickedness, they pretended to worship of God, as they would **"come and go from the holy place."** Nevertheless, they still were revered in the place where they practiced their wickedness, as they **"received praise in the city where they did this."** This is a backward world, a world that reveres wickedness, and derides goodness and truth. Oh Lord, come quickly!

The Importance of Justice

¹¹ When the sentence for a crime is not quickly carried out, the hearts of the people are filled with schemes to do wrong. ¹² Although a wicked man commits a hundred crimes and still lives a long time, I know that it will go better with God-fearing men, who are reverent before God. ¹³ Yet because the wicked do not fear God, it will not go well with them, and their days will not lengthen like a shadow. ¹⁴ There is something else meaningless that occurs on earth: righteous men who get what the wicked deserve, and wicked men who get what the righteous deserve. This too, I say, is meaningless.

¹⁵ So I commend the enjoyment of life, because nothing is better for a man under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany him in his work all the days of the life God has given him under the sun.

¹⁶ When I applied my mind to know wisdom and to observe man's labor on earth—his eyes not seeing sleep day or night—¹⁷ then I saw all that God has done. No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. Despite all his efforts to search it out, man cannot discover its meaning. Even if a wise man claims he knows, he cannot really comprehend it.

— Ecclesiastes 8:11-17

SOLOMON CONTINUES commenting on the “crooked” things in life: **“When the sentence for a crime is not quickly carried out, the hearts of the people are filled with**

schemes to do wrong” (vs. 11). With fallible humans running things, there will always be injustices. Solomon points out that injustice is a dangerous thing, for injustice breeds evil, as **“the hearts of the people are filled with schemes to do wrong.”**

Now, some would fault God in this area. They would say, “If God is just, why does He not immediately punish evil?” They may even use Solomon’s words to fault God: **“When the sentence for a crime is not quickly carried out, the hearts of the people are filled with schemes to do wrong.”** And yet, at the same time, these same people should be very glad that God does not punish sin immediately. Where would they themselves be, if He did? We must all thank God that He is patient and longsuffering, that He does not punish us immediately for our sins, that He gives us time to repent from them, and, most of all, that He has provided a way through His Son Jesus that we may be forgiven for our sins. As Peter tells us: **“The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance”** (II Pet. 3:9).

Also, we must make sure that we do not take improper advantage of God’s patience, that our **“hearts”** are not **“filled with schemes to do wrong”** because God does not immediately sentence us for our crimes. To do so is, as the Psalmist points out, to revile God: **“Why does the wicked man revile God? Why does he say to himself, ‘He won’t call me to account?’”** (Ps. 10:13). “What venom must there be in the corruption of our nature, that can suck such poison out of such a sweet attribute as the patience of God” [Cotton, in Bridges, 199].

Solomon realized that, in the end, God’s justice wins the day: **“Although a wicked man commits a hundred crimes and still lives a long time, I know that it will go better with**

God-fearing men, who are reverent before God. Yet because the wicked do not fear God, it will not go well with them, and their days will not lengthen like a shadow” (vss. 12–13). Many times, the fulfillment of God’s justice will wait until the afterlife. As the sun sets on the wicked, they do not see their days lengthen like a shadow. Rather, they see the darkness of the shadow. For the godly, they can view the lengthening of the shadow as a symbol that their days will continue forever in the life beyond this one.

Despite the fact that Solomon realized that God’s justice will prevail, he was still frustrated with the injustice he saw: **“There is something else meaningless that occurs on earth: righteous men who get what the wicked deserve, and wicked men who get what the righteous deserve. This too, I say, is meaningless”** (vs. 14). Alas, here on earth, injustice happens. This is how it will always be with fallible humans in charge of things. Such injustices should cause us to cry out for the day when the Lord’s righteous reign commences, when injustices will disappear forever.

Despite what is crooked here on earth, Solomon commends once again contentment with what God has given us: **“So I commend the enjoyment of life, because nothing is better for a man under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany him in his work all the days of the life God has given him under the sun”** (vs. 15). Contentment with what God has given us is a recurring theme in this book, contentment in spite of what is **“crooked”** and **“meaningless”** in this life. This is the fourth time that Solomon has commended enjoyment and satisfaction in this life (see also 2:24; 3:12–15; 5:18–20). These appeals by Solomon to enjoy life seem to get lost amidst his frustration at not being able to understand everything he saw in the world around him. But these appeals are an important part of the

book. They give the book balance. They tell us that despite all the things we don't understand in this life, happiness can be found in the blessings God has bestowed on each of us.

As for Solomon, he is at his end in his quest by human means to understand the things of life: **“When I applied my mind to know wisdom and to observe man’s labor on earth—his eyes not seeing sleep day or night—then I saw all that God has done. No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. Despite all his efforts to search it out, man cannot discover its meaning. Even if a wise man claims he knows, he cannot really comprehend it”** (vss. 16–17). Solomon surrenders. He realizes that he does not have all the answers; moreover, he realizes that he is unable, by his own means, to discover all the answers. Furthermore, he realizes that it is beyond the grasp of any man to fully comprehend life. Anyone who thinks he knows all the answers to life deludes himself: **“Even if a wise man claims he knows, he cannot really comprehend it.”** And indeed, it was rather presumptuous of Solomon to think that he could fully understand the workings of the creation of an all-knowing, all-powerful God. “It is no more unnatural that some [things in life] should overwhelm our understanding, than that the sun in full blaze should overpower our sight” [Bridges, 207].

It is quite important that we be humble concerning what we think we know about life, for only the humble can be taught the truth. “Too much attention cannot be bestowed on that important—yet much-neglected branch of learning—the knowledge of man’s ignorance” [Whately, in Bridges, 206]. There is much more that each of us needs to learn and understand. This is why it is so important for us continue diligently our study of God’s Word, so that we may continue the learning process. “Every secret that is disclosed— every discovery which is made—every new effect which is brought

to view, serves to convince us of numberless more which remain concealed, and which we had before no suspicion of' [Butler, in Bridges, 208].

In God's Hands

¹ So I reflected on all this and concluded that the righteous and the wise and what they do are in God's hands, but no man knows whether love or hate awaits him.

