

Lessons on Ecclesiastes

Taken from the Book of Ecclesiastes.

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Dedication

To the memory of John B. and Lillian V. Hendershot – who taught us to “pass
it on.”

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All Is Vanity - Ecclesiastes 1

No part of the Bible has been as misused and abused as Ecclesiastes. Once divided into chapter and verse, it's a favorite of those who pull quotations out of context. Let's understand the context, therefore: this is Solomon's search for meaning in life. It is therefore still relevant today; Solomon, the man who had everything, had nothing without God. It's just that it took him twelve chapters to get there.

Introduction

Ecclesiastes 1:1-3 NASB (1) The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. (2) "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity." (3) What advantage does man have in all his work Which he does under the sun?

Who

Except for those liberal scholars who start with the assumption that the Bible must be wrong, everyone agrees that this is the work of Solomon, son of David. He introduces himself:

- ✦ First, he calls himself the "Preacher." The word in Hebrew, *kohleth*, actually means "gatherer," as in one who gathers a crowd together. It's appropriate in another way, for Solomon has gathered wisdom and knowledge, as we shall see.
- ✦ He is the son of David – a favorite title of our Lord – the heir to the greatness of that line. Unlike his father, however, he is a man of peace. In effect, he reaped the benefits of his father's wars. Thus, he was not forced to do anything, nor to explain why the pressure of war compelled a particular action.
- ✦ He is the king. He has wealth, he has power, he has social status – he can have, in fact, all the desires of the human heart. The rest of us can say, "If only I had..." Solomon went out and got it.

All is vanity

Solomon begins with the prime observation: all is vanity. The word "vanity" does not mean self-admiration in this context. It means "useless." It's not a new answer, either. You'll find it in Job and the Psalms, too. But this is the penultimate expression of it.

Solomon seeks the answer to a great question: what is the purpose of man?

- ✦ The evolutionist tells us that there is no purpose to man – you happened by chance, there is no meaning to the universe. But the one reason you're here is that your ancestors were very good at one thing: reproducing. Therefore, it's survival of the fittest – may the strongest kids win. Interestingly, this accompanies a falling birth rate. Hmm.
- ✦ The existentialist tells us that there is no purpose, but to exist. All is meaningless – and often in this work Solomon will agree. But we are not at the end of his search, yet.
- ✦ And those of the emergent church, post-modernism in action? Since this question would require knowing an absolute truth, and there is no such thing, your guess is as good as mine.

Under the sun

The phrase, "under the sun," as used here means the things of this world, but not the things of heaven. Solomon will ask just what good these things are – a question not at all out of place today.

The Nature of Nature

Ecclesiastes 1:4-8 NASB (4) A generation goes and a generation comes, But the earth remains forever. (5) Also, the sun rises and the sun sets; And hastening to its place it rises there *again*. (6) Blowing toward the south, Then turning toward the north, The wind continues swirling along; And on its circular courses the wind returns. (7) All the rivers flow into the sea, Yet the sea is not full. To the place where the rivers flow, There they flow again. (8) All things are wearisome; Man is not able to tell *it*. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, Nor is the ear filled with hearing.

Poetry

The reader will recall the nature of Hebrew poetry: it rhymes in thought. Here is a thought rhyme. There is one other aspect, however, of Hebrew poetry that needs to be mentioned. When you get to the end of a particular rhyme, you are supposed to contemplate. In the Psalms you will often see the musical notation, “Selah,” which may mean, “Think about that.” So we shall think about it.

Constancy in cycles

Please distinguish between “change” and “rhythm.” Solomon’s point is that all around us we see things going on in a constant cycle. Sun rise, sunset – swiftly flow the years. This is true of nature.

And it is true of men too. Over and again each generation discovers the same things (grandchildren, good. Taxes, bad.) We see the same in the natural world in the cycle of days, the cycle of winds and the cycle of water. It is a pattern of the natural world; it applies to men as well.

Vanity of Man

How does it appear to man? It is weariness.

“Tote that barge, lift that bale,

Get a little drunk, you’ll land in jail.”

But it’s more than that. The other aspect of it is that man doesn’t get it. Over and again man chases that which seems good. He’s always looking for fulfillment – and the things of this earth do not fulfill. Worse, we usually find this out after trying them all. One of the constant things of life is that we do things the hard way.

Nothing New

Ecclesiastes 1:9-11 NASB (9) That which has been is that which will be, And that which has been done is that which will be done. So there is nothing new under the sun. (10) Is there anything of which one might say, “See this, it is new”? Already it has existed for ages Which were before us. (11) There is no remembrance of earlier things; And also of the later things which will occur, There will be for them no remembrance Among those who will come later *still*.

Technology

When moderns hear this passage, the usual reaction is that Solomon didn’t live in an age of technology, where things change all the time. On the contrary, he did. He lived in the era when iron was superseding bronze, a time of immense technical change – especially as viewed in that civilization.

From that fact, we may conclude that Solomon is not talking about technology – he’s talking about people. He is speaking of the common experience of human beings; one aspect of which is that technology is always changing. We are constantly tempted to believe that because we are so modern, the old ways do not apply to us. That temptation is as old as Solomon.

Of things human

What kind of things might Solomon be speaking of? Let’s take something we think of as a new scourge: pedophilia. It is scandalous to us because, for most of us, it is a new concept. It’s not new. We’re just missing our history books. Don’t think so? Caesar Nero was a pedophile. He liked to swim nude in a heated pool, with very young slave boys licking at his testicles. There is nothing new under the sun. And there is nothing new about sinners defending their particular pet sin as being righteous in a modern, enlightened way.

Solomon’s Search

Ecclesiastes 1:12-18 NASB (12) I, the Preacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. (13) And I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven. *It* is a grievous task *which* God has given to the sons of men to be afflicted with. (14) I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind. (15) What is crooked cannot be straightened and what is lacking cannot be counted. (16) I said to myself, "Behold, I have magnified and increased wisdom more than all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has observed a wealth of wisdom and knowledge." (17) And I set my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly; I realized that this also is striving after wind. (18) Because in much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge *results in* increasing pain.

His qualifications

Most of us do not have the qualifications of a Solomon. He was ideally suited to the question because of this. How often have you said something like, “if only I were really rich, I would...” Consider, then, Solomon:

- Wisdom? The wisest man who ever lived, according to the Scripture. There is no lack of qualification to tackle this greatest of philosophical thinkers.
- Wealth? He had money beyond our dreams. His annual gold tribute was 666 talents of gold. A talent, at the time, was about seventy pounds. At this writing gold is about \$1,200 per ounce. Works out to be about 500 billion dollars – a year.
- Accomplishment? This is the man who built the Temple, and much of Jerusalem. His public works were legendary.
- Knowledge – he was noted for his scientific knowledge of the day.¹
- Family matters? He had 300 wives and 700 concubines. To be more specific, he could sleep with a different woman every night for three years and never the same one twice. It goes on and on. What we imagine and chase, he could have.

¹ 1 Kings 4:33

His conclusion

After trying all the alternatives, Solomon concluded that all these things were just – vanity. Useless. A “striving after the wind.” These things are attractive, but ultimately they don’t serve as man’s purpose. They are a distraction.

Not only that, he concludes that it can’t be fixed. The world just can’t be fixed, no matter what we do.

He’s right. This is a fallen world, and until the Lord returns, it cannot be fixed. Of our own efforts we cannot fix the place. This is important for us to note because the dominant evangelical theology of our day, the emerging church, holds to exactly the opposite idea. We are to “build community” so that we might build a heaven on earth.²

The pain of wisdom

Worse yet, Solomon tells us, is the fact that wisdom is a painful thing. Wisdom itself, alone, is a striving after the wind. It is a very practical observation.

We must make a distinction here. When I was a young student my geometry teacher told me that it is impossible to trisect an angle using only a compass and ruler. That can be understood in two ways:

- I took it as a challenge. I played with the idea for a couple of hours, then concluded she was right. I sure couldn’t do it.
- But it is also the case that the experts on the subject, the mathematicians, have proven that it can’t be done.

One is the thought of a new student; the other the thought of an old master. Solomon is speaking to us as an old master, even if we understand his words as new students.

So Solomon begins his exploration of the meaning of life, the purpose of things and where the things of this world lead. His purpose is to warn us that we need not make the same experiment, and pay the same pain. Like the new geometry student, we need to listen to the old master explain – and avoid the same mistakes.

² This is related to the idea that the return of Christ is not to be taken as a literal event. A similar position happens with post-millennialism, which holds that Christ comes after the millennium, during which time we have established a heaven on earth. The two ideas should be distinguished.

