

CHASING THE WIND – LIFE OF FUTILITY

COMMENTARY ON BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES

APART FROM THE FEAR OF GOD AND AN ETERNAL PERSPECTIVE, LIFE IS A FUTILE EXERCISE OF CHASING THE WIND

Paul Apple (2008, Rev. March 2024)

For each section:

- Thesis statement ... to focus on the big idea
- Analytical outline ... to guide the understanding
- Devotional questions ... to encourage life application
- Representative quotations ... to stimulate deeper insight

Ecclesiastes 2:17 – *“everything is futility and striving after wind..”*

This data file is the sole property of the author Paul Apple. However, permission is granted for others to use and distribute these materials for the edification of others under two simple conditions:

- 1) The contents must be faithfully represented including credit to the author where appropriate.
- 2) The material must be distributed freely without any financial remuneration.

This data file may not be copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Paul Apple. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to:

Paul Apple, 304 N. Beechwood Ave., Baltimore MD 21228.

www.bibleoutlines.com

paulgapple@gmail.com

BACKGROUND NOTES

GENERAL

David Fairchild - Many in our day are looking for a **purpose to exist**. A purpose profound enough, big enough, consuming enough, that it grabs us by the shirt collar and demands our attention. Many are looking for a reason for living that will plumb the depths of our passions and sustain us until we breathe our last. That's why this book of Ecclesiastes is such a **helpful pre-evangelism tool** to use with our unsaved friends. I encourage you to seek out someone with whom you can share a copy of this book (**and Swindoll's helpful guide**) and discuss its perspective. But I find that too often Solomon's perspective of futility mirrors my own thinking as a believer .. how can that be? We all need to be reminded of the vast difference between the worldview of humanism vs one who is united to Jesus Christ and living for eternity. Solomon's Technique: literary pessimism. It's a negative argument to demonstrate a profound truth. To learn the true meaning of life ... first view life apart from God – see it in all of its futility ... then the layer of God-connectiveness can be added and it will mean something.

Wilkinson and Boa: Ecclesiastes is a profound book recording an intense search by the Preacher (traditionally understood to be Solomon) for meaning and satisfaction in life—in spite of the inequities inconsistencies, and seeming absurdities of life on earth. The key word in Ecclesiastes is vanity, the futile emptiness of trying to make sense out of life apart from God. Looked at “*under the sun*” (**Pr 8:17**), Life's pursuits lead only to frustration. Power, prestige, pleasure—nothing can fill the God-shaped void in man's life—except God Himself But seen from His perspective, life becomes meaningful and fulfilling Skepticism and despair melt away when each day is viewed as a gift from God. (*Talk Thru the Bible*)

G Campbell Morgan: Ecclesiastes is an inspired confession of failure and pessimism, when God is excluded, when man lives under the sun, and forgets the larger part, which is always over the sun, the eternal and abiding things. If you want to know what a man of great privilege, and of great learning and great wisdom can come to, read this record of a man who has put God out of count in his actual life.

Iain Provan: It is best to be frank from the outset: **Ecclesiastes is a difficult book**. It is written in a form of Hebrew different from much of the remainder of the Old Testament, and it regularly challenges the reader of the original as to grammar and syntax. The interpretation even of words that occur frequently in the book is often unclear and a matter of dispute, partly because there is frequent wordplay in the course of the argument. The argument is itself complex and sometimes puzzling and has often provoked the charge of inconsistency or outright self-contradiction.

Douglas Miller: The Relevance of Ecclesiastes

In varying degrees, all people face the issues that are addressed by Ecclesiastes: lack of satisfaction or sense of purpose, financial catastrophe, personal tragedy, societal injustice,

fear, frustration, chance, uncertainty, physical suffering, old age, and death. The book has proved to be timeless, continually valuable for persons in different locations, life situations, and cultures. Though it is partly accurate to acknowledge that Ecclesiastes is a difficult book and not for everyone, it is better said that sooner or later the message of this book will become both relevant and essential for each person's life.

In important ways the book faces the “dark side” of faith, issues that are often troublesome for those who seek to affirm the goodness, power, and love of God. Indeed, the author—in Hebrew *Qohelet* (pronounced ko-HELL-it), often translated as the Teacher or the Preacher—has much to say about the nature and activity of the Deity; the name God (*'elohim*) is one of the most frequent terms in the book, occurring forty times. The author essentially affirms the orthodox biblical portrait of God, yet he does not hesitate in ascribing to God some of the pain and inscrutabilities of life.

Many of his concerns are similar to those of Job, but unlike Job, Qohelet speaks only about God and never to God. The Teacher's book complements the book of Job because he sympathetically addresses people of faith who share many of Job's complaints; we could say he was the kind of friend that Job had in mind. He understands those who are disappointed with God, whether pondering in silence or crying out in pain; whether covertly cynical or unafraid to vent their anger openly to God.

Qohelet, with his relentless questions, sometimes scathing criticisms, and refusal to accept simplistic or comfortable answers, has also been a welcome traveling companion for those outside the faith who respect his integrity. For many, ours is a cold, lonely, and silent world. The struggle to determine life's meaning and purpose is evident across the millennia of human experience. If anything, it has become even more acute in recent times, leading to extreme confusion about personal identity and unsatisfying pursuits of intimacy in virtual communities. According to **Phillip Adams**, the famous dictum of Descartes—“I think, therefore I am”—has today become “I think, therefore I haven't a clue” (cited in **Curkpatrick**: 286). With directness and candor, the Teacher takes on identity traps of concern to all people, such as individualism, materialism, hedonism, workaholism, and the feeling of insignificance.

AUTHORSHIP, TITLE, DATE

Ted D Manby: Authorship:

The biblical book of Ecclesiastes may well be the most difficult book to understand and interpret in the Bible. It has been the source of debates for thousands of years. Yet, it is still part of the recognized canon of Scripture endorsed by both Jews and Christians.

(1) There is no known questioning of Solomon being the author of the book prior to the Reformation. Even ancient rabbis, who had doubts about the book's value and place in the canon, had to concede that it was Scripture because Solomon was its author in the tenth century B.C.

(2) After the “Enlightenment,” authorship became part of the debate on this work.

(3) It appears that the entirety of those who embrace historical-critical methods of interpretation consider Solomon’s authorship of this book to be equal to “the flat earth” theory.

David Malick: Authorship

Until the rise of literary and historical criticism during the Enlightenment (17th century) Solomonic authorship of Ecclesiastes was generally accepted.

- 1) The Jews considered Ecclesiastes to be inspired
 - a) It was included in the Mishnah and the Talmud
 - b) It was included in the LXX
 - c) It was not doubted by Josephus

- 2) It was approved in the early Christian era:
 - a) It was not doubted by the translation of Aquila
 - b) It was not doubted by the translation of Symmachus
 - c) It was not doubted by the translation of Theodotion
 - d) It was included in the catalog of Melito, bishop of Sardis (c. AD 170)

John MacArthur:

Title

The English title, **Ecclesiastes**, comes from the Greek and Latin translations of Solomon’s book. The LXX, the Greek translation of the OT, used the Greek term *ekklēsiastēs* for its title. It means “*preacher*,” derived from the word *ekklēsia*, translated “*assembly*” or “*congregation*” in the NT. Both the Greek and Latin versions derive their titles from the Hebrew title, *Qoheleth*, which means “*one who calls or gathers*” the people. It refers to the one who addresses the assembly; hence, the preacher (cf. **1:1, 2, 12; 7:27; 12:8–10**).

Author and Date:

The autobiographical profile of the book’s writer **unmistakably points to Solomon**. Evidence abounds such as:

- 1) the titles fit Solomon, “*son of David, king in Jerusalem*” (**1:1**) and “*king over Israel in Jerusalem*” (**1:12**);
- 2) the author’s moral odyssey chronicles Solomon’s life (**1 Kin. 2–11**); and
- 3) the role of one who “*taught the people knowledge*” and wrote “*many proverbs*” (**12:9**) corresponds to his life.

All point to Solomon, the son of David, as the author.

Once Solomon is accepted as the author, the **date** and **occasion** become clear. Solomon was writing, probably in his latter years (no later than ca. 931 B.C.), primarily to warn the young people of his kingdom, without omitting others. He warned them to avoid walking through life on the path of human wisdom; he exhorted them to live by the revealed wisdom of God (**12:9–14**).

Walter Kaiser: Whether Ecclesiastes is the work of more than one writer is, of course, exactly the point that needs to be debated. What is the evidence for multiple authorship of the text? None of our present Hebrew textual traditions suggests any division of labor; instead, the unity of the document is everywhere attested by all Hebrew manuscripts, and the absence of any good reason to suppose that the change in personal pronouns is convincing evidence, in and of itself, for multiple authorship.

Van Parunak: Authorship and Date

1. Not named explicitly.
2. Description of author fits Solomon, son of David: **1:1, 13** (emphasis on wisdom); **12:9, 10**, cf. **1 Kings 4:29-34**
3. The writer speaks of the Preacher in the third person: **1:2; 7:27; 12:9, 10**.
4. Language is strange
 - a) Lots of late elements; very unlike Proverbs or Canticles.
 - b) Lots of stuff that doesn't fit with late literature either.
5. Conclude that **the thought is Solomon's**. May be from his hand directly, though the text does not claim this; may be the work of another author of unknown date, based on Solomon's thoughts.

Alternate View:

Allen Ross: Author

Over the course of the last two centuries, however, the Solomonic identification has been nearly completely abandoned. The primary reasons for this move are:

- the recognition that the Hebrew of the book is much later than that which would have come from the period of Solomon and the early monarchy
- Qohelet's claim in **1:16** to have increased in wisdom "*more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me*" (lit., "*more than all who ruled,*" though David was the only king to have ruled in Jerusalem before Solomon; it is unlikely that this reference would be to the earlier Jebusite rulers of Jerusalem)
- the nonappearance of the name Solomon in the book, when his name had already been attached to Proverbs and the Song of Songs

Today few scholars still maintain Solomonic authorship for Ecclesiastes. Probably the majority position through much of the last century has been that an Israelite sage wrote the book as a skeptical, pessimistic, wisdom treatise and adopted a Solomonic persona to give it a measure of authority. Then a second person added an introductory title (**1:1**) and epilogue (**12:9–11**) to the book. A third person added a second epilogue (**12:12–14**) as an orthodox corrective to make the book more acceptable. . .

Qohelet, then, is a **composite character** behind whom stand both Solomon and Hezekiah, the two bookends of the royal wisdom tradition in ancient Israel—two kings who, in spite of their connection to wisdom, made unwise decisions. Thus, in addition to **Longman's** thesis that the book is a warning against "speculative, doubting wisdom in Israel," I argue that the book also serves as a censure of the Davidic dynasty for allowing

this pessimistic, skeptical teaching to stand alongside Torah and the instruction to “*fear God and keep his commandments*” (12:13). . .

I take the position that there are two voices in the book—that of Qohelet, who is the speaker in 1:12–12:7, and that of the frame-narrator, who is actually the author of the entire book, in 1:1–11 and 12:8–14 (briefly interrupting as well at 7:27). Qohelet, a literary creation of the frame-narrator, serves as a **foil** to provide a contrast for the author’s message. **That message is:** Beware the dangers of pessimistic skeptical wisdom thought; rather, fear God and keep his commands, “*for this is all there is to man*” (a more literal rendering of 12:13). In other words, this is where the meaning of life resides.

Knut Martin Heim: Author

In the title of the book, its author is described as son of David and king in Jerusalem. This suggests Solomon, but the alias **Qoheleth** suggests an **anonymous** ‘royal’ figure from the line of David whose name and actual identity are deliberately obscured. This would have been obvious to the live audiences who attended Qoheleth’s oral performances, while later readers of the book soon neglected the pseudonym and latched on to the royal aspects of his description. The debate over the identity of the author of the book of Ecclesiastes is thus a recent one. From antiquity until the eighteenth century, virtually everybody assumed that the author was Solomon, the son of David, who was king over all Israel in Jerusalem from 971 to 931 bc. This virtual unanimity is surprising because the author is not named as Solomon, in contrast with the titles of Proverbs and Song of Songs. Very few scholars today still support Solomonic authorship, on the basis that 1:1 and 1:12 – 2:26 are most naturally read this way (Longman 1998: 3). Such arguments overlook the rhetorical and ironical quality of these statements, which this commentary will demonstrate. Furthermore, the language of the book belongs to a later stage in Israel’s history, well after the exile (Delitzsch 1975: 190), and any allusions to or similarities with Solomon end after **chapter 2**, while passages that do refer to kingship later in the book (e.g. 4:1–3; 5:8–9; 8:2–9; 10:20) are critical of royalty.

BACKGROUND, SETTING, GENRE

Chuck Swindoll: Background

With Solomon as the author of the book, we know it had to have been written sometime before his death in 931 BC. The content of Ecclesiastes reflects someone looking back on a life that was long on experience but short on lasting rewards. As king, he had the opportunity and resources to pursue the rewards of wisdom, pleasure, and work in and of themselves. Yet the world-weary tone of the writing suggests that late in life, he looked back on his folly with regret, pointing us to a better, simpler life lived in light of God’s direction (**Ecclesiastes 12:13–14**).

Douglas Sean O’Donnell: Genre

It is **wisdom literature**. This is its genre. It is not an epistle (like Galatians), a lawbook (like Leviticus), or an apocalyptic revelation (like Revelation). And as a book of wisdom, it shares characteristics found in Proverbs, Job, and the Song of Songs. There is a

plethora of poetry. There are piles of parallelisms (synonymous, antithetic, synthetic, and inverted), as well as many metaphors, similes, hyperboles, alliterations, assonances, and other wonderful wordplays. There might even be onomatopoeia. There are proverbs. There are short narratives with pointed, parable-like endings. There are practical admonitions. There are rhythmic-quality refrains. There are rhetorical questions. There are shared key terms, such as wisdom, folly, and my son. There are shared concepts, such as the fear of God. And as is true of much other biblical wisdom literature, it was written by or about or by and about Solomon, the Old Testament's ultimate wisdom sage (**1 Kings 4:29–34**).

Craig Bartholomew: Genre

At a micro level a variety of different genres can be identified in Ecclesiastes:

1. **The proverb.** Examples are **1:15, 18**, and the multiple proverbs in **7:1–12**. Their form, generally containing parallelisms, and their pithy content identify these sayings as proverbs. A special group of proverbs in Ecclesiastes are the “better-than” sayings (e.g., **2:13; 7:1, 2, 5, 8**).
2. **Autobiographical sections.** Several sections in Ecclesiastes are presented as reports from Qohelet as he reflects on his journey (**1:12–2:26; 3:10–4:16; 5:13–6:12**). A major characteristic of these sections is the first-person narration.
3. **Reflection** arising from personal observation and experience. This is the dominant literary form in Ecclesiastes and is found throughout the book. It includes subgenres such as the proverb. The reflection is closely related to the autobiographical nature of Qohelet's journey and thus could be included under 2 above.
4. **Poems.** Most agree that **1:4–11; 3:1–8; and 11:7–12:8** are poems. It is unclear whether **1:4–11** is to be attributed to the narrator or to Qohelet; in all probability it is part of the frame introducing Qohelet's thought that starts in **1:12**.
5. **Rhetorical questions.** These are common throughout Ecclesiastes (**1:3; 2:2, 15, 19, 25; 3:9, 21, 22; 4:8, 11; 5:6, 11, 16 [5, 10, 15]; 6:8, 11; 7:13, 16, 18; 8:1, 4, 7; 10:14**).
6. **Quotations.** Gordis drew attention to Qohelet's use of quotations. A proverb may, for example, be quoted to support Qohelet's argument or as a basis for deconstruction as in **7:1a**. There can be no doubt that Qohelet does use quotations in his explorations, but the attempt to determine these with any precision is inconclusive. Although Gordis's attention to this issue helped move studies of Ecclesiastes toward a consideration of it as literature, the search for quotations is redolent of the source-critical attempt to get behind the text, a quest that is inevitably speculative and minimalist in terms of any probable conclusions. For example, the poem on time in **3:1–8** may be a quotation, but it could also be a poem by Qohelet. We simply cannot be sure. The interpreter needs to be able to identify the different views Qohelet articulates and how he interacts with them. Excessive concern with whether he is quoting a source is speculative and detracts from the primary exegetical task.
7. **The example story.** Qohelet recounts anecdotes to support his argument (e.g., **4:13–16** and **9:13–16**).
8. **The woe oracle** (e.g., **4:10** and **10:16**).

9. **The blessing** (e.g., **10:17**).
10. **Commands and prohibitions**. With its numerous imperatives, **5:1–7** is a good example of this subgenre.

PURPOSE OF WRITING / BIG IDEA

Chuck Swindoll: Big Idea

Ecclesiastes, like much of life, represents a journey from one point to another. Solomon articulated his starting point early in the book: “*Vanity of vanities! All is vanity*” (**Ecclesiastes 1:2**), indicating the utter futility and meaninglessness of life as he saw it. Nothing made sense to him because he had already tried any number of remedies—pleasure, work, and intellect—to alleviate his sense of feeling lost in the world.

However, even in the writer’s desperate search for meaning and significance in life, God remained present. For instance, we read that God provides food, drink, and work (**2:24**); both the sinner and the righteous person live in God’s sight (**2:26**); God’s deeds are eternal (**3:14**); and God empowers people to enjoy His provision (**5:19**). Ultimately, the great truth of Ecclesiastes lies in the acknowledgment of God’s ever-present hand on our lives. Even when injustice and uncertainty threaten to overwhelm us, we can trust Him and follow after Him (**12:13–14**). . .

3 Temptations addressed in Ecclesiastes:

- 1) The sensual lure of something better tomorrow robs us of the joys offered today.
- 2) The personal temptation to escape is always stronger than the realization of its consequences.
- 3) The final destination, if God is absent from the scene, will not satisfy.

David Malick:

Big Idea

The futility of life need not lead people to despair because God has given good gifts for them to enjoy as well as purpose in life through fearing and obeying him.

Purposes:

1. To reach unbelievers through a “**cultural apologetic**” so that they might straighten out their thinking, acting, values and prepare for their eternal destiny
2. To explain for unbelievers and believers that **meaning in life** is not to be found in life (which is unintelligible and hostile--meaningless, vanity), but in the God who gives life
3. To emphasize the central theme that an understanding of life begins with the **fear of God**

Sidney Greidanus: Big Idea

Fear God in order to turn a vain, empty life into a meaningful life which will enjoy God’s gifts.

Jeffrey Meyers: Big Idea

“*True wisdom*” that Ecclesiastes offers us is to fear God and keep his commandments, to receive and use the gifts of God with joy and gratitude.

Michael Eaton: Big Idea

Ecclesiastes defends the life of faith in a generous God by pointing to the grimness of the alternative.

Van Parunak: Big Idea

There are two errors we can make as believers in a fallen world. Qohelet warns us against both of them.

1. Danger 1: Pollyanna.

- a) The world is fallen, and the effects of that fall surround us on every side. Qohelet has the courage to look the fall squarely in the face, and "tell it like it is."
- b) Benefits of this honesty:
 - 1) Cf. our Lord, weeping over Jerusalem. If we don't recognize how bad it is, we will never be moved to help.
 - 2) Squelches pride, when we see how futile our own efforts are.
 - 3) Makes us more eager for the Lord's return; helps us to "set our affection on things above, not on things on the earth."

2. Danger 2: Pessimism and depression.

- a) Recognize that God is sovereign, and he is using this fallen world for his purposes.
- b) Enjoy what he does give us, as a gift from his hand, intended for our pleasure and refreshment.

Charles Ryrie: The message of the book may be stated in the form of three propositions:

- (1) When you look at life with its seemingly aimless cycles (**1:4ff.**) and inexplicable paradoxes (**4:1; 7:15; 8:8**), you might conclude that all is futile, since it is impossible to discern any purpose in the ordering of events.
- (2) Nevertheless, life is to be enjoyed to the fullest, realizing that it is the gift of God (**3:12-13; 3:22; 5:18-19; 8:15; 9:7-9**).
- (3) The wise man will live his life in obedience to God, recognizing that God will eventually judge all men (**3:16-17; 12:14**).

BasicTheology.com: The same themes that at first glance may appear incongruent, such as vanity and enjoyment of simple pleasures, meaninglessness and wisdom, the hopelessness of death and purpose in life, upon careful, contextualized investigation work together to serve the author's purpose of directing the reader to God for ultimate meaning in life. Ecclesiastes takes the reader through the highs and lows of life on this earth, from hedonism to nihilism, finally arriving at a conclusion that is perfectly at home within Old Testament theology: **fear God and keep His commandments.**

Justin Holomb:

Overall Purpose

Helps Christians understand the necessity of fearing God in a fallen and frustrating world, pointing us to God's mission to restore creation from the curse through the power of the gospel.

Ecclesiastes Is Unique and Provocative

The book of Ecclesiastes is unique and provocative as it states powerfully and repeatedly that everything is meaningless (“*vanity*”) without a proper focus on God. The book reveals the necessity of fearing God in a fallen and frequently confusing and frustrating world.

Humans seek **lasting significance**, but no matter how great their accomplishments, humans are unable to achieve the lasting significance they desire. What spoils life, according to Ecclesiastes, is the attempt to get more out of life—out of work, pleasure, money, food, and knowledge—than life itself can provide. This is not fulfilling and leads to weariness, which is why the book begins and ends with the exclamation “*All is vanity.*” This refrain is repeated throughout the entire book.

No matter how wise or rich or successful one may be, one cannot find meaning in life apart from God. In Ecclesiastes, the fact that “*all is vanity*” should drive all to fear God, whose work endures forever. God does what he will, and all beings and all of creation stand subject to him. Rather than striving in futile attempts to gain meaning on our own terms, what really is significant is taking pleasure in God and his gifts and being content with what little life has to offer and what God gives. In Ecclesiastes, while God is in the horizon of the Preacher's thinking, God is not brought in as a solution to the meaninglessness with which the Preacher is struggling.

Christ rescues us from the vanity of the world by subjecting himself to the same vanity of the world.

Ecclesiastes Prepares Us for God's Rescue Mission

Ecclesiastes describes the meaninglessness of living without God. In creation, we see that God created the world and he called it “*good.*” But despite this original goodness, humanity fell into sin and all creation was subjected to the curse of God. This brought into the world meaninglessness, vanity, violence, and frustration. Graciously, God did not leave his creation to an endless round of meaninglessness. God's response to sin is to redeem, renew, restore, and recreate. The Bible traces this history of salvation from beginning to end. While this starts immediately after the Fall, God's rescue mission culminates in Jesus Christ, who has rescued us from the meaninglessness of the curse that plagues us. **Christ rescues us from the vanity of the world** by subjecting himself to the same vanity of the world. He who is God chose to subject himself to the conditions of the world under covenant curse in order to rescue the world from the effects of that curse.

Douglas Miller: Qohelet is best understood as a **realistic counselor** with an insightful strategy to guide those who are frustrated by and discouraged about life. In the context of

a world often vexing, unsatisfying, and corrupt (i.e., vapor in all its dimensions), Qohelet sees and describes the harsh realities. His candor is a significant example of the honesty of biblical faith. He sympathizes with those who struggle to make sense of it all, and he probes and raises questions to challenge inadequate ways of responding. Amid his notebook of musings, he also provides counsel based on his understanding of God and God's relationship to creation.

First, Qohelet urges readers to acknowledge and accept the **vapor nature of all human experience**:

- a world that appears predictively repetitive, unpredictably tragic, purposeless, full of risks, and subject to chance;
- human finitude and death;
- the uncertainty of what comes after death;
- the elusiveness of success and the persistence of injustice;
- the presence of goodness and joy; and thus
- the pervasiveness of mystery.

He challenges readers to **reject bad assumptions** in responding to these realities:

- hard work and wisdom can guarantee success;
- establishing a proud legacy is a way of cheating death;
- pleasure, material gain, and obsession with productivity will bring satisfaction;
- foolishness is a viable alternative to wisdom; and
- through religiosity God can be manipulated to one's advantage.

Finally, Qohelet invites readers to **adopt good ways of responding to life's realities**:

- accepting one's divinely given portion in life;
- cultivating contentment, community, generosity toward others, advocacy of the oppressed, discretion, and prudence toward those in power;
- being diligent and taking appropriate risks;
- pursuing wisdom as valuable though vulnerable;
- enjoying God's gifts of work and pleasure (food, drink, rest, one's spouse), especially in one's youth; and
- rethinking one's faith in order to revere God, who is sovereign and mysterious.

In this way human beings can make the most of life before the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath returns to God who gave it (**Eccl 12:7**).

David Hubbard: Four Interpretative Assumptions

1) Assumption One: Ecclesiastes Has Crisis as Its Motivation

The crisis is the product of at least two influences: the Preacher's **historical setting** and the Preacher's **intellectual climate**. The crisis can be understood as the vacuum caused by the seeming absence of God in Koheleth's time and the overarching arrogance of religious teachers who sought to fill that vacuum with simple formulas for happiness and mechanical explanations of divine behavior. To point out the nature of the crisis and to suggest the way beyond it, the Preacher taught and wrote his book.

2) Assumption Two: Ecclesiastes Has Continuity as Its Method

The Preacher's means of arguing were identical to those of the conventional teachers. Virtually every literary form that he uses [**Reflections, Summary appraisals, Proverbs, Comparisons, Admonitions, Parables, Allegory, Rhetorical questions, Numerical Sayings, Beatitude and woe cry**] is found in the books of Proverbs and Job before him, and the apocryphal writings of Sirach and Wisdom (not to speak of the New Testament words of Jesus and James) after him.

3) Assumption Three: Ecclesiastes Has Conflict as Its Mood

A recent suggestion for labeling the opposing sides in this conflict is apt: it is a contest between Koheleth's "protesting wisdom" and the "dogmatized wisdom" of the conventional teachers (Loader, *Polar Structures*, p. 123). If this analysis of the polarities—the placing of opposing views side by side in a dozen or so themes and an equal number of literary forms—is even half right, the conflict is the core of the book.

4) Assumption Four: Ecclesiastes Has the Canon as Its Mooring

Ecclesiastes' acceptance in the Hebrew Bible was not altogether smooth. Some rabbis were as puzzled by its contents as we are. But just decades before the Christian era, Hillel's positive verdict carried the day over Shammai's doubts. Questions lingered among Christians for at least four centuries. But since then Koheleth's work has sat securely among the books of wisdom preserved in the Scripture and wants to be seen, as do all other books, in terms of what it offers to the faith and life of God's people.

Warren Wiersbe: Our Jewish friends read Ecclesiastes at the annual **Feast of Tabernacles**, a joyful autumn festival of harvest. It fits! For Solomon wrote, "*There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour. This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God*" (**Eccl. 2:24**). Even the apostle Paul (who could hardly be labeled a hedonist) said that God gives to us "*richly all things to enjoy*" (**1 Tim. 6:17**).

KEY WORDS, MAJOR THEMES AND THEOLOGY

David Hubbard: Creation, time, meaning, work, profit, piety, death, joy, grace, freedom, vanity—these are his **themes**. Nothing trivial or trite among them. To understand any would exhaust the wisdom of Solomon. In fact Koheleth reached back to Solomon's experiences of wisdom, pleasure, and achievement and used them as the core of his curriculum. And they make an incredible learning experience. . .

Few Old Testament writings have produced such a flurry of opinions as to how they should be read, and what they mean, as Ecclesiastes. The ancient Preacher blazed a trail of **obscurity in communication** that too many of us as his modern progeny have followed. Trying to puzzle out the major themes of his message is a task tantalizing, frustrating, and important. Coping with his style, weighing his contradictions, tracing his arguments, deciphering his imagery, trimming his exaggerations—those tasks have vexed

yet challenged all who have unrolled the Teacher's brief scroll. The book lies before us like a **chest full of puzzles**, testing us afresh each time we open the lid. Partial success is all we can hope for, but that's the case in most of what we do. . .

Three major issues confront us readers as we attempt to discover the gist of Koheleth's message. The first is the **meaning of the theme word—hebel**, variously translated vanity, futility, meaninglessness, mystery, enigma, absurdity, irony, brevity, and the like. Just how pessimistic is the word. . .

Hebel stands more for human inability to grasp the meaning of God's way than for an ultimate emptiness in life. It speaks of human limitation and frustration caused by the vast gap between God's knowledge and power and our relative ignorance and impotence. The deepest issues of lasting profit, of enlightening wisdom, of ability to change life's workings, of confidence that we have grasped the highest happiness—all these are beyond our reach in Koheleth's view.

The second major issue to be grappled with in our reading of Ecclesiastes is how much the Preacher is stating his own opinions and how much is he refuting those of his colleagues. . .

The third major issue to be tackled is the relative emphasis to be placed on the **two dominant formulas** which stitch the book together: the vanity verdict and the alternative conclusion which urges Koheleth's students to take daily joy in God's ordinary gifts of food, drink, work, and love. The vanity verdict seems to be the dominant note. It occurs more frequently, and, above all, it is the sweeping conclusion which sounds the book's theme at the beginning (**1:2**) and summarizes it at the end (**12:8**). The alternative conclusion occurs six times and is reinforced by other notes of joy (e.g., **11:9–10**).

In a sense these two motifs, **vanity** and **joy**, set the rhythm for the Preacher. They are more complementary than contradictory. Each must be heard in terms of the other. Vanity marks the limits of our ability to understand and change the way life works. It salutes in its gloomy way the sovereignty of God whose mysteries are to us unfathomable. **Joy** brings relief in the midst of frustration. It announces that God's puzzling clouds of sovereignty carry a silver lining of grace. That grace, expressed in the daily supply of our basic needs, gives us freedom to fear God, not to hate God.

Vanity is the main theme as tone, style, and frequency dictate. It had to be, because Koheleth's countrymen were in such dire danger of blaspheming God and perverting their humanity by arrogance. Koheleth shouted vanity loudly and pounded it heavily to get their attention. But his mission was more than negative. It had crucial lessons to teach about joy, grace, obedience, and gratitude. Pointedly, repeatedly, and winsomely it taught them. Faithful communicators of biblical reality will do the same.

John MacArthur: The key word is “*vanity*,” which expresses the futile attempt to be satisfied apart from God. This word is used 37 times expressing the many things hard to understand about life. All earthly goals and ambitions when pursued as ends in

themselves produce only emptiness. Paul was probably echoing Solomon's dissatisfaction when he wrote, "... *the creation was subjected to futility*" (Solomon's "vanity"; **Rom. 8:19–21**). Solomon's experience with the effects of the curse (see **Gen. 3:17–19**) led him to view life as "*chasing after the wind*."

Bruce Hurt: Key Words:

- **God** - 41x/36v - Eccl 1:13; 2:24, 26; 3:10-11, 13-15, 17-18; 5:1-2, 4, 6f, 18-20; 6:2; 7:13-14, 18, 26, 29; 8:2, 12-13, 15, 17; 9:1, 7; 11:5, 9; 12:7, 13-14
- **Under the sun** - 29x in 27v - Eccl 1:3, 9, 14; 2:11, 17-20, 22; 3:16; 4:1, 3, 7, 15; 5:13, 18; 6:1, 12; 8:9, 15, 17; 9:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 10:5
- **Vanity** - 22x/16v - Eccl 1:2, 14; 2:11, 15, 19, 21, 23, 26; 3:19; 4:4, 7-8, 16; 5:10; 6:2; 12:8
- **Wise** - 24x/23v - Eccl 2:14-16, 19; 4:13; 6:8; 7:4-5, 7, 16, 19, 23; 8:1, 5, 17; 9:1, 11, 15, 17; 10:2, 12; 12:9, 11
- **Wisdom** - 27x/24v - Eccl 1:13, 16-18; 2:9, 12-13, 21, 26; 7:10-12, 19, 23, 25; 8:1, 16; 9:10, 13, 15-16, 18; 10:1, 10
- **Fool (ish)** - 25x/23v - Eccl 2:14-16, 19; 4:5, 13; 5:1, 3-4; 6:8; 7:4-6, 9, 17, 25; 9:17; 10:1-3, 12, 14-15
- **Righteous (ness)** - 11x/9v - Eccl 3:16f; 5:8; 7:15f, 20; 8:14; 9:1f (cf Justice - Ec 3:16, 5:8)
- **Wicked (ness)** - 10v/8v - Eccl 3:16f; 7:15, 17; 8:10, 14; 9:2; 10:13
- **Evil** - 20x/18v - Eccl 2:21; 4:3; 5:1, 13, 16; 6:1; 7:25; 8:3, 8, 11-14; 9:3, 12; 10:5; 12:1, 14
- **Labor*** - 26x/19v - Eccl 2:10f, 18-22, 24; 3:13; 4:4, 6, 8f; 5:15, 18f; 6:7; 8:17; 9:9
- **Toil** - 6x/6v - Eccl 3:9; 5:16, 18; 8:15; 9:9; 10:15
- **Rich*** - 8x/8v - Eccl 4:8; 5:12-14, 19; 6:2; 10:6, 20 (Wealth - 4x/4v - Eccl 1:16; 5:19; 6:2; 9:11)

Raymond Ortlund, Jr.: The key Hebrew word in Ecclesiastes, appearing for the first time in **1:2**, is translated in various ways in our English Bibles: "vanity," "meaninglessness," and "futility." But this key Hebrew word simply means "*breath*." Like the steamy breath we exhale on a cold night, Solomon is saying, this mortal life just doesn't last. We are wisps of air, and all our accomplishments do not offset our futility. Indeed, our accomplishments keep proving our futility, as Ecclesiastes will show.

Knut Martin Heim: Opinions on the theology of the book of Ecclesiastes differ wildly. On the one hand, a significant minority opinion maintains that the book's protagonist is an orthodox teacher with a positive view of life (see the literature listed in **Longman** 1998: 31 n. 119). On the other hand, a strong majority position advocates that Qoheleth is a disillusioned sceptic who challenges orthodox beliefs. 'Commentators remain polarized as to whether Ecclesiastes is fundamentally positive, affirming joy, or basically pessimistic' (**Bartholomew** 2009: 93). The interpretation of Ecclesiastes as **resistance literature in the form of political satire** resolves this scholarly impasse.

The sociopolitical situation of the Jewish struggle for the survival of their socioreligious identity under foreign rule leads to a rhetorical strategy that fully affirms the illusory nature of life under the sun, that is, **under foreign rule**, while at the same time promoting a positive, hopeful outlook on life conducted within the trajectory of Jewish religion and tradition.

Qoheleth's instruction operates on two levels of meaning. On the surface level, he presents a theoretical debate on the purpose of life. On a deeper level of meaning, he aims to subvert the corrupting influence of foreign rule.

For those in the know, then, his message is not an abstract, disembodied philosophical tract, but one that is deeply rooted in their own painful experience under foreign rule. It is a missive of hope, a rallying cry to cultural resistance, an appeal to remain faithful to their God.

Van Parunak: Major Themes

1. Vanity (first half).

- a) **1:2,14; 2:11,17,26; 4:4,16; 6:9; 12:8**
- b) Signifies emptiness, wind, breath.
- c) This is his verdict on everything "*under the sun*." Cf. **Rom. 8:20**, where *mataiot8s* is the standard reflex of *hebel* in *Qoh*. Thus Paul holds the same opinion, and relates it to the fall.
- d) Another link to Genesis: The Hebrew word for "*vanity*" is the name of Abel, for the shortness and emptiness of his life (yet full of Godly significance, which should be a clue for us in studying this book!)

2. The travail that God has given to man, to search out unsearchable things.

- a) In general: **1:13; 3:10; 8:17**. For the futility, **7:14,23; 11:1-6**.
- b) This duty manifests itself in Solomon's own search, reported throughout the book: **1:13,17; 2:12; 7:25; 8:9,16**.
- c) Cf. **Prov. 25:2**. Solomon's wisdom did not come for free! God gave him an appetite and keen perception, but he himself went and looked for it! The virtue of study.

3. Anomalies with conventional wisdom.

- a) Unworthy rewards: **9:11; 10:5-7**.
- b) Evil and righteous treated the same: **3:16; 7:15; 8:9; 9:2**.
- c) Yet God will right these wrongs. Even Qohelet can see this, though not as clearly as we can in the light of NT revelation. **3:17; 11:9; 12:14**.

4. God's sovereignty and man's futility.

- a) God's sovereignty: **3:14,15; 7:13; 8:17**
- b) Futility of Man's labor (An antidote for workaholics): **2:17-23; 3:9; 4:4-6; 5:10-17; 6:1-9; 9:11-12**.

5. Enjoy good from the hand of God.

- a) Pervasive! **2:24-26; 3:12-13,22; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-10; 11:7-10**.
- b) Do not confuse with "*Eat and drink, for tomorrow we die*," condemned in **1 Cor. 15:32**.
- c) Rather, **1 Tim. 6:17**. Our future hope is in God, not riches; our present enjoyment is of the riches he has given.
- d) Combats the ascetic idea.

Douglas Miller: The **theme** of Ecclesiastes is stated in its opening phrase (1:2 AT): “*Vapor of vapors,*” says Qohelet, “*Vapor of vapors. All is vapor.*”

The phrase is then repeated in the conclusion (12:8 AT): “*Vapor of vapors,*” says Qohelet. “*All is vapor.*”

Six issues recur as touchstones around which Qohelet deliberates:

1. toil and work
2. pleasure
3. wisdom and knowledge
4. righteousness and good
5. relationship with God
6. human frailty and death; sometimes in the foreground and other times in the background, the reality of death, for Qohelet, affects everything else [*Death*, p. 229].

Throughout the book, Qohelet points out various aspects of human experience that he declares to be vapor, often accompanied by words or phrases such as *chasing after wind*, *evil* or *evil sickness*, *shadow*, and *dust*. The term vapor (*hebel*) is used elsewhere in the OT of things that are **ephemeral** and **inconsequential**. Qohelet uses the image of vapor as a metaphor and a symbol [*Vapor*, p. 258; *Metaphor, Simile, and Symbol*, p. 237]. As a metaphor, it is used to compare two things that are alike in some ways and not alike in others. . .

When we pay attention to the contexts and terms that Qohelet uses alongside vapor, we recognize at least three connections that he makes with the material meaning of the term.

1. In the first place, some things are vapor because they are **insubstantial**.
2. Other things are vapor because they are **short-lived**.
3. Finally, other things are vapor because they are **foul**.

Thus, Qohelet is able to use a single image, vapor, to describe a variety of experiences with which humans must come to terms. He employs vapor as a puzzle that challenges his readers to engage his teaching: How can all be vapor? He was writing to a discouraged and struggling audience. He points to some of the hard realities of life and shows how certain ways of responding to these are foolish. He wants to show better ways and also to show how faith continues to make sense in the midst of these realities [*Vapor*, p. 258].

The Book’s Rhetoric:

To persuade his audience, Qohelet employs a threefold strategy of argument or rhetoric.

1. Qohelet must first **establish credibility**. He gains the confidence of his listeners by agreeing with them, for example, that life is often not fair and that work is often unproductive. In some ways he shows them how things are even worse than they might have thought.

2. Second, he must **critique** (or destabilize) their belief system. He finds ways, at first more subtle, to challenge their style of living, to reveal its follies, and to help them evaluate its viability. As possible sources of security and satisfaction, he places pleasure, work, and wisdom under the microscope and finds them inadequate. He also berates materialism, petty rivalries, and individualism, among other things.
3. Finally, based on confidence in his credibility, and in response to what he has dismantled, he **gives counsel** (or restabilizes), providing some answers. He shows another way of living that can make the most of existence in this uncertain world [*Method*, p. 240].

Walter Kaiser: Theme

If, as I have argued, a fair case can be made for the **unity and integral connection of the epilogue to the rest of the book**, then Ecclesiastes does have a deliberate and consciously pursued summary: “*The conclusion* [Hebrew *soph*, “end”] *to the matter*” (12:13a) is developed throughout the book. There is a cohesiveness to the “*whole thing*” (*hakkol dabar*), and the author proceeds to give the theme and purpose of his whole book. Surprisingly enough, it is not “*All is vanity*,” nor is it that everything is just plain “*meaningless*,” as some (e.g., the NIV) are wont to translate the expression; instead, **the key to life is to “fear God and keep his commandments,”** for that is “*the entirety*” (*hakkol*) of one’s being and personality (i.e., the “man-ishness” of a man and “womanly-ness” of a woman) according to this single injunction. . .

That the analysis just announced is the one set forth by the author of Ecclesiastes can also be demonstrated from a set of **refrains** that recurs throughout the entire argument. Usually such repetitions underscore what an author is trying to emphasize. For example, the author of Ecclesiastes repeats the following refrain six times: “*Eat and drink and make your soul enjoy the good of its labor, for it is a gift of God*” (2:24; 3:12-13; 3:22; 5:18-19; 8:15; 9:7-9). That this is not an Epicurean sentiment, as some have argued, is clear, for unlike the Epicureans, Solomon did not end these refrains with “for tomorrow we die,” as did the Epicureans.

Daniel Akin: The atheist philosopher **Bertrand Russell** captures well the realities of the world people find themselves in as described by the preacher of Ecclesiastes. He writes,

We stand on the shore of an ocean, crying to the night and the emptiness; sometimes a voice answers out of the darkness. But it is a voice of one drowning; and in a moment the silence returns. The world seems to me quite dreadful; the unhappiness of most people is very great, and I often wonder how they all endure it. To know people well is to know their tragedy: it is usually the central thing about which their lives are built. And I suppose if they did not live most of the time in the things of the moment, they would not be able to go on. (Russell, *Autobiography*, 1,994)

STRUCTURE

Bruce Hurt:

THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES The Search for Significance The Quest for Contentment The Pursuit of Purpose					
Exploration			Exhortation		
All is Vanity	Vanity of Doing	Vanity of Having	Vanity of Being	Using Life Well	Source of True Living
Eccl 1:1-18	Eccl 2:1-26	Eccl 3:1-6:12	Eccl 7:1-9:18	Eccl 10:1-11:10	Eccl 12:1-14
Declaration of Vanity	Demonstration of Vanity		Deliverance from Vanity		
Subject	Sermons		Summary		
Fickleness of Life Versus Fear of the Lord					
Place: "Under the Sun"					
Decades of Searching (in the days of King Solomon) circa 936BC					
King Solomon Author					

Walter Kaiser: There has been an almost infinite number of schemes suggested for discerning the outline of Ecclesiastes. Without citing all the scholarly apparatus, we can summarize the key divisions among the scholars to be between those who argue for two sections (of equal parts: six chapters each; or unequal parts: the first four chapters and the last eight) and those who find three sections (of four chapters each)—or even, as we will argue here, four divisions of unequal length (chs. **1–2; 3–5; 6–8:15; 8:16–12:14**). . .

The most obvious advantage of the above fourfold division is that each of the first three sections climaxes with a formal refrain that is given in almost identical terms: “*To eat and drink and to realize the benefit of one’s labor*” is all a gift from God (**2:24; 5:18; 8:15**). . .

The unsigned article in the 1857 Princeton Review immeasurably improved on **Vaihinger's** arrangement of the argument of Ecclesiastes. There was agreement with **Vaihinger** on the fourfold division of the book. But the argument proceeded in this fashion:

- 1. (Chs. i.2–ii.26)** A preliminary argument from Solomon's own experience designed to show that **happiness is not in man's own power**; that all striving and toiling, though it may surround him with every gratification his heart can desire, is powerless to give that gratification itself.
- 2. (Chs. iii.1–v.20). [God] has a scheme** in which every event and all the multifarious actions of men, with the time of their occurrence, are definitely arranged. This scheme [3:11] is a beautiful one, though from their prevailing worldliness men do not comprehend it.... He [the writer] next proceeds to allege various facts...[or] anomal[ies] which]...seem to be so serious an exception to his grand doctrine that justice rules in the world and happiness attends right-doing...[that] he first utters a caution against being seduced to irreligion, to [the] neglect of religious duty, or to inconsiderate language reflecting upon God's providence by such contemplations.... These wrongs, which are acknowledged to exist, find redress, therefore, in superior government human and divine.
- 3. (Chs. vi.1–viii.15)** The next step, and this constitutes the central portion of the whole book, is to **apply this** [i.e., that enjoyment of the world is a gift of God, bestowed by God and regulated by His grand plan] **to the explanation of the inequalities of divine providence**. ...Prosperity may not be a good...: And adversity or affliction is not necessarily an evil...A right application of the considerations...will remove a large proportion of the apparent inequalities of providence.
- 4. (Chs. viii.16–xii.14)** The fourth section...is occupied with the **removal of discouragements and the enforcing of practical lessons**.... The remaining mystery of this subject need be no obstacle to human joy...nor to strenuous activity...while in both their joy and their activity men should be mindful of death and judgment.... The conclusion of the entire discussion is stated to be: Fear God and keep His commandments; for this is the whole welfare of man; for God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good or whether it be evil.¹⁵

Raymond Ortlund, Jr.: The book is structured in a deliberate way. There are 222 verses in the book, divided into two equal halves. In the first 111 verses, Solomon **investigates** how best to live this fleeting life (**Ecc 1:1 – 6:9**). In the second 111 verses, Solomon **teaches** how best to live this fleeting life (**6:10 – 12:14**).

Douglas Miller: The book of Ecclesiastes is a kind of philosophical notebook, something that has only partial precedent elsewhere among the wisdom literature of the ANE. It contains what are sometimes called "**reflections**": observations that are stated, then considered from several points of view, followed by a conclusion. Although the structure of the book is rather loose and thematically overlapping, this does not indicate a lack of

coherence. Sometimes the most systematic of philosophical thinkers, such as Ludwig Wittgenstein, have struggled to arrange their thoughts as neatly as they would like.

David Malick: Possible Views

- Some trace the argument of the book through rhetorical criticism involving the repetition of set formulas dividing the book into two main divisions with an introduction and conclusion added on:
 - a. Introduction: The Futility of All Human Endeavor **1:1-11**
 - b. The Futility of Human Achievement Empirically Demonstrated **1:12--6:9**
 - c. The Limitations of Human Wisdom Empirically Demonstrated **6:10--11:6**
 - d. Conclusion: Life Joyously and Responsibly in the Fear of God **11:7--12:14**
- Others trace the argument of the book into four parts around the formal refrain “*to eat and drink and to realize the benefit of one’s labor*” is all “*a gift from God*”. (**2:24-26; 5:18-20; 8:15-17; 11:7-10**)

John MacArthur: Outline

I. Introduction

- A. Title (**1:1**)
- B. Poem—A Life of Activity That Appears Wearisome (**1:2–11**)

II. Solomon’s Investigation (1:12–6:9)

- A. Introduction—The King and His Investigation (**1:12–18**)
- B. Investigation of Pleasure-Seeking (**2:1–11**)
- C. Investigation of Wisdom and Folly (**2:12–17**)
- D. Investigation of Labor and Rewards (**2:18–6:9**)
 1. One has to leave them to another (**2:18–26**)
 2. One cannot find the right time to act (**3:1–4:6**)
 3. One often must work alone (**4:7–16**)
 4. One can easily lose all he acquires (**5:1–6:9**)

III. Solomon’s Conclusions (6:10–12:8)

- A. Introduction—The Problem of Not Knowing (**6:10–12**)
- B. Man Cannot Always Find Out Which Route is the Most Successful for Him to Take Because His Wisdom is Limited (**7:1–8:17**)
 1. On prosperity and adversity (**7:1–14**)
 2. On justice and wickedness (**7:15–24**)
 3. On women and folly (**7:25–29**)
 4. On the wise man and the king (**8:1–17**)
- C. Man Does Not Know What Will Come After Him (**9:1–11:6**)
 1. He knows he will die (**9:1–4**)
 2. He has no knowledge in the grave (**9:5–10**)
 3. He does not know his time of death (**9:11, 12**)
 4. He does not know what will happen (**9:13–10:15**)
 5. He does not know what evil will come (**10:16–11:2**)

6. He does not know what good will come (11:3–6)
D. Man Should Enjoy Life, But Not Sin, Because Judgment Will Come to All (11:7–12:8)

IV. Solomon's Final Advice (12:9–14)

David Malick: Reference his detailed argument of the book
<https://bible.org/article/argument-book-ecclesiastes>

Douglas Miller: Outline
Introduction of Qohelet (1:1)

Part 1 (1:2–6:9): Human Effort

- Major Theme: All Is Vapor! (1:2)
- Restless Activity (Cosmology and Anthropology, 1:3-11)
 - Introduction to Part 1: Human Effort (1:3)
 - Focus Question: What Gain from Toil? (1:3)
 - Poem of a Toiling Creation (1:4-11)
- The King's Experiment (Toil, Pleasure, Wisdom, 1:12–2:26)
- God's Work in Time and Eternity (3:1-22)
- Toil for Self and in Community (4:1-16)
- Words Before God (5:1-7)
- Enjoyment Instead of Greed (5:8–6:9)
- Conclusion of Part 1 (Toil, Pleasure, Wisdom, 6:7-9)

Part 2 (6:10–12:8): Human Limits

- No One Knows What Is Good (6:10–7:14)
 - Introduction to Part 2: Human Limits (6:10-12)
 - Focus Question: Who Knows What Is Good? (6:12)
- Wisdom and Righteousness (7:15-29)
- Even the Wise Do Not Know (8:1-17)
- Enjoy Life Now (9:1-10)
- Time and Chance (9:11–10:15)
- Living with Risks (10:16–11:6)
- Youth and Old Age (Anthropology, Cosmology, 11:7–12:8)
 - Rejoice in Your Youth (11:7-10)
 - Poem of a Dying Creation (12:1-7)
- Major Theme Restated (12:8)

Epilogue (12:9-14)

Craig Bartholomew: Frame Narrative

I. Frame Narrative (1:1–11)

- A. Title (1:1)
- B. Statement of the Theme of the Book (1:2)
- C. The Programmatic Question (1:3)

D. A Poem about the Enigma of Life (1:4–11)

II. Qohelet's Exploration of the Meaning of Life (1:12–12:7)

A. Qohelet's Description of His Journey of Exploration (1:12–18)

B. Testing Pleasure and the Good Life (2:1–11)

C. The Problem of Death and One's Legacy (2:12–23)

D. Eating, Drinking, and Enjoying One's Labor (2:24–26)

E. The Mystery of Time (3:1–15)

F. The Problem of Injustice and Death (3:16–22)

G. Four Problems (4:1–16)

H. Worship (5:1–7 [4:17–5:6])

I. Oppression and Profit (5:8–17 [7–16])

J. The Gift of God (5:18–20 [17–19])

K. Riches and Wealth Continued (6:1–12)

L. Knowing What Is Good for One (7:1–13)

M. Moderation in Wisdom and Folly (7:14–22)

N. Qohelet's Reflection on His Journey and the Inaccessibility of Wisdom (7:23–29)

O. The Enigma of Political Rule (8:1–9)

P. The Problem of Delayed Judgment (8:10–17)

Q. The Fate of Death and the Gift of Life (9:1–12)

R. The Example of a City (9:13–18)

S. Wisdom, Folly, and Rulers (10:1–20)

T. Living with the Uncertainties of God's Providence (11:1–6)

U. Rejoicing and Remembering (11:7–12:7)

III. Frame Narrative: Epilogue (12:8–14)

A. Restatement of the Theme (12:8)

B. Epilogue (12:9–14)

Allen Ross: (outline similar to **Longman**)

I. Prologue (1:1–11)

II. Qohelet's Autobiography (1:12–12:7)

A. Autobiographical Introduction (1:12)

B. Narrative of Qohelet's Quest for Meaning (1:13–6:9)

C. Qohelet's Advice (6:10–12:7)

III. Epilogue (12:8–14)

Roland Murphy: (patterned after work of **A. Wright** based on repetition of key phrases)

I. Prologue, 1:1–11.

A. Superscription (1:1). This is an obvious heading for the book.

B. Inclusion (1:2 and 12:8). This inclusion contains the author's basic judgment about life.

C. Introductory poem of the prologue (1:3–11). The poem begins properly with the question in 1:3 about the profit of toil. This question is answered indirectly in the following verses; that there is no profit is illustrated by the examples of monotonous repetition (vv 4–7), which climax in the futility of human sight and hearing (v 8). The point is further secured by vv 9–11, which emphasize repetition (nothing new under the sun). A more explicit answer to v 3 is found in 2:11, 22 (cf. 3:9), which echo the futility of toil.

II. Part I, 1:12–6:9.

Part I is divided not on the basis of content but by means of the occurrence of the term “*vanity*” and/or “*chase after wind*.” There is not necessarily a conceptual unity to the division; several topics can be treated within one section (e.g., 4:17–6:9).

A. Introduction (1:12–18). “*I, Qoheleth*” announces (vv 12–15) the wise search into events under the sun, and its failure, as the phrase “*vanity and a chase after wind*” indicates. This is followed by an appropriate saying (v 15). In a second phase (vv 16–18), stress is laid on the pursuit of wisdom, which also turns out to be “*a chase after wind*.” Again an appropriate saying follows (v 18).

B. The experiment with joy (2:1–11). Qoheleth announces the experiment and delivers judgment upon it (vv 1–2), before describing it in detail (vv 3–10). The judgment follows in v 11, “*Vanity and a chase after wind*.” A kind of small inclusion with 1:3 occurs in v 11 (no profit).

C. What is the profit of wisdom? (2:12–17; cf. 1:17–18). V 12a announces the topics that will be pursued in vv 12–17: wisdom and its failure (hence the key phrase in v 17). V 12b (of uncertain meaning) seems to indicate the problem of succession that will be taken up in vv 18ff. Although wisdom is theoretically superior to folly, it fails because the same lot befalls both the wise and the foolish (vv 12–17).

D. In view of one’s successor, toil is vanity (2:18–23). This is followed (vv 24–26) by one of Qoheleth’s frequent conclusions about eating and drinking (cf. 3:13, 22; 5:17; 8:15; 9:7–10; 11:9–10), ending with the key phrase, “*chase after the wind*.”

E. Time and toil (3:1–4:6). The famous poem on time (3:1–8) provides the background for a reflection on human toil and divine activity (vv 9–15). Vv 16–22 are a reflection upon judgment, both divine and human, against the backdrop of human mortality (v 19; cf. 2:14). It culminates in another of Qoheleth’s resigned conclusions (vv 21–22). In 4:1 the theme of injustice is taken up from 3:16, with a decision in favor of the dead and unborn (vv 2–3). Qoheleth returns to the topic of toil (cf. 3:9) in the light of envy and diligence (vv 4–6). The section ends with the key phrase, “*vanity and a chase after wind*.”

F. A reflection upon “*two*” (4:7–16). The disadvantages for one who toils alone (v 8; on toil, see 2:18–23; 3:10) are treated in vv 7–12. These are followed by an example story

dealing with succession (cf. v 8 and also 2:12b) to the royal throne. The catchword “two” dominates this section (in vv 8–10, 15, and in vv 9, 11, 12). “Vanity and a chase after wind” ends the reflection (v16).

G. Varia (4:17—6:9). Several different topics are treated in this section (in many English versions, e.g., NRSV, the enumeration of the verses in chap. 5 is one digit ahead of the Hebrew numbering followed here). The first is speech, particularly speech before God (4:17—5:6). It is characterized by admonitions, culminating in the command “*fear God.*” The topic of oppression (cf. 4:1) returns briefly in an obscure admonition about officials, to which the advantage of kingship is added (5:7–8). In 5:9—6:9 the theme of riches/possessions is taken up. They do not satisfy, and allow no rest (vv 9–11; cf. 2:12; 4:8). Qoheleth shows by an example story how they can be lost (vv 12–16); there is no profit from toiling for the wind (v15). The only recompense for toil is “*eating and drinking,*” provided God gives it (vv 17–19). The uncertainty of possessions is shown by another example of misfortune (twice in 6:1–2); even the stillborn are better off than such a thwarted individual (vv 3–6). The conclusion (6:7–9) returns to the topic of insatiable appetite (cf. 4:8; 5:9–11) that is fed by human toil (v 7). The first half of the book ends here at 6:9, the midpoint of the number of verses in the book (111 of 222).

III. Part II, 6:10—11:6

As with Part I, the divisions within the second half of the book are determined by consistent repetitions. chaps. 7–8 are divided by the phrase “[not] find out,” yielding four sections: 7:1–14; 7:15–24; 7:25–29; 8:1–17. chaps. 9:1—11:6 are divided by the phrase, “not know,” also yielding four sections: 9:1–12; 9:13—10:15; 10:16—11:2; 11:3–6. The book ends with an address concerning youth and old age (11:7—12:7), the inclusion (12:8), and the epilogue (12:9–14).

A. Introduction to the second half of the book (6:10–12). Qoheleth states a thesis: whatever happens has been determined by God (cf. 1:9; 3:15), with whom humans cannot contend (cf. 1:15; 3:14; 7:13). This is so because there is no profit in human talk (v 11); hence they do not know what is good nor what will happen in the future (6:12).

B. Part IIa, 7:1—8:17.

1. Four confrontations with traditional wisdom concerning: a good name (7:1–4); the failure of a wisdom ideal (7:5–7); the caution of the sage, which orients him toward the past (7:8–10); wisdom’s inability to find out what God is about (7:11–14).
2. A reflection (7:15–18) on the failure of retribution, and what one should do about it. Another confrontation with wisdom: her vaunted strength is undone by human sinfulness, i.e., folly (7:19–22). Qoheleth’s avowal of his failure to attain wisdom (7:23–24).
3. A reflection of human righteousness (7:25–29).

4. Two confrontations with wisdom: the high calling of the sage is demeaned by opportunistic conduct before the king (8:1–4); the security of the wise comes to naught because of human ignorance and impotence (8:5–8). A reflection about injustice, despite wisdom’s claims concerning divine retribution (8:9–14). A conclusion about “*eating and drinking*” (8:15). A reflection upon the mystery of “*the work of God*” (8:16–17).

C. Part IIb, 9:1—11:6.

1. A reflection, especially on one’s “*lot*” that is not as fortunate as that of the dead (9:1–6). Another of Qoheleth’s conclusions about the enjoyment of life (9:7–10). An observation about the evil time that “*falls*” upon humans (9:11–12).

2. An example story about the failure to recognize the wise man and his wisdom (9:13–17). Sayings about the power of a small thing to undo wisdom (9:18—10:1). A series of sayings concerning: the fool (10:2–3), the ruler (10:4). A reflection about the breakdown in order (10:5–7). A collection of sayings concerning: the unexpected (10:8–11), the fool (10:12–14a), and ignorance (10:14b–15).

3. A collection of sayings: 10:16–17, 18, 19, 20; 11:1–2.

4. A collection of two sayings (11:3–4), an address (11:5), and a command (11:6), all dealing with the theme of uncertainty.

IV. Poem on youth and old age, 11:7—12:7.

V. Inclusion, 12:8.

VI. Epilogue, 12:9–14.

Warren Wiersbe: Outline

Theme: Is life really worth living?

Key verses: Ecclesiastes 1:1–3; 12:13–14

I. The Problem Declared (Ecclesiastes 1—2)

Life is not worth living! Consider:

- A. The monotony of life (Ecclesiastes 1:4–11)
 - B. The vanity of wisdom (Ecclesiastes 1:12–18)
 - C. The futility of wealth (Ecclesiastes 2:1–11)
 - D. The certainty of death (Ecclesiastes 2:12–23)
- Enjoy life (Ecclesiastes 2:24)*

II. The Problem Discussed (Ecclesiastes 3—10)

Solomon considers each of the above arguments:

- A. The monotony of life (Ecclesiastes 3:1—5:9)

1. Look up (**Ecclesiastes 3:1–8**)
2. Look within (**Ecclesiastes 3:9–14**)
3. Look ahead (**Ecclesiastes 3:15–22**)
4. Look around (**Ecclesiastes 4:1–5:9**)
 - Enjoy life (Ecclesiastes 3:12–15, 22)*
- B. The futility of wealth (**Ecclesiastes 5:10–6:12**)
 1. Employing wealth (**Ecclesiastes 5:10–17**)
 2. Enjoying wealth (**Ecclesiastes 5:18–6:12**)
 - Enjoy life (Ecclesiastes 5:18–20)*
- C. The vanity of wisdom (**Ecclesiastes 7:1–8:17**)
 1. We make life better (**Ecclesiastes 7:1–10**)
 2. We see life clearer (**Ecclesiastes 7:11–18**)
 3. We face life stronger (**Ecclesiastes 7:19–8:17**)
 - Enjoy life (Ecclesiastes 8:15)*
- D. The certainty of death (**Ecclesiastes 9:1–10:20**)
 1. Death is unavoidable (**Ecclesiastes 9:1–10**)
 2. Life is unpredictable (**Ecclesiastes 9:11–18**)
 3. Beware of folly (**Ecclesiastes 10:1–20**)
 - Enjoy life (Ecclesiastes 9:7–10)*

III. The Problem Decided (Ecclesiastes 11–12)

- A. Live by faith (**Ecclesiastes 11:1–6**)
- B. Enjoy life now (**Ecclesiastes 11:7–12:8**)
- C. Prepare for judgment (**Ecclesiastes 12:9–14**)
 - Enjoy life (Ecclesiastes 11:9–10)*

Van Parunak: The book deals with two paradoxes.

The answer to each is the positive exhortation to take the simple blessings that God gives. At the center is a reminder that the though sorrow is an inevitable part of life in a fallen world, we can bear it if we recognize that it comes from the hand of God.

A. The Paradox of the Values.

The things that men value (pleasure, status, wealth) cannot guarantee happiness, though when we view them from the divine perspective, we see some value in them. Two panels, the first from a purely human perspective, the second adding the divine insight.

1. 1:3-2:23, the human view.

- a) **1:3-11**, The Cycles. Thus no comprehensive knowledge, nothing new, no certain fame. The cyclic nature of the world is to the unbeliever a source of frustration and confusion.
- b) **1:12-2:23**, Qohelet's Search:
 - Lust of the Flesh (**2:1**),
 - Pride of Life (**2:12**),
 - Lust of Eyes (**2:18**).

2. 2:24-6:9, the divine perspective.

a) **2:24-3:22**, Answer to Cycles: God's sovereignty in the cycles of life.

POSITIVES: **2:24a; 3:12; 3:22a** form the center and extremes of this section, which is chiasmic. Lund's law.

b) **4:1-6:9**, Answer to the three values: Though none of the three is trustworthy, each can bring value if rightly used.

1) **4:1-12**, Principles of Companionship, related to lust of flesh: oppression, envy, loneliness, true friendship.

2) **4:13-5:9**, Authorities, cf. pride of life: Kings, God, Bureaucracies (good in middle, bad on outside).

3) **5:10-6:9**, Wealth, cf. lust of eyes: It brings only dissatisfaction, and can be lost. Trust in God, who gives the true wealth.

POSITIVE: **5:18-20**, center of chiasm.

B. 6:10-7:14, What is good? Sorrow!

We can't avoid it, because the world is full of vanity, but it is the Creator who has subjected it to vanity (**Rom. 8:20**), and trusting in his sovereign love, we can cope with the sorrow and even learn that, like castor oil, "it is good for you."

C. The Paradox of the Virtues.

We should pursue righteous labor and wisdom, even though we may not benefit from them personally, because these are God's will for us.

1. First praise of virtues.

a) **7:15-29**, The benefit of true righteousness, and the danger of false righteousness and false wisdom.

b) **8:1-14**, The benefit of Wisdom: enables us to understand the paradoxes of wickedness.

c) POSITIVE: **8:15**, at end of section.

2. 8:16-9:18, Man is impotent to help himself either through wisdom or labor.

POSITIVE: **9:7-9**, center of "man cannot do" chiasm.

3. Second praise of virtues.

a) **9:13-10:15**, The benefit of wisdom

b) **10:16-11:6**, The benefit of labor

c) **11:7-12:8**, POSITIVE: the conclusion: enjoy the good in life and expect the bad.

D. 12:9-14, Epilog.

OUTLINE --- CHASING THE WIND – LIFE OF FUTILITY

BIG IDEA: APART FROM THE FEAR OF GOD AND AN ETERNAL PERSPECTIVE, LIFE IS A FUTILE EXERCISE OF CHASING THE WIND

(1:1-18) INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW:

CHASING THE WIND – THE CYCLE OF FUTILITY –

The Experience and Perspective of Solomon Testify to the Emptiness of Life and the Lack of Any Satisfying Answers to the Human Cycle of Futility

(2:1-11) THE FUTILITY OF PLEASURE, POSSESSIONS AND PRIDE --

Investigation under the Sun Reveals the Futility of Pleasure, Possessions and Pride

(2:12-26) THE FUTILITY OF WISDOM AND WORK –

A Life of Pursuing Wisdom or Accomplishment Only Accumulates a Legacy of Futility

(3:1-22) THE FUTILITY OF TRYING TO COMPREHEND THE DIVINE MASTER PLAN –

The Inscrutable Nature of Eternity Will Frustrate Man's Efforts to Figure Things Out – Just Submit and Take Things as They Come

(4:1-16) THE FUTILITY OF CHASING WORLDLY SUCCESS --

The Five Rotten Steps on the World's Ladder of Success

(5:1-7) BE CAREFUL TO WORSHIP AS THE WISE INSTEAD OF THE FOOL –

Wise Worship Calls for Obedient Listening, Controlled Speech, Faithful Commitment and Reverential Awe

(5:8-20) PURSUIT OF WEALTH CAN CREATE HUGE PROBLEMS –

Apart from Contentment in Enjoying God's Gifts, the Pursuit of Wealth Can Create Huge Problems

(6:1-12) THE FUTILITY OF CHASING THE GOOD LIFE –

Even Those Who Appear to Have Grabbed Hold of the Good Life Struggle with No Enjoyment, No Satisfaction and No Answers to Life's ultimate Questions

(7:1-14) RECOGNIZE THAT GOD IS IN CONTROL – BOTH IN HAPPY TIMES AND SAD –

Since God Is Sovereign, the Wise Must Benefit from Sorrow and Submit Rather than Express Proudful Impatience and Frustration

(7:15-29) PURSUE THE PATH OF WISDOM AND THE FEAR OF GOD –

Understanding the Pervasiveness of Futility and the Reality of Personal Perversity, Pursue the Path of Wisdom and the Fear of God

(8:1-9) LIMITS OF WISDOM IN INTERACTING WITH SOVEREIGN POWER --

Wisdom Treads Carefully in Interacting with Sovereign Power Because of the Priority of Submission and the Reality of Limitations

(8:10 – 9:18) SOMETIMES LIFE DOESN'T MAKE SENSE – BUT WE CAN STILL RESOLVE TO LIVE IT UP --

Wisdom Cannot Figure Out Life's Perplexities, But the Enjoyment of This Life Does Not Come from Figuring Out Life's Deep Enigmas

(10:1-20) NUGGETS OF WISDOM – WISE RESPONSE TO FOOLISH LEADERSHIP –

Folly on the Part of Rulers Puts a Nation in Jeopardy and Requires a Response of Wisdom – Yet Wisdom Is Precarious at Best

(11:1-10) SECRETS TO A PRODUCTIVE AND ENJOYABLE LIFE –

By Opportunistic Faith and Joyful Contentment We Can Live Both a Productive and Enjoyable Life

(12:1-14) THE POINT OF IT ALL –

This Life Has Meaning When We Rise Above the Futility of Man's Wisdom to Embrace God's Wisdom = Fear God and Obey Him Before It's Too Late Because We All Will Be Held Accountable

TEXT: Ecclesiastes 1:1-18

TITLE: INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW –
CHASING THE WIND – THE CYCLE OF FUTILITY

BIG IDEA:

THE EXPERIENCE AND PERSPECTIVE OF SOLOMON TESTIFY TO THE EMPTINESS OF LIFE AND THE LACK OF ANY SATISFYING ANSWERS TO THE HUMAN CYCLE OF FUTILITY

The world claims to be searching for answers. **What is the meaning of life?** How can I find fulfillment and significance? Why do I hide from the boredom of reality and seek escape in the world of entertainment and sports, the world of education and Philosophy, the world of career success and achievements, the world of materialism and possessions, the world of sex and sensual pleasures, etc.? Most of our unsaved friends refuse to face the emptiness of their pitiful worldview. They do not want to be reminded of the death that awaits and the unknown eternity that follows. They do not want to consider their accountability before their Creator. They deny that they are bankrupt and lost and blind in this meaningless existence of life on this earth apart from God. They are boastful about their satisfaction with the life they have chosen for themselves. “I’m living the way I want to live.” But what will be their destiny? They need a heavy dose of **THE REALITY OF THEIR FUTILITY** before they will respond to the good news of the free gift of salvation and meaningful life through the Lord Jesus Christ.

David Thompson: ONE WHO IS IN A POSITION TO DISCUSS LIFE HAS CONCLUDED THAT EVERYTHING APART FROM GOD BEING AT THE CENTER OF IT IS VANITY ! Anything we do or pursue, apart from having God at the center of it, will leave us empty. It doesn’t matter who we are, how much we have, or how much we accomplish; the end result of leaving God out of the center of things will be a total emptiness.

David Fairchild: Many in our day are looking for a **purpose to exist**. A purpose profound enough, big enough, consuming enough, that it grabs us by the shirt collar and demands our attention. Many are looking for a reason for living that will plumb the depths of our passions and sustain us until we breathe our last.

