A Study of Ecclesiastes

Does Life Have Meaning?

Ecclesiastes

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There is no other book like Ecclesiastes in all of the Bible. At first glance, the book may seem overly pessimistic and offer little positive instruction; however we will see in our study that there is much to glean from a study on this book which will point us to faith in the eternal and sovereign Creator God while finding joy in the present life.

The name of this book (Ecclesiastes) comes from its title in the Septuagint. The term refers to one who speaks to an assembly. In Hebrew the author never uses his name, but always refers to himself with the pseudonym *Qoheleth.* This word appears seven times in the Hebrew text of Ecclesiastes. For this reason the main character is sometimes called "The Preacher," but no where in the book does the author "preach."

Jewish and early Christian tradition have accepted Solomon as the author of Ecclesiastes, but today many scholars; even conservative ones doubt Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes. The author certainly sounds like Solomon because he refers to himself as *"the son of David, a king in Jerusalem"* (1:1). Other clues that Solomon may be the author are found in 1:16 where the writer refers to his great wisdom; in 2:4-11 where *Qoheleth* describes his works, wealth, and endeavours; and in 12:9-10 where *Qoheleth* is said to have written many proverbs.

Those who doubt that Solomon is the author, point to conditions described in the book which did not seem to exist in the days of Solomon as well as the style of writing which some scholars say points to a time after Solomon. Still, in this study we will assume that Solomon is the author as there seems to be no compelling reason to overturn the consensus of Jewish and early Christian tradition.

Ecclesiastes is categorised along with Job, Psalms, Proverbs, and Song of Songs as the "Wisdom Literature" of the Old Testament. Jewish tradition has contended that Solomon wrote Song of Songs in his youth, Proverbs as a mature man, and Ecclesiastes toward the end of his forty year reign.[1]

Key Question

"What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?" *(Ecc.1:3)*

The key question in Ecclesiastes seems to be found in 1:3, *"What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?"*[2] We might ask the question this way, "Does life have meaning?" If ever there was a timely question for our world today it is this one. Does life have meaning? What is life all about? Solomon guides us through a series of discussions of many kinds of earthly endeavours, none of which completely satisfies.

[1] Smith, James E. *The Wisdom Literature and Psalms.* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1996), 696.

[2] Unless otherwise indicated all Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version.

The key word that is used repeatedly throughout Ecclesiastes is the Hebrew word *hebel* which literally means "breath" or "vapour," but which is usually translated as vanity, meaningless, useless, or absurd. It has also been translated as smoke which illustrates something that cannot be grasped and which quickly disappears. Thirty-eight times the author of Ecclesiastes refers to life or the endeavours of this life as *hebel.*

Key Word

Hebrew word *"hebel"*

The word *hebel* serves as bookends in Ecclesiastes. It is used first in 1:2 where we read *"Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity."* *Hebel* is used at the conclusion of the book in 12:8, *"Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity."*

Though life is described often as *hebel*, the author concludes in 12:13, *"The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man."* Life on earth can be difficult, but there is pleasure to be enjoyed.

1. **What are some reasons why life may seem *hebel* (meaningless or filled with vanity)?**

2. **What do we learn about the length of life in 12:1, 7-8; 11:10?**

3. **What do the following verses say about enjoying life? (2:24-26; 3:12-13; 5:18-19; 8:15; 9:7-9?**

Key Phrase

"under the sun" (used 29 times)

Ecclesiastes presents two ways of living. The first is the pursuit of pleasure in its various forms which eventually proves to be as fleeting as a vapour. The second is to enjoy the simple pleasures of this life while pursuing obedience to God. Throughout the book these to ways of living are presented and contrasted. More is written about the futility of aiming at worldly pleasure and accomplishments, but there are thirteen times when positive lessons are provided about life. In the end it is faith in God which provides meaning for life.

4. **What does the key phrase "under the sun" tell us about the type of pursuits Qoheleth was chasing?**

5. **How does 12:1, 13-14 contrast with putting hope in things done "under the sun" (1:14)?**

Key Conclusion

"The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man." (Ecc. 12:13)

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As we delve into a study of the text of Ecclesiastes, remember our keys to understanding the book: The Key Question: *"What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?" (Ecc.1:3).* The Key Word: *hebel* means breath or vapour and is usually translated as meaningless or vanity. The Key Phrase is *"under the sun"* and represents those things done on this earth and viewed from a human perspective. Finally, the Key Conclusion is: *"The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man."* (Ecc. 12:13)

All Is Vanity

Ecclesiastes 1:1 - 2:26

In 1:1, the author calls himself Qoheleth for the first of seven times. We will take the author to be Solomon as has been traditionally understood by Jews and early Christians. In Ecclesiastes, the wise king of Israel shares lessons he has learned in life. These lessons are likely aimed primarily at young men who he hopes will avoid his mistakes.

In 1:2, Qoheleth introduces his thoughts with the key word *hebel*. *"Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity."* (Ecc. 1:2) Solomon then sets out to show how things done under the sun are *hebel.*

1:3-11 is an introductory poem which begins with our key question: *"What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?"*

Definition of Gain

The word "gain" is translated from the Hebrew word *yithron* which comes from the business community and describes what is left over on the balance sheets after all profits and losses are tallied.

1. **Define the words "toil."**

2. **What answer is expected from the question posed in 1:3?**

3. **What four illustrations does Qoheleth use to describe the futility of life "under the sun?" (1:4, 5, 6, 7)**

4. **Why are eyes and ears "under the sun" never satisfied? (1:8)**

1:9-11 teaches us that there is nothing new under the sun. Every action, endeavour, or pleasure has been tried throughout human history. There is no long term remembrance of former things (or former people as some versions translate this verse.) No matter what we try, do, or accomplish "under the sun," this will be soon forgotten after our passing by those who follow. There is utter futility in all things done for human satisfaction apart from God.

The author describes the vanity of human wisdom in 1:12-18. Here Qoheleth identifies himself as the king of Israel who sought out wisdom of all that is done under heaven.

5. **How does Qoheleth describe the intensity of his search for wisdom? (1:13)**

Solomon chronicles his search for wisdom as *"unhappy business that God has given to the children of man..."* The word translated "God" is not *Yahweh,* the personal name for God, but rather the more generic *Elohim,* showing that this quest for wisdom is not just an undertaking of God's people, but rather a task of all people. God has placed within every person the desire to know the answers to life's ultimate questions. "Under the sun" this undertaking is grievous and unhappy with no satisfying answer.[1]

6. **What are the ultimate questions that every human strives to answer.**

7. **What conclusion does the author reach after his investigation into all things done under the sun? (1:14)**

Qoheleth realises that under the sun he cannot change very much in life (1:15). He internally dialogues in verses 16-17 concluding that no matter how much wisdom he accumulated he could never be satisfied. In fact, the more wisdom Solomon gained and the more knowledge he accumulated, the more vexation and sorrow he experienced.

After finding the search after wisdom futile, Qoheleth next pursed pleasure. Here he analysed every kind of self-indulgence, but found this vain as well.

8. **What pleasures does the author pursue in 2:2-3?**

9. **Describe Qoheleth's undertakings in 2:4-6.**

Solomon's Building Projects

1. Huge personal palace
2. A great hall with pillars of cedar
3. The porch of cedars
4. The harem for the daughter of Pharaoh
5. Fortresses
6. Store-cities
7. Chariot cities
8. Cities in distant lands
9. Great pools

(James Smith)

[1] Smith, James E. *The Wisdom Literature and Psalms.* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1996), 714.

10. What types of wealth did Solomon accumulate according to 2:7-8?

11. How does 1 Kings 11:3 support 2:8b?

In 2:9-11 Solomon had gained greater wisdom that all before him, he had not withheld any pleasure from himself, he had completed great projects and toiled tirelessly, but his only reward was the pleasure he found in these endeavours. However, even this reward quickly dissipated after the projects were completed and the pleasures faded leaving him all the more dissatisfied.

Now Qoheleth considered wisdom in comparison to madness and folly and was so thorough in his investigation that he believed that any who undertook this examination in the future will come to the same judgment (2:12).

12. Why does Qoheleth conclude that there is more gain in wisdom than folly? (2:13-14)

13. In the end, what happens to both the wise person and the foolish person? (2:15-16)

14. How did Solomon view life after chasing wisdom "under the sun?" (2:17)

Next our author examines his work. He ultimately sees futility in labour because whatever is accomplished will one day (after his death) be owned by another. Not only will another possess all that he gains, but he does not know the character of the person who comes after him. The one who follows might even be a fool who squanders all he had amassed and accomplished.

15. How does Solomon describe labour in 2:22-23?

The one who seeks satisfaction in wisdom, pleasure, or labour under the sun, and apart from God, is eventually dissatisfied. Now in 2:24 Qoheleth hammers the first nail of truth that will eventually lead to the key conclusion of the book.

When life is viewed through the lens of God's blessing and with a life of faithfulness to him, man can enjoy eating, and drinking, and toil. Conversely apart from God there can be no lasting joy in these endeavours, but only *hebel*. When one lives for God, he receives true wisdom, and knowledge, and joy in life. These good things should be viewed as precious blessings that come directly from the hand of God.

Truth

"There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God." (Ecc. 2:24)

Brown writes, "Neither achieved nor planned, neither grasped nor produced, the gifts of true pleasure are simply received from God."[2] These gifts are what are often called the simple pleasures of life which are given value by the goodness of God.

16. **How does the view of life differ between a man who lives to please God and a man who seeks fulfilment in life apart from God? (2:26)**

[2] Brown, William P. *Ecclesiastes: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching."* (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 2000), p. 37.