— Ecclesiastes 9:1

IN THE PREVIOUS SECTION, of the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon found himself at the end of his quest, by human means, to understand the things of life. He discovered that, no matter how worldly wise he may be, a man could not understand fully what goes on in life: **“When I applied my mind to know wisdom and to observe man's labor on earth—his eyes not seeing sleep day or night—then I saw all that God has done. No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. Despite all his efforts to search it out, man cannot discover its meaning. Even if a wise man claims he knows, he cannot really comprehend it”** (Eccl. 8:16–17). Here, he continues that thought, concluding that whatever happens on earth is in God's hands: **“So I reflected on all this and concluded that the righteous and the wise and what they do are in God's hands, but no man knows whether love or hate awaits him”** (vs. 1). God is in control. We cannot change that. And this is fine with Solomon. What is puzzling to Solomon, however, is that, despite the fact that God is in control, the **“righteous”** and **“wise”** do not know **“whether love or hate awaits [them]”**. One might think that,

since a loving God is in control, then the **“righteous”** could always expect a life of ease and peace, a **“good”** life with no suffering. Yet, this is not the case. This mystery of providence is a stumbling block for many.

Life, even for the most devout Christian, is not a bed of roses. God allows affliction. As Jesus pointed out: **“In this world, you will have trouble”** (John 16:33). Many would ask, **“Why, Lord, is there trouble for us?”** Part of the answer to this question is that God, in His sovereignty, has largely chosen to put the world under the stewardship of sinful man. And since sinful men are given by God the free will to run things down here, sin happens. Where sin is, there is affliction. And yet, the answer is more complicated than this. Despite the fact that men run things down here, God does direct circumstances according to His will, for we have statements from God’s word, such as: **“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose”** (Rom. 8:28). So, though there is pain and affliction in this sinful world, what we experience, what we must endure, is in **“God’s hands”**. Many ask, **“Well, how can a loving God allow His children to experience pain?”** One can respond, simply: **“Do not you, as a parent, allow your children to experience pain? Do you not discipline them? Do you not allow the doctor vaccinate them so that they will not contract horrible diseases? Do you not, for their good, deny them things they would think pleasurable?”** The fact that God allows us to undergo affliction is not a sign that He does not love us. On the contrary, the fact that we are disciplined by God is a sign that He loves us: **“Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had**

human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees” (Heb. 12:7–12).

Yes, the godly at times suffer; the ungodly at times prosper. “God’s approval or disapproval of us cannot always be read from [what happens to us]; things are not always what they seem to be to us or what our friends construe them to be. After all, Job’s three friends took the bare facts of his suffering and incorrectly concluded that he must have sinned grievously; otherwise he would not have been suffering as he was. Nor must we conclude that God hates those to whom He sends adversity and loves those who receive prosperity. If believers are to walk by faith, there will be times when outward appearances and facts will defy explanation for the moment. It is cruel to add to the hurt of oppressed persons by suggesting that they are definitely objects of God’s judgment. Such narrow-minded reasoning would suggest that all suffering is the result of personal sin, but that would be unbiblical” [Kaiser, 94–95]. We learn in the Bible, that the suffering of God’s children has its purpose. “Certainly some suffering is (1) educational (as Elihu informed Job by divine inspiration in Job 34:32;35:11;36:10,15,22); some is (2) doxological, for the glory of God (as Jesus showed His disciples the proper deduction to be drawn from the man born blind in John 9:1-3); some is (3) probationary (as when Habakkuk looked out from his watchtower on a world of tyranny, violence, and sin and found the answer in patient waiting for God’s long-suffering

retribution to take effect); some is (4) revelational (as the prophet Hosea learned the isolation felt by God as a result of Israel's spiritual adultery when he, Hosea, lost his own wife in physical harlotries); and some suffering is (5) sacrificial (as the suffering Servant bore great pain because of the sin of others, see Isa. 42;49-50;53). Therefore, it is most unfortunate when men hastily make a one-to-one nexus between personal guilt and suffering" [Kaiser, 95]. As for myself, I can truly say that all suffering I have experienced in life has been beneficial to me, in some way. I can see, looking back, God's hand at work, in all times of affliction that I have experienced. Think back. Can you not see God's hand at work in your life through your times of affliction?

The Destiny of All

² All share a common destiny—the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean, those who offer sacrifices and those who do not. As it is with the good man, so with the sinner; as it is with those who take oaths, so with those who are afraid to take them. ³This is the evil in everything that happens under the sun: The same destiny overtakes all. The hearts of men, moreover, are full of evil and there is madness in their hearts while they live, and afterward they join the dead.

⁴Anyone who is among the living has hope—even a live dog is better off than a dead lion! ⁵ For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no further reward, and even the memory of them is forgotten. ⁶ Their love, their hate and their jealousy have long since vanished; never again will they have a part in anything that happens under the sun.

⁷ Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for it is now that God favors what you do. ⁸ Always be clothed in white, and always anoint your head with oil. ⁹Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun—all your meaningless days. For this is your lot in life and in your toilsome labor under the sun. ¹⁰ Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom.

SOLOMON, as we have discussed, is at the end of his quest, by human means, to understand the things of life. He has discovered that, no matter how worldly wise a man may be, **“no one can comprehend what goes on under the sun”** (Eccl. 8:17). Solomon realizes that what happens to **“the righteous and the wise...is in God’s hands”**, but, frustratingly, despite this, **“no man knows whether love or hate await him”** (Eccl. 9:1). Solomon continues his frustration with the observation that, seemingly, the destiny of all is the same: **“All share a common destiny—the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean, those who offer sacrifices and those who do not. As it is with the good man, so with the sinner; as it is with those who take oaths, so with those who are afraid to take them. This is the evil in everything that happens under the sun: The same destiny overtakes all. The hearts of men, moreover, are full of evil and there is madness in their hearts while they live, and afterward they join the dead”** (vss. 2–3). All share death. Solomon, to underscore his point, gives a list of people from a wide range of moral, social and religious behavior: **“...the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean, those who offer sacrifices,... those who do not, ...the good man, ...the sinner, ...those who take oaths, ...those who are afraid to take them.”** For all, death happens.

We tend, wrongly, to look at death as some sort of accident. But death is not an accident; rather, it’s an appointment, an appointment that all must keep: **“[I]t is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment”** (Heb. 9:27, AV). Now, one might ask, since death happens to all, whether good or bad, why bother to live a godly life? The answer, of course, is that death is not the end. We all share the common destiny of death, but the moment of death is not an eternal destiny. We

all share the destiny that our lives on earth will end, but we do not all share the same destiny of what happens after death. And so, while worldly, natural men will agree with Solomon that **“this is the evil in everything that happens under the sun: The same destiny overtakes all”** (vs. 3), those with an eternal perspective know that death is not the end. For, yes, **“it is appointed unto men once to die”**, but we must also take into consideration what happens next: **“...but after this the judgment.”** The event of the judgment of God should be much more feared than the event of death. For the event of death is a moment of (perhaps) pain, but the result of the judgment determines our eternal destiny. And if we honestly look back at our lives, we realize that we deserve the judgment of God. We have largely ignored Him and His law, in order to pursue our own interests. But in His love, God has sent His Son to pay for our disobedience. The judgment of God fell on His Son Jesus Christ, if we but accept the gift of Jesus Christ.