That’s why this book of Ecclesiastes is such a **helpful pre-evangelism tool** to use with our unsaved friends. I encourage you to seek out someone with whom you can share a copy of this book (and **Swindoll**’s helpful guide – *Living on the Ragged Edge*) and discuss its perspective. But I find that too often Solomon’s perspective of futility mirrors my own thinking as a believer. How can that be? We all need to be reminded of the vast difference between the worldview of humanism vs one who is united to Jesus Christ and living for eternity.

Solomon’s Technique: **literary pessimism**. It’s a negative argument to demonstrate a profound truth. To learn the true meaning of life ... first view life apart from God – see it in all of its futility ... then the layer of *God-connectiveness* can be added and it will mean something.

“*Under the sun*” viewpoint – mark these words throughout the book
Not everything in here is true from God’s perspective ... but accurate from Solomon’s experience.

Ray Stedman: Ecclesiastes is a collection of what man is able to discern under the sun, i.e., in the visible world. The book does not take into consideration revelation that comes from beyond man's powers of observation and reason. It is an inspired, an accurate book. It guarantees that what it reports is what people actually believe. but it is an examination of those beliefs.

G. S. Hendry? Qoheleth writes from concealed premises, and his book is in reality a major work of apologetic. . . . Its apparent worldliness is dictated by its aim: Qoheleth is addressing the general public whose view is bounded by the horizons of this world; he meets them on their own ground, and proceeds to convict them of its inherent vanity. This is further borne out by his characteristic expression “*under the sun*”, by which he describes what the NT calls “the world”. . . . His book is in fact a **critique of secularism and of secularized religion**.

I. (:1) THE PERSONA OF THE PREACHER: EMINENTLY QUALIFIED TO SPEAK WITH AUTHORITY (SUPERScription)

A. Authoritative Blog (Public Journal)

“The words”

We are fortunate to have such a record;
Still everyone refuses to listen but stubbornly chases the wind on their own.
What if someone were to come back from the dead and give personal testimony?

Luke 16:19-31

David Hubbard: “*Words*” means something like “official collection of teachings.” Sages like Agur and Lemuel (**Prov. 30:1; 31:1**) and prophets like Amos (**1:1**) and Jeremiah (**1:1**) had sets of their proverbs and oracles so labeled by those who collected and preserved them for posterity. How the author and other wise teachers went about their work is described with some detail in the conclusion (**12:9–10**).

B. Author with Supreme Credentials – Identified with 3 Majestic Descriptions

1. The Preacher = title of the Book – Ecclesiastes

“of the Preacher,”

The Hebrew word designates a leader who speaks before an assembly of people;
Our culture: the preacher is someone TV makes fun of and portrays as weak and out of touch with reality; positive not negative connotations here

David Thompson: This title is critical to the book for it is referred to in several passages: **1:1, 2, 12; 7:27; 12:8, 9, 10**. The “*preacher*” then was one who got the people together publicly in order to give them instruction. In this case, it was instruction of a meaningful life.

2. Son of David – need to spend some time here and get some background

“the son of David”

Ray Stedman: Many of the critical commentators of our day question that view, and very few of them accept it. They try to date the book after the Babylonian exile, some 500 years after Solomon lived. That is the habitual stance of critics of the Old Testament.

(They try to make an argument based on the type of vocabulary and literary devices used ...)

Who is this man Solomon: name means “*peace*” – contrast to the wars pursued under his father King David (just finished studying 2 Samuel) – chosen to build the Temple; associated with wisdom and wealth; set up for success:

2 Chron. 9:5-8; 22-28

1 Kings 4:21-34

1 Kings 11:1-11 we see God’s displeasure with Solomon later in his reign

Brian Racer: He had the largest geographic parcel of any Israelite king; plenty of wealth; these were happy times in Israel; he was a philosopher, scientist, thinker, diplomat; He kept a journal of his life; he was more blessed by God than anyone; Still, he was not satisfied! Don't try to duplicate his pursuit of meaning in life -- Instead, learn by his mistakes.

David Fairchild: Solomon is King David’s son. He was born of Bathsheba, the woman David committed adultery with and had her husband murdered at the front lines of a battle. Though David loved God greatly, he was still a sinner that needed God’s grace. If you ever want to read a Psalm written by someone who has committed a great sin, read **Psalm 51**. It is the Psalm David wrote after he had sinned against God with Bathsheba.

3. King in Jerusalem

“king in Jerusalem”

In control of the pursuit of this special knowledge;

No limitations; no restraints – we need to listen to this authoritative message from Solomon

Pulpit Commentary: Solomon had it all -- position, power, possessions, prestige, prominence, pedigree, pleasure, and popularity. He had everything most people dream about. It was the ideal set up. Much of it was handed to him on a silver platter. But the one thing Solomon didn’t automatically have was **happiness**. In spite of all the things he had, **he was empty inside**. He wandered away from God and he lost his meaning and fulfillment. As one writer said, for Solomon, life seemed to be “the emptiest and poorest thing possible.”

II. (:2-11) THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE PREACHER:

MONOTONOUSLY BORED BY THE CYCLE OF EARTHBOUND FUTILITY

A. (:2) Simple Thesis – No Satisfaction in this life – just emptiness and futility

“Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.”

Cry of **Despair** --

Hebrew literary device for **emphasis** – like calling Christ King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

This insight for living comes from the same man who wrote much of the Book of Proverbs – what a different orientation!

- Certainly not the mindset of Christ:
John 4:34 *My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work.*
- Certainly not the mindset of the Apostle Paul:
Phil. 1:21-22 *For me to live is Christ and to die is gain. But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me.*

David Hubbard: The conclusion brackets the entire book and wraps it in the mood of mystery (see **12:8**, where **1:2** is repeated virtually verbatim). This mystery is akin to irony, because it is full of surprises. We find it where we least expect it. Values that we treasure prove false; efforts that should succeed come to failure; pleasures that should satisfy increase our thirst. Ironic futility, futile irony—that is the color of life as seen through the Preacher’s eyes. So frequently does life turn out the opposite of our expectations that “**absurdity**” (**Fox**) is one term used to describe Koheleth’s estimate of it.

B. (:3) Fundamental Question – Why do we do what we do?? What is the point??

“What advantage does man have in all his work which he does under the sun?”

Solomon is very analytical – trying to figure life out.

He tried every type of pursuit imaginable – pushed the envelope to the limit.

Using work here in a very general sense – all of life’s pursuits and activities and endeavors; He will look at work and careers very specifically later.

David Thompson: The Hebrew word “*advantage*” is critical to understanding this first point. The word is a commercial and business term which has to do with monetary gain due to work.

William Gesenius points out that this term not only has to do with a gain or a profit from work, but also with that which is at an over and above level of profit (*Hebrew Lexicon*, p. 377). This is not just a minimal level of profit because of work; this is a high level of profit because of one’s work.

Ray Stedman: After he has sucked dry all the immediate delight, joy or pleasure out of something, what is left over, what endures, what will remain to continually feed the hunger of his life for satisfaction?

Tremper Longman: Qohelet’s frequent use of the phrase *under the sun* highlights the **restricted scope** of his inquiry. His worldview does not allow him to take a transcendent yet immanent God into consideration in his quest for meaning. In the Bible this viewpoint is unique to Qohelet. The choice of the metaphorical phrase under the sun rather than the more prosaic “on earth” intends to appeal to the imagination of the reader in a memorable way.

Douglas Sean O’Donnell: The phrase “*under the sun*” (used twice in our text and twenty-eight times in the book, synonymous with the expressions “*under the heavens*” and “*on earth*”) draws a geographical line between God, who is “*in heaven*,” and man, who lives “*on earth*” (**Eccl. 5:2**; cf. **Matt. 6:9**), and also a theological one. This phrase designates not the secular life (life without reference to God) but **the fallen world** that both the secular and nonsecular share as sinners **under God’s curse**—his faithful carrying out of his promised punishment to Adam. What is found on earth—the thorn and thistle-infested ground, our sun-soaked sweaty toil of the ground, our bodies dying and returning to the ground—is not found with God in heaven. We are “*under the sun*”; he is above it.

C. (:4-7) Universal Illustrations of the Meaningless Cycles of Nature

Douglas Murphy: The poem of **Ecclesiastes 1:4-11** addresses both humanity and the cosmos, as does the concluding poem in **chapter 12**. This poem emphasizes that both the world’s activity

generally and human toil specifically have vapor's quality of insubstantiality (1:2-3). It suggests that toil will not accomplish something of genuine significance.

1. (:4) The Cycle of Generations don't make a Difference

*"A generation goes and a generation comes,
but the earth remains forever."*

- Baby Boomers – who cares
- Millennials (Generation X) – who cares
- Generation Z – who cares

2. (:5) The Cycle of the Sun is a Meaningless Repetition

*"Also, the sun rises and the sun sets;
And hastening to its place it rises there again."*

Course of the sun: Thing of beauty to some – but to Solomon, just another reminder visually of the meaningless repetition of life --

What is accomplished?? Nothing

Daniel Akin: Solomon gives three examples from nature and three examples where human experience mirrors the natural cycles (1:5-8). He compares the sun to an exhausted track runner who runs lap after lap, looks like he is moving somewhere, but is actually just going in circles (1:5) (**Garrett**, *Ecclesiastes*, 285). The wind also gusts in circles (1:6). There is lots of activity, but nothing changes. The east-to-west observation of **verse 5** and the north-to-south observation of **verse 6** make up a merism that pictures the totality of the world (**Murphy**, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 180). The whole of nature is characterized by **monotony**. The last cycle is that of the oceans (1:7). All of the streams of the earth run into the sea but the water level stays the same. There is no net gain!

3. (:6) The Cycle of the Wind – Accomplishing Nothing

*"Blowing toward the south, Then turning toward the north,
The wind continues swirling along; And on its circular courses the wind returns."*

- Sort of like the futility of watching NASCAR race -- What is the point of it all?
- Life is like a Beltway – lots of cars and activities – looks like they are just going around in a big circle.
- Life is like a Treadmill – you work hard and sweat; but go nowhere.

Constant repetitive motion – that is what the movement of the wind symbolizes. But with no purpose or goal or meaning.

David Fairchild: We often mistake movement with progress. We think we are making progress but in reality we are driving around a cul-de-sac and wondering why the neighborhoods all look the same.

David Hubbard: Much of our toil is **monotonous routine** that never really ends. You think you have all the dishes washed and from a bedroom or a bathroom there appears, as from a ghost, another dirty glass. And even when all the dishes are washed, it is only a few hours until they

demand washing again. So much of our work is cyclical, and so much of it futile. We shape plans that collapse; we pinch out savings that shrink; we toil for promotions that others get; we leave our goods to governments or heirs that squander them.

4. (:7) The Cycle of Rivers Flowing into the Sea Makes no Sense

*“All the rivers flow into the sea, Yet the sea is not full.
To the place where the rivers flow, there they flow again.”*

Cf. little children asking the question “Why?” repeatedly;

The sea is a bottomless pit; never satisfied; can never be filled up;

All of this impressive activity seems to accomplish nothing;

Probably reminds the housewives of their daily tedious chores:

- The dirty clothes and the dirty dishes just keep coming.
- Nothing is ever finished.

For business executives, why do you think they call it a rat race?

Tremper Longman: The verse observes that rivers, while constantly flowing into a sea, do not affect the water level, which remains constant. As **Graham Ogden** notes, the verse entails an action that “does not move toward completion; it knows only constant and cyclic motion.”

Warren Wiersbe: In this section, Solomon approached the problem as a scientist and examined the “wheel of nature” around him: the earth, the sun, the wind, and the water. (This reminds us of the ancient “elements” of earth, air, fire, and water.) He was struck by the fact that generations of people came and went while the things of nature remained. There was “change” all around, yet nothing really changed. Everything was only part of the “wheel of nature” and contributed to the monotony of life. So, Solomon asked, “Is life worth living?”

David Hubbard: The point of the summary is to encapsulate in one phrase the repetitive, dependable constancy of creation’s changeless pattern.

D. (:8-11) Frustrating Conclusion – One Man Cannot Make a Difference, an Impact –

We are a meaningless dot on the timeline of unchanging existence.
There is nothing new under the sun.

1. (:8) No Satisfaction or Fulfillment for Man

*“All things are wearisome; Man is not able to tell it.
The eye is not satisfied with seeing, Nor is the ear filled with hearing.”*

Our glass is always half-filled; some people you describe that way; really applies to all of us; no matter how upbeat and optimistic we appear.

Human desire is never satisfied; restlessness

David Thompson: The word “weary” means that everything you do without God at the center of life, will leave you fatigued, tired and exhausted (**Gesenius**, p. 329). In fact, man cannot even put

into words how empty life is apart from God. There is a loneliness and an emptiness that is beyond description when men and women try to live life without God at the center.

Daniel Akin: Solomon concludes in **verse 8** that our existence is **full of weariness**. He gives **three behaviors** to parallel the sun, wind, and sea. He contends that we cannot say enough, see enough, or hear enough. We cannot say enough words to find meaning in the midst of this monotony. The eye will never be able to see it all. There are always more sights to see, experiences to take in, and pictures to look at. For some there is always one more pornographic image to try to find pleasure in because the experience does not last. And the ear has never heard it all. There is always more gossip to spread, songs to hear, jokes to listen to, or flirtatious words to enjoy. Nothing we can say, see, or hear can bring meaning to this redundancy.

2. (:9-10) Nothing new under the sun

*“That which has been is that which will be,
And that which has been done is that which will be done.
So there is nothing new under the sun.
Is there anything of which one might say, See this, it is new?
Already it has existed for ages which were before us.”*

[Personal Illustration: Design and Funding experience with inventors; selling them on what a wonderful new idea they are trying to bring to market.]

3. (:11) No Legacy or Memorials

*“There is no remembrance of earlier things;
And also of the later things which will occur.
There will be for them no remembrance among those who will come later still.”*

- Man tries to build monuments and name roads after people – but don’t kid yourself; you are soon forgotten.
- Mantra of business: no one is indispensable; you are replaceable.
- Ask your friends tomorrow about the legacy of Solomon ... what does his life mean to them?

Daniel Fredericks: History notes and respects the efforts of an infinitesimally small fraction of the earth’s inhabitants, and the intensities of even these legacies are evanescent, fading with every passing year. Anyone who sees their eternal significance referred to in their journals and diaries or autobiographies has not sat at the feet of Qoheleth. Any artist, ruler, entrepreneur, hero, scientist or theologian who aspires to be read about in a “Who’s Who” should understand that their innovations, awards, writings, or whatever feats that are honoured now, will be assessed in the new earth much more modestly compared to the pomp with which they were first celebrated. . . Today’s celebrities are tomorrow’s obituaries, and their names are as disposable as the morning paper in which their life stories will be printed. And if that is what becomes of our celebrities, what will become of us?

**III. (:12-18) THE PURSUIT OF THE PREACHER:
DISCOURAGED AS HE DISCOVERS THE FUTILITY OF HUMAN EXISTENCE –
EXAMINING BOTH WORKS AND WISDOM**

(1:12 – 2:23 -- Solomon examining **works** and then **wisdom** – repeated cycles ... looking for a way to break out of the monotony and meaninglessness of life)

Douglas Sean O'Donnell: As in most other Hebrew poetry, the **structure** is simple, or what I prefer to call “simply beautiful.” After an introductory statement (**Eccl. 1:12**), there follow two reflections, each of which gives a statement about the vanity of pursuing wisdom, followed by a proverb that supports the statement. To express the poetic structure in outline form:

First Reflection—vv. 13–15

Statement of the vanity of pursuing wisdom—**vv. 13–14**

A proverb quoted in support—**v. 15**

Second Reflection—vv. 16–18

Statement of the vanity of pursuing wisdom (and folly)—**vv. 16–17**

A proverb quoted in support—**v. 18**

From this simple structure, it is easy to find and summarize what Solomon discovered about wisdom.

- His first reflection is that **wisdom cannot change reality**;
- his second is that wisdom **can increase sorrow**.

A. (:12-15) Examination of Works

1. (:12) Supremely Qualified Detective

a. Preeminent Insight

“I the Preacher”

Penned the words of the book of Proverbs earlier -- **12:9-12**

b. Preeminent Dominion

“have been king over Israel”

c. Preeminent Location

“in Jerusalem.”

2. (:13) Mission Impossible – Discover the Secret of Life

a. Supremely Focused Pursuit

(1). Analytical and Logical Pursuit

“And I set my mind”

Not getting some subjective, emotional reaction;

This will be well thought out; enlightened; reasonable

(2). Comprehensive Pursuit -- **Swindoll**

(a) *“to seek”* – investigate the roots of a matter

Do serious research

(b) “*and explore*” – examine all sides

It’s a practical word for experimentation

Ray Stedman: the **Searcher** – he is the ultimate investigative reporter.

Here is a searching mind which has looked over all of life and seen what is behind the actions of people.

(3). Gifted Pursuit
“*by wisdom*”

Who better than Solomon to investigate?

(4). Unconstrained Pursuit
“*concerning all that has been done under heaven*”

Our grand juries are limited; focusing just on investigating one issue;
Can be very frustrating; can’t ask certain questions; can’t go there

b. Supremely Frustrating Mission
“*It is a grievous task which God has given to the sons of men to be afflicted with.*”

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

Michael Eaton: God has appointed an unhappy task for the sons of men to do. The verb “*give*” sometimes has the force of “*appoint*” (e.g. **Je. 1:5**). People may live secularly in the earthly realm, but the problems they meet are ordained by the God who occupies the heavenly realm. Mankind cannot be indifferent to or detached from the futility which besets him; it is an “inescapable fact of one’s humanity” (**Rylaarsdam**). *Business*, denoting mankind’s restlessness and vigour in the quest for meaning, derives from *anah*, “to engage in something”, to be active in doing something”. It points to the sense of compulsion behind the quest. Mankind thinks and plans. This he can scarcely avoid, for he wants to understand where his life is going. This is the burden which, by God’s decree, every man bears; the problem of life is no optional hobby.

Knut Martin Heim: Qoheleth’s speech continues to explore serious attempts to find success. All of them lead to the same conclusion: that all human efforts to find success are doomed. The goals that humans pursue to find happiness are mirages, optical illusions of the mind. Qoheleth’s claim is not based on gut feelings, generalizations and anecdotes, but on empirical evidence based on experiments and careful reflections on scenarios which represent the gamut of human experience.

3. (:14-15) Theory of Futility Substantiated

Cf. Einstein and his theory of Relativity – Solomon known for his more fundamental human theory = **The theory of futility**

a. Comprehensive Investigation

“I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun”

b. Consistent Conclusion = Thesis of the Book Repeated

“all is vanity and striving after wind”

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

c. Confirmed Inevitability

*“What is crooked cannot be straightened
And what is lacking cannot be counted.”*

Wouldn't you like to be part of the solution; wouldn't you like to make a difference; cf all of the politicians each election promising CHANGE – they are going to step into office and enact policies and sponsor legislation that will cure our ills; take just one for example: cutting back on big govt spending ... what are the results?

How about trying to make changes in our own lives; all of the self-help books; all of the inspirational speakers who try to get us all enthused about mind over matter; all of the positive thinking gurus; reality: you can't change the spots on a leopard!
Only God can transform people's lives from the inside out.

Tremper Longman: The thrust of the verse is that there is something fundamentally wrong with life on earth, and, since the world as it is has come about as a result of God's will (**v. 13**), there is absolutely nothing that humans can do about it.

David Thompson: He thoroughly researched everything, seeing if it could really bring a man meaning and fulfillment. He came to four conclusions:

- 1) Any pursuit apart from God is empty. **1:14a**
- 2) Any pursuit to try and find meaning without God is like chasing the wind. **1:14b**
- 3) Any pursuit without God at the center is a crooked pursuit which will never lead one straight to fulfillment and meaning. **1:15a**
- 4) Any pursuit without God is so lacking in bringing meaning that one cannot even count or calculate how far short it falls. **1:15b**

B. (:16-18) Examination of Wisdom

1. Supremely Qualified Detective

“I said to myself, Behold, I have magnified and increased wisdom more than all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has observed a wealth of wisdom and knowledge”

I stopped at nothing; I gave it my best shot

2. Mission Impossible

“And I set my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly;”

3. Theory of Futility Substantiated

“I realized that this also is striving after wind. Because in much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge results in increasing pain.”

T. S. Eliot in Choruses from “The Rock”: All our knowledge brings us nearer to our ignorance.

Brian Racer: Why is there so much grief in Education?

- 1) Obsolescence -- there is always something more and newer to be learned (cf. computer software releases)
- 2) Hitting the wall of our own educational and mental capabilities (you can never know it all)

Steve Zeisler: Why is this? we wonder. Why should an increase in knowledge and understanding bring grief and pain? I think most of us suffer from a “cockeyed optimist” syndrome. We feel that if we could just understand reality, that some semblance of coherence would emerge; that there is something beautiful awaiting us at the end of the “yellow brick road”; that although to all outward appearances, the world seems topsy-turvy, at its core everything is good and rational. But no. If all we have to go on is life “under the sun,” if heaven does not break through somewhere along the line, then the farther we penetrate in our search the more we will discover that there is no good center awaiting us at the end of our quest.

Brian Racer: Song: “*Chasing the Wind*” -- sung by **Steve Green**

* * * * *

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) **Overview:** Read through the book of Ecclesiastes and make a list of all of the pursuits and endeavors of men that are labeled as “*Vanity*” by Solomon. Where are you tempted to find significance “*under the sun*”?
- 2) List some of your monotonous, repetitive tasks or responsibilities. What is your attitude or mindset as you perform these?
- 3) How can Solomon (writing back around 930 B.C.) claim that “*there is nothing new under the sun*”? What about the technological innovations of today? How do these mesh with the argument Solomon is making?
- 4) What are some other ways to express the theme of “*striving after wind*”? What are some cultural examples today of people who purport to have discovered the meaning of life and have something significant to live for?

* * * * *

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

G. S. Hendry (quoted by **Kidner**): Qoheleth writes from concealed premises, and his book is in reality a major work of apologetic Its apparent worldliness is dictated by its aim: Qoheleth is addressing the general public whose view is bounded by the horizons of this world; he meets them on their own ground, and proceeds to convict them of its inherent vanity. This is further borne out by his characteristic expression “*under the sun*”, by which he describes what the NT calls “the world” His book is in fact a critique of secularism and of secularized religion.

Thomas Constable: Assuming that Solomon wrote the book in its entirety, he must have done so during his lifetime and probably during his reign (971-931 B.C.). It has seemed probable to some expositors that he may have written Song of Solomon in his youth, Proverbs in his middle life, and Ecclesiastes in his old age (cf. **2:1-11; 11:9; 12:1**).

Brian Racer: Written in the later years of Solomon's life -- this is a journal of his wanderings "*under the sun*"; a view with blinders toward heaven; he writes as a broken man; Initially as king, worship had a prominent role; then money and women became an end in themselves; He ended up pursuing life apart from Jehovah God and ran into a wall; he stopped including God in his perspective

The Premise of the Book -- "*Vanity of vanities! All is vanity!*"

Life is empty; like blowing bubbles;

Fame, etc. only brings fatigue and not true happiness;

Easy to get caught up in this perspective; Life often is not all that exciting; Life isn't always a bowl of cherries; sometimes it is the pits; Sometimes life is boring, dull; it lacks sense;

There are little dawns throughout the book where he sees beyond the blinders; there is a reality beyond the materialistic world.

Themes of the book center around:

- What constitutes purposeful existence and
- How can we find it?

Chuck Swindoll: Apathy rules and nobody seems to care. Life isn't simply tragic. Life is dull. H. L. Mencken said it well, 'The basic fact about human experience is not that it is a tragedy, but that it is a bore. It is not that it is predominantly painful, but that it is lacking in any sense.' No one ever said it better than **Thoreau**: “Most men lead lives of quiet desperation.” We don't want to believe that. Motivational speakers who cheerlead seminars all across America hope that we won't believe that. It would blow a hole in their business. The last thing we're supposed to realize is that we have lied to most of our lives.

EXPOSING FOUR LIES ABOUT LIFE

I can think of at least four falsehoods many still call the truth.

1. “Laugh and the world laughs with you. Cry and you cry alone.”

I've found quite the opposite is true. “Laugh and you laugh alone. Cry and you get a crowd. The whole world will cry with you.”

2. "Every day in every way our world is getting better, better, better." I'd like to meet the guy who first wrote those words, wouldn't you? I'd string him up before sundown. What a tragic, disillusioning dream!
3. "There's a light at the end of every tunnel." Keep hoping ...keep looking for it. Murphy was right when he said that the light at the end of the tunnel was really the "headlamp of an oncoming train."
4. This fourth one comes from the pop music world of yesteryear: "Things never are as bad as they seem. So dream, dream, dream." Want to sing it with me? No, probably not. Things are not really as bad as they seem. They're often worse, and dreaming won't make them better!

Why do they tell us those lies? ... There's one simple answer: to make us believe there's purpose and happiness if we simply keep on hoping.

3 Temptations addressed in Ecclesiastes:

- 1) The sensual lure of something better tomorrow robs us of the joys offered today
- 2) The personal temptation to escape is always stronger than the realization of its consequences
- 3) The final destination, if God is absent from the scene, will not satisfy

David Fairchild: Solomon was brilliant, he wrote 3 books of the bible; Proverbs, Song of Solomon, and Ecclesiastes. He is considered the wisest man that has ever lived, and perhaps is the richest that has ever lived. He had a fleet of ships that would bring gold to him every day from far off lands. He had thousands of servants, tremendous amounts of land, and was a genius. He had 700 wives and 300 concubines. What in the world would a man with 700 wives need with 300 concubines? Needless to say, Solomon had an answer. Solomon married a woman that God had forbid so that he would gain favor from different nations and because of their worship of a foreign, non-existent God, Solomon's eyes were taken off the Lord and instead placed upon himself and his own wants and desires.

Steve Zeisler: Life is futile, says the Preacher. "*Vanity*" means emptiness; that which is insubstantial. Like the vapor which is visible for a moment when one exhales on a cold night, a life leaves no mark, it accomplishes nothing. It is weightless, without substance, like a soap bubble which bursts and disappears, leaving no clue that it ever existed. In this sense, says the Preacher, life is vain. The earth remains always the same despite the many generations that come and go. Each generation scratches about on the earth for a while, and perhaps some may leave a mark, but eventually it is covered by green vegetation and can no longer be discerned. Human lives don't have any weight, any lasting substance.

Daniel Akin: Ecclesiastes gives a bleak look on life, but the Spirit had a purpose for inspiring this book to be written. He wants to expose the meaninglessness of life in a cursed world in order to create a hunger for something better (**Kidner**, *Ecclesiastes*, 27). Ecclesiastes wants to push us to faith and contentment in God. **Tim Keller** points out that the author drives his readers to see that there are only two possible conclusions in life. Either there is a God above with a standard who will judge us at the end based on that standard, or life is totally meaningless. These are the only two options. Either there is a God and our actions have meaning, or there is no God, and as **Hemingway** said, "Life is a dirty trick, a short journey from nothingness to nothingness." **Keller** states, "People think Christians are naive, but if your origin is insignificant, and if your destiny is insignificant, then have the guts to admit that your life is insignificant." Why work for human

rights, or for the common good, or for justice for all, if it is all going to be burned up in the end anyway?! If we are just accidents heading for annihilation, then nothing we do matters (**Keller**, “*Problem of Meaning*”)!

Deep in the human heart we know that is not true—we know what we do matters in some way—but we also know the world is jacked up. Why is it like this? God imposed a curse on the world in response to human rebellion with the purpose that frustration would ultimately drive us to Him. The Holy Spirit inspired Ecclesiastes to convict you of your own meaninglessness in your current existence in order to “*make you wise for salvation through Christ Jesus*” (**2 Tim 3:15** ESV). **Romans 8** tells us we are groaning for rescue right along with this frustrated creation! That’s exactly what we are directed toward in the conclusion of Ecclesiastes.

Everything Is Meaningless Because Our Frustration Is Meant to Drive Us to Christ -- Ecclesiastes 12:8-14

Ecclesiastes cannot be rightly understood without the conclusion. The bleak outlook of the parts can only be understood in light of the whole that is wrapped up in the conclusion (**12:8-14**).

Warren Wiersbe: Is Life Worth Living?

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

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

TEXT: ECCLESIASTES 2:1-11

TITLE: *LIVING IT UP WILL ALWAYS LET YOU DOWN*

BIG IDEA: INVESTIGATION UNDER THE SUN REVEALS THE FUTILITY OF PLEASURE, POSSESSIONS AND PRIDE

CONTEXT:

Transition from seeking meaning in Work or Intellectualism and Education.
He has already acknowledged that education is a grind = much grief
(rushed through this last week – but we will take up this topic next week).

Solomon bounces to the other end of the spectrum -- maybe there is some secret of the good life that I am missing by being too intellectual -- I don't want to go overboard and get into the realm of the crazy and the insane; but I'll try letting my hair down and going with the flow and just seeking pleasure.

Possible Titles for this message:

- 1) WHEN YOU LIVE FOR THE PLEASURES OF TODAY -- YOU ARE LEFT WITH A HANDFUL OF SMOKE
- 2) FUN UNDER THE SUN = NONE WHEN LIFE IS DONE
- .3) SOMETIMES THE MAN WHO HAS EVERYTHING HAS NOTHING
- 4) I'LL BE HAPPY WHEN . . .

REVIEW: What are some **images of futility** (in addition to chasing the wind)

Cut to the chase, don't *chase the wind*
In pursuing life apart from Jehovah, Solomon ran into a wall
Like rat or hamster running on treadmill
"under the sun" = not including God in the equation
like *blowing bubbles*
like spending your life *shoveling smoke*
life is *not always a bowl of cherries*, sometimes it is the pits
life is like a *black hole* -- sucking the meaning out of life
chasing dandelion seeds in the wind

Important to keep these pictures in your mind

INTRODUCTION:

* * * * *

1 John 2:15-17

AN EXAMINATION OF THE WORLD PROVES THAT LOVE FOR THE WORLD AND LOVE FOR GOD ARE MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE --

LOVE FOR THE WORLD CHARACTERIZED BY 3 FUTILE PURSUITS --

A. Futility of Unbridled Appetites = Pleasure "*the lust of the flesh*" – **Maximizing Fun**

Nothing wrong with fun in itself; appetites given to us by God; self control essential

B. Futility of Coveting Possessions = “*the lust of the eyes*” – **Maximizing Things**

Nothing wrong with things; cannot serve both God and Mammon

C. Futility of Pride and Selfish Ambition = “*and the boastful pride of life*” -- **Maximizing Worldly Fame** = what others think of me – we should strive for excellence

* * * * *

Craig Bartholomew: In this first test we get a good look at Qohelet’s **epistemology in action**, the means by which he will try to answer the question of the benefit of labor under the sun. Experience and observation are core elements. Pleasure presents itself as an answer to his question, and he abandons himself to it relentlessly, using all the resources at his disposal. He explores the pleasure of wine, extensive building projects, gardens and parks, the accumulation of wealth and treasures, music, sex, and so on, but all to no avail. Once he stops and reflects on this test, he concludes that it too leaves his quest unanswered.

Douglas Sean O’Donnell: Pastor Solomon takes us to a place that we can name **the hollow house of hedonism**. Yes, the house is filled with wine and women, gardens and gold, songs and servants; but it is hollow when it comes to satisfying our deepest needs.

Within the house of hedonism there are many rooms. Solomon will show us four of them in **Ecclesiastes 2:1–11**: the private pub, the garden, the treasury, and the bedroom. Take my hand now and I’ll show you. Be careful, though, for seeing what Solomon saw might tempt you to want what he had. And that is not what we should truly desire.

- The Pub
- The Garden
- The Treasury
- The Bedroom

What went wrong with the pleasure-and-possession experiment, that he would pronounce it profitless? There are at least two explanations for the failure. Putting self first, ironically, fails to satisfy self and also, ironically, fails to give pleasure. The first failure deals with the sin of **selfishness** and the second with the sin of **idolatry**. The first failure breaks the second-greatest commandment (“*You shall love your neighbor as yourself*,” **Matt. 22:39**), while the second failure breaks the greatest commandment (“*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind*,” **v. 37**).

Knut Martin Heim: The most striking feature of this report on Qoheleth’s experiment is the high frequency of first person singular pronouns, indicating obsessive concern with self-gratification.

Daniel Akin: In **chapter 1**, Solomon concluded that everything is meaningless and fleeting because humanity rebelled against God and now lives in a cursed world where nothing we attempt to build our lives on will ultimately satisfy. If this cursed world is all there is, then there is no profit to all of our activity because nothing changes under the sun. Solomon told us we are trapped in a monotonous prison where nothing changes, and then we die.

That led to Solomon giving his personal testimony about how he tried everything to find some kind of meaning in this life, but he concluded that nothing works. The end of **chapter 1** set up

Solomon's testimony, and now **chapter 2** gives the details to his search for meaning. Like a scientist or a philosopher, he experiments with all kinds of things to see what has lasting value or meaning (**Chandler**, "Quenched").

First, he turns to pleasure, or what we might call "**hedonism.**" **O'Donnell** notes, "Within the house of hedonism there are many rooms," and Solomon tries to sleep in them all (*Ecclesiastes*, 43). He adopts the lifestyle of eat, drink, and be merry. **Tim Keller** points out that it is not until Solomon already concluded that there are no answers in life that he turns to pleasure ("*The Search for Pleasure*"). If nothing that I do matters and the world is going to burn up in the end, then I need to lighten up. Solomon's attitude is like the guy in the Tim McGraw song who got a bad diagnosis from his doctor and in response did all sorts of crazy things like skydiving, mountain climbing, and riding on a bull. Many people turn to pleasure, if not for ultimate meaning, then for distraction from lack of meaning. . .

Roland Murphy: The **sequence of thought** is as follows: an announcement of an experiment and a preliminary judgment about the value it yielded (**vv 1–2**); a description of the experiment (**vv 3–9**); an immediate judgment that the toil yielded pleasure as its "*portion*" (**v 10**); and an ultimate judgment in **v 11**. An inclusion may be indicated by . . . , "*Ah . . . vanity,*" in **2:1b, 11b**.

I. (2:1-3) THE FUTILITY OF PLEASURE: PARTY ANIMALS WILL HAVE TO WAKE UP SOMETIME AND FACE THE PAIN OF REALITY -- TRYING TO MAXIMIZE FUN

A. (:1) Sneak Preview Summary

1. The Focus for This Test – Checking out Pleasure

"I said to myself, 'Come now, I will test you with pleasure.'"

Did not seek the counsel of others; we see him talking to himself;
Transition from investigation of education and wisdom

Solomon became the ultimate Party Animal -- surprising given what we know about his background:

- Father David = a man after God's own heart
- given the greatest gift of insight and wisdom God has ever bestowed on a man
- involved in works of spiritual significance -- like the building of the Temple

Party animals tend to burn themselves out in 2 directions:

- in a Fun Fantasy -- Pure Escapism
- in a Feeding Frenzy -- Selfish Indulgence

Iain Provan: The Hebrew word is *śimḥa* (**2:1**), which in other contexts means "joy, gladness, gaiety"; indeed in **2:26; 5:20; 8:15**; and **9:7** it is described as a **gift of God** like wisdom and knowledge. The translation "pleasure" is thus an unhelpful one, if it carries for the reader the connotation of things forbidden or questionable.

Gladness of heart, joy, pleasure—it is not that these things are not good in themselves in *Ecclesiastes*. Yet Qohelet has discovered that the pursuit of them with the hope of gain is just

as pointless as the pursuit of wisdom and knowledge for that purpose. The concept *śimḥa* does not “*accomplish*” or achieve anything (v. 2). Indeed, it is as readily associated with fools as with the wise (cf. 7:4). The same is true of “*laughter*” (2:2), which is all too often uttered by those who have no profound grasp of reality (cf. 7:3–6).

2. The Frame of Reference

“So enjoy yourself.”

Very selfish and self-centered in his orientation;
He gets to pick the areas of pleasure that have the potential to interest him.

Cultural Slogans:

- Grab for all the Gusto – consistent with all the marketing slogans ...
- Just Do It
- You only go around once
- Eat, Drink and be merry for tomorrow you die
- If it feels good, do it
- Playboy philosophy

3. The Frustration

“And behold, it too was futility.”

B. (:2) Escapism Fails to Satisfy – Comedy routines, cutting up, hanging out and having a good time

“I said of laughter, ‘It is madness,’ and of pleasure, ‘What does it accomplish?’”

humor, joking around in sport; jesting; poking fun at someone

10:19 “*A feast is made for laughter*”; eating, drinking, and having a merry old time

Evaluation: It is madness; craziness; zany; off-the-wall

Cf. **Swindoll** illustration of man who goes in for counseling; gloomy, depressed; advised to get some comedy relief – turns out he is the clown or the comedian; what lies behind the mask of Jay Leno and David Letterman??

C. (:3) Indulgence Fails to Satisfy -- Feeding Frenzy -- feeding one's appetites to please yourself-- totally selfish

1. Sophisticated Indulgence

“I explored with my mind how to stimulate my body with wine while my mind was guiding me wisely”

not talking about some drunken fool here; but a sophisticated and intelligent pursuit

David Hubbard: After all, part of pleasure’s lure is that it offers to **heighten our senses**. We are created to enjoy a tender touch, a tasty morsel, a tangy beverage, a graceful figure, a delicate perfume. From the standpoint of our senses, we might conclude that pleasure is what we were made for. The Preacher sought to test that view of life by **abandoning himself to pleasure**. He gave his senses every chance to thrill and tingle, to stir and soothe. Would he uncover life’s full purpose by arousing his sensitivities? He thought it worth a try. . .

Pleasure has another lure: it offers to lift us above the routine. So much of our living seems bound to the ordinary. It is hobbled by the patterns we learned in childhood; it is grooved by the habits we developed as teenagers; it is fettered by the cords of conformity our culture puts upon us and kept on a narrow track by the duties of our daily jobs. Often we long to kick over the traces and bolt off on our own free course. Pleasure lets us do that. Temporarily we can hang our inhibitions in the hallway and go to the party without them.

2. Unrestrained Indulgence – mind no longer in control here
“and how to take hold of folly”

3. Verdict
“until I could see what good there is for the sons of men to do under heaven the few years of their lives”

Limitations of his investigation:

- a) limited by his nature -- looking at human endeavors
not looking at things from God's perspective
- b) limited by space -- earthly sphere
not looking at things from a spiritual perspective
- c) limited by time -- few years we have to spend here on earth
not looking at things from an eternal perspective

Limitations lead him to a sense of desperation to get on with the task of experimentation -- there is no time to lose in searching for the key to life, the key to happiness; sense that life is passing him by and he doesn't want to miss out

II. (2:4-8) THE FUTILITY OF POSSESSIONS – RICH FOOLS ARE STILL FOOLS -- TRYING TO MAXIMIZE POSSESSIONS

They just have bigger barns.

Solomon was the ultimate Top Dog -- THE TOP DOG MENTALITY THRIVES ON COMPETITION – desire to be #1; look at your neighbor and make sure you are beating him out

Craig Bartholomew: Qohelet's embrace of **debauchery** could lead us to think of him as a lowlife, a bum, but vv. 4–10 make clear that his experiment with pleasure was **sophisticated** and **wide ranging**. The royal fiction is strongly in evidence here since the projects Qohelet embarks on and the possessions he accumulates fit with what we know of Solomon and kings in the ancient Near East. The word 'śh, “to do” or “to make,” occurs seven times in vv. 4–11 and is part of Qohelet's vocabulary of work. Qohelet's list of accomplishments is paralleled by comparable lists in royal inscriptions found in the ancient Near East.

A. (:4a) TOP DOG IN ARCHITECTURE -- the ultimate Achiever
"I enlarged my works; I built houses for myself"

Mega Building Projects -- Bigger and Better

Note emphasis on **selfishness** in all of these pursuits -"*for myself*" -- not for any humanitarian or philanthropic purposes -- not out to make the world a better place for others

not talking about the Temple -- that was built for God to God's specifications

other royal residences completed later in life (**1 Kings 7:10-12; 9:19**); Palace in Jerusalem took 13 years in building

All of his **pet, personal projects** – whatever he wanted to excel in; if there were seven wonders in the world, he dedicated himself to building something even more grandiose and impressive – What do you devote yourself to???

Danger of **Pride of accomplishment** -- cf. Nebuchadnezzar in **Daniel 4:30**

"Look what I've done; Look what I've built" mentality

Ray Stedman: Solomon too gave himself to this. His own house took fourteen years to build, the temple seven. He built houses for his many wives whom he brought to Jerusalem, spending time, money and interest doing so. Southwest of Jerusalem, in a place seldom visited by tourists; there exist yet today vast depressions in the earth which are still called the Pools of Solomon, which he used to water the forest of trees which he planted in an effort to find satisfaction for his own heart.

Douglas Miller: Qohelet's list reminds one in several ways of Solomon's great wealth, works, and activities (**1 Kings 3-11**):

- building projects (v. 4; **2 Chron 8:1-6**)
- houses and vineyards (v. 4; **Song of Sol 8:11**)
- gardens (**Song of Sol 5:1**) and parks with fruit trees (v. 5; reminiscent of Eden, **Gen 1:11, 29; 2:9**)
- reservoirs and an irrigation system (v. 6)
- male and female slaves (v. 7; **1 Kings 10:5; 2 Chron 8:7-8**)
- herds (larger animals, such as cattle) and flocks (v. 7; smaller animals, such as sheep and goats)
- male and female singers (v. 8)
- treasures (v. 8) [Parody, p. 240]

B. (:4b-6) TOP DOG IN HORTICULTURE -- the ultimate Arborist; the ultimate Environmentalist; the ultimate gentleman farmer

1. Fruitful Vineyards – so he could indulge his taste for wine – Best possible drinks
"I planted vineyards for myself"

(**Song of Sol. 8:11**; cf. David's vineyards -- **1 Chron. 27:27**)

Wine, drugs, narcotics -- addictive -- **vs.3-4** "*vineyards*"
Best possible drinks (stimulants)

What are they searching for? Some type of fix that will satisfy;

Their testimony = "My life apart from these artificial stimulants is empty and boring and meaningless"

2. Natural Works of Beauty -- creative; aesthetically pleasing; fruitful

"I made gardens and parks for myself and I planted in them all kinds of fruit trees."

word used for parks (*pardesim*) -- Greek word = *paradise*

Luxurious gardens were characteristic of royalty and nobility in ancient Near East (no simple ChemLawn application)

creates almost a secular Garden of Eden; a man-made paradise

Problem: There is no paradise if God is not present

cf. people devoting their lives to the environment -- that's already been tried

1 Kings 4:33 Solomon spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon even to the hyssop that grows on the wall; he spoke also of animals and birds and creeping things and fish (a little bit of the zoologist in him also)

Remember: Man looks on the outward appearance, but God looks on the heart; Any ability we have to create artistic beauty is a gift from God anyway -- Direct the glory to Him

3. Irrigated Forests

"I made ponds of water for myself from which to irrigate a forest of growing trees"

Daniel Akin: Solomon indulged in the best of architecture, the best of agriculture, and the best of engineering (**2:4-6**). He planted vineyards, gardens, and parks. Your gardening hobby or the worlds your kids have created in Minecraft pale in comparison to Solomon's creations. He constructed an entire irrigation system to water these gardens and parks (**2:6**). One can still find these pools of Solomon in Israel today. Literally, Solomon tried to create a new garden of Eden (**Longman, Ecclesiastes**, 89). The phrase "every kind of fruit tree in them" (**2:5**) is used three times in the creation account (**Gen 1:11,29; 2:9**). He tried to get back to **paradise**, but one cannot get back there in this fallen world.

C. (:7a) TOP DOG IN EMPIRE BUILDING -- the ultimate Authority; the ultimate boss

"I bought male and female slaves, and I had homeborn slaves."

accumulating slaves -- power, control

people to satisfy your every whim -- certainly he did not have any workload which he did not choose to bear

Some people devote their lives to climbing the ladder of power and control -- the money might not be the main thing to them; What gives them pleasure is the opportunity to command others.

Remember **Matt. 20:25-26** “*You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant.*”

That does not mean that you won't be in a position of authority with a large area of responsibility (cf. the Apostle Paul) –but you won't view and treat those under you as slaves – rather your desire is to serve them.

Transition: slaves also viewed as objects of wealth

D. (:7b-8a) TOP DOG IN POSSESSIONS AND WEALTH -- the ultimate Acquirer

1. Flocks and Herds – Best possible food

“I possessed flocks and herds larger than all who preceded me in Jerusalem.”

"Beef -- It's what's for dinner" -- no bland vegetarian diet here; forget the cholesterol, full speed ahead; Go out and slaughter the best fatted calf you can find, marinate it, and cook it up

2. Silver and Gold

“Also, I collected for myself silver and gold, and the treasure of kings and provinces.”

Remember: the rich man in the parable --**Luke 12:15-34** "*and he began reasoning to himself..*" (many important principles in this parable)
"take your ease; eat, drink and be merry" (vs.19)

Is our security in our wealth and possessions?

Remember the principles of **Accountability** and **Stewardship**; pursue what is really important in life = furthering the kingdom of God

Faith should free us up not to be anxious about our material well-being.

Collectors are an interesting lot – cf. sports memorabilia; stamps; coins; antique cars; etc.

E. (:8b) Top Dog in Entertainment – the ultimate Artistic Performer

“I provided for myself male and female singers”

- American Idol example – music industry
- Sports Heros
- TV and movie stars

cf. How our society has adopted the pleasure-ethic instead of the old Puritan work-ethic
We live to play; we work to be able to finance our playing; We live for the weekend -- for our leisure time; We try to get away with doing the bare minimum.

ASIDE: Goal is to insulate yourself from the pain of reality; numb yourself; distract yourself from the harsh realities of your meaningless existence

F. (:8c) Top Dog in Sexual Pleasures – the ultimate Adulterer; Sex Addict
“*and the pleasures of men – many concubines.*”

Views them as just another collectible; something to allow him to indulge his physical appetites; no relationship or companionship in view here; playboy mentality is nothing new under the sun

Best possible sex -- variety and abundance of sexual partners (**1 Kings 11:1-3**)

Fairchild: Have you ever noticed in rap videos that they are going for the life of Solomon? Big cars, big houses, girls running around half naked massaging and feeding them. Apparently, these men are Old Testaments scholars who have read the book of Ecclesiasts.

But this message is not a 12 step program for deliverance from alcoholism or from gluttony or from sexual addictions – this message is about the underlying philosophy that drives us to seek satisfaction in pleasures themselves apart from God

cf. ministry of **John Piper** – Desiring God – what do we really desire; what really satisfies??

Problems with feeding our appetites: (**Hubbard:** The Snares of Pleasure)

a) Pleasure always promises more than it can produce

THE PARADOX OF HEDONISM: THE MORE YOU HUNT FOR
PLEASURE, THE LESS OF IT YOU FIND

b) Pleasure satisfies only during the act itself

requires repetition and intensification -- bigger dose of drugs-- like the potato chip commercial: "I bet you can't eat just one"; Instead of being satisfied, we are thirsting for the next dose

Danger of coming under the control of something -- being addicted to something.

What type of self-control, What type of self-discipline do I show?

Banowsky: Pleasure is a hard master, an appetite that grows on what it feeds. It is a physiological fact that a stimulated muscle reflexively demands greater stimulation, and people become enslaved by their passions in much the same way. With each overindulgence, the level of physical and emotional expectation gradually rises so that an increasingly greater thrill is required to satisfy the urge. Without finding full satisfaction, the hunger need settles into the monotony of filling and emptying. One begins by seeking pleasure to fill his boredom and ends by being bored with pleasures.

c) We get bored -- cf. cry of kids minutes after having the time of their lives: "I'm bored ... We never do anything that is any fun. I don't know what to do. There is no one to play with me"

d) If we don't get bored, we get frustrated -- unable to gain the goal

Bottom line: we can't take too many days of a feeding frenzy --

Reminds me of:

- Berenstain Bears "Too Much Birthday!"
- Proverbs: too much honey makes you sick

Shakespeare: "If all the years were playing holidays, to sport would be as tedious as to work"

III. (2:9-11) THE FUTILITY OF PRIDE AND SELFISH AMBITION – TRYING TO MAZIMIZE FAME AND POPULARITY

A. (:9) The Pursuit of Greatness – Mr. Popularity

"Then I became great and increased more than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. My wisdom also stood by me"

I'm sure he was getting a big head by now; but didn't completely lose touch with reality

Hebrew -- unusual force here: *"I was great, and I added"*

Solomon loved those visits from the Queen of Sheba and other visiting dignitaries

Remember: we are not called to be man-pleasers, but those who please the Lord who has bought us with His own blood

B. (:10a) Formula for Spiritual Disaster

"all that my eyes desired I did not refuse them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure"

How about that for a formula for raising kids?! How would that work out!

- "eyes" -- outward aspects of his pleasure
- "heart" – inward aspects of his pleasure

Getting dangerously close to the awful possibility that "Nothing has meaning!"

Sadly, this is the conclusion that the honest humanist must face-- The unsaved around us are wrestling with this perspective all of the time -- even though they won't admit that.

Goal: trying to lift himself above the monotony of the routine of life by being the ultimate Party Animal or the Top Dog in some area or the most respected by some group of significance.

Remember one of the signs of the evil last days:

"men will be lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God" -- 2 Tim. 3:4

The parable of the sower: the seed that fell among thorns was choked with the cares and riches and pleasures of this life and could bring no fruit to perfection (**Luke 8:14**)

Amos 6 -- *Woe to those who are at ease in Zion...who recline on beds of ivory*

1 Tim. 5:6 *the widow that lives in pleasure is dead while she liveth*

What does this say about the world's concept of **Retirement**??

C. (:10b) Fleeting Pleasure is the Only Reward

*"for my heart was pleased because of all my labor
and this was my reward for all my labor"*

If we know all of the above, why is temporary pleasure so attractive??

Not trying to kid ourselves ...

pleasure is enjoyable for the moment ..

After we have sucked dry all of the fizz of life -- What is left of any substance??

WHEN YOU LIVE FOR THE PLEASURES OF TODAY YOU ARE LEFT WITH A
HANDFUL OF SMOKE INSTEAD OF REWARDS FOR ETERNITY

D. (:11) Concluding Perspective: Bitter Disillusionment

*"Thus I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I
had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit
under the sun."*

the morning after; reflecting back -- "*I considered*" "*I faced*" -- to look someone in the eye
(**Job 6:28**) "face the facts" "turn one's attention"

Pleasure . . . Possessions . . . Popularity – all are futile pursuits apart from living to obey
God

Our ultimate happiness cannot come from trying to have fun or from trying to create some
type of environment that pleases us-- our connection to God and what is important in light of
eternity is the key

Ray Stedman: That is a very honest reporting. Solomon says there were some positive things,
apparently. First, he gained a degree of notoriety, he says. He became great, surpassing all
who went before him in Jerusalem. Many people think that fame will satisfy the emptiness of
the heart. Solomon found fame. He adds that he kept his objectivity, though. "My wisdom
remained with me," he says. In other words, "I was able to assess this as I went along. I did
not lose myself in this wild search for pleasure. I was able to look at myself and evaluate it as
I went along. But I tried everything. I did not miss or set aside anything." He belonged to the
jet-set of that day. "I enjoyed it for a while," he says. "I found pleasure in all my toil, but that
was all the reward I got for my labor – momentary enjoyment. Each time I repeated it I got a
little less enjoyment out of it." "My conclusion," Solomon says, "is that it was not worth it.
Like a candle, it all burned away, leaving me jaded and surfeited. Nothing could excite me
after that." He concludes that it was all emptiness, a striving after wind. He was burned out.

Applications:

- Don't envy the wicked their riches and comforts and pleasures
- Be bold to evangelize -- the need is there
- Practice Contentment -- Godliness with contentment is great gain
- Remember that there is a Day of Reckoning

1 Cor. 3:10-15 -- we will be left with only a handful of smoke after all the pleasures pursued for their own enjoyment have been burned away

Solomon's Conclusion: **Ecclesiastes 12:13-14**

THREE PARALLEL EXAMPLES OF WRESTLING WITH THE TEMPTATION TO PURSUE A LIFE OF PLEASURE, POSSESSIONS AND PRIDE

A. Experience of Eve in Yielding to Satan in the Garden (**Genesis 3:6**)

1. Unbridled Appetites – *“the tree was good for food”*
2. Covetousness – *“it was a delight to the eyes”*
3. Pride of life – *“desirable to make one wise”* – to know like God knows

B. Experience of Moses in Choosing Suffering with the People of God (**Heb. 11:24-26**)

1. Unbridled Appetites – *“passing pleasures of sin”* vs. *“endure ill treatment with people of God”*
2. Covetousness – *“choosing reproach of Christ”* vs. *greater riches than treasures of Egypt”*
3. Pride of life – *“refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter”*

C. Experience of Christ as He Defeated the Temptation by Satan (**Matt. 4:1-11**)

1. Unbridled Appetites – “Command that these stones become bread” -- **Priority of Word of God**
2. Covetousness – “All these things I will give you” – **Priority of Worship**
3. Pride of life – “throw yourself down” – **Priority of Humility**

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) How do you differentiate between when pleasures are legitimate for you and when they are illegitimate?
- 2) What are some cultural examples of men and women who have expressed regrets as they faced death – sorry that they had pursued a life of emptiness?

3) Why are we so attracted to pleasure and possessions and popularity?

4) What is your answer to the question: “I’ll be happy when . . .?”

* * * * *

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Iain Provan: The emphasis lies on enjoyment or joy as itself the reward that we may expect from life and all our effort expended in living it. There is no surplus, no profit beyond that. Indeed, the “reward” is itself a gift from God, an inheritance in which we share rather than a prize that we earn (cf. **9:6**) for *heleq* as our “share” [NIV “part”] of life under the sun; also **Gen. 31:14; Num. 18:20; Deut. 10:9**, etc., for the frequent use of *heleq* in the sense of inherited land or property). It is in receiving life as a gift from God and in not striving to manipulate it and exploit it in order to arrive at some kind of “gain” that mortal beings can find **contentment**.

David Fairchild:

Plato believed that being unhappy or acting evil was due to a lack of knowledge of “the good.” Plato thought if a person knew what the good life was, he would live the good life and be happy. So training yourself intellectually will help you discover what that “good life” is all about. He also believed that there is only one “good life” for all, that it isn’t relative. He thought that goodness isn’t dependent upon human opinion, it exists apart from our feelings towards it or understanding of it, but it needs to be discovered like math. Plato also believed that moral standards were superior even to God. So instead of God revealing to us what is “good” or “bad,” God is subject to what is good like you and I are subject. If God didn’t act according to this “good” He would no longer be God.

The problem with this view is that it contradicts Paul who tells us in **Romans 7:19**- For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want.

Aristotle on the other hand noticed that men regard some people as leading what they call “good lives” and others as leading what they call “bad lives.” He also notices that the various lives that people of common sense considered to be “good” all contain one common characteristic: happiness. And in the same way, the lives that ordinary people regard as being “bad” lives all have in common the characteristic of being unhappy. So, to answer the question “what is the good life for man?” Aristotle’s answer can be stated in one sentence: “It is a life of happiness.”

He also did not agree with Plato that there was one “good life” for all to discover, but that each individual should determine what the “good life” is for himself. This was called the doctrine of the mean. Meaning there are various ways of living for different people. What is good for one person may not be good for another. So, one can’t tell before actually experimenting or experiencing what it is. Reason alone won’t tell you what the “good life” is for you, you need to experiment to find out. You should eat, but not so you become a glutton or are famished. You should drink, but not so you’re a drunk, but not die of thirst. You should be proud because that is the “mean” between vanity and humility, etc. It means, in order to achieve happiness, people must act moderately, they must act so as to be striving for the mean between two extremes. If they do this, they will be happy.

Then we come to **Epicurus**, which Solomon seems like Epicurus on steroids. Epicurus must have only been able to get a copy of chapter 2 verses 3-10 of the book of Ecclesiastes to form his view!

Plato didn't think the good life was connected to pleasure. Aristotle thought moderation of pleasure will make you happy. Epicurus held a view that is today called "hedonism" which is the doctrine that pleasure is the sole good. Pleasure and the pursuit of it will make you happy. The best way to live, according to Epicurus, was to live pleasantly without suffering from any of the undesirable effects of living for pleasure.

Now on this point, I don't have much of a disagreement with how we think. Certainly I like kissing my wife over being beaten a cord. I like eating a steak over having a root canal. I would love to have a perpetual six-pack over not being able to tie my shoe laces. These things are no-brainers. And truth be told, I would much rather seek pleasure over pain, joy over suffering.

Solomon, the mad scientist who drinks his own chemical mixtures to experiment on himself came to the conclusion at the end of the last chapter that pursuing wisdom apart from God, under the sun, was as fruitful as running outside with your arms wide open trying to hug the wind. He said it was vanity!

This week, we are going to see his next great experiment as he does you and I the favor of trying out those things that we would most likely pursue to find happiness and the good life. Solomon becomes a hedonist who pursues these things with unparalleled gusto and then reports his subsequent findings.

He is going to try to answer our question for us, and he is going to try out what we put in our "blank" when we asked the question "I'll be happy when..." . . .

Solomon arranged every aspect of his external world so as to afford him maximum pleasure, but he never experienced enduring happiness and satisfaction because his internal condition remained sinful, and the highs of life experience eventually fade. He basically worshipped himself, doing everything for himself (i.e. **2:4, 2:8**).

He learned that happiness is a gift that God gives to those reconciled to Him and their neighbor by grace that comes only by being and never by having.

Those of us at varying levels below Solomon on the economic food chain cling to the myth that if they could trade places with him they would be happy, satisfied, and joyful. However, the parade of history from Jim Morrison to Hendrix, Elvis, and Cobain sings the same song as Solomon. Hence, those on top of the food chain try to get happy by chasing the wind of simplicity and reducing their stuff and experiences, while those at the bottom of the food chain try to get happy by complicating their life, chasing the wind of more pleasurable stuff and experiences. A few of us, like Michael Jordan, strive to succeed and do... only to get bored and quit to strive for a different success... only to get bored again, and return to the first thing that bored them.

What everyone shares in common is what our nation's Founding Fathers called "**the pursuit of happiness.**" Basically, we all want to be happy and so we live solely for the pursuit of pleasure. The philosophers call this hedonism, and though many Christians denounce it, we were in fact created by God for pleasure and should live as Christian hedonists.

Our problem is not that we are hedonists, but rather that we are too easily pleased, and rather than getting pure pleasure from God's right hand (**Psalm 16:11**) we settle for cheap imitations that never satisfy.

Consequently, we have sex but not love, music but not worship, and wealth but not stewardship. We long for the infinite and perfect, yet settle for the finite, imperfect and fleeting pleasures on the earth, which is a sin we need to repent of, turn from, and have forgiven and cleansed by Jesus. It was He, our great God, who was tempted as we are, yet did not settle for sin and instead died for our many sins. He then rose to make us new people with appetites for the pleasures of God instead of the god of pleasure.

"All men seek happiness," says Blaise Pascal. "This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end. The cause of some going to war, and of others avoiding it, is the same desire in both, attended with different views. The will never takes the least step but to this object. This is the motive of every action of every man, even of those who hang themselves." We believe Pascal is right. And, with Pascal, we believe God purposefully designed us to pursue happiness.

Does seeking your own happiness sound self-centered? Aren't Christians supposed to seek God, not their own pleasure? To answer this question we need to understand a crucial truth about pleasure-seeking (hedonism): we value most what we delight in most. Pleasure is not God's competitor, idols are. Pleasure is simply a gauge that measures how valuable someone or something is to us. Pleasure is the measure of our treasure.

By grace, we are then able to:

1. embrace our desire for happiness as good and not sinful
2. nourish our desire for happiness and not deny it
3. direct all of our desires to God who is our joy
4. share our happiness with others
5. gather together, needy and empty, in worship to be filled with Him

I'll be happy and satisfied when...**I find my satisfaction in God.**

Dr. John Piper – www.DesiringGod.org

What Is Christian Hedonism?

My shortest summary of Christian Hedonism is: God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him.

We all make a god out of what we take the most pleasure in. Christian Hedonists want to make God their God by seeking after the greatest pleasure—pleasure in him.

By Christian Hedonism, we do not mean that our happiness is the highest good. We mean that pursuing the highest good will always result in our greatest happiness in the end. We should pursue this happiness, and pursue it with all our might. The desire to be happy is a proper

motive for every good deed, and if you abandon the pursuit of your own joy you cannot love man or please God.

The Difference Between Worldly and Christian Hedonism

Some people are inclined to believe that Christians are supposed to seek God's will as opposed to pursuing their own pleasure. But what makes Biblical morality different than worldly hedonism is not that Biblical morality is disinterested and duty-driven, but that it is interested in vastly greater and purer things. Christian Hedonism is Biblical morality because it recognizes that obeying God is the only route to final and lasting happiness.

Johnny Carson: (Re his death)

"Laura and I are saddened by the death of Johnny Carson. Born in Iowa and raised in Nebraska, Johnny Carson was a steady and reassuring presence in homes across America for three decades. His wit and insight made Americans laugh and think and had a profound influence on American life and entertainment." **Pres. George W. Bush**
[quite the politically correct evaluation of a life that pursued the futility of comedy]

Carson, always cool and elegant, was a reliable presence on television. Despite a series of turbulent divorces, stories of his heavy drinking and the death of a son in a car accident, none of the personal tragedies intruded into his entertainment.

Ravi Zacharias:

How do we choose that which is legitimate pleasure and reject that which is illegitimate? More to the point, how do we learn to think on these matters constructively rather than live pragmatically, making momentary decisions?

Of particular concern to many of us is the frustration that is felt in knowing how to guide our own children, for theirs is a world of limitless opportunities. What deep struggles must engulf them as they are fed a steady diet of all that appeals to the eye and the imagination, with so little to nurture the conscience. They are being manipulated into the belief that appetite is a sufficient reason to consume anything. And what is worse, new appetites are being created that leave them hungrier than before and under the illusion that they can be met if one could only remove all restraint.

Please hear me: All pleasure does not come with a warning label.

Is it not clear, then, that we must have a philosophy of pleasure? A way to guide our children and discipline our own living? I encourage you to meditate on this with me, as we consider this theme through the week.

I think Postman is right. Any pleasure—whether good or illegitimate (and we will discuss this week how to discern between the two)—can make us slaves. Hunger for even the simple pleasure of food may become a life-dominating drive. Oscar Wilde said, "The only way to get rid of temptation is to yield to it." He's got it wrong. The unrestrained appeasement of desire only expands hungers. Does not our experience tell us so?

It is true. The fences of our moral pasture have been torn down, leaving us much room to graze. But let us remember what G.K. Chesterton once said: Any time you pull down a fence, always ask why it was put there in the first place. That is good advice, as we think further on

this issue through the week.

Have you determined life's purpose yet. God offers that purpose and pleasure must not violate that purpose.

There is a fundamental prerequisite for defining any legitimate pleasure in life and that is to first establish the purpose of life itself. All pleasure is built upon why you and I exist in the first place. If only we could grasp this truth, how many hours and years of grief would be spared us. God never intended for life to be lived out on an ad hoc basis, taking each opportunity as an isolated choice. Life is not to be regarded as a smorgasbord of appetizers before us from which we can choose or reject with equal impunity. The undergirding philosophy of life has to be the point of reference for all choices.

Thus, here is a sound principle: Any pleasure that refreshes you without diminishing you, distracting you, or sidetracking you from the ultimate goal is a legitimate pleasure.

Will Ferrell once called standup "hard, lonely, and vicious." Its practitioners are often thought to be flawed personalities, full of anger and unhappiness, driven by inexplicable demons into drugs and alcohol. The list of famously unhappy comedians goes on and on. In addition to Mitch Hedberg, there's Sam Kinison, Richard Pryor, Jerry Lewis, Phil Hartman, John Belushi, Paula Poundstone, and most recently, Michael Richards.

"the end of laughter is sadness" as the Bible says. Sometimes the ones that make us laugh the most, inwardly laugh the least. Suicide of comedian Richard Jeni

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

Daniel Akin: The cry of this generation is, do not repress your desires because that is dangerous and leads to depression, maybe even suicide. No matter what your desire is, whether it has to do with gender identity, sexual orientation, pleasure, or dreams, do not repress them. Solomon lovingly warns us that indulging in whatever feels good is dangerous. You may get all you ever wanted, but you will not want it when you get it. It will not satisfy. God loves you, and He knows indulging under the sun leads to brokenness. Pleasure is not bad, but because of the fall, it cannot be our final guide. It cannot be ultimate. Pleasure is a good thing that if turned into a god thing becomes an enslaving thing. So, if foolish hedonism does not work, then maybe living the right kind of life will. Right?

Wisdom Is Meaningless (2:12-17).

TEXT: ECCLESIASTES 2:12-26

TITLE: FUTILITY OF WISDOM AND WORK

BIG IDEA: A LIFE OF PURSUING WISDOM OR ACCOMPLISHMENT ONLY ACCUMULATES A LEGACY OF FUTILITY

INTRODUCTION:

You spend your life pursuing the highest levels of **education**; getting degree after degree – seeking the respect of your academic peers – What does that get you?

What does **hard work** get you? when viewed "*under the sun*"?

What is the end result when you try to make a name for yourself?

What can you leave behind that will have lasting value?

* * * * *

Cobb: In chapter 1, Solomon has states up front that everything he found on his search was empty--nothing satisfied. Not only was life empty, but on top of that we are told that the work God has left for men to do is a "*grievous task*."

In chapter 2, Solomon describes his search through the **Plains of Pleasure**. Anything and everything he ever dreamed of he got; but even in all of this he concluded, "All was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun."

As we pick up the record in v. 12, Solomon starts another quest for meaning in life. He is now entering the **Woods of Wisdom**, the **Marsh of Madness**, and the **Fields of Folly**. In his own way, I believe Solomon is going on a search to see if education holds the key to meaning in life. Education is not wisdom; yet education is the way to wisdom.

* * * * *

Then he is going to turn his attention in more detail to the life of a workaholic – what can he possibly achieve?

I. (:12-17) FUTILITY OF WISDOM – WISDOM EXCELS FOLLY BUT THE SAME END AWAITS BOTH

A. (:12) The Repetitive Investigation – Nothing New Under the Sun

“So I turned to consider wisdom, madness and folly; for what will the man do who will come after the king except what has already been done?”

These are his 2 options: a lifestyle marked by wisdom or folly (madness and folly grouped together here) – what should he go after?

Ryrie: Solomon’s successor may take up the same issues but will not arrive at any better solutions to the paradoxes of life.

B. (:13-14a) The Advantages of Wisdom – Light is Better than Darkness

“And I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness. The wise man’s eyes are in his head, but the fool walks in darkness.”

Glenn: A wise man has the foresight to avoid danger while a fool gets into trouble as though he stumbles around in the dark (cf. Prov. 4:18-19 for a similar metaphorical use of light and darkness).

Eaton: To possess wisdom will give success (10:10), preserve life and protect (7:12). It gives strength (7:19) and joy (8:1), and is better than mere brute strength (9:16). Man is guided by it (2:3), toils by it (2:21), tests and weighs experiences by it (7:23). Even the practical politics of delivering cities involves wisdom (9:15). Limited it may be, but it is still indispensable. . . As God’s gift it is light; as man’s possession it is sight.

John Gill: as the light of the day the darkness of the night; the one is pleasant and delightful, the other very uncomfortable; the one useful to direct in walking, the other very unsafe to walk in: light sometimes signifies joy and prosperity, and darkness adversity; the one is used to express the light of grace, and the other the darkness of sin and ignorance; now as the natural light exceeds darkness, and prosperity exceeds adversity and calamities, and a state of grace exceeds a state of sin and wickedness, so wisdom exceeds folly.

<http://www.studylight.org/com/geb/view.cgi?book=ec&chapter=002&verse=013>

C. (:14b-16) The Futility of Wisdom – The Same Fate Awaits Both

1. (:14b) Death is Every Man’s Destiny

“And yet I know that one fate befalls them both.”

Wisdom cannot solve the ultimate question of life’s purpose

Wiersbe: The certainty of death is a topic Solomon frequently mentioned in Ecclesiastes (1:4; 2:14-17; 3:18-20; 5:15-16; 6:6; 8:8; 9:2-3, 12; 12:7-8)

2. (:15-16) Two Reasons Pursuing Wisdom is Worthless

a. (:15) Pursuing Wisdom is Worthless Because it Cannot Change Man’s Destiny

“Then I said to myself, ‘As is the fate of the fool, it will also befall me. Why then have I been extremely wise?’ So I said to myself, ‘This too is vanity.’

b. (:16) Pursuing Wisdom is Worthless Because it Cannot Build a Redeeming Legacy – After Death All is Forgotten

“For there is no lasting remembrance of the wise man as with the fool, inasmuch as in the coming days all will be forgotten. And how the wise man and the fool alike die!”

Swindoll talks about the Egyptian pyramids – trying to preserve their legacy
Hard to come to grips with mortality and reality; they made sure they were buried with all of the glorious possessions they hoped to enjoy in the life beyond

D. (:17) The Frustrating Conclusion – No Purpose in Living

“So I hated life, for the work which had been done under the sun was grievous to me; because everything is futility and striving after wind.”

Cobb: Solomon was bitter and bummed out because he realized he couldn't take it with him. He had lived a life of self. His world revolved around him and now payday was coming. It wouldn't be too long before he would stand before the God who created him and give an answer for all he was given. He squandered God's wisdom. He hoarded the wealth. There were a lot of things he had done for the Lord in his life, but along the way he was drawn away by compromises he had made.