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Does Life Have Meaning?

The third chapter of Ecclesiastes records the best known verses in the book and some that most every person has heard even if they do not realise they are from the Bible. The key thought is found in 3:1, *"For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven."*

A Time for Everything

Ecclesiastes 3:1-22

The main thought contained in 3:1-9 is this: God is in control so live your life for him with this knowledge.

Our God is the Creator of time. He existed before time and created all that is. This ought to give us a great deal of comfort and confidence. This reminds us that there are some happenings in life that we have some control over and others that we do not. Qoheleth, as Solomon calls himself, is saying that there are seasons to life. There are many events and activities that mark our lives.

In Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, we are presented with a list of fourteen events that happen in the lifetime of an individual. "The fact that Solomon utilised . . . opposites in a multiple of seven and began his list with birth and death is highly significant. The number seven suggests the idea of completeness and the use of . . . opposites . . . suggests totality."[1] Since he begins with life and ends with death, he is telling us about the events that happen throughout our lives.

Our lives are ordered by time; in fact Solomon uses the word time 29 times in the first eight verses of Ecclesiastes 3.

1. **Define the word "season" and "time." Is there a difference in meaning between these two words?**

The very beginning of our lives is remembered in verse 2 where we read that there is a time to be born or a better translation is: "a time to give birth." Our birth is outside of our control; a newborn does not choose the time of his birth and his mother does not know the exact timing until the delivery is near. Our birth was not our choice and it was God who knit us together in our mother's womb.

The God who made you and knit you together in your mother's womb (Psalm 139:13) has brought you into this world in this time and in this place. God is in control of life and death. A birth takes

[1] Glenn, Donald R. "Ecclesiastes," in The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament, p. 983.

place in this world every three seconds. In the next hour 1,200 people will be born. Not one chose when, where, or if to be born.

Just as we had no choice in the time and place of our birth, we don't have much choice in the timing of our own death. Solomon continues in verse 2 by saying that there is a time to die. A person on this earth dies every eight seconds so in the next hour 450 people will depart this life.

While we think very little of death when we are young and strong, but birth and death serve as the bookends of our lives and during the years of our lives, the sovereign God has ordered that many kinds of events will happen to us.

This Scripture is not teaching that God predestinates all the events of our life. God gives us free-will, but we live in a world that is ordered by God. Birth and death are only two of the events that each of us face. Our free-will is evident in some of the events Solomon lists like the planting and harvesting, but it is God who has set the seasons in order and God who provides the rain. To farm successfully one must plant and harvest at the appropriate time.

We can even alter the length of our life by ending it unnaturally and have a limited influence our lifespan by the choices we make in eating, drinking, smoking, etc., but largely the timing of our own death is outside of our control. Certainly none of us can permanently postpone our own death.

Solomon teaches that God through his providence has placed order in this world and each of us live within this order. In Ecclesiastes 1:4 Solomon wrote, *"A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever."* God's grant of free-will to man is largely why Solomon writes. He wants young men to avoid some of the mistakes he has made. God allows us the choice of following him or rebelling against him.

2. **Many people in life say, "I wish I were older" or "I wish I were younger." After reading Ecc. 3:2, how would you answer them?**

3. **Can the events of life mentioned in 3:2-8 be changed or avoided? Why or why not.**

Solomon wrote, *"There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven."* We must remember is that we live in a world that passes through seasons. Prepare for the seasons of your life and prepare to minister to others as they pass through the seasons of their own lives.

The Events of a Generation Under Heaven

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

a time to give birth	a time to die
a time to plant	a time to pluck up what is planted
a time to kill	a time to heal
a time to break up	a time to build up
a time to weep	a time to laugh
a time to mourn	a time to dance
a time to cast away stones	a time to gather stones together
a time to embrace	a time to refrain from embracing
a time to seek	a time to lose
a time to keep	a time to cast away
a time to tear	a time to sew
a time to keep silent	a time to speak
a time to love	a time to hate
a time for war	a time for peace

As we go about our daily lives we encounter others who are experiencing all the various events of life. We see young people who are thinking about the next day at school, young adults anticipating marriage or the birth of a child. We encounter people each day who have suffered the loss of someone they loved and others who are sick themselves. Most of the people that we see each day are lost because they don't know Jesus as Lord. What an opportunity we have to minister and evangelise when we understand God's providential order.

In Ecc. 2:24 Solomon wrote, *"There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?"*

Now here in Ecc. 3:1-8 he has urged man to look at the various happenings in life. Man should "see that there is nothing better than to resign himself to the work and pleasures of the day, recognizing that this is a gift to man from the hand of God."[2]

Ecc. 3:9 poses the same key question that we was in Ecc. 1:3. *"What gain has a worker from his toil?"* The answer is "None!" "In all of man's actions and under all circumstances he depends upon times and seasons which are beyond his control."[3] It is all part of God's divine providence to give men labour (3:10), but that labour should reinforce man's limitations and God's blessing. In fact, when we realise God's blessing and the order he has placed in this world we should see it as "*beautiful*."

4. **What is God's providence and how does that relate to man's free-will?**

5. **What is meant by God putting "eternity into man's heart?" What are man's limitations in understanding God and eternity?**

6. **How do we see God's sovereignty and providence in Ecc. 3:14-15?**

Truth

"I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil —this is God's gift to man." (Ecc. 3:12-13)

If God is sovereign and his providence cannot be altered then why is there evil in the world? Why is there wickedness in the place of justice and righteousness?

We understand that man's free-will allows him to act unjustly and unrighteously. Solomon knows that God will act as judge and ultimately set things right (Ecc. 3:17)

7. **How and why is man tested in 3:18?**

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[2] Kidwell, R. J. *Ecclesiastes & Song of Solomon. (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1977), 77.*

[3] Smith, James E. *The Wisdom Literature and Psalms.* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1996), 730.

8. **In what ways are men and beasts alike?**

Men and beasts both face death, but the meaning of they "all go to one place" does not refer to eternity, but rather the earthly decay of the physical body. Verse 21 is a difficult one to translate from the original Hebrew into English. It can be translated as a question, it can suggest a "maybe" answer, or may affirm a truth through a question.[4] The best interpreter of Scripture is Scripture and the judgment of man and eternal reward or punishment is a common theme throughout the Scripture, so we take this to be a statement of fact. Man has an eternal destiny while the beast does not.

Verse 22 concludes this chapter advising man to rejoice or enjoy his work in the present and not concern himself about his future days on the earth since he cannot know what they will bring. James E. Smith writes, "...man's happiness is to make the best of the present, and cheerfully to enjoy what divine providence offers, without anxious care for the future."[5]

Ecclesiastes 3 teaches us that much of life is out of our control, but is ordered by God's providence. We all live within the seasons of life that God has put into place. We do have free-will to work, do good, and enjoy our labours, but trying to change the unchangeable will bring us frustration. While we have life, we should enjoy the present blessings that God brings.

Truth

"... there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot..." (Ecc. 3:22)

9. **How can enjoying the present and not concerning oneself with either the unalterable seasons of life, or with the unknowable future, bring contentment?**

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[4] Kidwell, R. J. *Ecclesiastes & Song of Solomon. (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1977), 86.*

[5] Smith, James E. *The Wisdom Literature and Psalms.* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1996), 737.

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In chapter four the author of Ecclesiastes turns to a number of "better than" statements and shows some circumstances are better than others. He also shows that it is better to live in harmony with another than to be alone.

What is Better?

Ecclesiastes 4:1-16

Qoheleth now looks up and sees that "under the sun" there are many who are oppressed and have no one to comfort them. The phrase "under the sun" is used twenty-nine times in Ecclesiastes and always relates to those things done in this world with no consideration of God. In this case, Solomon sees the world as a place of injustice.

1. **How does Qoheleth describe the oppressors in 4:1?**

2. **What effect did the oppressors have on the oppressed?**

Qoheleth views the oppressors with such disdain that he claims it is better to be dead than to be alive and oppressed, but better still to have yet been born. The unborn is not being oppressed nor has escaped a lifetime of oppression by death. The deeds of the oppressors are called "evil" and are done "under the sun."

> It is better to be dead, and better still to be not yet born, than to be oppressed.

The next subject Solomon confronts is that of excessive toil versus slothfulness. He views those who toil skilfully and industriously with suspicion because this work is often undertaken because of envy. The one who works hard does so to keep up with or surpass his neighbour. On the other hand the fool *"folds his hands and eats his own flesh."* Here the idea is that a lazy person just sits down and either chews on his knuckles or eats through his possessions leaving nothing behind.

3. **What do you see in the lives of people today who are driven in their careers by envy or a desire to feel superior?**

4. **How do we develop the proper balance between work and relaxation?**

Ecclesiastes 4:6 can be understood two ways, the first is that these words are a defence for the sluggard. He does not work and justifies himself by saying that it is better to be quiet. The second way to understand this verse is that Solomon is saying that one should avoid both the extremes of excessive toil and laziness. It is better to earn a modest living with quietness than wealth with overwork fuelled by envy or a desire to feel superior.

> It is better to satisfied with a modest amount than to overwork or to be lazy.

Verse 7 addresses the wealthy man who works to acquire more and more with no satisfaction while living without companionship. He has no one to share with him perhaps because he fears others may want to take advantage of him to gain from his wealth or because he has no time to develop relationships because of his excessive labours. This man lives in isolation, but finally concludes that he is uselessly depriving himself of pleasure bringing meaninglessness and unhappiness.

5.What trouble has the pursuit of wealth brought the man in verse 8?

