



Reflections on Ecclesiastes

Don Merritt

Introduction

I'm really not sure what to call this; is it a book, a Bible study, a devotional, a small group study, a commentary? To be honest, it isn't quite any of those things, yet it has aspects of all three. It's hardly long enough to be a book; it isn't complete enough to be a commentary. It's not quite a devotional, but it could be used for devotions. It's not quite a Bible study, but it could easily be used for that, too. If you're creative, it could also be used to teach a class, but it isn't in a proper format to be curriculum.

One thing differs here from the first two collections I have released. For this collection, I have not included discussion questions, but anyone could make up their own for use in a discussion or class setting.

This little "document" is freely given to you. By all means, feel free to share it with others for free. Please do not use any of this for commercial purposes! Make use of whatever helps you grow in your relationship with our Lord and anything here that isn't helpful, by all means set it aside. Helping other believers in their walk with Christ is my only purpose here!

All blessings to you in Christ!

Don Merritt

lifereference@gmail.com

www.lifereference.wordpress.com

www.donmerrittonline.com

Revised 11/2/16

A Brief Introduction

As we begin our adventure through Ecclesiastes, we should set out a little background information about it. First of all, I want to be very up front with you: This book is a little tricky, so we need to be very careful about things like **context**. If we don't keep the context straight, then we will come away with a long list of contradictions with the rest of Solomon's writings, not to mention the rest of Scripture. Thus, we must first and foremost bear in mind that this is a book of personal reflections, most of which are not intended as godly counsel or direction. If we aren't clear on that, and we decide to interpret this in a strictly literal sense, than by the time we are half way through, we will simply give up on life and look for a bridge to jump off of, or a psychiatrist to medicate us. This is not the intent of the book, and it is why I have called it a "tricky" book.

To understand this more fully, let's take a quick review of the career of Solomon, the book's author. King Solomon reigned over Israel for 40 years, following in the footsteps of his father, King David. His reign was the high water mark for ancient Israel, being as it was a time of unparalleled power and prosperity. In the early days of his reign, Solomon had a very close relationship with God, received a special gift of wisdom and wrote the Song of Songs. As time passed and Solomon's storehouse of wives and riches continued, he began to fall away from God, and his apostasy began to show up among his subjects. As a mature man, he penned the Proverbs, sharing much of the wisdom God had granted him. Although the historical books don't provide a great deal of data on Solomon, they do indicate that he entered a period in which he was, well let's just say he wasn't quite right in his thinking, but began to restore his relationship with God, and although his relationship was never again what it had been, he seemed to come to terms with God in his last years. This is when he wrote Ecclesiastes, and it clearly reflects the results of his searching for wisdom and the trials that this search brought upon him. As you might suspect, this is reflected in the structure of the book.

Ecclesiastes has three sections: A prologue (1:1-11) which introduces the book's main themes, the body (1:12-12:8) which consists of a long monologue outlining Solomon's search for the meaning of life, and a brief epilogue (12:9-14). The prologue and epilogue are distinguished from the main body by the use of the third person reference to Koheleth (which means "preacher"), and in this respect mirrors the structure of Job.

The aspect of this book that we must always bear in mind is that throughout, Solomon writes from two entirely different points of view. One is the viewpoint of natural man, and the other is from the viewpoint of divine insight. The natural man's view of life is skeptical and pessimistic (all is vanity) while the divine view is steadfast and hopeful. Obviously, mixing these two up is what results in chaos and confusion for a reader. An example of Solomon's two points of view is found in 12:11 where he speaks of this negative and positive commentary under the metaphors "the gods" for the negative and "nails" for the positive. As we go through the book, I'll point out more along these lines, and we won't be confused.

I have written many times here of the futility of trying to find Truth through human wisdom, pointing out that Truth is to be found in the One who is "the way, the truth and the life." As you

will come to understand, old King Solomon spent a great many years and a whole lot of trouble and anguish to learn this vital lesson.

When we get back together, we will begin our journey by taking a look at the prologue, and our most excellent adventure will begin!

Chapter 1

Ecclesiastes: The Prologue

Ecclesiastes 1:1-12

And so dear reader, we begin our most excellent adventure through the book of Ecclesiastes. After identifying Solomon as the “Teacher” of this lesson, the theme of the entire book is set forth in verses 2-3: The works of men are meaningless. The latest NIV uses the word “meaningless” here where other translations, certainly the older ones, have used the English word “vanity,” and I must admit that I’ve had some difficulty getting used to the change. The Hebrew word is *hebel* which literally means vapor or breath. Used as it is in this book, what it really refers to is something that is fleeting and empty; without meaning. “Vain” or “vanity” would be the traditional words for this, as in “they shall not have died in vain” meaning “for no reason.” So, I must admit that the new Niv’s “meaningless” is spot on in modern usage.

*“Meaningless! Meaningless!”
says the Teacher.
“Utterly meaningless!
Everything is meaningless.”
What do people gain from all their labors
at which they toil under the sun?*

We need to note the expression “under the sun” and understand that it tells us the point of view from which the author is speaking: life “under the sun,” here on earth, the natural state of things *without God*. As you will see, he writes differently when he changes his viewpoint to include God. Thus, the whole theme of the book is that all of human striving and energy in this world has no meaning whatsoever.

Verses 4-8 give four examples from nature to back up the author’s thesis:

First, in verse 4, he mentions succeeding generations as coming and going, verse 5 mentions the rising and setting of the sun over and over, then verse 6 speaks of the wind that blows and blows. Verse 7 mentions the rivers and streams that flow and flow; time marches forward and what is accomplished? Verse 8 seems to sum this up as simply wearisome, as though there is all of this natural activity... and so what?

Verses 9-11 amplify this unceasing action of nature and brings it into human terms: “There is nothing new under the sun.” The generations have always come and gone, the sun has always risen and set, the wind has always blown and the rivers and streams have always flowed; none of this is new. Nobody remembers the former generations of people, and nobody will remember us. In all of these generations, people have worked and striven to accomplish great things, and who even remembers their names or what they were about?

Who cares?

Nobody!

The Christian faith is essentially an optimistic faith, we speak of victory, and redemption, hope, assurance and an eternal future... see any of that here? Of course this is the Old Testament, but Judaism is also an optimistic faith for the most part; where is this dude coming from?

That's why this is a tricky book.

As we continue our adventure, we will see that the Teacher has searched for human wisdom, that he has received it, and that he has discovered that human life "under the sun" isn't all it's cracked up to be. Without God, it is meaningless... but then I'm getting ahead of myself.

Solomon, through all of his striving for wisdom has discovered to his surprise that putting this world into its proper perspective is a process that calls all of our natural inclinations into question, and that without an alternative; the quest for wisdom would best be avoided. To put this another way, reading this might cause us to wonder if the day-to-day struggles of this life are really all that important.

Verse 12 is transitional, and leads to the main body of the book, which we will throw ourselves into next time!

Ecclesiastes 1:12-18

Solomon (a..k.a. Koheleth) sets out his great quest for wisdom in these verses, but all of the wisdom that the wisest man of all time managed to collect, wasn't worth very much. Here's an example:

Suppose you went to the movies, and when you got to the front of the ticket line you said, "One please," and then handed the cashier your American Express card.

"I'm sorry," the cashier says, "But we don't take American Express. We accept cash, VISA, MasterCard and Discover."

"But I only have American Express," you reply...

Guess who isn't going to the movies today?

Like an American Express card, human wisdom is nice to have; certainly wisdom beats stupidity any day, but it doesn't get you into heaven, nor will it bring you into God's presence. That simply is not something human wisdom can do for you.

Solomon notes that after seeing all of the things that go on under the sun, none of them are much good for anything. Again the NIV uses the word "meaningless." Again I can't help but think "meaningless" isn't quite strong enough, "futility" seems more on the mark here to me... or just plain "worthless."