The Perils of Pleasure - Ecclesiastes 2

Solomon begins his exploration of the meaning of life with pleasure.

Test You With Pleasure

Ecclesiastes 2:1-11 NASB (1) I said to myself, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure. So enjoy yourself." And behold, it too was futility. (2) I said of laughter, "It is madness," and of pleasure, "What does it accomplish?" (3) I explored with my mind *how* to stimulate my body with wine while my mind was guiding *me* wisely, and how to take hold of folly, until I could see what good there is for the sons of men to do under heaven the few years of their lives. (4) I enlarged my works: I built houses for myself, I planted vineyards for myself; (5) I made gardens and parks for myself and I planted in them all kinds of fruit trees; (6) I made ponds of water for myself from which to irrigate a forest of growing trees. (7) I bought male and female slaves and I had homeborn slaves. Also I possessed flocks and herds larger than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. (8) Also, I collected for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I provided for myself male and female singers and the pleasures of men--many concubines. (9) Then I became great and increased more than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. My wisdom also stood by me. (10) All that my eyes desired I did not refuse them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart was pleased because of all my labor and this was my reward for all my labor. (11) Thus I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun.

Look at the first two verses. Solomon tells you his answer to start with: laughter and pleasure are futility – vanity. Why?

- ✚ Consider laughter first. Why do we laugh? Is it not true that humor is the result of the sudden perception of absurdity? Which implies, therefore, that the universe has a lot of absurdity in it. Laughter is the admission of the futility of things. We cultivate it for just that reason.
- ✚ Pleasure, per Webster, is the gratification of the senses. Pleasure must be sought; therefore it is not the normal state of man. In short, our senses are not normally gratified – which is to say that pain, the opposite of pleasure, is the normal state of man.

In short, what is the ultimate benefit of laughter? And of pleasure? They are the admission that life is vain.

The Experiments

Solomon takes a rather scientific view here: he's going to give these things a try and observe the result. So what does he try?

- ✚ Wine, women and song. Literally. The finest wine, a harem of delights and his own personal musicians. Result? Vanity.
- ✚ Great works. He builds; he accomplishes – and his works are far beyond anyone else he can know. Result: vanity.
- ✚ Vast possessions – the biggest boat on the lake, the largest house, the most money.
- ✚ Top dog status – this is a guy who had to slaughter twenty cows a day just to feed his posse, his personal retinue.

One thing is sure: most of us couldn't come close to this. Feeding one wife is hard enough; what would I do with three hundred, not to mention the 700 concubines on the side? But you can see

the dream; “if only I had the money...” And here you can see the results of one who lived that dream. Vanity.

The results

Solomon reports back his results:

- ✚ First, it felt good at the time. Getting drunk feels good; sex feels good; I even like classical music. We all know the feeling of accomplishment. We all know the pleasure of adding the new toy to our collection. And we can all at least envy the man with top dog status.
- ✚ Solomon isn't saying that it doesn't feel good at the time; it does. It just doesn't work as meaning; it's ultimately meaningless.

The Obvious Objection

There is, of course, an obvious objection to Solomon's experiment. “The problem you have is that you're trying to retain your wisdom while chasing pleasure. Give up the wisdom; make pleasure your ultimate good. Turn your brain off while you do this.” Solomon reminds us that he was not seeking pleasure but meaning in life:

Ecclesiastes 2:12-16 NASB (12) So I turned to consider wisdom, madness and folly; for what *will* the man *do* who will come after the king *except* what has already been done? (13) And I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness. (14) The wise man's eyes are in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I know that one fate befalls them both. (15) Then I said to myself, "As is the fate of the fool, it will also befall me. Why then have I been extremely wise?" So I said to myself, "This too is vanity." (16) For there is no lasting remembrance of the wise man *as* with the fool, inasmuch as *in* the coming days all will be forgotten. And how the wise man and the fool alike die!

In short, says Solomon, there are three ways to approach the problem:

- ✚ **Wisdom** – you can go into this search with your eyes wide open. Do it knowing what you're doing. That's what he did.
- ✚ **Madness** – of course, you can always go insane. You can become a drunkard, a drug addict, a compulsive gambler (or any number of things). But you have only to look at that lifestyle to see that it doesn't work.
- ✚ **Folly** – of course, you can just be foolish too. Don't think; just party. The problem is in the first step: don't think. God gave you a brain for a reason.³

But still

You see the point. Wisdom is better than madness or folly just as light is better than dark. But you need to see the other point as well. Wisdom itself is vanity; the madman, the fool and the wise man all die. Then what?

So I hated life

Ecclesiastes 2:17-20 NASB (17) So I hated life, for the work which had been done under the sun was grievous to me; because everything is futility and striving after wind. (18) Thus I hated

³ Some of these people do eventually grow up.

all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun, for I must leave it to the man who will come after me. (19) And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the fruit of my labor for which I have labored by acting wisely under the sun. This too is vanity. (20) Therefore I completely despaired of all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun.

The essence of Solomon's complaint might be familiar to anyone contemplating his death: I've worked hard all my life, accomplished a lot – and now what?

Indeed, he hates even the fruit of his labors – the accomplishments shining in the sun before him – because he knows he's going to die. He can't take it with him. Worse, it's all going to go to someone else – and who knows what a fool he might be. (I think maybe Solomon had an inkling of Rehoboam's lack of wisdom.) Apparently, the Prodigal Son is not a new phenomenon.

The result is despair – the lack of hope. What hope can you have when you see your possessions are going to go to your nitwit kid? And how much worse that feeling is when your possessions and accomplishments are truly great? Had he been a bum, Solomon might have felt he was losing nothing. But the more you accomplish, the greater the despair.

In View of Death

[Ecclesiastes 2:21-26 NASB](#) (21) When there is a man who has labored with wisdom, knowledge and skill, then he gives his legacy to one who has not labored with them. This too is vanity and a great evil. (22) For what does a man get in all his labor and in his striving with which he labors under the sun? (23) Because all his days his task is painful and grievous; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is vanity. (24) There is nothing better for a man *than* to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good. This also I have seen that it is from the hand of God. (25) For who can eat and who can have enjoyment without Him? (26) For to a person who is good in His sight He has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, while to the sinner He has given the task of gathering and collecting so that he may give to one who is good in God's sight. This too is vanity and striving after wind.

Useless Labor

Solomon gives us an insight on human behavior. The reason we regret giving up our accomplishments is not just because we've labored for these things – it's also because we've applied our "wisdom, knowledge and skill" to them. In short, how many nights we've been up with "hamster brain" because of these things! Possessions are one thing; the things you've worried over are quite another. And now it's going to someone who has never sat up nights worrying about it.

So what should we do about it? The best you can do is just eat and drink, and be happy in your work.

That's it? Yes. Solomon here opens the window just a crack so that you can see what's been missing. This is from "the hand of God." In other words, human beings are designed this way by God – and if we work as He designed us, things will go better. Ultimately, doing it God's way works. Doing it our way doesn't.

Perhaps even more is the fact that those who follow God's way ("good in his sight") are the ones who will be blessed with the truly good things of life – like wisdom, knowledge and (surprise) joy. Not pleasure; joy. If you haven't experienced the difference, I can't explain it to you. If you have, I don't need to.

If you're on the other side? How often have you seen it: an evil man works hard, accumulates wealth and dies – and God either destroys that wealth, or gives it to those who please him.

But, Solomon tells us, even this is vanity, a striving after the wind. It's better to be wise than foolish – but still, both are ultimately useless.

It's a down ending. But as we shall see next time, Solomon begins to look at it from a point of view closer to God. This will lead us further down his trail from wisdom to meaning.

Turn, Turn, Turn - Ecclesiastes 3

Prologue

Veterans of the 1960's will recall Pete Seeger's song, *Turn, turn, turn*. Seeger himself acknowledged that he only wrote six words for the song; the rest came from the King James Version of the first eight verses of this chapter. The best known version was by a group called The Byrds; there is a video of this [here](#). You might also be interested in the article on [Wikipedia](#), which notes that (as the song was a number one hit) this makes Solomon the oldest lyricist to have such an achievement.

A Time for Every Purpose

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 ESV For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: (2) a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; (3) a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; (4) a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; (5) a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; (6) a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; (7) a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; (8) a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.

Times of the body

Solomon begins his poetry with the times of the body.