It is better to have companionship than to only seek to acquire wealth for oneself. Qoheleth may have in mind a business partnership where two are able to earn more than each one alone while enjoying the camaraderie and mutual support that can come through cooperation with another.

> It is better to have companionship than to be alone.

Solomon may also have in mind a marriage partner. In this case the return for their toil is not just financial, but also satisfaction, contentment, and companionship.

6. What three illustrations does Solomon use to demonstrate that companionship has benefits over being alone? (4:10-12)

In verse 12, Solomon moves from talking about two to using three as an example. "A cord of three strands was the strongest made in the ancient world. Three is the number of completeness and perfection."[1]

The final comparison is chapter 4 is that of a poor and wise youth with an old and foolish king. Here we see the fleeting nature of power and influence. The old king would no longer take advice and is deposed by an unlikely person who came from the lowest level (prison and poverty) to take over the throne.

> It is better to be a poor and wise youth than a foolish king who will not accept advice.

The population adored the young man who would become king. All the people who lived under the sun followed the usurper and rallied to him. The young man will eventually suffer the same fate as the old king and will lose the support of the people.

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[1] Smith, James E. *The Wisdom Literature and Psalms.* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1996), 743.

7. **Why do leaders become foolish and unable to take advice?**

8. **Why do new political leaders eventually suffer the same fate as the previous leaders?**

All done under the sun, whether it be oppression, misuse of labour, a solitary and self-centred life, or foolish leadership all end up as vanity (*hebel*). Some circumstances in life are better than others and some choices are better. It is better to be satisfied with a modest living while enjoying companionship than to be lazy or overworked, or to be greedy or envious.

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In chapters 5 and 6, Solomon instructs his readers and the topics of worship and wealth which are *hebel* (vanity) if undertaken or enjoyed in a selfish or ungodly manner.

Fear God

Ecclesiastes 5:1-7

Qoheleth describes how worship itself can be vain if not done in a way that is honourable to God. In chapter 5, the worshipper approaches the temple in Jerusalem without an attitude of reverent fear. The admonition is to "*guard your steps*" when going to the house of God. In Exodus 3:5 God instructs Moses from the burning bush: *"Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."* God is completely holy and must be approached in a way that shows him the reverence he deserves.

Solomon warns against using too many words when approaching God and advises that listening is better than offering sacrifice. Listening equates to obedience and echoes the words of 1 Samuel 15:22, "*...Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams.*"

God's people must understand that God is in heaven and they are on earth. God is wholly other and restraint is needed when approaching him. He is wearied by too many words; probably referring to formalistic, lengthy, and thoughtless prayers.

1. **What do "rash" words tell us about the worshipper in 5:2-3?**

2. **What does Jesus teach in Matthew 6:7 and how does this relate to what was happening in Ecclesiastes?**

Dreams can come when a person is too busy, too stressed and filled with anxiety; likewise foolish utterances come when a person speaks too many rash words when approaching the God of Creation.

3. **What is the meaning of "reverence" and how might Christians today approach God irreverently?**

4. **Is it easier to speak to God or to listen to Him? Explain your answer.**

Vows were not a common part of Israelite worship and neither were they commanded, but in the days of Solomon they had risen to take on a mistaken importance.[1] Vows were made rashly and were not always kept.

5. **What does God say about vows in Deuteronomy 23:21-23?**

6. **Do Christians today make vows and if so how and when?**

It is far better to never make a vow than to make a vow and fail to keep it. This is described by Solomon as foolish and sinful. Solomon goes on to describe how some go to the "messenger" which was probably the priest to claim that their vow had been a mistake. The messenger did not have the authority to release a person from a vow made to God. These unkept vows anger God and bring punishment.

This making of vows was often a means of trying to manipulate God into doing (or not doing) something. It might be a promise to God that the worshipper would do a certain act for him if only God would provide something in return. These vows tried to force the hand of God and were foolish. These vows coupled with irreverent worship and many words were vanity.

The conclusion of Solomon is this: Worshippers should stand in awe of the powerful and holy God and fear him.

7. **What does it mean to "fear God"?**

The Vanity of Wanting More

Ecclesiastes 5:8-20

In 5:8-9, Qoheleth describes a scene of oppression of the poor and a violation of justice and righteousness in the province. This injustice could easily provoke discouragement and anger among the poor. While Solomon expects his readers to practice justice, he instructs them to not be amazed when they witness miscarriages of justice.

In the land one corrupt official is watched over by another corrupt official, who is in turn watched over by a third, and so on. The entire bureaucracy is one of rampant greed and corruption. At the top, however, is a king who rules over all and brings about a certain stability in the midst of chaos. There is debate about whether verse 9 refers to God or to an earthly king. If the meaning is God (which seems likely) then the verse teaches that God is over all, watching over the agriculture of the land, and providing for them while reminding them that everyone will eventually answer to him.

In 5:10, we turn our attention once more to the vanity of trying to gain and hoard wealth. If your desire is for the gain of money, then you will eventually be disappointed not only because you will

[1] Smith, James E. *The Wisdom Literature and Psalms.* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1996), 746.

never find full satisfaction, but because wealth itself can bring misery. The wealthy have many cares including providing for servants or employees as well as the constant pressure of creditors and debtors. The only satisfaction the wealth man may enjoy is in observing his wealth and this may be a fleeting joy.

8. Describe the sleep of the labourer verses the sleep of the rich.

Solomon next describes a situation where the wealthy man suffers a great financial loss in a bad venture. We can only speculate exactly how the man lost his money, but it could have been a bad investment, or a faulty partnership, or a mistimed business expansion. Since the man lost all his money he had nothing to pass on as an inheritance to his son.

9. What is the meaning of 5:15?

5:16 asks a rhetorical question that expects the answer of a resounding no. There is no gain in the toils of those who work for self. Their fortune can be lost in a myriad of ways and even if they are not lost in this life, they cannot be transferred to the next.

The man who seeks after worldly wealth (and especially the one who loses it) is described in dramatic detail in verse 17. He "eats in darkness" illustrating his frustration, aloneness, and despair. He is vexed, and sick, and angry at this situation. He is experiencing the full effect of *hebel.*

Even though wealth that is greatly loved and hoarded brings grief, the godly man should enjoy those things with which God blesses; even the physical things of this world.

10. How does Solomon describe "toil" in 5:18-20?

"There are two ways that people demonstrate discontentment. The first is in their constant effort to acquire more (5:8-12). The second is in their attempt to hoard what they acquire (5:13-17). In verses 18-20, Qoheleth now offers the counterpart of this 'gross sickness.' To those who do not spend their lives seeking, pursuing, devouring, and acquiring, God gives enjoyment."[2]

Truth

"Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot. Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil—this is the gift of God. For he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart."

(Ecclesiastes 5:18-20 ESV)

[2] Bland, Dave L. *The College Press NIV Commentary: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, & Song of Songs.* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 2002), 344.

Ecclesiastes

Does Life Have Meaning?

The Meaninglessness of Wealth

Ecclesiastes 6:1-9

In chapter 6, Qoheleth speaks from personal observation of what he sees "under the sun." What he observes is described as an "evil" that "lies heavy on mankind" and is common for those who live for self (under the sun). The wealthy self-absorbed man has many possessions and is respected by those around him, but he finds no lasting joy and contentment.

God is provider of the man's wealth and possessions even if he does not recognise God's providential care. Anything that anyone accomplishes is only possible because God created all, sustains all, and set in order the laws of nature. God does not give this man the power to enjoy his wealth; probably because the man does not acknowledge, love, and obey God.

There is great futility in living for self. This man's wealth is eventually owned by another who may have gained it in business, war, or through some foolishness of the wealthy man.

Not only is wealth without God folly, but a long life with many children will also not satisfy the greed present in those who live "under the sun." The man Solomon describes has even lost the ability to be buried in dignity. In times of war, bodies were left to be ravaged by animals and the elements. To die, discontented, and without proper burial was viewed as so terrible that to have been stillborn would have been better. The stillborn child did not suffer the meaningless of greed and will find immediate rest. It is better never to experience life in this world than to live with discontentment.

Both the wealthy man and the stillborn infant end in *Sheol* (6:6). *Sheol* is the Hebrew word meaning "unseen abode of the dead." Solomon is not speaking of where one spends eternity, but rather that the future of all is to die and be buried.

1. **For what ways is a stillborn child in a better situation than one who dies discontented?**

Hedonistic Paradox

In ethics there is a what is called "*hedonistic paradox*." Hedonism is the desire to please self, but the paradox is that the more one tries to please self, the more discontented he becomes.

2. **What can we learn about children who have not yet been born (or who die stillborn) in 6:3-6?**

3. **What is the purpose of Solomon's use of hyperbole in 6:3-6?**

4. **What is the meaning of 6:7?**

Not only does the pursuit of wealth end in meaninglessness, but the same can be said for wisdom. The wise, the foolish, and the poor all end up in *Sheol.* One does not have to be wealthy by the world's standards to be discontented and to live life in the pursuit of more.

The truth of the matter is that a man does better when he enjoys what is directly before him in the present rather than constantly looking for something in the future.

Truth

Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the appetite: this is also vanity and striving after the wind."

(Ecclesiastes. 6:9 ESV)

5. **Why do people often fail to find enjoyment in the present while looking for happiness in some future event or attainment?**

Introduction to Part 2

Ecclesiastes 6:10-12

Ecclesiastes 6:10 marks the beginning of the second half of the book. Here Solomon will look at two main subjects: 1) A desire to find out what is good and 2) an admission of ignorance and uncertainty about the future.