Take particular note of verse 15:

*What is crooked cannot be straightened;
what is lacking cannot be counted.*

Do you see the construction here? Notice the two poetic clauses separated by a semicolon? This is called a Hebrew parallelism, and it is very important in interpretation. Those two clauses are parallel which means that they mean the same thing, and this is quite handy to keep in mind if one or the other isn't quite clear. The first of these is simple enough at first glance: "What is crooked cannot be straightened" except for the fact that "crooked" is rather ambiguous, don't you think? Crooked in what sense? Does he mean that it's curved somehow, or maybe he means corrupt... or maybe its curve signifies corruption... or who knows what he means?

Since these clauses are parallel, we can look at the second one: "what is lacking cannot be counted" and here we find a little riddle we can solve easily. If something is lacking, then it isn't there, so you can't count what is lacking, since it isn't there. If you have \$20.00 in your hand, then you can't count \$30.00 since the other \$10.00 aren't in your hand. Thus, we can see that he means that "you can't straighten what is crooked" means that it just isn't straight, say a stick of wood, and you can't make it straight with all of the wisdom in the world, because it is what it is: crooked. Now that we have the parallelism figured out, go back to verse 14:

I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

To explain the totality of the meaning of this verse, the author used the parallelism in verse 15, and when you put these together here's what you have:

After examining everything that is done in this world apart from God, all of them are meaningless, futile, vain, of no account... and *nothing is going to change that.*

(Pretty cool, don't you think? These Hebrew parallelisms are found throughout the poetic books; Psalms, Proverbs, Job and the prophets)

In the remaining verses of our text, the author uses this same technique again to tell us that not only is all of the activity he found "under the sun" meaningless, but so is the pursuit of wisdom itself.

*For with much wisdom comes much sorrow;
the more knowledge, the more grief. (1:18)*

The wiser he became, the more he realized that none of this mattered, and that made him even more miserable than ever.

As the next chapter begins, our Teacher examines the pleasures of life; what will we discover there? Much pleasure, or maybe much folly!

Chapter 2

Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

Do you know anyone who doesn't like pleasure? To be sure, that is a loaded question because it is not possible to say "No" to that one. Everyone likes pleasure... by definition, although not everyone has the opportunity to experience it. Pleasure is fun, it is... pleasurable. We can do all sorts of things for pleasure; we can enjoy fine foods, drink good wines, read good books, watch good movies and listen to good music. Solomon, using the great wisdom he has gained, seems to have conducted an investigation into pleasure, to determine whether or not it would add meaning to life.

In verses 1-9 he tells us of his investigation, and then he sums up his conclusions in verses 10-11. In the first two verses, he goes after amusement, in 3 it is wine. In 4-6 he pursues pleasure in great accomplishments, then he goes for wealth in 7-8a, and then in 8b he pursues the pleasures of sex; the number of his wives and concubines (sex slaves) was in the thousands! (1 Kings 11:3). In verse 9 he sums this all up by pointing out that in all of this, he became far greater than anyone who had come before "in Jerusalem". Then he gives us his conclusions:

*I denied myself nothing my eyes desired;
I refused my heart no pleasure.
My heart took delight in all my labor,
and this was the reward for all my toil.
Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done
and what I had toiled to achieve,
everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind;
nothing was gained under the sun.*

Ecclesiastes 2:10-11

Verse 10 begins with another parallelism that clearly tells us that there was absolutely nothing that he didn't try, and that he utterly indulged his every fancy. He had a great time; his "heart took delight" in what he was doing, and that delight was his entire reward: Fun.

Yet when it was all said and done, what had he really accomplished? With the great wisdom he had received, he came to realize that all of his fun and frivolity was "meaningless" (vanity), chasing after the wind. He sums this up in a parallel construct this way: "nothing was gained under the sun."

Have you ever looked forward to some big event in your life, say a party or a trip or a concert or... whatever, and then felt let down afterwards? Maybe that big day was great, but now that it's over...blah. I do most of the cooking in my house, and there have been many times when I work 3 or 4 hours (or more) preparing a meal. I pull out my entire bag of culinary tricks and really try to create something special. Then comes the moment of truth as everyone sits down at the table and lo and behold a culinary triumph! Yippee!

After a few minutes I survey the scene. I put heart and soul into my creation, and now all I have left is a mess to clean up. Usually, what passes through my brain is something like: It would have been a lot easier to have zapped a few hot dogs!

Vanity of vanities.

Wisdom and Folly

Ecclesiastes 2:12-16

Our Teacher now examines wisdom and folly, and in so doing he comes to the conclusion that wisdom is better, but it only goes so far. A wise person walks in light, while a fool stumbles around in the dark; this is good. Yet they both end up in the grave, so what's the real difference? Oh yes, this is quite an optimistic message!

In verse 12 he points out that his successor will have nothing left to do that he (Solomon) hasn't already done, implying that we can re-examine his conclusions, but we'll still get the same results. Yes, wisdom is better than folly, but then we already knew that.

Here's my own illustration:

If you are old enough to recall the 1970's, then you will no doubt recall that all of the new things that went on in that period were cutting edge, really great, and of course in all cases cool in the extreme. Now, ask yourself: How are the cool things of the 1970's looking now? Do you still go to the store and hope to buy an avocado green refrigerator? Hey guys, do you miss wearing bell bottoms? Been to a disco lately?

Yuk.

Now look at things as they are now; you do realize that all of the latest and greatest cool things of today are going to look just as stupid as the latest and greatest of the 70's 35 years from now, right?

A wise person sees right through all of the latest and greatest styles and fads; a fool jumps into them with both feet thinking they have found the "ultimate".

Wisdom enables a person to think several steps ahead and avoid many problems in the process, while a fool jumps into everything that comes along and gets burned over and over. This, I think, is the heart of what Solomon is teaching us. It is good to be wise, but in the end, it really doesn't matter all that much, since the day is rapidly approaching when the wise and the foolish will be dead and gone... and forgotten.

Before I wrap up on this uplifting note, please notice that he is still speaking of life "under the sun"; can it be, that there is more to our lives than just that which goes on "under the sun"? I sure hope so!

Meaningless Labors... and a Different Point of View

Ecclesiastes 2:17-26

With verses 17 ff. we continue the Teacher's warm and cozy view of our lives under the sun, this time we are talking about work. In verses 17-23, we see a very high concentration of markers making it more clear than at any time before this that we are talking about life "under the sun" which he repeats no less than five times. Could something be in the works here?

The main point in this passage is that we might work diligently all our lives, we might achieve great things, as Solomon surely did, and yet even though we might act with wisdom and knowledge and skill our entire career, the day will come when we turn our accomplishments and fortunes over to someone who may or may not be wise, and who certainly did not earn them. He concludes that this is not a good situation, using the term "meaningless" no fewer than three times in the process.

Solomon isn't the only person to make this observation, and over the centuries many volumes have been written about great reputations and fortunes that were squandered by foolish heirs on riotous living. What do we get from all of our hard work under the sun? We get stress, grief and anxiety, and in the end, we leave it all behind... meaningless!

Something happens in verse 24:

A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This too, I see, is from the hand of God

At first, we might think that Solomon's rant is continuing, but then we see something different, eating, drinking and finding satisfaction "in their own toil" is a gift from God; this doesn't seem to follow. This is because 24 and 25 are transitional verses:

A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?

Ecclesiastes 2:24-25

Our vantage point is no longer "under the sun"; from here through 3:22, Solomon gives his counterpoint to life under the sun, a contrast that makes this adventure of ours a most excellent adventure, rather than a depressing one, for there really is a ray of hope for better things.

To the person who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. (v. 26)

By linking wisdom and knowledge with happiness, Solomon is making a distinction that this time, wisdom and knowledge are not vanity, as in the previous verses, for these are not the vain strivings of merely human wisdom and knowledge, but of a divine gift. This person, who is pleasing in God's sight, understands the difference between that which is eternal, and that which is not, and their priority is in the right place, thus they can find happiness even in this life. By contrast, the one who is not pleasing in God's sight does not find this kind of happiness and deep satisfaction, for if they have obtained even human wisdom, they realize that all is for

naught in the end, no matter what they do. They come to recognize that they have merely been chasing the wind.