Swindoll: I looked at all the labor, all the projects, all the little hobbies, all the plans, all the hours, all the years of education, all the investment of time and energy, and I saw it accomplishing little more than stirring up the dust of tomorrow and finally being forgotten. I hated it. Why? Because everything is futility and striving after the wind.

Kidner: If there is a lie at the centre of existence, and nonsense at the end of it, who has the heart to make anything of it? If, as we might put it, every card in our hand will be trumped, does it matter how we play?

II. (:18-23) FUTILITY OF WORK – A LIFE OF ACCOMPLISHMENT ONLY ACCUMULATES A LEGACY OF FUTILITY

The Work Ethic -- the harder you work... more commendable from society's standpoint, but what do you really have to show for it

Remember the story of Mary and Martha: (Luke 10:38-42)

devotion to Christ takes priority over activity -- there's a type of busyness that distracts us from our focus

Nothing wrong with Work -- Must understand God's design for work and commit ourself to a Biblical work ethic -- will be looking at that in future weeks

Someone that pursues the work ethic with an obsession = known as a workaholic

Characs. of a Workaholic: (think of ones you know)

- 1) preoccupied with the office even when he is home
all the time thinking about it
carries a briefcase and opens it every night
not just work at work; also work at home
- 2) put in long hours -- become strangers to their wives and family; more concerned with production than people
- 3) unable to relax --can't sit still in his easy chair – unless so tired he falls asleep

- buys a hammock; tries it out -- just can't get comfortable
- 4) can't find the time to take vacations – too much that needs to get done
 - 5) sense of guilt -- I'm not being productive enough – either self-guilt or imagining that others are judging you as unproductive; not measuring up
 - 6) driven for success -- Top Dog mentality; on the fast track
sometimes a perfectionist; wants to do things well
 - 7) very control-oriented
 - 8) very capable -- labored with wisdom, skill, knowledge

Dealing here with a very sophisticated super-achiever -- one who with knowledge and skill and wisdom has accomplished more than any one person we can point to today

Solomon is looking back and reflecting on his ultimate legacy -- What has he actually accomplished that will have lasting value?

A. (:18) You Can't Take it With You – Emotion of Hatred

TEST: GREEDY PAWS OR GENEROUS PURSESTRINGS

“Thus I hated all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun, for I must leave it to the man who will come after me.”

1. OT Example -- Lot's Wife (Luke 17:28-33) Don't look back and try to hang on to the pleasures and possessions of this life

2. NT Example -- Rich man who kept building bigger barns (Luke 12:13-14)
"you have many goods laid up for many years to come" (v. 19)
(1 Tim. 6:7-10)

His goal: Working to provide financial security for the future so that he could live selfishly a life of pleasure; never truly secure

Problem = Covetousness -- always desiring more; never content

We fail to remember some basic facts about material possessions (or accomplishments designed to accumulate possessions):

- 1) inconsequential compared to spiritual things -- not true riches -- called a little thing
- 2) belong to God ultimately; we are just stewards; Money is a test -- How will we use it? Faithfulness is the key
- 3) they do not constitute the essence of who you are – they don't give you meaning

"not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions"

Death comes quickly and often unexpectedly

Our Primary Failure: Because we have not yet seen heaven – we fail to appreciate the riches that God has in store for us;

God has things for us that are beyond our wildest dreams ;

Why are we trying to hold on to that which will rust and decay-- to the perishable?
What do we love so much that we will be sad to leave it behind?

Importance of leaving behind a Legacy of a Good Name

"a good name is rather to be chosen than great riches"

B. (:19) You Must Surrender Control to Someone Else – Emotion of Despair

TEST: ENSLAVED TO A SYSTEM OF WORKS OR EMANCIPATED BY GRACE?

“And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the fruit of my labor for which I have labored by acting wisely under the sun. This too is vanity.”

If you realize that all you have, you obtained because of the grace of God, you will have a different attitude towards leaving a legacy for others

Wiersbe: It's bad enough that we must leave our wealth behind, but even worse that we might leave it to somebody who will waste it!

John Gill: Some think that Solomon here gives a hint of the suspicion he had, that his son Rehoboam, his successor and heir, would turn out a foolish man, as he did; *yet shall he have rule over all my labour wherein I have laboured, and wherein I have showed myself wise, under the sun;* be he what he will, all will come into his hands; and he will have the power of disposing of all at his pleasure; not only of enjoying it, but of changing and altering things; and perhaps greatly for the worse, if he does not entirely destroy what has been wrought with so much care and industry, toil and labour, wisdom and prudence

If you are enslaved to a system of works, you will have a different perspective

1. OT Example -- Solomon and Rehoboam (1 Kings 11:41 – 12:24)

2. NT Example -- Father of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:29-32) -- involves an inheritance; Contrast good attitude of Father with poor attitude of older son

Who will get it all?? *"the man who will come after me"*

seems like a strange way to describe his son; not a very close relationship

What type of nurturing took place between David and Solomon??

Between Solomon and Rehoboam?

Sometimes the success-driven Achiever justifies his long hours away from home with the excuse:

"I'm doing it for my kids -- so that they will have the things I never had" -- how sad; what the kids really want is a Dad who is there for them

Def. of Legacy: a gift by will; a bequest; anything handed down by an ancestor or

predecessor

Solomon's will must have been most complicated of all time –all those wives

gains both possession and control (management) of all the resources

You can hear Solomon crying: "Unfair" "Foul" "I've been had"

(1) Person might not be worthy in terms of his character

"who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool" (Luke 15:29)

(2) Person might not be capable to maintain the legacy, much less cause it to grow and prosper (Luke 15:30)

Solomon labored with:

wisdom

knowledge

skill

Rehoboam comes along and the first day in office he engineers a split in the kingdom

Shows what a great politician Solomon was; holding things together -- everyone was not happy under the burden of high taxation and bureaucratic exploitation

(3) Even if a person is worthy, even if he is capable, It is still unfair because the Person did not Earn the Legacy

Conclusion: *"This too is vanity and a great evil"*

Aside: Work as an escape from other pressures -- from family, from spiritual priorities, from character flaws; from weaknesses you don't want to accept

Nice to have a comfortable work situation where you can hide and imagine you are successful, because you can control this environment

don't just assume that activity and even productivity is healthy if it is really an escape from some other responsibility (Cf. illustration from CAA – one of the directors)

Transition:

Japanese have given a name to this rat-race: *karoshi* which means death by overwork, usually from a heart attack

C. (:20) You Don't Get Any Return on Your Investment –

Emotion of Pain, Suffering, Pressure, Anxiety, Rat-race

TEST: EARTHLY POSSESSIONS OR HEAVENLY TREASURES

"Therefore I completely despaired of all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun."

1. OT Example: contrast between Abraham and Lot
Job -- what did he get for a life of righteousness?

Jacob -- working hard for Laban for 7 years -- ended up
the first time with Leah (not Rachel)

2. NT Example: Zaccheus -- hard-working, rich tax collector
(Luke 19) no peace of heart from accomplishment

bank account got bigger; knew all about investments;
commodities trading; pressured to meet quotas by Mid-East Mafia

Very Desperate man -- wanted to see who Jesus was -- a man who
didn't have any of the world's possessions but also was free
from the anxiety and rat-race

Summary: How do we measure up against these 3 Tests from our passage this morning?

1) GREEDY PAWS VS. GENEROUS PURSESTRINGS

What are we holding on to that we need to let go? Remember Lot's wife
You can't take it with you

2) ENSLAVED TO WORKS OR FREED UP TO LIVE BY GRACE

How are we relating to others? Remember the brother of the Prodigal Son who
wanted to operate strictly on a works value system

3) HEART SET ON EARTHLY POSSESSIONS OR ON HEAVENLY TREASURES

Where are we investing? What return on investment will we get?
Remember the tragic choices made by Lot

D. (:21) Your Hard-Earned Legacy Can End Up in the Hands of the Undeserving

*“When there is a man who has labored with wisdom, knowledge and skill, then
he gives his legacy to one who has not labored with them. This too is vanity and
a great evil.”*

Some wealthy people do not believe in handing down the bulk of their assets to
their children

E. (:22-23) Conclusion: The Pursuit of Work Brings No Worthwhile Return

*“For what does a man get in all his labor and in his striving with which he
labors under the sun? Because all his days his task is painful and grievous;
even at night his mind does not rest. This too is vanity.”*

**III. (:24-25) FLASH OF INSIGHT – ENJOY WHAT GOD HAS GIVEN TO
YOU (NOT WHAT YOU SEEK AFTER TO TRY TO SATISFY YOURSELF)**

Wiersbe: This is the first of six “conclusions” in Ecclesiastes, each of which emphasizes

the importance of accepting life as God's gift and enjoying it in God's will (3:12-15, 22; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-10; 11:9-10).

Kidner: Major transition at this juncture

- God is now in view in this section
- wisdom viewed as a gift from God rather than simply man's acquisition

Here then is the antithesis of secular pessimism. The Preacher has held before his readers two ways of life; the vicious circles of a pointless world, temporary pleasures, fruitless work, futile wisdom, inevitable death, versus an enjoyable life taken daily from the hand of God, in the "assurance of faith" that he deals appropriately with righteous and unrighteous.

A. (:24-25) God's Gifts Are Good and Should be Enjoyed with Thanksgiving

"There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good. This also I have seen that it is from the hand of God. For who can eat and who can have enjoyment without Him?"

1. Basic Gifts are the Best Gifts

- Food
- Drink
- Work

2. These Gifts are From the Sovereign, Providential Hand of God

3. No satisfaction apart from appreciation of God's Good Gifts

Swindoll: We have the idea that the world is the one that give enjoyment and God's the One who clubs us when we have fun – I mean the kind of fun that is really enjoyment (without a hangover) – then you need only one ingredient in your midst; you need a relationship with the living God. According to Solomon, *"Who can have enjoyment without Him?"* As God's people, we're the ones who ought to be having the time of our lives!

Ryrie: Solomon's solution to the paradoxes of life, set forth six times ... is to enjoy to the fullest the life that God has given, recognizing it as His gift. God has not revealed the solution to all of life's inconsistencies but has given man a life to enjoy while living in obedience to him.

B. (:26) God's Gifts Ultimately Flow to the Righteous

"For to a person who is good in His sight He has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, while to the sinner He has given the task of gathering and collecting so that he may give to one who is good in God's sight. This too is vanity and striving after wind."

1. Different Strokes for Different Folks

- a. For the Righteous

b. For the Sinner

2. Nothing but Futility for the Sinner Apart from God

Prov. 13:22 "A good man leaves an inheritance to his children's children, and the wealth of the sinner is stored up for the righteous."

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

CONCLUSION: How should we approach the pursuit of wisdom and meaningful accomplishment?

Swindoll: How very many there are who *appear* to be suave, stable, and successful but who, down inside, are dreadfully frustrated! The term "*frustrated*" comes from a Latin term *frustra*, which means "*in vain*." In other words, one who is "*frustrated*" feels that all he does is void of purpose. In spite of great effort and constant pursuit, the frustrated individual fails to realize his dreams. A sense of helplessness evolves into hopelessness . . . even though great pains are taken to hide the awful truth. Few are those who peel off their masks and admit how greatly they struggle. When they do, however, our admiration for them is enhanced. Vulnerability is a rare but much-respected trait. (p.40)

Example of Christ -- "*came not to be ministered unto* (not to accumulate possessions and accomplishments for himself) *but to minister and to give his life a ransom for many*" -- What type of legacy did he leave behind?? Purchased eternal life for us

2 Cor. 8:9 "*For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich*"

- 1) He left behind all of His glory and treasure in heaven - "*He became poor*"
no clenched fists of hatred
- 2) He operated on the basis of Grace
no cries of despair
- 3) He sought an eternal return on His investment -- a spiritual return -- instead
of earthly treasures
no anxiety of heart, but instead Perfect Peace

John 14:1-3 This is our eternal destiny

No need to get caught up in a lifetime of futile accomplishments that won't add anything to our heavenly home

Oppty now is to do "greater works" than even Jesus did:

- works of faith
- works energized by the Holy Spirit
- works accomplished thru prayer

1 Cor. 15:58 *"Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord."*
Tremendous promise of encouragement

* * * * *

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) Think of the workaholics you have known. List their characteristics. Why do they find it so difficult to relax and enjoy life? What is motivating their drive to accomplish?
- 2) How does our culture worship education and advanced degrees? How have we separated the relationship between knowledge and wisdom? In what ways is it grievous to pursue learning?
- 3) How many generations in your family can you remember? What type of lasting legacy did people leave?
- 4) What is your worldview towards work? What are the purposes of work? What enjoyment or satisfaction do you derive from your work?

* * * * *

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Cobb: Someone has well-said,
"You're not ready to live, until you're ready to die."

Solomon was not ready to die.

He had more money than anyone else. He had more wives than anyone else. He had the most glamorous house around. He was the wisest man of his day. But because he hadn't looked beyond the grave, he searched in vain to find meaning in life.

Have you come to grips with the fact that one day you will also die. Life as you know it will be over. You will never see another sunset. Never sit down in your present house to have another dinner. Your body will take its last breath and you

will be gone.

WHAT THEN?

Will it matter how much money you saved up during your lifetime?
Will it matter how big your house was?
Will it matter what kind of car you drove?
Will it matter what schools you went to?
Will it matter how fancy your clothes were?
Will it matter how much overtime you spent at the office
to move up the corporate ladder?
Will it matter what positions of influence you held?
Will it matter how smart you were, or how strong you were?

WHAT WILL MATTER IN ETERNITY?

Ah yes! This is the crux of the matter. This is the question we should come back to time and time again in our walk with the Lord. "What will matter for eternity?"

ONLY ONE LIFE

Only one life to offer, Jesus my Lord and King;
Only one tongue to praise Thee and of Thy mercy sing
Only one heart's devotion - Saviour Oh may it be
Consecrated alone to Thy matchless glory,
Yielded fully to Thee.

Only this hour is mine, Lord - May it be used for Thee;
May every passing moment COUNT FOR ETERNITY.
Souls all about are dying, dying in sin and shame;
Help me bring them the message of Calvary's redemption
In Thy glorious name.

Racer: The Gift of Enjoying the Fruit of One's Work

THREE WRONG VIEWS OF WORK

(from Your Work Matters to God by Douglas Sherman and William Hendricks)

1) Secular View = Work is an end in itself

I work so that I can get money so I can spend it how I want to pay the bills, etc.
God is not in the picture at all

2) Secular vs. Sacred Dichotomy --

There is some work that is less valuable to God than others. Secular work is less valuable than some type of Christian ministry; but Adam was a farmer -- even before the Fall; Christ was a carpenter for a good number of years

3) Sacred Platform -- Only one worthwhile end to work = a pulpit for evangelism

I go to work mainly to evangelize others

All these three views diminish the intrinsic value of work itself as designed by God Himself. Therefore, these views are wrong.

Let's look at the **Biblical concept of work:**

I. WORK AS AN EXPRESSION OF THE IMAGE OF GOD

Look at work back at the beginning in Gen. 1:26-28; Gen. 3

Man holds a special place in the created realm = vice-regent;

Man has creativity, intelligence, interpersonal skills, character, moral virtue, ability to produce and ability to serve others

(These things don't happen when we sleep, play, etc.)

God gave us privilege and responsibility -- the Dominion concept

cf. quotes from Back to the Blackboard by **Jay Adams**:

"to occupy and subdue to God's glory was man's role in the world."

Education must be designed to meet that objective

We need to enter into the work of God -- leads to many exciting possibilities

cf. relationship between Boredom and Anxiety

Oliver North's radio show mentioned the Institute for the Study of Boredom and Anxiety -- there is a known cause and effect relationship between slothfulness and mental health

If you are lazy, you are not cooperating with how God designed you

If you force your children to work and to do their best you will help develop their character

Thomas Edison: "I never did a day's work in all my life -- It was all fun"

Try taking that type of enthusiasm to the workplace

II. WORK AS AN EXPRESSION OF LOVE

See the context of Mark 12:28-35 -- talking about the foremost commandment

Matt. 28:38-40; Acts 20:34-35

When you work to serve someone else and provide for their needs, it eliminates the sense of vanity and purposeless (vs. Working just for myself)

We need to work not only to provide for our own family, but to have resources to share with others -- "*it is more blessed to give than to receive*"

1 Tim. 5:8; 6:18-19; Ephes. 4

Our work matters! God will see and evaluate our work.

Can you look at your work and recognize how it is an expression of love towards someone else? If you can't, you may be on your way down the road to meaninglessness!

III. WORK AS AN EXPRESSION OF WORSHIP

Matt. 22:37 *"love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and all your mind"*

Give God all that you're capable of giving; give your best effort

Work whole-heartedly -- because God is worthy; with enthusiasm -- Col. 3:23

Kidner: If one fate comes to all, and that fate is extinction, it robs every man of his dignity and every project of its point. . . . As to man's dignity, what is so mortifying (an appropriate word!) about death's final levelling of wise men and fools . . . is that if it is true, it allows the last word to a brute fact which tramples on every value-judgment we can make. Everything may tell us that wisdom is not on a par with folly, nor goodness with evil; but no matter: if death is the end of the road, the contention that there is nothing to choose between them will get the last word. The choices that we positively knew to be significant will be brushed aside as finally irrelevant.

Fairchild: Now Solomon comes to another of his great observations and experiments. Solomon tries wisdom and work, or in other words- getting smart and getting things done- our equivalent to getting a degree and getting a good job. But Solomon is confounded by his ultimate destination- death. Life is hard to understand, life is difficult to find meaning when we are mortal, life is frustratingly cruel when death stands in our way. Death acts as a great sandstorm that comes to flatten all of our sandcastles we are so proud of. Death is the great equalizer because no matter how high we build them, we all descend six feet under as we push up tulips. Paul calls death our last enemy (1 Corinthians 15:26). This explains why we spend so much of our lives obsessing over it, fearing it, sanitizing it, ignoring it, exalting it, or trying to postpone it. Yet it comes for each of us closer each minute and in every breath. . .

If we take God's gifts and decisions as they come with thanks and don't try to manipulate our outwit God, we will find our pleasure in what He gives to us daily. . .

Instead of spending all our time trying to figure out life, we should stick close to God and enjoy it. If we spend too much time trying to figure it out through wisdom, and try to straighten it out through work, we will die before getting around to actually enjoying it.

Everyone gets certain gifts from God such as life, food, drink, and work, but only the children of God who walk with Him faithfully get the gifts of enjoyment and satisfaction. This is a great secret, that our stuff and our satisfaction are two different things and that our satisfaction doesn't come from our stuff, but from our Savior.

<http://www.kaleochurch.com/sermon/I-Hated-Life>

Ray Stedman: Life in the Fast Lane

Unfortunately here [v.24] is another instance where we have lost the true meaning of the verse by a bad translation. In the next chapter there is a similar passage that properly includes the words, "there is nothing better than," but that is not what it says here. Delete from the text the words, "*better than*," because they are not in the Hebrew and they do not belong here. What this text actually says is,

There is nothing in man that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil.

There is nothing in man, there is no inherent value in him that makes it possible for him to extract true enjoyment from the things he does. That is the first thing Solomon says.

What does, then? He tells us:

This also, I saw, is from the hand of God; for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? (Ecclesiastes 2:24b-25 RSV)

That is his second declaration, and that is the true message of this book. Enjoyment is a gift of God. There is nothing in possessions, in material goods, in money, there is nothing in man himself that can enable him to keep enjoying the things he does. But it is possible to have enjoyment all your life if you take it from the hand of God. It is given to those who please God. Verse 26:

For to the man who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy; (Ecclesiastes 2:26a RSV)

Wisdom and knowledge have been mentioned before as things you can get from "under the sun," but they will not continue. To have added to it the ingredient of pleasure, of continual delight going on and on, unceasing throughout the whole of life, you must take it from the hand of God. The man who pleases God is given the gift of joy.

<http://www.raystedman.org/eccles/3807.html>

F. B. Meyer: The 19th-century British author **Charles Kingsley** wrote, "Thank God every morning when you get up that you have something to do that day which must be done whether you like it or not."

Consider what these three people gave to the world by working with diligence: Noah Webster labored 36 years and crossed the ocean twice to produce his dictionary. John Milton rose at 4 o'clock every morning to compose and rewrite his poetry. Edward Gibbon spent 26 years writing his famous history, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.

What we do may seem insignificant by comparison. But if we work "heartily, as to the Lord" (Col. 3:23), He will use our labors to provide for our needs and the needs of others. Any kind of wholesome work can be a blessing. —H. G. B.

To LEAVE LASTING FOOTPRINTS ON THE SANDS OF TIME, WEAR WORK SHOES.

TEXT: Ecclesiastes 3:1-22

TITLE: *WRESTLING WITH ETERNITY –
THE FUTILITY OF TRYING TO COMPREHEND THE DIVINE MASTER PLAN*

BIG IDEA:

**THE INSCRUTABLE NATURE OF ETERNITY WILL FRUSTRATE MAN'S
EFFORTS TO FIGURE THINGS OUT –
JUST SUBMIT AND TAKE THINGS AS THEY COME**

INTRODUCTION:

David Thompson: GOD SOVEREIGNLY CONTROLS EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENS IN THE TIME OF ONE'S LIFE, BOTH THE POSITIVE AND THE NEGATIVE, AND IF ONE DOES NOT HAVE GOD AT THE CENTER OF LIFE, NONE OF WHAT HAPPENS WILL MAKE SENSE AND THE PERSON WILL NOT KNOW WHAT TO SAY OR DO IN VIEW OF THE COMING JUDGMENT OF GOD.

Michael Eaton: This section elucidates the **worldview** underlying the life portrayed in **2:24-26**. Just as **1:2 - 2:23** moved from the pessimistic worldview (**1:2-11**) to the pessimistic daily life (**1:12 - 2:23**), so in a chiasmic movement the thought of **2:24-26** proceeds from the believer's life to his worldview (**3:1-22**). **Verses 1-8** lay down the basic postulate; **3:9-15** work out its practical implications.

Tremper Longman: In vv. **1–15** Qohelet acknowledges the order of God's universe. There are proper times and seasons. Nonetheless, since human beings cannot know these times, the result is frustration. In the light of humanity's inability to discover the larger picture or significance of God's creation, Qohelet advocates settling for the lesser pleasures of life. However, not everyone can avail themselves of these diversions, only those whom God so blesses. The implication is that other people, including Qohelet himself, must struggle with depressing reality.

Walter Kaiser: Solomon's personal experience as king, and the restlessness of nature itself, laid the groundwork for the inescapable conclusion that if enjoyment and happiness were ever going to be within anyone's reach, they would need to come as **direct gifts from God to persons of faith**—so Solomon taught by divine revelation. The wicked, meanwhile, were left with the aggravating and empty task of accumulating goods that could soon be converted to other uses by those fearing God as the wicked yielded those things up at their death. The contrast and difference in the outcome of each is very explicit in this memorable section of Ecclesiastes.

Thus, in the next step in his fourfold argument in this book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon boldly argued the thesis that **every action of an individual can be traced to its ultimate source, which is an all-embracing plan that is administered by God (3:1)**. This is a beautiful plan, yet men and women do not and, as a matter of fact, cannot

apprehend it because of their prevailing worldliness. So vast, so eternal, and so comprehensive in its inclusions is this plan that mortals are both threatened and exasperated in their attempts to discover it for themselves. Nevertheless, being built by God, and being made in God's own image, each person possesses a hunger within his or her heart to know the vastness, wholeness, and key details of this plan. Yet it cannot be known until one comes to personally know the living God (3:11). Therefore, each is once again cut off from the very substance for which his or her whole being yearns, just as each likewise searched for happiness and joy in chapters 1 and 2. There must be a divine plan behind all of this!

Douglas Miller: Following the summary conclusion to the royal investigation in 2:24-26, the start of chapter 3 indicates a new unit by the poem in verses 2-8. In the previous section, Qohelet has acknowledged the mysterious and arbitrary actions of the Deity. He now examines **God's relation to timing in the activities of life**. Although there are connections to the previous unit, this section (3:1-15) is unified by its attention to the sovereignty of God in determining events. This theme is further developed in the area of judgment (3:16-22). The latter paragraph resumes the issue of fate raised in 2:12-17, and the conclusion regarding pleasure in 3:22 both reinforces 3:13 and echoes 2:24-26.

Summary:

The focus in chapter 3 is not upon calculated human activity in itself, but upon God's activity and how humans might best respond to it. The most that humans can do is to respond to the way God acts, including the cycles of life that God has laid out and the events, even the terrible events, that God has allowed to happen.

In summary, Qohelet says,

- (1) humans do not achieve gain for their toil,
- (2) God is the one ultimately in charge,
- (3) human ignorance hinders the ability of persons to act appropriately to the time,
- (4) God will hold humans accountable,
- (5) God's judgment demonstrates the frailty of human life, and
- (6) the best response is for humans to enjoy their work, their portion, while life shall last.

Without using vapor (hebel), the first half of this unit gathers together the Teacher's conclusions concerning the insubstantiality of human effort and the difficult circumstances that God has prescribed. In the process, Qohelet emphasizes the permanence of God's work, which, in the unit's second part, comes into contrast with the insubstantial vapor (hebel) and dust of the human condition.

I. (:1-8) DIVINE CONTROL -- DIVINE APPOINTMENT DETERMINES THE SEASONS OF LIFE AND THE EVENTS THAT TAKE PLACE

David Hubbard: In this poem the motif of **changelessness** and **divine control** is applied to the **widest possible range of human activities**. The literary form comprises fourteen pairs of contrasts. The use of this double seven number helps to convey the idea of completeness. These contrary lines couple basic human experiences and their equally basic opposites. This device is usually called a **merism** and suggests that the poles that are stated mean to include every similar activity that occurs between them. The pair, for example, “*to be born*” and “*to die*” (3:2) embrace each major event, perhaps even each moment, in the human life cycle. The poem is wrapped in an introduction (3:1) and a conclusion (3:9).

The introduction establishes the **theme of set or appointed times**. “*Season*” means literally “*appointed time*” (NASB) as its use (Heb. *zemān*) elsewhere indicates: in Nehemiah it marks the schedule for the cupbearer’s journey to Jerusalem and his return (2:6); in Esther it pinpoints the calendar for the two-day feast of Purim in celebration of rescue from the genocidal plots of Haman (9:27, 31). “*Purpose*” in **verse 1** means “event,” “activity,” or “matter” (see 8:6 which carries a thought similar to that of 3:1). The breadth of the word (Heb. *hēphes*, which may also mean “delight” or “pleasure” in 5:4 and 12:1; see also “acceptable” in 12:10) is assured by its parallel use to “everything” in 3:14 and to “work” (“deed” or “task”) in 3:17. It seems to include **all the major activities in which human beings engage under the sovereign will of God**.

The human component in all of this is made clear in two ways. First, the items in the catalog all involve **human participation**. They are not activities of the elements like earth, sun, wind, and sea in 1:4–11. Second, the conclusion (3:9) centers in **the futility of all the human activity involved in life as summarized in verses 2–8**. . .

We live according to God’s determination, announced Koheleth, not ours. We live in time, conscious of it virtually every minute, but it is God’s planned time that dictates our important activities and significant events. . .

Our ignorance of God’s ways—this is the vexing problem. God controls our times, but He has not told us how and why. We walk in the dark, merely submitting to what God has determined, blind to His purposes, lame in our efforts to cooperate.

Walter Kaiser: The Principle: God’s Plan Embraces All of Our Reality

From the perspective of God, it is He who orders all aspects of a person’s life and actions. Even when there is sickness, death, war, and the like, God is in charge of the seasons and times of life. This does not mean God is willing to let a person’s life fall into chaos, for He also makes sure there are times for giving birth, healing, and peace as well. Life is not one of chance or fate, for despite the haphazard appearance of things, **God alone is in charge of nature and history**. The only persons who would be upset by this are secularists who wish to be their own god over all things. **Michael Kelley** noted that “The precise quality of man’s rebellion lies in his supreme aspiration to make nature and history serve and glorify man. To accomplish that goal he must have the absolute lordship of time and its content.”

A. (:1) God's Appointed Times

*"There is an appointed time for everything.
And there is a time for every event under heaven--"*

B. (:2-8) Seven Contrasting Seasons – Viewed as Extremes

Seven is number of completeness in Scripture; **14 comparisons**

Daniel Akin: The poem reveals the **great absurdity of life** because **each activity cancels the other out**. There are 14 pluses and 14 minuses, and that adds up to zero (**Begg**, "*Eternity on My Mind*")! Every birth ends in death, every planted crop is pulled up, every building is eventually condemned, every celebration gives way to a funeral, and every peace gives way to another war. Nothing is gained.

Douglas Miller: It is best simply to recognize these lines as a striking and poetic litany of **things that people do**, arranged in mutually exclusive couplets. They collectively emphasize the **varied experiences of life** that pull a person or group in opposite directions. They are representative of everything and every matter (**3:1**). . . there is a sense of **thoroughness**: the poem represents the **totality of human experience**. The fact that there are seven pairs of pairs (twenty-eight items total) may also symbolize completeness.

1. (:2) Life vs Death

*"A time to give birth, and a time to die;
A time to plant, and a time to uproot what is planted."*

2. (:3) Hurting vs Healing (Destruction vs Construction)

*"A time to kill, and a time to heal;
A time to tear down, and a time to build up."*

3. (:4) Grief vs Joy

*"A time to weep, and a time to laugh;
A time to mourn, and a time to dance."*

4. (:5) Hugging vs Throwing Stones

*"A time to throw stones, and a time to gather stones;
A time to embrace, and a time to shun embracing."*

Daniel Akin: There is a time to cast away and gather stones (**Ecc 3:5**). The phrase is difficult to understand for modern ears, but most likely stone casting refers to an ancient war practice. For example, **2 Kings 3:19, 25** lays out a war strategy for Israel in which they are to cast stones on their enemies' fields in order to make them unworkable. It disrupts agriculture. **Isaiah 5:2** describes the process of clearing stones from a field before you plant a vineyard.

Douglas Miller: An ancient rabbinic commentary on this verse equates scattering of stones with sexual intercourse and gathering stones with abstinence. The second half of verse 5 would seem to be consistent with this understanding, although the embracing mentioned there need not imply sexual relations.

5. (:6) Persistence vs Resignation

*“A time to search, and a time to give up as lost;
A time to keep, and a time to throw away.”*

6. (:7) Confrontation vs Forbearance (Union)

*“A time to tear apart, and a time to sew together;
A time to be silent, and a time to speak.”*

7. (:8) Love (Peace) vs Hate (War)

*“A time love, and a time to hate;
A time for war, and a time for peace.”*

Application: Use our time wisely in submission to God’s overall plan and His wisdom, even when we cannot understand everything about our particular season of life. God is in control.

Douglas Sean O’Donnell: Like the apostles before Jesus’ ascension, we want to know the fullness of God’s plan. But Ecclesiastes gives the same answer that Jesus gave his apostles on that occasion: *“It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority” (Acts 1:7).* *“The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever” (Deut. 29:29).* So let us rejoice in the revelation that we have been given. Let us be wise enough to recognize that **our times are in God’s hands (Ps. 31:15)**. Let us embrace the beauty of God’s comprehensive control of everything.

II. (:9-15) DIVINE TIMEFRAME – DIVINE PERSPECTIVE ALLOWS FOR CONTENTMENT IN THE PRESENT IN LIGHT OF GOD’S PURPOSES FOR ETERNITY

A. (:9-11) Connection to Eternity Can Be Frustrating Right Now

1. (:9) Work Seems Futile

“What profit is there to the worker from that in which he toils?”

2. (:10) Yet God Desires Responsible Living

“I have seen the task which God has given the sons of men with which to occupy themselves.”

3. (:11a) Life Must be Lived According to God’s Schedule

“He has made everything appropriate in its time.”

Van Parunak: He has established a world complex enough that "*everything is beautiful in its time.*" All the opposites of vv.2-8 fit somewhere, and where they fit, the opposite would be inappropriate. Men sense this; moral dilemmas take their root from it.

Daniel Akin: The word translated "*beautiful*" or "*appropriate*" means God made everything good and right, so that everything perfectly fits its own place and time. Bottom line, the phrase sums up the poem to show that God is the One in charge of these times and appointed activities. And it sets up what follows. The overarching point seems to be that God has appointed or ordained all of these things as part of His bigger, hidden plan.

4. (:11b) Man Cannot See the End from the Beginning

"He has also set eternity in their heart, yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end."

You won't find dogs leading a frustrated existence; they have no connection to eternity. It does not bother them that they cannot understand the eternal purposes and plan of God.

Van Parunak: He has put **eternity** [literal meaning of (*oLaM*) in men's hearts. Men know that they are meant for more than time, yet the inevitability of death means that they can never grasp that for which they reach. Thus men long to understand God's ways, but cannot. This is what drives them on their busyness.

Daniel Akin: We cannot know or see God's entire plan or fully grasp it, no matter how much we want to. The limit of man's knowledge is a major theme in Ecclesiastes, and the purpose of exposing that reality is to drive us to faith in God. We know there is more out there, and we want to know our purpose and our destiny. However, we are still dependent creatures who can only know and handle a sliver of what the Creator is really doing. And if we doubt in any way the truth of that statement, we need to be reminded that, mysterious as it may be, when the Son of God set aside His glory and took on human flesh, even He did not know all the times set by God (**Matt 24:36**). As **Matt Chandler** points out, we are like a child in the "why stage" ("*Ingredients*"). When you tell a child in the why stage to do something, he or she can ask "Why?" into infinity, and eventually you have to say in exasperation, "Because I told you so." In a sense we cannot handle all of the whys of God's plan, so He tells us, "Even though you cannot know it all, you can trust Me!"

Here, then, is the main idea of **3:11** and how it fits with the absurdity of life described earlier. We perceive and long for better things than this cursed misery, but we cannot see the full picture, and we must lean on God. **We are trapped between time and eternity**, and we must trust that God uses the details to work out a grander plan.

B. (:12-13) Contentment Now Comes from Staying Positive and Seeing All Good Things as a Gift from God

1. Cultivate an Attitude of Rejoicing – Stay Positive

“I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice”

Van Parunak: Enjoy Life -- At the center of the chiasm, we return to the **opening theme**. Frustration is only appropriate if we limit our gaze to ourselves. God has better for us.

2. Cultivate Actions that Benefit Others – Do Good

“and to do good in one’s lifetime”

3. Cultivate Appreciation for God Supplying Your Needs – Partake Thankfully

“moreover, that every man who eats and drinks”

4. Cultivate Awareness of All of God’s Good Gifts – Work Purposefully

“sees good in all his labor – it is the gift of God.”

Knut Martin Heim: Qoheleth draws three conclusions:

- first, that the pursuit of happiness is the only appropriate response to the precarious state of affairs just described (v. 12);
- second, that human capacity for happiness depends on God (v. 13); and,
- third, that the divine control over human pursuits is permanent, unchangeable and designed for a purpose (v. 14).

Douglas Sean O’Donnell: We are completely known by God, but we cannot completely know the plans or purposes of God because we are not God. The mirror before our faces is murky (1 Cor. 13:12), and our window into heaven narrow. What, then, should we do? Under the sunlight of God’s sovereignty, we should be holy and happy. Rejoice in the Lord. Obey Christ’s commands. Do good to others. Eat your roast-beef sandwich. Sip your Scotch. Smile, God loves you. Seriously.

The Purpose of Time: To review, there are three lessons to learn from our text.

- First, we should embrace the beauty of God’s comprehensive control of everything. Wow!
- Second, under the sunlight of God’s sovereignty, we should be holy and happy. Amen and amen.
- Third, because of God’s enduring, complete, and just providence, we should fear God.

C. (:14-15) Control Must Be Yielded to the Eternal Unchanging Sovereign God

David Thompson: What Solomon knew about God. 3:14-15

Fact #1 - God’s work is permanent. 3:14a

Solomon knew everything God does is something that stands forever. If we link into something God is doing, it will stand. If your life, if your business, if your ministry is of God, it will have a **permanence** to it. Everything man does and is, in and of himself, is

transitory. Everything God does and is, is eternal. When transitory man happens to link into the eternal plan of God, there is a permanence to it.

Fact #2 - God's work is perfect. 3:14b

There is nothing one will ever need to add or to subtract from the perfect work of God. In God's work, nothing is missing or lacking. It is true of God, it is true of His work and it is true of His Word (**Deut. 4:2**). Nothing ever needs to be added to the work of God or to the Word of God.

Fact #3 - God's work is purposeful. 3:15

There is a purpose for everything God sovereignly allows in life and that is to bring a person to the place where he will fear Him. God keeps doing and demonstrating the same kinds of things He has done before in order to bring a man to the point where that man will fear God.

1. (:14a) God's Works Last Forever

"I know that everything God does will remain forever;"

2. (:14b) God Does Not Need Our Help

"there is nothing to add to it and there is nothing to take from it"

3. (:14c) God Wants Men to Fear Him

"for God has so worked that men should fear Him."

Knut Martin Heim: The state of affairs pertaining to the divine order of creation after the fall is specifically designed to provoke and sustain "*fear of God*". Life is not meant to be easy, precisely in order to remind human beings that they do not have their lives and the outcomes of their endeavours in their own hands.

4. (:15) God Operates Outside of the Constraints of Time

"That which is has been already, and that which will be has already been, for God seeks what has passed by."

Application: **Doug Smith:** The works of God are eternal. Even though life, from our limited perspective, may seem like a repetitive cycle, God has a purpose in it all and He ensures that everything unfolds in accordance with His plan and His will.

We need to fear God and live lives of contentment, appreciating all of God's good gifts and allowing God to work out His eternal purposes.

Knut Martin Heim: This concluding reflection makes three more general affirmations.

- First, the entire state of affairs explored in **verses 1–14** is nothing new.
- Second, Qoheleth helps his audience to view their own perceptions of novelty – prompted perhaps by the new political circumstances of Ptolemaic rule – in the light of eternity.

- The final phrase in verse 15 appears opaque to the point of obscurity – and God seeks out what is being pursued – and this is reflected in the various interpretations it has received (Fox 1989: 197; Krüger 2004: 90; Longman 1998: 124). A contextually fitting interpretation is to conclude that *nirdāp* refers to that which human beings, Qoheleth’s intended audience in particular, are pursuing: happiness. The remainder of the statement then simply affirms, third, that **God is concerned for and personally interested in the human quest for happiness.**

III. (:16-22) DIVINE JUSTICE – DIVINE ACCOUNTABILITY MITIGATES THE FRUSTRATION FROM TEMPORAL INJUSTICE AND APPARENT PURPOSELESSNESS

David Thompson: GOD IS ALWAYS SOVEREIGN AND ALWAYS WORKING OUT HIS PLAN EVEN WHEN THINGS ARE UNJUST AND UNRIGHTEOUS, AND ONE WHO FEARS HIM AND HIS FUTURE JUDGMENT WILL BE HAPPY.

Knut Martin Heim: After a stylized sketch of the **public perversion of justice (v. 16)**, Qoheleth launches into an extended and highly complex response. Two internal dialogues reaffirm traditional Jewish beliefs in spite of the present circumstances (vv. 17–18) and explore the implications of death for human conduct (vv. 19–21). He then presents a practical conclusion, recommending the active enjoyment of human endeavour (v. 22).

David Hubbard: The flow of 3:16–22 moves something like this:

The observation of injustice	v. 16
The declaration of judgment	v. 17
The reflections on judgment	vv. 18–21
The alternative conclusion on how to live with injustice	v. 22

Daniel Akin: Why am I here? What’s the reason for my existence? Those are gigantic questions. Most people know things like pleasure or possessions or the pursuit of money are not high enough values. Most of us recognize that those aims are too low and inadequate for life. There has to be more to life—something more meaningful—than money and pleasurable experiences. As people ask the question about the meaning of life and come to believe that they are here for a “higher purpose,” many conclude, “I am here to make the world a better place.” People try different routes to accomplish that purpose. Some people go the **route of politics**. That is the path “cultural Christianity” has chosen. They put their hope in politics. . .

Many people are jaded with politics and think that nothing really changes, so they choose a different route to find meaning in life by changing the world. The second option is **grassroots work for social justice**. People fight against the system in order to see real change. They work to help the poor, defenseless, and disenfranchised. Many young people—who cannot seem to clean their rooms—desire to clean up the world,

and so they gravitate to this path. They get excited, and rightly so, about causes like orphan care, sex trafficking, endangered animals, and the environment. Some work hard to make a difference, but let's be honest, in most cases there is little actual change. . .

That is Solomon's point in Ecclesiastes. If this cursed world is all there is, then all of our actions, even actions to promote the common good, are futile. In **Ecclesiastes 3:16–4:3** and also **5:8-9**, Solomon indicts both politics and justice as ultimately fleeting and meaningless.

Iain Provan: Though these verses are tied to the previous passage by the mention of “*a time for every activity*” in **v.17** and possibly by the opposition of time versus eternity in **vv.21–22** (though this is not clear), a new set of concepts is introduced, particularly, injustice and the absurdity of a common destiny for humans and animals. Both are connected to the idea in **v.18** of God as the divine test-giver.

A. (:16) Frustration from Temporal Injustice

“Furthermore, I have seen under the sun that in the place of justice there is wickedness, and in the place of righteousness there is wickedness.”

Douglas Sean O'Donnell: We may summarize **Ecclesiastes 3:16–17** like this: The sight of wickedness in unlikely places should help us to turn in faith and hope to God, who will rightly judge at the right time. What comes next in **verses 18–22** may be summarized as follows: **The sight of our own mortality should motivate us to work with joy.**

Note that both reactions to the realities of wickedness and death are unexpected and ironic. While we would expect to arrive at hopelessness after viewing wickedness in places that we do not expect to find it, instead we are told to hope in God. And while we would expect to arrive at despair after seeing that we die and return to dust just like every animal in the fallen world, instead we are told to rejoice in our God-given work.

B. (:17-21) Frustration from Apparent Purposelessness – How is Man Different from Beast?

1. (:17) Expectation of Accountability

“I said to myself, ‘God will judge both the righteous man and the wicked man,’ for a time for every matter and for every deed is there.”

Walter Kaiser: God had instituted human tribunals (“*the place of judgment*” [**v. 16**] is a court of law) as places where men could expect to find judicial relief. But when wickedness is offered where justice should be found, that is a matter of utmost seriousness. Similarly, “*the place of righteousness*” (**v. 16**) is the house of God, where one would also expect a fair hearing and correction of injustice and evil. Such inequities, when both the law courts and the house of God fail the oppressed, God Himself will rectify in the future judgment, even though their cases appear temporarily to run unattended and to be adjudicated unfairly. Wronging the innocent and clearing

the guilty is dangerous business, for all who practice such crookedness and demagoguery will face the Judge of all judges in that final judgment.

2. (:18-21) Examination of Ultimate Destiny

“I said to myself concerning the sons of men, ‘God has surely tested them in order for them to see that they are but beasts.’ For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same. As one dies so dies the other; indeed, they all have the same breath and there is no advantage for man over beast, for all is vanity. All go to the same place. All came from the dust and all return to the dust. Who knows that the breath of man ascends upward and the breath of the beast descends downward to the earth?”

Walter Kaiser: **Death is the great leveler of all living beings.** It happens to men as it happens to beasts: both are subject to death. Yet by this very same fact, God shows mortals their frailty in an effort to force them to turn back and search for Himself: to come to the realization that all goods are from His hand, to receive from His hand the ability to enjoy those gifts, and to come to appreciate His sovereign plan.

Tragically, **we seldom take to heart as we ought to the reality of death.** We moderns are more primitive in our estimate of and regard for the life hereafter than were the men of antiquity. We are insulated from directly facing the grim aspects of death day in and day out; it was not so with those in Solomon’s day. They had no gadgetry to occupy their minds, no gracious living to cause them to forget, no hospitals and rest homes to remove the smell, sound, and sight of death or the death rattles from them. Most people conclude that since *“all go to one place”* (v. 20), that is, the *“grave”* (here the idea is not *“hell”*), that is the end of it. Certainly, both men and beasts are made out of dust, and their bodies return to the dust; but what poor gamblers men and women are if they believe that that is the end of the matter. **Verse 21** deliberately adds in the clearest tones possible (despite very little help from some translations or most commentators), *“The spirit of man goes upward, but the spirit of the beast goes down to the earth”* (emphasis mine). The verbs *“to go upward”* and *“to go downward”* are active participles with the article attached to them and not, as some incorrectly insist, the Hebrew sign of the interrogative. As **Leupold** has accurately rendered this concept, *“There are not many who take to heart as they ought to the fact that the spirit of man goeth upward and that the spirit of the beast goeth downward to the earth.”* The presence of the long *“a”* in the prefix *ha-* instead of the short *“a”* shows that the Hebrew scribes, called the Masoretes, did not regard **verse 21** as an interrogative or conditional sentence. Had not Solomon also argued already that unjust judges will face the living God at some point (**3:17**)? And will not God with consistency press the same facts into service in **Ecclesiastes 12:7**: *“The dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it”*? What would be the point of concluding his book with the ominous warning about the future that *“God will bring every deed into judgment”* (**12:14**) if men and women are dead and gone forever once they die? If that were the case, who would care if God reprimanded our worms after we had long ceased to exist? Neither they nor our dust will much care. But such is not Solomon’s thought. Concepts of **man’s**

immortality are as old as Enoch, the seventh from Adam (**Jude 14**); his body entered the eternal state directly. Even patriarchal Job knew that death was not the end of life. He observed that if you chop down a tree, it often sends out new “shoots” from the old stump (**Job 14:7**). Likewise, he contested, if you chop down a man so that he dies, there is hope for him that he too will also “shoot” again in new life (**Job 14:14**; the same root word as in **verse 7** is used here, although the fact is obscured in the translations). The same point of view was affirmed by the psalmist in **Psalm 49:12-15**, where he too argued that “*man...is like the beasts that perish. Like sheep they are laid in the grave...But God will redeem my soul/life (Hebrew nephesh) from the power of the grave, for he will receive me*”, (NKJV).

C. (:22) Existential Philosophy is the Best One Can Hope for Under the Sun

“And I have seen that nothing is better than that man should be happy in his activities, for that is his lot. For who will bring him to see what will occur after him?”

Application: We have no need to be anxious or cynical because God holds the future in His hands and will establish righteousness.

* * * * *

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) In what ways do we try to resist God’s timeframe and find ourselves frustrated? What seasons of life has God brought you through recently?
- 2) Are we realistic in the counsel that we offer to others or do we expect them to arrive at a state of unrealistic understanding of the divine purposes behind their trials?
- 3) How is man different from the beasts in terms of his sense of eternity? What practical difference does this make in man’s thinking and in man’s behavior?
- 4) Is Solomon just advocating a “Whatever will be, will be” philosophy? Is this godly counsel or just the conclusion of an observer looking at life “under the sun”?

* * * * *

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Warren Wiersbe: Time and Toil

Solomon discovered four factors that must be considered before you can say that life is monotonous and meaningless:

1. Look up: God orders time (:1-8)

God is in control of time and balances life’s expectations; If we cooperate with God’s

timing, life will not be meaningless

2) Look within: eternity is in your heart (:9-14)

This links man to God

- man's life is a gift from God (:10)
- man's life is linked to eternity (:11)
- man's life can be enjoyable now (:12-14)

When the well-known British Methodist preacher William Sangster learned that he had progressive muscular atrophy and could not get well, he made four resolutions and kept them to the end:

- (1) I will never complain
- (2) I will keep the home bright
- (3) I will count my blessings
- (4) I will try to turn it to gain

3) Look ahead: death is coming to all (:15-22)

4) Look around: life is full of problems and burdens (4:1 – 5:9)

Faith learns to live with seeming inconsistencies and absurdities, for we live by promises and not by explanations. We can't explain life, but we must experience life, either enduring it or enjoying it.

Derek Kidner: The Tyranny of Time

Perhaps “*tyranny*” is too strong a word for the gentle ebb and flow described here, which carries us all our days from one kind of activity to its opposite, and back again. . . Yet in the context of a quest for finality, not only is a movement to and fro no better than the endless “*circling*” of chapter one, but it has disturbing implications of its own. One of them is that we dance to a tune, or many tunes, not of our own making; a second is that nothing we pursue has any permanence. . .

Qoheleth in **verse 11** enables us to see perpetual change not as something unsettling but as an unfolding pattern, scintillating and God-given. The trouble for us is not that life refuses to keep still, but that we see only a fraction of its movement and of its subtle, intricate design. Instead of changelessness, there is something better: a dynamic, divine purpose, with its *beginning* and *end*. Instead of frozen perfection there is the kaleidoscopic movement of innumerable processes, each with its own character and its period of blossoming and ripening, *beautiful in its time* and contributing to the over-all masterpiece which is the work of one Creator. We catch these brilliant moments, but even apart from the darkness interspersed with them they leave us unsatisfied for lack of any total meaning that we can grasp. Unlike the animals, immersed in time, we long to see them in their full context, for we know something of eternity: enough at least to compare the fleeting with the “*for ever*”. We are like the desperately near-sighted, inching their way along some great tapestry or fresco in the attempt to take it in. We see enough to recognize something of its quality, but the grand design escapes us, for

we can never stand back far enough to view it as its Creator does, whole and entire, *from the beginning to the end.*

Laurin: God has ordered all life's occurrences according to his will. He has also given men minds that look beyond daily occurrences to the total sweep of life. Yet the human mind has been limited, so that no man can find out the work that God maketh; he can never solve all the seeming paradoxes of life. God has given man reasoning power, but he has not given him enough to unravel all mysteries.

Donald Glenn: Human labor is without profit because people are ignorant of God's eternal plan, the basis by which He evaluates the appropriateness and eternal significance of all their activities. Because of this ignorance there is an uncertainty and latent temporality to the value of all one's labor.

TEXT: Ecclesiastes 4:1-16

TITLE: *THE FUTILITY OF CHASING WORLDLY SUCCESS*

BIG IDEA:

THE 5 ROTTEN STEPS ON THE WORLD'S LADDER OF SUCCESS

INTRODUCTION:

The **American Dream** – study hard – go to graduate school – kill yourself in med school or business school or law school; scratch and claw to get to the head of the class so that you can get the best possible job and climb the ladder of success.

Solomon is speaking to the movers and shakers – As the King – He sees everything from the top down; he rubs shoulders with the most important people in the world; he knows what makes them tick.

No matter where they are on that ladder to the top ... or even if they are king of the hill ... they discover that **nothing satisfies** .. the American Dream is a lie – when viewed under the sun; in trying to keep up with the Joneses ... what you fail to understand is that the Joneses are not as happy and content as you might imagine.

Solomon is not advocating that we sit life out on the sidelines with no ambition or dedication to our work. But he wants to drive home here the harsh reality that awaits those who life is consumed by trying to climb the world's ladder of success.

Iain Provan: Definition of oppression = accumulation – seeking after profit – without regard to the nature, needs, and rights of other people.

Illustration from Scripture:

In the Bible, oppression involves cheating one's neighbor of something (**Lev. 6:2–5** associates it with expropriation, stealing, retaining lost property that has been found, and swearing falsely), defrauding him, and robbing him. It involves making an unjust gain, including the profit made from interest on loans (e.g., **Ezek. 22:1–29**, esp. vv. **12, 29**). It is the abuse of power, financial and otherwise, perpetrated on those who are not so powerful and are indeed vulnerable—the poor, the widows, orphans, and strangers (e.g., **Ezek. 22:7, 29; Amos 4:1, Mic. 2:1–2**). Thus it is often associated with violence and bloodshed in the Old Testament and with the denial of rights and justice (e.g., **Jer. 22:17, Ezek. 22:6–7, 12, 29**; cf. also **Prov. 1:10–19**).

Knut Martin Heim: **Ecclesiastes 4:1–16**, after the first main 'theological' section in Ecclesiastes (**3:16–22**), is deliberately designed to present several **case studies** of or object lessons from particularly illusory aspects of life, as a counterpoint to the theological passages **3:16–22** and **5:1–7** which frame it. Chapter 4 is another exploration of life under the sun, and while **chapter 1** was an observation of the

cosmos, **chapter 2** a self-observation and **chapter 3** another cosmos observation, it seems that **chapter 4** presents a series of shorter observations of ‘mundane’ aspects of life.

This chapter and the beginning of the next are composed of four different parts:

- (1) Case Study 4: an inquiry into pervasive exploitation and social injustice (**4:1–6**);
- (2) Case Study 5: on loneliness despite ‘success’ (**4:7–12**);
- (3) a first practical interlude: reflections on the illusory nature of youthful wisdom (**4:13–16**); and
- (4) a second practical interlude: instruction on the proper conduct in worship and the keeping of vows (**5:1–7**).

Simple Outline

THE 5 ROTTEN STEPS ON THE WORLD’S LADDER OF SUCCESS

Each will be represented by a common board game or card game we all grew up playing ... so should be easy to remember

I. (:1-3) RUTHLESS OPPRESSION GAME: SORRY

PROBLEM: NO COMFORT

First Game is Sorry

Game: Object of the game: you get ahead by knocking others off the board and sending them back to home base; you step on others to get to the top; cutthroat -- Sorry is a strange name, because you are anything but Sorry when you send someone back to home base -- You're ecstatic!

In the business world we see this type of exploitation of the poor and helpless that's the way to really make some bucks – look at the advertising of the Credit Card companies aimed at the college students – let’s hook them and get them enslaved; look at the cigarette companies who continue to churn out their cancer sticks; look at the finance companies who failed to caution people against types of mortgages that might get them in over their head. Let’s look at Solomon’s insights on this area of Oppression

A. Commentary: Solomon's Insights on Oppression

1. Oppression is Everywhere – The Way to the Top is to Put Others Down

“Then I looked again at all the acts of oppression which were being done under the sun.”

Van Parunak: Definition of Oppression -- to enrich myself at the expense of the poor and weak. There are two ways to prosper: fill people's needs, so that they want what I create and pay me for it, and use my power over them to take what they have. A narrow line between the two, but one that Christians must discern.

Solomon can easily observe these activities; not just thoughts of oppression; but the **malicious deeds** are carried out – openly – visibly – Political corruption especially in view – but applies to other realms as well.

Look at Paul's command to masters: **Col. 4:1** "*Masters, grant to your slaves justice and fairness, knowing that you too have a Master in heaven.*"

We see examples all of the time in the workplace – a boss lording it over those who work for him; being overly demanding and unreasonable – Peter counsels us to submit to such unfair treatment in the **book of 1 Peter** – that's how one lives for eternity instead of living just under the sun (probably the best book to balance out the message of Ecclesiastes)

BIG IDEA: BY THE GRACE OF GOD, THE PERSECUTED CHURCH FINDS VINDICATION AND VICTORY THRU LIVING FOR ETERNITY, MAINTAINING COMMENDABLE CONDUCT, AND ACCEPTING SUFFERING AS THE WILL OF GOD

cf. **Eccles. 8:9** good definition of lording it over another person = using your authority to the detriment of another

"All this I have seen and applied my mind to every deed that has been done under the sun wherein a man has exercised authority over another man to his hurt."

2. Oppression Enslaves Both Groups to a Life of Misery = No Comfort

"And behold I saw the tears of the oppressed and that they had no one to comfort them; and on the side of their oppressors was power, but they had no one to comfort them."

David Hubbard: The age in which Ecclesiastes lived was far removed from the golden days of Israel's beginnings. The sense of concern for the poor, the widow, the alien, and the orphan had long since dimmed, outshone by the highly organized commercial structures that had been borrowed from the Phoenicians and others. Apparently this was an age when the rich continued to acquire more, while the poor toiled ever harder to make ends meet. Wages were low, hours were long, rights were few. The oppressed had no ways to express themselves except through tears, and no one to wipe those tears except other oppressed.

Interesting that both groups have the same problem:

a. easy to see that the oppressed -- those characterized by **tears** -- lack comfort

b. but more surprising to find that the oppressors – those characterized by **power** -- have the same problem = No one that they can turn to and trust;

They live on an island; someone will come along with more power and knock them off their king-of-the-hill position

we easily see the bankruptcy of the poor, but often we forget the message of **Rev. 3:17** "*You say I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing, and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked*"

3. Oppression Makes Death or Non Existence Look Better Than Life

“So I congratulated the dead who are already dead more than the living who are still living. But better off than both of them is the one who has never existed, who has never seen the evil activity that is done under the sun.”

Solomon using hyperbole here – not really advocating suicide.

It would be interesting to study the lives of the CEOs of the Fortune 500 companies who have climbed to the top of the ladder:

(or the lives of successful politicians or judges or those in the field of education or medicine or law):

(or God forbid -- even the lives of some successful ministers of the gospel):

- What type of compromises did they have to make?
- What type of oppression did they engage in?
- How did they really make it to the top?
- What story is told by those whom they trampled on to get to the top?

Certainly it is possible to get to the top by the grace of God promoting you -- cf. Joseph and Daniel and Mordecai ...

(not apart from hard work, but in conjunction with faithful hard work)

But Solomon's commentary indicates to me that the fast track of the world has a lot of common ruts that are difficult to avoid.

Jews knew a lot about oppression from their own history

- cf. Egyptian bondage -- slave labor
- cf. later lamenting by Jeremiah -- extreme grief and tears

God has a tender heart for the oppressed; He also has the answer for the troubled conscience of the oppressors.

Allen Ross: This leads him to suggest that the best congratulations are reserved for those who have not yet been born. **Seow**, 187, perceptively notes, “The alternative of not having lived is not an option that people can choose.” The verse, then, “points to the irony of human existence: what is really ‘better’ in this regard is not within the grasp of mortals. People, by their very existence, have already been assigned their lot.” Thus Qohelet constructs a **hierarchy of happiness and contentment**: the dead are in the middle, the living are at the bottom, and the unborn are at the top—and none of them gets to choose their position.

Walter Kaiser: The problem of the oppressor and the oppressed in the history of mankind inevitably turned on the struggle of the strong over the weak; the strong who

were able to impose their will over others. Even in a democracy there can be the “tyranny of the majority,” if the principles guiding that majority are not taken from the Word of God. Without a God to answer to, humanists and secularists have little or no motivation to act righteously or to abstain from wickedness—especially if by that evil they can get their own way. As a result, the only outlook on life for such materialists is one of **cynical resignation** (vv. 2-3).

B. Contrast: Word of Christ: John 14:16

"I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Comforter, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not behold Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you, and will be in you"

Whatever the difficulty or grief of the situation, we have God's help immediately available; as Christ's bondservants we are not oppressed but **enabled**.

It's not that we don't cry the tears or feel the pain or go thru the suffering, but we have the presence of the Holy Spirit to comfort us and to give us God's perspective and wisdom to help us in a limited way to understand what is happening to us.

The presence of the Holy Spirit also equips us to comfort others (**2 Cor. 1:3ff**).

C. Charge: Our Calling: not to oppress others, but to be a Servant to others -- make others glad, make others great, meet the needs of others

- What can we do to recognize and ease the oppression of others?
- What can we do to serve other people -- especially in our job?

II. (:4-6) RATRACE RIVALRY GAME: CHESS
PROBLEM: NO CALM

Game: (could have picked a lot of games, but had to include my favorite)
intense struggle to try to outdo the other person; outthink them; out-trick them; etc.

seems like it should be a relaxing, easy-going game -- but not when you play in a tournament -- emotionally draining -- you can never let down your guard;

Like a War of the Minds -- **Ego involved** – extremely competitive

Allen Ross: In these verses Qohelet contrasts two attitudes toward labor and what it achieves, and then he suggests a third, mediating option. First he observes that all work and achievement is **motivated by envy**, a desire to keep up with—or rather surpass—one's neighbors in possessions and status. After declaring work so motivated as meaningless, he then provides a contrast in the case of the fool who “*folds his hands*” (cf. **Pr 6:10; 24:33**) and “*ruins himself*.”

As opposed to both of these attitudes, he suggests a **middle way** in v.6. Skillfully, he repeats from the first example in v.4 the term *‘āmāl* (translated by the NIV as “labor” in v.4 and “toil” in v.6) and the phrase “*chasing after the wind.*” For the second example in v.5, he substitutes two terms, *kap* and *ḥōpen* (both translated “handful”), for the word “hand” (*yad*). In this way he recalls both attitudes and suggests a third that is better, something in between: Strive, but don’t strive too much. One handful is certainly better than none (in which case you die); but one is also better than two, if to get two you never have time to rest.

A. Commentary: Solomon's Insights on Rivalry

1. Man’s Main Motivation is Competition and Rivalry – The Way to the Top is to Beat Out the Other Man

“I have seen that every labor and every skill which is done is the result of rivalry between a man and his neighbor”

Most productive efforts (in school, sports, the workplace, etc.) are motivated by a desire to outperform other people and to look better than someone else -- get the glory for ourselves.

the motivation = competition out of envy;
instead of love for neighbor, we see a selfish form of competition; dog-eat-dog mentality

David Hubbard: Think of the **injustices to which envy may push us**. We may be tempted to cheat our neighbors of their rights, to resent their accomplishments, to cut the corners of our own integrity—and all in the name of winning. The fabric of our communities gets torn into small pieces in our jealous competition. And the sense of concern for the welfare of others which is the heart of true justice becomes unraveled in the process. That was why the wise man branded so much of our toil as “*vanity*,” unfathomable mystery (see **1:2**), trying to grasp life’s meaning in ways as futile as a shepherd’s attempt to capture the “*wind*” and lead it into the sheepfold (see **1:14**).

2. Competition and Rivalry Get you Nowhere

“This too is vanity and striving after wind.”

3. Three Different Case Studies

“The fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh. One hand full of rest is better than two fists full of labor and striving after wind.”

Since you see that a hard-working man will stir up envy on the part of others, don't hastily jump to the conclusion that it is better to do nothing:

a. the sluggard -- the fool -- he quits the competition
“folds his hands”

no production; sits out the competition; doesn't participate;
ends up consuming his own flesh = starves to death

b. the fast track achiever --
"2 fists full of labor"

hard driving workaholic -- admired by society; has many of the outward trappings of success; a good candidate for burnout and a heart attack

c. the fortunate few who achieve some type of balance
"1 hand full of rest"

requires saying "No" to some pressures from the workplace

- **Prov. 14:30** *"A tranquil heart is life to the body,
But passion is rotteness to the bones"*
- **Prov. 15:16** *"Better is a little with the fear of the Lord
than great treasure and turmoil with it"*

Douglas Miller: In **verses 4-5** Qohelet has juxtaposed two extremes (**obsessive competition** and the **poverty of slothfulness**) in order to present a third and best option, a resolution in **verse 6** (cf. **2:12-17**) [*Yes-Yet Pattern*, p. 270]. Better, he says, is the small amount one has in one's hand with peaceful rest than to have two hands full yet accompanied by exhaustive labor, which amounts to futility. By this means, the Teacher urges his reader to **contentment in material things**.

Douglas Sean O'Donnell: In **Ecclesiastes 4:1-3**, we examined the topic of **oppression**. In **verses 4-6**, we turn next to the topic of **envy**. **Verse 4** reads, *"Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbor. This also is vanity and a striving after wind."* Why do we work? Here Pastor Solomon claims that the primary motive (although he uses the hyperbole of *"all toil and all skill"*) is **"competitive envy."** Envy is the ambition for industry! Rather than joy in our God-given labor (**3:22**) being the "caffeine" that gets us up in the morning, covetous competitiveness oils our engines. Contrary to the law of **Leviticus 19:18**, which is echoed by our Lord Jesus, *"You shall love your neighbor as yourself"* (**Matt. 22:39**), we embrace such mottos as "you gotta look out for number one." Such **cutthroat rivalry**, which rots the bones (**Prov. 14:30**), nevertheless rules the roost. **To climb to the top, you step on other people's heads.**

The antithesis to this inferiority-complex, anti-neighbor ambition is illustrated next in **Ecclesiastes 4:5-6**. One natural response to the reality that envious ambition drives our toil would be to **stop working altogether**. Wise Solomon answers that attitude with the proverb *"The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh"* (v. 5). It is hardly a lovely picture. Someone who folds his hands cannot or does not work. . . . Elsewhere, Solomon puts it this way:

How long will you lie there, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man. (Prov. 6:9–11)

The fool-headed notion that not working will solve the envy issue fails. A better solution is offered, also in proverbial form, in **Ecclesiastes 4:6**: “*Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind.*” Here, hand-images are paired against each other: a handful of quietness and two handfuls of greed. The pictures are plain enough. The phrase “*two hands*” depicts someone cupping his hands in order to possess as much as possible. People whose hands are cupped can carry more of the weight of this world. It looks good to carry the big house, the big car, and the big bank account, but it’s heavy. It weighs you down. And it requires overtime all the time—toil, toil, toil.

Everyone has a choice: be the workaholic who has everything but rest and genuine success (in the end, it is all “*a striving after wind*”), or else be a worker who is content (i.e., the guy with “*a handful of quietness*”). Envision the imagery! Instead of two greedy hands cupped to gain everything one can, it is simply one hand extended. The hand is full, but not of stuff; it is filled with “*quietness.*” His work (note: his hand is not folded but unfolded or extended out) is full of joyous contentment. With one hand he works for the glory of God (which brings its own reward), and with the other . . . well, one wonders what he is doing. Perhaps he is helping the oppressed of **verses 1–3**, as Zacchaeus did when he was saved—half to the poor, half to those he oppressed, and all to Jesus (**Luke 19:8**). Or maybe he is just relaxing. Either way, he is the poster boy for Paul’s super-slogan, “*there is great gain in godliness with contentment*” (**1 Tim. 6:6**; cf. **2 Thess. 3:10–12**). **Comfort** and **contentment** are the antidotes for **oppression** and **envy**.

B. Contrast: Word of Christ: Matt. 11:28-30

"Come to me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, 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 shall find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My load is light"

We don't want to spin our wheels with rat race activity.

The same Jesus who proved himself Lord over all the forces of Nature when He calmed the raging storm out on the Sea of Galilee can calm our hearts and rescue us from the rat race mentality.

C. Charge: Our Calling: not to strive to get glory for ourselves by outdoing one another, but to work hard to the Glory of God

Remember: We still need to work hard -- otherwise we will be like the sluggard who gives up and folds his hands and says, What's the use? But our efforts aren't motivated by rivalry but by a desire to see God glorified and a desire to serve others, not beat them out.

III. (:7-8) RELENTLESS GREED GAME: MONOPOLY

PROBLEM: NO CONTENTMENT

Game: Not enough to have Boardwalk and Park Place in your possession; you have to go and build hotels on the green and the red properties as well and crush your opponent; you can never have enough properties; cf. **Empire building**

Van Parunak: In view of the dangers of **oppression** and **envy**, one might be tempted to think that it is better to be a **hermit**. Yet this is no better.

1. Consider a man with no family.
2. He works hard, and accumulates wealth.
3. Yet what will happen to it after he dies? KJV "*neither*" is not in text. He does ask the question, but without any answer.

A. Commentary: Solomon's Insights on Greed

1. Riches Will Never Satisfy – The Way to the Top is to Accumulate the Most Things

*“Then I looked again at vanity under the sun.
There was a certain man without a dependent,
having neither a son nor a brother, yet there was no end to all his
labor. Indeed, his eyes were not satisfied with riches”*

Examines the **Miser Mentality** = an irrational drive for more riches -- takes the extreme case where there is no potential beneficiary -- no dependent -- no one that needs the money -- Yet the pursuit remains as relentless as ever -- WHY?

Because the riches are desired not to meet needs but to elevate one's status -- Therefore, you never have too much; in fact, you never have enough!

Another million dollars will not change the lifestyle of the millionaire -- you can still go where you please and buy what you want.

You don't have any desire to share the wealth; you are only into empire building in order to climb the world's ladder of success.

2. Selfish Motivations Will Consume a Person in Futility

“and he never asked, ‘And for whom am I laboring and depriving myself of pleasure?’”

There is a hidden cost associated with this pursuit of greed that is often overlooked:

- often you are driving yourself so hard that you are having to forego certain pleasures of life -- rationalizing that you will slow down later and smell the roses

- In fact you just keep accelerating the pace until your life burns out -- Never comprehending that: -- "**Simple Pleasures are the best**" -- remember that commercial??

David Hubbard: In the long run the real loser is the person who suffers loneliness, loss of identity, and the fatal flaw of leaving no heir to carry on the family continuity and preserve its name. To the Hebrews, the hope for permanence lay not in eternal life or bodily resurrection but in the durability of their name, perpetuated by their sons and their sons' sons throughout the generations. No amount of wealth could compensate for that loneliness and virtual annihilation. The teacher took pains not only to warn against greed but also to advocate fellowship and its power to combat both greed and loneliness.

3. What a Sorry Life!

"This too is vanity and it is a grievous task."

B. Contrast: Word of Christ: (as quoted by example and teaching of Paul)

Acts 20:33-35 *"It is more blessed to give than to receive"*

You can't just try to not be Greedy. You must always put on the positive trait that is the opposite -- Here, Generosity

C. Charge: Our Calling: not to accumulate more and more wealth and possessions for ourselves, but to be content with what God has given us and sacrificially give to help others who are in greater need

IV. (:9-12) RISKY ISOLATION GAME: SOLITAIRE **PROBLEM: NO COMPANIONSHIP**

Game: once you get this high up the ladder of success, no one will play with you anymore; plus you can't trust anyone anyway so you prefer to be by yourself –
Cf. Ricketts Construction – CEO lied and embezzled

It's lonely at the top; we don't tend to think of corporate executives as being lonely -- they are surrounded by so many people, but in terms of intimacy and close friendships they are often very lonely and disillusioned.