One of the primary questions man has is: "Who am I?" We know from Genesis 2:7 that God formed man from the dust of the earth. The created man is weak and powerless compared to his Creator. Man tries to argue with God, but this debate is futile because God (the one who is stronger than he) is in control and beyond the reach of man's criticisms. In fact according to 6:11, the more one hurls words at God the more vain they become.

6. **How and why does man sometimes attempt to rebel against God with words?**

7. **Why do more words bring more vanity when confronting God?**

8. **What does Ecc. 5:2 and 6:11teach us about approaching God with words?**

9. **What is the relationship of the potter to the clay and how does this relate to what Solomon is writing in 6:10-12?**

Man cannot know his future on this earth, but God does. Man's life is described as a shadow in 6:12, not referring so much to the brevity of life as the transitory nature of life. A man is born, lives for a few years, and a short time later is forgotten. While living in this world a man does not know what will happen in the days, months, and years ahead and he is unaware of what will happen on earth after his passing.

10. **How should the view of man's frailty and uncertain future (in the present life) affect his relationship to the Creator?**

The unknowable future reinforces what Qoheleth has previously taught that a man should enjoy God's present blessings and not be concerned with looking for something better in the uncertain future.

Lessons Made by Comparisons

Ecclesiastes 7:1-12

In the first fourteen verses of Ecclesiastes 7, Qoheleth teaches what is "good" or "better" through the use of a number of comparisons. On the surface these comparisons may seem to be contradictory to the natural order, but understood in context they help the reader to understand what is really valuable in life.

Qoheleth will use three themes in the first twelve verses of Ecclesiastes 7: the themes of death, the contrast between the wise and the fool, and the value found in wise living.

A good name or reputation is reflected in the respect that others have when they think of you. This "good name" is comparatively better than precious ointment. In Solomon's day ointment was an expensive luxury that was used to produce a good and fragrant smell. It was highly prized and popularly used at times of feasts and celebrations. While ointment was valuable a good name was better.

What might at first seem puzzling, Qoheleth claims that the day of death is better than the day of birth and similarly it is better to go the "house of mourning" than the "house of feasting." Death is in some ways better than birth for the godly person since they have finished their life victoriously and with a good name. At birth a person does not know what difficulties and challenges await them in the future.

The house of mourning forces one to consider the important details of life and to reflect on righteous living while feasting, merriment, and mirth do not usually bring reflective thinking. The house of mourning causes each to remember his own mortality and to take those steps necessary to assure a good name. (See Psalm 90:12)

1. **Describe some reasons why death may be more welcome than birth. (See also Rev. 14:13)**

2. **What lessons can be learned through mourning?**

Sorrow is described as better than laughter. This is so because sorrow has the ability to bring repentance which in turn brings true joy. Paul writes in 2 Cor. 7:10, "For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death." Sorrow causes a man to reflect on his life and the brevity of his existence in this world while the pleasantness of laughter does not lead to contemplative thinking. The goal is to gain and keep a good name and to live a wise life.

Rebuke from the wise is better than the music and songs of the foolish. The word translated as rebuke means: "that grave admonition which heals and strengthens even while it wounds."[1] While rebuke may be painful, it can help the wise person develop and keep a good name. The laughter of the fool is much like the crackling of thorns under a pot. These thorns were used when good wood was not available for the fire. They burn quickly with a burst of flame, and make a lot of noise, but are quickly consumed with little gained from their use. They are a "flash in the pan."

3. **Why is rebuke so painful and why can it be necessary? (Compare Titus 2:15)**

Two threats to wise living are found in verse 7. The wise man can be driven into madness by oppression or through the corruption that comes through bribery. The man who is oppressed can be driven to madness as he endures day after day the onslaught of an oppressive man who has power over him. Perhaps Solomon has in mind the potential that the wise man himself could become an oppressor. We have witnessed many ruthless dictators in the history of our world who have become "mad." On a smaller and more relevant scale we sometimes see employers, lower level government officials, or even church leaders seem to lose touch with reality as they abuse and oppress those under them. In either case corruption, greed, bribery, and the like can lead a person from wise living. This illustrates why rebuke can be beneficial as it keeps a man on the right course to keep his good name and finish life's course righteously.

The words of verses 8-9 point out the value of patience. The patient man can look back to reflect upon an undertaking and work through any problems along the way. The proud man runs ahead and then becomes angry when things do not go his way. He foolishly holds this anger in his heart.

4. **Why do people become angry?**

5. **What does anger do to the heart of a man?**

People have the tendency to believe the past was better than the present. As people age, they often remember the "good old days," and while some parts of life may have been better in the past constantly reflecting on a golden past can lead one to live with negativity. Qoheleth says that this is not wise living. Any difficulty with the present should cause the believer to look forward to his future with the Lord not back to the past to which he cannot return.

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[1] Smith, James E. *The Wisdom Literature and Psalms.* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1996), 762.

6. **What problems can arise from a desire to live in the past?**

Solomon describes three signs of a lack of wisdom: impatience, a willingness to harbour anger, and a failure to look at the present circumstances wisely.[2]

Verse 11 can be translated as either: wisdom along with an inheritance is good or wisdom is good like an inheritance. As one gains and then possesses an inheritance, one can also gain and then possess wisdom. Both are advantageous to those who "see the sun" (are alive) and both provide a degree of protection, but wisdom is greater because wisdom "preserves life." A wise person makes choices that tend to lead to a longer physical lifespan, but more important, the wise person will find eternal life with the Lord.

7. **Describe the protection and the limitations of what money can provide.**

8. **Describe the protection that wise living can provide.**

Learning the Limits of Human Influence

Ecclesiastes 7:13-14

Human beings have a limited ability to change the circumstances of life or the plans of God. In verse 13, Qoheleth points out that man cannot make straight what God made crooked. The word "crooked" has the idea of being "inscrutable" "instead of an ethical sense of 'wicked' or 'corrupt.'"[3]

In other words, there are many things in life which are difficult and seem out of alignment and these are impossible for man to change. Man does not have the power to travel a straight and untangled road free from problems. Therefore, he should be joyful "in the day of prosperity" as well as in the "day of adversity."

Our God is the God who made every day. He is in complete control of the world He created. The days of prosperity should bring us joy and cause us to praise Him. The days of adversity should cause us to seek Him and learn to depend upon Him. While we may never know what good comes from bad days we are reminded that he always cares for us. (Read 1 Peter 5:7)

In verse 10, Solomon had warned against thinking too much about the past and now in verse 14 he warns against thinking too much about the future. Man cannot change or return to the past and he does not know what is coming in the future.

9. **How does Romans 8:28 along with Ecclesiastes 7:13-14 help us to look at our past, present, and future?**

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[2] Kidwell, R. J. *Ecclesiastes & Song of Solomon. (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1977), 165.*

[3] ESV Study Bible. Online edition.

Living a Balanced Life

Ecclesiastes 7:15-29

In Ecclesiastes 7:15-29, Solomon discovers that life is to be lived with moderation or balance. He begins by describing his life as vain (*hebel*). Here the idea is that life is like a vapour; not long in duration. In his short life, Qoheleth says "I have seen everything." So this wise man, who who as "seen it all," chronicles what he has observed that leads him to conclude a life of moderation is the proper way of living.

In verse 15 he has observed that the righteous sometimes die young while the evil live long. Christians have often commented that the wicked seem to prosper while the righteous life is filled with trouble. Qoheleth is not saying this is always true, but it is sometimes true and seems to go against the natural order.

1. **Have you ever been perplexed when you see the righteous suffer while the wicked seem to prosper? Why does this happen?**

Verse 16 at first reading, seems inconsistent with what we believe is true. Solomon is not urging people to lack righteousness or wisdom, but is teaching his readers not to trust in their own righteousness or wisdom. There are those who believe they can be "good enough" to please God and then become overconfident and take pride in their own goodness. They are "self-righteous." Though Solomon has shown wisdom to be superior to folly, constant seeking of wisdom to excess will not lead to the understanding of everything that happens in life. Qoheleth asks, "Why should you destroy yourself?" The word translated as "destroy" literally means to confound or confuse oneself.[1] In other words, you are not going to be good enough or wise enough to understand everything that happens in life.

2. **Describe the lifestyle and attitude of those who believe they can be good enough or wise enough to find the answer to all of life's questions.**

3. **Can there ever be an excess of true righteousness?**

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[1] Smith, James E. *The Wisdom Literature and Psalms.* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1996), 768.

The next thought is similar, "don't be overly wicked, neither be a fool." Even though Solomon has previously said that sometimes the wicked live long, this is not the usual outcome. Wickedness and foolishness more often leads to a premature death in this life and eternal punishment in the life to come.

The balance between being overly righteous and overly wicked is found in verse 18. The one who will find success is the one who fears God. The person who believes he can be righteous and wise enough to please God and discover the answers to all life's complexities will ultimately fail and this failure could cause him to lose his faith. No one will understand everything that happens in this life. The one who persists in wickedness and foolishness may come to an early demise. The proper balance is to "fear God." Trust God to know what is right and place your faith and hope in him.

4. **How can we assess whether or not our life has the balance described in verse 18?**

While it may have seemed Qoheleth discounted wisdom in verse 15, instead he values real wisdom when used by the one who fears God. The metaphor that is used of ten rulers in a city describes the best of human wisdom. The number ten is denotes completeness, the city shows that this is not a small community, but wisdom is drawn from the best of a large population. Wisdom is necessary because there is no one who never sins (vs. 20). Wisdom will lead a man to see the error of his ways and return to the fear of God. Again we see the balance needed in life. While we cannot be sinless, we can live wise lives and fear God.