- ✚ Time to be born, and to die. As most women can tell you, the time to be born arrives a couple of months after mom is quite good and ready. But it is the nature of the human body that it takes nine months. Death, on the other hand, would never seem convenient. But it often seems a release from pain and suffering. Winston Churchill referred to 1940 and the Battle of Britain as a time when it was equally good to live or to die, a sense of death we have lost.
- ✚ Planting and harvest have their own cycle as well – and show us the value of rhythm in life. We demand change; we desire sameness. Only in the recurrent rhythms of life do we find both.
- ✚ Killing and healing – most of us find healing appropriate at any time, but consider, if you will, that there are times for killing. If you were a sniper in World War II, would you have hesitated had you found Adolf Hitler in your sights? A similar situation sometimes applies to police officers. Healing, too, has its seasons. Anyone with bronchitis knows the difference between summer and winter.

Times of the world

Likewise, in this world there are times and seasons:

- ✚ Breaking down and building up (think of cardboard boxes).
- ✚ Weep and laugh. Sometimes this is difficult for us; sometimes we're not sure just which to do. Triumph and tragedy, as Kipling said, are imposters and should be treated alike. The right reaction isn't always obvious.
- ✚ Construction and demolition – when fire guts the house, tear it down. Then rebuild it.
- ✚ Get and lose. We work hard to acquire things, and this is not necessarily evil. I'm rather fond of a roof over my head and meals on the table. But sometimes you have to downsize the house and lose the weight.
- ✚ Keep and cast away. Antiques handed down through the generations are often precious to us – but sometimes you have to clean out the garage.

- ✚ Tear and sew. In those days you tore your garments as a sign of grief. But when the time of grief is over, somebody had to stitch them back up.

In the world it seems so simple, doesn't it? But there is another group of times.

Times of the spirit

These three may be the hardest to discern, but perhaps we can give at least an example for them:

- ✚ A time to speak, and to keep silent. Most of us wish we knew just which was which; have you ever opened your big mouth at the wrong time? Worse, have you ever thought back and said, "I should have said something?"
- ✚ A time to love and a time to hate: this seems difficult to a Christian, who is to love at all times. But we can at least hate the sin and love the sinner – something we have a lot of practice at, concerning ourselves. Other examples may occur to you.
- ✚ War and peace. It is a sad fact that it only takes one side to make war; two to make peace. Just what makes a "just war" has been debated for thousands of years – but the concept does exist.

Man's Ability; God's Purposes

Ecclesiastes 3:9-15 NASB (9) What profit is there to the worker from that in which he toils? (10) I have seen the task which God has given the sons of men with which to occupy themselves. (11) He has made everything appropriate in its time. He has also set eternity in their heart, yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end. (12) I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and to do good in one's lifetime; (13) moreover, that every man who eats and drinks sees good in all his labor--it is the gift of God. (14) I know that everything God does will remain forever; there is nothing to add to it and there is nothing to take from it, for God has *so* worked that men should fear Him. (15) That which is has been already and that which will be has already been, for God seeks what has passed by.

What profit?

There is a consistent theme in this question: just why are you working so hard? What good is it? Solomon gives two answers:

- ✚ First, your task is God-given. He has so ordered things that your life is set before you; He will not ask why you had such opportunity, only what you did with the opportunity you had.
- ✚ Second, it must be acknowledged that work has its rewards at times. "Everything is beautiful" at the appropriate time. Most of us know the glow of accomplishment; we also know that this glow fades with time.

But in this there is a penetrating insight: God has put in man the knowledge of eternity. We know it exists. So we must naturally ask ourselves, "How are my achievements going to be viewed, eternally?"⁴ More than that, however, such knowledge prompts us to compare our works with God's. It is then we realize the truth: his works are so mighty that we cannot even truly determine just how great they are.

⁴ Ozymandias, "Look upon my works, ye mighty, and despair." (Shelley – Percy, not Mary).

That knowledge – that God is mighty beyond our thought – is an important realization **about the nature of man**. It's also about God, of course, but I hope you see that it puts man in the place God intended for him.

What shall we do?

Very well, then: man is but dust.⁵ What shall we do about it?

- ✚ Be joyful. The joy of the Lord is my strength⁶ - and I should exercise it.
- ✚ Do good. Isn't it amazing: when you do good, the challenge of the purpose of life seems to melt into the background. You know that what you did is good, and that seems ample justification for doing it.
- ✚ Eat and drink – hey, a little partying never hurt anybody (at the right time). Besides, it's tough to stay alive without eating and drinking.
- ✚ Take pleasure in your work. It's God's gift to you; you might as well enjoy it.

That last is important. Work is not your justification for existing – but it is given to you by God. Even in the garden Adam and Eve were given the task of gardening. Evidently it's a part of man to work – which is why so many people die six months after retirement.

Why does God...?

This is fairly simple:

- ✚ Your work fades with time. God's doesn't.
- ✚ You can't alter what he has done. You can use it – like the laws of physics – but you can't change it. He is the alpha and the omega.

That contrast should produce at least one result: the fear of God. No matter how mighty you are – and “mighty” might well be defined as “able to change what others have done” – you can't produce the slightest change in his work. Like the centurion “under authority”⁷, the mightier you are, the more you should recognize God's might. The result: you should fear the Lord.

It's interesting to see the observation that God seeks what is past. It's a way of saying that things keep coming around again in our universe – because God orders it that way. Thus you should listen to wisdom when you hear it, and not reject it because it's old.

Seen Under the Sun

Ecclesiastes 3:16-22 NASB (16) Furthermore, I have seen under the sun *that* in the place of justice there is wickedness and in the place of righteousness there is wickedness. (17) I said to myself, "God will judge both the righteous man and the wicked man," for a time for every matter and for every deed is there. (18) I said to myself concerning the sons of men, "God has surely tested them in order for them to see that they are but beasts." (19) For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same. As one dies so dies the other; indeed, they all have the same breath and there is no advantage for man over beast, for all is vanity. (20) All go to the

⁵ Which reminds us of the little child who, hearing these words in church, stage-whispered to her mother, “Mommy, what is butt dust?”

⁶ Nehemiah 8:10

⁷ Matthew 8:5-10

same place. All came from the dust and all return to the dust. (21) Who knows that the breath of man ascends upward and the breath of the beast descends downward to the earth? (22) I have seen that nothing is better than that man should be happy in his activities, for that is his lot. For who will bring him to see what will occur after him?

Why, we might ask, does God allow wickedness in the places where we have every right to expect righteousness and justice? I can see why there is sinful corruption in a gang of thieves; that's to be expected. Why does it exist in our court system? It's a good question: we should expect better of our courts than of our thieves.

One answer is given here: so that you will know that God will judge all of us. Just because you are a judge (or policeman, or minister, or whatever) doesn't make you immune to judgment. Which, of course, means that you too will face the judgment.

And will there be a judgment? Look at it this way: you die, just like the animals die, for you are an animal. You don't know – at least by experience – what happens to you after death. For all you know by experience, death is annihilation. Only God knows for sure – and we haven't reached that revelation yet.

So then, what shall we do? Be content with your lot in life. Be happy in what you do. The rest belongs to God.

Is Anything Worth Doing? - Ecclesiastes 4

Solomon now descends to his depths: is it possible that it's better never to be born than to be born anything but into the upper, oppressor class?

Ecclesiastes 4:1-3 NASB (1) Then I looked again at all the acts of oppression which were being done under the sun. And behold *I saw* the tears of the oppressed and *that* they had no one to comfort *them*; and on the side of their oppressors was power, but they had no one to comfort *them*. (2) So I congratulated the dead who are already dead more than the living who are still living. (3) But better *off* than both of them is the one who has never existed, who has never seen the evil activity that is done under the sun.

Irony

It is an ironic observation which must be made about this passage: Solomon is an advocate of the "sociological viewpoint." That viewpoint, so common in modern academia, says that one must NEVER make a moral judgment on a situation; only report on its effects. All cultures are equally valid, you know.⁸ Of course, it seldom is used to expose the perils of modern humanism. After all, that wouldn't be impartial.

Solomon has a similar view here: remember – he's the king. He is the chief of the oppressors. His system of creating public works, for example, relied on two things:

- ✚ Forced labor – people were drafted to do the backbreaking work. Remember, no power equipment in those days.
- ✚ Bullwhip management – no thought given to the feelings or presumed rights of the laborers other than the necessity of the bullwhip. After all, they certainly weren't going to volunteer for this.

The facts

For most Americans it seems that Solomon must have been exaggerating a bit. But the truth is simply this:

- ✚ There is a lot of oppression on this planet. It seems to be the first instinct of rulers to quash any dissent or disagreement, and one of the finest ways to do this is to round up the dissidents and put them to hard labor and starvation.
- ✚ Despite artwork to the contrary, the oppressed are not happy peasants, glowing joyfully.
- ✚ For such people, there is in their minds no hope for the future and no comfort in the present.