Walter Kaiser: There are more problems for theodicy, i.e., justifying the ways of God to mortals. What about the sadness of **isolation** and **solitariness**? Escape from competition may be a temporary solution, but then one has to cope with the issue of **loneliness**. This is a situation in which there is no family left, not even an heir for whom one could work and deprive one's self of pleasure. Previously we have seen "*no comforter*" (4:1-3) and "**no rest**" (4:4-6), but now there is "*no companion*" (4:7-12): What can be said to this situation?

A. Commentary: Solomon's Insights on Isolation

1. The Top Dog Mentality Only Allows for One King of the Hill – The Way to the Top Isolates from Meaningful Companionship

“Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor.”

Cf. Presidential Campaign – I’m not running for Vice President – not that we are having 2 people work together and pool their unique talents for the good of the country; all about who will end up on top.

Very lonely existence

Not primarily talking about marriage here; not even primarily talking about friendship.

Talking about partnership and cooperation and teamwork in the workplace -- in our careers -- in our climbing of the ladder of whatever life goal we are pursuing.

You've heard it said: "It's lonely at the top."

The higher you go, the less you can trust people; the higher are the stakes; the more people would love to take your place.

- You long for a companion; someone in whom you can confide; someone who will truly share the workload ;
- On the other hand you don't want to share your empire with anyone – so you are caught in a dilemma

You are especially vulnerable according to Solomon -- Uses the illustration of the risks of traveling alone without a companion

2. Three Vulnerabilities of Isolation

a. Danger of pits or ravines -- error or mishap (:10)

“For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up.”

We each have our blind spots; need one another;
Need deliverance when we slip and fall

b. Danger of cold nights, no warmth -- adversity (:11)

“Furthermore, if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm alone?”

c. Danger of robbers -- open hostility (:12)

“And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him.”

3. Principle

“A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart.”

If two are good ... then three are even better. We all need a helping hand

Are we benefiting from the companionship of our wife as we should? Or are we going it alone??

Are we cultivating close friendships ? Or are we Going it alone?

Van Parunak: *Threefold cord*--why all of a sudden introduce a third? Perhaps Qohelet is pointing us toward the need for fellowship with God. A human friendship, reinforced by divine love, is unbreakable.

Application: We need one another in the church. Must cultivate and encourage our friendships with one another, and guard against sins that would sever us one from another.

Chuck Swindoll:

Reasons two are better than one:

- mutual encouragement when we are weak
- mutual support when we are vulnerable
- mutual protection when we are attacked

OT Biblical examples of the value of friendship:

- Elijah and Elisha
- Naomi and Ruth
- David and Jonathan

B. Contrast: Word of Christ: John 15:12-17

What a Friend we Have in Jesus -- But it helps to have some friends with flesh on them as well

C. Charge: Our Calling: not to go it alone in the Christian life, but to join together in true fellowship in the gospel as friends who genuinely love one another; importance of fellowship in the gospel; importance of the local church

V. (:13-16) RECURRING INSTABILITY GAME: CHUTES AND LADDERS
PROBLEM: NO CONTINUITY

Game: When you think you are finally on top, you have finally made it; the wheel turns and you are crushed

Knut Martin Heim: This interlude is in reality a reflection on the corrupting influence of power, similar to the modern adage "Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely."

A. Commentary: Solomon's Insights on Instability

1. No One Stays at the Top Forever – The Way to the Top Only Begins the Cycle that Ends with Being Replaced by Another

“A poor yet wise lad is better than an old and foolish king who no longer knows how to receive instruction. For he has come out of prison to become king, even though he was born poor in his kingdom”

a. Look at Origins vs Endings

Wisdom cycles around to Stubbornness where the leader has outlived his usefulness;
Times of transition are very volatile;
What goes around . . . comes around

b. Look at Cycle of poverty and oppression vs riches and ruling

Ambiguity: Who is the one who has come out of prison?? Doesn't really matter because the unending cycle is what is in view;

The higher you go on the ladder, the more rickety it gets; your footing is never secure -- one false step and you don't just get a bruised knee; when you fall from the top, you are badly hurt.

2. Public Popularity is Fickle

“I have seen all the living under the sun throng to the side of the second lad who replaces him. There is no end to all the people, to all who were before them, and even the ones who will come later will not be happy with him”

Tremper Longman: In short, wisdom may bring a king temporary success, but it cannot guarantee him his greatest wish—a long reign and a hereditary successor.

3. Cycle of Leadership is a Cycle of Futility

“for this too is vanity and striving after wind.”

Look at the progression: the greedier you are the more isolated you get, the more isolated you get, the more unstable;
Finally, you are foolish and not able to cover your back and someone comes along and sends you down the chute;
In no time at all you are forgotten -- yesterday's news.

B. Contrast: Word of Christ: Matt. 7:24

“a wise man who built his house on the rock”

Psalms 1 – picture of tall tree and stability

C. Charge: Our Calling: not to be man-pleasers who are concerned with the fickle popularity of this world, but to only be concerned with doing the will of God -- having

our life built on the Rock = Jesus Christ Himself -- and enjoying the security of abiding on top forever in union with Christ --

It's not the world's ladder of success that we want to try to climb -- it's Jacob's ladder that reaches up into heaven.

CONCLUSION:

Nothing wrong with climbing the ladder of success -- as long as we do it God's way.

But the climb up the ladder of success and the view at the top is not always what you expect -- especially if your climb upward involves **one rotten step after another**.

* * * * *

PARALLEL: STORY OF HAMAN IN THE BOOK OF ESTHER:

- I. RUTHLESS OPPRESSION**
- II. RATRACE RIVALRY**
- III. RELENTLESS GREED**
- IV. RISKY ISOLATION**
- V. RECURRING INSTABILITY**

* * * * *

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) How would you define the American Dream for young people who are just starting out on their career path today?
- 2) Why does the Preacher find so much frustration associated with work and ambition to succeed?
- 3) When is rivalry and competition productive and helpful and when is it sinful and selfish? How can you tell the difference?
- 4) How should leaders prepare for transition of power before they become too inflexible and stubborn to receive counsel and resist the wisdom of stepping aside at the appropriate juncture?

* * * * *

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Warren Wiersbe: Life Just Isn't Fair

Solomon recorded his observations from visiting four different places and watching several people go through a variety of experiences:

1. In the courtroom (:1-3)

The king witnessed three tragedies:

- (1) oppression and exploitation in the halls of justice
- (2) pain and sorrow in the lives of innocent people
- (3) unconcern on the part of those who could have brought comfort

2. In the marketplace (:4-8)

- (1) the industrious man
- (2) the idle man
- (3) the integrated man
- (4) the independent man

3. On the highway (:9-12)

- (1) two are better than one when it comes to working
- (2) two are better than one when it comes to walking
- (3) two are better than one when it comes to warmth
- (4) two are better than one when it comes to watchcare (especially at night)

4. In the palace (:13-16)

Chuck Swindoll: The words of Solomon's journal ought to be:

- required reading at the famous business schools
- part of the content of famous textbooks on business management
- printed right below the heading of every issue of *The Wall Street Journal*
- mailed every New Year's Day to the nation's young aspiring executives
- words of warning printed on every diploma for business or finance

Steve Zeisler: Occasionally a new voice, a new political hero, a young, energetic and enthusiastic personality comes on the scene. People begin to hope that the old, foolish, doddering king, together with his old and foolish advisers, will fade away. When the new blood takes over, they reason, things will be different. This happens, says Solomon, but the new king one day becomes old, just like his predecessor, and you are faced with the same problems. "This too is vanity," he concludes. David's son Absalom rebelled against his father and the people flocked to the young man, thinking that David had lost his ability to reign. But Absalom was not the answer to their problems. The Republicans nominated Dan Quayle, a young, attractive, energetic new face, for Vice President. Many look to Jesse Jackson, a passionate, charismatic man drawn from a tough and deprived background, as their hope for the future. Even the Forty-Niners football team has a problem deciding between a young and an old quarterback. The younger man, however, will soon become an old quarterback. Solomon says all this is vanity, striving after wind. Heroes don't last very long.

Donald Glenn: Labor is often motivated by inappropriate incentives:

- 1) Labor is sometimes motivated by envy (:4-6)
- 2) Labor is sometimes motivated by selfish greed (:7-12)
- 3) Labor is sometimes motivated by the desire for advancement and prestige (:13-16)

It is better to be poor (and without influence) than to be powerful and influential. Why? Because power, influence, and prestige are all transitory. Though the truth of **verse 13** also commends wisdom over folly and commends responsiveness to criticism or counsel over unresponsiveness, these are not directly illustrated in the passage, which is confined to the futility of advancement. The point of the passage seems to be that the desire for prestige and advancement, two incentives which often motivate a person's labor, is, like envy and greed, futile or meaningless and a chasing after the wind.

H.C. Leupold: The king is merely the representative of those who have attained to high position. What is recorded is a common observation with reference to those who have held a prominent position for some length of time. Theirs will usually be a downfall that is all the harder and the more disappointing because, the longer they held such a position, the more do they cherish it and make it the goal of all their aspirations and tenaciously cling to it even after the period of their usefulness has come to an end.

Douglas Miller: To summarize **4:1-16**, the Teacher observes persons oppressed by those in power and decides that the situation of the oppressed is so horrible that he congratulates those who were never born. As he looks around for people to respond to this situation, he sees no one trying to comfort the oppressed. Instead, those who might do so are toiling to achieve two handfuls out of rivalry and competition with others. While sloth, a second lifestyle option for this middle group, is self-destructive, Qohelet advocates contentment as a third and best way.

Further, the Teacher sees people obsessively toiling for no one's benefit (**4:7-8**, center of the unit). He commends life in companionship (cooperation) for its many advantages (e.g., their toil has a good reward, **v. 9**). He concludes his meditation with an episode about an oppressed youth who came forth to reign with wisdom. But this royal one was eventually rejected and abandoned, left alone himself, a kind of suffering servant figure. By this arrangement of subpoints, Qohelet establishes the complex interrelationship among individualism, materialism, toil, and oppression.

TEXT: Ecclesiastes 5:1-7

TITLE: BE CAREFUL TO WORSHIP AS THE WISE INSTEAD OF THE FOOL

BIG IDEA:

WISE WORSHIP CALLS FOR OBEDIENT LISTENING, CONTROLLED SPEECH, FAITHFUL COMMITMENT AND REVERENTIAL AWE

INTRODUCTION

Douglas Sean O'Donnell: As we approach God in worship, Pastor Solomon wants to establish a safe distance between us and the transcendent God. He does this with two imperatives given at the top (**Eccl. 5:1**) and tail (**v. 7**) of our text. At the top we are charged to watch out when we go to worship (“*Guard your steps when you go to the house of God,*” **v. 1**), and at the tail we are given the central charge of wisdom literature: **to fear God**. This inclusion of admonitions counsels “caution, reverence, restraint, moderation, and sincerity” before the Lord, as well as recognition that God is God. . .

Here in **Ecclesiastes 5:1–7**, we learn three truths about God.

- First, God has a house.
- Second, God knows and judges the way we worship. He sees into the heart—the attitudes behind the actions—and judges whether our worship is “*acceptable worship*” (**Heb. 12:28**) or not.
- Third, unlike the gods of the Gentiles, which are deaf and dumb, Israel’s God hears and speaks. In the temple God’s people were told “*to draw near to listen*” (**Eccl. 5:1**), and in the temple God heard and accepted sincere sacrificial vows.

So, then, in light of God’s transcendence, omnipresence, omniscience, and holiness (God has a house), justice (God knows and judges our worship), and forgiveness and accessibility (God hears and speaks), “*God is the one you must fear*” (**Eccl. 5:7**).

Iain Provan: The insertion of this passage on the worship of God in the midst of reflections on the worship of wealth and advancement and its deleterious effects on humanness also reflects a broader biblical emphasis. “*No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money*” (**Matt. 6:24**). The first Master commands love of neighbor. The second applauds love of self and the trampling of one’s neighbor. This is why false and hypocritical religion is so often linked with economic sin in the Bible (e.g., **Mark 12:38–44**). It is also why the presentation of the whole self as a living sacrifice in worship to God leads on to just and neighborly behavior with respect to our fellow human beings (**Rom. 12:1–21**).

Walter Kaiser: The implication seems to be that the “*sacrifice of fools*” consists of excessive talk, especially talk that has little or no heart behind it, which seems to be borne out in **verse 2**. Therefore, to avoid looking like a fool, it is best to limit one’s

speaking in God's presence and be more ready to listen to what God has to say instead of offering a lot of chatter. Do not give the impression from your blustering verbiage that you believe you have achieved some kind of super status and what you have to say is all that important—to God (or even to human beings). Remember, you are on earth and God is in heaven! Neither should men attempt to bribe God with vows (vv. 4-7). How frivolous and unbecoming can mere mortals act? “*God is in heaven and [we] are on earth*” (5:2), as Solomon had already reminded us. Therefore, our words should be few. And thereby we are rebuked for all pretense, hypocrisy, and superficial religiosity by which we hope to be heard merely for our verbosity or “*much speaking*” (cf. **Matt. 6:7**). Limits are imposed only on the petitioner's pretense, and not on the length of his prayers. There may be times when a person's importunity (and hence the length and persistence of one's prayer) demonstrates the value and importance of what one asks from God, by the fact that the request is serious enough to be persistently on one's mind, even as Jacob refused to let the Angel of the Lord go until he blessed him (**Gen. 32:26**). On the other hand, only fools babble on relentlessly, like a man who has had a busy day and experiences dream after dream all night long (v. 3).

Albert Mohler: Religion that talks big but stays shallow cannot save us from futility; it only displays our futility. Glib God-talk trifles with the One who is our only hope. Far better to think before we speak and to say only what we mean. The Lord's Prayer, for example, teaches us reverently to get right to the point (**Mt 6:9-13**). Why, by our wretched hypocrisies, bring on ourselves divine discipline, in addition to everything we already suffer?

George Hendry: Surveying the vanity of all things under the sun, Ecclesiastes turns his critical eye upon religion; for secularized man is by no means averse to religion; only, his is a religion which is **secularized** and **humanized**. This is the great pitfall of religion, against which warning is given. For there is an inveterate tendency in men to seek to “**make use of God**” (*Deo uti*, **Luther**), to subject God to themselves and their own concerns, to treat Him as an ally, an anodyne or an insurance agency. Characteristic of this man-centered religion is its **verbosity**; its anxiety to say its say is reflected in a never-ending stream of reports, statements, pronouncements, pamphlets, etc. But it loses the ear for the word of God. The word of God is not the echo of our words. It is His own word, His word of judgment and of grace, and before it we must be silent and listen. In our approach to God it is necessary to remember “the otherness of God”, and respect “the infinite qualitative difference between God and man” (**Kiekegaard**).

I. (:1) WORSHIP GOD WISELY

A. Requires Proper Preparation

“Guard your steps as you go to the house of God,”

Iain Provan: In worship, the first task of the worshiper is to “*go near to listen*” (v. 1), with a view to obeying the divine voice (cf. the same language in **Deut. 5:27**). The activity contrasted with this listening is the offering of “*the sacrifice of fools, who do*

not know that they do wrong.” The second part of this phrase is (lit.) “*who do not know to do wrong,*” which is perhaps better translated as “*who sin without a thought*” (NEB). **Their sin is natural to them** and does not require any conscious design. The whole line refers to those who perform the rituals of worship without any deliberate intention to bring the whole self before God in an attitude of reverence and awe. The “*sacrifice of fools*” is thus **careless observance of religion**, unattached to any genuinely Godward movement of the soul and enacted out of custom, peer pressure, or habit. It is the kind of religion frequently attacked by the prophets, who associate it with oppression of one’s neighbor (e.g., **Isa. 1:10–20**; cf. also **1 Sam. 15:22–23**; **Prov. 15:8–9; 21:3, 27**).

The wise person comes before God carefully and with due attention, for such a person, unlike the fool, knows that God is really God. The wise person listens, therefore, rather than speaks (**v. 2**); for God is in heaven and is truly God, and mortal beings are mere creatures of dust found on earth. The fool, by contrast, is someone who is not in control of himself. As he sins without a thought, so too his speech pours out of his mouth just because the words are found in his heart (**v. 3**). It is as natural for the fool to be verbose as it is for dreams to come to those who toil pointlessly in search of gain. “*Cares*” is Hebrew *inyan* (as in **2:23**), and the phrase is better translated “*as a dream comes when there is overwork.*” Overproduction is the root problem in both cases. A heart attentive to God multiplies neither toil nor words.

Cole Newton: The first imperative is a warning for us to **guard our steps** when approaching God’s house. What does he mean by this? Throughout the Bible, walking is a **metaphor for living**. And it’s a fitting comparison. As the feet move so does the body. The Scriptures, therefore, repeatedly encourage us to walk down the path of righteousness and wisdom, while avoiding the way of wickedness and folly. Of course, Jesus capitalizes on this metaphor in the Sermon on the Mount by describing a narrow road and gate that lead to life and a broad road and gate that lead to destruction (**Matthew 7:13-14**). The point then is that the steps you take (and where you take them) have much to say about the condition of your heart.

Solomon’s call for guarding your steps whenever you approach God is really a plea for you to **consider the condition of your heart**. Where have your feet been lately? What does that say about your walk with God and the condition of your heart? These are important questions to ask before approaching God. After all, God is mysteriously awe-striking and deserving of reverential fear. He is so much greater than us that we must always approach Him with the utmost reverence.

However, what does this mean for us under the New Covenant? **Hebrews 4:16** tells us that we are to **boldly** approach God’s throne. Does that not contradict with this verse in Ecclesiastes? I believe that one of the greatest errors of modern Christianity is that we place little value on Old Testament thought. We tend to think that God used to be vengeful and angry, but now because of Jesus, He is loving and kind. We treat God as if He has changed personalities. But that is not the case! The God that we serve today is the same God that Solomon wrote about here. Instead of treating God like He is bipolar, we must understand that **God is still worthy our highest reverence**. He is still

infinitely greater and more majestic than we can ever imagine. The only difference between us and Solomon is that because of Jesus' atoning sacrifice we can now come before God, as His children, without fear that He will reject us. We should still approach in reverence, but we also know now that we come before Him in the perfect righteousness of Christ.

<https://bcnewton.co/2018/12/20/let-your-words-be-few-ecclesiastes-51-7/>

B. Requires Obedient Listening

1. Wise Way to Approach God

“and draw near to listen”

Tremper Longman: Qohelet admonishes people to **listen** when they approach God. This verb (*šm'*) has connotations of **obedience**.

Craig Bartholomew: The *sacrifice of the fools* should be thought of not as a denial of the value of sacrifice per se but as a critique of **superficial religion** that goes through the rituals with many words but no awareness of God. As **N. Lohfink** perceptively notes, “What alone matters is that the fear of God, which transcends any particular ritual act, must not be damaged.” “Not of ‘sacrifices’ in general does Koheleth here speak, but of the sacrifices of fools, which were not an outward form expressing the worship which is in spirit and truth, but the contrary thereof, namely an invitation whose purpose was to appease God and to silence the conscience.”

Cole Newton: Unfortunately, we often fail to listen to God's voice. We are like the people to whom God sent Isaiah, who “*keep on hearing, but do not understand*” (**Isaiah 6:9**). God's Word often goes in one ear and out the other without us having truly listened to any of it. Because of this propensity, God often prefaces His declarations with the word “*hear.*” By default, we are fools who like the sound of our own voices and who don't care what God has to say. **John Piper** describes this heart well: “Many people are willing to be God-centered as long as they feel that God is man-centered”. We will delight in meeting with God so long as the meeting is centered around us.

2. Foolish Way to Approach God

*“rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools;
for they do not know they are doing evil.”*

II. (:2-3) LIMIT YOUR WORDS IN YOUR PRAYERS

A. (:2) Exercise Self Control in Addressing God (in View of the Creator / Creature Distinction)

1. Curb Impulsiveness

*“Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought
to bring up a matter in the presence of God.”*

Allen Ross: While operating with speed and haste can sometimes be good, that principle never applies to speaking in the divine presence. Careful thought should

always precede speech in any situation; how much more so when it comes to speech uttered before God. Interestingly, the reason given is that when you are in God's presence, you are really not in his presence—you are still on earth, but God is in heaven. In other words, do not by your excessive talk give the impression that somehow you think you "have arrived." The gap between you and God will always be an infinite one.

2. Creator / Creature Distinction

"For God is in heaven and you are on the earth;"

Douglas Miller: By declaring God to be in heaven and humans on the earth, he insists on God's **transcendence** and **power**. Similarly, in Jacob's dream the Lord stands above the ladder, apparently in heaven (**Gen 28:13**). Solomon exclaims that the highest heaven cannot contain God, let alone his small temple (**1 Kings 8:27**; cf. **Acts 17:24**). Cyrus emphasizes heaven as God's domain (**2 Chron 36:23**; **Ezra 1:2**), and in John's vision, part of the newness is that God descends from heaven to dwell with human beings upon the earth (**Rev 21:1-5**). Similar to this latter emphasis, the Teacher, like the psalmist, marks the difference between God and mortals as of significant importance: *"Our God is in the heavens; he does whatever he pleases"* (**Ps 115:3**). For this reason, the reader should be circumspect in speech (**Seow** 1997a: 198-99) [*God*, p. 230].

Knut Martin Heim: In the light of **Isaiah 55:8-9**, the statement about the respective locations of Qoheleth's audience and their God does not emphasize the spatial separation between God and humans, but the discrepancy between human expectations on the one hand and God's abundant generosity on the other. It is better for worshippers to listen to God's word, to simply present their requests in the sure knowledge that God is already favourably disposed towards their desires; there is no need for extravagant promises in the form of oaths to motivate divine reward. After all, the temple was a location of God's presence, where God would favourably respond to the petitions of worshippers (**1 Kgs 8:27-30**; see also **Matt. 6:7-8**).

3. Count Your Words Carefully

"therefore let your words be few."

Douglas Sean O'Donnell: Our words should be few because many words do not mediate between God and man. In prayer, the number of words counts for nothing. **D. L. Moody** memorably said it this way: "Some men's prayers need to be cut short on both ends and set on fire in the middle." **Augustine** put it like this: "Remove from prayer much speaking, not much praying." And **Martin Luther**, with his usual blend of bluntness and humor, said that prayers should be "brief, frequent, and intense" because "God has no need of such everlasting twaddle." He also said:

Remember your situation: God is such a great majesty in heaven, and you are a worm upon earth. You cannot speak about the works of God on the basis of your own judgment. Let God rather do the speaking; do not dispute about the counsels of God and do not try to control things by your own counsels. It is God

who can arrange things and perfect them, for He Himself is in heaven. We express all of this in German by saying: “Don’t use many words, but: keep your mouth shut!”

The Irish say it this way: “It is better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to open your mouth and remove all doubt” (one of Murphy’s Laws). Or, less crassly, the Hebrews put it like this: “*When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent*” (**Prov. 10:19**). Wise worship starts with locked lips.

Jon Glass: He says that we should go to God to listen more and speak less. This sometimes makes us uncomfortable. We are not people who like to be quiet and listen, but when we come to worship God, it is better many times to simply listen to Him. We often come to God with our list of things we want from Him and our promises to Him, but sometimes we need to come to Him and just listen to His voice. In verse 2 he tells us that God is Heaven and we are on earth. Because of this, our words should be few. We are coming into God’s presence to meet with Him. And since He is God in Heaven and we are people on earth, we should be quiet and let Him do the talking.

<https://jonglassonline.com/2015/08/12/day-16-ecclesiastes-51-7/>

B. (:3) Excessive Speech Characterizes the Fool

*“For the dream comes through much effort,
and the voice of a fool through many words.”*

Douglas Miller: The dreams indicated here are neither nightmares nor revelations. The term *dream*—which occurs twice in this unit (**5:3, 7**) but nowhere else in the book—can express that which is unreal, worthless, or short-lived, that is, insubstantial or transient (**Job 20:8; Ps 73:20; Isa 29:7**; Sir 34:1-2; and esp. see its use alongside *hebel* at **Zech 10:1-2**). The sense of **Ecclesiastes 5:3**, then, would be as follows: Just as the dream (insubstantial) comes with many cares, so also the fool’s voice (insubstantial) is accompanied by many words. Unlike the fool, the one who fears God will keep words to a minimum to avoid being foolish when talking to God.

Robert Laurin: The author quotes a proverb in support of his previous point. Just as a night of dreams is the result of too much preoccupation with one’s business, so nonsensical speech is the result of too many words at worship.

III. (:4-6) PAY YOUR VOWS TO GOD

A. (:4) Commitments Must Be Taken Seriously

1. Prompt Payment Required

*“When you make a vow to God, do not be late in paying it,
for He takes no delight in fools.”*

Michael Eaton: The vow in ancient Israel was a promise to God, which might be part of prayer for blessing (**Numbers 21:2**) or a spontaneous expression of gratitude (**John**

2:9). It might take the form of a promise of allegiance (**Genesis 28:20-22**), a freewill offering (**Leviticus 22:18**) or the dedication of a child as Nazirite (**1 Samuel 1:11**). As in the matter of prayer, haste in taking a vow is cautioned against elsewhere (**Proverbs 20:25**). Here the Preacher warns against delay (cf. **Deuteronomy 23:21-23**) and evasion: **Pay what you vow!** Failure in these respects is a mark of fools.

Eric Stephens: The vow in ancient Israel was a promise to God, which might be part of prayer for blessing (**Numbers 21:2**) or a spontaneous expression of gratitude (**Jonah 2:9**). It might take the form of a promise of allegiance (**Genesis 28:20-22**), a free-will offering (**Leviticus 22:18**) or the dedication of a child as Nazirite (**1 Samuel 1:11**). When vows are made, they must be kept (**Psalms 76:11**), even as God keeps His word to us (**Exodus 12:41, 12:51; Joshua 21:45**). **Proverbs 20:25** is especially noteworthy:

*It is a trap for a man to dedicate something rashly
and only later to consider his vows.*

There is no harm in not vowing (**Deuteronomy 23:22**); but a vow once made becomes of the nature of an oath, and its non-performance is a sin and incurs the punishment of false swearing.

2. Payment in Full Required *“Pay what you vow!”*

Douglas Sean O’Donnell: This section centers on **temple vows**. Such a vow involved a conditional promise; a worshiper coming to the temple asked God for something in return for something—usually money or an animal sacrifice (**Lev. 27:1-25**), although it could be just about anything or anyone. For example, barren Hannah vowed to give God her son if she was able to conceive and give birth (1 Sam. 1-2). So the problem being addressed in Ecclesiastes is not the vow itself (it was a condoned but not commanded biblical practice), but the temptation to “*delay*” (**Ecc. 5:4**) or “*not pay*” (**v. 5**) the vow once the request has been granted. To say to the temple “*messenger*” (the spiritual bill collector sent to retrieve the coins for the temple treasury) that “*it was a mistake*” or “*it was unintentional*” is intentionally sinful (**Num. 15:30-31; Deut. 23:21**). It is better not to vow than to vow and refrain from keeping your end of the deal. “*Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one*” (**Matt. 5:37** NIV), as a wise man once said. Why? Because God doesn’t take kindly to the Ananias and Sapphira vowing club (**Acts 5:1-11**). Or, as Solomon exhorted, God “*has no pleasure in fools*” (**Ecc. 5:4**) and “*Why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands?*” (**v. 6**). All toying with God will be exposed (“*You blind fools,*” e.g., **Matt. 23:16-22**) and judged (“*a rod for his back,*” **Prov. 14:3**). All lame excuses will be leveled by the Lord.

Chuck Swindoll: These are some of the most overlooked words in all of Scripture—and especially so in a day of shallow roots and **superficial commitments**. We’d much rather bail out than follow through. As a result, a promise is little more than a casual hope. Whether it’s a commitment to pay back fifty dollars or a commitment to stay

faithful in marriage, the idea of sticking with a vow regardless is almost unheard of.” Not so in God’s eyes! Again, His truth penetrates. He says, “*You vowed it...you keep it.*”

B. (:5) Commitments Should Not Be Entered Into Carelessly

“It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay.”

C. (:6) Commitments Must Not Lead to Sin and God’s Judgment

1. Avoid Sinful Speech or Lame Excuses

“Do not let your speech cause you to sin and do not say in the presence of the messenger of God that it was a mistake.”

Robert Laurin: not the angel of judgment sent by God, but rather the priest whose duty it was to collect what had been vowed (cf. **Mal. 2:7**).

2. Avoid Angering God and Suffering Loss

“Why should God be angry on account of your voice and destroy the work of your hands?”

IV. (:7) WISE WORSHIP EXEMPLIFIES THE SUBSTANCE OF REVERENTIAL AWE

A. Avoid Emptiness

“For in many dreams and in many words there is emptiness.”

Douglas Miller: The works of fools are called *vapor* in this section. This is partly descriptive—these things constitute unproductive effort—but the Teacher also pronounces a value judgment by calling this activity evil (**5:1**), warning that the mouth may lead to sin, and cautioning that God may bring destruction upon the work of those who speak improperly. Since these are things for which people have choices, Qohelet indicates here (as elsewhere, **ch. 4**) that at least some things that are vapor and evil can be avoided.

B. Fear God

“Rather, fear God.”

Cole Newton: But why is the fear of the LORD necessary? Fearing God simply comes from understanding that God is God. To know God is to fear Him. He is holy. He is unique and in a class all unto Himself. It is only right and proper to have a healthy fear of Him, and only utter foolishness fails to do so. We fear God by simply acknowledging that He is God, and seeing God as God can only result in living a God-centered, not self-centered, life. The knowing and fearing God smashes self-aggrandizement into bits by pointing us to the magnitude of His glorious worth. All of our pretty words and lavish dreams are particles of dust compared to snow-capped mountains of

His sovereign decrees.

But fearing God is not just proper; it is also practical. As humans, we were created to fear the awesome might of the LORD, so when we fail to fear God, other fears take root within the heart. Consider the rise of fear, anxiety, and depression within our society which coincides with the decline of those holding to the Christian faith. Fear of terrorism. Fear of disease. Fear of collapsed economies. Fear of isolation. Fear of people. The list can (and does) go on without end. We fear these things because we fail to fear God. After all, the fear of God is exclusive. We cannot have a proper view of God, while continuing to fear other things. Understanding God's greatness and His love for us must cast all other fears aside. Why fear the uncertain future when the One who stands sovereign over time is our Father? Why fear death when it ushers us into eternal life with our Savior? Why fear the temporal opinion of others when God's evaluation of us is eternal? There is an exclusivity to fearing God. By properly revering Him, we realize that all else pales in comparison.

* * * * *

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) How is your family preparing for corporate worship each week?
- 2) Do we follow through on our commitments and keep our promises?
- 3) How can we avoid becoming too casual in our worship and cultivate the reverential fear of God?
- 4) Do you try to manipulate God in your prayers?

* * * * *

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Knut Martin Heim: Personal and intimate access to God is often taken for granted, and this can sometimes be observed in the **casual informality** of much modern worship in Western churches, particularly among Protestants. Such informality is intended to reflect intimacy with God, aiming to reflect the casualness of close family relationships and the relaxed attitude among best friends. However, it can also sometimes lead to a kind of familiarity that subconsciously breeds contempt, misleading well-meaning Christians into forgetting that, while God is indeed their Father and Friend, he is also the Creator and King of the universe. He gave himself to suffer on the cross for our sins. **He is never to be taken for granted.** Modern Christians and churches would do well to hear again the words of Qoheleth: *Watch your feet when you go to the house of God.*

Daniel Akin: Throughout Ecclesiastes, Solomon has repeatedly exposed the meaninglessness of life in this cursed world. If this cursed existence under the sun is all there is, then nothing you do has meaning. Nothing you attempt to build your life on will work, and you cannot find satisfaction or meaning in pleasure or work or success or politics. But now Solomon looks beyond the sun to God and asks the question, What about religion? **Can we find meaning in religion?** He tells us that religion can also be a dead-end street. Why? **Religion can be empty when we do not fear God.** Instead, we fall into a formalism that is either rote routine or foolish attempt to manipulate God. Solomon exposes three religious rituals that are meaningless apart from faith.

1. Offerings (5:1)

The problem was that the system put in place to allow men to approach God could be turned into formalism and legalism. The prophets repeatedly corrected the idea that the ritual itself without accompanying repentance and faith was profitable. God refuses ritual without repentance. We see a form of that correction here in Ecclesiastes. Solomon says it is better to draw near to listen than to offer the sacrifice of fools because the fool does not know that he is doing evil (5:1). . .

God has revealed Himself to us in the Word, so we must listen and obey. That is why we spend so much time on the sermon in our worship gatherings. That is why preaching rather than singing is central to our worship gatherings. We are here mainly to listen to God, not to talk or sing back to Him. Why? Because, when the Word is rightly preached, our God is speaking from heaven, and He is speaking to us. So we must draw near to Him and listen to Him.

2. Prayers (5:2-3)

He is speaking of both verbal and internal dialogue with God, which has to do with prayer. He commands us to be reserved with our words in our prayer lives because of God's awesomeness in heaven in contrast with our sinful frailty here on earth. He is the judge and king of the universe, so address Him with respect and restraint.

Part of the problem here again is an attempt to manipulate God. People think if they just pile up word after word after word, then God will hear and answer their prayers.

3. Vows (5:4-5)

Solomon exposes throughout this section the meaninglessness of religion that tries to **manipulate God**. The idea is, "I'll do this ritual for You if You will come through and do this for me." So much of American "Christianity" is this same kind of paganism. We try to bargain with God to get what we want. We think if we do what God wants, then He will do what we want. . .

(5:7) Through Christ, we can approach God with confident reverence. . .

Christ has changed how we approach God, and He has revitalized our religious rituals. Now in Christ we can boldly approach the throne of grace to pray anywhere and anytime, and our Father hears us for Christ's sake. We do not have to take off work, spend lots of money on a plane ticket, fly to Israel, and walk into a physical structure to draw near to God (**Driscoll**, "*Guarding Your Steps*"). We can come anytime we want, privately.

Now there are no sacred structures, but there is a sacred people that gathers together. As **Alistair Begg** argues, there is nothing special about the buildings we worship in except that God's people are there ("*Concerning Worship*"). When we gather corporately at Mount Zion, we listen to God's Word, we sing of His glory, and we offer our lives to Him. All that we are is offered as worship to our God: our bodies, our money, our praise, our confession, our love of our brothers, and so much more.

And now, in Christ, we let our yes be yes and our no be no (**Matt 5:37**). We keep our word and make good on our promises. How glorious would it be if the church of the Lord Jesus Christ was the one place in all the earth where people kept their vows and made good on their promises?! If that is not true of us, then we need to repent and confess. Let us stand in awe of our great God through the grace of Jesus Christ, and let us offer our whole lives and all of our words as pleasing sacrifices to Him!

Craig Bartholomew: The particular temptation Qohelet addresses is a **careless approach** to God and the use of many words, somehow thinking that this will satisfy God without accompanying deeds. Since the coming of Jesus, worship is no longer centered in the temple, but similar dangers remain. In mainline liturgical denominations the **danger of empty ritual** remains real. And nonliturgical churches have their own temptations, such as emotionalism and entertainment. As **N. Lohfink** says, "What alone matters is that the fear of God, which transcends any particular ritual act, must not be damaged." Once holy reverence for God is subverted, then other things move into center spot and the danger of idolatry is never far away.

Rick Ezell: The Preparation of Worship

Let me encourage you to come to worship **prepared to worship**.

- Pray before you come so you will be ready to pray when you arrive.
- Sleep before you come so you will stay alert when you arrive.
- Read the Word before you come so your heart will be soft when you worship.

Come hungry. Come willing. Come expecting God to speak. Come anticipating a memorable experience with the Creator of the universe.

- I. Get ready to meet God
- II. Listen to God
- III. Humble yourself before God
- IV. Mean what you say to God
- V. Take God seriously

<https://www.lifeway.com/en/articles/sermon-preparation-of-worship-ecclesiastes-5>

David Thompson: J. Vernon McGee one time said something that was very true and very startling: “Religion has damned more people than anything else...” Most people who will go to hell will be people who went to church.

In the context of Ecclesiastes, the sense of these verses is that some people will try to find meaning and fulfillment in a life of religion. They will go to church looking for answers and looking for meaning. But very few will actually find what they are looking for because they go with the wrong spirit and they go with the wrong motives.

Truth is very few people go to church because they actually want to know God and His Word. In fact, Paul predicted as we near the end that the time will come when most people going to church will not endure sound doctrine but will go hear some minister who will scratch their religious itch in an inoffensive way (**II Tim. 4:3**).

Solomon, himself, had been in many temples looking for meaning and fulfillment. In fact, he actually built temples for his foreign wives so they could have their own form of worship (**I Kings 11:1-8**).

IN ORDER FOR WORSHIP TO BE A MEANINGFUL EXPERIENCE, IT MUST BE ENTERED INTO IN COMPLETE CONFORMITY WITH GOD’S STANDARDS FOR WORSHIP.

Donald Glenn: [He argues that the emphasis in this passage is not so much on worship and prayer but on guarding against losing labor’s fruits through false vows.]

These verses are an important part of Solomon’s argument, warning against the **folly of rash vows** which could cause a person to lose the fruits of his labor through God’s destroying the work of his hands (**v. 6**).

Eric Stephens: Drawing Near to God

Sermon Theme: There is a right way to draw near to God in worship.

- Guard your steps (**vv. 1, 7**)
- Watch what you say (**vv. 1-3, 6**)
- Do what you say (**vv. 4-5**)

Spurious forms of religion, which made much of dreams, verbosity and vows are vanity, and have in it nothing substantial or comforting. The superstitious man who puts his faith in dreams is unpractical and unreal; the garrulous man who is rash in his vows and in prayer thinks to be heard for his much speaking, displeases God and never secures his object. For the one true God, replace the formality of your worship with a reverent and steadfast sincerity. Put obedience before sacrifice. Do not hurry on your mouth to the utterance of words which transcend the desires of your heart. Be not one of those who comes to worship with a preoccupied spirit, a spirit distracted with thoughts that travel different ways. Realize the presence of the Great King, and speak to

Him with the reverence due to a King. Keep the vows you have made in His house after you have left it. Seek and serve Him with all your heart, and you shall find rest in your soul. https://www.blackmountain.church/sermons/ecclesiastes-5_1-7/

TEXT: Ecclesiastes 5:8-20

TITLE: PURSUIT OF WEALTH CAN CREATE HUGE PROBLEMS

BIG IDEA:

APART FROM CONTENTMENT IN ENJOYING GOD'S GIFTS, THE PURSUIT OF WEALTH CAN CREATE HUGE PROBLEMS

INTRODUCTION

Iain Provan: Ecclesiastes 5:8–9 picks up the thoughts of 4:1–3, making it clear to the reader that oppression is not merely a matter of individuals behaving badly in respect of their neighbors. Oppression has its structural, systemic aspects. The oppression of the poor and vulnerable and the denial of justice and rights are consequences of an entire hierarchical system of government that is corrupt. Each government official “*is eyed*” (Heb. *šmr*) by another, either in the sense that each looks out for the interests of the other, or in the sense that each is supervised by another and cannot behave in ways that are not to his superior’s advantage.

In all this watching, however, no concern exists for the interests of the poor and for justice—for the powerless of 4:1–3. Government is in the interests only of the powerful. It has been forgotten that each person is supposed to be his brother’s “*keeper*” (*šmr* in Gen. 4:9, i.e., to watch out for his interests), just as God himself watches out for the interests of his creatures (*šmr* in verses like Ps. 16:1; 41:2; 121:3–5, 7–8).

David Hubbard: The Preacher’s counsel focused on understanding the **reality of corruption and greed in government**, with the assumption that such understanding would help his Jewish kin to cope with the inevitable. He describes the contemporary scene in terms that curdle the blood of any son or daughter of Israel raised on the Law, the Prophets, and the Proverbs, all of which condemn the practices Ecclesiastes described.

“*Oppression*” (see 4:1–3) and “*violent perversion* (lit. “*robbery*,” Ps. 62:10) of justice and righteousness” (see 3:16) are not new themes in the book. What is new here seems to be the specific connection with the **administrative structures of government**. This is made dear in the Hebrew word for “*province*” (*mēdīnāh*), which describes a judicial district with a centralized system for enforcing and adjudicating the law (see 2:8). Its most frequent use is in Esther, where nearly forty times it depicts the Persian provinces and their governmental structures by which Ahasuerus ruled the empire. “*High official*,” which translates a word meaning “lofty” or even “proud” (Heb. *gābōah*; Is. 2:15; 5:15), confirms this **bureaucratic setting**.

The “perversion of justice” takes place not in spite of the government officials but because of them. They are supposed to be checking on each other to make sure that the law is upheld and the rights of the citizens guarded. Instead, they are protecting each other, covering up for each other, which is what “*watches*” seems to mean here. The

evil has permeated the system so that each tier of the administration is free to work injustice—taking bribes, browbeating the defenseless, extorting higher taxes than called for, confiscating property and goods, demanding special favors, and commandeering people to work for them—because each official is supported in these crimes by his superior.

Albert Mohler: Money cannot rescue us from futility; money only proves its robbing power. The privileged insiders who control the bureaucracies structure the economy to their own advantage (5:8-9). The material successes we do gain can be delusional because they don't satisfy, they get taxed or even stolen, and they rob us of peace of mind (5:10-12). The way we live for money in the end proves bitterly disillusioning (5:13-17). How much better to live simply, take life as it comes, and enjoy each day as God's kind gift (5:18-20).

I. (:8-17) FOUR PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH THE PURSUIT OF WEALTH

A. (:8-9) Problem of Political Corruption

1. (:8) Corruption Results in Oppression and Injustice

a. Reality of Oppression and Injustice

*“If you see oppression of the poor
and denial of justice and righteousness in the province,”*

b. Reminder to Expect Such Corruption

“do not be shocked at the sight,”

Allen Ross: Qohelet says there is no reason to be **shocked** by oppression; for there is an established bureaucracy that sees that everyone gets his cut. The NIV's “*surprised*” is *tāmāh* which, in most of its other occurrences in the OT, refers not only to surprise but also to shock and dismay at a negative situation. Perhaps the admonition here is not just to expect these oppressive situations but also not to be dismayed at them. **Numbness** is the preferred reaction.

c. Reinforcement of the Political Swamp

*“for one official watches over another official,
and there are higher officials over them.”*

Craig Bartholomew: The point of one official “*watching over*” another is that they protect each other's backs in the maintenance of oppression. . .

Government, as Qohelet notes in 5:9 [8], is a good institution designed to facilitate justice for all. By design government wields power, and ideally this is to be for the benefit of all citizens (cf. **Rom. 13:1–7**). But from his observations, Qohelet knows that **corruption** can set in so that rather than promoting justice, government becomes the **source of oppression and exploitation of the poor**.

Tremper Longman: There is no doubt that the situation results in oppression and the deprivation of justice and righteousness. The preoccupation with other things means that no one is watching out for justice. Justice and righteousness were at the center of government's responsibility, not just in the OT, but in the ancient Near East as well.

In the context, I understand this verse [:9] to continue the thought of the previous one, which described governmental oppression and exploitation of the poor. **Verse 8 (English 9)** says that this line of corruption goes to the very top; even the king himself takes advantage of his politically powerful position to get the profit of the land.

2. (:9) Corruption Extends to the Highest Level of Government

“After all, a king who cultivates the field is an advantage to the land.”

David Hubbard: The major question has to do with whether **verse 9** is a **contrast** to **verse 8** or a **climax**. Was the king part of the problem (NIV, JB), or was he thought to make a difference in maintaining stability despite the corruption (NKJV, NIV, RSV, NEB, NASB).

The bureaucratic rationalize their greed with words like those: *“There is profit to the land in all this; after all the king has a right to the tilled field.”*

Iain Provan: The sense is that the only real “profit” made by workers from tending their crops is the king, who stands at the pinnacle of the corrupt regime and derives the ultimate benefit. We might paraphrase as follows: *“In the end, the only ‘gain’ from hard work in the fields is the monarchy, which flourishes in the soil of the workers’ labor.”* Note again **1 Samuel 8:10–18**, with its picture of the king who takes and takes from his people, employing them to plow “his” ground and to reap “his” harvest, while ensuring that his officials and attendants are well cared for.

Craig Bartholomew: This pithy statement would then sum up what a just order should be. **The profit of the land is not just for a select few, but is intended for the benefit of all.** This principle is encapsulated in a proverb: *“A king for a plowed field.”* This is confirmed by the importance of the inalienable holding of land by kin-groups in OT law. As **C. J. Wright** explains, “That the land should be held in the form of patrimonies which should not pass out of the family was a cherished ideal in Israel that was protected by legislation and theologically justified and sanctioned.” **Leviticus 25:23** asserts that the land belongs to Yahweh, and **Mettinger** notes, “The proper concept of this divine ownership appears to be that every Israelite was to regard his holding as deriving from God himself. . . . There existed the consciousness of an intrinsic equality among the Hebrews before God . . . which was expressed . . . by each head of a family holding his land as from God.” One’s land was a symbol of one’s share in the inheritance of Israel and the means of economic survival for one’s family. The sort of oppression of the poor that Qohelet describes in **v. 8** resulted very often from **theft of land**, which is why this is so frowned upon in the OT. **Proverbs 23:10–11** warns precisely against this: *“Do not move an ancient boundary stone or go into the fields of the fatherless, for their redeemer is strong, he will plead their cause against you!”* The

king was appointed to prevent this sort of thing from happening and to ensure justice for all, which included **making sure that property rights were respected**. Hence, “*a king for a plowed field*.”

The image evoked is that **just rule would facilitate plowed fields throughout the land** so that all can benefit from the fruit of the earth. The land should be for all and the king should facilitate justice, but the tone is ironic. The corrupt power relations have spread to the top of the tree and offer no hope of justice for the oppressed. **Land and its just distribution are central to OT law**, and in an agricultural context one’s survival depends on having one’s own land to cultivate. This principle of equitable land distribution is powerfully portrayed in the unlawful “robbing” of Naboth’s vineyard by King Ahab in **1 Kings 21**. This sort of robbery was presumably rampant in Qohelet’s day.

Walter Kaiser: Good government by a delegated officer, or the “higher-up” person, is a great blessing to any country. This is one source of correction of some of the abuses witnessed by mortals. Happy indeed is that country that recognizes that such “profit” of the land brings a blessing on everyone; ruler and people are happiest when they both realize that they are served by the farmed fields. But should human government also fail, there is still redress from God, who will not fail to adjudicate the injustices and unfair acts of those who govern.

B. (:10-12) Problem of Greed and Lack of Contentment

Craig Bartholomew: Qohelet reflects on the **love of wealth** and its dangers. Love of money and consequent work for it will not bring fulfillment. It is important to emphasize here that Qohelet is referring not simply to wealth per se but to love of it. As Paul says in **1 Tim. 6:10**, “*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*” (NIV). Qohelet elaborates on the type of grief that love of money can lead to. It **never satisfies**, because one always wants more; increasing wealth **brings more stress** into one’s life so that one is unable to really enjoy it; and if one’s identity is formed around wealth, then when it is taken away (**v. 14**), one’s life becomes empty and meaningless. Furthermore, one cannot take one’s wealth along at death.

David Hubbard: There is something about the drive to acquire that impels us to seek more and more. If it is **insecurity** that prods us to seek wealth, wealth itself will not cure that insecurity. If it is the **desire for power** that pushes us, money will not quell that desire. For many people the thirst for more material goods is **insatiable**. 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. Koheleth uses a chain of proverbs (sayings as the indicative grammar shows) to get this idea across. The first link (**v. 10**) makes the basic point: wealth cannot satisfy. The second (**v. 11**) and third (**v. 12**) links illustrate the point: wealth attracts idle hangers-on (**v. 11**), and wealth increases anxiety.

1. (:10) Never Satisfied with Enough – Insatiable Appetite for More

a. Greed Negates Contentment

*“He who loves money will not be satisfied with money,
nor he who loves abundance with its income.”*

Daniel Akin: Those who **love money** will never be satisfied by money, and Solomon calls this kind of discontentment “futile.” Solomon’s statement has nothing to do with tax bracket; he does not mention an amount. His statement has everything to do with the heart. You can love money and have a lot, and you can love money and have a little. The issue is not how much you have; the issue is the heart. The issue is **failure to be content** with what you have. There was a time in your life when you would have jumped at the opportunity to have the income, family, and house that you presently have, but now it is not enough.

The sinfulness of the human heart causes us to see what we have right now as not enough. You can see this reality in the people who win a jackpot in Vegas and go right back to the same slot machine to get more (Begg, “In Search of Meaning”). A reporter once asked Rockefeller, who was the richest man in the world, “Which million that you have earned was your favorite?” And Rockefeller answered, “My next million” (Begg, “In Search of Meaning”). **Nothing is ever good enough.** Solomon’s point is difficult for most of us to believe because we think if we had more money we would be the exception, and we would be satisfied with what we had. But our own experience tells us that is not true—after all, there was a time in our lives when we would have thought what we earn right now is a lot of money. We thought we would be content. Satisfied. But we amaze our friends and surprise ourselves to discover that we are not content.

Tremper Longman: The section begins with a proverb expressing the insatiability of wealth. No matter how much money a person has, there is always the possibility of and the desire for more. The implication is that those who set the acquisition of money as their highest goal in life have a never-ending task. They will never reach their goal, and, therefore, their life is “*meaningless.*”

b. Refrain: Love of Money Leads to a Life of Futility

“This too is vanity.”

David Hubbard: Why would anyone want to live that way -- that kind of life is. All the enjoyment of what these people have is clouded by the thought of what they want next. All gratitude for present blessing is overshadowed by the fear of tomorrow’s losses. All generosity may shrivel because the wealthy person is preoccupied not with how he can help others, but with what he can gain next.

2. (:11) Never Free from Leeches and Parasites – Increase in Your Posse

a. Multiplication of Leeches and Parasites

“When good things increase, those who consume them increase.”

Daniel Akin: You'll Attract Leeches

Solomon says the more money you make, the more leeches will want a piece of what you have, and ultimately you will watch it go away. The person who has wealth does not really get to enjoy the fruits of what he has earned (Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 165). Creditors, family, “friends,” the IRS, and more will consume what you have. Everyone will have a hand out to get what you got.

David Hubbard: Friends, family, and servants gather around wealth. They may pester the rich person and dissipate what he has. How often have we read of an athlete—say, a boxer—whose golden moments found him surrounded by an entourage that gladly shared his wealth, but whose twilight days saw him both broke and abandoned. Wealth can carry its own frustration—that was the Preacher’s apt observation.

Douglas Sean O’Donnell: He will need a maid to clean his big house. He will need a personal chef to cook his rich meals. He will need a gardener to trim the trees. He will need an accountant to keep the books. He will need a broker to invest his savings. One by one and week by week, in their different and seemingly subtle ways, they will all leech a little more and more and more from his back pocket. Then there is the family (which seems to continually extend outward the more he makes), and the old friends, and the new acquaintances (who never have enough and want a little more), and finally the tax man (who is usually the first at the front door to collect).

- b. Refrain: Helplessness of the Rich to Enjoy their Wealth
“*So what is the advantage to their owners except to look on?*”

Craig Bartholomew: The point is that the thing pursued, namely wealth, takes on a life of its own and starts to control the person pursuing it. All the owner can do is stand and watch as the problems gather momentum.

3. (:12) Never Able to Sleep Peacefully – Increase in Anxieties and Stress

- a. Working Man Sleeps Fine
“*The sleep of the working man is pleasant, whether he eats little or much.*”

- b. Rich Man Plagued with Insomnia
“*But the full stomach of the rich man does not allow him to sleep.*”

Iain Provan: The world of the rich is indeed a world of “*abundance*” (*šb*^ʿ, v. 12), which does not in fact satisfy (*šb*^ʿ, v. 10) and permits no sleep (cf. 2:23; 5:3). The world of the worker (*bd*, as in 5:9, “*cultivated*”), by contrast, is one in which there may be less consumption (he may not eat [*ʿkl*] much, v. 12; cf. “*consume*” in v. 11), but at least he has peace of mind that permits restful slumber. The one suffers the indigestion of materialism, being too full of good things. The other, tasting more selectively of life’s bounty, knows sweeter dreams (Heb. *matoq/metuqa*, “*sweet*,” often refers to what is

eaten, esp. honey, cf. **Judg. 14:14**). Once again it is suggested that the pursuit of profit brings not only oppression to others but also damage to the self.

Craig Bartholomew: Wealth involves increased worries and cares so that the rich person does not enjoy the good sleep of the poor laborer (v. 12).

David Hubbard: Here the Preacher's point was not so much the anxiety over the responsibilities of wealth, as it was the *anxiety caused by the use of wealth*. "Abundance" is literally "satisfaction," a noun (Heb. *sābā*) related to the verb used in **verse 10**. This is an ironic choice of words: the lavish possessions which ought to satisfy have the opposite effect. Fancy parties, rich food, high living, risky investments—none of these is conducive to relaxation. The overindulgence which wealth makes possible and the stress which fame and attention produce all work against sleep. And where "sleep" flees, hardly anything else in life can truly be enjoyed. Insomnia is much more likely to occur in the fancy houses on the hilltops than in the small cottages in the valley. Wealth may bring frustration in many forms. And sleeplessness is surely one of the more vexing.

C. (:13-14) Problem of Bankruptcy Despite Hoarding of Riches

Douglas Sean O'Donnell: **Hoarding** can hurt the hoarder in at least three ways.

- First, riches can be **suddenly and ruinously lost**. **Verse 14** throws the first match into this bonfire of vanities: "those riches were lost in a bad venture."
- In any case, riches are **certain to disappear at death**. This is the second way in which hoarding hurts.
- Third, without God's gift to enjoy abundance, everything that money can give is **joyless**. As **Luther** again put it, "The wicked begin their hell in this life." This touches back on the "I can't get no satisfaction" theme that Solomon explored earlier in **Ecclesiastes 2:1–11**. It puts an exclamation point on it, however, because of God's clear role in the matter. It is not merely that money can't buy joy; it is also that God makes sure of it.

1. (:13) Temptation to Hoard Riches

*"There is a grievous evil which I have seen under the sun:
riches being hoarded by their owner to his hurt."*

Iain Provan: An explicit statement to this effect, looking back over **5:10–12**, is found in **verse 13**. Qohelet has seen a "grievous evil" (lit., "sick evil," in the sense of "miserable outcome," cf. **5:16**;) as he observes the world: wealth "hoarded" to the harm of its owner (cf. "owner" also in **5:11**). The Hebrew verb behind "hoarded" is *šmr*, reminding us of **3:6** and, most recently, of **5:8**. The rich man has kept his wealth when he ought to have been keeping his neighbor; but even though his goods have increased (v. 11), the end result for him has only been "harm" (lit., "evil," playing on the concept of whether "goods" are really good for the person).

David Thompson: The Hebrew words “*grievous evil*” are words that mean there is an evil that will wound you and leave you sick, lacking strength and worn down and that is hoarding wealth (**Gesenius**, p. 279). The word “*hoarded*” is one that pictures hoarding something to such an extreme that one keeps, watches and preserves his wealth by guarding it to the point of putting it someplace and then mailing it shut for protection (**Gesenius**, pp. 837-838). The picture here is of a person who is consumed with hoarding and protecting his wealth. His money is the primary passion of his life. The person who is like this is involved, in God’s estimation, in a “*grievous evil*” and the ultimate result will not be happiness, but hurt.

2. (:14) Tragedy of Bankruptcy

*“When those riches were lost through a bad investment
and he had fathered a son, then there was nothing to support him.”*

Daniel Akin: Statistics tell us that “60% of families waste away their wealth by the end of the second generation. By the end of the third generation, 90% of families have little or nothing left of money received from grandparents” (**Voorhees**, “*Why Most Families Lose Their Wealth*”). Thus, Solomon argues that wealth is an **insecure** basis for happiness (**Garrett**, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs*, 314). After all, Proverbs said that **wealth sprouts wings and flies away (Prov 23:4-5)**, which leads to the next reason.

D. (:15-17) Problem of Death and the Stripping of All Wealth

Craig Bartholomew: There is the **problem of death (vv. 15–17)**. Even if one had a son, one comes naked into the world and cannot take one’s labor along at death (cf. **Job 1:21**). **Verses 16 and 17** most likely refer to the father. The father can carry nothing with him when he dies, and having lost his wealth he spends his remaining days in darkness and anger.

1. (:15-16) Naked in Death

a. Statement of the Harsh Reality

*“As he had come naked from his mother's womb,
so will he return as he came.”*

b. Futility of Work

*“He will take nothing from the fruit of his labor
that he can carry in his hand.”*

Daniel Akin: We brought nothing into this world, and we will lose everything when we die. After all, Ecclesiastes has made it abundantly clear that we return to the dust. The point is that if we do not lose our money in a bad business deal, then we will certainly lose it at death. Thus, we lose it one way or the other. We enter this world naked, with nothing in our hands. Every parent knows this is true. Babies do not come out of their momma’s stomach holding the cash necessary to pay the hospital bills. And we die the same way—with nothing. Paul says the same thing in **1 Timothy 6:6**, and a country

song called “*Trailer Hitch*” makes the same point. You never see a hearse with a trailer hitch, so why spend all this effort to make so much money when death will cancel all of our work and earnings? Jesus asks us why we would kill ourselves to make as much money and accumulate as much stuff as possible when we will lose it all in the end anyway. He calls that foolishness in **Luke 12**.

c. Restatement of the Harsh Reality

*“And this also is a grievous evil—
exactly as a man is born, thus will he die.”*

d. Refrain: Futility of Work

“So, what is the advantage to him who toils for the wind?”

3. (:17) Miserable in Life

*“Throughout his life he also eats in darkness with great vexation,
sickness and anger.”*

Daniel Akin: Solomon’s final point is that the rich man eats in darkness with much sorrow, sickness, and anger. This man does not enjoy life. He is lonely and has no one with whom to share his wealth. Thus, trying to find satisfaction in money and stuff is meaningless. It never truly brings satisfaction, and then you die. This point is illustrated in the poignant story by **Tolstoy** called, “*How Much Land Does a Man Need?*” The story is about a content peasant farmer who says that he needs just a little land to be happy. The Devil overhears the man and commits to getting him more land in an effort to destroy him. The peasant farmer gets a little land but is not satisfied, so he trades it for more land but is not satisfied. This goes on repeatedly till the man dies in his quest for a huge chunk of land, and the story ends with the servant burying him and this telling statement: “Six feet from his head to his heels was all he needed.” Death is the great equalizer! It cancels out all the earnings we have! Why kill yourself to gain more money, more stuff, and more land, when you are just going to be shoved into a hole in the ground at the end and eaten by worms?!

Jacob Gerber: You can't put your hope in public life. You can't put your hope and your private stocks and in your wealth and in your business and in your toil, you can't find any hope for satisfaction in this world under the sun. So where then can you turn? What can you look for for satisfaction in life?

<https://harvestpca.org/sermons/occupied-with-joy-ecclesiastes-58-20/>

II. (:18-20) CONCLUSION – ANTIDOTES TO THE PURSUIT OF WEALTH AND TRYING TO FIND SATISFACTION AND SECURITY IN RICHES

Daniel Akin: Solomon follows his condemnation of the love of money with another *carpe diem* passage. He calls us to **contentment** during our short life. The key is not how much or how little you have but rather how you view what you do have. The basic idea is to **enjoy what God has given you** instead of craving more, more, and more.

Enjoy food, enjoy drink, enjoy your work, and enjoy your spouse and your family because until you enjoy what you already have, new things will not help or satisfy. Why should God provide more for you if you are not content with what He has already given you (Driscoll, “*Redefining Riches*”)? You can be so concerned about what you do not have that you fail to enjoy and show gratitude for what you do have!

David Hubbard: Koheleth is not speculating here. The alternative conclusion is grounded in his careful observation and reflection (“*I have seen,*” see **1:14**) as firmly as are the observations on wealth in **5:13** and **6:1**. The wise man has taken careful note of how wholesome and solid human life can be when people follow the path charted in the alternative conclusion. “*Good*” and “*fitting*” (lit. “handsome” or “beautiful”) tie this kind of conduct (**v. 18**) to God’s creative plan, as **3:10–13** point out. At the same time the passage is worded to form a deliberate connection and contrast with the sad observations about lost wealth in **5:13–17**. Both experiences are widespread and typical in our kind of world, as “*under the sun*” (**vv. 13, 18**) shows. Both speak of “*riches*” (**vv. 13, 14, 19**), but from very different angles: “*riches kept for (or “by”) their owner*” and “*perish*” (“*are lost,*” **v. 14**) versus “*riches “given” by God, which last as part of an inheritance (v. 19)*. Both feature “*labor,*” but in one case he takes “*nothing*” from it, no “*profit*” at all (**vv. 15–16**), and in the other he is able “*to enjoy the good of all his labor*” (**vv. 18–19**). Both allude to a family “*heritage*” (or “*inheritance*”) but the shattered man has nothing to leave his “*son*” (**v. 14**) while the joyful man’s stable “*heritage*” is mentioned twice (**vv. 18–19**). Both seem to live long lives, though the loser spends “*all his day*” in the gloom of his vanished fortune (**v. 17**) while the winner takes joy “*all the days of his life*” in productive labor (**v. 18**) and is occupied with joyful tasks (**v. 20**). Finally, the bereft person stewes daily in the broth of his bitterness, rehearsing, reviewing, and reliving his misfortunes (**v. 17**), but the fulfilled man does not “*dwell unduly*” (lit. “*remember much*”) on the incidental happenings of the past, whether weal or woe, but plunges with a “*heart*” full of “*joy*” into the opportunities of the present. Which person would you rather have as a neighbor? Following the alternative conclusion makes princely people.

Allen Ross: In this, the fourth of the so-called *carpe diem* passages, Qohelet again declares what he has found to be good: that it is appropriate for humans to eat, drink, and take pleasure in the fruits of their labor. The days in which this can be done will be few. And when a person is able to do so, he should recognize the opportunity as a gift from God.

Douglas Miller: The **giving nature of God** continues to be emphasized: God gives not only life (**v. 18**), but also wealth, possessions, the ability to enjoy them, and the ability to accept one’s lot and be happy in one’s toil (**v. 19**, perhaps meaning the results of one’s toil; cf. **2:18-19**). This instruction is reminiscent of **2:24-26** and **3:10-13**.

A. (:18) Resetting Expectations

1. Life Lesson from Observation

“*Here is what I have seen to be good and fitting:*”

Knut Martin Heim: The words *what I have seen as good, which is beautiful* have two functions:

- to create a contrast with the dark fate of those who pursue happiness through stockpiling material goods,
- and to signal the importance of what comes next.

2. Enjoy What You Can When You Can

“to eat, to drink and enjoy oneself in all one's labor in which he toils under the sun during the few years of his life which God has given him;”

3. Contentment with Your Lot in Life

“for this is his reward.”

B. (:19) Appreciating God's Generous Gifts

1. Privilege of Wealth = Gift from God

“Furthermore, as for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth,”

2. Enjoyment of Wealth = Gift from God

“He has also empowered him to eat from them and to receive his reward and rejoice in his labor; this is the gift of God.”

Knut Martin Heim: The statement includes at least four claims that are central to Qoheleth's theology.

1. Everyone who is able to **secure wealth** can do so only through divine providence (to whom God has given).
2. Everyone who is able to consume his wealth can do so only through divine providence (and whom he [= God] has enabled to eat from it).
3. Everyone who is able to be **contented** with a limited allocation of material possessions can do so only through divine providence (and whom he [= God] has enabled to . . . accept his share).
4. Everyone who has these three skills in combination can exercise them only because **that aptitude is a gift from God.**

In sum, Qoheleth here promotes economic modesty and self-restraint regarding the consumption of material goods as pathways to emotional fulfilment dependent on **divine generosity**.

C. (:20) Enjoying Life While You Have Opportunity

Derek Kidner: At first sight this may look like the mere praise of simplicity and moderation; but in fact the key word is God, and the secret of life held out to us is **openness to Him**: a readiness to take what comes to us as **heaven-sent**, whether it is toil or wealth or both. This is more than *good and . . . fitting (18)* : more literally it is ‘*a good thing which is beautiful*’. Once more, a positive note has broken through, and as

the chapter ends we catch a glimpse of the man for whom life passes swiftly, not because it is short and meaningless but because, by the grace of God, he finds it utterly **absorbing**. This will be the theme of the closing chapters; but **first there is more to be explored of human experience and its harsh realities**.

1. Don't Focus on the Brevity of Life

"For he will not often consider the years of his life,"

David Thompson: Life for one right with God is an exciting expedition, not a depressing drudgery. One right with God isn't worried about what he does or doesn't have. He doesn't worry about how long he will live. He just enjoys the day and lives in light of the words of Jesus Christ, who said, *"Therefore do not be anxious for tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own"* (**Matt. 6:34**). I want us to carefully observe where happiness, fulfillment and joy are found -- in the heart. Nothing material, nothing tangible can produce gladness. God must put it in a man's heart. Even though we live in dark and evil days, **our days can be enjoyable**. When God grants job and happiness to a man, man can forget about the brevity of his life.

2. Focus on Enjoying What Aspects of Life You Can Right Now

"because God keeps him occupied with the gladness of his heart."

John MacArthur: When a person recognizes the goodness of God, he rejoices and does not dwell unduly on the troubles detailed in the previous context.

Tremper Longman: One can almost feel Qohelet's envy as he describes those to whom God has given riches and the ability to enjoy them. They are the ones, unlike himself as his speech continually testifies, who are able to take his advice and enjoy life now. He is suffering, but they have an anesthetic to life's harsh realities. As **Michael Fox** noted, according to Qohelet, "Pleasure is an anodyne to the pain of consciousness."

* * * * *

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) How do we see political leaders enriching themselves while oppressing the poor and failing to establish justice in the land?
- 2) Why does greed prove to be so insatiable that one never has enough to be satisfied?
- 3) What are the implications for your life of the reality that "You can't take it with you"?
- 4) How can we cultivate a spirit of thanksgiving, gratefulness and contentment in our lives?

* * * * *

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Douglas Sean O'Donnell: Chiastic Structure – Concentrate on the key message at the center in **5:20 = Enjoy the Moment**

- A People Who Cannot Be Satisfied (**5:8–12**)
- B People Who Cannot Enjoy (**5:13–17**)
- C What Is Good (**5:18–19**)
- D Enjoy the Moment (5:20)**
- C' What Is Bad (**6:1–2**)
- B' People Who Cannot Enjoy (**6:3–6**)
- A' People Who Cannot Be Satisfied (**6:7–9**)

Van Parunak: The passage has simple chiastic structure.

1. The outer two sections, **5:10-17** and **6:1-9**, emphasize the **futility of trusting in riches**. They combine two themes, not quite in chiastic order:
 - a) Dissatisfaction: Wealth does not bring satisfaction.
 - b) Loss: It is easily lost.
2. In the center, **5:18-20**, we are reminded to seek our satisfaction in God alone.

Craig Bartholomew: Qohelet perceptively analyzes just how destructive the love of wealth can be in a person's life. In our culture of relentless consumerism love of wealth is a constant temptation. As **Susan White** notes,

If there is an overarching metanarrative that purports to explain reality in the late 20th century, it is surely the metanarrative of the free-market economy. In the beginning of this narrative is the self-made, self-sufficient human being. At the end of this narrative is the big house, the big car, and the expensive clothes. In the middle is the struggle for success, the greed, the getting-and-spending in a world in which there is no such thing as a free lunch. Most of us have made this so thoroughly “our story” that we are hardly aware of its influence. With the demise of socialism and the “triumph” of free-market capitalism, the **love of money** is commonly regarded as the goal to be pursued. But, as Qohelet rightly observes, it is not the answer to life and can bring its own share of grief.

Robert Laurin: Here riches are viewed from three angles: Though God may give a man a certain power to enjoy wealth, yet:

- (1) riches are the cause of much greed and injustice among government officials (**5:8, 9**);
- (2) the gaining of wealth never brings satisfaction, for the more one gets, the more one wants (**5:10-12**);
- (3) riches are an insecure possession, for a man acquires wealth only to pass it on to others (**5:13-17**).

So in **5:18-20** the author gives his oft repeated counsel: **Enjoy life while you can.**

George Hendry: The fancied satisfaction of mammonism, which conceives of man's life as consisting in the abundance of the things which he possesses and identifies his state with his estate, is a mirage which continually recedes; for the lust of acquisitiveness, once unleashed, becomes insatiable, and the appetite grows with eating. Capitalism can thrive only on an expanding market, and the circle of supply and demand, however expanded, remains a circle; it cannot be squared. Further, acquisitiveness brings anxiety, for wealth is uncertain (cf. **1 Tim. 6:17**), the bubble of prosperity bursts, and slump follows boom. Finally, the rich man dies, and what good is all his wealth to him then?

Are we to commend ascetic renunciation? By no means. The good things of the world are God's gifts to be enjoyed by us with **thankfulness** and **contentment**. The key to enjoyment is to substitute grace for grab. "*For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving*" (**1 Tim. 4:4**). Experience shows that the art of enjoyment usually comes readiest to those least cumbered with worldly goods, while those who possess "all the advantages" may miss it.