5. **What does 1 John 1:8-10 teach Christians about sin?**

Verses 21-22 moves to practical instruction about handling criticism. Qoheleth has already stated that no one is sinless, but even if we could be, that would not stop criticism. It is best to attempt to avoid hearing what others say about you when you aren't present. If you do overhear someone talking about you, the instruction is "do not take to heart all the things people say." Then comes the need for self-evaluation if you do overhear a criticism. Have you never criticised others?

6. **What makes criticism so painful?**

7. **What steps can a person take to "not take to heart" what others say about them?**

Qoheleth had tested his conclusions by wisdom, but the deepest of things eluded him. He understood much of what he observed in life (Ecc. 1:16), but strive as he might, he could not understand those things that are described as "far off" and "deep, very deep." He could not know

what was "far off" either before the Creation or into the distant future. He could not understand the seeming contradictions of life (as in verse 15). He could not fathom the intricacies of what God knows. They were and would always be beyond the grasp of his wisdom. Solomon has come to this conclusion about the limits of wisdom after great effort. In verses 24-29 the phrases "find out," or "sought out," or "search out" are used repeatedly. This indicates "the intensity of Qoheleth's search."[2]

Since Solomon could not understand the things that are "far off" and "deep, very deep" he turned his heart to understand life in his world. He wanted to know "wisdom" and the "scheme of things." The "scheme of things" is a phrase used in verses 25, 27, and 29 and "is an accounting term, which involves the idea of taking inventory, of calculating or adding up the facts of life."[3] Qoheleth wanted to understand life so desperately that he turned his heart to "know," to "search out," to "seek." He made every effort to understand the scheme of things. In this search concludes that folly and foolishness are both wickedness and madness.

Along the way Solomon finds something "more bitter than death." This bitterness comes from the seduction and ensnaring of a wicked woman. She can only be overcome by a man who pleases God. We do know from Biblical accounts that Solomon allowed the women in his life to lead him away from faithfulness to God.

What we now need to determine is the identity of the woman in verses 26-28. Certainly Solomon is not describing the female population in general. Often he has written of the joy of marriage in Ecclesiastes and in Proverbs 31 he writes about the great value of a virtuous wife. Perhaps he is speaking of an evil woman as he does so often in the book of Proverbs. This evil woman is one that a man allows to lead him into sin and debauchery. Others take this woman to be a personification of folly. In Proverbs 9, Solomon writes of the woman "Folly" which is not a physical woman, but rather worldliness personified as a woman named Folly. Perhaps it can be both a seductive and evil woman or the personified "Folly."[4]

8. **Why is the bitterness of the ensnaring woman of verse 26 worse than death?**

9. **How does the evil woman "snare" and "net" and in what sense are her hands "fetters?"**

Again we must be reminded that Solomon is not making a wholesale condemnation of women for often in his writings he praises women. What he is saying is that an evil woman can bring a righteous man great pain. The opposite would be equally true. Solomon's experience with evil women (and his experience was expansive) led him to to his conclusion after learning lesson after lesson (vs. 27).

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[2] Bland, Dave L. *The College Press NIV Commentary: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, & Song of Songs.* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 2002), 359.

[3] ibid. p. 360.

[4] Smith, James E. *The Wisdom Literature and Psalms.* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1996), 773.

Solomon found in his search for wisdom and the scheme of things that there were very few righteous. He found only one man in a thousand and not even one woman to be righteous. This is not to be taken as a literal percentage, instead he is saying that righteous men are very rare and from his observation, probably from his many wives and concubines, there were even less righteous women in his day.

Qoheleth's final conclusion in verse 29 is this: God is not to blame for man's failure because God made man upright. Man is to blame for his own failures which have come through many schemes which are contrary to righteous living.

Ecclesiastes

Does Life Have Meaning?

Submitting to the King

Ecclesiastes 8:1-9

Ecclesiastes chapter eight begins by asking two questions. The first is: "who is like the wise?" The answer is that no one can compare favourably with the wise. The second question is asked: "who knows the interpretation of a thing?" Again it is the wise man who has the answers to the events of life. Even though we learned in the previous chapter that wisdom has limitations, the wise man does know and understand many things in this life that are hidden to the understanding of a foolish man.

The wisdom of the wise man causes his countenance to shine and removes the hardness from his face. This is to say that wisdom helps a man to experience a measure of satisfaction, calmness, and confidence. This is especially true as he approaches a king.

In verses 2-9 we learn about some of the proper and imprudent ways to interact with a king. Some commentators take the king to be God, while others believe the king refers to an earthly monarch. The actions of the follower of God will be the same since they are to obey both God and earthly governments (Romans 13:1-7).

Qoheleth urges obedience to the commands of the king because of "God's oath to him." If the king is God then the oath must refer to the covenant. If the king is a human leader then the oath comes from the necessity placed upon God's people to obey those in authority.

1. **List some reasons why God's people are to obey their earthly leaders. (Read also Romans 13:1-7)**

Going from the king's presence in verse 3 refers to refusing to pay allegiance to the king. A wise man will not rebel against his leader because the king has the authority to do whatever he wants and act however he chooses. No subject has the right to question the decisions of a king. Therefore a wise man will follow the commands of the king and even if the king acts with evil he will know the time and nature of the actions he should take. He knows that God will make the final judgments so the wise man can remain calm and obedient even in the face of injustice.

2. **Why is it wise to follow the commands of the king?**

In verse 6, we read there is a time and way for everything. God will right all wrongs though man may have to wait to see his justice. Rebelling against authority, even unjust authority, can bring many troubles on a man. The wise man waits for justice, not knowing when God will act, but trusting that he will.

In verse 8, Qoheleth lists four things over which man has no control. First, he cannot retain the spirit.[1] Death will bring the departure of the spirit from the body and not even an king has the power to hold his spirit in his body. Second and similarly, man has no power over the day of his death. Third, death is like a soldier in battle, he cannot remove himself from fighting while the war rages. Fourth, no one can gain control and escape judgment through wickedness.

3. **How does an understanding of verse 8 help a wise man obey the king even in the face of adversity?**

Even though man cannot restrain the spirit or avoid death, he does have the power to hurt others. This is especially true in the case of a king or governmental leader. In verse 9 we see the familiar phrase, "under the sun" indicating these actions were taken by man without consideration of God.

Wisdom in Fearing God

Ecclesiastes 8:10-17

There is nothing that escapes the sight of God who knows even the intents of the heart (Jeremiah 17:10). The wicked in verse 10 gave the appearance of faithfulness. They went in and out of the temple and were praised[2] and given a proper burial even when they had practiced evil. Solomon probably has in mind the wicked kings who would not escape punishment, but it is equally true of any evil person. This is vanity (hebel) which tells us that every person, even kings, will be forgotten after death.

Qoheleth repeats a theme found in the previous chapter that it can appear that the wicked prosper and live long lives without any retribution from God. The wise man should know that this will not go on indefinitely and that the evil man will be punished. God does not always act according to the timetables humans might consider appropriate, but God will always execute justice on the wicked and will vindicate the righteous.

The perceived slowness of God's execution of justice causes the sinner to increase in his sin. The wicked man who seems to have "gotten away" with wickedness is emboldened to continue. Qoheleth wants his readers to "fear God" because that is the only path to rightness with God.

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[1] Some translations say that no man can restrain the wind. Either translation can be grammatically correct and it impossible to say with certainty which Solomon had in mind. No one can restrain the wind, just as no one can restrain the spirit leaving the body.

[2] The word translated "praised" in the ESV is translated as "forgotten" in some translations.

4. **Why does God sometimes delay in the execution of his justice?**

5. **How does God describe the relationship he has to those who fear him in verse 12**

6. **What negative words and phrases does Solomon use in verse 13 to describe the condition of the wicked.**

Verse 14 continues the thought that "on earth" or under the sun there is a vanity (hebel) which takes place where those who are righteous sometimes suffer as if they were wicked while the wicked sometimes prosper as if they were righteous. While this is not to be considered the "norm" it does happen.

The righteous man should not become embittered from what happens in life that seems unfair. Instead he should be joyful in his blessings. It is these simple blessings that bring joy: eating, and drinking, and working.[3] These are not hedonistic pleasures, but simple joys granted to man by God. He should relish God's blessings.

A man should not allow the circumstances around him that seem inequitable to rob him of joy. The fact is that the limits of human knowledge prevent man from ever understanding why life unravels as it does. He should fear God, placing his faith in the only one who has the power to right all wrongs and vindicate all who have been righteous.

Truth

I commend joy, for man has nothing better under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun.

Ecc. 8:15

7. **How can man go about enjoying the simple pleasures of life without becoming embittered by what seems to be inequities around him?**

In verses 16-17 Solomon reaches an important conclusion. He had applied his heart so diligently to seek wisdom (1:16) that he had been unable to sleep.[4] In his great quest to understand what happens "under the sun" Qoheleth often came up empty handed. There are some happenings in this world simply beyond understanding even for the wisest of the wise no matter how intently they seek answers. No man can understand why God acts or does not act as he sometimes does. Those who claim to know the answers to all of life's mysteries are only fooling themselves.

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[3] See also 2:24; 3:12, 22; 5:18.

[4] The one who cannot find sleep can either be Solomon as he makes his search for wisdom or it can be translated to mean that those on earth do not sleep as they work and labour in the activities of life.

8. **What frustrations can develop when a person cannot be content to "not know" why God sometimes works as he does.**

For those who want to be wise as they live on this earth, Solomon has this advise in chapter 8. Obey your leaders, fear God and trust in Him to right all wrongs in his time, don't concern yourself with what you cannot understand, and enjoy the simple blessings that come from the hand of God.