Solomon next discusses the advantages the living have over the dead: **“Anyone who is among the living has hope—even a live dog is better off than a dead lion! For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no further reward, and even the memory of them is forgotten. Their love, their hate and their jealousy have long since vanished; never again will they have a part in anything that happens under the sun”** (vss. 4–6). In essence, the living have an advantage over the dead in that the living still have an opportunity to improve their lot in eternity. **“Anyone who is among the living has hope.”** The dead **“have no further reward.”** Their destiny after death is decided by what they do in this life. Despite what Hollywood may tell us with its fanciful tales of angels coming to earth to improve their lot in heaven, the **“dead know nothing”** of this life. After death, we will not have anything to do with this life,

or as Solomon tells us: **“Never again will [the dead] have a part in anything that happens under the sun”** (vs. 6). This is an encouragement for us to make the most of our lives on earth. Life is our only opportunity to influence, for good or ill, what goes on on earth. “The dead do not know what is happening on earth, but the living know and can respond to it. The dead cannot add anything to their reward or their reputation, but the living can. The dead cannot relate to people on earth by loving, hating, or envying, but the living can. Solomon was emphasizing the importance of seizing opportunities while we live, rather than blindly hoping for something better in the future, because death will end our opportunities on this earth” [Wiersbe, 109]. Most importantly, the living have **“hope”**, and the **“living know that they will die”**. Thus, the living have time to prepare for death. We have time to pursue the **“high calling of God in Christ Jesus”** (Phil. 3:14, AV).

Solomon ends this section with advice on how enjoy this life on earth that we are given: **“Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for it is now that God favors what you do. Always be clothed in white, and always anoint your head with oil. Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun—all your meaningless days. For this is your lot in life and in your toilsome labor under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom”** (vss. 7–10). And though Solomon sounds a bit cynical here, possibly even a touch sarcastic, what he says has merit. He is, in essence, telling us to enjoy a simple life, **“for this is your lot in life.”** Joy can be found, not in extravagance, but in moderation, in the

ordinary things of life: eating with gladness, drinking with joy, living in righteousness (being **“clothed in white”**), dressing nicely (anointing **“your head with oil”**), enjoying marriage, working hard. All of the elements of joy that Solomon recommends are within our reach. There is nothing extraordinary here.

This can be contrasted with the world’s view of joy. For the world, joy is not found in the simple life, but in pushing things to the limit, in seeking riches, in winning the lottery, in casting off the simple life and living in extravagance. For example, the world does not see working hard as a means of joy. Solomon commends: **“Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom.”** Our only opportunity to do good in this world is while we live in this world. So, we should work hard, be an example. Moreover, we should smile as we work, and derive joy from the work itself, not just its results. As Christians, all work that we do, even secular work, is for the Lord. As Paul exhorts: **“Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord you are serving”** (Col. 3:23–24). It is significant that Solomon here does not commend extravagance and leisure. He led one of the most extravagant lives ever lived, but he does not commend such a life. His extravagance and leisure led to his misery (see II Kings 11).

Solomon also speaks of the joy in married life: **“Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love.”** Let me note briefly the interesting wording here, when Solomon speaks of marriage. He says: **“Enjoy life *with* your wife.”** Your spouse is spoken of, not as the source, but as the companion of joy. The joys of

life are greatly magnified when you have a lifelong companion to enjoy them with.

Our enjoyment in this life is tinged with the awareness that this life is full of vain and meaningless things. Solomon reminds us of this, even in the midst of telling us to enjoy life: **“...all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun—all your meaningless days.”** So, though it is proper to enjoy life, don't get too wrapped up in this life. Everything in this life will burn. Find joy in this life where God gives it, but always look ahead to the next life where there will be no sorrow nor tears.

Time and Chance

¹¹ I have seen something else under the sun: The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favor to the learned; but time and chance happen to them all. ¹² Moreover, no man knows when his hour will come: As fish are caught in a cruel net, or birds are taken in a snare, so men are trapped by evil times that fall unexpectedly upon them.

¹³ I also saw under the sun this example of wisdom that greatly impressed me: ¹⁴ There was once a small city with only a few people in it. And a powerful king came against it, surrounded it and built huge siegeworks against it. ¹⁵ Now there lived in that city a man poor but wise, and he saved the city by his wisdom. But nobody remembered that poor man. ¹⁶ So I said, “Wisdom is better than strength.” But the poor man’s wisdom is despised, and his words are no longer heeded. ¹⁷ The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouts of a ruler of fools. ¹⁸ Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.

— Ecclesiastes 9:11-18

SOLOMON HAS JUST exhorted us to find joy and contentment with what God has given us in life (see Eccl. 9:7–9). This exhortation to contentment is especially needed given what he has next to tell us: **“I have seen something else under the sun: The race is not to the swift or the battle to**

the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favor to the learned; but time and chance happen to them all” (vs. 11). The swift, the strong, the wise, the learned, all would seem to have it made. But, alas, life is unpredictable. One might think that success and joy in life would depend on our abilities, but, as Solomon points out, even having great talent or ability is no guarantee of success. From man’s point of view, there is always an element of unpredictability: **“Time and chance happen to them all.”**

“Time and chance”, bad timing and the whims of chance, can mess up the best of plans. Given this, we would do well to learn not to trust in our own abilities, in our own wisdom, for we cannot, even at our best, conquer **“time and chance”**. We would do well to put our trust in Him who is the Master of Providence, the Master of **“time and chance”**. If we trust in God, we are no longer at the mercy of **“time and chance”**, but at the mercy of God. We should say to God, with David: **“My times are in Your hands”** (Ps. 31:15). Paul tells us that, for His children, God manipulates the whims of **“time and chance”** for our favor: **“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose”** (Rom. 8:28).

To put our trust in God is even more important when we realize that, not only the events of life, but the occasion of death is subject to the whims of **“time and chance”**. Solomon continues: **“Moreover, no man knows when his hour will come: As fish are caught in a cruel net, or birds are taken in a snare, so men are trapped by evil times that fall unexpectedly upon them”** (vs. 12). James teaches us not to forget the unpredictability of life: **“Now listen, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.’ Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What**

is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, ‘If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.’” (James 4:13–15).