Jim Erwin: Dollars and Sense – Seven Realities About Money and God

1. The more money I have, the more money I want. (:10)
2. The more money I have, the more money I spend. (:11)
3. The more money I have, the more I worry. (:12)
4. The more money I have, the more money I lose. (:13-14)
5. The more money I have, the more money I leave behind. (:14-17)
6. My ability to earn money is a gift from God. (:18)
7. My ability to enjoy money is also a gift from God. (:19-20)

TEXT: Ecclesiastes 6:1-12

TITLE: *THE FUTILITY OF CHASING THE GOOD LIFE*

BIG IDEA:

EVEN THOSE WHO APPEAR TO HAVE GRABBED HOLD OF THE GOOD LIFE STRUGGLE WITH NO ENJOYMENT, NO SATISFACTION AND NO ANSWERS TO LIFE'S ULTIMATE QUESTIONS

INTRODUCTION:

Daniel Akin: Chapter 6 begins, echoing the curse with the language of “sickening tragedy,” by presenting a man who has everything the world says you need to be truly happy (interestingly, the very things promised to Solomon in **2 Chr 1:12**). But God does not give him the ability to enjoy what he has. What makes this situation more awful is that someone else will enjoy that for which the man worked so hard (cf. **Eccl 2:18-23**). Thus, a man can live the American dream but find it is actually a nightmare!

What should we make of God’s sovereign choice mentioned here? God sovereignly allots things to us, and He even allots the ability or inability to enjoy what He has given to us. God chose what you would get and where you would be stationed in life. He chose the life, family, job, skills, looks, and intellect you have. But **why in the world would God give someone something but withhold the ability to enjoy it?** Because He knows what is best for us. He gives some the inability to enjoy what they have because in His goodness He will not give you something that drives you away from Him. He knows there is no such thing as happiness apart from Him. . .

Ecclesiastes 6:3-6 shows that a man can have the blessed life of the Old Testament—wealth, kids, and long life—yet not be satisfied. If you cannot enjoy life, then a stillborn baby is better off (**6:3**). Why? Because the rich man is all alone. He does not get a proper burial (**6:3**), which means he is unlamented and no one misses him (**Hunt, Ecclesiastes, 28**). . .

All the work a man does is for his mouth, but his appetite is not satisfied (**6:7**). **Life is a treadmill**; we work so that we can eat so that we can have the strength to work so that we can eat (**Kidner, Ecclesiastes, 61**). We have uncontrolled appetites to consume food, money, technology, and so much more, but the problem is the “more” we get is never enough because the human heart was made to be satisfied only in God alone. Thus, no amount of money or things will ever fill our void (**Hunt, Ecclesiastes, 22**). Interestingly, the wise really have no advantage over fools, and the poor wise man cannot get a leg up either (**6:8**). The problem of dissatisfied appetites affects every station of life, and even if the poor man figured out how to make his way in the world and get some success, he would be as unsatisfied as the rich man. Therefore, Solomon concludes that the sight of the eyes is better than the roving appetite, and he writes “*futile*” over the whole section (**6:9**). It is better to **be content with what you have**—what is right in front of your eyes—than constantly crave more!

David Thompson: There is no doctrine in all of the Bible that is more calming or stabilizing than the doctrine of the **sovereignty of God**. Here is what you are faced with in this world—either God “is” sovereign or He “isn’t.” God either rules or He must be ruled. God either does

the swaying or He must be swayed. God either must accomplish His will or He must subject His will to others. The Bible in no uncertain terms clearly affirms that God is totally and completely sovereign in every realm. God is the supreme ruler who does what He wants, when He wants with whomever He wants. No one can defeat His counsel, His purpose or His will. It is just as **Psalm 115:3** says, “*But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases.*”

When we read the inspired writings of Solomon, it becomes very clear that he had a high and holy grasp of the sovereignty of God (i.e. **Prov. 16:1-4**). And as we come to a text like this in Ecclesiastes, it is obvious that even when Solomon was focused on life “*under the sun,*” he still knew there was One calling the shots who was “above the sun.” Solomon believed the “day of prosperity” was from God and he believed the “day of adversity” was also from God (**Eccl. 7:14**).

NO PERSON WILL FIND TRUE MEANING OR FULFILLMENT IN LIFE UNTIL HE COMES TO ADMIT AND BELIEVE IN THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD.

Man cannot even be in a right frame of thinking until he begins to grasp the sovereignty of God. Any man who thinks he is in control is a man “*chasing the wind.*” We are the clay, God is the Potter. We are the creature, God is the Creator. God is totally and completely sovereign and we will not even begin to find real meaning in life until we grasp this Biblical point.

(:1) OBSERVATION: CONSISTENCY OF THIS GLOOMY PERSPECTIVE

*“There is an evil which I have seen under the sun
and it is prevalent among men”*

Continued worldly insight into the futility of the human condition;
Book becomes somewhat repetitious as it continues to drive home the same messages and repeatedly investigates the same themes.

A. Consistency of the Ominous Observations = dark and brooding *“an evil which I have seen”*

Journal of what Solomon saw as he looked around him and what he personally experienced;
this is his blog and the tone is heavy

“*Evil*” is a pretty strong word; Solomon not sugar coating anything; not looking through rose-tinted glasses; but not making things up either; facing reality square in the face and reporting what he sees around him

B. Consistency of the Finite-Limited Perspective *“under the sun”*

Doesn't have his “*mind of Christ*” spectacles on – despite some glimpses of light

C. Consistency of the Human Condition *“it is prevalent among men”*

cf. “no temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man” **1 Cor. 10:13**

Sometimes as believers we view the world as divided into 2 classes of people: the saved and the unsaved; that’s how we view our neighbors, our co-workers, etc. We think of all of the distinctions between these two groups – What fellowship can light have with darkness, etc. – But Solomon is thinking here of how much all of mankind has in common – what is innate to the human condition – the reality that is prevalent among men – yes, those with a divine perspective will be able to deal with this reality without the despair of the unsaved ... connectivity to Christ gives us the divine perspective ... but viewed just “*under the sun*” apart from how we deal with the reality, there are some perplexing questions in this life.

David Hubbard: Koheleth introduces (v. 1) his final observation (“*I have seen*”; see **5:13, 18**) by featuring the frequency— “*common*” is literally “much” or “many”—and the ubiquity— “*under the sun*” means “everywhere in our broken world” (see **1:3**)—of the “*evil*.” “*Evil*” here as often in the book means “painful misfortune,” a “happening fraught with danger or frustration,” “something that blocks life’s blessing and robs it of joy.” “*Men*” (Heb. *’ādām*) stands for persons regardless of gender (see **1:3**).

I. (:2-6) NO ENJOYMENT -- THE FUTILITY OF THE GOOD LIFE – APART FROM GOD

Albert Mohler: Here’s another depressing reality: owning cannot guarantee enjoying, so that a life unlived is better than a life unenjoyed.

Robert Laurin: (:1-9) -- One of life’s greatest misfortunes is that a man may have riches and not be able to enjoy them, either because of an early death or perhaps because of a spirit of avarice which will not let him be satisfied.

A. (:2) The Good Life Proves Elusive

1. (:2a) Possessing the Good Life is a Gift from God – Solomon’s Blessings – Riches / Wealth / Honor cf. 2 Chron. 1:11-12

“a man to whom God has given riches and wealth and honor so that his soul lacks nothing of all that he desires”

This is a self-portrait on Solomon’s part – he is this man he references here; God asked him what he most wanted in all of the world and then God abundantly blessed him beyond his imagination.

What sorts of people do we know that have been blessed with riches and wealth and honor? Important to acknowledge that such prosperity is a gift from God.

John MacArthur: The Lord gives and takes away for His own purposes. So, the blessings of God cannot be assumed or taken for granted. But they should be enjoyed with thankfulness while they are available.

2. (:2b) Enjoying the Good Life is Impossible Apart from a Gift of God as Well – Solomon’s Frustration

a. You Don’t Get to Enjoy Your Possessions

“yet God has not empowered him to eat from them”

Imagine how frustrating this must be. Everything you want is within your reach, but for some reason you cannot partake and enjoy.

Warren Wiersbe: Enjoyment without God is merely entertainment, and it doesn’t satisfy. But enjoyment with God is enrichment and it brings true joy and satisfaction.

Douglas Miller: Earlier Qohelet stated the general rule (for all people): God gives good things and it is fitting to enjoy them (**5:18-19**). But now he addresses the individual exception to the rule (**6:1-2**). Yes, God gives, but some are not able to enjoy God’s gifts.

Michael Eaton: “*eat*” means to enjoy here (**Is. 3:10**)

Look at the **gracious invitations** of the Lord Jesus Christ: (just picked out 4)

To those who are in need of repentance in order to experience the divine favor:

Rev. 3:20 “*Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me.*”

To those who are on the treadmill of this rat race life:

Matt. 11:28 “*Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.*”

To those who want to discover real meaning and purpose in life:

Matt. 4:19 “*Follow Me and I will make you fishers of men.*” But you must leave your nets and follow

John 6:27 “*Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you, for on Him the Father, God, has set His seal.*” All hinges on living a life of faith

b. A Stranger Enjoys Your Possessions

“for a foreigner enjoys them.”

Chuck Swindoll: What types of foreigners are in view?

- Could be national enemies that take spoils of war
- Could be things out of your control such as disease and failing health
- Could be time commitments that don’t allow you the freedom to enjoy the good life
- Could be family conflicts that devour your peace of mind and your material estate

3. (:2c) Conclusion: Futility and Pain Once Again

“This is vanity and a severe affliction.”

Sobering Comparison:

B. (:3-6) The Good Life No Better Than the Non Life – In fact more painful and frustrating

1. Possible Mitigating Factors

- a. Larger Family – language of hyperbole
“If a man fathers a hundred children”

Children viewed as a blessing from the Lord – no humanistic concerns over population control here

- b. Longer/Healthier Life
“and lives many years, however many they be”

2. Same Problem: No Enjoyment or Satisfaction

*“but his soul is not satisfied with good things,
And he does not even have a proper burial”*

Warren Wiersbe: But his family does not love him, for when he died, he was not lamented. . . His relatives stayed around him only to use his money (**5:11**), and they wondered when the old man would die. When he finally did die, his surviving relatives could hardly wait for the reading of the will.

John MacArthur: Not having a burial, as in the case of King Jehoiakim (**Jer 22:18,19** -- *“a donkey’s burial”*), indicated complete disrespect and disregard for one’s life. To die without mourners or honors was considered worse than being born dead, even if one had many children and a full life.

[cf. cremation – not showing much respect for the body or much hope for the afterlife]

Tremper Longman: I thus stay close to the MT and understand the meaning to be that, though someone may have the external trappings of a happy life, he may be miserable, and his dead body may be treated in a horrid fashion (**Deut. 28:26; 2 Kings 9:10; Jer. 14:16**). The idea expressed in this verse is also found in **Ecclesiastes 4:2**.

3. Worse State Than Non Existence

- a. Point of Comparison
“then I say, ‘Better the miscarriage than he”

Talking about the still born child – such expectation; the mother carries the child for 9 painful months; the agony of delivery and then the devastation of the child being still-born – isn’t this a cruel illustration on Solomon’s part .. how can the life of any man be more sorry than that sad state of affairs.

Douglas Miller: The point the Teacher makes is that it would be better to be a mysterious stillborn child than to have a hundred offspring and live a long life without finding satisfaction in good things. At least the lost child has rest (v. **5c**; cf. **4:6; Job 3:13, 17**).

David Hubbard: Despite the complete absence of identity (v. **4**) and utter lack of experience of life, the stillborn (*“this,”* v. **5**) has a **huge advantage** over the shattered man—the

advantage of “*rest*” or even “*pleasure*” as the rabbis sometimes translated the word (Heb. *nahat*, see 2:24). **To feel nothing, know nothing, experience nothing**, Koheleth deems preferable to the vexing pain of missing out on all the things that bring satisfaction—again the word is “*goodness*” (v. 6; see v. 3).

b. Unrecognized Futility Better Than Recognized and Experienced Futility

1) Not Known by Anyone

*“for it comes in futility and goes into obscurity;
And its name is covered in obscurity.”*

2) Not Knowing any of this World’s Evil and Suffering

*“It never sees the sun and it never knows anything;
It is better off than he.”*

Warren Wiersbe: More than one person in the Bible became so discouraged with life that he either wanted to die or wished he had never been born. This includes Moses (**Num. 11:15**), Elijah (**1 Kings 19:4**), Job (**3:21; 7:15**), Jeremiah (**8:3; 15:10**), and Jonah (**4:3**). Even the great apostle Paul despaired of life during a particularly tough time in his life (**2 Cor. 1:8-11**).

Michael Eaton: The child at least has rest; he does not have to endure the conflicts of life “*under the sun.*”

c. Same Destiny

“Even if the other man lives a thousand years twice and does not enjoy good things – do not all go to one place?”

Michael Eaton: The destination is common to all, no matter how long it takes to get there. The one place is *Sheol*, the realm of the dead.

Solomon: we know where we are all headed; let’s just get there with the minimum of suffering and frustration.

David Hubbard: The **leveling effect of death** is a familiar theme: it happens alike to the wise and the fool (**2:14**), to beasts and human beings (**3:19–20**). As in **3:20**, “*one place*” must refer to **Sheol**, the grave or the abode of the dead (see **9:10**), omnivorous and insatiable in its appetite (**Prov. 30:16**).

II. (:7-9) NO SATISFACTION (FILLING UP) -- THE FUTILITY OF ONE’S LABOR IN LIGHT OF THE INSATIABLE NATURE OF THE HUMAN APPETITE

A. (:7) Laboring . . . Eating . . . Emptiness

“All a man’s labor is for his mouth and yet the appetite is not satisfied.”

Chuck Swindoll: The term translated “*appetite*” is the Hebrew word *nephesh*. It’s the term often rendered “*soul*” in other Old Testament passages. The soul is not satisfied. Work doesn’t bring satisfaction to an empty life.

David Thompson: The particular Hebrew word for “labor” (*amal*) is one that refers to labor that brings one to the point of being wearied, fatigued and exhausted (**Gesenius**, p. 639). There is a very positive reason why a man works hard at a job; so he may provide for his physical needs. In fact, there is nothing wrong with working so we may have something to eat. This is a blessing of God and also it is the will of God (**Ecc. 2:24; 3:13; II Thess. 3:10-12**). Hard work will bring relief from hunger, but it won’t bring **total fulfillment** or **satisfaction**. Truth is bread alone will never satisfy or fulfill the soul no matter how hard one works (**Deut. 8:3; Matt. 4:4**).

Man is a bottomless pit; nothing can fill him up or satisfy.
Work would have some value if it could bring satisfaction.

B. (:8) What’s the Point? 2 Piercing Questions:

1. No Difference – Wise Man or Fool

“For what advantage does the wise man have over the fool?”

2. No Difference – Rich Man or Poor

“What advantage does the poor man have, knowing how to walk before the living?”

Craig Bartholomew: Wealth cannot provide meaning (rest), and both the wise person and the fool have the same destination; **what then if any is the advantage of “wisdom,”** asks Qohelet (v. 8). **Verse 8** refers back to **5:8–9 [7–8]**. Wisdom is all about skill in living, but what value is it to the poor if their lot is to be oppressed and exploited? How can wisdom help the poor if rising out of poverty, that is, becoming wealthy—one of the things wisdom is meant to produce (cf. **Prov. 3:9–10**)—merely compounds the problem of the meaning of life? Qohelet’s use of “*wisdom*” here is surely ironic, for the context assumes that the person seeking wealth is wise, whereas the book as a whole will time and again show that this sort of wisdom is folly.

C. (:9a) Mini-Insight – Focus on What You Have

“What the eyes see is better than what the soul desires.”

Proverbial saying: “A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.”

Some people go through life with that grasping, covetous spirit – imagining that the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence; let’s jump to that next job – it has to be better than what I’ve got here; then you find out that human nature is the same everywhere; the jerks you thought you were escaping somehow popped up over there;
If I could just have X . . .

Solomon has a lot to say about the **secret of Contentment**.

Chuck Swindoll: Balancing perspective – we still need dreamers – great quote:

“The reason mountain climbers are tied together is to keep the sane ones from going home.”
So it takes a few dreamers out front to tell them what it’s going to be like, to keep their hopes up. And so it is with life. But the problem comes when we live only in a fantasy land and

refuse to face reality. . . Dreaming sets us on a collision course where fantasy hits reality broadside. Face the inescapable truth – You need God.

D. (:9b) Same Old Conclusion = Futility Under the Sun

“This too is futility and a striving after wind.”

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

III. (:10-12) NO MAKING SENSE OF ONE’S SHORT LIFE ON EARTH -- THE INABILITY TO DETERMINE YOUR OWN DESTINY OR EVEN UNDERSTAND WHAT LIFE IS ALL ABOUT

Robert Laurin: It is ultimately useless to try to change things, and to wish for more than one has. Submission to the fixed order is best, since God has determined things the way they are. Man is powerless even to argue the issue.

George Hendry: The nature and destiny of man are determined by One mightier than him, and he cannot contend with his Maker or add to his stature one cubit. All his endeavours to find enduring substance in this transitory life issue in vanity, and leave him facing the final question.

David Thompson: I like what **C. S. Lewis** said -- “To argue with God is to argue with the very power that makes it possible to argue at all.” **Dr. Chuck Swindoll** said disputing with God about His sovereignty is a “waste of time and effort” (*Living On the Ragged Edge*, p. 183). When we dispute with God about His sovereignty, we reject what God has revealed about Himself, we miss the lessons we can learn in the midst of anything and we typically think emotionally, irrationally and unbiblical. Even Solomon, when focused “*under the sun*,” knew disputing about God’s sovereignty was something that would never cause one to be fulfilled.

A. (:10-11) The Futility of Trying to Determine Your Own Destiny – 3 Don’ts:

**1. The Finality of the Sovereignty of God – since your course has been determined
Don’t Think that You Can Change Your Future**

“Whatever exists has already been named, and it is known what man is”

Michael Eaton: To “*give something a name*” is to study or (as here) to appoint its character. Both the world (*what is*) and man have settled characters. *One who is stronger than he* is God. Thus the Preacher is underlining the impossibility of changing the basic character of life. Man cannot escape his limitations, nor can he completely unravel the world’s anomalies (cf. **1:15**). He may, like Job, wish to debate the matter with God, but God is altogether greater.

Charles Ryrie: Man is unable to control his destiny, which is determined by God. This is contrary to fatalism, which views God as either nonexistent or uninvolved.

Donald Glenn: Solomon introduced his discussion on the limitations of human wisdom (6:10 – 11:6) by reverting to two themes he had used earlier to demonstrate the futility of human toil, namely, the immutability (1:15; 3:14; cf. 1:9) and inscrutability (3:11, 22) of divine providence.

2. The Frustration of Any Human Speculation or Debate – since God is wiser and more powerful

Don't Debate with God

“for he cannot dispute with him who is stronger than he is.

“For there are many words which increase futility.”

Chuck Swindoll: Disputing is a waste of time and effort. So long as I fight the hand of God, I do not learn the lessons He is attempting to place before me. Everything that touches me comes through the hand of my heavenly Father who continues to love me, who continues to maintain control of my life, who continues to be totally responsible for my life. He does the same with all His created things. That's why He's God!

Van Parunak: (:10b) -- he cannot contend with or enter into judgment with God.

- 1) He cannot complain about the events, since they are determined.
- 2) He cannot complain about his lot in them, since he is determined!

3. The Pointlessness of Life Under the Sun – since God trumps man at every turn

Don't Try to Beat God at His Own Game = Controlling Life

“What then is the advantage to a man?”

Craig Bartholomew: In such a context many words simply increase the enigma of life (v. 11). This is not to say that all words increase the enigma of life, but this line raises in an acute fashion which words do not! Qohelet certainly seems unable to find them. **Who then can say what the path to life and joy is in the few days of a person's enigmatic life? Verse 11b** repeats the programmatic question of “*what benefit*” there is for the person (cf. 1:3). **Verse 12a** repeats the question with an emphasis on the brevity of life and its enigmatic nature.

Seow insists that “enigmatic” must mean “fleeting” here but gives no reason for this, presumably because it extends the idea of the brevity of one's days. As a conclusion to vv. 1–12, however, there is no reason why Qohelet should not refer to the brevity of life and its enigmatic nature. **Transience** is indeed a major theme in this section, but it contributes to the **enigmatic nature of life**. God, according to Qohelet, has made people like a **shadow**. This metaphor, which occurs elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, emphasizes the **insubstantiality** of the human person—shadows come and go, and this is just like humans, who have no idea what will happen after them under the sun.

B. (:12) The Futility of Even Understanding Your Lot in Life – 3 Who Knows:

Albert Mohler: Two mysteries elude our grasp.

- One, who knows the best way to live this brief life?

• Two, who knows the best way to prepare for the unseen future?
God holds the key to these unknowns, and he isn't sharing the answers with us. So we are wise to humble ourselves and trust in him.

1. The Uncertainty and Moral Relativism of Agnosticism –
Who Knows What is Best?

“For who knows what is good for a man during his lifetime,”

2. The Brevity and Futility of This Life on Earth –
Who Knows Whether You Will Be Around Tomorrow?

“during the few years of his futile life? He will spend them like a shadow.”

Tremper Longman: Specifically, the verse says that he made people like a *shadow*. The expression occurs elsewhere (**1 Chron. 29:15; Ps. 144:4; Job 8:9; 14:12**) in contexts that also emphasize the frailty of human beings. The metaphor is one that highlights the brevity of human life, but perhaps even more pointedly its **ephemerality**. It conveys the fact that humans are so ephemeral, so **insubstantial**, that they are unable to know the future, what happens after they leave the scene. That Qohelet means the future on earth is clearly established by the key phrase *under the sun* (**1:3**); Qohelet never seriously entertains the thought of an afterlife.

Thus, in this one verse Qohelet raises his two largest problems: death and the future's uncertainty. God has made human beings ephemeral, and that is why they cannot know the future, either theirs or anyone else's. The verse places the responsibility for this sad state of affairs squarely on God.

3. The Mystery and Dread of the Future --
Who Knows What the Future Holds?

“For who can tell a man what will be after him under the sun?”

* * * * *

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) Where have I been able to exercise self control with respect to my appetites so that I can practice contentment?
- 2) Where am I striving after something I don't have rather than enjoying in the present what God has already given me?
- 3) What advantages do people richer than I am actually have?
- 4) Where do I argue with God about how He is directing my life rather than submitting to His control and acknowledging that He knows what is best for my future?

* * * * *

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Warren Wiersbe: In **Ecclesiastes 6**, Solomon discussed three of life's mysteries:

1. riches without enjoyment (**1-6**),
2. labor without satisfaction (**7-9**),
3. and questions without answers (**10-12**). . .

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

Chuck Swindoll: [Review:] Solomon paints realistic pictures with which his readers can easily identify. As we've seen already, his pen portraits include:

- the serious philosopher who is bored and bewildered
- the funny-face clown who makes us laugh
- the hedonistic playboy who forgets all restraint
- the "good times Charlie" who is living it up
- the industrious worker who hopes to find satisfaction in his job
- the committed worshiper who tries to connect with God
- the blue-collar welder who labors without much anxiety, yet not without his own struggles
- the entrepreneur who loses it all in bad investments, who tosses and turns through the night
- the wealthy person, the "filthy rich," who seeks to find satisfaction in his possessions

This self portrait in **chapter 6** is of the disillusioned king himself.

Derek Kidner: Secular man, heading for death, and swept along by change, can only echo, "*Who knows what is good . . .? Who can tell man what will be after him . . .?*" It is a double bewilderment. He is left with no absolute values to live for ("*what is good?*"); not even any practical certainties ("*what will be?*") to plan for.

H.C. Leupold: No man is able to discern what is coming after the situation in which he now finds himself. What the next turn of the road will bring is completely hidden from him. Why, then, make extensive preparations along one line – like amassing riches – if a man has absolutely no knowledge as to whether that will happen to be the thing that he should really have acquired? Here are cases that may develop: he may later require patience, but he laid up a stock of gold; he may require strength of character, but all he has is a strong fortune; his particular situation may call for Christian hope, but his hope is built on uncertain riches. Such a situation is a downright calamity.

David Fairchild: Some of you think that having more money and things and respect would make you happier? Is this true? Not if your heart stays the same. If your heart does not change, no matter the increase or decrease of these things will make you truly happy so that you can ENJOY life. Why? Because ultimate joy and the ability to enjoy the gifts given by

the giver, must be attached to desiring and delighting in God above all else

<http://www.kaleochurch.com/sermon/Riches-Wealth-Honor>

Paul W. Martin: Enjoying the Good Life

1. (:1-6) Prosperity is not necessarily a good thing.

Describes this as a heavy weight; something that is oppressive; Illustration of life of Thompson family = richest family in Canada – no relationships, no happiness, no trust, just despair; wealth isn't life; the sinful nature ensures dissatisfaction; cf. pursuit of long life; at best they prolong their inability to find joy in this life and delay the inevitable judgment

2. (:7-9) An Ability to Work combined with an insatiable appetite is evil also.

Your appetite drives you; but you never have satisfaction; pick up and enjoy the apple you have on your table rather than laboring in the vineyards for more apple trees; Pick something and just be satisfied with it for an extra long time; Do I really need a new car? Establish: this will be my standard of living; gives everything else away for the glory of God

3. (:10-12) Intelligence with No Final Answers is an Evil.

<http://www.sermonaudio.com/search.asp?chapter=6&BibleOnly=true&currSection=sermonsible&keyword=Ecclesiastes>

Charles Seet: Do You Have a Truly Blessed Life?

This is the time to reflect on the real blessings that God has bestowed upon us - not the material blessings, which are only transient, but spiritual, intangible blessings which money cannot buy. This is a time also to consider the real value in eternity, of all that we are presently pursuing in life, and through this we can gain a **better understanding of our purpose in living**. It has often been through times like these that people become better and wiser. And one of the things we can learn about is **the inescapable vanity of life**.

The **vanity of life** is the subject of the book of Ecclesiastes. In this book of the Bible, King Solomon the wisest man who ever lived, used all the vast wisdom he had to make an accurate assessment of every pursuit in life, and the conclusion that he reached under the Holy Spirit's inspiration, was always the same: *“All is vanity and vexation of spirit.”*

You will notice that the main theme of this passage is this: **No matter where a man turns, he cannot escape the fact that nothing under the sun is really worth living for. Everything in life leads to the same futile result. It is all vanity, vanity and more vanity!**

Solomon even cites some situations that people today would dream of having, Let us consider them now, one by one: In **vv.1-2** he tells about a man who had everything he wanted in life - wealth, possessions and even honour. In **v.3** he describes the hypothetical situation of a person who has a hundred children. In **v.6** he describes another situation - living for a thousand years twice told (which is 2000 years). These three things - wealth and success, many children and longevity - were regarded by the Jews since ancient times as being the marks of blessedness. We can compare this with the conclusion of David's life as recorded in **1 Chronicles 29:28** *“And he died in a good old age, full of days, [longevity] riches, and honour:[wealth and success] and Solomon his son reigned in his stead. [children, or posterity]”*

I. Wealth is Not Always a Blessing

What is the use of having everything that one could wish for and yet not be able to enjoy it? Contrary to what many people think, money cannot buy happiness.

In **Ecclesiastes 6:2** God's Word also tells us that matters are made worse when it is a stranger who gets to enjoy all a person's hard-earned riches in the end! This may happen if a man has no children to inherit his wealth, or when he loses his property through war, violence, or some other act of injustice.

II. Children are Not Always a Blessing

III. Longevity is not always a Blessing

IV. The Pursuit of Success is not always a Blessing

The next verse gives us another reason to be contented, and that is that we should humbly accept whatever plans God has already made for us. *“That which hath been is named already, and it is known that it is man: neither may he contend with Him that is mightier than he.”* If we refuse to accept God's will for our lives, and we aspire to things that are greater than what He wants for us, then we are contending against God, who is mightier than us. No one can oppose God and win.

The final two verses form the conclusion of this whole chapter: *“Seeing there be many things that increase vanity, what is man the better?”* The many things here refer to all that has been stated before: the pursuit of wealth, having many children, trying to live longer, and pursuing what this world calls “success.”

None of these things can provide the real lasting blessedness that man is seeking. All they do, is to **increase vanity**. Whatever man seeks to do in life, he cannot escape from the final outcome, which is vanity. The last verse tells us that no one can ever come up with something really good and worthwhile for man to pursue with his short life on earth, because no one can see what the outcome of it will be. *“For who knoweth what is good for man in this life, all the days of his vain life which he spendeth as a shadow? for who can tell a man what shall be after him under the sun?”*

So dearly beloved, here now is the dilemma: A man has no choice but to live for a time in this world, and therefore **he should make good use of his life**. That is the only way to have a truly blessed life. But then on the other hand, whatever he does with his life leads to vanity! He just cannot escape from it. So what is he to do?

Now the solution to this dilemma is actually implied in the last verse itself. If we were to seek an answer to the questions that are asked in **v.12**, the most obvious and best answer that one can give to both of them is “God.” God alone knows what is good for man in this life, because He created man. And God alone can tell a man what shall be after him under the sun, because He knows, and in fact, He determines the final outcome of all things. God Himself says this in **Isaiah 46:10** *“Remember the former things of old: for I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like Me, Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure.”*

And in the light of what God has already revealed to us in the Scriptures we can learn what is good for us to do with our lives. Let us turn our Bibles to **Micah 6:8** “*He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God.*” According to this verse, what is good, what is truly worthwhile for us to do, that will ensure a blessed life for us, and not vanity, consists of three things:

1. Firstly, to **do justly** - this implies putting away our personal sins and living according to the commandments of God.
2. Secondly, to **love mercy** - this implies loving our fellow men as God has loved us and shown mercy to us.
3. And the third thing is to **walk humbly with the Lord** - this implies maintaining an intimate personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

<https://www.lifebpc.com/index.php/resources/treasury-of-sermons/60-ecclesiastes-song-of-solomon/369-ecclesiastes-6-1-12-do-you-have-a-truly-blessed-life>

TEXT: Ecclesiastes 7:1-14

TITLE: RECOGNIZE THAT GOD IS IN CONTROL –
BOTH IN HAPPY TIMES AND SAD

BIG IDEA:

SINCE GOD IS SOVEREIGN, THE WISE MUST BENEFIT FROM SORROW AND SUBMIT RATHER THAN EXPRESS PRIDEFUL IMPATIENCE AND FRUSTRATION

INTRODUCTION:

Walter Kaiser: Present grief and pain may prove to be **more beneficial** in their effect on us than all the festivity, mirth, and jovial laughter of the outwardly prosperous and successful person. Solomon makes his point with various proverbs and with Hebrew words of similar sound (a figure of speech called **paronomasia**). For example, this occurs in **verse 1** (“name,” in Hebrew pronounced *shem*, and “perfume,” Hebrew *shemen*) and, as we pointed out above, in **verses 5 and 6** (“song,” Hebrew *shir*; “pot,” Hebrew *sir*; “thorns,” Hebrew *sirim*, or as we say in English, “As the noise of nettles under the kettle[s]”). . .

The truth of the matter is that **affliction is from the appointment of God (7:13-14)**. The “*crooked*” that needed straightening (**v. 13**; cf. **1:15**) is perhaps found in the presence of afflictions and adversities in life. No wonder the text exclaims (to paraphrase the point): Look with wonder, admire, and silently wait for the result of God’s work! The contrasts of life are deliberately allowed by God so that men should ultimately develop a simple trust and dependence on God.

For prosperity and the goods from God’s hand, be thankful and rejoice. But in adversity and the crookedness of life, think. Reflect on the goodness of God and the comprehensiveness of His plan for men.

Therefore, although men appear to be treated irrespective of their character in the providence of God (**7:15**), the just man perishing in his righteousness and the evil man apparently prolonging his life in his wickedness, this is again only “judging a book by its cover,” or using external appearances by which to judge the whole case. Such a verdict is premature and improperly grounded. We must penetrate more deeply beneath the surface if we are to properly evaluate either of these men or the plan and ordinance of God.

Douglas Miller: Moving now to develop his theme of **human knowledge of the good** (*ob*), Qohelet in this section presents a series of proverbs and good/better than sayings on such traditional wisdom topics as name (reputation/legacy), wisdom and foolishness, pleasure, inheritance, patience, and arrogance. We should not misunderstand this section as a simple list of the Teacher’s wisdom, for the introduction indicates that he is presenting material to make his case that **many words increase vapor (6:11)**, and to

pursue the question **whether anyone knows what is good (6:12)**. On the other hand, he does not reject the advice of these sayings outright either (7:1-12). They are of partial value, but nothing upon which one can completely rely.

Tremper Longman: That 7:1 begins a new section may be observed most readily by the **shift in literary form**. The first twelve verses of the chapter are proverbs, many constructed according to the “**better-than**” pattern (see 4:2). While **R. N. Whybray** is correct in saying that “attempts to see a logical progression of thought throughout the section are probably wasted,” there is nonetheless a noticeable change of content in this new section as well. There is a link with the question posed at the end of 6:10–12, “*who knows what is good for people during the few days of their meaningless life?*” That question was rhetorical, indicating that Qohelet felt that there was nothing absolutely good. By the use of the “better-than proverb,” however, Qohelet does indicate that **some things are better than others**. That is, he gives expression to what he believes are **relative values**. While some of these values are commonplace in wisdom literature (vv. 1a, 5a, 9), others intend to shock the reader familiar with wisdom orthodoxy (vv. 1b, 2, 3, 11). Two themes dominate vv. 1–12 and unify the section:

- death (vv. 1b, 2, 4, and perhaps 8)
- and wisdom and folly (vv. 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12).

Van Parunak: In answer to the challenge, “*Who can tell man what is good*” (6:12a), Qohelet here does! Of the 52 occurrences of “good” or “better” in Eccl., 14 (1/3) are in this chapter! v.14 similarly corresponds to the second half of 6:12.

Ironically, the “good” that Qohelet singles out is **sorrow**! It has much to teach us about life and God’s ways with us. Note how incongruent this all is with a Santa Claus god (but entirely consistent with a holy and loving God, whose law requires sorrow to result from sin, and whose love turns that sorrow into a means of blessing).

We can discern a simple ABBA chiasm here. The outer members (1-6,13-14) tell why to bear sorrow, from two perspectives, while the center members (7-10,11-12) tell how, first negatively, then positively.

- A. (:1-6) Why Bear Sorrow? Human Perspective
- B. (:7-10) How Not to Bear Sorrow
- B1. (:11-12) How to Bear Sorrow: Wisdom
- A1. (:13-14) Why Bear Sorrow? Divine Perspective

I. (:1-4) SORROWFUL TIMES ARE BETTER THAN PARTYING TIMES

A. (:1a) Internal Integrity Is Better than External Deodorant

“A good name is better than a good ointment,”

The inward reality of proven character is to be preferred over the external embellishment that dresses one up and puts on a false front to go out and party with others.

David Thompson: Now to the Jewish mind and to the mind of God, a good name was something of extremely high value. A good name is the same as a good reputation or character (**Prov. 22:1**). A name was “no mere label” in Solomon’s day, but was intended to express an underlying nature. Now good ointment in Solomon’s day, like ours, was expensive. What Solomon is actually saying here is that a good character that is internal is far more valuable than a good perfume that is external.

Craig Bowen: Think of the difference between your reputation & your deodorant: being known as genuinely godly is better than just covering up what’s bad underneath (a dirty armpit still stinks when the roll-on wears-off)!

<https://media-cloud.sermonaudio.com/text/72191745524142.pdf>

Walter Kaiser: This may well refer to the practice in Biblical times of anointing a dead body with spices and perfume to make the corpse more presentable, but Solomon’s retort is that it is more preferable to have a good reputation (“name”) than a sweet-smelling body on one’s deathbed.

B. (:1b) Death Is Better than Birth

“And the day of one’s death is better than the day of one’s birth.”

Craig Bowen: Birth introduces you to who knows what! A baby’s future is filled w/ big questions. Will he choose the path of the wise or the broader path of the fool? Destruction or life? Certainly years of difficulty lie ahead (Job): *As surely as sparks fly up, so a man is born to trouble.*

David Thompson: When you think about it, if one has a good name in the sight of God, the day of one’s death is better than the day of one’s birth. When a person is born, he/she has all of life before him and he will make sinful choices and there is no guarantee one will wind up with a good character. But if, at the end of life one has a good name, from God’s perspective he is much better off.

Mike Miller: On the day of one’s birth there are certainly many terrible things that he will inevitably experience as he lives on this earth.

1. Pain – physical, mental, and emotional.
2. Injury – physical, mental, emotional – a broken heart.
3. Injustice
4. Sorrow and suffering ...and crying
5. Loss
6. Trouble of all kinds
7. The presence of sin every day they live.

On the day of the death of a person who is ready to meet God there is nothing but good things that await him in the future.

C. (:2-4) Sad Times Are Better than Party Times

1. (:2) Mourning Is Better than Feasting

*“It is better to go to a house of mourning
Than to go to a house of feasting,
Because that is the end of every man,
And the living takes it to heart.”*

Peter Wallace: The “house of mourning” is not just a place where people weep. It is also a place where the body of the deceased is prepared for burial.

Douglas Miller: Since *house of feasting* (v. 2a) was a common designation for a marriage celebration, Qohelet is claiming that going to a funeral is better than going to a wedding. The basis for this claim is, first, that death is the end/destiny for every human being (also at **3:11; 12:13**), and second, that wise persons will ponder death at a funeral and thereby gain something better than the pleasure found at a feast.

Chuck Swindoll: A 30 min. stroll in a cemetery will do you more good than a weekend in Vegas!

Douglas Sean O’Donnell: How does a funeral help with this task [of making a good name for ourselves and glorifying God’s name on earth]? At a birthday bash, frat party, wedding reception, or whatever other kind of party one might attend, people do not normally evaluate how well and wisely they are living their lives. Even the most celebratory New Year’s Eve parties are superficial. We would do better to stay home that night, shake our heads in dismay, and read Ecclesiastes until falling asleep. Do not underestimate the divinely appointed opportunity that every funeral allows. Outside each funeral home God holds up his picket signs: “Life is brief.” “Death is inevitable.” “Walk wisely!” And within each funeral home, every casket cautions us (“redeem the time!”) and questions us (“how are you spending your time?”). What will be said of you when people gather at the house of mourning to mourn over you? Will you be remembered as someone wise or foolish?

2. (:3-4) Sorrow Is Better than Laughter and Pleasure

*“Sorrow is better than laughter,
For when a face is sad a heart may be happy.
The mind of the wise is in the house of mourning,
While the mind of fools is in the house of pleasure.”*

Walter Kaiser: While often laughter is good for the soul, yet a sad face may open up the heart more than the hollow ring of robust joviality. Some are not even capable of facing death (**7:4**), for they flee from death and try to drown any thoughts about it with alcohol and anything else except sober reflection.

Craig Bowen: **V.3** assures us that **mourning isn’t a bad thing!** The bereaved learn lessons in **trusting that God is in control.** A sorrowing countenance can reflect a heart that is doing business with eternal truths.

When I officiate a funeral, my preaching goal is to address the living, not the dead. My experience has been that funeral congregations are the most attentive groups I stand before, and I don't want to waste that solemn opportunity. What better time to tell someone that life is short and judgment is real and eternal life is offered to those who still live!

Fools would rather sport that *little black dress* than wear that *sad black suit*!

Douglas Miller: Qohelet has no respect for a life philosophy rooted in prosperity and pleasure. True wisdom must grapple with absurdity, tragedy, and the puzzles of life.

II. (:5-6) WISE WORDS OF REBUKE ARE BETTER THAN EMPTY WORDS OF A FOOL

A. (:5) Preference for Listening to Wisdom

*“It is better to listen to the rebuke of a wise man
Than for one to listen to the song of fools.”*

Craig Bowen: A rebuke is a form of **confrontation**, when someone tells you you're wrong (sinning). A rebuke appeals to your conscience. A song appeals to your feelings (often to pleasure). A fool cares about fun, but not about anything eternal. He sings his song for you...under the sun. A wise friend cares about your soul, enough to rebuke you if needed. Scripture says *faithful are the wounds of a friend*.

Joe Erwin: The praise of fools doesn't accomplish anything more than puff a person up. However, it doesn't make the person better. However, when one is corrected by a wiser person, if the one who is corrected would listen, they would learn. The hard part with this better thing is to discover that correction helps me more than praise. Correction is a form of encouragement. When I rebuke someone, it should always be to make the person better – to correct a flaw, to teach a lesson, to improve something. Inherently, correction can be encouraging and healing. This is why it is better than praise. Praise is letting me know I do something well. But correction helps me to do something I don't do well in a better way.

<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jimerwin/2017/06/13/ecclesiastes-71-14-wisdom-better-life/>

B. (:6) Futility of Listening to Fools

*“For as the crackling of thorn bushes under a pot,
So is the laughter of the fool, And this too is futility.”*

Walter Kaiser: Thorn bush fires flare up quickly into a huge fire, but they also just as quickly die down and are therefore **short-lived**.

Trevor Longman: The point seems to be that a fool's laughter has no connection with reality and is irritating. In regard to this image, **James Crenshaw** points out, “Thistles

provide quick flames, little heat, and a lot of unpleasant noise.”

Craig Bowen: The song (laughter) of a fool is like the short-lived popping and crackling of poorly fueled fire. **A lot of noise but not much lasting heat; it won't do you much good.** You'll be eating cold uncooked stew for dinner!

John MacArthur: (:2-6) -- The point of this section is to emphasize that **more is learned from adversity than from pleasure.** True wisdom is developed in the crucible of life's trials, though the preacher wishes that were not the case when he writes “*this too is futility*” (v. 6).

III. (:7) DANGER OF WISDOM BEING COMPROMISED

A. Compromised by Oppression

“For oppression makes a wise man mad,”

Tremper Longman: The wise are not above suspicion. There are factors as to why their advice and/or rebuke may not be reliable, and one is explained in this verse: the wise person's judgment may be affected by **extortion** (*‘ōšeq*), that is, blackmail. The term is the same as that rendered “*oppression*” in **4:1–3**, but in this context the more specific rendering is appropriate and attested elsewhere (**Lev. 5:23** [English **6:4**]). As we will see, this provides a perfectly acceptable parallel to **bribe** (*mattānā*), which we find in the second colon. . .

Specifically, wisdom is weakened by **extortion**, on the one hand, and **bribery**, on the other. Extortion requires payment from someone in return for silence, and bribery is the receipt of money from someone in return for some desired action. The former makes the wise person a fool by surrendering control of life to another; the latter clouds one's judgment by introducing bias.

Craig Bowen: Solomon has written often about corruption and oppression. Because man is sinful, oppression is everywhere and there no solution under the sun! A man who is troubled by injustice but won't understand it & address it God's way will go crazy with cynicism & doubt!

B. Compromised by Bribery

“And a bribe corrupts the heart.”

Craig Bowen: Here's a second common cause of spiritual heart disease: the bribe. A bribe entices you to ignore the law & your conscience for personal gain. The attraction of riches and advantage can lure you off the narrow way. And the man who accepts the bribe can fall under the power of the one who offers it.

IV. (:8-10) A PATIENT PERSPECTIVE IS BETTER THAN A PRIDEFUL PERSPECTIVE

A. (:8) Impatient People Have a Short Term Perspective and a Haughty Spirit

1. (:8a) Short Term Perspective

“The end of a matter is better than its beginning;”

Douglas Miller: Here what appears as a general principle may be referring more specifically to matters addressed in this list of proverbs, for example, the end of life as opposed to its beginning, or **the result of discipline rather than its initial sting**. At least with some matters, such confidence in outcomes is consistent with traditional wisdom.

2. (:8b) Haughty Spirit

“Patience of spirit is better than haughtiness of spirit.”

Walter Kaiser: “Patience” (7:8b) in waiting for God’s timing is better than fretting over the elusiveness of things (7:8-9). It may be that the impatient are those who have a haughty spirit and who try to fix things by using force or yelling at others. Persons who are quick to get angry (7:9) are those who carry over anger from other situations and often are unwilling to work through a problem before blowing up over it.

Craig Bowen: The patient man knows how to wait to see things all the way to their conclusion. His patience is grounded in God’s sovereignty; he believes the promise of **Rm 8:28**: *For we know that God causes all things to work together for good for those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.*

That’s enough to tell us, right there, that patience is a mark of wisdom – seeing the world and what concerns me, God’s way. We also remember that patience is a fruit of God’s Spirit (along with love, joy, peace, etc.), as He works in the soul of the redeemed.

The opposite of patience is...**haughtiness (v.8)**? Well, if you said impatience, that is good too! But here Solomon contrasts patience with pride. Impatience believes my schedule is more important, my needs are more pressing, my ideas are more useful. Me! Me! Me! The impatient man is a proud man. But patience understands how to defer, and to wait. **The end will be better!**

Van Parunak: Impatience is a species of pride! We insist on being in control, and do not wait for God to work out his way with us.

B. (:9) Impatient People Quickly Become Angry

*“Do not be eager in your heart to be angry,
For anger resides in the bosom of fools.”*

David Thompson: Now, the word “*anger*” is actually one that means to be one who becomes irritated or provoked (**Gesenius**, p. 409). Solomon’s point is the wise person is not one who is easily or quickly provoked or irritated. It is not that the wise person does not ever become angry or irritated, it is that he is not quick to become this way. Now he gives one simple reason why a wise person is not quick to become angry—because one

who is this way is a fool. From God's perspective, people who quickly or easily lose their tempers are fools (**Prov. 29:8-11, 22**). Wise people in Scripture are always **controlled people**. Spiritual people are controlled people. In fact, Paul wrote that *the fruit of the Spirit was love, joy, peace, patience...gentleness and self-control* (**Gal. 5:22-23**).

Philip Graham Ryken: One of the easiest ways to tell whether we really trust God's timing or not is to see **how angry we get when things do not go our way — the sin of exasperation**. The Preacher gives us this command: "*Be not quick in your spirit to become angry, for anger lodges in the bosom of fools*" (**Ecclesiastes 7:9**). The connection between anger and folly is well known. Solomon gave similar advice in his book of Proverbs: "*A man of quick temper acts foolishly*" (**14:17**), and "*he who has a hasty temper exalts folly*" (**14:29**). Here the Preacher-King has a particular kind of anger in mind — the rash anger that explodes whenever we think that something is not happening as quickly as it should. Usually we tell ourselves that we have a right to be angry. But Ecclesiastes sees our anger for what it is — **sinful folly, spiritual immaturity, and an underlying mistrust of the sovereignty of God**. As soon as we start to get impatient, we need to ask the Holy Spirit to keep us from the folly of rash anger.

B. (:10) Impatient People Romanticize the Past While Complaining about the Present

"Do not say, 'Why is it that the former days were better than these?' For it is not from wisdom that you ask about this."

Christopher Lasch: We need to distinguish between nostalgia and the reassuring memory of happy times, which serves to link the present to the past and to provide a sense of continuity. The emotional appeal of happy memories does not depend on disparagement of the present, the hallmark of the nostalgic attitude. Nostalgia appeals to the feeling that the past offered delights no longer obtainable. Nostalgic representations of the past evoke a time irretrievably lost and for that reason timeless and unchanging. Strictly speaking, nostalgia does not entail the exercise of memory at all, since the past it idealizes stands outside time, frozen in unchanging perfection. Memory too may idealize the past, but not in order to condemn the present. It draws hope and comfort from the past in order to enrich the present and to face what comes with good cheer." (*The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics*, Norton, 1991).

Derek Kidner: The clear-eyed Qoheleth is the last person to be impressed by this golden haze around the past: he has already declared that one age is very much like another. "*What has been is what will be... and there is nothing new under the sun.*"

V. (:11-12) WISDOM IS BETTER THAN FOLLY

A. (:11) Wisdom Offers Advantages

*"Wisdom along with an inheritance is good
And an advantage to those who see the sun."*

B. (:12) Wisdom Offers Protection

*“For wisdom is protection just as money is protection.
But the advantage of knowledge is that
wisdom preserves the lives of its possessors.”*

Douglas Sean O’Donnell: Money has its advantages. If you have money, when adversity strikes—the loss of a job, a sputtering economy, a natural disaster—you have some shelter and security. Similarly, **wisdom protects**. The wise know how to navigate through life’s deep and difficult waters. The wise know the wisdom of tempering the tongue, listening, waiting, and attending funerals. Yet human wisdom without a right relationship with God gets us only so far. Thus, there is another step, a final step forward, that we must take. The last step is the beginning of wisdom: **to fear the Lord**. This is how Solomon concludes our journey in Ecclesiastes **7:13–14**.

David Hubbard: Both offer certain forms of protection or shelter (“*defense*” is lit. “*shade*,” relief from the heat that life “*under the sun*” entails). But “*money*” is no match for “*wisdom*” when it comes to giving life to those who possess it.

Douglas Miller: the Teacher believes wisdom is valuable to the extent that it preserves the life of the one possessing it, and he finds that ability to be restricted. He is giving positive answers to the questions of advantage and good, but the answers are highly qualified.

David Hubbard: Combined, “*knowledge*” and “*wisdom*” give “*life*” to those who have (lit. “*own*”) them. More is meant here than “*keep alive*” or “*offer a livelihood*,” though “*wisdom*” contributes substantially to both. What “*wisdom*” does best is to help us not only to use wealth well but also to develop a quality of “*life*” not totally dependent on wealth (**Luke 12:15**).

(:13-14) CONCLUSION: SUBMISSION IS BETTER THAN FRUSTRATION

Tremper Longman: The last two verses of this unit depart from the proverbial form of the preceding and comprise an **instruction on God’s work**. Qohelet urges his listener to be attentive to the work of God in the world. In conjunction with the next verse it is clear that his advice is not for the purpose of changing what God has done, but to go along with what God has done. After all, no one can influence his actions.

David Thompson: A wise person is one who realizes **God is the one calling the shots**. We are not able to withstand God on anything. What He bends, we cannot straighten. Even days of our lives are governed by Him. Our very life breath is governed by God (**Dan. 5:23**).

Wise people realize that when they are in times of prosperity, they can and should be happy. But they also realize that when they are in days of adversity, they can trust God's sovereignty.

The last part of **verse 14** is critical – “*So that man may not discover anything that will be after him.*” We do not know why God does what He does and we do not know what ultimately is going to happen.

Some people question God's love if all positive things aren't happening. I love the words of **C. S. Lewis**: “We want...not so much a Father in heaven as a grandfather in heaven...whose plan for the universe was simply that it might be truly said at the end of each day, ‘a good time was had by all’...I should very much like to live in a universe which was governed on such lines. But since it is abundantly clear that I don't, and since I have reason to believe, nevertheless, that God is love, I conclude that my conception of love needs correction” (Cited from **Chuck Swindoll**, p. 199).

God's plan for our lives includes days of prosperity and days of adversity. The wise way to live is to **trust God no matter what is happening**. We should not become anxious or angry. We should not live in the past, but remain faithful to God in the present. This is the wise way to live life. It is the key to a meaningful life.

Albert Mohler: Above all, let's remember that, in good times and bad, it is the sovereign God we are always dealing with. Enduring the pain we cannot remedy and facing the outcomes we cannot predict, we are wise to stay humble before him (**vv. 13-14**).

David Hubbard: These words are,

1. First, a call for **sober reflection**. “*Consider*” in both verses is the familiar word “*see*,” used so frequently by the Preacher to describe the sages' task of scrutinizing with a gimlet eye and then reflecting on it with a tough mind (see **1:14; 7:15**).
2. Second, they are a **confrontation with divine sovereignty**. In the flow of the text God's name has not appeared for more than twenty verses. Suddenly we are told to consider how “*God*” works in making life “*crooked*” and bringing “*prosperity*” (lit “*good*”; see **2:24**) as well as “*adversity*” (lit. “*evil*,” see **2:21**).
3. Third, these verses are a **caution to humility**. Life at its crucial points is in higher hands than ours. See **1:15** for language close to that of **7:13** but without a specific mention of “*God*.” We cannot prevent what God wants to do (**v. 13**); we cannot predict (“*find*,” Heb. *masā*”; see **3:11**) what God is going to do after we have passed from among those “*who see the sun*” (**7:11**). “*After him*” (see also **3:22** and **6:12**) seems almost certainly to describe **death**, beyond whose horizons Koheleth and his fellow sages in the Old Testament had no power to see.
4. Finally, these verses are a **caveat against indignation**. Bumping our heads against the stone wall of God's sovereignty can make us downright angry. Why can't we change what we don't like? Are we stuck with the constant problems

of joyless work, ceaseless pain, endless hassles in the home, fruitless efforts to make sense of life's puzzles, pointless speculations about what tomorrow may bring? "*Often we are,*" says the Teacher. Better it is to **let God's sovereignty do its thing** than spend our days flushed with anger, aglow with indignation. There is almost no malady in life which high blood pressure will cure. Anger, which we all feel at times and which great biblical figures like Jeremiah and the psalmists felt with keen intensity, will rarely improve our circumstances. It can, however, ruin our chance at any joy and can rain on the parades of everyone around us.

A. (:13) Submit Because We Can't Change Things

"Consider the work of God,

For who is able to straighten what He has bent?"

Douglas Sean O'Donnell: The first question ("*Who knows what is good for us?*") is answered in **Ecclesiastes 7:1–12**; the second question ("*Who can tell what will happen to us?*") is answered in 7:13–14. The second question is rhetorical. The tone is negative, as in: "Who on earth can possibly predict what will become of us in the future? Will tomorrow bring feast or famine, work or unemployment, prosperity or adversity, happiness or sorrow?" What is the answer to these questions? Only God knows. It follows that to God we must go. We go to him not for answers but for **shelter under his sovereignty**.

Craig Bartholomew: Qohelet's exhortation to "*observe the work of God*" alerts us to the fact that his autonomous epistemology has led him to this conclusion; **one is unable to determine from traditional wisdom what is good for humans**. Neither achieving a good reputation, nor vexation, nor listening to the advice of a wise person, nor trying to discern why the present is worse than the past, nor money provides an adequate answer to the question of what is good for humans. **All is enigmatic**.

Douglas Sean O'Donnell: **Phil Ryken** says that we should see these verses "not as an expression of fatalism but of Calvinism!" That is, they exhort us to see our situation—whether seemingly straight or certainly crooked—as ordered and smooth in the sovereign mind of God. The Scottish Presbyterian **Thomas Boston** titled a book after **Ecclesiastes 7:13**, *The Crook in the Lot*. By this title he did not mean that there was a thief in the backyard; he meant, rather, that things happen in all our lives that we wish we could change, but can't. **Boston** writes:

While we are here, there will be cross events, as well as agreeable ones
Sometimes things are softly and agreeably gliding on; but, by and by, there is some incident which alters that course, grates us, and pains us Everybody's lot in this world has some crook in it.

We all struggle with the **twisted expressions of divine administration**. Why, when the world is in the hand of a good and sovereign God, is it such a crooked place? And why

does the dial of his wheel of fortune more often stop on “Bankrupt” than on “Win a Trip to Hawaii”?

Yet part of the point of the crookedness is to straighten us out, as Pastor Solomon attempts to do in the final two verses. I call these verses Solomon’s “Job-moment” because they reflect both the beginning and the end of Job’s drama. At the end, in **Job 37:14**, Elihu exhorts Job to “*stop and consider the wondrous works of God.*” Then in **chapters 38–41**, God cross-examines his creature (Job) with his creation. God summons even the ostrich to testify against human arrogance, ignorance, and ingratitude. Finally, in **chapter 42**, the righteous man repents. “*I have uttered,*” Job admits, “*what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me . . . I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you*” (**vv. 3–5**). What Job finally sees clearly is that he could not see clearly (cf. **1 Cor. 13:12**). He acknowledges that the Lord is lovingly involved in the operations of an exceedingly complex universe; that God’s mysterious providence is too wonderful to comprehend; that human perceptions of justice are not the scales on which the righteousness of God is weighed; and that God has an inescapable purpose in whatever he does, even if that purpose is never revealed to the creature it affects.

B. (:14) Submit Because God Controls Both Prosperity and Adversity

1. Perspective on Day of Prosperity

“In the day of prosperity be happy,”

Tremper Longman: The instruction of this verse follows up the previous one. Qohelet advises his listeners to enjoy themselves on a good day, while making the best of a bad day. God made both, and no one can change what God has done.

2. Perspective on Day of Adversity

*“But in the day of adversity consider—
God has made the one as well as the other
so that man may not discover anything that will be after him.”*

Knut Martin Heim: He urges his audience to accept the alternation of good and bad times in life as a divinely ordered reality to motivate them to enjoy the good times in life on the one hand, while accepting without bitterness the inevitable difficult periods in life on the other.

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) What type of character traits do we exemplify that positively impact the lives of others (compared to the effect of our cologne)?
- 2) Do we take advantage of the lessons we can learn from times of sorrow and mourning?

3) How do we respond to words of correction?

4) Do we live in light of eternity with a long term perspective or do we lack patience and react very arrogantly as if we are in control of our times and events?

* * * * *

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

David Thompson: When it comes to living life before God, there are two ways to live it: One way is the way of wisdom. This is the type of lifestyle that puts God at a preeminent position and then purposes to understand His Word and apply His Word to any situation or circumstance. The other way is the way of a fool. The fool proudly and arrogantly lives life his own way. God is not in the picture and the Word of God and the will of God are not applied to anything.

Philip Graham Ryken: One of the party games we played in high school was called “**Bigger and Better**.” We would divide into teams, with each team receiving a single toothpick. Then we would go out into the surrounding neighborhood, knocking on doors, trying to find something bigger and better than a toothpick (or whatever upgrade we had in hand). “We’re playing ‘Bigger and Better,’” we would say to unsuspecting homeowners. “Do you have anything bigger and better than this?” By the end of the night we would come back with, say, an old television set, or once, triumphantly, a riding lawn mower that some unfortunate man’s wife was dying to get rid of.

The Preacher of Ecclesiastes uses a similar strategy in teaching us the way of wisdom for life in this “*all is vanity*” world. At the end of **chapter 6** the Preacher wondered how we can live well during our few and passing days on this earth. He answers that question in **chapter 7** by making a series of “*better than*” comparisons. The Preacher is teaching us how to exercise discernment in choosing the way that we will live.

David Malick: Argument of Book of Ecclesiastes

The Resolution of Difficulties: The struggle of futility in the difficulties that come upon the wise in life is only resolved by using those difficulties to drive one to fearing God rather than searching for more diverse answers **7:1—27**

a. Difficulties Enrich: The value of difficulties is described variously as that which enrich rather than destroys a person **7:1-6a**

1) Difficult vs. Festive Experiences: Value in life is derived from the difficult yet forging experiences rather than from natural and festive ones **7:1**

2) Funeral vs. Party: The value of a funeral which supersedes a party is that those who are living think about their mortality **7:2**

3) Sorrow vs. Laughter: The experience of sorrow enables a person to really know the essence of happiness **7:3**

4) Death vs. Pleasure: When one deals with the issue of death, one becomes

wiser than if one always escaped through pleasure **7:4**

5) Rebuke vs. Praise: Constructive criticism from someone who cares and knows is better than empty praise that will quickly abandon **7:5-6a**

b. Unwise Choices Under Difficulty: Nevertheless, there seems to be futility in all of the good that difficulty can provide because people are still corruptible with oppression or strong temptation **7:6b-7**

c. Consequences of Unwise Living: To not be wise or have skill at life is to be at a great disadvantage in life **7:8-12**

1) Patience vs. Arrogance: It is better to patiently endure than to arrogantly begin **7:8**

2) Anger vs. Resolution: When one harbors unresolved anger, one demonstrates their inability to deal wisely with their life **7:9**

3) Past vs. Present: To dwell on the superiority of the past is to not deal skillfully with today **7:10**

4) Money vs. Wisdom: Although money can provide a type of protection, wisdom supersedes it because it enables one to deal with all of his experiences **7:11-12**

d. A Wise Choice Under Difficulties: One is not able to face life through one's own attempts at goodness but when one recognizes that God's design has placed difficulty into one's life to draw them to Himself **7:13-22**

1) Thesis: When one accurately considers the unalterable design God has given to life, one can enjoy prosperity and use adversity to draw him to God **7:13-14**

David Hubbard: Outline

- I. Sobriety Is Better Than Levity (**7:1-7**)
- II. Caution Is Better Than Rashness (**7:8-10**)
- III. Wisdom Is Better Than Folly (**7:11-12**)
- IV. Resignation Is Better Than Indignation (**7:13-14**)
- V. Integrity Is Better Than Pretentiousness (**7:15-22**)
- VI. Reflections on Human Limitations (**7:23-8:1**)
- VII. Admonitions on Respect for Authority (**8:2-9**)

Mike Miller: There are many things about our perception of things that are upside down from God's view.

- A. We like beginnings and we do not like endings.
- B. Beginnings make us happy and endings make us sad.
- C. We are sad when we should be happy, and happy when we should be sad.
- D. We rejoice when we should mourn, and mourn when we should rejoice.
 1. We rejoice and weep for joy when a child is born into this world of sin, sorrow, pain, sickness, hatred, war, and perversion.
 2. Then we weep for sorrow and are heartbroken when a dear saint of God who has fought the good fight and made it through this vale of sorrow, and in victory graduates to very presence of God and escapes this life of pain.

- E. We live too much in the past and very little or none in the future.
- F. We look back when we should look forward and we look forward when we should look back.
- G. We cherish feelings from the past and entertain none for the future.
- H. The end of a thing is somewhat of a shock to our soul and forces us to consider and evaluate everything again.
- I. We seldom do such a thing in the beginning of a thing.

<https://media-cloud.sermonaudio.com/text/52521339273473.pdf>

George Hendry: Ecclesiastes sets forth a wisdom of life which takes full account of the great negatives, **adversity, sorrow and death**. He who would live wisely must lay death to heart and integrate it with his view of life. The wisdom which would see “life steadily and see it whole” must see death also; it “exacts a full look at the worst.” The **modern flight from death**, shown by the avoidance of serious consideration of it in popular thought and even of all mention of it in polite conversation, as if death were a sleeping dog one could pass on tiptoe, is the index of a view of life to which death has no meaning save that of an irrational brute fact which rudely interrupts man’s efforts and aspirations. Man’s hopes today are bound up with a progressive postponement of death and the dream of its eventual elimination.

Charles Spurgeon: [Death] is much nearer to us than we think. To those of you who have passed fifty, sixty, or seventy years of age, it must, of necessity, be very near. To others of us who are in the prime of life, it is not far off, for I suppose we are all conscious that time flies more swiftly with us now than ever it did. The years of our youth seem to have been twice as long as the years are now that we are men. It was but yesterday that the buds began to swell and burst, and now the leaves are beginning to fall, and soon we shall be expecting to see old winter taking up his accustomed place. The years whirl along so fast that we cannot see the months which, as it were, make the spokes of the wheel. The whole thing travels so swiftly that the axle thereof grows hot with speed. We are flying, as on some mighty eagle’s wing, swiftly on towards eternity. Let us, then, talk about **preparing to die**. It is the greatest thing we have to do, and we have soon to do it, so let us talk and think something about it.

TEXT: Ecclesiastes 7:15-29

TITLE: PURSUE THE PATH OF WISDOM AND THE FEAR OF GOD

BIG IDEA:

UNDERSTANDING THE PERVASIVENESS OF FUTILITY AND THE REALITY OF PERSONAL PERVERSITY, PURSUE THE PATH OF WISDOM AND THE FEAR OF GOD

INTRODUCTION:

Albert Mohler: Wise living in this world must take human evil into account with utter realism. Stupidity and madness, as well as wisdom, call for our alert attention (v. 25). Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes as a guidance for a young man soon to enter adulthood (1:9), so he warns his young reader about the kind of woman who is out to destroy a man (7:26). Solomon is not saying that men are more virtuous than women. He is explaining that he found **any** virtuous person rare indeed (vv. 27-28). And that Solomon found no woman he could admire might have been his own fault (1Ki 11:1-4). The one thing Solomon had no difficulty finding: the capacity of all human hearts to turn from uprightness toward ever-new forms of evil (Ecc 7:29). How sadly anticlimactic – one of Solomon’s most solid discoveries in this lifelong quest for truth and reality is that we are sinners!

Walter Kaiser: It is the fear of God that is the best protection against either absurdity. Neither man’s folly nor a conceited and strained righteousness will serve as a guide, or as a guise, to mask the real need of men. They must come to fear God. That is true wisdom. Wisdom, then, is not a self-imposed estimate of one’s own abilities or attainments. Indeed, true wisdom will be a better protection against all these errors and excesses than ten rulers or sultans in a city (v. 19).

We cannot be too careful in our evaluation of the character of men. Too much passes for true piety that is not piety at all. The only thing a pseudo-pious kind of scrupulosity will yield is the judgment of God. Therefore, warns Qoheleth, the Teacher, **let us not be too quick to label the providence of God as unjust.**

In fact, rather than being too pious, no one is without fault in deed or word (vv. 20-22). Men are **universally depraved**, and we all fall short of the glory of God. The advantage (v. 20 begins with a “because”) of the recommended wisdom in fearing God (v. 18) is that it does more than open up the pattern of meaning to the eternity of all things here below and above (3:11); this wisdom also gives men and women a **self-control** that will not resent the ill-advised slander, abuse, and curses of others. It is foolish to be overly concerned about and troubled by what others think and say about us in their unguarded, unkind, and foolish moments (vv. 21-22).

Nevertheless, it still must be said of even the wisest of us that despite the original uprightness of man as he came from the hand of his Maker in the Garden of Eden, we

have one and all alike gone after our own schemes (v. 29). This truth could be set forth in a hyperbole: “There is only one in a million (the Hebrew says a “thousand”) who acts as he ought” (v. 28). **Sin has worked its corrosive effects on the entire human race.** Therefore, those who discover wisdom (for that is the subject of this section [vv. 20-29]), are very few indeed.

Iain Provan: The pursuit of wisdom and righteousness brings **no guarantees**, moreover, about how the individual life will work out (7:15). The wise person accepts as reality the mixed nature of experience and does not struggle against it (7:13–14, 16–18). He or she accepts the **limitations** that God has set on mortal life. Thus does Qohelet continue to **balance appreciation for wisdom with critique of its potential** and, no doubt, of the way that it was sometimes used within his own culture and time.

The crucial thing to be remembered about the universe is that God has created it (vv. 13–15). Wisdom is not a key that can be used in independence of the Creator to unlock the secrets of the universe, to shape existence after mortal desires, and to control life. Although certain ways of being and behaving are wiser than others and in general tend toward life rather than death, yet in the end we must remember that **the universe is not a predictable machine** but a personally governed and complex space. Wisdom is not magic. God is not an object to be manipulated, nor does God’s world belong to human beings. If God makes something crooked, it is beyond human power to make it straight (v. 13; cf. 1:15).

The wise person accepts the world as he or she finds it, receiving both good and bad from God and acknowledging that either might lie in the future (v. 14). The wise person knows that righteousness does not infallibly produce life in the short term (in spite of the advantage that wisdom has over money), just as wickedness does not inevitably lead on, in the short term, to death (v. 15). The embrace of wisdom does not give one leverage in respect of God, so that the future becomes predictable. As **chapter 3** has reminded us, it is God who controls the “*times*,” and the times are extremely varied.

To those who accept these limitations (i.e., conform themselves to reality), there is clearly “*benefit*” (*yoter*, 7:11) in wisdom. To those who do not and think of life not so much as something to be lived as something to be capitalized upon—who are committed to striving with and struggling against reality rather than living in harmony with it—life will ultimately seem to have no benefit worth speaking of (cf. *yoter* in 2:15, NIV “*gain*”).

Douglas Sean O’Donnell: We can’t always or often explain why bad things happen to good people or good things happen to bad people. It’s a crooked world! It’s a crooked world filled with guilty and scheming sinners.

Douglas Miller: Outline

- I. Choosing Righteousness and Wisdom, 7:15-18
- II. Wisdom and Righteousness of Others, 7:19-22
- III. The Elusiveness of Wisdom and Righteousness, 7:23-29

I. (:15-22) CHOOSE THE PATH OF WISDOM AND THE FEAR OF GOD

A. (:15-17) Two Paths of Futility in Life

1. (:15) Thesis Statement – Pervasiveness of Futility

a. Futility Dominates the Preacher's Investigation

"I have seen everything during my lifetime of futility;"

Walter Kaiser: Therefore, although men appear to be treated irrespective of their character in the providence of God (7:15), the just man perishing in his righteousness and the evil man apparently prolonging his life in his wickedness, this is again only "judging a book by its cover," or using external appearances by which to judge the whole case. Such a verdict is premature and improperly grounded. We must penetrate more deeply beneath the surface if we are to properly evaluate either of these men or the plan and ordinance of God.

David Hubbard: "*Days of vanity*" (Heb. *hebel*) speak first of the brevity of life but also of its frustrating character, facing us as it does with puzzle upon puzzle, mystery after mystery.

b. Futility of Path of Self Righteousness –

Bad Things Happen to "Good" People

"there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness,"

David Hubbard: "*There is*" (v. 15), which introduces both unsettling observations, suggests that the instances of injustice are not the norm but are frequent enough to prompt inner distress about the ways of God's governing. These exceptions to the conclusions of conventional wisdom are too common to be swept under the rug.

c. Futility of Path of Rebellious Indulgence –

Good Things Happen to Bad People

"and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his wickedness."