Ecclesiastes

Does Life Have Meaning?

Facing Death and Enjoying Life

Ecclesiastes 9:1-10

The first six verses of chapter 9 are a continuation of the thoughts in chapter 8, that wisdom comes in fearing God. "But all this I laid to heart, examining it all" refers to what Qoheleth had discussed in the previous verses: On this earth it can be hard to reconcile why the unrighteous sometimes prosper while the righteous suffer, but the wise man will trust God who will one day make things right. A wise man will enjoy the simple blessings that come from the hand of God while trusting God in those things he cannot understand.

In chapter 9, Qoheleth sees that all who are righteous and wise are in the hand of God regardless of whether they suffer or prosper in the present life. The conclusion is to make the best of every day because there is hope and industry while alive, but death will bring an end to all activity "under the sun."

1. **What does it mean to be in the "hand of God?" (9:1; 2:24)**

The love or hate in verse one describes the entire breadth of experiences a person can have in life. There are both good and bad happenings in the life of every person. Being in the hand of God does not prevent terrible experiences nor do problems in life show that a person has been unwise or unrighteous. Similarly prosperity does not indicate whether or not a person is righteous or wise.

In verse 2, the same point is made in expanded form. No matter if a person is righteous or wicked, good or evil, clean or unclean, a man who sacrifices or one who does not sacrifice, a good man or a sinner, one who swears or does not swear an oath each one experiences a range of happenings in life. There is no way to tell by external observances of a person's circumstances whether or not they are righteous.

2. **What if anything do these verses say to those who claim that health and prosperity will come to the righteous? (Sometimes called the "Prosperity Gospel)**

In verse 3, death is described as "an evil" which comes to all. For the unrighteous person the realisation of a coming death causes them to be full of evil and madness while they live. "The term 'madness' ... embraces the idea of being blind to the real issues, spiritually deluded.[1] It appears to them that there is no advantage in righteous living because the righteous suffer and die just like the unrighteous. Solomon repeats what he wrote in 8:11 "that because evil is not in this world visibly punished, men become confident and bold in sinning."[2]

3. **Why does an awareness of a coming death sometimes lead the unrighteous to sin?**

In verse 4, Qoheleth says there is hope only while one is alive. (This the hope for accomplishing anything "under the sun.") It is better to be a live dog (which was viewed with contempt, as a wild scavenger, by the people of Solomon's day) than to be a dead lion (which was considered the noblest of animals.) The living have an awareness of life and death, but the dead know nothing of what is happening on earth and even their memory is soon forgotten.

Solomon is not teaching that there is no life after death (see 12:7). He is saying that the dead no longer have any knowledge of or participation in what happens on earth. In a generation or two they will be forgotten and they are no longer loved, or hated, or envied by anyone. This is the view of death "under the sun" without a knowledge and appreciation of the workings of God. This is an accurate view of death for non-believers who "refuse to let the light from the empty tomb illuminate the darkness of death."[3]

4. **What emotions might the unrighteous person experience if he believes life "under the sun" is all there is or ever will be?**

5. **How should an awareness of a coming death motivate and affect people?**

The previous verses in Ecclesiastes may seem quite depressing. Everyone faces problems, pain, and tragedy in life even if they are righteous. There is no equity "under the sun;" the wicked may prosper while the righteous suffer. Everyone faces a certain death and their contribution to life in this world will be soon forgotten. How can a person bear up under the expectation of such a future? Solomon basically says live your life to the fullest and enjoy every moment you can.

In verse 7, Solomon says, "eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart." Enjoy food and drink "for God has approved of what you do." God has provided these blessings for our

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[1] Smith, James E. *The Wisdom Literature and Psalms.* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1996), 785.

[2] C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch. *Commentary on the Old Testament.* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), vol. 6, p. 756.

[3] Smith, James E. *The Wisdom Literature and Psalms.* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1996), 787.

enjoyment. God has made food and drink to have good flavour, to nourish, and to bring satisfaction.

White garments were used to denote purity and celebration. Oil was used as a perfume and to refresh the skin. These show an attitude to joy, celebration, and thanksgiving. Again, the teaching is to enjoy the blessings God provides. Do not wallow in self-pity or allow yourself to be depressed by what you cannot change. Take pleasure in what God gives you to enjoy.

Next Solomon teaches that a man should enjoy his life with the wife he loves. Solomon commends marriage and makes it clear that marriage is between a man and a woman and is considered to be a permanent union as long as they both shall live (see Matt. 19:4-6). The word translated as "vain" in verse 9 is the word *hebel* that we have seen repeatedly in Ecclesiastes. The idea is that life is transitory, so enjoy your marriage as long as you and your spouse live.

Your wife is "your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun." The idea is that a good marriage can bring joy in the midst of a life filled with work and difficulty. It is likely that Solomon originally wrote these words of advice late in his life to young men to impress upon them that taking a wife can make life more bearable.

6. In what ways can a good marriage make the toil in life more bearable?

The final advice for enjoying life comes in the pleasure of work. When you labour, do so with all your might because the days of your activity in this world will one day cease. Whether we are working in our occupations, or engaging in activity for the Lord, we should work diligently, intently, and industriously because the grave will one day bring an end to our labours. We are all headed to Sheol (the unseen abode of the dead). Solomon is not teaching there is no afterlife, but that all our activities in this world will be complete at our death.

Time is a precious commodity. For the righteous, there should enjoyment from the work of our hands as the Bible commends industrious living. There is also much work to do for the advance of Kingdom of God. The brevity of life should lead the believer to make the most of every opportunity for service to Christ.

The Uncertainty of the Future

Ecclesiastes 9:11-18

The outcome of our activities is far from certain. In verse 11, Solomon lays out what seems to be a number of contradictions. We cannot be certain that the swift will win the race, that the battle will be won by the strong, that the wise will have bread, that the intelligent will be wealthy, that the knowledgeable will have respect and influence. The reason why these expected outcomes do not always occur comes from circumstances outside of man's control.

Regularly our well laid plans are interrupted or short-circuited by events that we could not have anticipated nor prevented. Life under the sun is filled with uncertainty. Even the time of a man's death is outside of his control and can come unexpectedly like fish caught in a net or birds entrapped in a snare. Man can prepare for many things, but unexpected happenings occur quickly and without warning. No man can be certain of what will happen tomorrow.

7. **The word translated as "chance" in verse 11 means an unexpected circumstance. How should people prepare for the unknown?**

The chapter closes with a story of a mighty king with a great army who came against a small and poor city. The fearsome army built siege-works and was nearly to breach the walls of the city. Inside the walls of the city was a poor, but wise man. He delivered the city through his wisdom; probably by shrewd negotiation.

Though the poor wise man saved the city from certain destruction he was soon forgotten. His wisdom was greater than the army's might, but under normal circumstances he has no voice and his despised by all around him.

Solomon writes a wise proverb in verses 17-18. The wise word heard in quiet is better than the shouting of a ruler among fools. A wise man offers his advice quietly and when accepted is greater than the loud leader who carries much influence. His wise counsel is greater than the mighty weapons of war. Conversely one sinner destroys much good.

8. **How does a sinner destroy much good?**

There are many lessons in chapter 9 of Ecclesiastes. Let us summarise some of the main lessons:

1. Every person will face good times and bad and these events are unpredictable. They do not necessarily reflect upon how righteous or unrighteous a person is living.

2. All believers are in the hand of God.

3. Death comes to all, but the believer will not concern himself with what he cannot change. He will enjoy the life that God provides and live it with enthusiasm.

4. Time is precious and we should use it wisely.

5. It is better to be wise and to accept the counsel of the wise even if it is not popularly accepted.

Wisdom is Better Than Folly

Ecclesiastes 10:1-20

Ecclesiastes 10:1 is a continuation of the thought found in the last verse of chapter 9. In 9:18, Qoheleth says that "...one sinner destroys much good." Now in 10:1 he adds that a few dead flies can destroy an expensive perfume. The perfume becomes less than useful because it now gives off a stench, the exact opposite of its intended purpose. In a similar way a foolish action can outweigh many wise and honourable deeds.

1. **Describe how a single foolish action (or a small number of foolish actions) can overshadow a lifetime of wise and honourable endeavours.**

Because of the destructive nature of sin (folly) each person should carefully consider how he lives. Every decision to sin runs the risk of ruining our reputation in this world as well as our relationship with God.

The right hand represented "strength, power, and justice" while the left represented "perversion, incompetence, and weakness"[1] therefore a wise man will incline his heart to the right. The foolish person shows himself to be senseless every time he steps outside his house. His actions proclaim his folly to all.

In verse 4, a ruler becomes angry and the wise response to that ruler is restraint. If you are acting wisely, do not change course, but remain calm and steady. Sometimes we refer to this as acting with "composure" in the face of adversity. Acting with restraint can often diffuse a tense situation with a foe who has superior strength or position. (See Proverbs 15:1 and 25:15)

2. **How does a soft answer turn away wrath?**

The ruler in verse 4 is unwise and volatile and in verses 5-7 we see an example of his foolish reign. In verse 5, his error is not intentional, but nevertheless demonstrates incompetence and unfitness to rule. This ruler places inept people in places of authority in the government and the natural social order is not maintained. The foolish are in charge while those who have wisdom and ability are placed in subservient positions.

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[1] Bland, Dave L. *The College Press NIV Commentary: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, & Song of Songs.* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 2002), 378.