Approaching the next chapter, we see that Solomon is going to develop this new theme more fully; actually he will take on a persuasive structure in the

Chapter 3

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

In the previous verses, 2:24-26, the Teacher has set forth a basic proposition that God is in control and that outside of His will, everything is useless, meaningless, empty, futile; vanity. Yet within His will there is satisfaction and true happiness; in this chapter, he sets forth to prove his point. In this first part, the Teacher reminds us that there is an undeniable pattern to life, a rhythm we might say, which has been established by God.

These verses are so familiar, they were even made into a hit song back in the 1960's, but do we really grasp their significance?

To ensure that we really "get" this passage, commentators often go into great detail to analyze each of these couplets, to squeeze out every bit of juice from the poem, often engaging in great philosophical dissertations that are quite fascinating to ponder, and you are quite welcome to search these out if you like. If you choose to take this approach, you can join so many other great minds who suddenly find themselves trying to justify killing, tearing things down and hatred into a Biblical context of love and compassion. It sounds like taking a side trip that involves a whole lot of chasing the wind to me...

I say this because these verses are not eight separate points, this passage does not stand on its own in the context of this book; it is one complete thought set up to demonstrate one part of the demonstration of one point in a series of points that make up the complete message of Ecclesiastes, and as richly rewarding as it may be to analyze this line by line, to do so misses the point entirely. I'm sorry that I have to admit this, but to my strange little mind, and with my oddball little sense of humor, charging off on such an errand would be hilarious and supremely ironic while studying Ecclesiastes, of all books.

The Teacher's thesis is stated in the beginning of my comments above, and verses 1-8 are supporting point 1 in his attempt to back it up; this is evidence, not a philosophical treatise. What is he really trying to tell us? Simple: (go figure)

Thesis: Satisfaction in this life and thus true happiness can only be found when we are within the will of Almighty God.

First supporting point: God, in His infinite wisdom has ordained a season for every purpose of Man.

Ecclesiastes 3:9-15

Mankind lives in the sorry state of rebellion against God. Yes, I'm afraid that is the reality of life under the sun, but that doesn't mean that God has lost His grip, for He has ordered things in a certain way under the sun; there are seasons that men cannot change, seasons for everything. Within all of this chaos, confusion, rebellion and order, God still has a purpose. Of course, His purpose is significantly clearer in the New Testament than in the Old, but there was Purpose in play even then. In the OT, every person who sprang forth from the seed of Abraham had a choice to make; they could either confine themselves to God's will (purpose) for them, or they could live in rebellion under the sun. In our day, this choice extends to every single human being.

The Teacher makes this case here in Ecclesiastes 3. In this text, he deals briefly with three aspects of God's purpose beginning in verses 10-11 where he speaks of our completion of God's purpose, then in 12-13 he speaks of our enjoyment of God's blessing and then finally in 14-15, he speaks of our contentment with God's will. All of this is his answer to the question posed in verse 9:

What do workers gain from their toil?

We are those workers, so what do we get?

I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end. (10-11)

When we come to understand that we are put here for God's purposes rather than our own, we begin to see that everything is beautiful in its time. To put this into Christian terms, we might ask ourselves what could be more beautiful than to see our labors result in someone coming into relationship with Jesus Christ. We might see that a man or woman who is able to be set free from bondage to addiction or poverty or hopelessness and enter into the fullness of His grace is a beautiful thing indeed, and more rewarding than all of the treasure of this world. Yes, He has put eternity into our hearts, for unlike the animals, we have the ability to plan and to think ahead, but what will our plans and thinking be: to serve God or to serve ourselves? With the former we will find beauty that others may miss, while with the latter, the only beauty we will find is that which will perish with us.

The Teacher continues:

I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God. (12-13)

Those of us who do our toil for God's purpose have a gift that others do not; real happiness and satisfaction. The Teacher has made great pains, and will continue in this book to take great pains, to document the utter futility of the pursuit of mere human endeavors, but the gift of God for those who labor in His service is a most excellent gift, for it is a gift that will endure and that will satisfy the craving within every man and woman to seek after the eternal things of God.

I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that people will fear him.

*Whatever is has already been,
and what will be has been before;
and God will call the past to account. (14-15)*

The Teacher winds up this thought in these verses in an interesting way as he gives us a contrast of sorts. God's purposes and accomplishments last forever, we can neither add nor detract from God's purpose, but where is the contrast? The contrast is the works of men that are "meaningless" under the sun. Verse 15 makes this clear as the Teacher quotes himself (Ecc. 1:9) where he wailed about the futility of our accomplishments. God is in charge, not us; we can do whatever we want, but if we want our accomplishments to count for something, then we must accomplish things that are within God's will and purpose for us, not our own flights of fancy. God has ordained this so that we might take notice, for everyone will be called to account.

The rest of this chapter, as you might guess, speaks of the justice of God; His most excellent justice. Before we dive headlong into God's judgment, let's pause and get our bearings. I've never actually come out and said this before, so lucky you; you get to read it first: *God's judgment is really something of a paradox: God is entirely and completely in control of it, but you decide the outcome.*

Oh, I can hear the theologians screaming! Hey, not so fast; think about it. You decide whether your life will be used to advance His purpose or yours, and that decision will result in what becomes of you in judgment. Will you pursue all of those meaningless things as you chase the wind in this life under the sun, or will you labor for His purposes and enjoy His gifts of happiness and satisfaction?

Justice on Earth and Beyond

Ecclesiastes 3: 16-22

Our most excellent adventure now examines the state of judgment both here on earth, and in heaven. Before we look at the text, I would be remiss if I didn't remind you that we are still within

the context set in 2:26, within the thesis I stated a couple of posts back: Satisfaction in this life and thus true happiness can only be found when we are within the will of Almighty God.

As in the last two sections, the Teacher is making an argument, so we must keep this in mind as we read this section on justice. Verse 16 tells of something Solomon has seen “under the sun” so we know that he is again speaking in human terms. The courts of men are corrupt; it was true then and it is true now.

Verse 17 takes us back to a more heavenly view: God will ultimately judge both the wicked and the righteous, and of course this has been set up this way to beg an obvious, but unstated question: Why does God allow this wickedness to go on?

Many have given answers to this question, including me, but for the sake of the lesson, let’s see what the Teacher has to say:

I also said to myself, “As for humans, God tests them so that they may see that they are like the animals. Surely the fate of human beings is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; humans have no advantage over animals. Everything is meaningless. All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return. Who knows if the human spirit rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?” (18-21)

Everything on this earth has an expiration date; our works, our dreams, our trials, our joys apart from God, even our very lives, for just like the animals, we will surely die. Yes, dear reader, there is a time for every season under heaven, including *my season*. The time for men to choose whether or not they will follow God’s ways is one of those seasons too, and the day is coming when that season of men choosing not to follow God’s ways will also pass away, and when it does, all of us will be called to give an account. That is the answer to the unwritten question.

I would like to mention one other thing before we continue, and that is about verse 21:

Who knows if the human spirit rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?

I hate to draw your attention away from Solomon’s point here, but I think that the NIV and most other modern translations have missed this one. I might be crazy, but there is no “if” in the Hebrew, nor is there the “that” that the NASB puts in this sentence. I can’t claim to be a great scholar of Hebrew, but the way I read the original is this: “Who knows the spirit of the man that goes upward and the spirit of the beast that goes down to the earth?”

To this question, there is a definite answer: God knows, and He will judge them accordingly when He sees fit to do so.

The chapter ends on this note, a summation of the entire section:

So I saw that there is nothing better for a person than to enjoy their work, because that is their lot. For who can bring them to see what will happen after them?

In thinking about this summation, recall that Solomon has linked happiness with work in one instance only: when we are working to accomplish God's purpose. So, with this in mind, what is the Teacher telling us? The best way for all of us to proceed through this life is for us to dedicate ourselves to His service, for God has created us to do this; anything less is meaningless and futile.

Finally, here is the complete structure of the case the Teacher has made:

Thesis: Satisfaction in this life and thus true happiness can only be found when we are within the will of Almighty God.

First supporting point: God, in His infinite wisdom has ordained a season for every purpose of Man.

Second supporting point: The only things that last are the things ordained by God and our part in them, which brings happiness and satisfaction as His gift.