Craig Bartholomew: Qohelet has found living examples that clearly contradict Proverbs' character-consequence teaching that righteousness will lead to blessing and folly to destruction.

Tremper Longman: The two case studies present us with a paradox, and Qohelet surely wanted his listener/reader to be **shocked** by what he said. He saw the righteous perishing and the wicked living long. This is the polar opposite of what some strands of biblical teaching indicate. For instance, certain legal portions of the Bible teach that observation of the law prolongs life (**Exod. 20:12; Deut. 4:40**), and the wisdom teachers instructed that righteousness led to life (Prov. 3:1–2), while the wicked suffered and died early (**Ps. 1**). Although **Raymond Van Leeuwen** has now shown how

the book of Proverbs as a whole does not teach a simple **retribution theology**, nonetheless, Qohelet's observation **cuts across normative biblical expectations**.

2. (:16-17) Theology of Moderation

David Thompson: Now, we know from studying Scripture that Solomon cannot mean by this verse that a person may be **too holy**, too committed or too fervent in his pursuit of righteousness. The Apostle Peter challenged believers to "*Be holy as God is holy*" (**I Pet. 1:16**). Paul said believers should forget everything else and put the high calling of God as the ultimate pursuit of life (**Phil. 3:13-14**). **Certainly this text is not designed to get believers to lessen their commitment level to God.**

- a. (:16) Don't Kill Yourself Pursuing Self Righteousness
"Do not be excessively righteous, and do not be overly wise. Why should you ruin yourself?"

e.g. like the Pharisees of Jesus' day – they were all about external acts of self righteousness in trying to earn favor before God

Van Parunak: Don't be very righteous, since the only kind of righteousness you can put forth is **works righteousness**, self-righteousness, which merits God's judgment just as much as wickedness does.

David Thompson: Some suggest it means that one will not be excessively righteous in the sense of a **self-righteous, rigid, ritualistic legalism**. This is the type of righteousness that becomes stricter than even what God demands.

Philip Graham Ryken: When he tells us not to be "*overly righteous*," he might be telling us not to be **self-righteous**. Grammatically speaking, the form of the verb that the Preacher uses in **verse 16** may refer to someone who is only pretending to be righteous and is playing the wise man. In that case, the person the Preacher has in mind is too righteous by half. He does not have the true holiness that comes by faith, but only the **hypocritical holiness that comes by works**.

After all, if God's standard is perfection — if we are called to love him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength — then how could anyone ever be "*overly righteous*"? No, **our real problem is thinking that we are more righteous than we really are**. Somehow there never seems to be any shortage of people who think they are good enough for God. This leads **H. C. Leupold** to suspect that a "peculiar type of righteousness was beginning to manifest itself in Israel, an overstrained righteousness which lost sight of the ever-present sinful imperfections of men and felt strongly inclined to argue with God and to find fault with Him because He was apparently not rewarding those righteous men as they deemed they deserved to be rewarded."

In response, the Preacher warns us not to be self-righteous. We should not think that trying to be more righteous will save us on the Day of Judgment. Nor should we think

that we are so righteous that we do not deserve to suffer any adversity, that it is unfair for someone like us ever to have a crook in our lot. When we think too highly of ourselves, resting on our own righteousness, then it is easy for us to say, “I don’t deserve to be treated like this. Doesn’t God know who I am?” It is also a very short step from there to saying, “Who does God think he is?” So the Preacher cautions us not to be, as it were, “too righteous.” In saying this, he is warning against a conceited righteousness that “stands ready to challenge God for His failure to reward” us as much as we think we deserve.

This is not to say that we should be unrighteous, of course. The Preacher warns against this mistake in **verse 17** when he tells us not to be too wicked. His point is not that it is okay for us to be a little bit wicked, as if there were some acceptable level of iniquity. When it comes to sin, even a little is too much. His point rather is that **there is great danger in giving ourselves over to evil**. It is one thing to sin from time to time, as everyone does. The Preacher will say as much in **verse 20**: “*Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.*” But there is a world of difference between committing the occasional sin and making a deliberate decision to pursue a lifestyle of theft, deception, lust, and greed. “*Don’t be a fool,*” the Preacher is saying. “*If you live in sin, you will perish.*”

So there are two dangers. One is a temptation for the religious person — self-righteousness. The other is even more of a temptation for the non-religious person — unrighteousness. Both of these errors will lead to **destruction**; they may even lead to an untimely death. But there is a way to avoid both of these dangers, and that is to live in the **fear of God**. Qoheleth says, “*It is good that you should take hold of this, and from that withhold not your hand, for the one who fears God shall come out from both of them*” (**Ecclesiastes 7:18**). . .

To fear God is to **revere God**. It is to know that he is God and we are not. It is to hold him in awe for his majestic beauty. It is to have respect for his mighty and awesome power. Having the true and proper fear of God will help us not to be so self-righteous. We will know that God sees us as we really are, and this will teach us not to pretend to be something we are not. The fear of God will also keep us from living a wicked life, because when we understand his holiness, the last thing we will want to do is fall under his judgment.

David Hubbard: Claiming to be better than we are -- **self-righteousness** -- and posing as wiser than we are—playing at wisdom—these are the deadly sins against which Ecclesiastes warns us in **verse 16** (see **v. 20** as comment on the impossibility of perfect righteousness). In a sense they are one sin, since “*righteous*” and “*wise*” are virtually synonymous in wisdom literature, especially Proverbs. The same may be said of “*wicked*” and “*foolish*” in **verse 17**. The **self-destructive** nature of this conduct is made clear in a rhetorical question which serves as the motivation or argument to support the command (**v. 16c**): pretending is one of the sins that are bound to find us out. We brag on our prowess; then fall flat on our face in our failure to maintain the pose.

- b. (:17) Don't Kill Yourself Pursuing Wickedness
*"Do not be excessively wicked, and do not be a fool.
Why should you die before your time?"*

Robert Laurin: Why should you alienate yourself by extreme conduct from the few good things that life can provide.

David Hubbard: The second admonition (v. 17) is a counter-balance to the first. If we are called to lean away from false claims to righteousness and wisdom, an antidote is not to fall off the other side by diving into wickedness (again the root *rāshā'*; see v. 15) and folly. That overcorrection is almost sure to be fatal, as the motivating question (v. 17c) warns us. Some there may be who defy the odds, swim in the pools of wickedness, and avoid drowning (v. 15). There is no assurance that we shall be among them. Most of the time, even in the short run, wickedness and foolishness produce disaster. In the long run, as we know from the New Testament, that result is inevitable.

B. (:18-22) Key to Life = Pursuing the Path of Wisdom and the Fear of God

David Malick: (7:18-22) The Place of Fear of God:

To be someone who fears God is to be able to be upright and to live with the knowledge that one is good and evil.

(1) Statement: It is good to hold on to righteousness and to also be aware of one's evil because this leads to a fear of God **7:18**

(2) Illustration: Although Wisdom and righteousness are helpful, no one is completely pure **7:19-22**

1. (:18) Fear God

*"It is good that you grasp one thing, and also not let go of the other;
for the one who fears God comes forth with both of them."*

David Hubbard: Balance is the key: no pretense; no impetuosity. "Both" (as "all" should be read; see v. 15) temptations can be avoided ("escape") by the one who sober-mindedly and humbly seeks to do things God's way ("fears God"; see **3:14**).

Douglas Sean O'Donnell: In other words, we should grab hold of God, "*for the one who fears God shall come out from both of them,*" which is perhaps more clearly translated "*will succeed either way*" (NLT) or "*will win through at all events*" (NAB). Put it this way: a saint or a sinner can become a winner only by trusting in God alone. We are to grab hold of God—or, better, we are to allow God to grab hold of us. The one who tremblingly trusts God avoids the temptation of **irreligious antinomianism** (i.e., lawlessness) on one side and **religious arrogance** on the other. The one who tremblingly trusts God worships him because he is worthy of our worship regardless of the sweet or bitter providences that he brings into our lives.

idcraleigh.com: Fearing God means...

- Stand in awe of his majesty.
- Depend on him.
- Walk in his word.
- Stand in awe of his forgiveness.

Don't go the route of irreligious wickedness.

Don't go the route of religious self-righteousness.

Take the narrow path: Stick to Jesus. Follow him and you'll avoid these extremes.

An illustration of this verse is the story of two sons in **Luke 15**

- One is irreligious – he's overly wicked and leaves everything before coming home smelling like Cognac and pigs...
- One is smug self-righteous guy – "I've never broken any rules."
 - He's a religious score keeper.
 - He can't rejoice that his brother his home.
 - He's condescending and smug.
 - He's angry at his Father's compassion because Pharisees don't like grace.
- Both need salvation.

<https://idcraleigh.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Eccl-7.15-29-1-1.pdf>

Alternate View:

Allen Ross: My conclusion here is that Qohelet simply **gives bad advice**. Motivated by **v.15** that the righteous die young and the wicked live long, Qohelet advises against committing oneself totally to either of the two options. The one who is afraid of what God can do, as evidenced by what he has already done in **v.15**, will go forth in life accompanied by Qohelet's two axioms. Sometimes he will employ the one, sometimes the other, and maybe both at the same time—whatever it takes to stay on God's good side. **A balanced, mediocre, boring but safe life.**

2. (:19-22) Pursue Wisdom

Iain Provan: **Verses 19–22** further explain the message of **verses 15–18**. Although wisdom may be pursued from bad motives and its pursuit may result in bad consequences, yet in itself it is a good thing. It is vastly superior, in fact, to political or military power (**v. 19**; cf. **9:13–18**; **Prov. 21:22**; **24:5–6**), which is dependent on wisdom for its success. One wise person is "*more powerful than ten rulers* [perhaps better, officials] *in a city*." Yet the wise person will still be a **flawed person**, because he or she is a human being. No one is sinless (**Eccl. 7:20**; cf. **1 Kings 8:46**), no matter how intent a person is in pursuing God. To err is human.

- (:19) Wisdom Supplies Strength
*"Wisdom strengthens a wise man
more than ten rulers who are in a city."*

David Thompson: Most people do not place much **value** on wisdom and very few place much value on God's wisdom. Simply listen to people and watch their decisions and we may quickly discover that the wisdom of God and choosing to do what God deems as wise doesn't make much difference to most people.

Solomon knew the value of wisdom. He taught his son that there was "*nothing*" that compared to having God's wisdom (**Prov. 3:13-18**). Time and time again he taught his own son to get the wisdom of God because it would do many wonderful things for him (**Prov. 4:5-13**).

In Solomon's day, a ruler of a city was not just a political figurehead, he was one who ruled. He had power, he had authority and he had honor. Ten rulers of a city represent a complete and massive amount of strength and power. Solomon is saying one wise man with the wisdom of God has more strength, more power, more authority and honor than ten rulers of a city.

The man with wisdom rules himself and has God's blessings on his life. He has a supernatural strength given to him by God and he has a reputation that doesn't just matter in a city, but in eternity.

Philip Graham Ryken: In this simple analogy, the Preacher imagines a city governed by a **council of ten**. Most cities would be fortunate to have even one wise leader to protect the city. But there is strength in numbers, and this particular city has ten good rulers to govern its civic affairs. A wise person has the strength of a well-governed city.

- Wisdom governs thought; so the wise person knows how to think about things in a God-centered way.
- Wisdom governs the will; so the wise person knows what choices to make in life.
- Wisdom governs speech; so the wise person knows what to say and what not to say.
- Wisdom governs action; so the wise person knows what to do in any and every situation.

Take hold of wisdom, and it will make you strong.

b. (:20) Wisdom Recognizes the Universality of Sin
"Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who continually does good and who never sins."

David Thompson: When one is thinking wisely, one will be quick to admit what the Word of God says time and time again, and that is **no human is perfect!** Every human being is a sinner and no man, in and of himself, is totally and completely righteous.

Certainly this principle is established time and time again in the Scripture:

1) **I Kings 8:46** says – "*When they sin against Thee (for there is no man who does not sin...)*"

- 2) **Psalm 14:3** says – “...*There is no one who does good, not even one.*”
- 3) **Prov. 20:9** says – “*Who can say, I have cleansed my heart, I am pure from my sin?*”
- 4) **II Chron. 6:36** says – “...*for there is no man who does not sin...*”
- 5) **Psalm 143:2** says – “*And do not enter into judgment with Thy servant, for in Thy sight no man living is righteous.*”
- 6) **Rom. 3:23** says – “*for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*”
- 7) **James 3:2** says – “*For we all stumble in many ways...*”
- 8) **I John 1:9** says – “*If we say we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us.*”

No one is perfect and that is a Biblical fact. Now the wise man realizes there will be times in his own life when he will sin, when he will fail. Apparently understanding this is a critical key to living a meaningful life.

If one doesn't grasp this point, negative things can happen:

- 1) A person can become so depressed with himself or herself that life seems useless and worthless. If one does not realize this about himself, one may miss an exciting, meaningful life even though he is a sinner.
- 2) A person can become so used to his sin that it becomes excessive. One who doesn't admit there are times he sins is one who lives in his sin continually. He is not living the truth and any relationship we have with God must always be based on truth.

No one who tries to cover his sin will go anywhere in his relationship with God (**Prov. 28:13**).

A critical key to living a fulfilled life is knowing and admitting you aren't perfect. There is a tension of admitting sinfulness and striving for righteousness. When this tension is at the proper level, life is meaningful.

c. (:21-22) Wisdom Accepts Personal Perversity

“Also, do not take seriously all words which are spoken, lest you hear your servant cursing you.

22 For you also have realized that you likewise have many times cursed others.”

David Hubbard: In integrity we should face our own **propensity to sin** by remembering the times, whether by tongue or by thought (“*heart*”), we have spoken badly of others and heaped harsh wishes on their heads.

Iain Provan: **Verse 22** identifies by way of example one such flaw (cursing others in one's heart), drawing from the reality of universal human sinfulness in this regard the advice that people should not be too attentive to the words of their servants and (presumably) take punitive action against them. One's attitude to other human beings should be conditioned by the awareness of one's own flawed humanity. The truly wise

person who fears God and remembers who he is (vv. 15–18, 20) will also remember who one’s neighbor is and will behave accordingly.

II. (:23-29) CONFRONT THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF PURSUING WISDOM BY HUMAN EFFORT

David Malick: Only Fear of God Satisfies:

Except for fearing God, all attempts at explaining life lead to the trappings of despair because mankind’s tendency is to seek that which is against God’s upright design for him.

- 1) The Failure of Human Attempts: All of man’s attempts of skillfully explaining life fall short of the mysteries before him 7:23-24
- 2) The Deliverance of Fear: In examining life Solomon discovered that only the one who fears God can escape the painful trappings of life 7:25-26
- 3) The Tendency of Mankind: In examining life Solomon found that man’s bent as a race is to seek that which is against God’s upright design for them 7:27-29

A. (:23-24) Impossibility of Discovering Wisdom Apart from Sovereign Revelation

Douglas Sean O’Donnell: From a recognition of our moral limitations in **Ecclesiastes 7:19–22**, Solomon moves on to a recognition of our mental limitations in **verses 23–24**.

Ultimate, or godlike, wisdom is **elusive** and **incomprehensible**. Trying to grasp it is like trying to leap from Boston to Brisbane or like trying to jump into the middle of the Black Sea and touch the bottom. It is **too distant** and **too deep**.

These horizontal and vertical challenges, however, are intentional. God alone is God, and God alone is perfectly righteous and perfectly wise. We were never supposed to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. His thoughts are too high and too deep for us to comprehend (cf. **Isa. 55:9**; cf. **Rom. 11:33**). To admit that we don’t have the answers shows wisdom on our part. **Calvin** called it “learned ignorance.” Even the wise are not all wise, and sometimes sin.

1. (:23) Failure of All Attempts

*“I tested all this with wisdom,
and I said, ‘I will be wise,’ but it was far from me.”*

2. (:24) Futility of Grasping the Mysterious

*“What has been is remote and exceedingly mysterious.
Who can discover it?”*

B. (:25-26) Impossibility of Avoiding the Seductiveness of Sin Apart from Sovereign Grace

1. (:25) Desiring to Seek Out the Essence of Wisdom and Folly

*“I directed my mind to know, to investigate,
and to seek wisdom and an explanation,
and to know the evil of folly and the foolishness of madness.”*

Craig Bartholomew: The rest of this section expands on Qohelet’s failure to find the wisdom he sought. Verse 25 reminds us of the energy involved in his search (to know, to explore, to seek), the extent of his search (wisdom, an explanation, wickedness, stupidity, folly, madness), and its intensely personal nature: he turned his “*heart*” to know and explore. Qohelet has been fully invested in his journey of exploration, but the result is that **wisdom is far from him (v. 23)** and so deep that if it exists he cannot find it; indeed, who can (v. 24)? The metaphors of distance (far off) and depth (extraordinarily deep) evoke both **the extent of Qohelet’s quest and its dismal failure.**

Douglas Miller: Qohelet has sought wisdom but found it **elusive**. As he explored folly as well as wisdom, he found that Dame Folly is dangerous. . . He has not discovered the scheme or ultimate solution to life. But he does know that God made people in such a way that they keep trying to make sense of things, and that no person can be so righteous or so wise as to control life to his or her complete advantage.

2. (:26) Discovering the Power of the Seductiveness of Sin

a. Personification of Temptation and Bondage

*“And I discovered more bitter than death the woman
whose heart is snares and nets, whose hands are chains.”*

b. Pleasing God Depends on Sovereign Grace

*“One who is pleasing to God will escape from her,
but the sinner will be captured by her.”*

C. (:27-29) Impossibility of Establishing Righteousness Apart from Sovereign Redemption

1. (:27-28) Goodness in Mankind Is Extremely Rare

*“Behold, I have discovered this,’ says the Preacher,
‘adding one thing to another to find an explanation,
28 which I am still seeking but have not found.
I have found one man among a thousand,
but I have not found a woman among all these.’”*

Craig Bartholomew: Clearly these images are intended to evoke the **inaccessibility of wisdom**. . .

Douglas Miller: In the context of the whole section (**7:23-29**), either the rarity of good people (like the rarity of wisdom) or the elusiveness of finding them (like the elusiveness of wisdom) is in focus more than gender comparisons.

2. (:29) God's Creation Mortally Marred by the Fall – Requiring Sovereign Redemption

*“Behold, I have found only this,
that God made men upright, but they have sought out many devices.”*

George Hendry: The conclusion, which is the utmost to which human wisdom can attain, is that man has fallen from the state in which God created him, and through his cleverness has brought about his own undoing. The irresolvable antinomies of life have their focal point in the fact that man is at variance with himself.

* * * * *

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) Is this a message about **moderation** and a need for a **balanced approach** to life so that we don't pursue anything to the extreme?
- 2) What does it mean to be *excessively righteous* or *overly wise* (:16)?
- 3) What do you think of the irony of Solomon attempting to use wisdom to discover wisdom?
- 4) Is Solomon exhibiting a chauvinistic perspective that views males as superior to females?

* * * * *

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Jason Lim: Wisdom Sees the Lord (7:15-29) [Ed.: Extremely helpful message]

Introduction: We need wisdom. Life is complicated. Some of the toughest questions:

- Why do bad things happen to good people?
- Why do good things happen to bad people?

Ps. 73:12-14 – Psalmist is puzzled; we tend to believe in retribution

Jer. 12: 1 – Why does the way of the wicked prosper?

Hab. 1:13 – not easy questions

Eccles 7:15 – Solomon has observed the same phenomena.

Doesn't answer the question up front; instead, see the Lord who is sovereign in life (**vs. 18**). You don't know all the answers ... but you know the person who is sovereign over all. Key is fearing God.

7:16-17 – very strange statement; You cannot be overly righteous in a good sense. He is not saying just be a mediocre Christian. Not saying that you should not be too godly; in fact there is no one who never sins (**vs. 20**).

7:21-22 – No one can be exempt even from the sin of the tongue.

This “over-righteousness” is a self righteousness he is talking about. Be not overly self-righteous. Don’t be someone who prides yourself on thinking that you have done so much that now you have obligated God to bless you.

The other group is overly wicked. Live their life based on immorality. Both groups are foolish people and destroy themselves. There is a group that tries to earn favor with God and a group that could care less about pleasing God. Both are in trouble.

Luke 15:12 – Prodigal Son – wasted his life and now is penniless. For a Jew to live with the pigs is the ultimate dishonor. Father rejoices at the return of repentant son. But the elder brother is angry. He has been a good boy at home. The elder brother never loved his father as well. Just his strategy to get his stuff was different. Both were equally alienated from their father. There are people who are Rebellious and Religious – both are equally lost.

Solomon: Both of these 2 philosophies of life lead one to destruction. There is a third way = the only way to have life with God – vs. 18 = Repentant path = the wise man who fears God and recognizes the grace and goodness of God. Wisdom is seeing God in his Gospel, in His Son.

Eccles. 7:19 – *Wisdom gives strength*

Prov. 3:13-18 – Blessed is the one who finds wisdom

Prov. 4:5-9 – make sure you get wisdom; what are you pursuing?

The reality is that it is extremely difficult to get wisdom. Extremely difficult to know God.

7:23-25 – Solomon testifies that he has tried to seek wisdom. Why so difficult to get?

7:26 – Why does he throw in a woman in this context? He has 300 wives; 700 concubines; the woman here is not talking about one particular lady, but a metaphor, a personification of folly – Folly, like a seductress, is all over this world to imprison you and distract you from God

Prov. 9:13-18 – So loud calling to those who are walking by and the simple turn in; the pilgrim is easily seduced. She is like a Delilah; her guests are in the depths of Sheol. Folly is a temptress that you see throughout the world.

7:27-28 – sounds really chauvinistic; Solomon exalts womanhood in his writings (cf. Prov. 31); not saying men are better than women; speaking in hyperbole; genre is poetic language; wisdom language; to exaggerate to prove a point; wisdom is so difficult to find – so very rare

7:29 – This folly we see in the world cannot be blamed on God and His creation but on the fall of Adam and Eve and the results of the entrance of sin; but in the midst of this

folly a wise man sees God

The knowledge of God can only be found in the Scripture. Don't take our privilege of access to God's Word for granted. God is not known by imagination but by revelation. We are so corrupted by sin, God must reveal Himself to us.

Prov. 2:1-5

It's all about a passionate pursuit for wisdom.

Application: Why do these bad things happen to me?

Wisdom is the perspective to go through all types of bad circumstances and at the end still testify that God is sovereign and wise and good and knows what He is doing and is manifesting His love towards me.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YyLaGzWP9Ds>

Van Parunak: Conclusion Regarding Righteousness

- 1) Righteousness comes from God.
- 2) What man produces is "*inventions*," man-made ideas that look good and sound righteous but are displeasing to God.
- 3) Fits precisely with the full biblical revelation about justification, that man can produce only wickedness, and righteousness comes only from God!
 - **Isa. 64:6**
 - **Tit. 3:5ff**
 - **Rom. 4:19-24**
 - **Phil. 3:4-11**

Iain Provan: It is necessary when considering wisdom, therefore, constantly to remind ourselves—and to be reminded by the Bible—of the true nature of things. **What can wisdom really achieve?** What is it really for? The biblical answer is that wisdom can never achieve for human beings the kind of control over life and destiny that they aspire to. At all times it is God who controls the times; at all times it is God who rules the universe, and his ways are inscrutable:

*Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable his judgments,
and his paths beyond tracing out! (Rom. 11:33)*

One of the first steps in true wisdom, in fact, is the acceptance of this reality and thus the truth that while wisdom is indeed light for life, it cannot be a means of gaining autonomous control of life. The New Testament achieves the necessary balance here by linking true wisdom firmly with the person of Jesus and by attacking any wisdom that ultimately stands apart from him. There is a human wisdom that opposes God and that God opposes. It is a wisdom he intends to frustrate (**1 Cor. 1:17–21**). Christ, by contrast, is himself "*the power of God and the wisdom of God*" (**1 Cor. 1:24**, cf. **v. 30**), *the firstborn over all creation* (**Col. 1:15**, alluding to the personified figure of wisdom in **Prov. 8:22–31**; cf. **Col. 2:3** and **John 1:1–5**). All truth and wisdom are ultimately focused on him and derive from him (e.g., **1 Cor. 12:8**; **Eph. 1:8**; **Col. 1:9**).

Jacob Gerber: Fearing the Lord vs. Scheming

I. (:15-18) Wisdom is not in Pretense.

It's not something that you can pretend to possess. . .

You don't find protection from dotting all your I's and crossing all your t's in righteousness. [= people who put on righteousness as a pretense, who pretend their righteousness] You also don't find safety and security by doing things your way, even when it involves a wickedness. . .

He's not saying sin a little to balance things out. Instead, what he is talking about is someone who puts a righteous or a wise face to the world. Who tries to conduct everything that people can see externally in their life to project righteousness to the world, but someone who does it from a pretense where it is not genuine and coming from the heart. . .

Don't try to make righteousness or wisdom, a pretense, a show. Don't try to live according to your wisdom or your wickedness, instead live by wisdom, which is characterized by a **fear of God**.

II. (:19-24) Wisdom is not in Pragmatism.

Pragmatism is putting the highest value, deciding what you are going to do, based on **what seems like it will work in this life**. I say seems because even when what seems to work in this life does not genuinely work in the eyes of God. . .

Creation cannot understand wisdom because **wisdom came before creation**. . . So where is wisdom? Well, **Job 28:23** says this, "*God understands the way to it, and he knows its place.*" And then at the very end of the chapter in **Job 28:28**, here's the answer we get, listen carefully, "*And he God said to man, behold the fear of the lord. That is wisdom. And to turn away from evil as understanding.*"

If you are stuck, it is because you are trying to find wisdom in this world. If you were stuck, it's because you haven't guided your first steps according to the fear of the Lord.

III. (:25-29) Wisdom is not in People.

The main thing that can lead him astray from this pursuit of wisdom = sexual immorality (:26). . . First of all, understand Ecclesiastes is a book that was written originally to men. The warning here, then, for men is to beware the adulterous woman who might lead them astray into sexual morality. If this book's primary audience had been women, he would say the exact same thing about the silver tongued, manipulative men who would lead women away into this form of sexual immorality. . .

Living without wisdom, the wisdom that begins with the fear of the Lord is like trying to solve a complicated math problem. I talked about this with the youth group this week on Wednesday night. It's like trying to work your way through a complicated, lengthy math problem, but where you make an **early mistake**. Do you ever do that on your math exams or you made an early mistake? It doesn't matter how brilliant your

mathematical prowess is from that point on, you will end up with the wrong answer. You'll work and work and try to recheck things and try to add things together again, but if you made an early mistake, you will invariably come to the wrong answer.

Scheming, then, is when you can tell that you've got the wrong answer in life because of your misery, because of your dissatisfaction, because of your sorrow. You can tell that something is wrong and you're stuck there. So you try different approaches. But you keep making the wrong answer with the same early mistake, it's like being desperate to try just random combinations on the escape room locks. **Living by scheming doesn't work**, as **Warren Wiersbe** says, "**Faith is living without scheming.**" Faith is living without scheming. It's to live according to the fear of the Lord.

<https://harvestpca.org/sermons/fearing-the-lord-vs-scheming-ecclesiastes-715-29/>

Alternate Views:

Rory Mosley: The Mystery of Perceived Injustice

SO THE COMMAND IS

Not to expect that your righteousness will spare you from suffering.

And not to assume that wickedness will go unpunished.

And then comes THE APPLICATION / EXPLANATION.

(18) *"It is good that you grasp one thing and also not let go of the other; for the one who fears God comes forth with both of them."*

The preacher warns against choosing one side over and above the other.

- Don't be the man who forsakes wickedness only because he thinks it will keep him from suffering and who ultimately ends up shocked in adversity.
- Don't be the man who embraces wickedness thinking he can escape unpunished.

You need to hold on to two understandings.

1) Hold on to your awareness that the righteous can and do suffer.

2) Hold on to your understanding that wickedness is very dangerous.

DON'T LET EITHER OF THOSE GO.

(even if circumstances confuse you)

BUT SADLY, THAT'S WHAT PEOPLE DO.

They see a perceived injustice and immediately want to doubt God and get angry and fall into foolishness.

But *"the one who fears God comes forth with both of them."*

- The one who fears God trusts Him even when the righteous suffer.
- The one who fears God trusts Him even when the wicked prosper.

The man who fears God doesn't let confusing circumstances

Shake him from his steadfastness.

<https://fbcsipur.org/the-mystery-of-perceived-injustice-ecclesiastes-715-29/>

Douglas Miller: Qohelet's point is not to avoid all extremes (so T/NIV, v. 18). Rather, it is to **accept the human condition and to find a way of faith within it:** *the one who fears God shall succeed* [lit., *go forth*] *with both* (NRSV), will understand (*hold on to*) both righteousness/wisdom and wickedness/folly. His warning to avoid wickedness and folly (v. 17) is very traditional (cf. **Prov 5:22; 16:4**): do not be fooled into thinking that wickedness is a means of success because it actually brings suffering. What he adds is a challenge to a simplistic understanding of proverbs that says the opposite, that the righteous will prosper (cf. **Prov 14:11; 15:29**). **Righteousness**, he insists, **is not a means to accomplish security from all harm**. Just as the Teacher has previously counseled that wisdom does not guarantee a safe, pleasant, and prosperous life (**Eccl 1:18; 2:12-17; 6:8**; cf. **9:11, 15**), so here he says the same thing about both wisdom and righteousness.

Thus the Teacher warns against a certain type of perfectionism: **one cannot manipulate the Deity by righteous actions and avoid all problems** (Roberts). Just as wickedness is not a route to success, **neither should one exhaust oneself with religious actions for the purpose of avoiding trouble and tragedy**. The worthwhile challenge of life is to find a way to be a God-fearer in view of human weakness.

TEXT: Ecclesiastes 8:1-9

TITLE: *LIMITS OF WISDOM IN INTERACTING WITH SOVEREIGN POWER*

BIG IDEA:

WISDOM TREADS CAREFULLY IN INTERACTING WITH SOVEREIGN POWER BECAUSE OF THE PRIORITY OF SUBMISSION AND THE REALITY OF LIMITATIONS

INTRODUCTION:

John Gill: The preacher begins this chapter with the praise of wisdom, from its excellency and usefulness, **Ecclesiastes 8:1**; and advises men, if they would live quietly and comfortably, to honour and obey the king that rules over them, and not be rebellious against him, since he has great power and authority, **Ecclesiastes 8:2**; and not be anxious about things to come, since there is a set time for everything, and future things cannot be known nor frustrated; and, particularly, there is no avoiding the hour and stroke of death, **Ecclesiastes 8:6**; Though there are times wherein wicked men rule over others, it is to their own hurt, and they must die; and though they may be pompously buried, yet are soon forgotten, **Ecclesiastes 8:9**; and the reason of their insolence is the delay of justice; yet there will come a time when it shall be well with them that fear God, and ill with the wicked, though they may live long in wickedness; and for the present it may befall good then what wicked men deserve, and wicked men may have that which might, be thought more proper for good men, **Ecclesiastes 8:11**; wherefore this should give no uneasiness; but men should cheerfully and freely enjoy what they have with thankfulness, there being nothing better than that under the sun, **Ecclesiastes 8:15**; and the chapter is concluded with observing the unsearchableness of divine Providence, **Ecclesiastes 5:16**.

Albert Mohler: Wisdom helps us navigate the world of politics and power. The wise may have little influence; but still, they can stand out by their radiant gentleness (**v. 1**). It is foolish to provoke or to snub a ruling authority; but there are ways to be wise in such a situation, hard as it is to wait patiently (**vv. 2-6**). Human government inevitably disappoints because human knowledge is limited, power fails, sin backfires, and pride abuses (**vv. 7-9**).

D. Thomas: The Ruler and the Subject

It is possible that some persons, living under a form of government very different from that presumed in the admonitions of this passage - under a limited monarchy or a republic instead of under an absolute monarchy of a special theocratic kind - may fancy that these verses have no special significance for them, no applicability to the practical conduct of their actual life. But reflection may show us that this is not so, that there are **valuable principles of interest and import for the civil life of all men.**

I. CIVIL AUTHORITY IS IN ITSELF OF DIVINE ORIGIN, AND POSSESSES DIVINE SANCTIONS.

II. WISE PATRIOTISM LEADS TO CHEERFUL OBEDIENCE AND SUBMISSION TO AUTHORITY.

III. LOYALTY TO EARTHLY, HUMAN AUTHORITY IS SUGGESTIVE OF LOYALTY TO GOD.

https://biblehub.com/sermons/auth/thomas/the_ruler_and_the_subject.htm

Douglas Miller: Qohelet concludes with an observation. He saw/observed the work done under the sun (v. 9a), in this case the problem of a time (*et*) when a person exercises authority over another to the other's hurt (NRSV; not NIV, to his own hurt; cf. 4:1-3; 5:8). Yet this section (8:1-9) has some words of encouragement in an otherwise grim situation. Those who are wise will be careful before rulers (8:1b-5a). They know that, even so, a ruler may harm them (8:3b). And yet even though their own limitations are great (8:5b-7), rulers are also accountable to God and have certain significant limitations (8:8). Such is the complexity of the Teacher's quest for wisdom: some of the bigger answers remain elusive, yet certain valuable things can be understood, and he seeks to pass them along.

David Thompson: A KEY TO LIVING A MEANINGFUL AND FULFILLED LIFE IS BY MAINTAINING A PROPER ATTITUDE TOWARD THOSE IN AUTHORITY.

R. N. Whybray: He captures well the ambivalence in Qoheleth's attitude toward political authority: "on the one hand he counsels obedience and submission to it on the grounds of prudence, while on the other he does not hide the fact that he regards it as brutal and tyrannical."

(:1) TRANSITION – WHAT TO MAKE OF WISDOM?

A. Paradox of Wisdom

"Who is like the wise man and who knows the interpretation of a matter?"

Craig Bartholomew: The opening question of v. 1 starts a **new section**. Although some think v. 1 concludes the previous section, the theme of **knowing** introduced in v. 1 is picked up again in vv. 5 and 7, and the section is coherent as a whole. . .

Wisdom involves **knowing what is fitting in a particular situation**, and this will vary. This aspect of interpreting a matter is especially relevant in this context because Qohelet will go on to discuss **how to conduct oneself in the presence of the king**.

Douglas Miller: It may be, however, that the question *Who knows?* (though rhetorical and meaning *No one really knows*) provides an opening frame that anticipates the directly stated conclusion at the end of the larger unit: *No one can find out and They will not find it out* (v. 17 NRSV).

Regardless of the exact ending of the previous unit (7:23-29), 8:1 serves as a good **transition** because it **ties the theme of wisdom's elusiveness to that of powerlessness before the monarch**, yet also before God. Sages offered counsel on how to relate to the monarch similar to the counsel the Teacher offers in the next several sentences. Here he indicates that the weakness of wisdom means it **cannot guarantee a good outcome** in this arena either (v. 1; cf. 5:8; 7:15-18).

B. Positive Effect of Wisdom

"A man's wisdom illumines him and causes his stern face to beam."

Craig Bartholomew: Hardness of countenance thus symbolizes the opposite of graciousness, namely, harshness and meanness. Wisdom transforms this into a face open to God and one's neighbor.

Iain Provan: But it is possible to understand **verse 1b** as the quotation of a proverbial saying, the significance of which is then expounded in the verses that follow. The first part of **verse 1** is then to be understood as an introduction to the saying and translated thus: *"Who is like the wise man? Who knows the interpretation of the saying [pešer dabar] . . . ?"* . . .

So what can the proverb of **8:1b** mean? To what does it truly refer? The material that follows suggests that Qohelet interprets it to refer to **behavior at the royal court**, where a glowering countenance will do no good and may bring great personal danger. It is wise not to show one's disapproval of, or disagreement with, a despotic monarch. The proverb now speaks of things as they should be made to appear rather than as they actually are.

Van Parunak: The General Principle: The Benefits of Wisdom

Though wisdom is rare, and polluted by man's sin, yet it is exceedingly **valuable**, and worth seeking, for it enables us to confront the inevitable suffering of our world with joy and graciousness.

1. Its definition--not common. Something very rare.

- a) The wise man, picked up in **2-9 (v.5)**. Begins with the fear of the Lord; comes as a special gift from the Lord (Solomon). **Skill in living**; applied knowledge of the Scriptures.
- b) One who knows the interpretation of a thing, picked up in **10-14 (v.12)**. Here is the definition Qohelet wants us to keep in mind. The wise man knows what events really mean.

2. Its benefit--leads us away from two undesirable reactions that the vanity of life under the sun might otherwise impose on us:

- a) **Enlightens the face:** Joy where the world expects sorrow. Remember, though Qohelet recognizes how rotten the world is, his conclusion is always the same--REJOICE.
- b) **Changes the boldness/strength of his face:** Gentleness where the world

expects harshness and antagonism.

I. (:2-6) WISDOM UNDERSTANDS THE FOLLY OF OPPOSING SOVEREIGN POWER (PRIORITY OF SUBMISSION)

A. (:2-4) Submission to the Ruling Authority

1. (:2) Obey the Ruling Authority as Your Responsibility before God

“I say, ‘Keep the command of the king because of the oath before God.’”

Rom. 13:1-5; 1 Pet. 2:13-17

Iain Provan: As the focus of the passage now shifts more explicitly to the wise man at court, the emphasis falls in the first instance on obedience (**8:2**). The command of the king is paramount and must be obeyed. The implication of this instruction, however, and the assumption of the verses that follow are that there will be occasions when the wise man will not approve of the king’s command and be tempted to ask: “What are you doing?” (v. 4).

Douglas Sean O’Donnell: If the king here was an Israelite king, this [oath] could refer to God’s promise to King David (**2 Sam. 7; Ps. 110:1**). In light of that messianic promise of an heir, God’s people were to tread lightly. But the oath here could refer to a human pledge of allegiance, as the alternative ESV reading gives, “*because of your oath to God.*” Either way, a **high view of providence is in mind**. The God who controls the times (**Eccl. 3:1–15**) also controls the reign of kings: “*The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will*” (**Prov. 21:1**; cf. **16:9; Eccl. 9:1**).

We must trust that the world isn’t “aimlessly whirled about,” but that the “Creator of all” also “sustains, nourishes, and cares for, everything he has made, even to the least sparrow.” Everything is directed by “the secret stirring of God’s hand.” So, then, insubordination to those in authority over you—teachers, parents, bosses, presidents, and others—shows an attitude of ingratitude and a mistrust in God. Be like Daniel instead. Do not compromise, but be discreet, respectful, loyal, diligent, and willing to suffer through wrongdoing. In other words, “*be wise as serpents and innocent as doves*” (**Matt. 10:16**) as you serve your “*earthly masters,*” knowing that “*you are serving the Lord Christ*” (**Col. 3:22, 24**; cf. **Eph. 6:7–8**). . .

Whatever government God has given us to rule over us, we are to respect it and (as we can) submit to it. In this era of exile (**1 Peter 1:1**), as we long for the city of God (cf. **Heb. 11:10**), Christians seek the welfare of the city (**Jer. 29:7**) as we spread the gospel of God (**Mark 1:14; Rom. 1:1**).

2. (:3) Opposing the Ruling Authority by Abandonment or Rebellion Will Fail

a. Forbidding Opposition

1) Abandonment Forbidden

“Do not be in a hurry to leave him.”

Iain Provan: If **verse 2** is thus read as a unit, then **verse 3** should be understood either as providing balanced advice to the wise man on how to react to a foolish command (he should not storm out of the king's presence in a rage, but neither should he tarry in a bad situation), or, syntactically better (given the absence of any adversative particle that might be translated as "*but*"), as suggesting how a wise person should react and then what he should do ("Do not be dismayed³; leave the king's presence. Do not tarry in a bad situation . . .").

The difference between the two interpretations lies in the **role of the oath**. In both cases, however, it is clear that the wise person is advised to disguise his true feelings while in the king's presence, for "*a king's word is supreme*" (v. 4). The **theme of power**, especially expressed in Hebrew *šlt* ("*supreme*" [v. 4]; "*power*" [2× in v. 8]; "*lords it over*" [v. 9]), is indeed prominent throughout the passage. It may be true that wisdom makes one wise man more powerful than ten rulers (Heb. *šallitim*, 7:19), but the truly wise person knows not to flaunt his wisdom when confronted by a foolish ruler, for there is a serious risk of "*harm*" if he does so (v. 5).

Tremper Longman: Qohelet continues his instruction concerning behavior in the presence of the king. After asserting the necessity of obeying the monarch's command, Qohelet says that it is prudent not to argue with the king, but just leave his presence and carry out his will. After all, he is the king. He is sovereign and his desires will be accomplished no matter what.

2) Rebellion Forbidden

"Do not join in an evil matter,"

Douglas Sean O'Donnell: If the government you serve is like the king described here (e.g., its unpredictable power is "sometimes used to perpetrate rather than punish injustice"),⁴ the temptation would be to take the path of revolution, insurrection, or at least grumbling-between-your-teeth personal rebellion. God's wisdom counsels us not to. Why? What tempers that temptation?

b. Failure Will Result Due to Sovereign Power with No Accountability

"for he will do whatever he pleases."

Craig Bartholomew: Once the king's power is regarded as absolute, as v. 2 implies, then any difference of opinion with him ironically becomes an "*evil matter*." From observation Qohelet knows (v. 4) that the king's word is **absolute**, and as far as he can see, the king is accountable to no one; there is no one to interrogate him about what he is doing. At any sign of such opposition from the king, therefore, one should desist and get out of the king's presence fast. Qohelet envisages the power of the king as absolute: he will do whatever he pleases and no one will call him to task (vv. 3–4).

3. (:4) Objections Cannot be Lodged against Supreme Authority

"Since the word of the king is authoritative,

who will say to him, ‘What are you doing?’”

Iain Provan: The command of the king is paramount and must be obeyed. The implication of this instruction, however, and the assumption of the verses that follow are that there will be occasions when the wise man will not approve of the king’s command and be tempted to ask: “*What are you doing?*” (v. 4).

B. (:5-6) Shrewd Understanding of the Situation

1. (:5) Discretion Is the Better Part of Valor

*“He who keeps a royal command experiences no trouble,
for a wise heart knows the proper time and procedure.”*

Allen Ross: The king must be obeyed, and for those who do so, harm from the king can usually be avoided. Of course, as suggested by the following verses, there is always the possibility of a certain arbitrariness or capriciousness to the king’s actions, which, like God’s capriciousness (see comments on **3:15–22; 7:13–14**), keeps us guessing and thus instills greater fear of the king.

David Hubbard: The time may come when toppling the throne is the right course of action, but it will be the wise not the rabble who best discern when and how.

2. (:6) Discern the Times and Situations

*“For there is a proper time and procedure for every delight,
when a man’s trouble is heavy upon him.”*

Allen Ross: Nevertheless, Qohelet does suggest that the wise man should be able by his wisdom to figure out the proper times and procedures with regard to coming and going and behavior in the king’s presence.

Iain Provan: It seems best to interpret **8:5–6** as exhorting the wise man at court, faced with a foolish ruler, to **exercise patience** rather than to give free rein to his true feelings—to remember that there is a time for everything, including divine judgment on foolishness and wickedness.

II. (:7-9) WISDOM UNDERSTANDS ITS LIMITATIONS

A. (:7) Inability to Know the Future

“If no one knows what will happen, who can tell him when it will happen?”

David Hubbard: Let arrogance learn the limits placed on all human authority. It does not know the future and, therefore, must make its decisions humbly. It cannot stave off the day of death and, therefore, must build contingencies into its plans. It may trigger responses beyond its control, like a war, which an authority may begin but not be able to end. It may engage in wicked conduct with tragic results from which there is no recovery. Such are the pitfalls of authority when its reins are in haughty hands.

B. (:8) Inability to Exercise Control – Four Images

Iain Provan: Various **images of mortal lack of control** are then given in **verse 8** to underline the point. No one has power over the wind (cf. **1:6**) or over the number of the days of one's life. Once a war is under way, no one has the ability freely to walk away from the army. Wickedness, finally, will not allow "*those who practice it*" (i.e., its possessors; Heb. *ba'al*; lit., "*master, owner*," as in **5:11**) to escape—a clever line, which is better translated more literally than in the NIV, since it raises the question of whether anyone ever really "possesses" wickedness rather than being enslaved by it. One would expect an owner to try to prevent the slave's escape rather than vice versa.

These truths are general ones that might apply to anyone, and in particular to the wise person, who may be tempted to think that he can change things by his words and actions that cannot in fact be changed for the moment (at this "*time*"). The deliberate twofold use of Heb. *šlṭ* (NIV "*power*") in **verse 8**, however, which reminds us of the "*supreme*" word of the king in **verse 4**, already makes us think of the king in particular—the one who appears to be completely in control when in reality he is not. It is the king's word that has the potential for harm or evil (*ra'*) in **verses 3** and **5** and that creates misery (*ra'a*) in **verse 6**. Yet **verse 8** suggests that wickedness (*reša'*) ends up possessing its possessor.

1. No Control over the Wind

"No man has authority to restrain the wind with the wind,"

2. No Control over Death

"or authority over the day of death,"

3. No Control over Escaping the Dangers of War

"and there is no discharge in the time of war,"

4. No Control over Escaping the Bondage of Wickedness

"and evil will not deliver those who practice it."

Van Parunak: Four negative statements showing the king's weakness in the face of death.

- 1) No man can retain his own spirit, i.e., postpone death.
- 2) No one can be triumphant in the day of death.
- 3) Nor can one get a furlough from that war. No such thing as R&R in the struggle with death. You are trapped into the conflict, and cannot escape.
- 4) Wickedness, which has served him so well in life, is powerless to aid him in death.

C. (:9) Inability to Restrain Oppression by Those in Power

"All this I have seen and applied my mind to every deed that has been done

under the sun wherein a man has exercised authority over another man to his hurt.”

* * * * *

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) How does the difference in our governmental structure impact the relevance of these principles regarding interacting with authority?
- 2) Are we learning how to control our emotions and speech and body language and reactions in situations where we disagree with those in authority?
- 3) When is it appropriate to engage in acts of rebellion or insurrection?
- 4) How do proponents of human wisdom fail to acknowledge its obvious limitations?

* * * * *

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Douglas Miller: This unit is framed by references to the wise and their futile quest for knowledge, a simple **chiasm** [*Chiasm*, p. 225]. The rhetorical question in **verse 1** (*Who knows ...?*) anticipates the statement and question in **verse 7** ([The person] *does not know, for who can inform ...?*), and the conclusion in **verse 17** (*Even the wise do not know*).

The first subunit (**8:1-9**) emphasizes the lack of human power and knowledge, including knowledge of the future. The second (**8:10-15**) concerns the lack of proper reward, a matter addressed previously by Qohelet (**2:18-23; 3:16; 4:1-3; 5:8**) and to which he will return (**9:1-3; 11:9**). The concluding verses (**8:16-17**) return to the theme of knowledge, insisting that God’s ways are mysterious even to the wise.

BibleHub: Chap. 8 – God’s Ways Are Mysterious

Verses 1-5: Wisdom's Influence and the Respect for Authority

The chapter begins with the assertion that wisdom makes one's face shine and changes its sternness. It advises obedience to the king’s command out of respect for the oath to God. It further suggests that one should not rush out of the king's presence or persist in an evil matter, for the king does whatever pleases him. Wisdom will help a person know the right time and procedure for every matter, for there are burdens that weigh heavily upon them.

Verses 6-9: Wisdom’s Limitations and Life’s Uncertainty

The writer accepts that there is a proper time and procedure for every matter, yet human misery stems from not knowing what will happen next. No one can predict when hard times might come. Like fish caught in a net or birds trapped in a snare, people are

ensnared at an unfortunate time when disaster suddenly strikes. In this, the limitations of human wisdom are underlined; even those who claim to be wise can't control or fully predict their fate.

Douglas Sean O'Donnell: If our government is corrupt, or at least under the control of the curse, and if the culture generally approves of such rule, **how are we to navigate our way through the darkness? Wisdom!** We need wisdom. This is where Pastor Solomon starts: “*Who is like the wise? And who knows the interpretation of a thing? A man's wisdom makes his face shine, and the hardness of his face is changed*” (Eccl. 8:1). Like Joseph, who trusted God to grant him the interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams, we must ask God to help us interpret the times we live in. We do so not only because wisdom will light the path we are to walk on, but also because wisdom changes our outlook on life. As coffee in the morning invigorates my body and brain, so wisdom turns a hard face (i.e., a frowning face) into a cheerful one (“*wisdom makes his face shine*”; cf. **Prov. 15:13**).

Lamar Austin: Responding to Authority

In Solomon's day, the king had far-reaching power over his subjects. They literally had the power of life and death in their hands and no one could hold them accountable. Therefore, it became imperative to avoid his wrath. We must keep this background in view because it lies behind what Solomon says throughout **chapter 8**. . .

The first reason we should obey the king is that **God made an oath to him**. Rightful kings in Israel ruled because of God's promise, just like the promise God made to David in **2 Samuel 7**. The people of God were obliged to obey their earthly king because he was **anointed by Almighty God**. To obey the king, therefore, was to give honor to God.

A second reason to obey the king is that **they possess ultimate control**. Verse 4 tells us that the “*word of the king is supreme*.” You can't argue with him or accuse him of wrongdoing. There is no law that would find him guilty.

Third, when you go against the king, **you will be punished (v. 5)**.

Some day that ruler will appear before the ultimate judge and they will be held accountable. But that does not always happen in this life.

But suppose the officer simply cannot obey his master? What other possibilities are available?

A second possibility that Solomon poses, then denies, is **desertion**. This is what is meant by “*be not hasty to go from his presence*.”

Even leaving the palace would not guarantee one's safety if the king became angry. It would not be as precarious to walk out on a company engaged in immoral practices today. It may cost you financially, but you would keep your integrity.

A third option in the face of immoral or abusive leadership is **defiance**. But Solomon says “*Do not take you stand in an evil cause, for he does whatever he pleases.*” I believe what Solomon is saying here is don’t become involved in an overthrow of the king, even if he is doing evil. . .

That is where vv. 5-6 lead us. The fourth option, rather than **disobedience**, **desertion** or **defiance**, is **discernment**.

We need discernment, because **the word of the king is law** (v. 4). The sage has little protection against the authority of his royal master. Therefore, if we are unwise in the way we challenge the king’s authority—or worse—if our resistance is evil—then we may fall under his judgment (see **Romans 13:4**).

You just have to be careful before an all-powerful ruler. According to **Derek Kidner**, therefore, there are times when “wisdom has to fold its wings and take the form of **discretion**, content to keep its possessor out of trouble.”

The discerning person knows there is “*a proper time and the just way*” (v. 5). It takes discernment to know how to object to authority in the right time and the right way. The impulsive person who overreacts and storms out of the room (v. 3) is probably only making the problem worse. . .

When the king is determined to pursue a policy that appears to be wrong or harmful, it is important to avoid responding in ways that reflect a lack of loyalty to the king. It is tempting to react with anger or revulsion or to join in a rebellion against the ruler. Qoheleth’s advice is to **be patient**, obey the king, and look for opportunities to turn the king away from the ill-conceived course. In such situations it is essential to keep the power and authority of the king clearly in view—he has ultimate authority on the human level, is answerable to no other human being, and does whatever he chooses.

Wise people can often identify the right time and the right way to bring about significant changes for good. The dangers inherent in such situations are obvious because of many factors that not even the most skilled sage can predict or control.

<https://gracestillamazes.blog/2021/11/04/responding-to-authority-ecclesiastes-81-9/>

Jim Erwin: Respect God and the Government

When you look at this text, you can’t come at it from 21st century view of an American political system. These rulers were dictators, and for the most part they were tyrants who didn’t let anything stand in their way of fulfilling their desires³ without the benefit of a check and balance system that we have today. These verses give us practical guidance for dealing with earthly government, whether good or evil, even in matters of life and death.

These verses share three directives about how to deal with the government. Within these three directives are a set of five proverbs about the government. Let’s go through these verses and see how one can respect the government and God.

HOW TO DEAL WISELY WITH THE GOVERNMENT

1. Obey the government while being loyal to God (Ecclesiastes 8:2)

Jesus [Mark 12:17] and the writer of Ecclesiastes both recognize that God's authority and the government's authority must co-exist. Yet Solomon goes one step farther. He states that one obeys the government because of a loyalty to God.

Every Christian is called to be a law-abiding citizen and to respond to any godly request the government makes for help. This includes everything from paying our full taxes to answering the president's call to volunteer service.

People often wonder whether this obedience has any limits. Must I always submit to the governing authorities, or are there times when it is my duty as a Christian to disobey? The simple answer is the one that Peter gave when the rulers of Jerusalem told him to stop preaching the gospel: "*We must obey God rather than men*" (Acts 5:29). When it comes to a conflict between God and man, we must obey the higher authority.⁵

2. Stay loyal to the government (Ecclesiastes 8:3)

Dealing with any kind of bureaucracy has its pitfalls. One man's decision, anywhere along the chain of command, can spell success or failure. The Preacher's advice on behavior before a monarch is equally applicable to situations we may encounter on any bureaucratic level. We achieve nothing by exasperating those in authority—neither will we get a sympathetic hearing from one to whom we have been discourteous.

FIVE PROVERBS ABOUT THE GOVERNMENT

1. The government's power is authoritative (Ecclesiastes 8:4)
2. A wise citizen stays away from trouble unless it is right to do so (Ecclesiastes 8:5)
3. Every situation has its right time and place, but worries make it hard for one to wait (Ecclesiastes 8:6)
4. Governments live with the same uncertainty in life as everyone else (Ecclesiastes 8:7)
5. No one has ultimate power, except God (Ecclesiastes 8:8)

3. Warning: Power abuses relationships, so be careful how you use it (Ecclesiastes 8:9)

The warning that Solomon leaves us with is the fact that power can abuse relationships. We begin with the tension between the power of the government and God. We see that not every government submits to God's authority. They can abuse it. Yet, ultimately, God will have the last word.

To quote the famous phrase from Spiderman: “with great power comes great responsibility.” This is true not just in civil governments, but also any of our relationships where we have responsibility for other people. As Christians, we learn that to when God grants us power, we need to be careful how we use it. Will we use it selfishly and risk the consequences? Or will we use the power God gives us to honor Him?

<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jimerwin/2017/07/06/ecclesiastes-81-9-respect-god-government/>

TEXT: Ecclesiastes 8:10-17

TITLE: *SOMETIMES LIFE DOESN'T MAKE SENSE*

BIG IDEA:

WISDOM CANNOT FIGURE OUT LIFE'S PERPLEXITIES

INTRODUCTION:

Douglas Miller: In sum, the larger unit (8:1-17) begins in 8:1 with the double rhetorical question: *Who is like the wise man? Who knows the interpretation/explanation?* It closes with statements that *no one can find out* (*find*, three times) or *know the work of God* (v. 17 NRSV). Qohelet's concern for the limitations of human knowledge in this section is then confirmed by the triple use of *vapor* at its center (8:10-15). The problem of the wicked prospering is not resolved; there remains a tension between confidence in God's justice and the presence of injustice.

Craig Bartholomew: Traditional wisdom may teach that there is a time and a place for judgment and justice (v. 6), but what if our observation contradicts this and we see justice endlessly delayed? This is the problem Qohelet moves on to in this section, which deals with the problem of the wicked not being speedily punished.

George Hendry: The mills of God grind slowly – so slowly that men may easily suppose they do not grind at all. The universe appears indifferent to moral distinctions, and Ecclesiastes is well aware of the difficulties of a too facile acceptance of the Jewish “philosophy of history” and of attempts to discern divine judgments in the course of events (v. 14). Nevertheless he knows of the certainty of judgment, even though it be not manifest in the things that are seen and temporal, and for this cause he faints not and can even laugh at despair (v. 15). Here he shows, more clearly perhaps than anywhere else in the book, that his own soul has an anchor within the veil.

Albert Barnes: In the face of the incomprehensible course of external events, he determined to abide in the fear and trust of God **Ecclesiastes 8:6-14**, and to acknowledge the natural incompetence of every man to find out the unsearchable ways of God **Ecclesiastes 8:15-17**.

Joseph Benson: It shall be well with the good, and ill with the wicked, though not immediately, **Ecclesiastes 8:12-14**. Therefore cheerfully use the gifts of God, and acquiesce in his will, **Ecclesiastes 8:15-17**.

I. (:10-14) LAMENTING INCONSISTENCY – THE PERPLEXITIES OF DIVINE JUSTICE

David Hubbard: The first set of **reflections** explores the **pattern of rewards** that prevails in human experience. The wicked seem sometimes to be honored for their

hypocrisy, while the righteous are forgotten despite their piety (v. 10); divine judgment often lingers so long that fear of it ceases to be a corrective to society's proneness to do wrong (v. 11); in short, the system of rewards on occasion, at least, works backwards—righteous people get what is due the wicked and vice versa (v. 14).

The thoughts (vv. 12–13) sandwiched between these criticisms of divine justice show clearly that Koheleth was suggesting that the **apparent inconsistencies** in God's dealing with the human family were the **exceptions not the rule**: in the great bulk of situations those who “*fear God*” will receive blessing (“*good*”), while the “*sinner*” and the “*wicked*” person will ultimately perish even though the “*sentence*” (v. 11) may seem frightfully slow in coming.

A. (:10) Inconsistent Legacies

1. Inconsistent Honoring of the Wicked in Their Burial

*“So then, I have seen the wicked buried,
those who used to go in and out from the holy place,”*

Allen Ross: The first sentence sets the stage with the observation of the funerals of wicked people. The second sentence is about those who came to the holy place (most likely a synagogue) to honor the dead and then exited the holy place to join in the funeral procession. The third sentence then completes the picture of what Qohelet calls absurd: those who had done righteously were forgotten. It is oppressive for him to think that the wicked are buried with pomp and great honor (cf. **Job 21:32–33**), while the righteous are forgotten.

David Thompson: The fact that wicked people are buried implies that when wicked people die, many people show up to honor them. Wicked people do reach positions of honor and prominence and Solomon had certainly witnessed lavish funerals for wicked people that died. Solomon saw that wicked people die and are honored by an impressive funeral. People gather to pay their respects to people who do not deserve respect.

2. Inconsistent Forgetting of the Righteous

“and they are soon forgotten in the city where they did thus.”

3. Refrain of Futility

“This too is futility.”

Tremper Longman: Qohelet observes that wicked people die and their deeds are forgotten (the verb in the MT is the hithpael of *škh*) in the city where they were active in the holy place. On a surface level that sounds like good news to the righteous: What could be better than to have the wickedness of the evil slide into oblivion? But Qohelet surprises us and concludes, “*This too is meaningless.*” . . .

[Longman] argues on the basis of the ancient versions for a slight emendation from the hitpael of *škh* “*to forget*” to the hithpael of *šbh* “*to praise.*” With this reading (see also NIV, NRSV, and numerous modern commentators), the verse clearly **pinpoints a**

logical cause behind Qohelet's frustration. The wicked may indeed die, but even then they are buried and praised in the city where they did their evil deeds and religious posturing. It is the fact that the wicked continue to receive the praise owed to the righteous that frustrates Qohelet and leads him to utter his conclusion that "*this is meaningless.*"

Douglas Miller: one can discern the heart of the Teacher's message regardless of how one resolves the textual puzzle. As he has observed before, sometimes the wicked fare well, the righteous fare badly, and justice is not served (**5:8** and **8:14** just below). For this reason, sifting through all the interpretive options for **verse 10** is not essential. . .

That being said, the sixth option [*"The wicked came from the holy place and were buried; those who acted righteously were forgotten"* (**Symmachus**, NJPS)] is attractive because it complements the way **verses 11-14** contrast wicked and righteous. The sixth option requires a small change in the received Hebrew text (the result would well fit the Hebrew text reconstructed from the LXX for this part of the verse); the statement then means brought to burial (buried, T/NIV and NRSV). The sixth approach also interprets the word *ken* (*this*, NIV; *such things*, NRSV) as *righteously*; although this word is not used with this sense elsewhere in Ecclesiastes, it is a well-established usage (e.g., **Gen 42:11**; **1 Sam 23:17**). Forgetting (*šaka*) the righteous in the context of death indicates an abandonment, a neglect of proper burial (**Fox** 1999: 284; cf. **Ps 9:18**; **Isa 49:15**); the bodies of the righteous lie neglected in the city, while the wicked who die are taken from the city for burial in the cemetery. Thus, since Qohelet says elsewhere that everyone is forgotten (**1:11**; **2:16**), the sixth option explains a special use of *šaka* (*to forget*) in this context. The holy place is either the temple or the synagogue from which the funeral proceeded. Thus Qohelet moves from a lack of power over death (**8:8**) to a reflection on the **injustices of death (8:10)**.

David Hubbard: [Supports same textual changes] "*Then I saw the wicked approaching and entering the place of holiness and doing so frequently, while the righteous were forgotten in the very city where they did the right things. This also is vanity.*"

B. (:11) Inconsistent Retribution for Wickedness

*"Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed quickly,
therefore the hearts of the sons of men among them are given fully to do evil."*

David Hubbard: Note that nothing is said here about human responsibility to execute sentences. From this silence, and indeed the whole context, especially the emphasis on the fear of God (**vv. 12–13**), it seems safe to say that the One who does not work "*speedily*" enough is God.

Allen Ross: Building on this example, Qohelet complains that the **lack of swift retribution** for wicked crimes only encourages further wickedness. In the case just mentioned in v.10—that of wicked people's burial with full honors—there is no longer even the possibility of retribution for crimes committed. While initially one might think that Qohelet's complaint is against those in the city who have honored the wicked and

forgotten the righteous, the very fact that death has entered the picture means that, ultimately, **his complaint is against God**, who has allowed the wicked to go beyond the jurisdiction where justice can be meted out.

William Barrick: Being Wise in God's Thorne Room (:10-17)

Because of the sluggish pace of the legal system, the law loses its power to dissuade people from evil. Solomon observes that people give themselves more fully to committing evil deeds when “*the sentence against an evil deed is not executed quickly*” (v. 11). Deniers of Solomonic authorship point out that Solomon, as king, had control over the pace of justice. Why complain about something over which he himself had control? He did not make every legal decision. Like all kings he delegated authority in lesser cases to other leaders (see 5:8). Some failed to expedite justice or were slowed in the process by accepting bribes (cp. 7:7). All such injustice comes about because of the fallen nature of humanity.

<https://drbarrick.org/files//studynotes/Ecclesiastes/Ecclesiastes08PBC.pdf>

Leon Hyatt: The same problems exist today in enforcing the law. Suspension of penalties, probation, and parole are techniques that are used to give people an opportunity to make a new start and to correct their ways, but all too often they become excuses for a person to continue his wrongdoing. No human wisdom can tell when placing a person on probation or parole will help him correct his ways and when it will increase his incentive to do wrong. The best judgment of judges often proves to be wrong, no matter how they decide to handle a case. In spite of all the advances in law enforcement and in spite of all of the sincere efforts to improve the dispensing of justice, the problem of unfair and unequal enforcement of the law is as great a problem today as it was in Solomon's day. It remains as a testimony to the vanity of human wisdom.

C. (:12-13) Indisputable Value of the Fear of God

1. (:12) It Will Ultimately Be Well for Those Who Fear God

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

Douglas Miller: The Teacher laments that sentence against an evil deed/crime comes slowly, a circumstance that encourages more wrong to be committed (v. 11). The statement is general enough to include divine as well as human judgment against an evil deed. With **verse 12**, on the other hand, the speaker seems confident that regardless whether a wicked person commits a hundred crimes and lives long, it will somehow be better for God-fearing ones because they fear God. While this does not negate the lament of **verse 11**, it softens it by giving an encouraging word to faithful believers.

David Hubbard: the verse attests the fact that divine slowness in punishing the wicked should not dampen the hopes of the faithful for their own just and joyful reward.

2. (:13) It Will Ultimately Not Be Well for Those Who Don't Fear God

*“But it will not be well for the evil man
and he will not lengthen his days like a shadow,
because he does not fear God.”*

Iain Provan: Qohelet resists the conclusion that wickedness pays. He continues to affirm that it will go better with the person who fears God than with the person who does not (vv. 12–13), and he explicitly states that the days of the wicked “*will not lengthen like a shadow,*” by which is probably meant that the life of the wicked is a fleeting and insubstantial thing that does not last long (cf. 6:12).

Craig Bartholomew: The confession continues in v. 13 but with an important shift. In contrast to the one who fears God, it will not be well with the wicked and their days will not be long, because they do not fear God. As we have observed before, when Qohelet juxtaposes his confessional view with his enigmatic view, he does not resolve the contradictions but leaves them intact. So here, the clear contradiction is left intact: in v. 12a the sinners do prolong their lives, whereas in v. 13b they will not prolong their days! The confessional statement of vv. 12–13 thus affirms the character-consequence structure of Proverbs, but the **juxtaposition of contradictory views is not resolved**. Thus a gap is opened up in the text between what Qohelet observed and what he knows. The gap represents the immense struggle within Qohelet: **how does one resolve the contradiction between what one observes and what one “knows”?**

D. (:14) Inconsistent Examples of Futility Under the Sun

1. Bad Things Can Happen to the Righteous

a. Refrain of Futility

“There is futility which is done on the earth,”

Allen Ross: Verse 14 is a further description of an enigmatic situation of injustice that Qohelet has observed. **Justice is turned upside down**. The righteous are treated as if wicked and the wicked as if righteous. This too Qohelet cannot comprehend—it is enigmatic, a terrible mystery. Qohelet’s strong feelings about this are indicated by the double use of “enigma(tic),” at the beginning and end of this verse.

b. Observation

“that is, there are righteous men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked.”

2. Good Things Can Happen to the Wicked

a. Observation

“On the other hand, there are evil men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous.”

b. Refrain of Futility

“I say that this too is futility.”

II. (:15) EMBRACING ENJOYING THE PRESENT DESPITE UNRESOLVED MYSTERIES

“So I commended pleasure, for there is nothing good for a man under the sun except to eat and to drink and to be merry, and this will stand by him in his toils throughout the days of his life which God has given him under the sun.”

Iain Provan: The business of living well before God in this way must not be sacrificed in the pursuit of truth that is ultimately beyond our grasp.

Douglas Miller: The Teacher concludes the subsection with his **familiar exhortation to enjoy life**: people should eat, and drink, and enjoy themselves (v. 15 NRSV; cf. 2:24; 3:12-13; 5:18; 9:7). While there is some reason to hope for a better future, appropriate rewards are often inaccessible in the present. He therefore commends enjoyment in the midst of the present circumstances. His reference to the days of life that God gives them under the sun alludes to what Qohelet has said before about the **brevity** of these days (NRSV; 2:3; 5:18; 6:12) and their pain (1:13; 2:23; 5:17), as well as their **vaporous nature** overall (7:15; 9:9) [*Death*, p. 229].

David Hubbard: The simple graces from God’s hand are the daily staff of life. We should lean on them particularly hard just at those points where bafflement bodes spiritual defeat. “*Commended*” is literally “*praised*” (Heb. *shābah*), the same word with which the Preacher saluted death in 4:2. When the mystery of justice or any other mystery looms overwhelmingly before us, what better distraction, what sounder reorientation can we gain than to fix our hearts on the certainty of what we understand: food, drink, and rejoicing. “*Labor*” (see 1:3) there will be—both the “*labor*” to gain sustenance and the “*labor*” to gain understanding. But we have a “stand-by” (to adapt one translation of “remain”, JB) to see us through “*the days of (our) lives*” that “*God gives.*” **That stand-by is joy.**

Philip Graham Ryken: the Preacher is growing more and more confident about this joy. Earlier he told us that he had found “*nothing better*” than joy (**Ecclesiastes 2:24**) and that he had “*seen*” joy (**Ecclesiastes 5:18**), but here he urges us to experience God’s joy for ourselves. “*I commend joy,*” he says (**Ecclesiastes 8:15**), and the word he uses for “*commend*” is a Hebrew word for praise (*shabach*). Yes, there is vanity under the sun. Yes, we see injustice that is hard to accept or understand. Yes, we have a lot of hard work to do. Nevertheless, there is joy for us in the ordinary things of life — eating, drinking, and sharing fellowship with the people of God. **Dietrich Bonhoeffer** wrote, “Our life is not only a great deal of trouble and hard work; it is also refreshment and joy in God’s goodness. We labor, but God nourishes and sustains us. There is a reason to celebrate. . . . God is calling us to rejoice, to celebrate in the midst of our working day.” Without the saving, personal knowledge of Jesus Christ and the certainty of eternal life, it is hard to have much joy at all. Even the best moments in life are tinged with sadness because we know that life will not last forever. One day we will have to die, and unless we know Christ, we live in the fearful expectation of judgment.

III. (:16-17) LAMENTING INACCESSIBILITY – THE LIMITATIONS OF WISDOM

A. (:16-17a) The Pursuit of Wisdom

“When I gave my heart to know wisdom and to see the task which has been done on the earth (even though one should never sleep day or night), 17 and I saw every work of God,”

Tremper Longman: Qohelet here restates the goal of his intellectual labor (vv. 16–17a). He wants to know wisdom (v. 16), but his conclusions are extremely disappointing. What he discovers is the **limitation of knowledge**. No one, not even the wise, can understand what is going on in the world. As in 7:25–29 Qohelet admits that no one can find (*māṣā*’, here translated *comprehend*) the world.