3. Why are inept and incompetent people often found in places of authority?

In verses 8-11 proverbs are used to illustrate what can happen when one acts with folly instead of wisdom. In the first, a man digs a pit and then falls into it. Some believe the pit was designed to snare another, but the person himself is caught in the trap.[2] An even simpler possibility is that the person who dug the pit carelessly and foolishly fails to take precaution around the danger he has created.

The next illustration is of a man who breaks through a wall, but fails to consider what is on the other side. In this case it is a venomous snake which bites him.

Next a man who quarries stones is hurt by them and a man who splits logs is endangered by them. These are dangerous, but necessary jobs which should be undertaken with proper precaution or a man may be seriously harmed through a careless accident. A wise man plans and prepares for his endeavours as demonstrated by the sharpening of the axe.

In verse 11 the ancient eastern act of snake charming is used to illustrate the uselessness of wisdom that is not used. Here a snake charmer allows the venomous snake to bite before employing his professional skill of charming the snake.

4. What do the illustrations in verses 8-11 have in common?

5. What practical lessons can we learn from verses 8-11?

In verses 12-15 Solomon describes the difference between the words and actions of the wise and the words and actions of the foolish. A wise man speaks in such a way to win him favour and his words are gracious, kind, persuasive, and endearing. Conversely, the fool speaks words that bring him disfavour with others and are destructive to himself.

6. How does a wise man gain favour through his words?

The fool starts by speaking lunacy and the more he talks the more ignorant and evil he becomes. He starts badly, but finishes much worse through his incessant babbling about matters of which he knows nothing. This ignorant man demonstrates his foolishness to all. In verse 14, words pour from his mouth in mindless abundance about what will happen in the future, but Solomon has written time and time again throughout Ecclesiastes that even the wisest man does not know what will happen tomorrow.

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[2] Kidwell, R. J. *Ecclesiastes & Song of Solomon.* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1977), 249.

In verse 15, the foolish man labours unproductively until exhausted, but does not even have the common sense to find his way to the city over a clearly marked path and often traveled path. This is roughly equivalent to saying today, "He doesn't have enough sense to come in out of the rain." Qoheleth is portraying the foolish man in the most unflattering way possible.

7. Why do fools tend to talk too much?

In verses 16-17 foolish and wise national leadership is contrasted. The first king is described as a mere child, but many scholars believe Solomon is thinking of Rehoboam who ruled and acted like a child even though he was forty when he became king[3] (see 2 Chronicles 13:7 and 1 Kings 12:1-14). Rehoboam took advice from the young men he had grown up with instead of listening to the counsel of the older men.

In verse 16, the princes eat heavy meals in the morning, wasting their time and making them sluggish, instead of attending to the affairs of the nation. They should have done their work and then eaten later in the day.

A better leadership model is found in verse 17 where the king comes from a good background. This king comes from a noble family and has received a good education. Likewise the princes take care of the affairs of state before sitting down to a feast. Even in their feasting they eat "for strength" or to sustain themselves instead of becoming gluttons and drunkards.

8. What woe comes to a nation with inexperienced and childish leadership? (vs. 16)

In verses 18-19 a nation that has been neglected by its rulers is in view. These leaders have been slothful or exceedingly lazy and self-centred. The country is like a house what has not received proper care and maintenance. This house has a roof which sags and leaks because of the laziness and neglect of the owner. The rulers have lived lavishly, feasting and drinking, while believing that money held the answer to every problem. These leaders viewed their people as a source of endless money as they excessively taxed their citizens. In the case of Rehoboam massive taxation led to the loss of the ten tribes.[4]

Though a person may have to live under the authority of a corrupt king or government, the wise man will carefully weigh his words and not curse the king. Speaking out against a corrupt government could bring danger to self and family. The rich are the business owners and government officials and it is not prudent even to criticise them in the privacy of the home lest someone overhear you and carry them news of your lack of respect for them. Verse 20 is the origin of the common phrase, "A little bird told me."[5]

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[3] Smith, James E. *The Wisdom Literature and Psalms.* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1996), 797.

[4] Kidwell, R. J. *Ecclesiastes & Song of Solomon.* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1977), 258.

[5] Bland, Dave L. *The College Press NIV Commentary: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, & Song of Songs.* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 2002), 385.

9. When is it prudent and when is it imprudent to criticise those in authority?

We learn the following lessons in Ecclesiastes 10:

1. A single sin or act of folly can overshadow much wise and righteous living.

2. Many accidents can be avoided by careful planning and thoughtful execution.

3. A wise man will weigh his words and will speak in ways which are gracious, kind, persuasive, and endearing.

4. Those who speak endlessly (and with a belief in their own superior knowledge) are often the most foolish.

5. Foolish and incompetent people often find themselves in positions of leadership. They can be corrupt and vicious. The wise person will tread cautiously and criticise them at his peril.

Practice Generosity, Work Hard, and Enjoy Life

Ecclesiastes 11:1-10

Chapter 11 contains a number of Proverbs interspersed with the key thought that no one knows the future. Notice these phrases "for you know not" (vs. 2); "as you do not know" (vs. 5); "so you do not know" (vs. 5); and "you do not know" (vs. 6). Since no one knows the future, people should go about their lives with enjoyment; especially in the days of youth. The only caution is to realise that God is the judge so enjoyment and pleasure should come within the context of those things of which God would approve.

The first proverb has been interpreted variously by Bible students. The most popular idea is that a person should do good without any thought of being rewarded, but that reward may one day return from these undertakings. A second similar idea is that good is done and labour pursued with the understanding that in the future God will provide reward. So the casting of bread is a metaphor of labour, generosity, or good deeds done for another without the expectation of an immediate return. These good deeds float away like bread on the waters, but may one day be rediscovered in some pleasant way.

Verse two goes along with verse one and says the same thing in a clearer way. Here bread is given to seven or even eight. The adding of a number plus one indicates an unlimited number.[1] Do good as often and to as many as you can. Don't focus your generosity or efforts on just one or two people, but to many. One day you may need their benevolence. These good deeds are undertaken even in times of stress or the possibility of impending disaster. The wise man does not simply plan for his own future by personal investments, but by generosity to others. One day this generosity will be rewarded either in this life or the life to come.

1. **What are some of the ways in which generosity may one day be rewarded?**

2. **Why is it wise not to be generous to just one or two, but to many?**

Verse three shows the future to be outside of man's control. No one can control the rain, the wind, or the falling of a tree in a storm. These events can impact a man's life, but he is powerless to predict or prevent them. Man must continue to live and act even in the midst of an uncertain future.

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[1] Smith, James E. *The Wisdom Literature and Psalms.* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1996), 799.

While a farmer should be prudent in observing the weather, he must still plant and harvest. Verse 4 pictures a man so consumed with concern for the unknown future that he neither sows nor reaps. It is true that unforeseen weather events could destroy the farmer's crops, but not planting and not harvesting assures he will reap no reward.

3. **What happens to a man who is immobilised by the fear of what "might" happen?**

Hebrew scholars are divided on how verse 5 is to be translated. The key dilemma is how to render the Hebrew word *ruah*. The same word can be translated as wind or as spirit. The ESV translates this verse: *"As you do not know the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything."*[2] The NIV translates the verse in this way: *"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."* The way in which the NIV renders the verse is the most popular and probably is the preferred translation.

Whichever way verse 5 is translated the key point is the same; man does not know the future nor understand the complexities of the creation of a baby in the womb. Man cannot fully predict which direction the wind will blow or its strength; in fact windspeed and direction are in constant change.

4. **What should to a man do about those things that are outside his ability to predict or control?**

Verse 6 repeats the thought of verse 4 that one should not be immobilised by thoughts of what might or might not happen in the future. Hard work is encouraged from morning till evening. A man does not know if his early work, or his late work, or both will be fruitful. He does know that no labour will yield no reward.

The unknown nature of the future along with the myriad of problems that a person "might" encounter can cause indecision, inactivity, stress, unproductiveness, and debilitating paralysis. It is possible to do nothing because of the fear of what "might" happen. In the previous chapter, Qoheleth encourages proper planning and precaution (see 10:8-11), but now he teaches that a man must move forward with all his efforts if he is to accomplish anything.

5. **How does one find the balance between the prudent planning of 10:8-11 and not becoming paralysed by fear?**

[2] The ESV includes a footnote for the alternate translation.

In verse 7 Solomon begins to conclude his thoughts for Ecclesiastes. Here he basically says that it is good to be alive. After a number of passages in Ecclesiastes that can seem somewhat gloomy, Solomon says that it is good to see the sun. Instead of focusing on the difficulties of life and the fear of what "might" happen a person should enjoy life to the fullest.

The days of darkness in verse 8 are those days that come after death. The brevity of life and its precious nature should motivate a person to rejoice in whatever days he has. The phrase, *"all that comes is vanity"* teaches that life is like a vapour that quickly vanishes. A young man should make the most of every opportunity, and live life to the fullest because the difficulties of old age and the grave are ahead. This should not cause fear or dread, but inspire activity and pleasure while it can be enjoyed.

The young should "rejoice" or be exuberant with their strength and the unknown days ahead. The heart is the seat of the emotion and should be trained to enjoy life. Activities should be undertaken, work enjoyed, pleasures relished, and plans made. Solomon urges young men to be ambitious. The only advice is to realise that God is the judge, so all activities should be ones that would honour God.

To enjoy life, the young man must remove "vexation" from his heart. These are the anxieties of life or discontentment. Next he should put "pain" or "evil" away from his body. The instruction here is to live a moral life. Youth is fleeting and old age will come, so make the most of the opportunity that your strength affords.

Here are some of the key lessons in chapter 11:

1. There are many possible happenings in the future that a man cannot know or predict.

2. A will man will be generous to as many as possible, not expecting an immediate reward, but realising reward will come later in this life and/or in the life to come.