We are the exceptions, folks. Most of the rest of the world expects dictatorship by those who are lining their pockets at the expense of the oppressed.

Solomon's conclusion

It is almost comic: while Solomon no doubt enjoys his life of luxury, vain though he knows it to be, he sees nothing for the oppressed. In fact, his conclusion is rather startling: it's better to be dead than to be one of the oppressed. Best of all is to never have been born in the first place.

This is the low point of Solomon's search – and it is a Death Valley indeed.

⁸ Including the Aztecs who practiced human sacrifice. As did many ancient civilizations.

Rat Race

Ecclesiastes 4:4-6 NASB (4) I have seen that every labor and every skill which is done is *the result of rivalry* between a man and his neighbor. This too is vanity and striving after wind. (5) The fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh. (6) One hand full of rest is better than two fists full of labor and striving after wind.

The sin of envy

What's Solomon talking about here? It's envy – or, to use an older word, covetousness. Today it goes by a much more respectable name: competition. Amongst Republicans, it's a virtue. Amongst liberals, it's just the human version of Darwinian struggle. Both agree: it's inevitable. And that's a good thing, too.

You think not? Let me share with you the experience of my daughter. She earns a living as a copy editor, often correcting student papers for grammar and for logic. A professor at a local university, who teaches a course in Business Ethics, has sent a lot of business her way. The professor seems to have some sense of ethics as Christians might understand ethics. Her students almost uniformly do not. When my daughter finally gets it through their heads that ethics implies a moral imperative, their universal response is that the moral imperative they follow is making more money for the company. Anything that accomplishes that is, by definition, good.

What can we do about it?

Solomon saw this problem too: we envy, we want, we compete. What can be done about this yearning?

- ✚ Like the business student, we can give in and make competition our top priority.
- ✚ Like the fool we can decline to participate at all – just quit, and in Solomon's day starve. Or beg. Or go on welfare.
- ✚ Or we can work, and enjoy the little we have.

Unchallenged assumptions

May I point out why this is so common? We have made assumptions in our society – some not new to us – which cause this. In particular:

- ✚ "More" is better. A bigger house is better, a faster car, a larger TV – on and on it goes.
- ✚ "I am what I buy." The modern American is defined by his possessions.⁹
- ✚ I am better than you are – and pride is a virtue.

Solitaire?

Ecclesiastes 4:7-12 NASB (7) Then I looked again at vanity under the sun. (8) There was a certain man without a dependent, having neither a son nor a brother, yet there was no end to all his labor. Indeed, his eyes were not satisfied with riches *and he never asked*, "And for whom am I laboring and depriving myself of pleasure?" This too is vanity and it is a grievous task. (9) Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. (10) For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not

⁹ Ask me about the \$100 hoodie sometime.

another to lift him up. (11) Furthermore, if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm *alone*? (12) And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three *strands* is not quickly torn apart.

Solomon now gives us an example. May I give you a personal counterpart? My wife's father is (at this writing) 95 years old. He has disinherited his kids. He is very rich, arrogant – and profoundly lonely. He goes to his office six days a week; if he doesn't, he will die for lack of purpose.

And for what?

Cooperation

Why is this such a lonely life? Because it is based on pride and competitiveness. Everyone else around him must be treated as an inferior so that his pride may be maintained. Solomon points out the obvious advantages of cooperation instead:

- ✚ If you personally do all the thinking because you personally have all the brains, you just missed an awful lot of brain power. Two people working together are more productive, physically and mentally, than twice one.
- ✚ Can you really “handle it” by yourself? Is it really true that you have no need for family, friends, church or the society around you?

Society

What does this attitude say for our society? In particular:

- ✚ Is competition *always* a blessing? For example, should automobile manufacturers be allowed to cooperate in developing safer cars? (It's a violation of antitrust statutes – competition is always good.)
- ✚ Is competition *always* morally right? And would you feel that way if you're the one being laid off, with your job going to India?

The Man Who Has It Made

Ecclesiastes 4:13-16 NASB (13) A poor yet wise lad is better than an old and foolish king who no longer knows *how* to receive instruction. (14) For he has come out of prison to become king, even though he was born poor in his kingdom. (15) I have seen all the living under the sun throng to the side of the second lad who replaces him. (16) There is no end to all the people, to all who were before them, and even the ones who will come later will not be happy with him, for this too is vanity and striving after wind.

So far we've been talking about the peons – the poor, the oppressed, the laid off. But what about the guy who has it made? In their world, what about the king? Being king is good, right?

Solomon points out here that just because you're king doesn't mean that you're not a victim of your own success. “I got to the top because of my drive and intelligence – and the lessons I learned along the way are going to keep me here. I don't listen to anybody.” In short, I don't need to change. I'm on top. Everybody else should change to please me.

Better to be the new kid

Perhaps Solomon was thinking about his father, David. But the point remains the same: it's better to be the new kid, because wisdom is better than foolishness. Eventually, that kid will replace the king – and it feels so good to him when he does. Being the new winner is great – or is it?

The next new kid

Just remember, new kid, that there's another new kid waiting in the wings. He will take your place. And just as the people tired of you, they will tire of him. And just as your works will be forgotten, so will his. Future generations won't care.

You think not? As of this writing, the state of North Carolina is revising its high school curriculum in U.S. history. History now starts in 1877 – right after reconstruction. Pilgrims, colonies, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln – all are now just unimportant. And forgotten.

See why I said this chapter is the low point?

No Delight In Fools - Ecclesiastes 5

In this section Solomon brings to us something new: the fear of God. Up until this point God is seen as the one who ordains the order of things; one who cannot be bargained with but must be accepted. In this section his vision rises to the beginning of wisdom: the fear of the Lord.

Guard Your Steps

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

Our usual approach

If there is any characteristic most noticeable in the American Christian today, it is the confidence with which he approaches God. When we think about the future, we usually do it this way:

- ✚ We dream big. We have a great idea for all sorts of wonderful things, and we submit our plan to God for his approval.
- ✚ Once submitted – it doesn't take that long – we begin to tell others at church and elsewhere of our great idea.
- ✚ We discover that "it is vanity." God takes no ideas from us, but rather accords to us that which is in his plan. No matter how smart you are, God has another idea, it seems.

No delight in fools

Solomon's wisdom gives us the correct method:

- ✚ First, when you are in the house of the Lord, listen rather than talk. Don't tell him what to do; instead, ask him what to do.
- ✚ Don't be hasty about it. Think things through.¹⁰ The idea that Christianity is *nothing but* emotional has no support in the Scripture.
- ✚ "Let your words be few." It's much more difficult to get in trouble, with God or with man, when your mouth is shut.

Instead ...

- ✚ Remember: dreams do come true – with effort. Just because you can talk about it doesn't mean God is obligated to make it happen.
- ✚ When you make a commitment to God, keep it. If it angers your fellow human beings when you don't keep a commitment – and they are sinners just as you are – how much more is God going to be angry?

¹⁰ I know; think? In church? We are so enamored with "God wants your heart" that we forget he wants mind, soul and strength as well.

✚ Fear God. Remember who is the Creator and who is the creation.

That last may seem strange; “after all, God is a God of love, right?” Have you ever angered your spouse? You have? They don’t love you? Love is not incompatible with anger – especially for the holy and righteous God.

Oppression and Riches

Ecclesiastes 5:8-17 NASB (8) If you see oppression of the poor and denial of justice and righteousness in the province, do not be shocked at the sight; for one official watches over another official, and there are higher officials over them. (9) After all, a king who cultivates the field is an advantage to the land. (10) He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves abundance *with its* income. This too is vanity. (11) When good things increase, those who consume them increase. So what is the advantage to their owners except to look on? (12) The sleep of the working man is pleasant, whether he eats little or much; but the full stomach of the rich man does not allow him to sleep. (13) There is a grievous evil *which* I have seen under the sun: riches being hoarded by their owner to his hurt. (14) When those riches were lost through a bad investment and he had fathered a son, then there was nothing to support him. (15) As he had come naked from his mother's womb, so will he return as he came. He will take nothing from the fruit of his labor that he can carry in his hand. (16) This also is a grievous evil--exactly as a man is born, thus will he die. So what is the advantage to him who toils for the wind? (17) Throughout his life *he* also eats in darkness with great vexation, sickness and anger.

Why is there oppression?

The problems of pain and evil have been with us since the beginning. Solomon, by having this passage following his section on fearing God, brings us some measure of understanding of this problem.