Allen Ross: His autonomous epistemology results in his not seeing sleep! What he sees is so disturbing that it prevents him from finding rest. He is fully engaged in the quest, but it is constantly bringing him irresolvable enigmas, and one can imagine the impact of such a state on one’s sleep. Qohelet himself shares in the experience he describes in 2:23: even at night his mind does not rest.

B. (:17b) The Elusiveness of Wisdom

“I concluded that man cannot discover the work which has been done under the sun. Even though man should seek laboriously, he will not discover; and though the wise man should say, ‘I know,’ he cannot discover.”

Walter Kaiser: No one can know entirely what goes on under the sun (8:17)—only God knows comprehensively and completely. What mortals know is partial and incomplete. Mortals can dig and search for wisdom as much as they wish, but they will discover that they will be as shut out from their desired goal for comprehensive knowledge as the person who went on the same quest for wisdom in Job 28. The author of Job 28 plainly declared: *“Man does not know the way to [wisdom]”* (Job 28:13), for only *“God understands the way”* (Job 28:23). In fact, God said to man, *“The fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is discernment”* (Job 28:28). No wonder, then, that even so-called wise men cannot know what goes on under the sun. Human insight, understanding, and reason, like water, cannot rise higher than their source or its own level. Therefore, to the degree that God reveals His plan to believers, to that degree only are they able to apprehend that much of the plan of God. Yet there still are mysteries and puzzling aspects that remain. Only God knows entirely; we mortals know only in part.

Joseph Benson: No man, though ever so wise, is able fully and perfectly to understand these things. And therefore, it is best for man not to perplex himself with endless and fruitless inquiries about those matters, but quietly to submit to God’s will and providence, and to live in the fear of God, and the comfortable enjoyment of his blessings.

Douglas Miller: With some repetition, the Teacher insists that no one—not even the wise, who have the greatest potential—can make complete sense of what is going on in the world (v. 17). Comparing this verse with other statements Qohelet has made, we should understand that some knowledge, even important knowledge but not total knowledge, can be achieved.

Allen Ross: There are no wise people, only those whom God has given for a few short years the task of trying to find wisdom, yet has not given along with the task the ability to find it. To Qohelet, this is absurd.

David Thompson: As a believer, we do not have to understand or be able to explain everything God does to find meaning to life. God does what He does. He does not demand that we be able to explain it. What He does demand is that we trust Him and fear Him and obey Him. That is the mark of wisdom. That is the mark of a meaningful life. There are many mysteries of God that exist in this world. We will never be able to resolve them and that is okay. We can still have meaning and fulfillment if we will keep our focus on God and continue to enjoy what He has given to us.

* * * * *

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) Why pursue wisdom if it is ultimately elusive and inaccessible?
- 2) What are some of the futilities and frustrations of life that you have experienced?
- 3) Why is our justice system so slow to exact retribution?
- 4) Why do the wicked seem to escape accountability?

* * * * *

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Brian Borgman:

I. Fear God regardless of the way things appear (10-13)

- A. Forgotten or praised? (10)
- B. No consequences (11)
- C. Fear God openly (12-13)

Even though a sinner might commit a hundred crimes and still live a long time, yet I know that it will go well with God-fearing people— for they stand in fear before him. (Ecc 8:12 NET)

II. Hebel and the Limits of Wisdom (14-17)

- A. There is a hebel that is done/takes place on the earth (14)

B. I Commend Joy! (15)

C. The Incomprehensibility of God and His work (16-17)

Jim Erwin: The Wisdom of Divine Justice

Here, we see that Solomon is starting to take the long view of wisdom. He is beginning to see that there are things which are completely out of his control. You get to the point in life when we realize that you can't control everything. So you have to rely on the fact that God is in control. God will execute divine justice when He sees fit in the future. But it requires taking an inventory of your life and realizing that there are just some things in life you can't control no matter how hard you try.

SEVEN THINGS IN LIFE I CAN'T CONTROL

1. Death (Ecclesiastes 8:10)

2. Depravity (Ecclesiastes 8:11)

You can't stop people from sinning. Only God can do that.

3. Deliverance (Ecclesiastes 8:12)

4. Delay (Ecclesiastes 8:13)

5. Damage (Ecclesiastes 8:14)

Bad people get rewarded and good people get punished. This is the unjust damage that sin causes on this Earth. Solomon looks at how this happens in the world and reveals his frustration. Even though we know that God will execute divine justice in the end, we don't like seeing the damage. We don't like to see the wicked get off from punishment and we don't like to see the world treat the righteous unfairly. That means that since we can't control that, we need to accept our lot in life.

6. Destiny (Ecclesiastes 8:15)

We can't control the destiny of life. We can't control the ultimate fate. You can change the destination for eternity, but that's it. You can't change how it will happen. Think about it. You can't escape death. If you don't know Jesus, you can't escape the judgment either. It's not like you can say, "Well, I think I am going to skip the judgment. I want to go do what I want after death." It won't work that way.

7. Discovery (Ecclesiastes 8:16-17)

Wisdom endeavors to know all that can be known. Nonetheless, when it comes to the things of God, there are limits to what a person can discover. In spite of hard labor, no one may figure what God is up to in the universe. The only way that I will discover what God wants me to discover is through divine revelation.

<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jimerwin/2017/07/13/ecclesiastes-810-17-wisdom-divine-justice/>

**Bill Baldwin: Living with Injustice; Waiting for Judgment
The Judgment Does Not Appear to Be Coming (10-15)**

A. The Preacher Sees No Justice in the World (10-11)

Vs. 10 -- "*Then I saw the wicked buried; and they had gone in and out of the place of holiness* (i.e. they were remembered through burial and had had a place of respect in life). *Meanwhile those who did right were forgotten in the city.*"

There! [This translation] has got all the themes we want:

- The reversal of place of the wicked and the righteous (Cf v.14)
- The fact futility follows even into death
- The need for remembrance and the forgetting of those who had done great things (4:13-15)

Because of incidents like this, men are made bold to do evil

B. Yet by Faith He Says Justice Must Come (12-15)

1. He cannot discern this by observation
2. His eyes tell him that the wicked are not punished nor the just recompensed
3. Still he believes it will be better for those who fear God
4. Even though this flies in the face of his observations.
5. For on earth he has seen just men to whom it happens according to the way of the wicked and vice versa.
6. There's just no discerning by sight whether there will be a time of judgment, only that the time is not now.

C. So He again Commends Pleasure (16)

D. Because God's Ways Are Inscrutable (16,17)

http://web.archive.org/web/20071013072655/http://bettercovenant.org/ecclesiastes/ecc_8_2-17.htm

TEXT: Ecclesiastes 9:1-18

TITLE: LIFE JUST DOESN'T ADD UP –
BUT WE CAN STILL RESOLVE TO LIVE IT UP

BIG IDEA:
**THE ENJOYMENT OF THIS LIFE DOES NOT COME FROM FIGURING
OUT LIFE'S DEEP ENIGMAS**

INTRODUCTION:

[What's your **favorite parable** in the Scriptures?]

Despite the repetition of common themes in this Book of Ecclesiastes, I find one aspect to be especially puzzling – to what extent does the view of Solomon ever rise above the “under the sun” perspective and benefit from God’s perspective of eternity? More difficult question than it might seem ... Commentators differ on their views here.

“*enigma*” – something obscure; inscrutable; mysterious

Kidner: The fascination of this book throughout its length arises very largely from such collisions between obstinate facts of observation and equally obstinate intuitions. So it pushes us towards a synthesis which lies mostly beyond its own pages; in this case, the prospect of reward and punishment in the world to come.

3 AREAS OF WRESTLING . . . 1 AREA OF RESOLVE

**I. (:1-6) WRESTLING WITH THE EARTHLY FATE OF THE RIGHTEOUS
VS THE FATE OF THE WICKED – SINCE IT LOOKS LIKE THEY END UP
THE SAME**

A. (:1) Man’s Earthly Fate Lies in the Hand of the Sovereign God

1. Should be a source of comfort and encouragement to the Righteous

*“For I have taken all this to my heart and explain it that righteous men,
wise men, and their deeds are in the hand of God.”*

Baxter: this verse introduces Solomon’s **Review** of his entire quest and summarizes his conclusions – chaps 9-12

2. But Unpredictability is Unsettling

*“Man does not know whether it will be love or hatred; anything awaits
him.”*

Talking about outcomes that are dispensed from the hand of God

Ryrie: Love = happy circumstances; Hate = unhappy circumstances

Swindoll: Being in the hand of God is not synonymous with or a guarantee for being economically prosperous, physically healthy, shielded from pain, enjoying a trouble-free occupation, and having everyone smile and appreciate us. As Solomon wrote

“Man does not know whether it will be love or hatred; anything awaits him.” But what does help is the knowledge that behind whatever happens is a God who loves us and cares, who hasn’t lost a handle on the controls.

Eaton: the point is that the treatment the righteous will receive is unknown; who can tell what the future will bring? Righteousness and wisdom have no built-in guarantees of an easy life.

B. (:2-3) No Difference Between the Righteous and the Wicked – in terms of their earthly fate

1. Same Fate Awaits All

“It is the same for all.”

2. Five Sets of Contrasts Between the Character of All Men / Yet One Fate for Both

a. *“There is one fate for the righteous and for the wicked;”*

b. *“for the good, for the clean and for the unclean;”*

c. *“for the man who offers a sacrifice and for the one who does not sacrifice.”*

d. *“As the good man is, so is the sinner;”*

e. *“as the swearer is, so is the one who is afraid to swear.”*

Is it good or bad here to take an oath?

Eaton: refers not to profane or rash swearing (the majority interpretation; cf. Ex. 20:7; Mt. 5:34), but to swearing “*by the Lord’s name*” (cf. 6:13; 10:20) which was part of allegiance to the covenant. . . This view is upheld by the fact that in the series of contrasts the good characteristic comes first (as **Plumptre** observes).

3. One Fate for All Men / Character of Men Apart from God is Ultimately the Same = Evil and Insanity – Moral and Mental Twistedness

“This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that there is one fate for all men. Furthermore, the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil and insanity is in their hearts throughout their lives.”

Swindoll: We’ve heard about the doctrine of depravity all our lives, but not much about the doctrine of insanity, right? . . . Lurking in the human heart is a permanent mixture of evil and insanity . . . What an awful mixture -- meanness and madness!

Nightly news is just an accounting of the day’s experiences of evil and insanity being worked out in different circumstances. Nothing should surprise or shock us anymore. Those who hold to a humanistic philosophy of the inherent goodness of man have a

tough sell.

4. Same Fate Awaits All

“Afterwards they go to the dead.”

Longman: The abrupt syntax at the end of the verse is intentional and reflects the suddenness of death in the midst of life.

C. (:4-6) Hope Remains as Long as Life Lasts – there is a difference between the dead and the living

1. Hope is an Intrinsic Part of Life

“For whoever is joined with all the living, there is hope;”

2. Illustration: Life is always better than Death

“Surely a live dog is better than a dead lion.”

Wiersbe: dogs were despised in that day . . . 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.

Lion is the most majestic and powerful of the animal kingdom – Lion King – good combination of terms for a title

Look at a powerful horse like the filly Eight Belles yesterday that ran her heart out in the Kentucky Derby against those powerful colts; nothing more futile than that picture of the dead carcass – once the life is gone, what is left?

3. Expectation of death better than Cessation of thinking

“For the living know they will die; but the dead do not know anything,”

Constable: "The dead do not know anything" does not mean they are insensible. Later revelation indicates that the dead are aware of their feelings, the past, and other things (cf. Matt. 25:46; Luke 16:19-31; et al.). In the context this clause means the dead have no capacity to enjoy life as the living can.

4. Death Quickly Erases All Legacy and Reward in this life

“nor have they any longer a reward, for their memory is forgotten. Indeed their love, their hate and their zeal have already perished, and they will no longer have a share in all that is done under the sun.”

Eaton: earthly life cannot be enjoyed in retrospect

Longman: *reward* likely refers to the end of all earthly wages or benefits, and thus Qohelet is not leaving open the possibility of heavenly rewards. The thought does not even cross his mind.

II. (:7-10) RESOLVING TO LIVE THIS EARTHLY LIFE TO THE FULLEST – ENJOYING ALL THE GIFTS GOD HAS GIVEN

Solomon keeps coming back to this common thread – the closest he can come to any type of solution to the enigmas of this life – still he does not have much of an eternal perspective

4 Areas of God's Gifts to Us in This Life:

A. (:7) Grateful Eating and Drinking

“Go then, eat your bread in happiness and drink your wine with a cheerful heart; for God has already approved your works.”

Last phrase here is one of the most difficult in the chapter to interpret – *“for God has already approved your works”* – this is the important **motivation clause** for enjoying God's good gifts: to whom is this addressed? what are the possible meanings? Can't mean God's unlimited approval of all deeds of all men

Agrarian society; the fact that the fields have already yielded fruit from your labors only comes as the blessing of God; otherwise your fields would be barren and you would be experiencing drought and famine; so if you have something to eat, partake in recognition that it is only the goodness of God that has so blessed your labors

We are not called to a life of asceticism like the monks of the Middle Ages who imagined that they could draw closer to God by abstaining from all worldly comforts and pleasures

Baxter: This advice in Ecclesiastes has nothing of Epicureanism or godless, fleshly indulgence in it. It is simply a periphrasis for living in a legitimate comfort and prosperity (see Jer. Xxii. 15), due to Jehovah's bountifulness.

C. J. Mahaney: Sermon on addressing the **sin of Complaining**, murmuring, grumbling – this is an offense against God – Who are we not to be grateful and thankful and content with the gifts that God has provided? Look at how seriously God treated those who sinned in this area – study book of Numbers; look at NT commands – sin of complaining lumped right in there with others – but we treat it so lightly; we have our own expectations; when those are not met, we grumble; what does that say about our view of the Goodness of God and His Providence in our life; how do we feel as parents when our kids grumble and complain

B. (:8) Joyful Enjoyment of the Comforts of Life (or Festive Occasions)

“Let your clothes be white all the time, and let not oil be lacking on your head.”

Eaton: make life more comfortable in a hot climate

Longman: The hot, dry climate of Palestine is the reason for both the white clothes, which reflect rather than absorb the heat, and the oil, which protected against dry skin (Ps. 23:5; 45:7; Prov. 27:9; Isa. 61:3).

Lots of people take very elaborate symbolic interpretations here ... white representing clothes of righteousness and oil being a symbol of the Holy Spirit – I don't think anything very complicated is going on here – sometimes the simple view is the best one – Why wear a cloak of camel's hair like John the Baptist and limit your diet to locusts and wild honey?

Whybray: both were signs of joy and associated with festive occasions

C. (:9) Happy Marriage -- Refreshing Love and Companionship

“Enjoy life with the woman whom you love all the days of your fleeting life which He has given to you under the sun; for this is your reward in life and in your toil in which you have labored under the sun.”

Recognition that life is hard and difficult; laborious; not enjoyable; frustrating

Enjoy the relationship in terms of the companionship it provides ...

Enjoy the physical side of the relationship with all of the pleasures that God has designed into sex ...

Issue of concern for many singles:

Swindoll: mentions book by his sister, **Luci Swindoll**, Wide My World, Narrow My Bed – what a great look at the single life – the freedoms and opportunities it affords ... Contentment and God's providential provision for you personally must be embraced

D. (:10) Hard Work -- Diligent Labor and Accomplishment

“Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might; for there is no activity or planning or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol where you are going.”

Work is not a curse!

Great verse for church administrators!

Pleasure and leisure are not intended to be an escape from the responsibilities of activity, planning, knowledge, wisdom ... a break, Yes ... a change of pace, Yes ... But just like the major league pitcher – most of the time you want to throw that fastball ... all of life cannot be a change of pace

Eaton: life is to be active and energetic

Robert Laurin: The Hebrews of ancient times thought Sheol was a pit deep under the earth where the dead abode (cf. Deut 32:22). It is uniformly depicted as the place to which both righteous and unrighteous went after death, and where there were not punishments or rewards (cf. Eccl 3:19, 20; 6:6). It was a “land of forgetfulness” (Ps 88:12) and darkness (Job 38:17), where men existed as shadowy replicas of their former selves (cf. Isa 14:9, 10). Here (Eccl 9:10) is one of the strongest statements in the OT about the nothingness of Sheol.

The sense of eternity and expectation of future judgment are only hinted at in this book Perspective = “under the sun” – looking at Sheol from that perspective as well

III. (:11-12) WRESTLING WITH THE VALUE OF AMBITION VS THE FUTILITY OF FINITENESS AND FAIRNESS – SINCE MAN’S EARTHLY FATE IS UNPREDICTABLE AND UNDESERVED

A. (:11) What’s the Point of Trying Hard in Life?

1. Futility of Life Under the Sun

“I again saw under the sun”

2. Five Inequities of Life – accomplishments which do not guarantee success

a. *“the race is not to the swift”*

b. *“and the battle is not to the warriors”*

c. *“and neither is bread to the wise”*

We will be looking more at the poor wise man in the last section of this chapter

d. *“and wealth to the discerning”*

Far from it – those with the greatest discernment in the NT church had very few material resources

e. *“nor favor to men of ability”*

James 4 – you must say “If the Lord wills ...” – you are not the one in control

3. Enigma of Finiteness and Fairness – Fate is Unpredictable and Undeserved

“for time and chance overtake them all”

Look at all of the cosmetic gimmicks designed to try to slow down or thwart Father Time – let’s cover over the wrinkles; let’s see how long we can prolong our looks and even our life

Who knows when your next breath will be your last?

* * * * *

Study of Psalm 33 (:13-19) GOD CAN BE COUNTED ON TO SAVE THOSE WHO ARE COUNTING ON HIM

- God Sees the Basis for Our Confidence

He knows the orientation of our heart = the object of our trust

- God has the best vantage point for such observation

“looks from heaven” = “His dwelling place”

no limitations on God

- God as the Creator has the ultimate understanding of the heart of man

- God is not fooled by the False Confidences that are attractive to man

-- *“the king is not saved by a mighty army”*

-- "a warrior is not delivered by great strength"

-- "a horse is a false hope for victory"

-- "nor does it deliver anyone by its great strength"

- God is looking for those who fear Him and hope in His lovingkindness
*"the eye of the Lord is on those who fear Him,
on those who hope for His lovingkindness"*

- God Can be Counted on to Deliver from Death and Preserve from Danger
*"to deliver their soul from death,
And to keep them alive in famine"*

* * * * *

B. (:12) Man's End Comes Suddenly and Surprisingly

*"Moreover, man does not know his time: like fish caught in a treacherous net
and birds trapped in a snare, so the sons of men are ensnared at an evil time
when it suddenly falls on them."*

The fish and the birds did not wake up that morning and go forth with the expectation that they were in grave danger that day; in fact that day looked like any other when they could spend their time not in the panic of anxiety but enjoying God's gracious provision for their daily sustenance – flying around from place to place; paddling around in the depths of the sea – enjoying the good life – Then all of a sudden out of nowhere – Zap – they are captured and killed – no time to get their life in order; no time to say good bye to their young – destruction suddenly falls on them

Wiersbe: our abilities (:11-12) and opportunities (:13-18) are no guarantee of success

Swindoll: various ways to view life. Although each is popular, each has its own set of problems.

Optimism – rose colored glasses; not facing reality

Pessimism – grim existence; lack of joy

Suspicion – everyone is out to get you; lack of trust

Fatalism – whatever will be will be; lack of hope

IV. (:13-18) WRESTLING WITH THE VALUE OF WISDOM VS THE FUTILITY OF WISDOM – SINCE WISDOM IS IGNORED AND DESPISED IN THIS LIFE RATHER THAN RECOGNIZED AND REWARDED

A. (:13) Expectation that Wisdom Would be Rewarded as Impressive

"Also this I came to see as wisdom under the sun, and it impressed me."

We would expect wisdom to be impressive; we would expect others to value wisdom and exalt it and promote it and reward it ... we would be wrong!

B. (:14-15) Parable of Wisdom Ignored and Despised – Packed with meaning
“There was a small city with few men in it and a great king came to it, surrounded it and constructed large siegeworks against it. But there was found in it a poor wise man and he delivered the city by his wisdom. Yet no one remembered that poor man.”

Who knows this parable? A forgotten parable!

Contrast between the great king and the small city and poor nobody

Contrast between the superior offensive troops and armaments and the weak Defenses

Miraculous deliverance accomplished by Wisdom – What Power!

Unbelievable and Pitiful Conclusion: *“Yet no one remembered that poor man.”*

Why didn't the city bless the poor man for his heroic efforts?

Lessons for us: (get class to suggest)

- don't pursue wisdom with the thought that this world will receive you as a hero and thank you for your contributions – look at all my sacrifices; look at all my contributions

- God will reward wisdom abundantly – because you surely aren't getting the reward in this life

- How did Christ feel after He cleansed the ten lepers and they failed to return and give thanks?

- Look at the apostles – silver and gold have I none – very poor men ... but rich in wisdom and in their contribution to the foundation of the church

C. (:16-18) Contrast Between the Value of Wisdom and the Futility of Wisdom

1. Better than Strength? Despised and Ignored

“So I said, ‘Wisdom is better than strength.’

But the wisdom of the poor man is despised and his words are not heeded.”

2. Better than Political and Military Power? Fragile and easily Destroyed

“The words of the wise heard in quietness are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools. Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.”

Swindoll: Some people are selling their souls to a secular therapist. They are listening more to the well-educated psychologist than they have ever listened to the Lord or paid attention to His Word. And as they take their cues from their counselor, they are being seduced by today's psychology.

[cf. yesterday's conference: Equipping the saints for ministry of counseling]

What did people learn yesterday about the limitations of man's wisdom and the

sufficiency of God's wisdom in the area of counseling?

- People today put their faith in drugs
- People today don't think the Bible is sufficient to deal with major behavior issues; in fact only the Bible can get beyond the visible presenting issues to the core root issues that must be addressed

Kidner: In the pattern of the chapter this is one more example of what is unpredictable and cruel in life, to sap our confidence in what we can make of it on our own. The last two verses give an extra thrust to the parable by showing first how valuable and then how vulnerable is wisdom. We are left with more than a suspicion that in human politics the last word will regularly go to the loud voice of verse 17 or the cold steel of verse 18. Seldom to truth, seldom to merit.

Longman: Summary of Chap. 9

In ch. 9, Qohelet gives advice in the context of statements of deep skepticism. Indeed, this chapter might be judged the most depressing of the entire book.

Qohelet begins the chapter with a powerful evaluation of life (9:1-10). He states that it does not matter who one is or what one does, death renders everything meaningless. After all, death is the end of everything for an individual (vv. 6, 10). From this basic, though sad, truth, Qohelet advises his readers to seize the joy of the day.

The next unit (9:11-12) continues the depressing thoughts of the previous one by asserting that time and chance rule the lives and the deaths of all people. Qohelet once again puts an emphasis on death – that is, no one knows when the end is going to come. There is absolutely nothing that anyone can do to prevent or predict one's death.

This appropriately leads to two further units that question the effectiveness of wisdom. First, wisdom has its limits (vv. 13-16). A wise man may save a city, but he will not be remembered. Second, wisdom has power and is, on a surface level, to be preferred to foolishness, but it does not take much to spoil the good that it might produce (vv. 1-18).

* * * * *

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) Do the uncertainties of life tend to frustrate you?
- 2) Do you find people to be willing to face up to the reality of death and speak of death in realistic terms?
- 3) How is Solomon's advice in vv. 7-10 different from Hedonistic philosophy?
- 4) Where have you seen the poor man of wisdom neglected and despised and run over by the political machine of man's power and bluster?

* * * * *

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Jim Ehrhard: Living Joyfully -- No Matter What

1. Mysteries that steal our joy
 - a. The Mystery of Death-one event, one reason, one concern
 - b. The Mystery of Life
 - *Not the swift
 - *Not the strong
 - *Not the smart
 - *Not the skilled
 - c. The Mystery of Man
 - *Ignored
 - *Forgotten
 - *Despised

2. Certainties That Protect our Joy
 - a. God's sovereignty-He is in control
 - b. God's majesty-He will be glorified
 - c. God's justice-He will judge

<http://www.sermonaudio.com/search.asp?currPage=1&keyword=Ecclesiastes&BibleOnly=true&currSection=sermons bible&chapter=9&AudioOnly=false&SortBy=bible>

David Silversides: Faith not Sight

Solomon tackles the apparent anomalies of God's Providence in this world under the sun. He keeps coming back to this theme again and again – dealing with the objections of the unbeliever.

1. (:1-3) God's approval or displeasure not clearly discernible in the events of this life
 - a. Confidence of Faith – from what is visible, you cannot tell whether the person is under God's blessing and favor or under His wrath; sometimes the roles seem reversed in terms of conditions of life
 - b. Shared Providences and their tendencies (:2) – the same event of prosperity or adversity come upon both the wicked and the godly; the same thing happens to them both; no obvious benefit in this present world

Why doesn't God vindicate righteousness in this life? The genuine of godliness must exist when then is no evident outward benefit. Cf. testing of Job; We cannot determine whether someone is godly from looking at the level of their material prosperity

2. (:4-6) The death of the wicked is to be feared
 - a. There is hope for those who are not in hell yet – only hinted at here; once you are dead that is it; if you are not a Christian there is no hope;
 - b. The possibility that the living will prepare for death (vs. 5); no prospect of betterment after death; we can see what is on the stage under the sun; just hinting at what we cannot see beyond this life
3. (:7-10) The heavenly wisdom is worth having
 - The worldly man looks at just what is under the sun and concludes there is no value to godliness; you need to look at heavenly wisdom by faith; God accepts the

works of the wise; saved by grace but works will be rewarded; enjoy the Lord's provision in a way the unbeliever cannot; glorify God with vigor while we are here on this earth (:10); attaining wisdom belongs to this world

4. (:11-12) The uncertainties of life – something of a division occurs here

No sure favorites – doesn't work out the way people thought (cf. Kentucky Derby); wisest man doesn't always prosper; something happens beyond their control despite all their ability; things don't always work out like we imagine; trouble can catch us like fish caught in a net (:12)

5. (:13-15) Even when wisdom delivers it is not appreciated by those who benefit

Wisdom doesn't guarantee success; not always appreciated by the beneficiaries; people forget; only a momentary hero; true in the long view of history; look at the freedoms enjoyed in this country – to whom do we owe this great debt?? Who remembers them with honor now?

6. (:16) Wisdom not only not valued; it is despised

Unimpressive, poor man – his wisdom is not valued unless it is accompanied by the trappings of this world –

7. (:17) This wisdom might be heard more in calmer circumstances than tumultuous times

8. (:18) One wicked man can ruin things

Overall thought: true wisdom which is from above is worth having even though it is often not acknowledged, not heeded, despised, its influence seems small, and its achievements can so easily be marred by the wicked – Why?? Because those who are truly wise in Christ take joy in his salvation and gracious gifts in this life and look forward to blessing in the next life; answering the cynical objection: Is it really worth it to pursue God's wisdom??

<http://www.sermonaudio.com/search.asp?currPage=1&keyword=Ecclesiastes&BibleOnly=true&currSection=sermons bible&chapter=9&AudioOnly=false&SortBy=bible>

David Malick: IV. FOURTH DISCOURSE:

Even though there are many futile aspects to life from a natural viewpoint, a divine viewpoint enables one to enjoy life, to prefer it to death, to use it for the benefit of others, and to live with a fear of God and in obedience to His word knowing that there will be a future judgment 6:1--12:14

C. Life Is Preferable to Death: Although there is no explanation, apart from God, for the hurtful, capricious nature of life, it is still preferable to death because God has designed it alone to be enjoyed and used for the benefit of others 8:16--9:18

1. Life Is Unexplainable Apart from God: Because one does not receive from life what one puts into life, it is impossible to explain the experiences of life outside of the hand of God 8:16--9:1

a. Life Cannot Be Thoroughly Known: No matter how wise, diligent, or hard-working one is to explain life which God has given to man, its unifying principle cannot be known 8:16-17

b. God Holds Life: The experiences of life are in the hand of God and not appropriately awaiting those who "are" or "act" in a certain way 9:1

2. The Universality of Death: Death is a fate which awaits everyone, even those who pursue evil and deserve worse 9:2-3
 - a. Death Awaits All: Death is a fate which awaits every person no matter how he stands in relation to God 9:2
 - b. Those Who Do Evil Only Die: It is especially evil that those who specialize in doing wrong receive exactly the same as all others in that they only die 9:3
3. Live is Advantageous: Life is more advantageous than death because the living are still able to enjoy life and especially impact the lives of those around them 9:4-10
 - a. Living Mark Life: Because the dead, even though once great are no longer able to make any mark upon life, the living are at a great advantage 9:4-6
 - 1) Living Have Hope: Just as a living dog can do more than the king of animals--the lion--who is dead, so is it true that as long as one is alive there is hope 9:4
 - 2) Living Affect Life: Even though the living can foresee their eventual death, they are at an advantage over the dead because they can no longer make any affect upon life 9:5-6
 - a) Living Can Do Things: Even though the living can foresee their death they are at an advantage by virtue of what they can do 9:5a
 - b) Dead Cannot Do Things: The dead are at a disadvantage to the living because of what they can no longer do with mankind 9:5b-6
 - (1) No Future: The dead have no future to look toward 9:5b
 - (2) No Reward from Men: The dead have no further reward to receive by men since they are forgotten 9:5c
 - (3) Passion is Expended: The dead have expended all of their passion for life and are no longer effective 9:6a
 - (4) No Effect on Life: The dead no longer have an ability to affective life on earth 9:6b
 - b. Life Has Refuge: God has designed life to have enough refuge to be enjoyed while one strives hard to do the tasks God has given one in the time available 9:7-10
 - 1) The Good of Life Is a Refuge: One should enjoy the good aspects of life (fruit, parties, partners) because God has designed them as a refuge with toil 9:7-9
 - a) Enjoy The Good Fruits of Life: The living should enjoy the fruits of life as approved gifts of God 9:7
 - b) Enjoy the Festivity of Life: The living should enjoy the festivity of life 9:8
 - c) Enjoy the Partnership of a Mate: The living should enjoy the partnership of a mate in life because God has given this person to be a refuge in the midst of toil 9:9
 - 2) Use Life to Do One's Tasks: One must use their life to do the tasks before them because this is the only time one has 9:10
4. Wisdom Is a Source for Life: Even though the experiences of a person's life may be capriciously hurtful to any individual, one's skill in life will be a source of life for many 9:11-18
 - a. Time and Chance: There is not a natural cause-and-effect relationship to life because all are subject to the limitations of time and the capriciousness of chance 9:11
 - b. Time and Turmoil: Time seems to capriciously throw men into turmoil just like helpless animals in a trap 9:12
 - c. Wisdom Can Provide Life: Although skill for living may be capriciously despised or hurt by evil, it can be used to provide life for many 9:13-18

http://bible.org/page.php?page_id=963

Wiersbe: In this chapter, Solomon drew two conclusions: death is unavoidable (1-10) and life is unpredictable (11-18). That being the case, the best thing we can do is trust God, live by faith, and enjoy whatever blessings God gives us. . .

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

- 1) **Escape** (v. 3)
- 2) **Endurance** (vv. 4-6)
- 3) **Enjoyment** (vv. 7-10)

Robert Laurin: Since God's ultimate purposes are unknowable (8:15-17), since there is no afterlife (9:1-10), and since the length of life is uncertain (9:11-16), the wise course of action is to enjoy oneself here and now.

Baxter: The Cause and Cure of Pessimism

Three lines of pessimism in Koheleth's review – although his conclusions are not pessimistic:

- 1) First, he views life selfishly rather than socially. He has lived to get, instead of to give; and he has found what all such persons find, namely, that the more one lives for self, the less do earthly things satisfy.
- 2) But second, Koheleth views life as apart from God rather than as controlled by Him. God is scarcely mentioned, and even then only distantly. All seems in the hands of men (iv. 1-3).
- 3) And third, Koheleth views human life as bounded by the grave rather than as having destiny beyond.

Koheleth's final conclusion is right. It is fully right, as far as it goes; but it is far from adequate. That is, it is far from adequate as a motive and power to inspire human conduct. We can learn very much from what he has told us; but as we have said, we need to turn on through the pages of holy writ and see how much more its developing revelation from God has to say to us. We must turn on to the pages of the prophets and find there whole continents of further truth and wonderful new horizons spreading out before us. And most of all, we must turn on to the New Testament, to the crown of Divine revelation, even the incarnate Son of God Himself.

TEXT: Ecclesiastes 10:1-20

TITLE: *NUGGETS OF WISDOM – WISE RESPONSE TO FOOLISH LEADERSHIP*

BIG IDEA:

FOLLY ON THE PART OF RULERS PUTS A NATION IN JEOPARDY AND REQUIRES A RESPONSE OF WISDOM – YET WISDOM IS PRECARIOUS AT BEST

INTRODUCTION:

Most people would find no structure in these proverbs – similar to **chap. 7** – Those that try to group the verses in some type of pattern don't agree as to the main topics ...

R. Norman Whybray: This section consists of short apparently independent pieces, of which the majority are similar in form to the sayings in the Book of Proverbs (cf. **Eccles. 7:1-14**). Although some of them appear to have been arranged roughly according to theme, it is not possible, despite various attempts which have been made, to find any overall structure in the section as a whole.

But I think there is a **common theme** running through these verses dealing with the relationship between rulers and their subjects. Certainly Solomon was qualified to speak on this subject as the great and wise king of the nation of Israel. He starts out with some more general observations comparing wisdom and folly; but then makes the more specific application to the realm of civil government. These same principles would apply to other realms as well: leadership and submission in the home; in the church; at work; etc.

Stuart Chase: I must stress, as I have stressed elsewhere, that folly in biblical wisdom literature is more an ethical than an intellectual category. Folly has less to do with your IQ than it has to do with your submission to God's word. If we carelessly live, speak, act, or think as if there is no God, it can have devastating and long-lasting effects. Though such carelessness shows itself in very practical settings.

<https://brackenhurstbaptist.co.za/the-power-of-folly/>

Derek Kidner: This chapter takes a calm look at life, sampling it at random, so as to help us to keep our own standards high, without being too surprised at the oddities of others, or taken off our guard in our dealings with the powerful.

Van Parunak: Though Qohelet has warned us that wisdom can't guarantee happiness or success, still it is better than the alternative. To help us keep wisdom in perspective, he has:

1. told us a story about what wisdom can and can't do, showing that wisdom is the best tool for dealing with the world, but that the wise man may not always get the credit he deserves;

2. compared wisdom and folly, showing that while wisdom is stronger than folly in solving problems, folly is stronger than wisdom in that it can swamp out the effects of wisdom;

3. outlined the effects of folly in three spheres: leadership, labor, and speech. We should strive to exhibit wisdom in our daily lives.

I. (:1-3) FOLLY LEADS TO RUIN

A. (:1) Ruining That Which Otherwise Would Be Good -- One Rotten Apple Spoils the Barrel

*“Dead flies make a perfumer's oil stink,
so a little foolishness is weightier than wisdom and honor.”*

Derek Kidner: It takes far less to ruin something than to create it. . . it is easier to make a stink than to create sweetness.

Allen Ross: The basic message is clear: as a dead fly (or flies) in perfume can actually reverse the effect so that the perfume becomes foul-smelling, so a little folly can reverse the effects of wisdom and honor. While this can be related to the previous passage—in particular **9:18**, with its assertion that one sinner can destroy much good done by a wise person—it is also possible that this verse is making a quite different point, namely, that **a wise person who turns to folly makes people forget that he was ever wise**. The turning of the wise person into a fool is a distinct possibility (see **7:7**), and all that people will remember is the folly.

David Hubbard: **Folly has dangers and wisdom has limits**—those twin points are made in the first proverb. **Folly is so powerful that a little of it—like a bad smell—can overwhelm large amounts of wisdom**. This saying seems to use the “fly in the ointment” metaphor to reinforce the idea of **9:18**. The “flies” do the same thing to expensive perfume as the “sinner” does to the things “wisdom” is trying to achieve. This is a reminder that the effectiveness of the wise is not measured in batting averages where three hits in ten tries is superb baseball, but in fielding averages where one error in thirty chances is too many. The story is told of a German scholar whose years of impeccable scholarship were disgraced by his use of the wrong Hebrew word for “kill” in an offhand note on the Decalogue’s command against murder. Harsh treatment that was for a learned person, but it serves as a warning against taking lightly either wisdom or the role in teaching it.

B. (:2) Ruining the Fool’s Course of Life by Consistently Making Bad Choices -- Let Your Conscience Be Your Guide – If You Have a Good Conscience

(Divine Guidance for Political Campaigns)

*“A wise man's heart directs him toward the right,
but the foolish man's heart directs him toward the left.”*

Tremper Longman: Wisdom and folly go in two different directions.

Allen Ross: Since most people are right-handed, or turn to the right, the fool's turning aside to the left makes him more conspicuous. Thus folly draws more attention than wisdom.

H.C. Leupold: Since we believe that the author is writing coherent discourse and has logical sequence of thought we shall expect the thought of the first verse to remain in the forefront, vis., how low the now esteemed Persian monarchy shall be brought by its folly, which is already operative. We have, therefore, not only general observations that contrast folly and wisdom but thoughts which bear very distinctly upon the historical situation. The emphasis is, therefore, not chiefly on the "*wise man*" and his tendencies. He is brought in only as a foil to the "*fool*." The thought, by way of contrast, runs about as follows: Had the ruling people been wise they would have turned to the right, for the heart of wise men is thus inclined; but being fools, they have directed their attention toward that which is not right.

David Thompson: Going right or left is more than just a direction choice. In Scripture, the right side was the side of blessing, the side of God's favor and protection (**Ps. 16:8; 110:5; 121:5**). Jesus Christ used the right concept as being those who would enter the eternal kingdom (**Matt. 25:31-46**). The left side was just the opposite. It represented the side of disaster, calamity and judgment (**Matt. 25:31-46**). Clearly the right side is the side that pleases God and the left side is the side that doesn't.

C. (:3) Ruining the Fool's Own Reputation and Legacy -- A Fool is Easy to Spot

*"Even when the fool walks along the road his sense is lacking,
and he demonstrates to everyone that he is a fool."*

Michael Eaton: the fool cannot conceal himself. Thus the fool's inner deficiency comes out in the open for all to see.

We are going to see that when he opens his mouth, it is obvious he is a fool . . . but even as he just moves through life .. he does not live wisely.

Allen Ross: The last line in the verse is capable of at least three different interpretations. Literally it reads, "*and he says to everyone he is a fool.*"

- One possibility is that he is calling other people fools.
- Another is that he proclaims as he walks along, "I am a fool! I am a fool!"
- The third is that the subject of the verb "*says*" is the word "*heart*" (the previous line [NIV, "*the fool lacks sense*"] being literally, "*his heart is lacking*"). **Fox** (ibid., 302–3) compares this to **Proverbs 12:23**, "*The heart of fools cries out, 'Folly!'*" and argues that the idea in v.3 is that a fool's heart "*works against him*" and produces behavior that, contrary to what the fool may say, announces to everyone that the person is a fool.

It is not impossible that all three interpretations may be correct.

II. (:4-7) FOLLY ON THE PART OF RULERS CAN FRUSTRATE THE WISE WHO ARE IN A POSITION OF SUBMISSION

David Hubbard: Wisdom is a guide in governmental affairs. That was a point that Koheleth returned to frequently. Like all wise men he recognized that human life is basically political. Whether we thrive or chafe will in large measure depend on how we are governed. All of us—from tribal aborigines to urban intellectuals—live under governments. Knowing how to deal with those who order and regulate our lives is an essential part of our education.

A. (:4) Tempted to Run Away From Your Circumstances -- Keep Your Cool / Hold Your Water

“If the ruler's temper rises against you, do not abandon your position, because composure allays great offenses.”

Don't have a knee jerk reaction; “I'll just quit” is the easy way out. What about the need for endurance?? In your job; your church; your family; The “I want to move to Kansas” mentality – what am I going to accomplish for the Lord in Kansas?

Michael Eaton: The same vocabulary (“*anger . . . soothed*”) occurs in **Judges 8:3** which illustrates the point.

Knut Martin Heim: With his audience probably still in stitches, Qoheleth moves in for the kill, presenting the lesson he wants his audience to adopt above all else: **If the spirit of the ruler rises against you, he counsels, do not forsake your position, for calmness can calm great offences.** Every part of this instruction is hyper-ambiguous (**Krüger** 2004: 219). It can be heard as encouraging opportunism. It can also be heard as a critique of opportunism.

David Hubbard: The Preacher's advice was practical—almost shrewd: “stay on good terms with the powerful.” Use your power of self-control to offset the abuse of power displayed in the temper tantrum of your superior (v. 4).

David Thompson: This is a wisdom principle that is emphasized several times in Scripture—wise people are not prone to quit or abandon ship, they hang in there, they stick to it, they rebound, they stay faithful and try to do their best even if their ruler has become angry with them.

B. (:5-7) Tempted to Resent Inequities -- The Prince and the Pauper – Incompetence Exalted over Competence

“There is an evil I have seen under the sun, like an error which goes forth from the ruler-- folly is set in many exalted places while rich men sit

in humble places. I have seen slaves riding on horses and princes walking like slaves on the land."

"Smarter people than I are making the decisions here . . ."

Often the right people are not promoted to the right jobs . . . inequities; not our job to try to right every wrong; cf. Peter Principle – someone eventually promoted to one level higher than their level of competence.

Douglas Miller: Verses 6 and 7 describe two contrasting situations defining the evil that Qohelet has introduced in **verse 5**: foolish people are appointed to important positions while the (perhaps formerly) rich are in lower positions, demoted. Similarly, he notices slaves who have the prestige of riding on horses, while princes are reduced to walking as slaves normally do. Several texts of Egyptian wisdom literature use such comparisons to describe a society in turmoil (cf. **Prov 19:10; 30:21-23**). This is presented not as a positive situation in which the poor have received unexpected opportunity, but as a chaotic situation in which the most bizarre things are possible, and the governance of society is fragile and uncertain [*Political Power*, p. 242].

Warren Wiersbe: Solomon's son Rehoboam was proud and unyielding, and this led to the division of the kingdom (**1 Kings 12:1-24**). Instead of following the advice of the wise counselors, he listened to his youthful friends. He made the elders walk and he put the young men on the horses. On the other hand, more than one king in Jewish history has been so pliable that he turned out to be nothing but a figurehead. The best rulers (and leaders) are men and women who are tough-minded but tenderhearted, who put the best people on the horses and don't apologize for it.

H.C. Leupold: sees God ultimately as the "*Ruler*" here

David Hubbard: "Be aware of life's injustices" was another part of the Preacher's practical advice. His sharp eye had seen rulers make tragic mistakes. They had often put the wrong people in power (**vv. 5-7**). The warning is a good one. Inequities do arise in life, especially in government. But the Preacher did not tell us what to do about them. Are we to correct such abuses ("*error*," **v. 5**; see **5:6** for the other use in Ecclesiastes of the Heb. *shegāgāh* which means "a flat-out mistake" for which there can be no valid excuse) or merely to be warned against them? In his kind of society, there may not have been much choice. Still, Koheleth cannot be encouraging his students to be complacent about something so harmful ("*evil*," **v. 5**; see **2:21**) to and pervasive ("*under the sun*," see **1:3**) in society. At least he is saying, "Be watchful when others do it"; at most, "Whenever it is in your power to prevent such arbitrary mismanagement, make sure you do so."

Walter Kaiser: In this connection of pacifying anger aroused by great errors, "*There is an evil*," says Qoheleth in one of his favorite introductory phrases (**10:5**; cf. **5:13; 6:9**). Yet in line with the wise and meek attitude he has just counseled in the preceding verse (**v. 4**), he continues, "*Such an error*" gives evidence that not everything rulers do is always perfect and fair. This blot on the record of human governments is another one of

those enigmas in the divine plan: Why does God allow such foolishness to continue? The blunder and error of human governments can often be seen in this tragedy: rulers put their foolish favorites into office over those who are more qualified (**10:5-6**). Such strangers to the fear of God are called fools. Meanwhile, those who by birth and training are more qualified for such government posts are passed by. These errors are the natural fruit of partiality, tyranny, and despotism. If the ruler had used wisdom, he would have chosen the “nobles” (literally “the rich”), whose ability to accumulate and handle wealth might have indicated the gifts of prudence and wisdom.

The **arbitrariness of despotism** is indicated by the frequent **reversal of positions** among the citizenry. In a culture in which only dignitaries were allowed the privilege of riding, there was great social upheaval, as suggested by the complete reversal of normal roles—servants were riding horses while princes walked like menials at their side (**10:7**). Many have longed to know why such things are allowed by God to happen. If only—. But that is one part of God’s plan that He has not been pleased to reveal to us in detail. The reality of such arbitrariness is freely granted by the text, but the text also warns us against permitting it to become a roadblock to joyful and active involvement in life.

III. (:8-11) WISDOM IS SUPERIOR BUT PRECARIOUS

Derek Kidner: The outlook behind these pointed remarks is not fatalism, as **verses 8** and **9** might suggest on their own, but elementary **realism**. The blinding glimpse of the obvious in **verse 10**, backed up by the dry humour of the next verse, dispels any doubt. We are being urged to use our minds, and to look a little way ahead. For there are risks bound up with any vigorous action, and the person we call accident-prone has usually himself to blame, rather than his luck. He should have known; he could have taken care. But Qoheleth drops a hint of a parable by talking of a pit and of a serpent; for the pit that traps its maker was a proverbial picture of poetic justice, and the unnoticed serpent was the very image of lurking retribution. This was how the prophet Amos saw it; so too did the witnesses of Paul’s encounter with the viper.

Verse 8, then, may be making a different point from **verse 9**, aimed at the **unscrupulous** rather than the **feckless**. As for the latter, they (or we?) are beautifully dealt with in **verses 10** and **11**: first with the elaborate patience suited to the dunce, then with a flash of wit and a touch of farce. After the startling opening, where the snake has been too quick for everybody, one can almost see the shrug that accompanies the throw-away line (NEB) -- ‘the snake-charmer loses his fee’. As for the victim. . . but why labour the point?

Allen Ross: These verses deal with various **occupational hazards (vv.8–9)** or with problems to be encountered in the performance of one’s task (**vv.10–11**). It is important to note from the outset that with regard to the hazards there is no indication of moral judgments being made, nor, for that matter, are there any evaluations of the skills or work ethic of the tradesmen to whom these accidents happen. Nor is there any

indication that the “accidents” are due to carelessness; **they just happen.**

**A. (:8-9) Wisdom Understands the Dangers and Uncertainties of Life --
Accidents Happen – They are Unavoidable –**

Fine line between production and catastrophe – No Guarantees of Success in this life;
God’s Sovereignty and Providence governs all circumstances; the Fool is not in control.

(Cf. Haman in Book of **Esther 7:10**)

Sometimes: What goes around, comes around

4 Examples:

1. Digging a Pit

“He who digs a pit may fall into it,”

David Thompson: – Success does not come through vindictive plots.

The idea of “*digging a pit*” is the idea of setting a trap for someone so that one might entrap or ensnare them. This imagery is often used in Scripture -- **Ps. 7:15-16; 9:15-16; 35:6-8; 57:6; Prov. 26:27; Jer. 18:18-23.**

There are people who believe that the way to the top is to try to get rid of anyone who stands in their way. These people are manipulative schemers who will do whatever it takes to try and trap a person so they can climb the ladder of success.

2. Breaking through a wall

“and a serpent may bite him who breaks through a wall. “

David Thompson: Solomon’s point here is that one had better carefully watch his attack before he just starts using his power to start breaking through a wall, for he may discover that a snake is in the wall and it may bite him and kill him

3. Gathering Stones

“He who quarries stones may be hurt by them,”

David Thompson: Solomon’s point is this; if we are just relying on our own strength to try and tackle something like the removal of something big and powerful, we may discover that we are the one who ends up being hurt.

4. Splitting Logs

“and he who splits logs may be endangered by them.”

You can be your own worst enemy

Tremper Longman: The thought, though not the motivation, is similar to **Psalm 7:15**: “*He who digs a hole and scoops it out falls into the pit he has made.*” The context of the Psalm is clearly one of just retribution. The enemy tries unjustly to trap an innocent person, but ends up in his own trap. Qohelet’s use of this image is the opposite. Here an innocent person is simply engaged in his occupation, and he is accidentally injured. This is the first of four illustrations of people who are simply doing their jobs and who fall prey to the dangers that are inherent in their occupations. Their injuries are simply accidental. They are not punishments for bad behavior, and they are not mentioned so that the wise person can avoid them; they are unavoidable accidents. No matter how careful people are they may fall into the pit they dug, and they might be surprised by a snake on the other side of the wall they are demolishing.

Warren Wiersbe: Solomon was describing people who attempted to do their work and suffered because they were foolish.

David Thompson: There are many ways that at first glimpse seem to be able to lead you to the top or to **success**. That word “success” which occurs in **verse 10** is one that means there are certain paths that appear would take one to gain, profit or preeminence (**Gesenius**, p. 377). At first appearance, these are paths that would seem to take people to the top, but in all reality may take you nowhere.

Solomon came to realize that the key to success was **one’s relationship to God**. That is why he will conclude this book with his conclusion which is “*fear God and keep His commandments*” (**12:12**). In these verses Solomon sets forth this idea

THE KEY TO SUCCESS FROM GOD’S PERSPECTIVE IS HAVING GOD’S WISDOM, NOT BY HAVING HUMAN PLOTTING, PLANNING OR STRIVING.

B. (:10) Wisdom Must be Applied Skillfully -- Work Smart / Use the Right Tools

“If the axe is dull and he does not sharpen its edge, then he must exert more strength. Wisdom has the advantage of giving success.”

Douglas Miller: What follows is the obvious: if the iron is not sharpened, more strength must be exerted (v. 10 NRSV). Yet wisdom (NRSV) brings an advantage (*yitron*), as the Teacher has said previously (**2:13; 7:12**). In this case the advantage could be the sharpening of the iron (so less energy is needed) or clever compensation for a dull iron. In either case, the worker is still vulnerable to a bad outcome, but the possibility of a good outcome is increased. Just as one should sharpen an iron tool before using it, one should employ a snake charmer to avoid snakebite. Yet the snake may bite first, resulting in no advantage (NRSV; NIV: *profit*) to the snake charmer (**10:11b**, lit., *master of the tongue*, perhaps one who speaks incantations) [*Special Terms: Gain*, p. 253]. **Some problems can be attributed to a lack of wisdom, but accidents can happen even when wisdom is employed.**

David Hubbard: The key to the passage may be, “*But wisdom brings success*” (lit. “*profit*,” “*advantage*,” Heb. *yitrôn*, see **1:3**). Wisdom, with its cautious common sense,

coaches its adherents to be careful and thereby cut down the possibility of accidents in otherwise hazardous work.

Stuart Chase: Several years ago, at the Rez Conference in Randburg, a question-and-answers session was arranged with keynote speaker **Voddie Baucham**. During the session, a young, very zealous man expressed his frustration that he had not yet found something of real significance to do with his life for the Lord. He wanted to get out there and make a difference and asked Voddie for counsel. Voddie thought for a moment and then said, “Do nothing.” He paused for a moment before explaining. He exhorted the young man that the best thing he could do at that time was to patiently involve himself in typical local church ministry. Sit at the feet of more seasoned Christians and take time to learn. In time, God may use him, but he would be ill-advised to rush into significant ministry without careful, deliberate preparation. He needed, in other words, to take as much time as necessary to sharpen his axe before swinging it. It was sage advice. Solomon would have approved.

C. (:11) Wisdom Must Be Applied at the Right Time -- Timing is Everything

“If the serpent bites before being charmed, there is no profit for the charmer.”

Warren Wiersbe: Snake charmers were common as entertainers in that day (v. 11, and see **Ps. 58:4-5** and **Jer. 8:17**). Snakes have no external ears; they pick up sound waves primarily through the bone structure of the head. More than the music played by the charmer, it is the man’s disciplined actions (swaying and staring) that hold the snake’s attention and keep the serpent under control. It is indeed an art.

Allen Ross: Whatever the case may be, it should be noted that unlike **v.10**, there is nothing in the verse that suggests the charmer was late or negligent. **It just happened.** Wisdom and skill are wonderful things to have, but opportunity is needed as well. You have to be diligent, but you also have to be fortunate.

IV. (:12-15) FOLLY LEADS TO RUIN

David Hubbard: Three proverbs (**vv. 12–13, 14, 15**) center in the gift of speech and its impact on its hearers. Koheleth, like the wise teachers of Proverbs, knew that his students were headed for positions of responsibility, whether in government service or business. As persons of prominence they had to **watch their language**. Success or failure would be determined, in some measure at least, by the winsomeness, accuracy, and frugality of their speech. Like the snake charmer (**v.11**), they had to be “*masters of the tongue.*”

David Thompson: WE MAY DETERMINE ONE WHO IS WISE FROM ONE WHO IS FOOLISH BY OBSERVING THEIR SPEECH, THEIR WORK AND BY THEIR ATTITUDE TOWARD LEADERSHIP.

A. (:12-14a) The Folly of Speaking Stupidly

“Words from the mouth of a wise man are gracious, while the lips of a fool consume him; the beginning of his talking is folly, and the end of it is wicked madness. Yet the fool multiplies words.”

1. Destructive words – James 3:1-12

2. Wacko words – they don’t even make any sense

Allen Ross: If a fool gives a speech, and at the beginning it sounds like nonsense, then wait till you hear the end of the speech! While this could almost be funny, unfortunately the madness at the end of the speech is characterized by “*wickedness*” or “*evil*” as well.

3. Multiplication of words – Prov. 10:19

Derek Kidner: The little portrait of the fool likewise hints at the inner attitudes that underlie his words. If we laughed at him in **verse 3**, we see the tragic and dangerous side of him now. In Scripture he is wrong-headed rather than dull: his thinking (and therefore his speaking) refuses to begin with God. **Verse 13** in fact makes this clear, spanning the whole process from its foolish start to its disastrous end. That end, in wicked madness, may look too lurid to be true; but its two elements, moral and mental, are the final fruits of refusing the will and truth of God. If there are innumerable unbelievers whose earthly end could hardly be described as either wickedness or madness, it is only because the logic of their unbelief has not been followed through, thanks to the restraining grace of God. But when a whole society goes secular, the process is far more evident and thorough-going.

B. (:14b) The Folly of Thinking Stupidly – Presumptuous Boasting

*“No man knows what will happen,
and who can tell him what will come after him?”*

C. (:15) The Folly of Working Stupidly

*“The toil of a fool so wearies him
that he does not even know how to go to a city.”*

Michael Eaton: Any form of *toil* the *fool* finds wearisome. The result is incompetence. The second half of the verse specifies his “utter ignorance of the things easily come-at-able and familiar to everybody” (**Ginsburg**).

R. Norman Whybray: The fool’s efforts are bound to come to nothing: he remains as before one who cannot even find his way home. The second half of the verse is probably a popular saying about people who “**do not know enough to come in out of the rain**” (**Gordis**).

David Hubbard: The final saying (v. 15) sums up both the **fate and competence of fools**. First, their endless efforts at talking—so “*labor*” (Heb. *‘amāl*) **1:3**) must mean

here—accomplish nothing more than the exhaustion of their energies—a bane to them and a boon to their audience. Second, their lack of wisdom is glaringly exposed: “*they do not even know how to go to the city!*” is probably a stock saying like “They can’t even find their way home,” or “They don’t know enough to come in out of the rain.”

V. (:16-20) FOLLY ON THE PART OF RULERS CAN FRUSTRATE THE WISE WHO MUST BITE THEIR TONGUE AND EXERCISE DISCRETION

David Hubbard: **Chaos** was the result of the undisciplined regime that stemmed from ill-prepared leadership. It showed itself in the physical neglect of public buildings (v. 18), where the picture of collapsed roof beams (“*building decays*”) and the water-soaked “*house*” may be a metaphor of the damage done to the kingdom by the lazy, pleasure-loving leaders (on ‘*āsēl*, *lazy, sluggish*, see **Prov. 6:6, 9**). It showed itself further in the waste of “*money*” (v. 19, lit. “*silver*”; see **2:8**) that was a public crime, adding to the shame of the carousals described in **verse 16** and repeated here. The lavish, riotous, and cruel banquet in Esther (ch. 1), may remind us of the potential degradation of royal drinking bouts.

A. (:16-17) Contrast Between Foolish and Wise Leadership – The Quality of Leadership Makes All the Difference

1. Foolish Leadership – Cursing on the Land

“Woe to you, O land, whose king is a lad and whose princes feast in the morning.”

2. Wise Leadership – Blessing on the Land

“Blessed are you, O land, whose king is of nobility and whose princes eat at the appropriate time-- for strength, and not for drunkenness.”

Cf. **Is. 5:11-13; 21:5**

Michael Eaton: Another criterion of national wisdom is self-control. Drinking in the early hours of the day marked a dissolute, slothful approach to life, with emphasis on luxury and personal indulgence. As we have frequently seen personal enjoyment had a place for the Preacher and the antithesis to indulgence here is not asceticism, but self-control. The mark of such pleasure is that it is to be enjoyed in a state of strength, not in a state of drunkenness. The enjoyment of life’s pleasures as the outworking of a position of wisdom-strength is a mark of national bliss; the pseudo-enjoyment of self-centered indulgence is a mark of national danger.

B. (:18) Laziness on the Part of Leaders Leads to Ruin

*“Through indolence the rafters sag,
and through slackness the house leaks.”*

You could debate whether **vs. 18** applies to the leaders or just to everyone in general.

Derek Kidner: The chapter ends, as it began, with shrewd remarks on **practical politics**, as if to re-emphasize that the interest of the wise in ultimate questions does nothing to lessen their concern for the present. The wise man cares very much about the way his country is governed, and about the way to rule himself and his affairs, in a world which is at once **demanding (18), delightful (19) and dangerous (20).**

How the Wise can avoid Frustration?

C. (:19) Response: Enjoy Your Life as Best as Possible (or applied sarcastically to rulers? Just raise taxes to try to fix everything)

“Men prepare a meal for enjoyment, and wine makes life merry, and money is the answer to everything.”

D. (:20) Response: Bite Your Tongue -- Discretion is the Better Part of Valor

“Furthermore, in your bedchamber do not curse a king, and in your sleeping rooms do not curse a rich man, for a bird of the heavens will carry the sound, and the winged creature will make the matter known.”

“Furthermore” connects vs. 19 and 20 – speaking to the same group of people

Warren Wiersbe: Even if we can’t respect the person in the office, we must respect the office (**Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17**). *“You shall not revile God, nor curse a ruler of your people” (Ex. 22:28).*

David Hubbard: The final result of the political chaos that seems to dominate this passage is the embargo that is placed on all criticism of dissent (**v. 20**). “Curse” here is probably not an invoking of judgment on the “king” (who may also be the one called “rich” in the parallel clause), but a voicing of disparaging comments (“revile,” NIV; “speak ill,” NEB; see on **7:21–22**). “Rich” seems to connect this verse with **verse 19** and suggest that the reviling thoughts and words were triggered by the whole program of carousing (**v. 16**), laziness (**v. 18**), and profligacy (**v. 19**) that tarred the reputation of the court. The “bird” (**v. 20**) must be both hyperbole to show how carefully a would-be critic had to control tongue and mind, and metaphor to show how comprehensive and controlled was the king’s network of informers. We use the same metaphor today, “A little bird told me.” The admonition called for a pragmatic prudence on the courtier’s part. That such restraint was necessary gave a pathetic ring to the whole regime.

* * * * *

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) In what sense is foolishness more powerful than wisdom?
- 2) How do the principles of submission from **1 Peter 2** apply to these instructions by Solomon?

- 3) How do our political leaders measure up to the standards set forth in this chapter?
- 4) Think of some counseling situations where you could apply some of these proverbs about the distinction between foolishness and wisdom.

* * * * *

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

David Silversides: Wise Sayings Concerning Wisdom and Folly

1. The threat of folly to the wise (:1)

Cf. last verse of **chapter 9**; destruction is far easier than building up;

This is true even with the reputation of the godly; ointment is beautifully fragrant but delicate; dead fly will ruin it; a little destroys all that was fragrant and beautiful; immense harm done; everything is spoiled and ruined;

Ps. 73:13-15; is godliness a waste of time? Asaph kept back from speaking such discouraging words – would have marred his testimony and done harm to the people of God; a reputation for godliness increases the expectation of others – you will be watched and standards will be set for you by others

2. Wisdom and Folly as Ways of Life (:2-3)

Wisdom is here used in the godly sense of the believer living by the Word of God; Folly is used in the sinful sense of ignoring God's Word; he never thinks what glorifies God; he is careless, thoughtless, foolish; does what his impulses tell him; godly thinking leads to effective work and practice; what we do with our right hand is usually well done since most of us are right-handed; fool is like someone who is right-handed but tries to do everything with their left hand; botches everything up; **Prov. 17:28** -- as soon as a fool speaks he is found out

3. Warning against Foolish Reaction to an Angry Ruler(:4)

What are we to do when the ruler is angry? Yield and submit and stay where you are; **1 Pet. 2:21-23**; Pride makes us storm off in an indignant huff and makes the matter worse; acknowledge their authority in lawful things; Tries to justify that he was standing on principle, but that was not the case; beware of inventing principles that don't exist; act in meekness; accept the oppression that may result

4. The Folly of Rulers (:5-10)

- a) Promoting Fools in the place of experienced leadership; the promotion of the incompetent
- b) Reversal of Order (:7) – servants usually make bad masters; those who aren't used to power but are given it are worse than just normal tyrannical rulers
- c) (:8-9) Brutality on the part of those in authority and its dangers

d) (:10) Blunt ax – not getting very far; ruler just tries to use more brute strength; a better idea would be to sharpen the blade; we are to seek God’s direction to guide us rather than just pushing harder in our own fleshly wisdom; are there areas of our life where we are chopping away with our own ideas; are we following the godly approach; are we bringing the Word of God to bear – we’ve always done it this way and never questioned whether it was the right way

5. The Folly of Words (:11-15)

Man or woman whose tongue has never been tamed will do great harm just like a venomous serpent; contrasting words in vs. 12; an uncontrolled tongue will always end up in wickedness; vs. 14 – the limits of our knowledge – but this doesn’t stop the fool from spouting off; pride of man is so great – he loves to pontificate and speak as if he knows

6. Bad Rulers (:16-20)

Self indulgent, childish ruler; they don’t do a day’s work of usefulness and then have a rewarding meal at night; govt of a nation – if a ruler is slothful there will be downfall of the nation; if the rulers just give themselves over to feasting and drinking and money, the nation will slide down hill; Warning not to curse the king even if he is bad; you never know who might report you

Conclusion: we need the application of godly wisdom; you are surrounded by ungodly and unreasonable people; how should you respond? Don’t lose your patience or throw the towel in or stomp off in a huff; need grace for the day-to-day trials of abuse of power and injustices and pressures

<http://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=42005184437>

Timothy Worrell: Proverbs to Rulers and Those Ruled

These principles primarily oriented to civil govt but applicable to other realms as well (family, church, business). Going to nail us with a lot of proverbs very rapidly; this is all application

1) Preserve your Reputation (:1-3)

a) (:1) Warning to the wise man -- **Eccles. 7:1; Song of Song 1:3** ointment refers to reputation; watch out for those little foxes or dead flies; only takes one misstep in front of the public and all of a sudden you will stink; a danger to the wise; self-government is the most difficult of all government;

b) (:2) the efficiency of wisdom – working best with his right hand; and a wise man has his heart in his work

c) (:3) Fools can’t hide their foolishness; wants to appear wise before the world; his behavior shouts to everyone that he is a fool

2) Humbly Submit to Our Superiors (:4-10)

a) (:4) don’t quit your post in anger and haste; whether you have entered into that

relationship voluntarily or not; **1 Pet. 2:18-19** – Follow Christ in this regard; if you can submit when the ruler is wicked and unjust, that is pleasing in God’s sight; all wrongs will be righted by Him

b) (:5-7) we must accept the fact that the right men or women don’t always get the positions of leadership; you might not be in the pecking order where you think you should be; you are not getting the influence you think you deserve; rulers don’t always evaluate character very well; “richness” regarding nobility of character and gifts; often you don’t get what you deserve; cf. class financially with class spiritually;

c) (:8-9) don’t be given to change – 4 metaphors; don’t start breaking up a hedge (divide up family farms) – moving the boundary of your estate; fear the Lord and the king; don’t be always trying to start a revolution and try to establish a more equitable regime; that is not the way forward; they who are impatient of rule over them, have ruin close to them; there may be a time to leave our church or corporation, but don’t be hasty; don’t be hanging around with revolutionaries

d) (:10) don’t bang our head against the wall; there’s a time to say something to your ruler, but you had better be prepared and have a sharpened edge before you cut; don’t do it hastily but thoughtfully and prayerfully; **Prov 25:15** – by long forbearing is a prince persuaded – this is how we sharpen our axe; we may have to tell someone a lot of times before they get it; must be gentle

3) Govern Our Tongues in These Situations (:11-15)

a) (:11) Tame that serpent of our tongue; don’t be a babbler or we will be offensive; we should enchant the serpent rather than out-hiss him (**Matthew Henry**)

b) (:12-14) – Fools talk a great deal, but don’t say very much; his talking will catch up with him; Pharisees started with questions but ended with stones and anger; **Prov. 29:22**; when we are angry we don’t think straight; too busy talking to listen

c) (:15) fools are easily overwhelmed; they always are over their head; not working according to wisdom; they don’t know how to handle themselves in political situations with their superiors; Jew had to go to the city to get their controversies resolved

4. 4th Admonition – the Rulers Govern Discreetly (:16-19)

a) (:16-17) Rulers being a curse or blessing --
not going to go well with you when your king is a child and when your princes eat in the morning; bad rulers are a judgment from God; Josiah was a child king; **2 Chron. 13:7** – Rehoboam was acting like a child in not listening to counsel; experience does teach certain things; son of nobles = brought up right and trained for leadership; it’s rarely the first generation Christian that becomes the Spurgeon; brought up with ethical purity; the morning is the time for serious labor – before it gets too hot in the Middle East

b) (:18-19) Consequences of slothfulness – homeowner – constantly having to make adjustments; maintenance that has to be done; don't just think that everything is on autopilot and neglect the problems; **Is. 58:12**; leave the institution better than they found it; the slothful man can desire to do good but just doesn't get around to doing it; always making excuses; be involved in building – **vs 19** related to **vs 16** – child always seeking to use his position for his enjoyment; labor to put a little away; don't be spending every extra tax dollar for your enjoyment; don't burn it all up on vanity; having a little bit stored away can be helpful; money is an instrument of commerce; don't dissipate the wealth of your realm

5. Don't Speak Evil of Rulers (:20)

Acts 23:5 – it doesn't do you any good; doesn't do anyone any good; don't even curse them in your heart; **Ezek. 11:5**; don't even be careless in private; God knows our thoughts; kings have many eyes and ears; also long and strong arms to punish us when they find out; our sins will find us out

<http://www.sermonaudio.com/search.asp?chapter=10&BibleOnly=true&currSection=sermons&bible&keyword=Ecclesiastes>

H.C. Leupold: This situation is naturally of such a kind as to provoke any man to cry out against the injustice of it all, to charge the offenders publicly with their misdeeds, and to make public denunciation of them. Yet such a course is not the part of wisdom. The situation would not be improved. The individual who protested would be imperiling his very life in the days when absolute monarchs ruled with the very highest degree of unlimited power. Therefore the caution of **v. 20**, which at the same time gives us the author's own explanation as to why he has spoken largely in figures and extended parables.

TEXT: Ecclesiastes 11:1-10

TITLE: *SECRETS TO A PRODUCTIVE AND ENJOYABLE LIFE*

BIG IDEA:

BY OPPORTUNISTIC FAITH AND JOYFUL CONTENTMENT WE CAN LIVE BOTH A PRODUCTIVE AND ENJOYABLE LIFE

INTRODUCTION:

We need balance in our lives. Some people concentrate so much on being productive and achieving something ... they seem to have no enjoyment of life. Others are so consumed with enjoying life that they seem to waste opportunities to invest in being productive for God's Kingdom. God has designed our lives to be both productive and enjoyable.

John MacArthur: (11:7 – 12:8) Solomon crystalizes the book's message. Death is imminent and with it comes retribution. Enjoyment and judgment, though strange partners, come together in this section because both clamor for man's deepest commitment. Surprisingly, one does not win out over the other. In a world created for enjoyment but damaged by sin, judgment and enjoyment/pleasure are held in tension. With too much pleasure, judgment stands as a threatening force; with too much judgment, enjoyment suffers. In the final analysis, both are prominent themes of life that are resolved in our relationship to God, the primary issue of life and this book.

Raymond Ortlund Jr.: As Solomon moves toward his conclusion, his pace quickens and his tone becomes urgent. Life is to be lived to the fullest – cheerfully, reverently, deliberately! The wise refuse to settle for a grim existence; they come alive to the radiant goodness of God daily surrounding them, but they also reckon solemnly with death and eternity (11:7-8). Solomon urges the young to relish the joys and opportunities opening up at the dawn of their adult lives while bearing in mind that they will give an account to God. The “*judgment*” in 11:9 is not condemnation but evaluation – whether good or evil (12:14). It is not morally superior to banish color and laughter and fun from the days of youth; on the contrary, what should be banished is anxiety, because the prime of life does not last (11:10).