Third supporting point: God will rightly judge the works of all men to determine whether or not they have followed His ways, for the season of men will come to an end.

Conclusion: Satisfaction in this life and thus true happiness can only be found when we are within the will of Almighty God.

Chapter 4

Ecclesiastes 4

Our vantage point has returned to the life of people apart from God where it will remain from 4:1 – 6:9. Our adventure in chapter 4 is a most excellent one, for we will see earthly life as it really is, which is to say that we will see things on display that most of us never consider. Happiness in this world we live in depends largely on external circumstances. For instance, we assume that more money means more happiness, but is that really true? We look forward to achievement, fame and amassing possessions as a means to happiness. Some have a strong desire to assert power and influence as a means to happiness; who wouldn't like to be the one that the president or prime minister calls upon to save the day?

The Teacher sees things a little differently.

So there you are, puttering right along in life, paying the bills, buying nice things; everything is hunky dory and then change comes along. A new administration, a new regime and overnight you are an outcast for who you are. Oppression begins in the land, discrimination, inequality, and all the rest, and you are on the wrong side of it. Happy now?

This is the theme developed in verses 1-3. Everything under the sun is vanity, is meaningless, and is futile because at any moment outside forces can clean you out of everything. Think it can't happen? Come now, it happens all the time...

Verses 4-6 speak of a different situation under the sun, a situation in which you might have put together a substantial portfolio; what now? Can you sit back and relax? No way! Now you need to worry about protecting what you have. Now you must keep on top of the tax laws, new regulations, market fluctuations, scheming competitors, identity theft and frivolous lawsuits, to name just a few perils; you might even need to worry about your physical safety! This substantial portfolio can become a millstone around your neck, and the source of many sleepless nights; is it worth the cost?

The Teacher says it's just chasing the wind...

In verses 7-12 we see another side of wealth, a lonely side. When people come into quick fortunes, they usually find that they have many new relatives and friends; what do these new associates seem to have in common? You know the answer to that; they want some money. Most people don't realize just how isolating great wealth can be, and if it involves fame, the isolation is even greater. What does the Teacher say about it? Vanity, a miserable business, and don't you suppose that Solomon, the richest man ever, might be in a position to know what he's talking about?

The Teacher moves on to speak of the powerful in the remaining verses of chapter 4. In these verses is a little twist, that political scientists call "fatigue". As time goes on, a leader's popularity tends to fade as the public becomes fatigued with the administration. Often, this results from the

fact that the leader in question is more and more isolated from everyday life in the country. They may also become quite impressed with their own greatness, no longer listening to advisors who better understand life on the street than the leader does, with the result that the performance of their government seems to fall short of people's expectations. The result is that someone else rises to power either by death and inheritance as with a royal succession, or if perhaps there is a coup. In our day, there might be a new election... and then the cycle begins anew, always with the same result.

With this in mind, would you like to be president or prime minister?

Be careful what you wish for; unless you enjoy sleepless nights, high stress, and looking over your shoulder while you chase the wind!

As I look at this passage one more time before moving on to chapter five, I'm struck with a thought...

We've just run through several scenarios relating to our lives under the sun; in this world of ours. Can you see a pattern beyond the obvious "all is vanity"? Well there is one, for it would seem that nothing under the sun is really what it appeared to be at first.

Now, our most excellent adventure will move into an area that we haven't ventured into before, an area that may cut a little closer to home for some of us.

Chapter 5

Ecclesiastes 5:1-9

Up to this point in our adventure, the Teacher hasn't spoken about worship, at least not directly, but that changes in this passage; oh what an excellent adventure we are on; old Solomon doesn't seem to miss anything!

Watch your step when you enter the house of God, go there to listen and don't offer the sacrifice of fools; a colorful way to put it, don't you agree? The house of God (Temple) was said to be the dwelling place of God on the earth, so entering into His presence is a time for a little respect, a time to listen more and speak less, and time to avoid letting your hypocrisy show too obviously; comforting, yes?

This is a common refrain in the Old Testament, for example:

*“Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices
as much as in obeying the LORD?
To obey is better than sacrifice,
and to heed is better than the fat of rams.*

1 Samuel 15:22

We should enter God's house eager to listen, to learn and to put into practice His Word, as we can clearly see in Samuel's comment, yet often this is not the attitude of worshippers, either in Solomon's time, or for that matter, our own. Putting the Word into practice tends to fly in the face of ritualistic worship in which ritual and ceremony may run the risk of replacing life application altogether; there is a serious warning here for us to consider.

Verses 2-3 speak of prayer, as we can see:

*Do not be quick with your mouth,
do not be hasty in your heart
to utter anything before God.
God is in heaven
and you are on earth,
so let your words be few.
A dream comes when there are many cares,
and many words mark the speech of a fool.*

OK, dear reader, I will admit that when thinking about prayer, these aren't the first two verses that come to mind, but here they are and they must be dealt with. Solomon is trying to warn us about praying without considering what we pray for or about. Are our prayers empty and selfish? Are we merely filling the airwaves with the sound of our voices? Are we just repeating the same old requests over and over as though we can talk God into something, the way a child might try to outlast a parent in their ceaseless requests? Are we just repeating something from a book by

rote, with no thought to the meaning? Could we, in our haste and selfish concerns be saying something to God that He would take offense to?

Prayer is a powerful thing when it is within God's purpose, but to be honest, I don't hear many of those uttered in "God's house" I'm sorry to say.

In 4-7, the Teacher speaks of making vows (oaths) before God. Of course, as we know, Jesus spoke even more clearly centuries later when He summed up the subject by simply saying, "let your "yes" be yes, and your "no" be no.

Verses 8-9 seem to be on a different subject and obviously the NIV translators seem to agree, but I see them as transition into the next section; not quite about worship, and not quite about wealth. Maybe you'll think I'm mistaken, but to me, these verses speak of faith in general.

If we look around us and see the poor being oppressed, taken advantage of, ripped off and defrauded, those who can least afford to defend themselves, who have so little with which to survive and feed their families... with the unofficial approval of the powers that be, it would be rather easy for a person to question not only God, but the whole basis of faith itself. Yet things like this go on under the sun. Here, the Teacher tells us that such is the way of this world apart from God. We should not be surprised by such things, although they are outrageous, for why would we be surprised when the lost behave as though they are lost? Make no mistake: a world that lives apart from God is lost indeed, and isn't that the message we have seen here in Ecclesiastes through 4 chapters already?

Everything under the sun is meaningless, chasing after the wind, vanity, empty, futility itself. So many who should know better get sucked in, so many have their faith put to the supreme test in this life under the sun. We must be on our guard.

From this point, our Teacher turns once again to wealth; next time, let's talk dollars and cents...

Wealth: Bad News, Good News

Ecclesiastes 5:10-20

This is an interesting section; the Teacher gets into some reasons why wealth is meaningless, and then there's a little twist at the end. Verses 10-11 speak of the meaningless nature of the love of money; what's the point in loving money, which is to say being overly desirous for money, giving it too much priority in life. Yes, loving money is a pointless waste.

Verses 12-14 make this point further, when he notes that such a person has no sleep, how many lovers of money hoard so much of it that they do themselves harm, or even lose their fortunes due to some external crisis. Imagine living your life to amass a fortune, being eaten up with the desire for more and more, and then... the market crashes and you lose it all in a day.

Then what? We've all heard the stories of the Wall Street people jumping out of their windows in 1929...

In verses 15-17, the Teacher really sums up his point about wealth: Naked you come into this world, and naked you pass from this world. Fill up a bank vault with gold and in the dusty dark vault your gold will remain. Why even bother? Now comes the twist...

In the remaining verses of the chapter, we see a different approach to money. Here, a man realizes that his labor doesn't need to be pointless, in fact, to the discerning person, it is a gift from God. Approaching work in the right way will also lead to wealth of a sort, but maybe not the shameless accumulation of it simply to hoard.

Hey buddy! It's OK to enjoy the fruits of your labors!