3. The wise man will act prudently, but not allow himself to be consumed with the fear of what "might" happen.

4. A person should enjoy life, especially when young, realising that youth and strength are fleeting.

5. A person should undertake activity and enjoy life avoiding all things which would be displeasing to God because each person will face judgment.

Youth and Old Age

Ecclesiastes 12:1-8

In chapter 12, Solomon continues the instruction of the young that he started in the previous chapter. His very strong admonition is: "Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth ..." In that period of life where one is strong and healthy it is easy to become self-absorbed and to feel self-reliant. Qoheleth's advice is to remember the God who is Creator. This aspect of God's nature shows him to be completely sovereign and should impress on even the young that they must be thankful to and trust in God.

The relationship of man to his God should be cultivated in the days of youth. No one is assured they will live to reach old age, but attitudes, conduct, and faithfulness cultivated in the days of youth and vigour will benefit a man for a lifetime.

It is impossible to defy the marching deterioration of the ageing body. In verse one these days are called "evil" because they bring with them pain, illness, a weakening body and mind, and eventually death. Solomon speaks of the "days" of youth and contrasts them with the "years" of older life. Youth is fleeting and the wise man will use those days to remember his Creator and to begin his life of service to God.

1. **Why is it so beneficial to develop the right relationship with God at an early age?**

2. **Why does Solomon say there is no pleasure in the evil days that come after youth?**

In verses 2-7 Solomon describes some of the problems one may experience in old age in metaphors that make old age sound quite unpleasant. In verse 2, old ageing is described as a coming storm. In Scripture light is symbolic of life and here the light is slowly extinguished. Note that the light gets progressively dimmer as the sun, the moon, and then the stars are darkened. This storm is one that does not pass, but clouds return immediately after the rain. The troubles of getting old are like reoccurring storms which confront time and time again.

The ailments in verses 3 and 4 are metaphorically described. The "keepers of the house" trembling alludes to palsy or tremors which occur with many diseases and neurological problems. The "strong men" which are "bent" are the legs which become weak and unable to remain straight. The "grinders" are the teeth which are decreasing in number. Those who "look through the windows are dimmed" referring to failing and dimming eyesight.

The "doors on the street are shut" most likely describes the loss of hearing for one who can barely even hear the grinding of grain in the house. The aged man rises at the "sound of a bird" illustrating a lack of sound sleep. The "daughters of song" which are "brought low" describes a once melodious voice which now has lost is beauty.

In verse 5, the elderly person is afraid of heights or steep inclines. There is the fear of falling or losing breath. There are obstacles in every path that create fear because any slip could be tragic. The almond tree blossoming is the greying of the hair and speaks of a decaying body. The grasshopper who drags himself along is a metaphor for the gait of an aged person. The locust hatches in the early spring in Palestine and has no wings, so its progress is clumsy and slow.[1] Desire fails indicating a loss of energy, exuberance, and interest in the things associated with this life. Desire fails because death is near and man goes to his eternal home. Here Qoheleth is not speaking of the after life, but rather the grave to which each man is destined. While this elderly man awaits death the mourners prepare to make their way into the streets to loudly lament his passing.

3. Why does Solomon paint such a negative picture of old age?

Death is pictured in verses 6-7 as a silver cord that is snapped, and a golden bowl that is broken, a pitcher that is shattered, and a wheel is broken. These illustrations show one useful objects that can no longer serve their purpose. The oil is lost from the golden bowl extinguishing the flame, the pitcher is broken releasing the water it once held, and the wheel is broken so that it can no longer draw water from the well. In physical death the body begins to decay so that it returns to dust. The man's spirit goes to God who will serve as judge.

There have been medical advances in recent decades so that many people see who would have been blind in early ages, they hear when they would have been deaf in times past, they often keep their teeth to the grave, they walk when before they would have been immobile, and many live longer than they would have without the medications, treatments, and surgeries which are available in today's world. Still, man has not and will not avoid growing old and facing the grave.

There is often pain, disability, and decline in many areas of our physical and mental lives. It is important that we begin to build our relationship with our Creator at the earliest possible age.

4. How can we impress upon young people that life is short and that they should remember their Creator?

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[1] Smith, James E. *The Wisdom Literature and Psalms.* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1996), 809.

5. **How should a coming death and judgment affect our thinking?**

There is often pain, disability, and decline in many areas of our physical and mental lives. It is important that we begin to build our relationship with our Creator at the earliest possible age.

Concluding Thoughts

Ecclesiastes 12:8-14

Solomon begins his conclusion the way in which he began Ecclesiastes. "Vanity of vanities," "all is vanity." Life under the sun is *hebel.* It is a vapour that is soon gone. Life has been shown to be unpredictable with pain, injustice, and perplexity throughout.

Again our author refers to himself as "the Preacher" (*Koheleth*) and claims to be a man of wisdom. This we know to be true of Solomon since God granted him great wisdom. Solomon was also a teacher giving wise instruction after careful investigation. Note he weighed, studied, and arranged his material. Many of the proverbs are recorded for us here is Ecclesiastes as well as in the Old Testament book of Proverbs.

When we read Ecclesiastes it may seem discouraging on the surface, but that was not Solomon's intent. In fact in verse 10 Qoheleth says that he wants to find words of delight. The words that he wrote were upright and true. They are both the words of Solomon's heart and words of truth from the Lord. Ecclesiastes is challenging, helpful, and relevant for believers of all ages.

6. **How can we find delight in the words of Ecclesiastes?**

The words of the wise, like Solomon's words in Ecclesiastes are like "goads" which was a rod used for poking and driving oxen. The words create some pain and promote a response. They are designed to move one in the right direction.

The "collected sayings" (words of Ecclesiastes) are like nails that are fixed which give stability and strength. Nails penetrate and the words of Ecclesiastes also penetrates deep into the heart of the reader. These words are arranged and ordered in a way to bring the greatest result.

7. **How can goads and nails be helpful?**

The words of Ecclesiastes are given by "one Shepherd." The shepherd of course is God who is the one who inspired all Scripture. This is why Qoheleth can confidently say that these words are upright and true because they ultimately are words from God. This is another way of saying Ecclesiastes is an inspired writing.

Books and words outside of Scripture do not have the same legitimacy of truth as does God's inspired words. There are endless numbers of books written claiming to contain wisdom and truth, but only the Word of God can be trusted to always be true in every way. Studying every truth claim in every book outside the Bible will wear one out as every detail must be weighed, deciphered, and analysed.

ECCLESIASTES

All Is Vanity

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

2 Vanity[2] of vanities, says the Preacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.
3 What does man gain by all the toil
at which he toils under the sun?
4 A generation goes, and a generation comes,
but the earth remains forever.
5 The sun rises, and the sun goes down,
and hastens[3] to the place where it rises.
6 The wind blows to the south
and goes around to the north;
around and around goes the wind,
and on its circuits the wind returns.
7 All streams run to the sea,
but the sea is not full;
to the place where the streams flow,
there they flow again.
8 All things are full of weariness;
a man cannot utter it;
the eye is not satisfied with seeing,
nor the ear filled with hearing.
9 What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be
done;
and there is nothing new under the sun.
10 Is there a thing of which it is said,
"See, this is new"?
11 What is crooked cannot be made
straight;
and what is lacking cannot be
counted.
12 I said in my heart, "I have acquired
great wisdom, surpassing all who were over
Jerusalem before me, and my heart has had
great experience of wisdom and knowledge."
13 And I applied my heart to know wisdom and
to know madness and folly. I perceived that this
also is but a striving after wind.
14 For in much wisdom is much vexation,
and he who increases knowledge
increases sorrow.

The Vanity of Self-Indulgence

2 I said in my heart, "Come now, I will test
you with pleasure; enjoy yourself." But
behold, this also was vanity.[4] 2 I said of laugh-
ter, "It is mad," and of pleasure, "What use is
it?" 3 I searched with my heart how to cheer my
body with wine—my heart still guiding me
with wisdom—and how to lay hold on folly,
till I might see what was good for the children
of man to do under heaven during the few
days of their life. 4 I made great works. I built
houses and planted vineyards for myself. 5 I
made myself gardens and parks, and planted
in them all kinds of fruit trees. 6 I made myself

8. Describe the usefulness and limitations of books outside the Bible.

Solomon's conclusion after all his great investigation into every facet of life, undertaken with every resource, and with great energy, and enthusiasm is this: "All has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments for this is the whole duty of man."

That man should fear and obey God is the conclusion of Ecclesiastes. Fear here means a reverent respect and honour of the one who is Creator and Lord. The two commands to fear God and keep his commandments cannot be separated for it is impossible to truly fear God without obeying him. Likewise a man will not obey God without the respect that comes seeing God the Creator as awesome and holy in nature.

Solomon has written time and time again that man cannot know the future and much of what happens under the sun is outside of man's hands. There is one who created all, knows all, and has all power. He is awesome and is to be respected and obeyed.

To fear and obey God is the whole duty of man. Some translations say this is the duty of every man. Whichever translation is correct, both are true. The God who made all, knows all, and sees all. He will judge man after evaluating everything that man does in public and in secret.

9. Describe how a man is to fear God.

10. What commands does God expect man to keep?

Here are some of the main lessons in chapter 12:

1. A person should begin to remember and obey God as a youth.

2. Ageing brings man difficulties, so obedience to God should begin early in life.

3. The words of Scripture are inspired by God and are true. They contain words to teach us, rebuke us, and spur us to faithful living.

4. Nothing is more important than fearing and obeying god.