Solomon realizes that not only time and chance, but the fickleness of men can thwart the success of the talented. He recounts a story demonstrating this: **“I also saw under the sun this example of wisdom that greatly impressed me: There was once a small city with only a few people in it. And a powerful king came against it, surrounded it and built huge siegeworks against it. Now there lived in that city a man poor but wise, and he saved the city by his wisdom. But nobody remembered that poor man”** (vss. 13–15). This story is doubly ironic. First, we have a man **“poor but wise”** who, through his wisdom, outwits a **“powerful king”** and **“saves the city by his wisdom”**. This is surprising in itself. And then, we have the result: **“But nobody remembered that poor man.”** This is sad, but oh so true to life. We have all seen situations where the wrong people get credit for things, and where the right people go unrewarded. A lesson we must learn is that we must not count on men for accolades. **“Learn to prepare for disappointment. Work for the best interests of your fellow- creatures; but not for their approbation or reward”** [Bridges, 230]. Look to please God instead of men. Give to others, as Jesus prescribed, not for earthly reward but for treasures in heaven (see Matt. 6). Your Father, **“who sees what is done in secret, will reward you”** (Matt. 6:4).

Solomon ends this section with lessons he learned from this story: **“So I said, ‘Wisdom is better than strength.’ But the poor man’s wisdom is despised, and his words are no longer heeded. The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouts of a ruler of fools. Wisdom is**

better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good” (vss. 16–18). The first lesson Solomon learned was **“wisdom is better than strength.”** The poor man’s wisdom outwitted the powerful king. However, this lesson is tempered by the next lesson: **“But the poor man’s wisdom is despised, and his words are no longer heeded”** (vs. 16). Though the poor man saved the city, his words are **“no longer heeded”**, and indeed, even his past, proven wisdom is forgotten, because he is poor. Unfortunately, the rich and powerful are listened to and obeyed with little discernment; the poor are ignored without consideration. We must learn to discern based on truth and godliness, not based on worldly standing. Solomon expresses this: **“The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouts of a ruler of fools”** (vs. 17).

The final lesson that Solomon draws from his story concerns the ability of sin to nullify wisdom: **“Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good”** (vs. 18). In the story, the **“sin”** lies in forgetting the poor man’s wisdom. Quite probably, credit for saving the city was given to another man, possibly the **“ruler of fools”**. By not crediting the poor man for his wisdom, **“much good”** was destroyed, for the city forever lost the benefits of the poor man’s wisdom.

Real Life

¹ As dead flies give perfume a bad smell, so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor.

² The heart of the wise inclines to the right, but the heart of the fool to the left. ³ Even as he walks along the road, the fool lacks sense and shows everyone how stupid he is.

⁴ If a ruler's anger rises against you, do not leave your post; calmness can lay great errors to rest.

⁵ There is an evil I have seen under the sun, the sort of error that arises from a ruler: ⁶ Fools are put in many high positions, while the rich occupy the low ones. ⁷ I have seen slaves on horseback, while princes go on foot like slaves.

⁸ Whoever digs a pit may fall into it; whoever breaks through a wall may be bitten by a snake. ⁹ Whoever quarries stones may be injured by them; whoever splits logs may be endangered by them. ¹⁰ If the ax is dull and its edge unsharpened, more strength is needed but skill will bring success. ¹¹ If a snake bites before it is charmed, there is no profit for the charmer.

— Ecclesiastes 10:1-11

AS SOLOMON APPROACHES the end of his writings in Ecclesiastes, he gives us in this chapter some words of wisdom concerning real life. And though, in this book, Solomon uncovered the shortcomings of worldly wisdom, nowhere does he advocate folly. On the contrary, Solomon well knew the dangers of folly. He begins: **“As dead flies give perfume a**

bad smell, so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor” (vs. 1). This carries on from the last thought in the previous chapter, where Solomon pointed out: **“Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good”** (Eccl. 9:18). Solomon’s observation is that it is far easier to be destructive than constructive, that it takes far less effort to ruin something than to create it. This, in fact, is a physical law in the universe (the Second Law of Thermodynamics), as well as a behavioral one. A sin can destroy much good; a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor. Knowing this, we must guard our behavior very carefully, especially as Christians. How many times have you heard someone denigrate a Christian, saying something like, “Oh, he claims to be a Christian, but I saw him doing thus and so...”? As Christians, we are representatives of our religion, and are watched closely by a world that looks for every reason to denigrate the Christian religion. “A little folly is enough to produce immense mischief. The unguarded moment—the hasty word—the irritable temper—the rudeness of manner—the occasional slip—the supposed harmless eccentricities—all tend to spoil the fragrance of the ointment. The minor morals of the Christian code require strict attention” [Bridges, 234]. Note also that the better the ointment, the more liable it is to be spoiled by **“dead flies”**. Solomon’s ointment was perfume, so the **“dead flies”** were especially harmful. “The more excellent is the ointment, the sadder it is that so little a thing as dead flies should be allowed to spoil it... The more delicate the perfume, the more easily spoiled is the ointment. Common oil is not so liable to injury. So the higher a man’s religious character is, the more hurt is caused by a sinful folly in him” [JFB, 537].

Solomon continues his observations on wisdom and folly: **“The heart of the wise inclines to the right, but the heart of the fool to the left”** (vss. 2). In that culture, the **“left”**

represented the sinister, and so here, Solomon is telling us that the wise tend to do good, while the foolish tend to do evil. Moreover, a fool's stupidity is evident and can be discerned from afar: **“Even as he walks along the road, the fool lacks sense and shows everyone how stupid he is”** (vs. 3).

Next, Solomon warns against foolish behavior in the presence of authority: **“If a ruler's anger rises against you, do not leave your post; calmness can lay great errors to rest”** (vs. 4). Solomon argues for using self-control, rather than storming off in a sort of righteous huff. Such righteous huffs have at their root usually more pride than righteousness. Self-control, or as Solomon puts it, **“calmness”** in the presence of a ruler's anger is a wise alternative to storming out in a righteous huff. **“Calmness can lay great errors to rest.”** The ruler may be in error or yes, you yourself may be in error. In any case, self-control and calmness are called for, so that the error may be put to rest.