David Hubbard: Scripture Outline

<u>First Principle:</u>	Diversity	(11:1–2)
<u>Second Principle:</u>	Observation	(11:3–5)
<u>Third Principle:</u>	Diligence	(11:6)
<u>Fourth Principle:</u>	Celebration	(11:7–8)

The **structure and movement** of the text can be analyzed as follows:

Admonitions to diversity in investments and other activities	1–2
Take the risk	1a

Expect a return	1b
Divide the risk	2a
Hedge against disaster	2b
<u>Examples of lessons learned from observation</u>	<u>3–4</u>
Clouds	3a
Trees	3b
Wind	4a
Clouds	4b
<u>Examples of what cannot be learned from observations</u>	<u>5</u>
Wind	5a
Womb	5b
Conclusion	5c
<u>Admonitions to timely action</u>	<u>6</u>
Sow the seed	6a
Do not withhold	6b
Reason: you don't know how growth works	6c
<u>Conclusion on enjoying life</u>	<u>7–8</u>
Saying on life's joy	7
Admonition to remember that death is coming	8

I. (:1-6) FIVE SECRETS TO A PRODUCTIVE LIFE – EXERCISING OPPORTUNISTIC FAITH

Raymond Ortlund Jr.: The wise also pursue the adventure of life with enthusiasm, not deterred by maybes, not paralyzed by questions, but confident in the active providence of God (**11:1-6**).

Robert Laurin: Since the future is always unpredictable, even “the best laid schemes of mice and men gang aft a-gley [go off astray].” Therefore a man must be willing to take risks if he is to achieve any sort of success. The person who waits until he is certain will wait forever.

Walter Kaiser: Since we cannot comprehend the totality of God's providential acts, the only proper course of action is to be diligent and wholeheartedly involved; some of this activity will succeed even if all of it does not. . .

Thus Solomon has repeatedly coaxed, urged, argued, pressed, and begged us as wise men and women to get off the dead center of attempting to outguess God and His works. We must earnestly and diligently get into life's work. It is enough to know, as far as the progress and results of our work are concerned, that God is also at work. It is enough to know that He has given us the knowledge of the broad spectrum of His plan.

Therefore, we will not deliberately withhold our energies or refrain from working. That small amount of admitted mystery in the divine plan will not hinder us from becoming active in life to the glory of God.

A. (:1) Aggressively Invest Your Resources for the Widest Possible Blessing --
Expecting Your Generous, Sacrificial Investment to Yield Unexpected Dividends –
Trust God to reward you / The way to Reap is to Sow Aggressively

1. Counsel: Strategically Bless as Many People as Possible
“*Cast your bread on the surface of the waters,*”

Bread = that which has value to you and others; that which provides sustenance; instead of hoarding it for yourself and making sure you have enough security and provision for your later years ... invest it in ways where you must trust God for the results – Pragmatic person would respond: “You will never see that bread again; it’s gone forever!”

[This is a key verse for me for Internet ministry of distributing Bible commentaries]

Three alternatives:

a) Agrarian society – speaking of sowing and reaping

Yuen Who Voon: In an agrarian society, seeds speak a different language to the people. To the sower, the seed gives hope of a bountiful harvest, whilst to the farmer’s wife, the seed can be processed into bread for food today. One can sow the seed or use it to make bread, but one cannot do both with the same seed. This is the “sower-eater” dilemma.

<http://sermoncentral.com/sermon.asp?SermonID=106030&Sermon%20CASTING%20BREAD%20-%205%20PRINCIPLES%20ON%20SOWING%20by%20Yuen%20Woh%20Voon>

b) Commerce – shipping of goods

Brian Atwood: In the first verse of **Ecclesiastes 11**, Solomon describes the **risks** taken by merchants in his day. They would "*cast their bread upon the waters.*" That is, they would put their merchandise on boats to be shipped to foreign ports, hoping for a profitable return "*after many days.*"

But consider these facts:

- In Solomon’s day, an awful lot of ships wrecked. Merchants would often take a total loss.
- Pirates frequented the seas. Cargo was stolen.
- Ship captains were often dishonest.
- There certainly weren’t any insurance policies to cover losses.
- And to top it off, there was a long wait to see if you were going to make any money.

Why would merchants take these risks? Because the reward was great!

By using this illustration Solomon is encouraging his readers to be risk takers. Not only does this scripture encourage us to be risk takers - but it encourages us to be high-risk takers!

<http://sermoncentral.com/sermon.asp?SermonID=36119&Sermon%20Calculated%20Risk%20Taking%20by%20Brian%20Atwood>

c) Common proverb of the day

Ray Stedman: The idea expressed there is one of **openhanded generosity**. Give freely, wisely, but generously to the needs of those about. This phrase, "Cast your bread upon the waters," was a proverb in Israel for what looked like wasteful expenditure. No one would take good bread and throw it in the river; he would be regarded as a wastrel for doing that. But here we are enjoined to do that very thing. This is not encouraging us to be spendthrifts, to thoughtlessly and carelessly give away our money, spending it like a drunken sailor. What is meant is, be willing to take a chance where a real need is evident.

Application is the same:

- Are we hoarding or investing?
- Are we more concerned for providing security for ourselves for the future or investing by faith and trusting God for the future?
- Are we satisfied with some very narrow use of our spiritual gifts or do we have a large vision for blessing many people?

Warren Wiersbe: Solomon used two activities to illustrate his point [**life is an adventure that must be lived by faith**]:

- the merchant sending out his ships (**vv. 1-2**)
- and the farmer sowing his seed (**vv. 3-6**).

In both activities, a great deal of faith is required, because neither the merchant nor the farmer can control the circumstances. The ships might hit a reef, meet a storm, or be attacked by pirates and the cargo lost. Bad weather, blight, or insects might destroy the crop, and the farmer's labor would be in vain. However, if the merchant and the farmer waited until the circumstances were ideal, they would never get anything done! Life has a certain amount of risk to it, and that's where faith comes in.

2. Promise: Patiently Look for God to Bear the Fruit

"for you will find it after many days."

"No Deposit, No Return" – title one preacher gave this passage

What reward have I received? No joy of interaction ... not seeing people grow and respond ...

Application: What resources has God committed to you?? How are you investing those?

B. (:2) Wisely Allocate Your Resources Across Different Ventures –

Avoiding putting all your eggs in one basket – mitigating the risk factor in light of the uncertainties of life; Sow widely, not narrowly; Sow abundantly, not sparingly

1. Counsel: Strategically Spread Your Resources in a Number of Key Directions

“Divide your portion to seven, or even to eight,”

Seven = number of perfection of completion;
even go beyond and divide your portion to eight

It would be presumptuous to put all of your eggs into one basket; cf. investment portfolios

David Hubbard: The misunderstanding is that we usually take this casting of bread as a picture of charity. “Do good deeds and you will be rewarded” is a customary interpretation. But the Preacher’s practical shrewdness and the context within the book suggest something else—namely, advice not about charity but about **wise investment**. Where did one gain the highest return on one’s money? In investments overseas: in the rich export and import business of the Mediterranean ports like Tyre and Sidon. “*Bread upon the waters*” that you will “*find*” “after many days” was Ecclesiastes’ way of describing **investment in those lucrative mercantile enterprises where fortunes were to be made**.

There was risk involved, of course. And in the second admonition, the Teacher urged his students to **diversify their investments** to hedge against such risk.

2. Caution: Misfortune May Hit Where You Least Expect It

“for you do not know what misfortune may occur on the earth.”

You give now to others because you have abundance and they have need; what about when misfortune strikes you; who will come to your aid??

2 Cor. 8:7-15; 9:10-11 – key passage – if we knew our OT better ... when we study the NT we would illustrate the truth by these OT examples

**Application: Why are you limiting what God can do through you to one area?
Why are you failing to be generous to as many as possible?**

C. (:3-4) Take Reasonable Risks – Not waiting for ideal circumstances

(Chiastic Structure: **A B B A**) -- Best to take these two verses together ...

Some people come up with some wild interpretations here .. But Solomon is making one main point

1. Certain Obstacles are Inevitable – Deal with Them

a. Expected Cause and Effect Relationships –

“If the clouds are full, they pour out rain upon the earth;”

Difficult to tell here whether rain is viewed as a good thing = The blessing of rain is essential for the harvest – you can expect it ... but no guarantees ... Deal with the hand that is dealt you – Or is rain viewed as a negative thing = prevents you from working in the fields and gathering the harvest; or maybe even a symbol of God pouring out His judgments.

In either case the application is similar: You can't be overly cautious and try to put off work because of your guesses about the weather ... do what is in your power when you have opportunity.

C.H. Leupold: Since “*the evil that shall be upon the earth*” has just been referred to, it is best to regard this verse as a further reference to this evil. Since “*clouds*” are elsewhere in the Scriptures referred to as visible tokens of God's coming judgment, cf., **Isa. 19:1, Ps. 97:2; 18:11; Rev. 1:7**, we have ample ground for here, too, thinking of God's judgments as we find these judgments to be the “*evil*” referred to at the close of the preceding verse.

[OR: God has blessed you so that you can bless others?? So **Ray Stedman** below]
[**Ray Stedman:** The first reason is that we are to give generously because it is the natural outflow of a full life; like clouds that are filled with rain and empty themselves again and again and again upon the earth.]

- b. Isolated and Unpredicted Events – Wind knocks down trees
“*and whether a tree falls toward the south or toward the north, wherever the tree falls, there it lies.*”

Again, deal with unexpected circumstances that are out of your control and move on.

Alternative Views:

[**Charles Spurgeon:** **Use your opportunities now** ... once your tree has fallen, no more chance to change direction – speaking of being saved or not]

[**Ray Stedman:** “**Bloom where you are planted.**” That is, it is God who controls the fall of the tree out in the forest; whether it falls to the south or the north is within the scope of divine providence to determine, but where it falls, that is where it is to be. This is Solomon's way of saying to us, “Where God has put you, in your present circumstances, that is where you are to give. Meet the needs around you. Supply the needs of those with whom you come in contact.”]

2. Don't Let Future Uncertainties Rob You of Present Productivity

- a. Sow while there is opportunity
“*He who watches the wind will not sow*”
Hag. 1:2
- b. Reap while there is opportunity
“*and he who looks at the clouds will not reap.*”

Jeff Strite: A Georgia farmer, ragged and barefooted, was standing on the steps of his tumbledown shack. A stranger stopped for a drink of water and just to pass the time of day he asked: "How is your cotton coming along?" he asked. "Ain't got none," replied the farmer. "Did you plant any?" asked the stranger. "Nope," was the reply, "afraid of bollweevils." "Well," continued the stranger, "how is your corn?" "Didn't plant none," came the answer, "'fraid there weren't going to be no rain." The visitor persevered: "Well, how are your potatoes?" "Ain't got none. Scairt - of potato bugs." "Really, what did you plant?" pressed the stranger. "Nothin'," was the calm reply, "I jest played safe."

www.sermoncentral.com

Application: Where are you **making excuses** for failing to step out in faith and trust God and get busy in building His kingdom? Why are you procrastinating?

Why are you scared to take risks? – “All authority is given unto me ... Go .. Make Disciples”

D. (:5) Don't Try to Unscrew the Inscrutable – leads to being overly cautious and paralyzed – you don't have to have everything figured out – Trust God to work

“Just as you do not know the path of the wind and how bones are formed in the womb of the pregnant woman, so you do not know the activity of God who makes all things.”

Cf. Jesus using this thought in his conversation with Nicodemus in **John 3**

You might object: I don't see how my investing in the kingdom will really make much of an impact ... What can God possibly do with this mysterious teaching ministry over the internet? I can't see the process or the results?? When I witness, I don't see any amazing conversions ... doesn't seem like it matters ...

How about if the **obstetrician** threw up his hands and said .. I'm not going to use my skills to help with this delivery of this new life into the world ... I don't fully understand how it all works ... I know the facts of life ... but they don't make a lot of sense to me ... How does God create a new life ... How do the bones form and grow?? I give up ..

Application: Takes faith to minister and leave the results to God

Must live by **conviction:** God's Word is powerful; your labor is not in vain in the Lord; can't walk by sight .. but by faith; God is the one who creates life; God is the one who brings forth fruit .. He wants us to Abide in Him – not to have a comfortable, risk-free life ... but to bear fruit ... have a productive life ... and bear fruit abundantly ..

E. (:6) Seize Every Opportunity for Productive Living – Give yourself every chance for success; don't limit yourself by laziness or procrastination; leave the results in God's hands – Trust God to bring forth fruit

“Sow your seed in the morning and do not be idle in the evening, for you do not

know whether morning or evening sowing will succeed, or whether both of them alike will be good.”

Application: Think of the context of witnessing You want to witness by your life ... great ... Do it ... but don't neglect speaking up in the workplace and confronting evil as lights in this world; you are not big on street preaching ... OK ... but how about giving out a tract ... how about supporting missionaries ... How can you sow seed in the morning and in the evening – all day long, every day; through all the seasons of life .. as a teenager ... as a retired grandparent ... when you feel like it When you don't feel like it .. when it's easy ... when it's not so easy ...

II. (:7-10) FOUR SECRETS TO AN ENJOYABLE LIFE – PRACTICING JOYFUL CONTENTMENT SEASON BY SEASON – STARTING IN YOUTH

Walter Kaiser: **Rejoice**, shouts our learned guide, in all of life (11:7-9). Yet just as quickly he warns that the quality of life must be such that it will pass muster before the final Judge of all persons and deeds. Our present life was meant to be joyous, as pleasant to the eyes as the rising sun in the morning light (11:7), but with the consciousness that we must render an account unto God for all of life. And if we should live many years, **verse 8** counsels that we should enjoy them all. Yet our eyes must be directed to those inevitable days of disease and death when we must go to the grave and then to meet our Maker and Fruit Inspector-Judge. Thus our writer begins his finale as he winds up his massive argument on God and culture, man and meaning.

Douglas Miller: “The trouble with youth,” someone once mused, “is that it is wasted on the young!” Qohelet’s counsel is a form of “Carpe diem,” seize the day! Enjoy life to the full while there is still time! (cf. **Eccl 9:1-6**). Yet, with the Teacher there is also caution, somewhat like the old Pennsylvania Dutch saying, “Too soon old, too late smart.” Considering all that Qohelet has to say about life’s struggles and the oppressive nature of looming death, his comments on youth and old age are intriguing. Many have concluded that the Teacher himself was of advancing years since he speaks authoritatively of the character and challenges of old age. For him, these were no “golden years.”

This unit changes the focus from concern with the future’s unknowability to considering the possibility that the reader might live to old age (11:7-8). There is something that can be known about the future: one way or another, days of darkness are coming! In effect, Qohelet says that death is a tragedy, but living until old age is not so great either. The celebration of youth and the call to enjoy it (11:7-10) are followed by a poem on old age and the death of the cosmos (12:1-7). As in 10:16 -- 11:6, the sage frequently uses second-person speech (*your, your*) to address the reader quite personally.

A. (:7) Appreciate Every Day You are Alive

The light is pleasant, and it is good for the eyes to see the sun.”

Connection between light / sun and life in the Scriptures

Enjoyment does not come from our possessions ... but from our attitude ... and our ability to appreciate God and His good gifts

B. (:8) Prepare for Death -- by Counting Your Blessings Every Day

“Indeed, if a man should live many years, let him rejoice in them all, and let him remember the days of darkness, for they shall be many. Everything that is to come will be futility.”

You are not ready to live until you are ready to die; Death is coming.

Could be talking about difficulties we encounter in this life; but more probably a contrast with death; we will spend more days in the ground than above it ...

C. (:9) Pursue Your Dreams -- Take Advantage of Each Season of Life – Yet with Balance Guarding Against Indulgence

“Rejoice, young man, during your childhood, and let your heart be pleasant during the days of young manhood. And follow the impulses of your heart and the desires of your eyes. Yet know that God will bring you to judgment for all these things.”

Chad Forrester: One thing for sure, we’re not getting any younger. Time is surely linear. Someone described the seven stages of man’s life like this: spills, drills, thrills, bills, ills, pills, wills. If you’re going to do something with your life now is the time, now is your window of opportunity.

Ps 39:4-5 says

"Lord, remind me how brief my time on earth will be. Remind me that my days are numbered— how fleeting my life is. You have made my life no longer than the width of my hand. My entire lifetime is just a moment to you; at best, each of us is but a breath."
NLT

<http://sermoncentral.com/sermon.asp?SermonID=103063&Sermon%20The%20Mystery%20of%20the%20Future%20of%20Life%20by%20Chad%20%20Forrester>

Warren Wiersbe: *“Walk in the ways of your heart”* (NKJV) is not an encouragement to go on a youthful fling and satisfy the sinful desires within (**Jer. 17:9; Mark 7:20-23**). It is rather a reminder for young people to enjoy the special pleasures that belong to youth and can never be experienced again in quite the same way. Those of us who are older need to remember that God expects young people to act like young people. The tragedy is that too many older people are trying to act like young people.!

D. (:10) Practice Contentment -- Try to Mitigate Emotional and Physical Distractions – *Tempus fugit* --

“So, remove vexation from your heart and put away pain from your body, because childhood and the prime of life are fleeting.”

Vexation: combines anger and resentment – we don't think things are fair that we are experiencing; we resent the hand God has dealt us; opposite of contentment

Godliness with contentment is great gain

We will not always be dealing with ideal circumstances and conditions

* * * * *

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) Why does it seem foolish to us to cast our bread upon the waters? What are the obstacles to our faith?
- 2) Where am I procrastinating or making excuses for not doing what God wants me to do?
- 3) How can I more aggressively pursue my dreams and by faith take risks in the areas where God wants me to be aggressive in investing for Him?
- 4) Do I tend to focus on pain and vexation and magnify my problems or do I practice contentment?

* * * * *

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Timothy Worrell:

I. Talking about Giving to God --

A. Lesson stated Twice (:1a, 2a) – Give Much; Give to Many --

Throw out that seed that will produce bread on the low places on the ground where there is still residual water; fertile ground; waters = multitudes of people (**Is. 8:7; Rev. 17:15**); **Is. 32:20** – give our resources to people; Repeating the thought in (**:2a**) – be generous towards others; **Job 31:17**; don't hoard everything and leave the hungry without food; be concerned about the needy; give an adequate provision – not just a pittance; spread it out

B. Two Reasons (:1b, 2b)

- 1) Our Reward is Certain – God won't forget our labors; He will reward;
- 2) Our Opportunity is Uncertain --

Some say: "Because life is short, eat your dessert first." Solomon says, "Give your dessert away." This wealth I possess may be gone tomorrow. You have the opportunity now; you don't know if you will have the opportunity tomorrow; Give it now. Turns an excuse into a motivation;

C. Answers to 4 Objections:

1) **Objection:** “It’s my portion; I don’t have to give it.” – Why do the clouds get full of water??

Answer: God wants you to bless others; God fills them with water not just for their good but to pour it out on the earth

2) **Objection:** “I don’t know where to give; there are so many needs; I don’t know where it will be profitably used.”

Answer: Where you give, there it will prosper. Where God in His Providence places the gift through you.

3) **Objection:** We tend to procrastinate; we think of all of the potential outcomes; Good farmer does not try to guess the weather; he just works hard whenever he has opportunity; the weather is not the problem; it is the lack of desire in your heart to work hard; **Prov. 22:13**; our minds can make up many excuses to put off working hard

Answer: Say No to those objections that rise up in our mind; don’t make a mountain out of a molehill about how hard it will be

4) (:5) **Objection:** “I don’t see how the blessing is going to come. I don’t see how helping these people will work out.”

Answer: Yes, it is somewhat mysterious and hidden from you – the positive effects that God can bring about; but God will use our giving for the extension of His kingdom and His glory; God wants to keep us humble; it is always appropriate to be sowing seed

Ps. 126:6 –sowing in tears but reaping in joy; for certain that he will reap; sow in the morning of our lives and in the evening of our lives – addresses the youth and the elderly; it is always appropriate to be serving God and His people; **Ps. 92:14**

II. (:7-10) Admonition: Think About Dying – How to Die Well

(Had taught us earlier about How to Live Well)

A. (:7-8) Speaks to the Aged – the sweetness of life – not eternal --

Light refers to Life; **Job 3:20-21**; but think about death while you are enjoying it; it is not endless; “*days of darkness*” – lying in the grave – **Job 10:21** – you will spend more time underground than above ground; all vain if you are outside of Christ

B. (:9-10) Speaks to the Young – gives a caution in vs 9 and an exhortation in vs. 10;

1. (:9) Caution -- is not a concession but using irony; Go do whatever you want – but you better know you are going to be judged; not walking in God’s counsel; **Ps. 25:7**; you don’t see straight in all your zeal and energy; throwing off the important things of life; making too much of other things; must read the owner’s manual

2. (:10) Exhortation: as enjoyable as it all is, it is coming to an end; “sorrow” – root of word means trouble – anger, discontentment – with God’s authority over

you however it is exercised over you; get your heart right and your behavior right; **2 Cor. 7:1**; Pursue God; Don't wait to serve God until the evening of your life

<http://www.sermonaudio.com/search.asp?chapter=11&BibleOnly=true&currSection=sermons&bible&keyword=Ecclesiastes>

David Silversides: Redeeming the Time

I. (:1-6) Don't Hold Back Because of the Unknown

A. (:1-2) Do what is our responsibility – Is. 28:28 – bread corn = same word – refers to Eastern practice of scattering seed corn while fields still have residual water; may seem haphazard; but necessary if there were to be any harvest at all; waters would subside and eventually there would be a harvest; the return would come in due course; Generosity of spirit; possibility of evil to come, then the opportunity to show this generosity will not be there; so serve the Lord now; urging fulfillment of present opportunity -- **Is. 32:8; Prov. 11:24; Luke 6:38; 2 Cor. 9:6; Heb. 6:10**; what seems safe ends up not safe; what seems risky ends up being what is appropriate and blessed by God; to serve the Lord is always the safe way and way of blessing; application: spread the truth of God

B. (:3) Reminded of things over which we have no control

We cannot control the clouds and the rain – but that mustn't prevent us from doing what the Lord requires of us; When a tree falls we are not consulted about it; it happens outside of our control; comes about in the Providence of God; may signify our condition at death – state of salvation or condemnation – accentuates the need for the right use of the present life because the end of it is not in our hands – we do not know when our lives will be brought to an end

C. (:4) Present obligations are not to be put off

Illustration from the natural realm applies to seeking the Lord and serving the Lord; there are no ideal circumstances or infallible guarantees; don't always be waiting for a more suitable time; **Hag. 1:2** – people sounded pious; not that we are not interested; apparently it was the right time to build their own houses and attend to their own affairs; it is always the right time to obey the Word of God

D. (:5-6) Unknown Outcomes

We have our limits spelled out in vs. 5; word for spirit and for wind are the same; we don't know how God puts the soul in man; we don't understand all of the works of God or what God will do in the future; do all that God requires unselectively; we can't tell what God will prosper; we don't know who the elect of God are – just evangelize wherever we have opportunity; we don't need to know; we must obey

II. (:7-10) Seeking the Right Kind of Joy and Seeking it Early

A. (:7-8) Life at Best is Short

It's good to be alive; but what follows even a long life is infinitely longer than life under the sun; death and judgment follow; such a life on earth only produces vanity in what follows.

B. (:9) Youth is Short

He does have his whole life before him; even at his peak he is most given to this feeling that it is good to be alive; finds it relatively easy to enjoy himself; walks in the way of his own heart; fit, well, has energy; but there is an end; youth doesn't go on and on; gives way to middle age and then old age.

C. (:10) Childhood and Youth are Vanity

This young man doesn't think he even has any sorrow; but it will come; he will get old and his pleasures will evaporate; that's why **12:1** begins how it does; childhood and youth are vanity; spend far more years looking back wistfully.

Application:

- it is always the right time to obey the Word of God, put away sin, seek Christ and holiness; it is always the right time to evangelize
- seek the joys that last – fellowship with Christ and with those in Christ

<http://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=4210534210>

Warren Wiersbe: Is life worth living? That was the question the Preacher raised when he began the discourse that we call Ecclesiastes. After experimenting and investigating “*life under the sun*,” he concluded, “No, life is *not* worth living!” He gave four arguments to support his conclusion: the monotony of life, the vanity of wisdom, the futility of wealth, and the certainty of death. . . Now Solomon was ready for his conclusion and personal application. What he did was present four pictures of life and attach to each picture a practical admonition for his listeners (and readers) to heed. The development looks like this:

Life is an ADVENTURE – live by faith (**11:1-6**)

Life is a GIFT – enjoy it (**11:7-12:8**)

Life is a SCHOOL – learn your lessons (**12:9-12**)

Life is a STEWARDSHIP – fear God (**12:13-14**)

These four pictures parallel the four arguments that Solomon had wrestled with throughout the book. Life is not monotonous; rather, it is an adventure of faith that is anything but predictable or tedious. Yes, death is certain, but life is a gift from God and He wants us to enjoy it. Are there questions we can't answer and problems we can't solve? Don't despair. God teaches us His truth as we advance in “the school of life,” and He will give us wisdom enough to make sensible decisions. Finally, as far as wealth is concerned, all of life is a stewardship from God; and one day He will call us to give an account. Therefore, “*fear God, and keep His commandments*” (**12:13**).

H.C. Leupold: In regard to every kind of work that might be done with a look to the future men might grow pessimistic and lose all spirit of enterprise and do only what must be done to maintain life and to eke out a meagre existence. Any enterprise of greater moment that might seem in danger of miscarrying because of the perils and the uncertainties of the times is liable to be slighted because the dangers of failure seem so

prominent. Reasonable caution with reference to undertakings on a major scale is naturally dictated by common sense. If men are going to be only cautious and undertake nothing they will be like unto the farmer that is about to sow but observes a strong wind that might blow away some of his seed and so puts off the sowing until a time when the wind is entirely suitable. Such a one may never get his sowing done.

Chuck Swindoll:

I. (:1-6) Be Bullish

Honestly now, can you remember the last time you broke with routine and did something unusual? I'm told there's a sign along the Alaskan Highway that reads: "Choose your rut carefully. You'll be in it for the next 200 miles."

Are we allowing someone or something to enslave us, so that we will live our lives and ultimately pass from time to eternity without ever discovering who we are? Some do. That's not living; that's existing.

- A. Instead of protecting, release yourself!
- B. Instead of hoarding, give and invest.
- C. In place of drifting, pursue!
- D. As an alternative to doubting, trust!

II. (:7-10) Enjoying Life Now, Not Later

It was a great moment in my adult life when I realized that life was meant to be enjoyed rather than simply endured. . . For most people, life has become a grim marathon of misery, an endurance test full of frowns, whines, groans, and sighs. . .

What are you waiting for to enjoy life?

- I'm waiting until I have the things I've always wanted. When that happens, then I'll be happy.
- I'm waiting for a person who will fulfill my life.
- I'm waiting until I have achieved my goals and realized my dreams.

"The chief end of man is to love God and enjoy Him forever." . . . Happiness is to pervade all the years of our life. . . What hinders the pursuit of happiness?

- self-appointed excuses keep us from claiming daily joy.
- a self-styled independence that keeps us from remembering our Creator

TEXT: Ecclesiastes 12:1-14

TITLE: *THE POINT OF IT ALL*

BIG IDEA:

THIS LIFE HAS MEANING WHEN WE RISE ABOVE THE FUTILITY OF MAN'S WISDOM TO EMBRACE GOD'S WISDOM = FEAR GOD AND OBEY HIM BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE BECAUSE WE ALL WILL BE HELD ACCOUNTABLE

INTRODUCTION:

Our culture: Getting older; living longer, more healthcare and elder care issues

Chuck Swindoll: story of woman with painful arthritis reading a book entitled: I Don't Want to Live Like This Anymore – cf. helping your parents in the twilight of their years

Common feelings and emotions of the elderly:

- uselessness – I am in the way, I am over the hill
- guilt – I have totally fouled up my lifeIf only . . .
- bitterness and resentment
- fear of the unknown and the future – What's going to happen to me?

As young people – how do we live right now in anticipation that old age will come sooner than we think?

As older people – how do we graciously accept the challenges of the aging process

How do we live right now in such a way that our life has meaning – that we are not caught up in the futility of life under the sun?

Douglas Miller: From early in the history of interpretation, this poem has been understood as a **description of old age** (so the Targum, Ecclesiastes Rabbah, and b. abbat 131b-132a, as well as early Christian sources). Although a bit difficult at points, many of the images make apt connections to that time of life (see “*Youth and Old Age*” in TBC for **11:7 – 12:8**). More recently, scholars have taken note of dirge or funeral language in the poem as well as apocalyptic terminology suggestive of the end times. The commentary will offer a discussion of each verse followed by an assessment of proposals for the meaning of the poem as a whole. . .

Thus, from earliest times on into the present, interpreters have understood that **old age** and the **end of human life** are concerns of the poem in **12:1-7**. It is striking that Qohelet does not describe the older years of life in terms of wisdom, veneration, or honor, assessments typical of the wisdom tradition (**Prov 20:29; Job 12:12; 15:9-10; Sir 25:3-6**). Instead, it is a time of **discomfort, declining faculties, and impending death** [*Human Beings*, p. 232]. The more recent recognition of the apocalyptic

language employed by Qohelet alerts us to his **interweaving of the difficult days of the elderly, the darkness of death, and looming end of the cosmos**. Such a combination serves as a fitting complement to the exhortation to young people in **Ecclesiastes 11:7-10**.

Daniel Akin: Solomon's intention in this section is to explain that today is the day to turn to God—don't delay. He's exhorted us to enjoy life, and as we have seen, turning to God is the only way to enjoy life rightly. In order to accomplish his purpose, Solomon gives a sobering picture of the curse of death with the hope that it will drive us to God now. **Murphy** points out that the poem is **relentless in its move toward death**. This entire section is **one long run-on sentence** that if read together would literally leave the reader out of breath (**Murphy**, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 215). . .

The vocabulary of the poem is **apocalyptic**. It uses language often used in passages that describe the end of the world, such as the darkening of the sun and moon (cf. **Joel 3:15**). The point in **Ecclesiastes 12** is that **your world personally will end in death**. In the poem the author gives three "*before*" statements to depict vividly aging and dying. First, we must turn to God before evil days come (**12:1**), which refers to impending death. Death is not the way the world should be. It was not part of God's original design but rather is an enemy intruder in the world. When those evil days come, we will have no pleasure in them (**12:1**). The depressing reality for many people is that if they live long enough, they will become so sick, experience so much daily pain, or feel the indignity of not being able to do everyday things they used to do with no thought, and **they will beg God to let them die**. They will ask God why they continue to live, and they will hope for death.

Second, we must turn to God before the astrological lights go out (**12:2**). We need to understand as we walk through the poem that it contains highly metaphorical language, and we cannot be dogmatic about what it all means. However, we can make some observations that come close, I think. Solomon says the lights will go out, which may refer to eye failure or the loss of mental powers. The reference to rain and clouds could refer to glaucoma (i.e., cloudy vision) or that our reasoning and memory functions decline in old age—after all, even when young people forget something, they say they had a "senior moment." Perhaps Solomon is alluding to the heartbreaking effects of dementia. Others think the clouds could refer to troubles that were minor setbacks in youth, but now the aged do not recover as quickly from them, or they never recover from them. Thus, the clouds never go away (**Kidner**, *Ecclesiastes*, 102). . .

Third, we must turn to God "*before the silver cord is snapped, and the gold bowl is broken, and the jar is shattered at the spring, and the wheel is broken into the well*" (**12:6**). The images of the silver cord, the golden bowl, the shattered jar, and the broken wheel refer to drawing water. The problem is that the system to get life-sustaining water has deteriorated and shattered into the finality of death (**Webb**, *Five Festal Garments*, 99). The cord that pulls the water, the bowl that holds the jar, the jar that holds the water, and the wheel for the pulley system are all broken at the bottom of the well. Life has gone out. The outcome is that man returns to dust (**12:7**), that is, he dies and decays

under the curse of sin while the breath of life returns to God. Again, this is not a comment on heaven. It refers to the **departure of life**. This reality is the sentence God passed on Adam because of his sin and his posterity's sin (**Gen 3; Rom 5**). When you sin against God, you shall surely die and return to the dust from which you came. Ecclesiastes has said all along that we live in a cursed world where death is inevitable because of humanity's sinful choices that led us to this point.

I. (:1-7) THE URGENCY OF EMBRACING GOD'S WISDOM: FIGURE LIFE OUT SOONER . . . RATHER THAN LATER . . . OLD AGE IS FAST APPROACHING

A. (:1a) It is Never Too Soon to Submit to the Lordship of Your Creator

1. Remember God by Submitting to His Lordship

"Remember also"

Definition of "*Remember*" in this context: much more than keeping God in your memory; deals with how you regard God and how you respond to Him

Chuck Swindoll: used in **1 Samuel** for Hannah when she was without a baby. She really wanted a baby, and she prayed for a baby. And Scripture says, "*The Lord remembered Hannah.*" God acted on her behalf and caused her to conceive. It's the same term. It means "*to act decisively on behalf of someone.*"

Quotes **Derek Kidner**: To remember Him is no perfunctory or purely mental act; it is to drop our pretense of self-sufficiency and to commit ourselves to Him.

Ray Stedman: The thought is: recall God's presence daily; live in a relationship with him; seek to discover the greatness and glories of God while you are still young, before it is too late.

Douglas Miller: The term *remember* means to engage the truth of the past with one's present practice or lifestyle; here the point is to live in such a way as to avoid God's judgment (**Ecc 11:9**).

2. Respond to God as your Creator

"your Creator"

Say "No" to Evolution – does it matter what you believe about Creation? You bet!
Says a ton about accountability and how you are going to live your life;
Should the pot talk back to the potter? Relationship of Creator to Creature; yet not animal but privileged human being into whom God has breathed His Spirit so that we are made in his likeness

You are not your own; made for a purpose.

3. Recognize the Brevity of Life – Youth = Opportunity
“in the days of your youth” –

You are younger today than you will be tomorrow.

Ray Stedman: When you are young, life seems to stretch endlessly before you; it seems that you will never approach old age. But as you live day by day, life seems to speed by rapidly; it is very brief. You suddenly find yourself exhibiting the appearances and experiences of age. As someone has well said, "Just about the time your face clears up, your mind begins to go!" This is how brief life seems to be.

B. (:1b-7) Graphical Description of the Decay Involved in the Aging Process

We are on a downward path that leads to increasing darkness and pain and hardship

1. General Description of Old Age

a. Time of Trouble

“before the evil days come”

Craig Bartholomew: At a literal level, there is clearly a contrast here between youth and old age—the longer one lives, the more possibilities there are for experiencing the enigmas of life. And “the evil days” and the approaching years in which one finds no delight probably refer to the approach of death, the great enigma for Qohelet.

b. Time of Distress

*“and the years draw near when you will say,
‘I have no delight in them’”*

c. Time of Darkness and Gloominess

1) Prime of Life Extinguished

“before the sun and the light,”

2) Twilight of life Fading

“the moon and the stars are darkened,”

Ray Stedman: These mental faculties are described in terms of **light**. The mind, with its powers of reasoning, of memory and of imagination begins to fade, like the fading of the light of the sun. The reasoning power of the brain, perhaps the greatest gift that God has given to us, begins to lose its ability, and the memory fades. That is one of the first marks of old age. There are three things that indicate the onset of old age: the first is losing the memory, and I can't remember the other two!

H.C. Leupold: All joys are dimmed very materially in old age.

3) Depression / Gloominess Persisting

“and clouds return after the rain”

Ray Stedman: a reference to a kind of second childhood, of senility, which comes on in old age. As a child, one's life revolves around three simple things: eating, sleeping, and going to the bathroom. When one gets old that same cycle returns again.

Churck Swindoll: The cloudy weather represents the aging mind as it begins to get dull. Senility steals so much of the joy of living.

R. Norman Whybray: The unexpected return of the clouds soon after a storm, once more shutting out the light, is a bad sign and brings gloom, both literally and psychologically.

The mind does funny things to old people as they become confused and disoriented.

2. Specific Signs of Deterioration and Decay

Douglas Sean O'Donnell: But before death happens, **bodily frailties accumulate** as we age. Like a once-vibrant but now-unattended estate, our hands, legs, teeth, eyes, ears, vocal cords, and hair slowly decay. Our hands, which once provided a living and protection, now shake (*"in the day when the keepers of the house tremble"*), our legs can't support the weight of our bodies for long (*"and the strong men are bent"*), our remaining molars can't chew food like they used to (*"the grinders cease because they are few"*), and our vision declines (*"those who look through the windows are dimmed," Eccl. 12:3*).

And if all that were not bad enough, other awful issues accompany old age. When we want our ears to work well, they don't (we can't even hear ourselves chew: *"and the doors on the street are shut—when the sound of the grinding is low"*), but when we would be fine with deafness, our ears work too well (*"and one rises up at the sound of a bird," Eccl. 12:4*). Moreover, we cannot sing like we used to. Our vocal cords "no longer have the elastic strength to make sweet music" (*"and all the daughters of song are brought low," v. 4b*).

Finally, before we die (go to our *"eternal home"*) and people grieve our passing (*"and the mourners go about the streets"*), our hair turns gray or white (*"the almond tree blossoms"*), we lose our mobility and get around painfully (*"the grasshopper drags itself along"*), our motivation to work, our appetite for food, and our sex drive diminish (*"desire fails"*), and a fear of falling and of other dangers increases (*"they are afraid also of what is high, and terrors are in the way," Eccl. 12:5*). And then the moment comes! What was once beautiful, precious, useful, and life-giving is destroyed (*"the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is shattered at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern," v. 6*). Light crashes to the ground and life spills out like water. "Life is broken beyond repair. Death is final and irreversible."

- a. Loss of Strength
 - 1) Trembling Hands

“in the day that the watchmen of the house tremble”

arms/hands used to provide a strong defense
How steady are your hands?

- 2) Crooked Legs – You used to stand tall
“and mighty men stoop”

Legs are mighty – controlled by the largest muscles in the body

Ps. 147:10-11 *“He does not delight in the strength of the horse; He does not take pleasure in the legs of a man. The Lord favors those who fear Him, Those who wait for His lovingkindness.”*

My older sister just lost her father-in-law – stooped over at almost 90 degree angle

b. Loss of Essential Functions of the Body

- 1) Chewing Capability – only a few Teeth left
“the grinding ones stand idle because they are few”

Liked Swindoll’s story of the older man buying baby food – strained peas – it was for him, not for his grandkids.

- 2) Vision Capability – eyes grow dim
“and those who look through windows grow dim”

All sorts of eye problems; lens get thicker; can’t read anything up close; cataracts develop.

- 3) Hearing Capability – ears have trouble hearing
“and the doors on the street are shut as the sound of the grinding mill is low”

Warren Wiersbe: Either your hearing starts to fail, or you close your mouth because you’ve lost your teeth.

H.C. Leupold: Doors are means of communicating with the outside world. The mouth and its teeth have been referred to (**3c**). Therefore the author is at this point referring to the *ears*. They are shut to the outer world as is attested by the fact that that common sound of the grinding of grain, which was heard daily about the Oriental home, is scarcely perceived by the unfortunate old man.

- 4) Sleep Capability – no more sound sleeping
“and one will arise at the sound of the bird”

Awakened by the least disturbance; trouble getting back to sleep.

5) Speech/Lung Capability (Or Hearing Capability again??)
“and all the daughters of song will sing softly”

Warren Wiersbe: Your voice starts to quaver and weaken.

Derek Kidner: participation in singing . . . or enjoyment of the singing of others ??

Adam Clarke: The VOICE, that wonderful instrument, almost endless in the strength and variety of its tones, becomes feeble and squeaking, and merriment and pleasure are no more. The tones emitted are all of the querulous or mournful kind.

Ray Stedman: One of the signs of old age is that everybody seems to talk in a much lower tone of voice than they used to; people mumble all the time, as "*the daughters of song are brought low.*"

Start to go deaf; need hearing aid – **2 Sam. 19:34-36 ??**

Are we presently Giving God Thanks for these basic functions?

Or do we take these for granted each day?

Is our happiness and contentment dependent on these functioning well?

c. (:5) Loss of Virility – Increasing Fears

1) Loss of Boldness and Courage

a) Fear of Falling

“Furthermore, men are afraid of a high place”

Need railings installed; every step is a potential disaster; break one hip ... break two hips ...

Things that used to be easy to accomplish are now difficult or impossible.

b) Fear of Attack

“and of terrors on the road”

Afraid of driving at night; afraid of driving on the beltway;

2) Loss of Strength and Vigor

a) Loss of Hair – Or Change to White or Gray Hair

“the almond tree blossoms”

You can try to use various hair products to mask this inevitable process; you aren't kidding anybody; like the white blossoms of the almond tree.

b) Loss of Mobility

“the grasshopper drags himself along”

Go to the assisted living facility and watch as the residents drag themselves along; takes forever to get anywhere; stiffness just gets worse; difficult to move around.

- c) Loss of Appetite (maybe sexual reference)
“and the caperberry is ineffective.”

Michael Eaton: The caperberry was apparently a stimulant to bodily appetites

3. (:5b-7) Ultimate Pictures of Departure and Devastation and Death

a. **Departure** from This Life

- 1) The One Who Leaves for a New Destination

“For man goes to his eternal home”

Always liked the imagery of the departed one setting sail for a new destination; mourners grieving on one shore as the ship disappears; but other joyful ones gathered on the other shore to greet the new arrival.

- 2) The Ones Who Remain to Mourn the Departed

“while mourners go about in the street”

b. Two Pictures of **Devastation** of the Physical Body

- 1) Life is Valuable and Precious – But Broken and Crushed

*“before the silver cord is broken
and the golden bowl is crushed”*

Extinguishing of the light of life

- 2) Life Seems Endless – But is Shattered and Crushed / Fragile

*“the pitcher by the well is shattered
and the wheel at the cistern is crushed”*

No more flow of water of life.

Michael Eaton: The final act of dying is pictured in four expressions, which divide into two pairs. In the first pair a golden bowl is attached to a silver cord or chain. When the chain is removed the bowl falls and is irreparable damaged. The image points to the value of life, and the drama in the end of a life whose pieces cannot be put together again.

The second pair of images visualizes a pitcher lowered into a well by a rope running round a wheel. Death is the smashing of the jar.

H.C. Leupold: Do not attempt to discover the specific meaning of “*silver cord*,” “*bowl*,” etc. They have no specific meaning; they are only a part of the background of the picture.

- c. **Death** = Separation of Body and Spirit
- 1) Physical Decay – back to dust
“*then the dust will return to the earth as it was*”
 - 2) Spiritual Return – back to God
“*and the spirit will return to God who gave it.*”

II. (:8) THE NEED FOR GOD’S WISDOM = THE FUTILITY OF LIFE UNDER THE SUN: APART FROM GOD . . . ALL IS VANITY

“*Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, all is vanity!*”

Review of previous chapters:

C1: INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW – CHASING THE WIND – THE CYCLE OF FUTILITY

THE EXPERIENCE AND PERSPECTIVE OF SOLOMON TESTIFY TO THE EMPTINESS OF LIFE AND THE LACK OF ANY SATISFYING ANSWERS TO THE HUMAN CYCLE OF FUTILITY

C2:1-11: LIVING IT UP WILL ALWAYS LET YOU DOWN

INVESTIGATION UNDER THE SUN REVEALS THE FUTILITY OF PLEASURE, POSSESSIONS AND PRIDE

C2:12-26: FUTILITY OF WISDOM AND WORK

A LIFE OF PURSUING WISDOM OR ACCOMPLISHMENT ONLY ACCUMULATES A LEGACY OF FUTILITY

C3: WRESTLING WITH ETERNITY –THE FUTILITY OF TRYING TO COMPREHEND THE DIVINE MASTER PLAN

THE INSCRUTABLE NATURE OF ETERNITY WILL FRUSTRATE MAN’S EFFORTS TO FIGURE THINGS OUT – JUST SUBMIT AND TAKE THINGS AS THEY COME

C4: THE FUTILITY OF CHASING WORLDLY SUCCESS

THE 5 ROTTEN STEPS ON THE WORLD’S LADDER OF SUCCESS

C5: WORSHIP, WEALTH AND WISDOM

C6: THE FUTILITY OF CHASING THE GOOD LIFE

EVEN THOSE WHO APPEAR TO HAVE GRABBED HOLD OF THE GOOD LIFE STRUGGLE WITH NO ENJOYMENT, NO SATISFACTION AND NO ANSWERS TO LIFE’S ULTIMATE QUESTIONS

C7: WISDOM REDISCOVERED

C8: RULERS AND RIDDLES

C9: LIFE JUST DOESN'T ADD UP –
BUT WE CAN STILL RESOLVE TO LIVE IT UP

**THE ENJOYMENT OF THIS LIFE DOES NOT COME FROM FIGURING
OUT LIFE'S DEEP ENIGMAS**

C10: NUGGETS OF WISDOM – WISE RESPONSE TO FOOLISH LEADERSHIP
FOLLY ON THE PART OF RULERS PUTS A NATION IN JEOPARDY AND
REQUIRES A RESPONSE OF WISDOM – YET WISDOM IS PRECARIOUS
AT BEST

C11: SECRETS TO A PRODUCTIVE AND ENJOYABLE LIFE
BY OPPORTUNISTIC FAITH AND JOYFUL CONTENTMENT WE CAN LIVE
BOTH A PRODUCTIVE AND ENJOYABLE LIFE

Douglas Miller: The concluding pronouncement again declares, *Vapor of vapors! says Qohelet. All is vapor (12:8, AT)* [Qohelet, p. 245]. Thus he says that it all is completely and thoroughly vapor. Throughout the commentary, we have been observing the diversity with which the Teacher uses the term *vapor (hebel)*. One metaphorical use of vapor points to its insubstantiality; occasionally he draws upon vapor's transience; and quite often he signals the foul dimension of vapor. We discerned this through verbal clues provided whenever vapor was used. A few times those clues indicated multivalency: more than one meaning (1:14; 2:15, 17; 8:14; 9:2). And on several occasions quite general statements indicated omnivalency: vapor as a symbol involving all of the various meanings and applications (1:2; 7:15; 9:9; 11:8; 12:8).

In the concluding major section of his work (11:7 – 12:7), Qohelet uses vapor two more times since its last previous mention in 9:9. As in that text, his use of the term in 11:8 draws upon more than one metaphorical meaning. It is worthwhile to list the ways in which the Teacher alludes to all dimensions of vapor's meanings in 11:7 – 12:7: the unit just prior to the final occurrence of vapor in 12:8.

1. Transience is developed in 11:7-10. The period of one's youth does not last long, so one should enjoy it while remembering one's Creator. Uses of vapor to mean transience are rare, and all occur in the book's second half (6:12; 8:14; 11:10). In the first half, he alludes to the transience of years (2:3) and days (5:18) without using the term *hebel*.

2. Insubstantiality is developed, first, by the layer of the poem that displays the decline of old age, especially the introduction in 12:1 and the references to poor functioning. Second, insubstantiality is emphasized in the statement that the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath returns to God who gave it (12:7 NRSV). Both the terms dust and breath (*rua*) recall Qohelet's presentation of human frailty in 3:18-22.

3. Foulness is indicated by the prominent use of evil (*ra'*; 11:10; 12:1) that so often accompanies vapor elsewhere. It is also clear that the human situation for the Teacher is

disappointing and frustrating (days of darkness is associated with vapor in **11:8**). He begins the final poem by describing old age as days of trouble (*ra'*, **12:1**), just as at other times he mentions coming days in which there will be no delight since they are evil (*ra'*; cf. **2:21-23; 5:16-17; 7:14**).

4. Finally, the frequent use of *day(s)* in this unit (**11:8, 9; 12:1** [two times], **3**) recalls the two previous occasions in which Qohelet used vapor in an **omnivalent way** to describe days (**7:15; 9:9**).

All of these elements anticipate the omnivalent use of vapor three times in **12:8**, where the book's theme is restated. This reprise of **1:2** serves as a reminder to the reader that all the writer has been describing of life under the sun may be appraised as vapor. It is a summons to recall each of the examples and assessments given by the author that are consummated in this statement.

III. (:9-14) THE COMMUNICATION OF GOD'S WISDOM: THE PREACHER FAITHFULLY DRIVES HOME THE MESSAGE OF TRUTH

[Note: no need to view this section as an appendix added by later editors – **H.C.**

Leupold defends Solomon as the author]

David Hubbard: There are useful lessons to be learned about the task of garnering and applying wisdom and how good teachers and good students go about their work of understanding the wonders and mysteries of God's dealings with the human family.

- I. The Teacher's Discipline (**12:9-11**)
- II. The Student's Duty (**12:12-14**)

A. (:9-10) The Expository Role of the Preacher: Communicating God's Truth Accurately and Effectively

1. Prerequisite: Preacher Must be a Wise, Godly Man

"In addition to being a wise man"

2. Goal of Edification – Systematic, Thorough Teaching

"the Preacher also taught the people knowledge"

3. Dedication to His Craft – can be a tedious process involving much discipline

Wrestling with the text and how to unfold it

a. Insightful Observation / Meditation / Analysis

"and he pondered"

b. Diligent Investigation

"searched out"

c. Methodical Organization

"and arranged many proverbs"

Michael Eaton: The Preacher's skill at his task is set before us in three verbs: *pondered*, *searched out*, *arranged*. The first (literally "weighed," a rare word) points to careful evaluation, indicating his honesty, caution and balance; the second to thoroughness and diligence. The third, *arranged*, points to the skillful orderliness of his presentation and reminds us that there is an artistic element in his work (as in all preaching and writing).

4. Choice of the Best Possible Words – for Accuracy and Effectiveness

a. Make it Interesting -- Don't be Boring

"The Preacher sought to find delightful words"

Chuck Swindoll: winsome, easy to grasp, readily applied
The most effective communicators are those who can make the complex simple.

b. Make it Accurate -- Don't be Wrong

"and to write words of truth correctly"

Rightly dividing the Word of truth –

2 Tim. 2:15 *"Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth."*

How can people imagine that you just open your mouth and expect the Holy Spirit to fill you with the right words to say ... that is presumption and laziness; much of what you hear on TV = repetitive gibberish – who listens to that stuff??

B. (:11-12) The Productive Impact of the Preacher: Applying God's Wisdom to Stir People to Action and to Drive Home God's Truth

1. 2 Illustrations:

a. Goads that Prick People Into Action

"The words of wise men are like goads"

Used on an ox to get the ox going forward; painful;
Prosperity preachers have put away the goad; all sugar and spice and everything nice;
If no one ever gets upset at your preaching, you are not fulfilling your mission;
Conviction of sin; need to change behavior; making people feel uncomfortable – all necessary.

b. Stakes that Drive Home God's Truth

"and masters of these collections are like well-driven nails"

Chuck Swindoll: A well-driven stake keeps the tent in place. It secures it to the ground.

Michael Eaton: establish teaching in the memory

2. Unity and Authority of God's Wisdom -- Sourced from One Shepherd

"they are given by one Shepherd"

That is why the word is so powerful and impactful; accomplishing the Master's purpose.

Distinction between the One Head of the Universal Church and multiple undershepherds in each local church.

3. Contrasted with Weariness of Book Learning – Accumulating Man's Wisdom

“But beyond this, my son, be warned: the writing of many books is endless, and excessive devotion to books is wearying to the body.”

Thomas Constable: This verse does not say that all study is tiring, though that is true. It means that study of books other than what God has revealed to learn wisdom is an endless, wearisome occupation. This is not to say we should avoid reading books other than the Bible. Nonetheless the main place to look when you want to find true wisdom is God's Word.

C. (:13-14) The Main Message of the Preacher: Fear God and Obey His Commandments Since You Will Be Held Accountable

1. Summary Lesson – The Point of it All

“The conclusion, when all has been heard,”

Book has been building to this great climax.

2. Simple Secrets to Purposeful Living –

Two Commands that summarize the Law:

a. Fear God

“is fear God”

b. Obey God

“and keep His commandments”

3. Scope of Solomon's Counsel

“because this applies to every person”

4. Supreme and Total Accountability

“For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden whether it is good or evil.”

Steve Zeisler: Solomon asked all the questions and looked squarely at all of life, its hopes, dreams, joys and sorrows. In the last analysis he declares that we must cease asking questions and worship God. Our most important choice is to bend our knee before God and receive answers from him.

* * * * *

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) Why does Solomon seem to focus his closing address on young people rather than the elderly?
- 2) As we visit the elderly in nursing homes and assisted living facilities, what parallels do we see to the observations Solomon makes in these verses?
- 3) In what sense have specific texts of Scripture served as goads or nails in our life?
- 4) What contributes and what detracts from our living life in the fear of the Lord?

* * * * *

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Douglas Sean O'Donnell: Two mistakes are often made when reading these verses. The first is to assume that because “*the Preacher*” (Pastor Solomon, as I have been calling him) is referred to in the past tense, these verses must have been written by another author, usually called a frame narrator. This may be, but is not necessarily the case. Pastor Solomon could have created this frame narrator as a character, as is still done in books today. For this book to end with such artistic flair would be fitting. Another option is that Solomon is speaking about himself by using another voice. Jesus sometimes did this: “*And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside, and on the way he said to them, ‘See, we are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over,’*” and so on (**Matt. 20:17–18**). Jesus is talking about himself! Therefore, my educated assumption is that Pastor Solomon wrote everything in Ecclesiastes, even the ending. As an author today might be asked to write a brief biography and book summary for the back of his own book, so **Solomon gives an honest appraisal of himself and his work.**

The second mistake is to view **Ecclesiastes 12:9–14** as an orthodox corrective of **1:2 – 12:8**, the sense being this: “Forget everything the Preacher has preached and remember the heart of the Torah: fear God and obey his law.” This view is absolutely wrong. There is **no thematic disconnect** between the final verses and the rest of the book. These verses affirm what was “affirmed previously:

- (1) the value of revering God (**3:14; 5:7; 7:18; 8:12–13**),
- (2) the need to obey God’s commands (e.g., **5:4–6**, which cites **Deut. 23:21–23** regarding vows; cf. also **8:5**, literally, ‘*a command-keeper*’), and
- (3) the certainty of divine judgment, either under the sun or after death (**3:15, 17; 5:6; 7:17; 8:12–13; 11:9**; possibly **8:5–6**.)”

Thus, I agree with **Richard Schultz** that “at the core [the Preacher] has not strayed from the central convictions of the Israelite faith.” Better yet, **Daniel Fredericks** writes that the summary ending “is not ‘changing the subject’; it is the subject of Ecclesiastes.” Indeed! **The ending is the rudder that steers the ship.** Without **verses 9–14** (esp. vv. **13–14**) to guide, we would easily read Ecclesiastes wrongly.

David Silversides: The Christian and the Aging Process

- (:1) Youth is short – a time to seek the Lord; then come the days of trouble and decay; and affliction
- (:2) The winter of life comes
- (:3) Trembling arms; strong men = the legs; the teeth; the eyes
- (:4) not able to speak as we once were and declare our mind and wishes; the slightest thing troubles the elderly and alarms them
- (:5) everything high becomes a problem; things that used to be easy are now difficult; appetite for food and sexual desire now decline; The end comes; man goes to his home beyond the earth
- (:6) silver cord = spine; Wheel broken –
- (:7) **Gen. 3:19** fulfilled

Description of the process of decay that ends in death

What are we to make of this description?

1) Why growing old involves decaying

It wasn't always so; don't know how long Adam and Eve lived in state of innocence
Because of sin; every illness is just a forerunner of death

2) Anticipating the aging process

Unless taken early, we must expect decline

There is a wrong type of anticipation as well as a right anticipation

Wrong Anticipation:

- counsel of despair – throw yourself into having a good time without any significant restraint; but no one knows when they will be taken from this world;
- running to meet old age as an excuse for offloading responsibilities – danger of convincing yourself you can no longer do some things you are still capable of doing; making excuses for what you don't want to do

Right Anticipation:

- young people should use the energy they have well; they won't always have that energy; not to follow the wicked indulgent counsel of sin; redeeming the time;
- seek a well settled assurance of salvation in Christ and fellowship with Him
- when physical and mental decline come; can only be contently endured if we are submitted to His will; can't have happiness dependent on our physical strength

3) Submission to the will of God as we get older

There are lessons from the aging process;

- life is short; **Psalm 39:4-5**
- Our inheritance in Christ should be increasingly precious to us; **Ps. 71:7-9**
- Assurance of God's faithfulness should be sought from the Word;
- increased awareness of preciousness of Christ;
- use the remaining time for God's glory – study **Ps. 71**
- Don't try to deceive people desperately by cosmetic means regarding our age; presenting ourself smartly in a manner consistent with honesty is fine; there is a line;

- accept the Providence of God; don't try to hang on to a youthful appearance that you no longer have

4) the place of regret as we get older

Beware of unspecified regrets; just general feeling of sadness about the past; Why do I feel sad about the past? Don't be murmuring against God; that our youthful vigor was not prolonged longer, etc; need to examine our regrets; we should always regret sin; still rejoice in forgiveness in Christ

5) the place of thankfulness as we get older

Cf. Christian upbringing – even though not perfect; kindness of God

Timothy Worrell: First part of book was a recounting of his pursuit for meaning apart from God; all was vanity; this book is a record of Solomon's repentance.

Beginning of **chap 7** – Solomon turns to wisdom'

Much like proverbs; grand crescendo of **12:13-14**; do not delay in serving God; very graphic picture of old age; give God the best of our days – the strength of our days; now he moves on and begins to wrap up.

I. (:8) Reaffirmation of thesis

Reminds us of the vanity of this world; wants us to see how meaningless, empty, valueless it all is

II. (:9-12) Vindication of this book

A. (:9a) speaks of himself

B. (:9b-10a) Speaks of his preparation

How he actually put this book together; file knowledge in the right place so we can benefit; put together outline and then put the appropriate words into the content

C. (:10b-12) Preacher's subject = Words of Truth

1. Nature of Word of God – inspired words

- upright

- words of truth = the instrument of our sanctification; how much do we value truth? Would we not be in the market to obtain it more; to hold onto it; if you don't value truth much you easily lose it

2. Efficacy of the Word of God – the effect – 2 holy illustrations:

○ goads – pricks that sting; used on an ox to get the ox going forward; painful

○ nails, stakes – convicts; **Ps. 19:11** the word is to prick sharply and hold firmly (not telling us about all of the purposes of the Word of God)

Fastened and riveted upon us as we hear them expounded by the instrumentality of gifted preachers; we don't grow just through preaching; but it is supremely important to hear God's Word preached accurately

3. Authority of the Word of God – these words all come from one Shepherd; one author; coming through the various authors and preachers
By these words be admonished – learn something from these words

I've been down the path of studying all of the greats of human learning – vanity
No end to who is writing about something; what a waste; focus on the Word of God
Yes, it has its place ... but limited – contrasting this worldly knowledge with knowledge of God
Don't fall into the trap that I did; serve God earlier in life than I did

III. (:13-14) Conclusion of this book – heart of his message

A. (:13) Duty of Man

Summary of all that I have been saying = crux of the matter
Ordinarily the Hebrews would not use large letters
Deut. 6:4 and here in this verse – begins with a capital
Means of perfect happiness and tranquility of mind

Fear of God in the mind as the root; obedience in the life as the fruit

1. Fear of God:

Delightful and reverent thoughts about God

- the holy fruit of forgiveness **Ps. 130:4**
- consistent with the love of God -- fear of God combined with cleaving to God – not inconsistent; not one that keeps us from coming to God; but causes us to cleave to God
- living life in the presence of God

2. Obedience = Fruit

If we reverence someone, we delight to know what they want us to do so that we will obey it

Obedience = barometer of our fear of God

B. (:14) Reason: the Judgment of God

Every work; not just partial judgment

What we do now matters for eternity;

- Hedonism – just live for pleasure in the Now
- Pessimistic, nihilistic view – what happens now is valueless

Solomon has written this book as an evangelistic tool – reminds us of the paths he had taken that were empty; points us to meaning in God; not vain to fear God

Ray Stedman: Everything hangs upon that word, "*Fear God.*" I know that this is a difficult word for us to comprehend. Most of us think of it in terms of abject terror, of running from God, of seeing him as a threat, but that is never the biblical meaning of the word. I have tried to put it in the form of an acrostic to make it easier for us to remember what the elements of fearing God include.

First, "F" stands for faith in his existence. You cannot come to God unless you know he is there. **Hebrews 11:6** says, "*He that comes to God must believe that he is and that he is a rewarder of those that diligently seek him.*" There is where fear begins: faith that God exists. The whole of the created universe is shouting that at us. All the inner responses of our heart are confirming it. The Word of God declares it. History confirms it. There is a world of evidence that God is there. **Francis Schaeffer** says that this is the great and first truth of the gospel -- *The God Who Is There*.

Then "E": experience of his grace. You never can properly fear God until you have learned what kind of a God he is. He is a God of mercy, of grace, of forgiveness. Until you have stood before him and felt your guilt, acknowledged it, known you were wrong and corrupt, and heard him say in your inner heart, "*Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more*" [**John 8:11** KJV], you will never be able to properly fear God. One element of fear is the experience of the wonder of forgiveness, that God forgives and sends you out again with a whole new purpose and a new resource available.

That leads to the third element. "A": awe at the majesty, the wisdom and the wonder of God. What a Being he is! What a marvelous mind that can comprehend all the billions of pieces of information in this universe and hold them continually before him, that can hear every voice and relate to every person who has ever lived! What a marvelous God! Awe at the sense of his majesty, his comprehensiveness, his unfailing wisdom and power, is part of fearing God.

The last letter, "R," stands for resolve. Resolve to do what he says, to obey his word, to "*keep his commandments,*" as the Searcher puts it here. There are only two commandments; Jesus himself said that. All the law and the writings can be reduced to two simple things: "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind,*" [**Matt 22:37** RSV]. That is in response to his love already shown to you; love him because he first loved you. And two, "*Love your neighbor as yourself.*" That's it. As Micah put it, "*What does God require of man, but to do justice and love mercy and walk humbly before his God,*" [cf. **Mic 6:8**]. There it is: to obey him, to follow him, to keep the commandments. So this is what it means to fear God:

- Faith
- Experience
- Awe
- Resolve

Chad Forrester: I heard the story about the group of seniors at the nursing home who were sitting around talking about all their ailments. "My arms have gotten so weak I can hardly lift this cup of coffee," said one. "Yes, I know," said another. "My cataracts are so bad I can't even see my coffee." "I couldn't even mark an "X" at election time, my hands are so crippled," volunteered a third.

“I can’t turn my head because of the arthritis in my neck,” said a fourth. “My blood pressure pills make me so dizzy!” exclaimed another. “I forget where I am, and where I’m going,” said another. “I guess that’s the price we pay for getting old,” winced an old man as he slowly shook his head. The others nodded in agreement. “Well, count your blessings,” said one woman cheerfully, “and thank God we can all still drive”.

<http://sermoncentral.com/sermon.asp?SermonID=103063&page=2>

Francis Camacho: The Pursuit of Happiness

- Remember your Creator
- Redeem the time
- Reverence God
- Resolve to keep His commandments

<http://sermoncentral.com/sermon.asp?SermonID=48261&Sermon%20The%20Pursuit%20of%20Happiness%20by%20Francis%20Camacho>

The Four Calls

*The Spirit came in childhood and pleaded, “Let me in,
”But oh! the door was bolted by thoughtlessness and sin;
“I am too young,” the child replied, “I will not yield today;
There’s time enough tomorrow.” The Spirit went away.*

*Again He came and pleaded in youth’s bright happy hour;
He came but heard no answer, for lured by Satan’s power
The youth lay dreaming then and saying, “Not today,
Not till I’ve tried earth’s pleasures.” The Spirit went away.*

*Again He called in mercy in manhood’s vigorous prime,
But still He found no welcome, the merchant had no time;
No time for true repentance, no time to think or pray,
And so, repulsed and saddened, the Spirit went away.*

*Once more He called and waited, the man was old and ill,
And scarcely heard the whisper, his heart was cold and still;
“Go leave me; when I need thee, I’ll call for thee,” he cried;
Then sinking on his pillow, without a hope, he died!*

http://preceptaustin.org/ecclesiastes_illustrations_ii.htm#12

BIBLIOGRAPHY OF ECCLESIASTES

BOOKS:

Akin, Daniel L. *Christ-Centered Exposition – Exalting Jesus in Ecclesiastes*. Nashville, TN: Holman, 2016.

Bartholomew, Craig G. *Baker Commentary on the Old Testament – Wisdom and Psalms -- Ecclesiastes*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009.

Baxter, J. Sidlow. *Explore the Book*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1960.

Eaton, Michael A. *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries series. Leicester, Eng., and Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1983.

Garrett, Duane. *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary -- Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016.

Glenn, Donald R. “Ecclesiastes” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*. Colorado Springs, CO: Victor, 1985.

Goldingay, John. *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes & Song of Songs*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014.

Haupt, Paul. *Ecclesiastes*. Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2009.

Heim, Knut Martin. *Tyndale Old Testament Commentary – Ecclesiastes*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019.

Hendry, G. S. “Ecclesiastes” in *The New Bible Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956.

Hubbard, David A. *The Preacher’s Commentary – Ecclesiastes / Song of Solomon*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2004.

Kaiser, Walter C. Jr. *Coping with Change – Ecclesiastes*. Scotland, UK: Christian Focus Publications, 2013.

Keil and Delitzsch. *Biblical Commentary on Ecclesiastes*. Grand Rapids, MI: 1950.

Kidner, Derek. *The Message of Ecclesiastes: A Time to Mourn, and a Time to Dance*. The Bible Speaks Today series. Leicester, Eng., and Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1976.

Laurin, Robert. "Ecclesiastes" in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*. Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1962.

Leupold, H. C. *Exposition of Ecclesiastes*. Wartburg Press, 1952; reprint ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1966.

Longman, Tremper III. *The Book of Ecclesiastes*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1998.

MacArthur, John. *The MacArthur Study Bible*. Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2006.

Miller, Douglas B. *Believers Church Bible Commentary – Ecclesiastes*. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2010.

Murphy, Roland E. *Word Biblical Commentary – Ecclesiastes*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018.

O'Donnell, Douglas Sean. *Ecclesiastes – Reformed Expository Commentary*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2014.

Ortlund, Raymond C. Jr. "Ecclesiastes" in *NIV Grace & Truth Study Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2021.

Provan, Iain. *The NIV Application Commentary: Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011.

Ross, Allen P. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary -- Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017.

Ryken, Philip Graham. *Ecclesiastes – Why Everything Matters*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010.

<http://storage.cloversites.com/firstevangelicalfreechurch2/documents/Ryken-Ecclesiastes.pdf>

Swindoll, Charles R. *Living on the Ragged Edge – Coming to Terms with Reality*. Nashville, TN: W. Publishing Group, 1985. [Used as supplementary text for SS class.]

Whybray, R. Norman. *Ecclesiastes – The New Century Bible Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1989.

Wiersbe, Warren W. *Be Satisfied – Looking for the Answer to the Meaning of Life*. Colorado Springs, CO: Victor, 1990.

Wright, J. Robert. *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014.

SERMON ARCHIVES:

Atwood, Brian.

Website: <http://www.sermoncentral.com>

Barrick, William.

Website: https://www.preceptaustin.org/ecclesiastes_commentaries

Bridges, Charles.

Website: https://www.preceptaustin.org/ecclesiastes_commentaries

Camacho, Francis.

Website: <http://www.sermoncentral.com>

Cobb, John. Sermon Notes from Open Door Bible Church.

Constable, Dr. Thomas L.

Website: <http://www.soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/2samuel.pdf>

Deffinbaugh, Robert.

Website: <http://www.bible.org>

Fairchild, David.

Website: <http://www.preceptaustin.org>

Forrester, Chad.

Website: <http://www.sermoncentral.com>

Guzik, David.

Website: <http://www.enduringword.com/commentaries/10.html>

Macdonald, James M.

Website: https://www.preceptaustin.org/ecclesiastes_commentaries

Malick, David.

Website: <http://www.bible.org>

Parunak, Van.

Website: <https://www.raystedman.org/old-testament/ecclesiastes>

Piper, John.

Website: <http://www.DesiringGod.org>

Racer, Brian. Sermon Notes from Open Door Bible Church.

Schultz, John.

Website: https://www.bible-commentaries.com/source/johnschultz/BC_Ecclesiastes.pdf

Silversides, David.

Website: <http://www.sermonaudio.com>

Smith, Douglas. Sunday School Notes from Hope Bible Church.

Stedman, Ray. Peninsula Bible Church, Mountain View, CA.

Website: <http://www.pbc.org>

Website: <https://www.raystedman.org/old-testament/ecclesiastes>

Strite, Jeff.

Website: <http://www.sermoncentral.com>

Thompson, David.

Website:

<https://www.sermonaudio.com/search.asp?t=t&keyword=Ecclesiastes&BibleOnly=true&subsetcat=speaker&subsetitem=David+E%2E+Thompson>

Worrell, Timothy.

Website: <http://www.sermonaudio.com>

Zeisler, Steve.

Website: <http://www.pbc.org>