What if the man who realizes that his work is a gift from God also comes to understand that the money he earns from it is also a gift; a gift to be enjoyed? That is quite a different matter than just driving oneself to amass a fortune to hoard, for it is God's gift. A person who views God's presence in their daily life has little time to worry about the shortness of his days; or other philosophical matters, he is quite busy enjoying his life and his work in God's light.

While this sounds pretty good, maybe we shouldn't get too giddy just yet, for as the next chapter begins, the Teacher has some more to say about the failure of wealth.

Chapter 6

Some time back I watched an episode of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* from 1955; oh what a great show!

This episode was a story about a man who owned and operated a shop that sold antiques, and opens with the shop owner speaking with a female customer who asks for a price on an object on the counter. The shop owner tells the lady that the item is not for sale. Then, the lady asks about another item, but it too isn't for sale, and the shop owner seems irritated by the woman's presence. Then a man enters and introduces himself as the son of one of the shop owner's suppliers, and asks for a private word.

The men step into the office and the visitor tells the shop owner that he is behind with his bill and must pay \$12,000.00 within two weeks or face foreclosure. Suddenly there is the sound of something breaking and the shop owner rushes out of the office to discover that the woman has accidentally broken an item in the shop. In the end, she writes a check for \$1,000.00 to pay for the item she has broken. She leaves and the other man snaps the check out of the shop keeper's hand and says, "Now you only owe \$11,000.00. "Perhaps you should invite that lady back so she can break some more, since you can never bring yourself to actually sell any of your merchandise." You see, the reason for his financial problems is that nothing was for sale in that shop; the man was hoarding antiques, not selling them, for he is obsessed with owning them.

He goes home and demands that his wife give him 11K from her trust fund, and when she refuses, he kills her so he can inherit, which is how he pays his debt. But he must have more stuff, so he seeks out the lady from the first scene since she is obviously very wealthy, and in time marries her. Eventually, he is in the same mess again, and guess what the solution to the problem is?

Yes, exactly, she also must die!

Here, I have Ecclesiastes 6 to comment on, which describes the same kind of thing: wealth and our insatiable appetite for more: Meaningless, futile, empty, pointless... Vanity, chasing after the wind.

When the shop keeper wanted to kill his second wife, he tried to bring about the same "accident" that had killed his first wife, but the second wife and her lawyer had figured things out, and she avoided the trap. Right then, her lawyer calls and the man answers the phone. The lawyer demands to speak to his wife, and when she walks to the phone, she trips, falls, hits her head and is killed, the exact accident the man wanted to befall her, the same one he had arranged for his first wife, the same accident that the second wife and her lawyer were expecting, only this time it really was an accident, and our shop keeper will hang for a murder he failed to commit.

Meaningless, chasing after the wind! Amassing wealth cannot bring happiness under the sun.

Chapter 7

Ecclesiastes 7:1-7

Chapter 7 is a chapter of wisdom, and reads much like the Proverbs. It covers three subjects, the first of which is being serious here in vv. 1-7. This section, in turn, is divided into three subsections.

The first of these is found in verses 1-2, and deals with maintaining a good name. This expression would mean the same thing to Solomon that it would have meant to our fathers' generation; a good reputation in the community. With a good name, many doors will open, with a less than good name, many will be closed. The Teacher brings some other ideas into this, but we aren't to be confused, because on this most excellent adventure of ours, we pay closer attention to context than many others do!

*A good name is better than fine perfume,
and the day of death better than the day of birth. (v. 1)*

The good name sets the subject for this verse, and in that context, of course the day of death is better for you went through life with your good reputation intact. Verse 2 works the same way:

*It is better to go to a house of mourning
than to go to a house of feasting,
for death is the destiny of everyone;
the living should take this to heart.*

For a person to bear in mind that death is the destiny of everyone is a sober thought indeed, and when it comes to maintaining a good name, sober thoughts are the ones that will keep a person on track. Certainly living a frivolous life is no way to maintain respect in the community.

This idea of there being value in mourning continues in verses 3-4:

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

Notice the way the Teacher moves into his point at the end of verse 4. His whole thought is that mourning is good for the heart because it keeps our minds off of the mere pursuit of mindless pleasure, which is what? Right you are: Meaningless!

The third subsection is the value of a rebuke.

*It is better to heed the rebuke of a wise person
than to listen to the song of fools.
Like the crackling of thorns under the pot,*

*so is the laughter of fools.
This too is meaningless.
Extortion turns a wise person into a fool,
and a bribe corrupts the heart. (5-7)*

Once again, notice the matter of context; verse 5 changed the subject, so we are now talking about the value of a rebuke. Better we should heed the rebuke of the wise than listen to the chattering of fools. It sounds almost like something parents tell their children; of course the rebuke of a wise person is more valuable than the chattering of fools! I really like the next verse; the cracking of thorns under a pot; thorns, like fools, can cut you and cause injury, but the pot smashes them when placed upon them. Those smashed thorns are worthless, just like the laughter of a fool; priceless imagery.

So what do extortion and bribery have to do with this? Think of the contrast between the rebuke of the wise with the laughter of the fool. Which one is likely to become involved with extortion and bribery?

Ah, good, I see you've got it!

The next section, vv. 8-14 is all about patience, so I know that if you are anything like me, you'll be paying extra close attention when we continue our adventure...

Ecclesiastes 7:8-14

Our most excellent adventure now moves into the second of the sections in chapter seven: Patience. Yes dear reader, I am going over this one carefully myself, since patience is really not my strongest suit! The topic is set clearly enough in verse 8:

*The end of a matter is better than its beginning,
and patience is better than pride.*

This verse hearkens back to the discussion in the previous section about houses of mourning and the day of death being better than the day of birth; a matter is best concluded in life, rather than begun, for in its conclusion we know if we have concluded it properly and in a way pleasing in the eyes of God. Likewise, it is better to be patient than proud. If you stop and think about pride, it might not seem to line up well with patience, for all too often it leads a person to impatience, as a proud person seeks to have their way over someone else, while the patient person must deal with others in ways that respect their opinions, views and personhood.

Verse nine reinforces this thought:

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

Allowing ourselves to be provoked would seem to trigger (in this context) rash actions of anger and impatience which reside in the “laps of fools.” This is set out further in verse 10:

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

How common this is; ah yes, the good old days were so much better than the here and now. Were they really? My father used to speak of those good old days, when people weren’t as crazy as they are “now”. Well, his “good old days” were the 1930’s and ‘40’s. The “now” was the 1960’s. If you stop and think about it, as crazy as the ‘60’s were in some ways, I doubt they were worse than the Great Depression and the Second World War! But from my father’s point of view, the ‘30’s and ‘40’s had been concluded; he knew how they ended, and things eventually worked out. The ‘60’s and how all of the issues of the day seemed to have no end in sight; would we tear civilization apart?

How do I know why he thought what he thought? Because for me, the ‘60’s and ‘70’s are the good old days! Today? What is going on in this world, will we tear civilization apart? You see, I don’t know how this is all going to come out in the end, and *I want to know right now.*

Funny how that works, isn’t it?

In verse 10, the Teacher tells us that it isn’t wise to ask the question about the good old days, and in 11-12 he goes on to tell us essentially that impatience isn’t compatible with wisdom; wisdom is better than impatience. Solomon wraps up this discussion in 13-14:

*Consider what God has done:

Who can straighten
what he has made crooked?
When times are good, be happy;
but when times are bad, consider this:
God has made the one
as well as the other.
Therefore, no one can discover
anything about their future.*

We can be just as impatient as we please. We can work ourselves into a tizzy if we want, we can become perfectly obnoxious in our impatience if we choose. Yet none of that will make the slightest difference... or if it does make any difference, it will end up being a difference that does us no good at all, for impatience is not compatible with wisdom. It is better to be wise and patient, than impatient and a fool... and you may quote me on that.

*In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these:

the righteous perishing in their righteousness,
and the wicked living long in their wickedness.*

*Do not be overrighteous,
neither be overwise—
why destroy yourself?
Do not be overwicked,
and do not be a fool—
why die before your time?
It is good to grasp the one
and not let go of the other.
Whoever fears God will avoid all extremes*

Ecclesiastes 7:15-18

Solomon has noticed two things that might come as a surprise: First, he has seen righteous men die young in their righteousness, and he has seen really wicked men live long lives. From our point of view, this isn't all that surprising; it happens all the time, and is something that we sometimes wonder about... Why O Lord is this so?