- ✚ Oppression exists. Get used to it. It is a normal part of the condition of fallen, sinful humanity.
- ✚ But even out of such oppression some good may come. The “Beloved Leader” may conscript laborers to work his fields, but at least somebody will get something to eat from it. Indeed, it can be argued that God will allow no evil out of which he cannot bring a greater good.
- ✚ Most of all is this: the oppressor in your face reports to a higher one. On it goes up the chain. At the top the ruler is still under God; and God is not finished with him yet. Nor you.

Consider the oppressor’s lot

Of course, the normal human reaction to oppression is not to revolt; rather, it is to accept oppression as normal – and then try to find a way to join the oppressor class as quickly as possible. But do you really want to do that?

- ✚ Consider that such people are always poor – for they always want more.
- ✚ Secondly, while very often such folks have an abundance of “stuff,” there is usually an abundance of people around to want more stuff than is available. Get yourself elected president and you’ll find there are fifty people for every fat job you can fill.
- ✚ And while we’re at it, who sleeps better at night? And how do you think that Solomon knows that?

The problem: greed

Comedy, I'm told, is the sudden perception of the absurd. Jack Benny made a career of posing as a stingy tightwad – and then getting what he deserved, while the audience laughed.¹¹ His most famous gag was this: a mugger comes up behind him, sticks him up and says, "Your money or your life!" After a long pause (timing is everything) the mugger says, "Well?"

"I'm thinking, I'm thinking!"

It is absurd; hoarding your wealth is absurd.

Solomon points out another absurdity: what if you have the money and lose it? If you never had it, your children don't expect to inherit it. But if they have silver spoon expectations... then what?

Finally, at the end of your life, it comes down to this: there are no pockets in a shroud. What good did your money do you?

The Right Answer

Ecclesiastes 5:18-20 NASB (18) Here is what I have seen to be good and fitting: to eat, to drink and enjoy oneself in all one's labor in which he toils under the sun *during* the few years of his life which God has given him; for this is his reward. **(19)** Furthermore, as for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, He has also empowered him to eat from them and to receive his reward and rejoice in his labor; this is the gift of God. **(20)** For he will not often consider the years of his life, because God keeps him occupied with the gladness of his heart.

Good and fitting

So just what are you supposed to do? Solomon is nowhere near the Christian answer, but he sees it in what we might call a pre-Christian light. It's pretty simple, really.

- ✚ First, eat, drink and enjoy. You need to eat and drink anyway – you might just as well enjoy it.
- ✚ Consider it as a reward from God for your hard work. Much depends on the way you look at things.
- ✚ Life is short, eternity is long – best to focus on what's at hand.

We can see in this the Christian doctrine of vocation. God has provided a way for you to make your living in this world; whatever that way is, enjoy it. Take pleasure in your work; do not regard it as simply "the way I make money." Prostitutes make money too.

The spiritual value of work is something which is now minimized in our teaching, but the truth is always there. Paul put it this way:

Colossians 3:23-24 NASB (23) Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, **(24)** knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.

¹¹ For the younger reader, Mr. Benny was a comedian who flourished in the middle of the 20th century. He was also noted for his generosity outside his stage persona.

What about the rich man?

Well, what about him? Is this really your problem? Consider that he gets his reward from God as well. The Old Testament view often was that riches were a sign of favor from God. Is this really something to worry about? Maybe this is the rich man's problem!

Long life

Interestingly, Solomon reveals quite a bit about himself in this passage. He is concerned, as many are, about the length of his life. But this is not wise; better a life well lived and short than a long and fruitless one.

- ✚ Do what you are tasked to do by God.
- ✚ Accept the reward he offers in this life.
- ✚ And in all things, rejoice. Give thanks.¹²

¹² Ephesians 5:20

Bummer, Dude - Ecclesiastes 6

One of our former members, Jackie Crockett, told us a story of her parrot. An African Gray, which is a very intelligent breed, the parrot did not like having its cage covered for the night. As she would put the pillow case over the cage, the parrot would comment, "Bummer, dude."

That parrot could be Solomon's spokes-bird this week.

A Prevalent Evil

Ecclesiastes 6:1-2 NASB (1) There is an evil which I have seen under the sun and it is prevalent among men-- (2) a man to whom God has given riches and wealth and honor so that his soul lacks nothing of all that he desires; yet God has not empowered him to eat from them, for a foreigner enjoys them. This is vanity and a severe affliction.

May I point out two quick items about this evil which Solomon describes?

- ✚ First, it is an evil. It's a bummer, dude. You may or may not work your tail off to get wealth and honor, but if you have them only to find someone else – a stranger – enjoying them, it's a bummer. Once you have something, you feel entitled to it. If you think you are entitled to something, losing it is a bummer. (Obvious enough, I hope).
- ✚ And it is prevalent. The story is repeated often enough. The schlemozzle does the work and the schlemiel gets the credit and the money. But only after the schlemozzle gets used to the lifestyle. (Comedy and tragedy are the same art.)

God gives

Notice something, please: God gives this wealth and honor in the first place. It is a good gift; it's a bummer to lose it. The Old Testament view is generally that wealth and honor are a sign of God's favor, though the matter is more complicated than that. The word "honor" here can also be translated "weight;" just as we today might say that someone is "a real heavyweight." The problem is not the wealth and honor, then. So what is it?

The real evil

It's that the man doesn't get to enjoy it. When this happens, we usually ask one question – "Why?" – and really mean to ask two:

- ✚ The first is, "Why?" By this we mean we want to know why this sort of thing happens at all. The short, simple answer is that we live in a fallen world.
- ✚ The second is, "Why me?" Often enough the righteous see the answer the way Job's friends did: the victim is a horrible sinner, that's why. Often enough, that's wrong.

"I don't get no satisfaction"

Ecclesiastes 6:3-6 NASB (3) If a man fathers a hundred *children* and lives many years, however many they be, but his soul is not satisfied with good things and he does not even have a *proper* burial, *then* I say, "Better the miscarriage than he, (4) for it comes in futility and goes into obscurity; and its name is covered in obscurity. (5) "It never sees the sun and it never knows *anything*; it is better off than he. (6) "Even if the *other* man lives a thousand years twice and does not enjoy good things--do not all go to one place?"

A translational difficulty

Those of you with the NIV will have, in verse three, “if he cannot enjoy his prosperity” instead of the phrase underlined. This is a problem with the “phrase by phrase” method of translation. I hope you see the difference. In the NASB (and ESV, and KJV, and a number of other, stricter, translations) it’s clear that the issue is the satisfaction of the soul, not the enjoyment of prosperity. We may look at those two items now.

Soul

Noah Webster defined the soul as the “spiritual, rational and immortal” part of man’s being – that which distinguishes us from all other animals. Darwinists must, therefore, deny the existence of the soul, but I assume you are no such fool. There are two pertinent aspects here:

- ✚ This is a *spiritual* problem – not a financial one. It originates in the spirit of man, in his desires, not in his wallet.
- ✚ This problem can be dealt with *rationally* – it does not require mystic mumbo-jumbo. It does require discipline.

Satisfaction

The problem is relatively simple: satisfaction occurs when our expectations have been met by reality. So I ask you, which is easier to change: expectations (which are under your sole control) or reality (which is not)?

Belly is their god

Ecclesiastes 6:7-8 NASB (7) All a man's labor is for his mouth and yet the appetite is not satisfied. (8) For what advantage does the wise man have over the fool? What *advantage* does the poor man have, knowing *how* to walk before the living?

It can’t be all futility – after all, we still get to eat, right? Why can’t we just “go with the flow” and just live for our bellies? Let pleasure be our guide!

Suppose you do. May we point out (that’s Solomon and I):

- ✚ You’re still going to get hungry again.
- ✚ You’ll always want a better steak. If you get it, you’ll want a better diet.

In short, we’re back to older whiskey, younger women, faster cars and more money. So why not?

Reductio ad absurdum

It’s Latin for “reduction to the absurd.” The logical argument is simply this: if you reach an absurd conclusion based on your assumptions, your assumptions are wrong. Let us examine the conclusions:

- ✚ If this is true, then everything you know about good manners is useless. Reach, grab and fight for everything as rudely as you can. You don’t need to know which fork to use, only how to stab with it. Which is absurd.
- ✚ More than that, wisdom is useless – you don’t need wisdom to use a fork at all. Wisdom? Don’t need it. Which is absurd.

The entire idea of living for your belly is absurd. Paul put it more fully to the Christian in this manner:

Philippians 3:18-19 NASB (18) For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, *that they are* enemies of the cross of Christ, (19) whose end is destruction, whose god is *their* appetite, and *whose* glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things.