This last verse speaking of rulers and errors must have brought to mind another type of injustice that Solomon had seen rulers commit: **“There is an evil I have seen under the sun, the sort of error that arises from a ruler: Fools are put in many high positions, while the rich occupy the low ones. I have seen slaves on horseback, while princes go on foot like slaves”** (vs. 5–7). Solomon, in the book of Ecclesiastes, has much to say about the wisdom and folly of rulers. He understood the importance of wise rulers on this earth. Our well-being on earth, our prosperity and comfort have much to do with how wise our rulers are. Here, Solomon speaks of foolish favoritism shown by some rulers in choosing who to put in positions of leadership. Not always are the best choices made, and some rulers show their folly by putting **“fools...in many high positions.”** Not many of us are put in the position of being the ruler of a country, but many of us are

put in positions of leadership at our church or workplace. At our workplace, we must resist the temptation to advance others for reasons of foolish favoritism, rather than true ability. And then, “the evil is greatly increased, when the high stations of the Church are bestowed upon unworthy men, passing by men of God, sound in doctrine, and upright in heart.” [Bridges, 242].

Next, Solomon has some words of wisdom concerning the hazards of everyday occupations: **“Whoever digs a pit may fall into it; whoever breaks through a wall may be bitten by a snake. Whoever quarries stones may be injured by them; whoever splits logs may be endangered by them. If the ax is dull and its edge unsharpened, more strength is needed but skill will bring success. If a snake bites before it is charmed, there is no profit for the charmer”** (vss. 8–11). In everyday life, wisdom is especially important at your workplace, because others depend on, and even pay for, your wisdom and skill at work. Wisdom is also important when at work because, as Solomon points out, many occupations are hazardous. In fact, nearly all occupations have hazards to one extent or another, some more than others. Solomon is pointing out the hazards of work, not to discourage you to work, but to underscore the need for wisdom in everyday life.

The hazards enumerated by Solomon can all be avoided by being wise and careful. If one constructs a **“pit”** wisely, and digs it with care, he will not **“fall into it.”** In the Middle East, snakes could be anywhere. Special care needs to be taken when breaking down a wall to avoid being bitten by a snake. There is a proper way to quarry stones and split logs, so as not to be injured by them. Those who are “accident-prone” usually only have themselves to blame. Most accidents, through proper preparation, with wisdom, can be avoided.

One should also take the time to be properly prepared for work. If you are going to need your ax, make sure it is properly

sharpened before you begin work. It takes wise planning to be properly prepared for work. The lazy man skirts planning; the wise man is always prepared for probable eventualities. It takes more time up front to be properly prepared for one's work, but proper preparation saves more time than it takes. And if the wise man should fall into a situation where he must use a dull ax, he realizes that **“more strength is needed”** and that **“skill will bring success.”**

In verse 11, Solomon warns against not having the patience to do a job properly: **“If a snake bites before it is charmed, there is no profit for the charmer”** (vs. 11). If the snake-charmer is too impatient, such that he fails to properly charm the snake, the on-lookers will not put money in his jar. It is nearly always better to allocate time to plan ahead before beginning work, so that a job will be done properly the first time. To rush into a job, without planning first, is to invite failure.

Needless to say, not many of us are snake-charmers or quarrymen or ditch-diggers or log-splitters. Nevertheless, by analogy, we can apply these words of Solomon to our own occupations. I leave meditation upon this as an exercise for the reader.

Foolishness

¹² Words from a wise man's mouth are gracious, but a fool is consumed by his own lips. ¹³ At the beginning his words are folly; at the end they are wicked madness— ¹⁴ and the fool multiplies words. No one knows what is coming—who can tell him what will happen after him? ¹⁵ A fool's work wearies him; he does not know the way to town.

¹⁶ Woe to you, O land, whose king was a servant and whose princes feast in the morning. ¹⁷ Blessed are you, O land, whose king is of noble birth and whose princes eat at a proper time—for strength and not for drunkenness. ¹⁸ If a man is lazy, the rafters sag; if his hands are idle, the house leaks. ¹⁹ A feast is made for laughter, and wine makes life merry, but money is the answer for everything.

²⁰ Do not revile the king even in your thoughts, or curse the rich in your bedroom, because a bird of the air may carry your words, and a bird on the wing may report what you say.

— Ecclesiastes 10:12-20

SOLOMON CONTINUES his words of wisdom concerning real life, as he works his way to the conclusion of the book of Ecclesiastes. In this section, he speaks of foolish speech, and of foolish rulers. First, concerning foolish speech: **“Words from a wise man's mouth are gracious, but a fool is consumed by his own lips. At the beginning his words are folly; at the end they are wicked madness— and the fool**

multiplies words. No one knows what is coming—who can tell him what will happen after him? A fool’s work wears him; he does not know the way to town” (vss. 12–15). Since the main subject of Ecclesiastes is wisdom, it is appropriate that Solomon speak concerning the tongue, for the tongue is the instrument of both wisdom and folly. The speech coming from the tongue is often the primary gauge to prove wisdom or folly.

Solomon begins by comparing the words of the wise to the words of the foolish man: **“Words from a wise man’s mouth are gracious, but a fool is consumed by his own lips.”** The wise man’s words, being **“gracious”**, benefit those around him. The wise man heeds Paul’s words: **“Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen”** (Eph. 4:29). **“How valuable then is the art of enchanting our tongues; bringing them under wholesome discipline, so that they may pacify and instruct, instead of bringing the serpent’s sting!”** [Bridges, 249].

In contrast to the wise man’s words, the foolish man’s words not only do not benefit others, they are destructive to the fool himself: **“...a fool is consumed by his own lips.”** Solomon documents the process of the fool’s self-destruction: **“At the beginning his words are folly; at the end they are wicked madness—and the fool multiplies words. No one knows what is coming—who can tell him what will happen after him? A fool’s work wears him; he does not know the way to town”** (vss. 13–14). At first, a fool’s speech is relatively harmless, maybe even cute, mere **“folly”**. But if the fool remains in his foolish ways, his words become **“wicked madness.”** The fool then aggravates the situation by **“multiplying”** his words.

Solomon gives an example of the fool's lack of wisdom: **“No one knows what is coming—who can tell him what will happen after him?”** The fool is most self-destructive concerning his ultimate destiny. Solomon's example here reflects the foolishness of agnosticism: “We can't know what will happen, so why try?” The agnostic fool erroneously believes that, if there is a God, we cannot know Him or His will. The agnostic fool rejects the Word of God in the Bible, even though there are many proofs of its authenticity.