Back in the time of Solomon, this was more shocking, for the righteous were supposed to live long, have many children and prosper in the land, while the wicked were supposed to suffer the calamities they so richly deserved and come to an early termination if they didn't change their ways. As we now understand, there is a season for everything, and a time for every season under heaven.

Then he goes on to tell his readers that they should neither be overly righteous, nor overly wicked; what does he mean by that? This dear reader is simpler than it might seem at first.

The best Biblical example of being overly righteous that I can think of as I write this is the example of the Pharisees. Those guys were really very righteous; they did everything just exactly right. No, really they did. Think about it, they were so righteous that they not only followed the letter of the Law, they actually made up more laws so that they wouldn't even come close to breaking a Law. Yet in the end, they became so outwardly righteous that they put form over substance, and lost track of the inward realities of their relationship with God, and they perished in their outward form of righteousness.

As for being overly wicked, you might think that we aren't supposed to be wicked at all, and in this you would be correct. OK, maybe I should just speak for myself here: As much as I might want to be perfectly righteous in everything I do, say or think, I fall short and can comprehend completely Paul's observation that the things he would do, he didn't, and the things he wouldn't do, he did. Oh wretched man that I am! Yet while all of this is going on, I manage not to go too far, for I have no wish to damage my relationship with our Lord, so I restrain myself, and with His grace I do much better than I used to, by the power of His life in me.

In this, we avoid both extremes, as the Teacher says in the last verse. Notice that he says "whoever fears God." This is the guy who also said that "the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom." Thus a wise person avoids extremes, and another word for this is "moderation."

See how simple this text is? Now just because the text is simple, putting it into practice may not be easy, but if we are completely honest with ourselves, it isn't all that hard either.

I'll bet you can't wait for restraint, and that is coming up next!

"Restraint" is everyone's favorite concept, but it is a quality of the wise. Even outside of relationship with God, a wise person learns self restraint. To be sure, a person doesn't even need to be all that wise to understand that unrestrained speech can quickly get you into trouble, and that unrestrained action can easily land a person in the penitentiary. A person who is wise in the faith knows much more, for he or she is fully aware that our God is a model of self restraint. A wise person of faith will restrain his or her speech and actions simply out of love for God.

*Wisdom makes one wise person more powerful
than ten rulers in a city.*

*Indeed, there is no one on earth who is righteous,
no one who does what is right and never sins.*

*Do not pay attention to every word people say,
or you may hear your servant cursing you—
for you know in your heart
that many times you yourself have cursed others.*

Ecclesiastes 7:19-22

Although the word "restraint" is not present in these verses, restrain is very much in evidence; restraint in deeds is clearly implicit in the first two verses and in word in the remaining ones.

In the first two verses, notice that one wise person is said to be more powerful than ten rulers, and that this is followed by a statement that no one is without sin. What is it that makes the wise person so strong? The Teacher speaking of sin and righteousness is the clue; the wise person avoids the sins that lead to destructive and limiting behaviors that detract from the rulers' effectiveness, even though the wise person has their problems sometimes.

Then there is the matter of words; we are advised not to pay attention to what everybody says and that requires restraint. He gives an example: Don't listen to everything people say, or you might hear your servant curse you; but then you have done your share of cursing. The curse uttered by the servant isn't worth hearing, and your own cursing isn't worth saying; a wise person uses more restraint than either reacting to every idiot utterance they hear, or saying stupid things. In the process, they avoid so much grieving of the Lord, not to mention problems of a more earthly nature.

When I think about it, this is a really simple little lesson. In fact, it's a lesson my mother and father taught when I was a little kid; "behave yourself and watch your mouth."

You would have thought I wouldn't need to hear this all these years later, but there are times when I do need to hear it again; how about you?

*All this I tested by wisdom and I said,
“I am determined to be wise”—
but this was beyond me.
Whatever exists is far off and most profound—
who can discover it?*

Ecclesiastes 7:23-24

The value of wisdom is that we can search out everything that goes on around us, and draw conclusions about them; this is the Teacher’s quest. The Teacher will tell us of his search for wisdom in these last verses of chapter 7, and in this discussion, he reveals some interesting things, but not quite what we might expect. In the first 2 verses, he tells of the difficulty of the search and how it seemed to evade him. Verse 25 seems to be his goal:

*So I turned my mind to understand,
to investigate and to search out wisdom and the scheme of things
and to understand the stupidity of wickedness
and the madness of folly.*

He wants to understand the “scheme of things” and to understand the stupidity of wickedness and folly; all I can say is “good luck.” His results are in verses 26-27:

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

“Look,” says the Teacher, “this is what I have discovered:

“Adding one thing to another to discover the scheme of things—

To begin with, he mentions “the woman who is the share” an interesting illustration. It would seem that our wise Teacher has found that many fall victim to the allurements of lust and sensuality; some commentators might want to expand this to drink and drugs, but I’ll let the Teacher’s words stand alone without any help from me. A wise man of God will avoid this trap, but woe to the not so wise. I doubt much has changed since Solomon wrote these words...

And now, the rest of his results:

*while I was still searching
but not finding—
I found one upright man among a thousand,
but not one upright woman among them all.
This only have I found:*

*God created mankind upright,
but they have gone in search of many schemes.”*

Ecclesiastes 7:28-29

As for verse 28, let's not shoot the messenger here gang; I didn't write this text! It would seem that in Solomon's investigation, he had a hard time finding upright men, and that he failed entirely to find an upright woman. I wonder how large his sample was... It is possible that he is using a little touch of hyperbole here, at least I hope so. In any event, people who are truly "upright" aren't easy to find I suppose, even now. This brings us to verse 29, which seems to summarize the whole of his search under the sun. God created us as upright and moral people, certainly He intended that we should live this way, but humanity entered into sin and folly, and each of us knows what happened after that, for even these many centuries after Solomon breathed his last, we endure life in a world that is filled with the consequence of sin and rebellion against God.

Chapter 8 moves on to another topic: Submission, both to the king and to God. Will we receive a better report on the state of things? Will we be able to find a ray of hope there?

Let's find out as our adventure continues...

Chapter 8

Ecclesiastes 8:1-8

Our adventure moves into chapter 8 and brings us to what no doubt will be a favorite subject for all of us: submission and obedience. As you can see, verse 1 is transitional; the meat begins to be seen in 2-4:

Obey the king's command, I say, because you took an oath before God. Do not be in a hurry to leave the king's presence. Do not stand up for a bad cause, for he will do whatever he pleases. Since a king's word is supreme, who can say to him, "What are you doing?"

The Teacher gives some very practical advice here; don't mess around with the king! I'm sure that everyone can understand this; the king was the last word on every matter.

I skimmed through a commentary or two to see if the commentators pointed out the obvious, and at least in the ones I could get hold of quickly, none did, but here it is: The Teacher who is telling us this *is the king!* My point in mentioning this is that the author in this case, will be the beneficiary of his own advice; you may do with this information what you like.

To be fair, this is good advice in any case after all, didn't your Mama warn you not to go looking for trouble? Mine did.

Verses 5-6 amplify his point with the statement that the person who obeys the command of the king (comparable to our saying "is law abiding") will come to no harm, and "the wise heart will know the proper time and procedure" of course is indicative of the fact the wise will know the rules to play by. Playing by the rules is the most intelligent policy, even in times of difficulty. Our final two verses amplify this further by pointing out that in matters of submission to higher authority, we simply lack the power to prevail if we choose to oppose it, and once we act in a wicked way, we are pretty well stuck with a wicked outcome.

So far, chapter 8 seems fairly obvious to me; there isn't really much for me to add to it to make it more interesting, which as you know, makes the writer's job much more difficult. I'm tempted to do as any good preacher might and introduce a tangent that leads to a hobby horse, so I can take you all for a nice ride and 'fill the time,' but not today... I will tell you this, however: This writer sees a ray of hope in the next section...