Solution

So what's the answer? Look again at verse 9: it's contentment. It's better to be satisfied with "what the eyes see" (i.e., what you already have) than what the KJV calls the "wandering of the desire". If you're never satisfied, maybe it's because you're still looking.

Consumer capitalism

Ecclesiastes 6:10-12 NASB (10) Whatever exists has already been named, and it is known what man is; for he cannot dispute with him who is stronger than he is. (11) For there are many words which increase futility. What *then* is the advantage to a man? (12) For who knows what is good for a man during *his* lifetime, *during* the few years of his futile life? He will spend them like a shadow. For who can tell a man what will be after him under the sun?

Look at the facts

To wit:

- ✚ You already know what's out there. Better than ever, in our time. So don't tell me you're looking for something unknown. You're looking for "more".
- ✚ You already know what people are like: they're sinners. They're going to disappoint you eventually. If your expectations include the perfect wife¹³ you're going to be disappointed. And it won't take long.
- ✚ You also know what your chances are of getting God to alter the universe to your liking. Given that, just what is it that people really do about it?

What to do

We talk about it, that's what. We write books about it, we complain about it, we watch TV shows that show us people like this, we read gossip magazines – and accomplish nothing. Why? Because there is nothing we can accomplish. It's basically useless.

What's with the futility?

Solomon's point, in our terms today, is pretty simple: without Christ,

- ✚ Life's a bummer
- ✚ Then you die
- ✚ And who knows what then?

But with Christ, things are different:

¹³ Defined as the woman who knows the answer to the question: "How many men does it take to open a beer can?" Correct answer: "None. It should already be open when she brings it to him."©

- ✚ Life has purpose, meaning and joy.
- ✚ He gives us eternal life, and
- ✚ We know it.

Better Life, Balance Life - Ecclesiastes 7

Solomon shifts tone at this point – he begins to give advice in the positive, telling us just what we should do. It's not that "vanity, vanity" has vanished, but rather the introduction of "fear God" has put the world in order. On that order Solomon now gives wisdom.

Better Life

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

We may break this down into three sections: money, time and attitude.

Money

The Bible has a lot to say about money. Here, Solomon makes two points which are of interest.

The first is simply this: if you have to choose between a lifestyle of luxury based on dishonor (for example, a Mafia don) and an honorable life as a poor man, you're better off with the honor. That's wisdom. That's a truth that holds water. One way to know it? It's a truism that the Mafioso wants his kids to go into legitimate work.¹⁴ It's normal to want your kids to have it better than you do.

The relationship between wisdom and money is a bit more complicated. Solomon makes these points:

- ✚ Money is good (especially if it's an inheritance you didn't have to work for) **if** you couple it with wisdom. Money is a tool. We don't let toddlers play with the power saw; fools shouldn't have money. They usually lose it quickly enough.
- ✚ Wisdom, like money, is a defense against life's troubles. But it's better: money can defend you, but wisdom not only defends but enhances your life.

¹⁴ The story of Butch O'Hare and his father is instructive in this. As of this writing, the story is at <http://www.truthorfiction.com/rumors/b/butchandeddie.htm>.

May I put the matter simply? Even in making money wisdom is required. As my stockbroker puts it, “Bulls make money, bears make money – but pigs get slaughtered.”

Time

Solomon sees life as a journey, starting at birth and ending in death. Foreseeing the Christian position, he tells us that the end of the journey is best. To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. The best is yet to come – and most of us moan about lost youth and dread the future. Fear God – and see things as they really are.

This then changes your view. Many of us are anxious to “fix things right now.” Solomon tells us the opposite: patience is better than pride. For when you approach problems in pride, you give Satan a handle with which to hold you. You also see defeat if victory is not rapid. But the man of patience endures. Even if he is overmatched by his problem, by endurance he may triumph. If you see life as the world sees it, this is difficult to do. But if you see the world in God’s hands, and the victory his, then patience comes more easily.

That attitude applies to the future. It also applies to the past. Many of us worry about what has already happened. “Oh, if I only...” Permit me some wisdom from that great Russian philosopher, Josef Stalin: “The past is history, and history belongs to God.”

Attitude

Solomon deals with two ideas concerning our attitude. The first is our reaction to a rebuke. If someone comes to you (preferably privately) and points out your faults, wisdom tells you to LISTEN!¹⁵

His second idea is well expressed in this prayer: “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”¹⁶ The argument is simple: there are things that God does which you cannot change. He is the source of your prosperity as well as your adversity. You can’t change that. So what should you do?

- ✚ In prosperity, enjoy it.
- ✚ In adversity, learn from it.

Moderation

Ecclesiastes 7:15-22 NASB (15) I have seen everything during my lifetime of futility; there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness and there is a wicked man who prolongs *his life* in his wickedness. **(16)** Do not be excessively righteous and do not be overly wise. Why should you ruin yourself? **(17)** Do not be excessively wicked and do not be a fool. Why should you die before your time? **(18)** It is good that you grasp one thing and also not let go of the other; for the one who fears God comes forth with both of them. **(19)** Wisdom strengthens a wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city. **(20)** Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who *continually* does good and who never sins. **(21)** Also, do not take seriously all words which are

¹⁵ Much has this author learned from quiet words spoken by his wife in the privacy of the bedroom.

¹⁶ Various attributed; most likely Reinhold Niebuhr. Falsely attributed to St. Francis.

spoken, so that you will not hear your servant cursing you. (22) For you also have realized that you likewise have many times cursed others.

Excessive wickedness

This should be a no-brainer. Wickedness can kill you, not to mention the judgment to come. And you should know this by chapter 7.

Excessive righteousness

Here's the rub. Any Bible teacher will tell you not to be wicked – but excessive righteousness??? It can be seen that way – especially in light of the fact that we depend upon Christ's righteousness, not our own. To be specific:

- ✚ There is such a thing as perfectionism. If you are obsessed with being righteous (or worse, being right) you can drive yourself crazy. One result is that you might tend to deny that you have sinned. With no confession, there is no repentance; with no repentance there is no forgiveness.
- ✚ Remember too that in Solomon's time righteousness meant keeping the Mosaic Law. If you do this to excess you become like the Pharisees. Don't slip from righteousness into legalism.
- ✚ Of course, righteousness can also be done for show.¹⁷ If you are careful about appearances but not the heart, it is worse than useless.

Don't listen to everything you hear

My father was sent to Japan at the beginning of the Korean War. He was scheduled to land at Inchon, but they pulled him off the boat when they found he was a finance officer. Reason? There were huge quantities of supplies in Japan, left over from World War II – and they needed them for the war. Dad and two other officers were given the task, dividing Japan into three regions.

Dad – a mustang officer, wise in the ways of the enlisted man – simply formed teams to inventory what was there. The other two officers tried to reconcile all paper transactions in the office. Dad delivered his material; the rest of it is probably still in Japan.

Moral? Don't believe the paperwork is infallible. Don't believe that a chance remark is the whole truth.

You know this; you've made those remarks too. Wisdom sometimes must look inward to discover the truth about things outward.

Wisdom Alone not the Answer

Ecclesiastes 7:23-29 NASB (23) I tested all this with wisdom, *and* I said, "I will be wise," but it was far from me. (24) What has been is remote and exceedingly mysterious. Who can discover it? (25) I directed my mind to know, to investigate and to seek wisdom and an explanation, and to know the evil of folly and the foolishness of madness. (26) And I discovered more bitter than death the woman whose heart is snares and nets, whose hands are chains. One who is pleasing to God will escape from her, but the sinner will be captured by her. (27) "Behold, I have discovered this," says the Preacher, "*adding* one thing to another to find an explanation, (28)

¹⁷ Matthew 6:1-7

which I am still seeking but have not found. I have found one man among a thousand, but I have not found a woman among all these. (29) "Behold, I have found only this, that God made men upright, but they have sought out many devices."

So Solomon gives a bit more on wisdom itself.

Some questions wisdom can't answer

Perhaps I can give you a parallel. There are some questions that science will never answer, no matter how much we know. Miracles are by definition contrary to scientific understanding. You can either say they can't happen – despite all the evidence – or you can say that this is beyond the limits of science. (Think about it: science deals with the repeatable.) Wisdom has its limits too.

History is another example. Historians constantly struggle with the problem that different participants tell different stories. That's particularly true of war. Reasonable assumptions may be made, but ultimately there is no real way to determine exactly what did happen.

So just accept it. Some things are beyond you. As George Washington Carver had it,

"When I was young, I said to God, god, tell me the mystery of the universe. But God answered, that knowledge is for me alone. So I said, god, tell me the mystery of the peanut. Then God said, well, George, that's more nearly your size."