In the end, the foolish man's words carry over into all aspects of his life: **“A fool's work wearies him; he does not know the way to town”** (vs. 15). Fools make easy things difficult, largely through the attitude they take in doing anything. To the fool, everything is an unreasonable chore. Rather than being edified and strengthened by his work, rather than using his work as an opportunity to grow and become a better person, **“a fool's work wearies him.”** In the end, he cannot do even the easiest things: **“He does not know the way to town.”**

Next, again, Solomon comments on the wisdom and folly of rulers: **“Woe to you, O land, whose king was a servant and whose princes feast in the morning. Blessed are you, O land, whose king is of noble birth and whose princes eat at a proper time—for strength and not for drunkenness”** (vss. 16–17). The importance of good leadership is again noted by Solomon. The land whose king behaves like a **“servant”** is full of woe; the land whose king has a noble bearing is blessed. And then, the woe or blessing (as the case may be) will continue on, for the traits of the kings are passed on to the princes. Moreover, the damage done to a land by poor rulers is lasting: **“If a man is lazy, the rafters sag; if his hands are idle, the house leaks”** (vs. 18). Still further, the character of the ruler affects the moral values of the land: **“A feast is made for laughter, and wine makes life merry, but money is the**

answer for everything” (vs. 19). A foolish, immoral leader and the government he installs will lead to a climate where only material things are important, where joy only comes from feasting and merrymaking; and **“money is the answer for everything.”**

Clearly, given these things, wise, godly leadership is a valuable thing to have. For those of us who live in countries where we can choose our leaders, the onus is upon us to educate ourselves concerning those who are running for election, and to choose wise, godly leaders.

Solomon ends this section with words of wisdom concerning our response to foolish leaders: **“Do not revile the king even in your thoughts, or curse the rich in your bedroom, because a bird of the air may carry your words, and a bird on the wing may report what you say”** (vs. 20). Even though we may see our leaders as foolish and destructive, wisdom dictates that we should be careful what we say about them. Private matters have a way of coming to light, many times mysteriously: **“A bird of the air may carry your words.”** Is there any value to be gained from criticizing our rulers? Praying for our rulers is a much more constructive thing to do. God can change the heart of our rulers, and give them wisdom.

These last words concerning criticism of the king should be applied with respect to anyone in authority over us. For instance, at our workplace, we should not speak ill of our bosses. This is never a constructive thing to do, and such talk behind the boss’s back can poison a job site, and make work miserable for everyone. Your words would be put to much better use by praying for your boss.

Dealing with Uncertainty

¹ Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it again. ² Give portions to seven, yes to eight, for you do not know what disaster may come upon the land.

³ If clouds are full of water, they pour rain upon the earth. Whether a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where it falls, there will it lie. ⁴ Whoever watches the wind will not plant; whoever looks at the clouds will not reap. ⁵ As you do not know the path of the wind, or how the body is formed in a mother's womb, so you cannot understand the work of God, the Maker of all things.

⁶ Sow your seed in the morning, and at evening let not your hands be idle, for you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well.

⁷ Light is sweet, and it pleases the eyes to see the sun.

⁸ However many years a man may live, let him enjoy them all. But let him remember the days of darkness, for they will be many. Everything to come is meaningless.

⁹ Be happy, young man, while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see, but know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment. ¹⁰ So then, banish anxiety from your heart and cast off the troubles of your body, for youth and vigor are meaningless.

IN THIS CHAPTER, Solomon concludes his words of proverbial wisdom. In verses 1 through 6, he advises us how to act in the face of some uncertainties of life. In verse 2, we are told: **“...for you do not know what disaster may come upon the land.”** In light of this uncertainty, Solomon advises: **“Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it again. Give portions to seven, yes to eight”** (vss. 1–2). Given that disaster may strike at any time, Solomon advises liberal generosity—even what some may call foolish generosity.

There are two major opinions concerning the literal meaning of verse 1: **“Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it again.”** Some believe it refers to maritime commerce, advising to send ships selling grain out to many different ports, for some are bound to gain success. Others believe it refers to casting seed on the shallow areas of a river, with the hope that some will take root. Whatever the literal meaning, the figurative lesson seems to be that a daring, seemingly foolish, distribution of your assets will yield returns in the future.

More specifically, these returns will come at a time when you most need them: when disaster strikes. **“Give portions to seven, yes to eight, for you do not know what disaster may come upon the land.”** Note that Solomon advises liberal generosity, giving not just a pittance, but a **“portion.”** Now, Solomon’s advice may be counter-intuitive for some. The natural man would say, “Hoard up your possessions, for you do not know what disaster may come upon the land.” Solomon, however, wisely knows that generosity in good times is the best insurance for making it through bad times. God will honor your generosity. Those who were recipients of your generosity will return the favor in the bad times.

The next uncertainty that Solomon deals with is that of natural phenomena: **“As you do not know the path of the wind, or how the body is formed in a mother’s womb, so you cannot understand the work of God, the Maker of all things”** (vs. 5). In light of this, Solomon warns against inaction due to expectation of what will happen: **“Whoever watches the wind will not plant; whoever looks at the clouds will not reap”** (vs. 4). There are some natural signs that can be easily interpreted: **“If clouds are full of water, they pour rain upon the earth”** (vs. 3). Other signs are more difficult to predict: **“Whether a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where it falls, there will it lie”** (vs. 3). We must be careful not to be overly confident that we can tell from natural signs what will happen, lest we end up doing nothing. Excuses for inaction can always be found. The expected weather will never be just right. “There is no greater impediment of action, than an over-curious observance of time and season” [Bridges, 270].

By the way, I find it interesting that, despite all the advances of science since Solomon’s time, we still **“do not know the path of the wind, or how the body is formed in a mother’s womb”** (vs. 5). The inaccurateness of our weathermen prove that we **“do not know the path of the wind.”** Likewise, “the attempt to comprehend one’s self conquers our understanding. Anatomical experiments may bring out some facts. Questions may be asked. But they can only be answered by the confession of our ignorance— *the way of the spirit*, or the human soul—how it is formed— whence it comes—whether by the immediate creation of God—how it is conveyed into and animates the body—the formation of the body itself—*how the bones* (without which we should only creep as worms) are jointed and *grow in the womb*—the union of the soul with the body—of the immaterial spirit with the gross

corporeal substance—in all this the soul is a mystery to itself. We know not the way” [Bridges, 273].