Ecclesiastes 8:9-17

These verses seem to go on in a familiar refrain; everything is meaningless. Things happen under the sun that shouldn't, people conjure up their schemes, and people die; what's the point? The Teacher has been saying these things for over 7 chapters... and then it happens.

When I applied my mind to know wisdom and to observe the labor that is done on earth— people getting no sleep day or night— then I saw all that God has done. No one can

comprehend what goes on under the sun. Despite all their efforts to search it out, no one can discover its meaning. Even if the wise claim they know, they cannot really comprehend it.

Ecclesiastes 8:16-17

The most wise Solomon, the man who sought wisdom and received it, the great Teacher who has examined everything that goes on under the sun, using his great wisdom in a quest for understanding, has failed; his conclusion is that this simply cannot be understood.

With this sad admission, the first major section of Ecclesiastes comes to its conclusion, but before we rush on to the next section, let's just have a look at one little thing in this text; we find it at the beginning of verse 17, a small little clue we might pass right over: "*then I saw all that God has done*".

Wait a second: Hasn't he been talking about what man has done?

Yes, he has been talking about what man has done! So why is that little clause in the sentence?

Has Solomon given us an additional riddle that has no solution, or is he trying to tell us something more concrete?

Oh my, there are more questions being raised than answers given, and this is always what happens under the sun, when men become philosophical, for philosophy seldom provides real answers to things, just questions. But there is an answer to this one.

The works of Man have been ordained by God in all of their futility.

Think about it: All of that labor under the sun; all of those sleepless nights. All of that wickedness, all of those schemes, all of the justice on earth, and all of the injustice; sin, rebellion against God, and godliness and righteousness: All of this was ordained by God when He created Mankind with free will. That is not to suggest that God is the source of sin, nor is it to say that God makes men do bad things, but God gave Man free will and was prepared to deal with the consequences. Why did God do it that way?

Ah, that is what the Teacher could not discover, in spite of all of the neatly packaged Sunday school answers; no one actually knows for sure why God set things up this way, but He did. This leads us that which our wise Teacher did succeed in discovering: We must live with this situation under the sun, which is to say that we must submit to it, for there is nothing else that we can do.

With all of that said, we now have some information that was not available to the Teacher, for in the many centuries that have passed since his time, God's plan of redemption has been fully revealed, and as a result of that plan, we have the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit that the Teacher did not have. That gift makes our jobs much easier than Solomon's was!

I am pleased to be able to tell you, that this is about to become a lot more interesting, for the Teacher will reveal the next big conclusion he has come to in his quest, and our adventure will be a most excellent one when he does so in the next chapter...

Chapter 9

Ecclesiastes 9:1-12

Our most excellent adventure now comes to the Teacher's second conclusion: There is only one thing in this life that is certain.

That certainty is simply this: It doesn't matter who you are or what you do in life, you are going to die and be forgotten.

This warm and cozy reality forms the basis of Solomon's wisdom, at least in the wisdom of his teaching. He actually calls it "the evil in everything that happens under the sun: The same destiny overtakes all" in 9:3. I should remind everyone at this point that in Solomon's day there was no concept of eternal life as Christianity understands the term; you only lived on through your children. Thus, with a fate of death in common, why be surprised that people are wicked, greedy and unrighteous? Why not eat, drink and try to have as much fun as you can? In the context in which Solomon says these kinds of things, this is logical, isn't it? I think it is in his context, but it isn't in our context as followers of Jesus Christ, yet that is exactly the attitude of most of us today.

Verses 4-6 discuss the fact that it is better to be alive than to be dead, but he can offer no hope of anything after that. Verses 7-10 tell us to enjoy our limited time here on earth as much as we can, and he is giving this advice to the godly ones, not the wicked, for there will be nothing when you're gone. Verse 11 tells us that success and greatness aren't just for the wise and talented, but rather that some will be lucky and some will not: Oh well...

Verse 12 tells us that some of us will be trapped by evil events that are out of our control: Oh well...

Thus begins the second section of the book, and as we continue in our adventure, the Teacher will develop this theme further. In the first section of the book, he taught us that we don't know our present, in the rest of the book; he develops the conclusion that we also don't know our future. Thus are the consequences of Man's rebellion against God. I can say one thing in the midst of this cheerful narrative:

Boy am I glad that I didn't come along until after Jesus Christ changed everything!

Ecclesiastes 9:13-10:15

In this section, the Teacher develops the idea that none of us knows our futures under the sun. He does this in four subsections, beginning with 9:13-10:1. Here, the Teacher tells a fictional story reminiscent of 2 Samuel 20:15-22 in which a poor but wise man saves his small city from certain destruction by a large and powerful army, only to be entirely forgotten once the city no longer needed him; fame and honor are indeed fleeting. Yet, even though the man was poor, and hardly powerful in the city, his counsel was more valuable in the crisis than the council of

the city fathers, and it overcame the strength of arms. Thus the Teacher concludes: "Wisdom is better than strength" yet what did this man actually gain? Nothing.

10:2-7 shows us that there are impediments to wisdom under the sun. The wise person is guided by wisdom, is cool under fire and his heart and mind are steadfast, yet there is a very good chance that he is surrounded by fools. The primary example used here is that of an unwise ruler who appoints his friends and "yes men" to high places, and becomes angry with those who actually could have given him wise counsel. I think maybe we may still encounter this problem today.

The third section is in 10:8-11 and deals with the unexpected things that seem to take place so often in this life. The wording here is entirely self explanatory, and I think we can all identify; you just can't be sure when misfortune might strike, no matter how careful you might be; it's sort of an "occupational hazard" of being alive.

Finally, in verses 12-15, we see the futility of words. While a wise person's words are gracious, most of the words we hear come from fools who get carried away and speak injudiciously about all sorts of things. If they are irritated or excited, they get carried away. If they are feeling down, they get carried away, if they are happy they get carried away: blah, blah, blah. Their endeavors come to naught, their projects fail, they become weary; they can't win. Why?

Oh dear reader, that's an easy one: because they are fools!

As a result of this, we are back where we started: Nobody knows what will happen next; that is the way of things under the sun.

Chapter 10

Ecclesiastes 10:16-11:2

In this section, the Teacher continues with his elaboration of life's uncertainties under the sun. Here, it would appear that he is talking about those who rule the nation; not all rulers are wise! The first verse in the text sets this out, and the (new) NIV gives us a bit of confusion right off the bat:

*Woe to the land whose king was a servant^[a]
and whose princes feast in the morning. (10:16)*

To be fair, I left the footnote in place; it says "or king is a child". The Hebrew word in question is *na'ar* which can be rendered as a boy, a lad or a servant. I don't know this for sure, but my guess is that the newer translators went with servant because "boy" and "lad" are male, and "servant" can be either male or female. This would avoid offending the contemporary politically correct person, but in my view would lack historical accuracy, since boys or lads could be heirs to thrones, and young women or girls could only do so in rare and extreme circumstances. In certain cases, this Hebrew word can also be taken to be a child, so I'll agree to a compromise; child it is! If you insist on "servant" here, it will still work in one sense; both a child and a servant are people who are not ready for leadership in so high a position as king, in which case they are vulnerable to manipulation by their advisors, and this was (and is) often the case. Now couple that with "princes who feast in the morning" and you have an immature king under the thumb of advisors who are the ancient equivalent of playboys, and you can see that things will not go well in the land. I'm thinking that some might see this kind of thing happening still in our time when someone comes into power who isn't really ready for it, surrounded by people who don't know how things actually work in the real world; it can be messy. Verse 17 is the contrast to 16, where the king is qualified, trained and ready to reign, and his nobles were sober and wise.

Verses 18-19 are a further elaboration of the circumstances referred to in verse 16, the result of that crisis of unwise leadership:

*Through laziness, the rafters sag;
because of idle hands, the house leaks.*

*A feast is made for laughter,
wine makes life merry,
and money is the answer for everything.*

Oh my, how did the Teacher phrase it? "There's nothing new under the sun"!