Wicked Women

Solomon probably knew this quite well:

- ✚ There are women out there who are cold-hearted, money-grubbing souls who will destroy a man for his money.
- ✚ The righteous man escapes this trap – because such a trap depends upon sly and devious conduct. It's somewhat like Barnum; you cannot cheat an honest man.

How do you suppose Solomon came to feel this way? The richest king in history, 300 wives, 700 concubines – do you suppose that not one was a gold-digger?

A good man is hard to find

Why is there a limit to wisdom? It's simple: God made man "very good." In that state man should have wisdom. But man is fallen, and in that there is folly. Thus it is that wisdom has its limits.

Temple and State - Ecclesiastes 8

Differing Views

Throughout the history of the church there has been one particular conflict between church and state which does not seem to be leaving us: just what is the role of the government in matters social? The matter is now before us again in what is called “social Gospel.” Here’s a brief history:

Augustine

For those not familiar with St. Augustine, he’s the man who gave us original sin. He also gave us views of “just war” and the role of the state. Recall that he lived in a time when the Roman Empire (western) was collapsing. More and more authority was coming to the church.

His view was this: the state is the handmaiden of the church. Guided by the wisdom of the bishops, the state is to perform what we today would call welfare *on behalf of the church*. Thus society would continually improve until we reach the golden age of man. Note that the golden age was not the driving factor; rather, it was the supremacy of the church over the state. Roman Catholic politics are based upon this doctrine.

Post Millennialism

This view of Revelation, common from the Reformation through the beginning of the 20th century, holds that there will come a golden age of man, the millennium, which lasts for a thousand years. Since they saw no way for the millennium to arrive without human effort, it was obviously the task of the church in a democratic society to campaign for actions which would bring it about. Much of the law concerning child labor, for example, is rooted in this view. It is still the official view of many mainstream churches, which have a long tradition of what would today be called liberal politics.

Emerging Church

In the evangelical churches there is a new view sweeping over the land. In the “emerging church” view the promises of Revelation – the second coming, the judgment of the living and the dead, the millennium – are all “metaphorical” (English translation: not going to happen.) For example, our pastor preached on heaven – and not a mention of any of the seven last things.

Since, in this view, there will be no millennium it behooves the church to attempt to create the best possible environment here on earth. We don’t evangelize (there are many ways to heaven in this view) but we “build community.” Liberal politics now prevail.

Pre-millennialism

The older view of the evangelical churches is based on two factors:

- ✚ The pre-millennial view of Revelation, which prophesies a golden age of man *after* the return of Christ. Thus it is that no amount of effort now will bring about such a golden age.
- ✚ A strong dose of American capitalism, which tends to view the poor as being deserving of it. That said, we may now ask, “Just how does Solomon see it?”

Getting Along with the Government

Ecc 8:1-13 Who is like the wise man and who knows the interpretation of a matter? A man's wisdom illumines him and causes his stern face to beam. (2) I say, "Keep the command of the king because of the oath before God. (3) "Do not be in a hurry to leave him. Do not join in an evil matter, for he will do whatever he pleases." (4) Since the word of the king is authoritative, who will say to him, "What are you doing?" (5) He who keeps a *royal* command experiences no trouble, for a wise heart knows the proper time and procedure. (6) For there is a proper time and procedure for every delight, though a man's trouble is heavy upon him. (7) If no one knows what will happen, who can tell him when it will happen? (8) No man has authority to restrain the wind with the wind, or authority over the day of death; and there is no discharge in the time of war, and evil will not deliver those who practice it. (9) All this I have seen and applied my mind to every deed that has been done under the sun wherein a man has exercised authority over *another* man to his hurt. (10) So then, I have seen the wicked buried, those who used to go in and out from the holy place, and they are *soon* forgotten in the city where they did thus. This too is futility. (11) Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed quickly, therefore the hearts of the sons of men among them are given fully to do evil. (12) Although a sinner does evil a hundred *times* and may lengthen his *life*, still I know that it will be well for those who fear God, who fear Him openly. (13) But it will not be well for the evil man and he will not lengthen his days like a shadow, because he does not fear God.

The reader will recall that the basic relationship between the Christian and the state is one of submission. We are not speaking of rebellion here; rather, what does the Christian do with a more-or-less reasonable government?

Solomon's advice

If your going to work in the palace (or the White House) there are three adjectives you need:

- ✚ **Wise.** The halls of government are no place for amateurs and fools. Rather, seek after wisdom – and use it. Does this mean that experienced politicians might do a better job? Could be. Could be. There is a time and procedure for everything – and you'd best know what they are.
- ✚ **Obedient.** Even to this day we swear in our congressmen and president. You take an oath of office. But you take it before God Almighty, and he will not take it lightly if you violate that oath.
- ✚ **Righteousness.** What goes around, comes around – usually in the next election. It is amazing how many of our politicians think that they can conceal – and how often they can't.

The uncertainty principle

In physics there is a law known as the "uncertainty principle." Very broadly put, it says that the more you know about one variable (say momentum) the less you know about another (position). You can't know everything to the last decimal place – it is impossible.

The same is true in government. Many are the politicians forecasting glories for their programs and doom for their opponents' ideas. But do you really know what is going to happen? More important, can you really control it? Solomon points out that you have as much chance of directing the wind as you do in avoiding death.

That said, there are going to be times that the government is run by wicked men (just who was Spiro Agnew?) But this principle applies to them too. Being wicked ultimately doesn't work; it's like

drinking salt water when dying of thirst. It just brings on more wickedness until it falls apart. Ultimately, these people die and are forgotten. Who would remember Richard III if not for Shakespeare?

Justice delayed

Of course, that doesn't mean that wicked rulers are not a problem. One of the more serious side effects is that justice is often delayed. Justice delayed is justice denied, we often say. It is certainly true that justice delayed invites more evil.¹⁸

But again, who wins in the end? It is better to fear God and be content with what you have than to climb the corporate ladder with a cutlass in your teeth.

What to Do

Ecc 8:13-17 But it will not be well for the evil man and he will not lengthen his days like a shadow, because he does not fear God. (14) There is futility which is done on the earth, that is, there are righteous men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked. On the other hand, there are evil men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I say that this too is futility. (15) So I commended pleasure, for there is nothing good for a man under the sun except to eat and to drink and to be merry, and this will stand by him in his toils *throughout* the days of his life which God has given him under the sun. (16) When I gave my heart to know wisdom and to see the task which has been done on the earth (even though one should never sleep day or night), (17) and I saw every work of God, *I concluded* that man cannot discover the work which has been done under the sun. Even though man should seek laboriously, he will not discover; and though the wise man should say, "I know," he cannot discover.

Expect perplexity

Let's face it: our frustration with the evils of this world comes down to the fact that we know that shouldn't happen – and yet it does. We then cry to God and ask *why*. Permit me three questions in response to that question:

- ✚ Does God have to explain it to you? Just who are you? You may want an explanation; you may be obedient – but God is still God. He doesn't have to tell you anything.
- ✚ If he did, would you understand it? Are you really as profoundly wise as all that? Is there that much IQ stuffed into your skull?
- ✚ If he did, what would you do about it? The reason you're complaining is that you can't fix it. You'd have to ask him to fix it anyway – and you don't need to know why it's broken to ask that.

What can you do?

Eat, drink and be merry.

Look, it's not a sin to eat, drink and be merry. Honest. There's a time and place for it; in due moderation, it's just fine. Even better – it involves no complication of wisdom. All of us understand it.

¹⁸ What this says for the debate about the death penalty, I leave to the reader.

The work of God

“What is man that you are mindful of him?” Therein lies our basic problem with the state. Particularly in a democracy, we feel we should see all ends, understand all things, and proceed with confidence.

It is not so. Consider, for a moment, physics. It’s still an on-going pursuit. But I ask you:

- ✚ Could you really discover it all? The pattern so far is that every new discovery opens up more to discover.
- ✚ Suppose we did discover it all. Could anyone understand it?
If that’s true of physics, how much more is it true about the nature of evil and righteousness?

The Value of Wisdom - Ecclesiastes 9

The world today is mad for knowledge and has little use for wisdom. But the old computer geeks had it right: Data is not information. Information is not knowledge. Knowledge is not wisdom.