The last uncertainty that Solomon deals with is that of how things will go for us in our professional endeavors: “... **for you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well**” (vs. 6). His advice in light of this uncertainty is to be diligent and to work hard: “**Sow your seed in the morning, and at evening let not your hands be idle...**” (vs. 6). We here in the twenty-first century have too many ways to vegetate. There are far too many leisure-time diversions. Solomon suggests we put in a full day’s work: “**Sow your seed in the morning...**,” and then, even after that, don’t waste your time, “**...and at evening let not your hands be idle.**”

Solomon ends his proverbial words of wisdom with two sets of verses that seemingly (as is often the case with proverbial wisdom) contradict each other. In the first, he says that the future is meaningless: “**Everything to come is meaningless**” (vs. 8); in the second, he says that the past is meaningless: “**...for youth and vigor are meaningless**” (vs. 10).

It seems to me that the second set of verses (vss. 9–10) is a reappraisal of the first set of verses (vss. 7–8). The reappraisal comes because Solomon realizes that we must not follow the worldly point of view that “**everything to come is meaningless.**” For those of the world, all that exists is in this world; there is nothing beyond this world. For those of the world, “**everything to come is meaningless.**” The worldly man would say, without qualification, “**however many years a man may live, let him enjoy them all**” (vs. 8). Solomon warns, “**But let him remember the days of darkness**”, that is, the days after this life on earth, “**for they will be many.**”

The worldly man's retort to this is: **“Everything to come is meaningless.”**

In the final verses of this chapter, Solomon recasts verses 7 and 8 from a godly perspective: **“Be happy, young man, while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth”** (vs. 9). There is nothing wrong with enjoying the days of youth, enjoying life on this earth. But we should enjoy it, with awareness of what will happen after life on this earth: **“Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see, but know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment”** (vs. 9). Most young people feel as if they are invulnerable. They think death and judgment are far off. They tend to ignore the judgment, and the **“days of darkness.”** They must realize that, whether judgment be near or far, they will be judged for all the deeds they do in this life, **“for all these things God will bring you to judgment.”** Therefore, the best way to live an enjoyable life is to **“banish anxiety from your heart and cast off the troubles of your body”** by living a godly life. Don't be fooled by those of the world. There is great joy and peace to be found in living a godly life. And the joy of a godly life is an untinged and lasting joy. Godly joy brings no regrets. Godly joy keeps the conscience clear. Godly joy yields a lasting smile.

Remember Your Creator

- ¹ Remember your Creator
in the days of your youth,
before the days of trouble come
and the years approach when you will say,
“I find no pleasure in them”—
- ² Before the sun and the light
and the moon and the stars grow dark,
and the clouds return after the rain;
- ³ When the keepers of the house tremble,
and the strong men stoop,
when the grinders cease
because they are few,
and those looking through the windows
grow dim;
- ⁴ When the doors to the street are closed
and the sound of grinding fades;
when men rise up at the sound of birds,
but all their songs grow faint;
- ⁵ When men are afraid of heights
and of dangers in the streets;
when the almond tree blossoms
and the grasshopper drags himself along
and desire no longer is stirred.
Then man goes to his eternal home
and mourners go about the streets.

- ⁶ **Remember Him—**
 before the silver cord is severed,
 or the golden bowl is broken;
 before the pitcher is shattered at the spring,
 or the wheel broken at the well,
⁷ And the dust returns to the ground it came from,
 and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

— Ecclesiastes 12:1-7

SOLOMON HAS FINISHED his examination of worldly wisdom, and now aims to bring his book to a conclusion. Solomon found no satisfying answers through worldly wisdom to the problem of the meaninglessness of life. So, as he concludes his book, he emphasizes man's relationship to his Creator. In this section, he gives us a poem that encourages us, through a poignant description of old age, to **"remember"** our Creator while we are still young.

In my opinion, this poem is one of the best in all literature, its standing as such being enhanced because it is included in God's inspired Word. Like much great poetry, there are a multitude of interpretations, and levels of interpretations, to the word-pictures that Solomon uses. Yet, as we read this poem, even if we do not come to fully understand all the levels of meaning given in these word-pictures, we can intuitively feel that they describe the decline of the body as one grows older, and nears death.

The poem begins with words of advice from Solomon: **"Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, 'I find no pleasure in them'"** (vs. 1). To **"remember"** here means more than just bringing to mind. Action in response to mere remembrance is implied. "When he uses the word 'remember', he is not asking for mere mental

cognizance, for the biblical term ‘to remember’ means much more than simple recall. Besides reflecting on and pondering the work of God in creating each individual and His world, there is the strong implication of action... To remember our Creator calls for decisive action based on recollection and reflection on all that God is and has done for us” [Kaiser, 118]. “For our part, to remember Him is no perfunctory or purely mental act: it is to drop our pretence of self-sufficiency and commit ourselves to Him” [Motyer, 100]. With remembrance of Him, comes remembrance of His Word and His commandments. Remembrance fosters obedience.

It is sad that we have to be reminded to remember our Creator, but such is the case. Thoughts of and gratitude to our Creator should come naturally, especially in the days of youth when joys and pleasures abound. To aid His people in remembrance of Him, God established certain sacraments. For the Israelites, the Passover was established to remind them of God’s miraculous intervention to free them from their taskmasters, the Egyptians. For Christians, Jesus established the sacrament of communion to remind His people of His sacrifice for us (see I Cor. 11:24–25).

Solomon exhorts us to remember our Creator in our youth, **“before the days of trouble come.”** It is important, of course, to know and serve God early in life, but it is more difficult to do so. In our youth, we feel invincible, and so we consider death and our eternal destiny to be far away. Solomon tells us to consider our eternal destiny, to remember our Creator in our youth, so that we would develop a relationship with our Creator, in order that we may have the strength of the Lord, and the hope of eternal life, to endure the **“days of trouble”** that come with old age.

In verses 2 through 5, Solomon uses analogous word-pictures to describe old age. First, he compares old age to the

coming of winter: **“Before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark, and the clouds return after the rain”** (vs. 2). In the next few verses, Solomon seems to be comparing the aging of the body to the decaying of an old house and household: **“When the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men stoop, when the grinders cease because they are few, and those looking through the windows grow dim”** (vs. 3). Many commentators interpret the trembling **“keepers of the house”** and the stooping **“strong men”** as trembling arms and stooping legs, clear signs of aging. The dwindling **“grinders”** seem to indicate the losing of teeth, and then the loss of eyesight seems to be described by **“those looking through the windows grow dim.”** And then things progress so that **“the doors to the street are closed and the sound of grinding fades”** (vs. 4). The **“doors to the street”** closing could be the lips closing over where teeth used to be, as the **“sound of grinding fades”** due to the total lack of teeth.