Verse 20 provides us with a caution for such times, when an honest and hardworking person might be tempted to become frustrated or resentful about the way things are going:

*Do not revile the king even in your thoughts,
or curse the rich in your bedroom,*

*because a bird in the sky may carry your words,
and a bird on the wing may report what you say.*

Yes indeed, and a childish ruler is a vengeful ruler...

This brings us to the final two verses of our text, and to be perfectly honest with you, these two innocent little verses have led me to more research that I intended to sign up for when I started blogging about Ecclesiastes. The reason is that the new NIV interprets these verses, and the rest of the chapter in a way I hadn't encountered before. The thing is, translators aren't supposed to interpret, and yet they must interpret, and anyone who has studied a foreign language in any great depth will understand this, for in any language I'm familiar with, there will be times when you can understand something in more than one way. In this case, we can take these verses as being a reference to business and commerce, or as a reference to benevolence. The way the new version of NIV takes it, Solomon is telling us to diversify our holdings in tough times, to engage in international business, with kingdoms that don't have incompetent leadership ruining their economies, and that makes sense.

I tend, however, to take a historical – critical approach to texts like these and that keeps bringing me back to the fact that the real author of this text is the reigning King of Israel, and I'm having some trouble with this advice being understood this way, coming from an incumbent. Particularly in a kingdom that views everyone else as filthy dogs! In addition, Solomon has given counsel in the Proverbs more like the benevolent understanding of such things, and of course I ask myself why he would suddenly be giving advice to only a few of his readers, when up until now, he has said things that could apply just as well to the poor majority as to the rich minority. Thus, to make a long story short, here's how I see this; you are welcome to see it differently, as always...

*Ship your grain across the sea;
after many days you may receive a return.
Invest in seven ventures, yes, in eight;
you do not know what disaster may come upon the land. (11:1-2 new NIV)*

###

*Cast your bread upon the waters,
For after many days you will find it again.
Give portions to seven, yes to eight,
For you do not know what disaster will come upon the land. (11:1-2 old NIV)*

I think he is telling us that we should always practice benevolent acts, to help others out, and thus to make many friends, or as Benjamin Franklin said, that we should "do well by doing good". Thus, when hard times come, we don't have to stand alone; there will be those who are happy to help us as we have helped them.

The main principle will work in either interpretation, for in the commerce model, you will have friends in other lands should you need them, but in the meantime, you should still be profitable

in your own land when the economy turns south, which seems to me to be the disaster the Teacher is talking about here, based up his remark in verse 19.

Chapter 11

In the last passage, we saw that evil can come upon us at any time; that's just the way it is. In this section, we will see that good can come upon us as well, and that we must not be so cautious about the potential of evil that we miss out on the good. This discussion begins with verse 3 of chapter 11 in which the laws of nature are used to illustrate the potential for bad times:

*If clouds are full of water,
they pour rain on the earth.
Whether a tree falls to the south or to the north,
in the place where it falls, there it will lie.*

Who knows exactly what will happen – who knows just where there will be rain, floods blizzards or danger? Nobody, that's why we are being bombarded with warnings. This is the message of verse 3; you just never know what might happen. The next verse, verse 4 tells of our possible response:

*Whoever watches the wind will not plant;
whoever looks at the clouds will not reap.*

I remember a couple of years ago when a major winter storm was moving into the Washington, D.C. area; on the news they were listing (over and over) all of the closings and “late starts” for the incoming storm. Amazingly, the Federal government was open for business that day, and I must admit that I was a bit surprised, since they normally surprise me by how quickly they shut it down. Since the government wasn't closed that day, I predicted that it would be a real major storm; they almost always guess wrong!

...Which is exactly the point that the Teacher is making. Using an agricultural metaphor, he is saying here that if you are always looking at the clouds and the wind, you'll never get your fields planted, or to put it another way, if you are always looking for danger, than you can always find a reason not to try.

*As you do not know the path of the wind,
or how the body is formed in a mother's womb,
so you cannot understand the work of God,
the Maker of all things. (11:5)*

This transitional verse is where the tide changes: None of us knows the workings of God, so we can't easily predict what will come next. Even with advanced weather models and satellite tracking of storms, they don't always get the forecasts right. How can any of us think we can predict the future?

*Sow your seed in the morning,
and at evening let your hands not be idle,*

*for you do not know which will succeed,
whether this or that,
or whether both will do equally well. (11:6)*

The conclusion is simply that we should get out there and give it our all in this life, and not worry about the storm clouds that come along, for who can say what will bring good and what will bring evil into our lives; do your best always.

With this Solomon brings this second section of Ecclesiastes to its close. Next time, our adventure will reach the third and final section of the book: The conclusion of the matter.

Ecclesiastes 11:7-12:14

I thought that I would cover the end of the matter from two points of view; first from Solomon's and then from the view of a Christian. Since this is fairly obvious, I hope that you'll read the passage, and then come back for a few reflections on it.

As I think about what the Teacher has taught us in Ecclesiastes, it occurs to me that the great majority of Americans today are too young to remember the day that President Kennedy was killed; but I remember it vividly. Most of us are too young to remember when Dr. King told us of his dream; but I was transfixed by it. Most of us are too young to have known a time when parents would have their children walk a mile or more to school every day in safety, but from the 1st grade forward I walked more than a mile down a busy city street to school, along with all of the other kids, and nobody had cause to worry. Likewise, I would imagine that most Englishmen alive today are too young to remember when their Queen was young.

All of us who have these memories can tell the young that in the blink of an eye, your youth will be gone, as will we be.

Enjoy your brief youth; make good use of your time while you can. You are free to do what you desire; who knows? Perhaps you will live in a palace one day! But remember this: Naked you came into this world, and naked you will leave it. All of the wealth you manage to acquire will mean nothing in the end. All of your fun and thrills will get you nowhere, for in the end you, like the rest of us will become old and die. And then...?

Judgment.

Enjoy this life as best you can, but remember God and keep His commands, for this life only lasts so long, and you have a date with destiny.

Essentially, this is Solomon's point in this whole book. Yet as wise as this is, much has changed since his time; let's discuss briefly what those changes mean for us.

Reflecting upon the end of the matter as Solomon stated it, life under the sun now is about what it was at the time Solomon wrote his book: Meaningless! When our time on earth is completed, we will die and be forgotten by those who come after us; a chasing of the wind.

Even so, something has changed since Solomon lived and wrote: Messiah came and accomplished His work. Because of what Jesus has done for us, we have the option of forgiveness of our sins and the gift of eternal life, things that the old Law did not provide. This is all obvious to a Christian, but what about our lives under the sun; can we possibly find meaning that the Teacher couldn't find even with his great wisdom?

Yes, there is very certainly meaning in this life under the sun that was not available to Solomon, because something else changed as a result of Messiah's work on that cross, the re-establishment of fellowship. "Fellowship" is usually not a term associated with salvation, but for the life of me, I don't see why. Fellowship was God's purpose for creating Mankind in the first place, and we see it clearly in the old Genesis story. Recall that while Adam and Eve were running around the garden naked together, they had direct personal access to God; they literally spoke together. There was nothing in between them and God, either literally or figuratively, and they had relationship with Him. God gave them dominion over the earth, creating what we might call a sort of partnership in which they served God's purpose as stewards of His Creation on earth. Thus, they had relationship and purpose in common with God, and relationship + purpose is what the word "fellowship" means. When Jesus completed His work on earth, the relationship was restored through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and once again, Mankind can have direct, unfettered access to God with nothing standing between them, either literally or figuratively.

After Jesus arose from the grave He gave a command, His last, which is found in Matthew 28:18-20 that we should make disciples, and in doing so, He gave us His purpose, for that was why He came to earth in the first place. Thus, in Christ, we have relationship and purpose: Fellowship. To the extent that we serve His purpose, we live meaningful lives, even while we are "under the sun." Even better, we have the hope of eternity with Him; therefore as Christians, who follow Jesus Christ in this life, life need not be entirely a matter of chasing the wind.

This little equation brings us to one other consideration. We know what parts of this life are meaningless and which part of this life is meaningful: How will we spend our remaining time here under the sun? Will we chase the wind, or will we serve His purpose?

Ah yes, dear reader, that challenge is what makes this adventure a most excellent one!