In old age, sleep is typically not sound: **“When men rise up at the sound of birds, but all their songs grow faint”** (vs. 4). Sleep is disturbed even by the **“sound of birds”**, even though the ability to hear is degraded, as **“all their songs grow faint.”** Old age also brings new fears: **“When men are afraid of heights and of dangers in the streets”** (vs. 5). The unsteadiness of step causes a fear **“of heights”**; the frailty of the body causes a fear of **“dangers in the streets”**, as the aged become more vulnerable. **“When the almond tree blossoms and the grasshopper drags himself along and desire no longer is stirred”** (vs. 5). The blossoming **“almond tree”** is probably referring to the graying of hair. Then, getting around becomes so difficult that it is compared to a wounded grasshopper dragging itself along. Finally, **“desire no longer is stirred”**, which most likely refers to the cessation of sexual

desire. In the end, death comes: **“Then man goes to his eternal home and mourners go about the streets”** (vs. 5).

Solomon again exhorts: **“Remember Him—before the silver cord is severed, or the golden bowl is broken; before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, or the wheel broken at the well”** (vs. 6). The poetic image used here seems to be that of a fountain of life, with the drawing of the water being the drawing of the lifeblood. If we do not remember God in our youth, as previously exhorted, Solomon pleads at least to remember Him before access to the fountain of life is impeded, when **“the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it”** (vs. 7). This last phrase points out that it is worth noting that the body and spirit go different places after death. While the body returns to the ground as dust, the spirit goes to God. Solomon is exhorting us to prepare for this meeting. For those who have **“remembered”** their Creator, who have heeded His Word and accepted the salvation provided by His Son, this meeting will be joyous. For those who have lived their own lives, and ignored their Creator, this meeting is to be feared, just as death is to be feared. Are you afraid of death? Are you afraid to meet God? **“Remember your Creator.”**

The Conclusion of the Matter

⁸ “Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Everything is meaningless!”

⁹ Not only was the Teacher wise, but also he imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. ¹⁰ The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true. ¹¹ The words of the wise are like goads, their collected sayings like firmly embedded nails—given by one Shepherd. ¹² Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them. Of making many books there is no end, and much study wears the body.

¹³ Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole [duty] of man. ¹⁴ For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.

— Ecclesiastes 12:8-14

SOLOMON HERE concludes the book of Ecclesiastes. Most of this book contained Solomon’s observations as he devoted himself “to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven” (Eccl. 1:13). Solomon sums up what he found: “‘Meaningless! Meaningless!’ says the Teacher. ‘Everything is meaningless!’” (vs. 8). “He took an inventory of the world, and all the best things in it. He cast up the account; and the sum total is *vanity*.” [Bridges, 299]. Through human

wisdom, Solomon could find no meaning in life, no rhyme nor reason to life.

Given this, Solomon now goes outside of human wisdom to offer up some words of advice on how one should live. But first, he gives a review of his qualifications: **“Not only was the Teacher wise, but also he imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true”** (vss. 9–10). Solomon’s writings were the result of hard work and research. Since he was the king of a very wealthy nation, Solomon’s experience and resources were vast. Moreover, Solomon not only researched well his subject, he also worked hard to communicate well his conclusions, as he **“searched to find just the right words.”** In summary, Solomon’s work was well researched, and well stated.

In preparation for his concluding statements, the summing up of his wisdom, Solomon reminds us of the merits of the words of a wise man: **“The words of the wise are like goads, their collected sayings like firmly embedded nails—given by one Shepherd”** (vs. 11). First, they are like **“goads.”** Just as the driver of the oxen **“goads”** the stubborn oxen onto the correct path, so does the words of the wise steer us onto the right path in life. Second, they are **“like firmly embedded nails—given by one Shepherd”** (vs. 11). At face value, this is saying that the words of wisdom are sure, strong and true, just like **“firmly embedded nails.”** But here I see a bit of prophetic symbolism. Does not the juxtaposition of the **“nails”** and the **“Shepherd”** remind you of the cross of Christ? And when pondering wisdom, one would always do well to be reminded of the cross of Christ. The value of any human wisdom must be ascertained taking into consideration of the

cross of Christ, and all that it means. With this standard, much human wisdom becomes frivolous.

Solomon warns us to beware of frivolous, superfluous wisdom: **“Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them. Of making many books there is no end, and much study wears the body”** (vs. 12). For wisdom, for meaning, for guidance, turn to the Bible first. **“Be warned”** of worldly wisdom. **“Be warned”** of any advice that does not come from God. Be careful that the things of the world do not distract you from the truth of God. **“Of making many books there is no end, and much study wears the body.”** Do not be wearied by the study of worldly wisdom. Keep your mind sharp for the study of God’s Word.

To conclude, Solomon gives concise guidance on how we all, without exception, should live our lives: **“Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole [duty] of man”** (vs. 13). As Solomon discovered, human wisdom leads us nowhere but to **“meaninglessness”**. Many people ask, “How can I find happiness?” or “How can I find satisfaction in life?” or “How can I find meaning in life?” The answer is given succinctly here, by Solomon: **“Fear God and keep His commandments.”** As Solomon notes: **“This is the whole [duty] of man.”** Actually, he says, **“This is the whole of man”** (the word “duty” was added by translators). I believe the literal translation sums up the advice better: To fear God, and keep His commandments, is the **“whole of man.”** Human wisdom leads to meaninglessness and emptiness; fearing God leads to wholeness.

To fear God means to realize that God is the Creator of all, and that He is in control of everything that occurs in this life, as well as the life to come. “The remarkable thing about fearing God is that, when you fear God, you fear nothing else; whereas,

if you do not fear God, you fear everything else” [Chambers, in Wiersbe, 135]. If one fears God, he will naturally seek to **“keep His commandments.”** Now, we have a loving Creator, and so the commands He gives us are for our own good. “God created life and He alone knows how it should be managed. He wrote a ‘manual of instructions’ and wise is the person who reads and obeys. ‘When all else fails, read the instructions!’” [Wiersbe, 135]. As John told us: **“This is love for God: to obey His commands. And His commands are not burdensome”** (I John 5:3).

Solomon concludes the book with an overriding reason for following his last piece of advice: **“For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil”** (vs. 14). After we die, we will be judged. There is no way around this. Man is **“destined to die once”**, and **“after that, to face judgment”** (Heb. 9:27). We will be judged by God, through Jesus Christ. Knowing this, it makes sense to **“Fear God, and keep His commandments.”**

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