The View Before the Cross

Ecc 9:1-10 For I have taken all this to my heart and explain it that righteous men, wise men, and their deeds are in the hand of God. Man does not know whether *it will be* love or hatred; anything awaits him. (2) It is the same for all. There is one fate for the righteous and for the wicked; for the good, for the clean and for the unclean; for the man who offers a sacrifice and for the one who does not sacrifice. As the good man is, so is the sinner; as the swearer is, so is the one who is afraid to swear. (3) This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that there is one fate for all men. Furthermore, the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil and insanity is in their hearts throughout their lives. Afterwards they *go* to the dead. (4) For whoever is joined with all the living, there is hope; surely a live dog is better than a dead lion. (5) For the living know they will die; but the dead do not know anything, nor have they any longer a reward, for their memory is forgotten. (6) Indeed their love, their hate and their zeal have already perished, and they will no longer have a share in all that is done under the sun. (7) Go *then*, eat your bread in happiness and drink your wine with a cheerful heart; for God has already approved your works. (8) Let your clothes be white all the time, and let not oil be lacking on your head. (9) Enjoy life with the woman whom you love all the days of your fleeting life which He has given to you under the sun; for this is your reward in life and in your toil in which you have labored under the sun. (10) Whatever your hand finds to do, do *it* with *all* your might; for there is no activity or planning or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol where you are going.

Death comes to all

It is fascinating to note that so many have passed through this world with no contemplation of their day of death. It seems to surprise many that they will die. What is of importance to us in this lesson is the timing: the hour of your death is in the hands of God.

Does that surprise you? It is by his providence that you are here at all; all the events of your life are in his plan. The real question is, "What next?"

Here is the difference between the days of Solomon and our day. Solomon knew the character of God; he knew that the righteous would fare better with God than the wicked. But he had no specific promises about what happens after death. He didn't know, "what next?"

He calls this an "evil under the sun." The argument is pretty simple, really. You know that there is evil and indeed insanity running amok in this world.¹⁹ You know that God is righteous – and yet you don't see that God's justice is prevailing in this world. To the contrary, the righteous are sorely tried, and the evil often seem to prevail. And then you die. It doesn't seem right.

¹⁹ How he knew about Obama that far in advance.... (some things never change.)☺

Of course, after the coming of the Christ we know the answer: there is a heaven to gain and a hell to shun – and there is a day of judgment coming. Solomon has pointed out the problem; Christ is the solution.

It's worse than you think

So, from Solomon's point of view, things are bad because only the living have hope. Stop and examine that for a moment. What you do in this world is what counts eternally. Solomon reasoned that this must be so simply because he had no information about life after death. Once you die, you can change nothing – and therefore "future" is a word which is meaningless. That's his view.

We see it from the other side. For those who follow Christ, it is still true that only the living have hope – for the dead in Christ are "present with the Lord." Their faith is now made sight. Hope is a virtue reserved for the living. So live in hope while you can. Remember, your conduct counts.

Indeed, once you are dead, who's going to remember you? Your family will for a little while, but eventually life moves on and you're just a name in the family genealogy. This is burdensome to some of us; we think that our loves and hatreds should live on forever (ever try to pass on a love for classical music to your kids?). We are very passionate about things, and we think others should carry on that passion.

Even there – consider those who abolished slavery in our land. Do you feel their passion today? No; their cause is completed; only a few names remain in the history books. That's the way it is; what are you going to do about it while you're here?

What to do

Well, says Solomon, if you're one of the righteous (see verse 1), then here's what you should do:

- ✚ Eat, drink and be merry – for God approves of your work. If you're one of the good guys, don't be gloomy. Act like you enjoy life – abundantly.
- ✚ Enjoy life with the woman you love. Notice the singular; and this is from Solomon! It's a basic fact for males: things go better when you're married to the woman you love, and enjoy that.²⁰
- ✚ Whatever your vocation might be, give it your best shot – "as if unto the Lord."
You only have so much time on the planet; make the best of it.

The race

Ecc 9:11-12 I again saw under the sun that the race is not to the swift and the battle is not to the warriors, and neither is bread to the wise nor wealth to the discerning nor favor to men of ability; for time and chance overtake them all. (12) Moreover, man does not know his time: like fish caught in a treacherous net and birds trapped in a snare, so the sons of men are ensnared at an evil time when it suddenly falls on them.

²⁰ We may assume Solomon's advice works as well for women; remember that in his time a woman's status was greatly different.

The way to bet

The race is not always to the swift – but that’s the way to bet. Consider, though, that if you can bet on it, that means it’s not certain. Let’s translate this well known passage into modern terms:

- ✚ Just because you have the pole position, doesn’t mean you’ll win a NASCAR race. Think about it; if it were always the fastest car that won, we wouldn’t need a race, just time trials. Time and chance happen in NASCAR as well as life.
- ✚ We were supposed to win in Vietnam, too. Remember? We were the ones with all the technology – but wars are not just technology and strength. They are struggles of the will – and our will wasn’t nearly as strong as theirs. So the weak won.
- ✚ Is it possible that among the starving people of Zimbabwe there are no wise men? Or is it not more likely that Robert Mugabe’s kleptocracy prevails over all?²¹
- ✚ There is someone who got rich in the latest stock market dive, but it wasn’t me. And I think I’m pretty smart.
- ✚ Skill? Consider one Walter Johnson – the best pitcher baseball has ever seen.²² He **lost** 271 games.

There it is: time and chance happen to all. The word “chance” should not be construed as probability; rather, it means “an event or interruption.” The message is clear: stuff happens. Expect it.

That has a significant implication. It means that you are going to face unexpected events in your life – and these events are a test of the Christian character you should be developing. And who knows when that exam ends?

The Value of Wisdom

Ecc 9:13-18 Also this I came to see as wisdom under the sun, and it impressed me. (14) There was a small city with few men in it and a great king came to it, surrounded it and constructed large siegeworks against it. (15) But there was found in it a poor wise man and he delivered the city by his wisdom. Yet no one remembered that poor man. (16) So I said, "Wisdom is better than strength." But the wisdom of the poor man is despised and his words are not heeded. (17) The words of the wise heard in quietness are *better* than the shouting of a ruler among fools. (18) Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.

Wisdom is greater than strength

So we are told – and then we go out to get more strength. While it is true that “superior firepower is an excellent aid to negotiations” (George S. Patton), there are reasons why wisdom is preferable:

- ✚ Strength alone leads to evil, because power corrupts. Without wisdom, strength simply leads you into trouble.
- ✚ If you rely on strength, you will soon discover that every crisis means war. (If all you have is a hammer, everything is a nail). It is plain, however, that war rarely produces benefits commensurate with its cost. Lincoln once estimated that the North could have purchased all the slaves in the South for the price of conducting the Civil War *for ninety days*.

²¹ This lesson was prepared in June, 2010. The illustration will be out of date soon – we hope.

²² IMHO – but he was one of the first five men elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame, along with Ruth, Cobb, Mathewson and Honus Wagner.

- ✦ Rarely does war end anything. War is not over when you have defeated your enemy; it's over when you have made your enemy into your friend. How much better to make friends first!

The poor man's wisdom despised

Did you notice that in every FUBB²³ there's someone with a memo in his Pearl Harbor file that screams, "I told you so!" How does this happen?

- ✦ One reason is that we are social animals. In times of uncertainty, we look for the man who seems certain. If we can't find him, we look for the man with the prestige. The lemmings are always looking for a cliff, it seems.
- ✦ If we can't find the certain or the prestigious, we can always find the rich. A guy with that much money must know what he's doing, right? We sure aren't going to listen to the poor working stiff. It's amazing what we can talk ourselves into, isn't it? So how do we find wisdom?

Wisdom heard in quiet places

It is a fact: my wife's wisdom has its own wisdom. She delivers it in the quiet of the bedroom. Isn't it amazing how much more likely a man is to listen when she does it that way? Why is that?

- ✦ One reason is the ego. If wisdom is delivered in raucous argument, it's likely to be overwhelmed by the emotional response of "saving face."
- ✦ Contrarily, most of us also know that people who speak softly (but not hesitantly) are confident of their wisdom. They don't need to shout. Therefore we listen to people who speak this way – if we can hear them at all.
- ✦ Indeed, is it not the case that God himself prefers the "still, small voice?"

It only takes one idiot...

With all this being indisputably true, why is there so much stupidity in the world we live in? I submit a simple answer: it only takes one fool to screw things up. Who knows how many wise men will be required to fix his foolishness?

May I submit to you an example? Consider the Japanese Empire in late 1941. Their relations with America were hardly satisfactory. This is not surprising given their incursion into China and generally threatening attitude. The intelligent thing to do was to back down, lighten up and make some substantial changes in policy.

But that would have someone "lose face." Despite the fact that a long war with America could only have one result, the Japanese saw no choice but to attack. They awakened the sleeping giant. Within four years they were crushed. They knew this would happen, but convinced themselves that the Americans wouldn't go to war in a serious way. The result was completely predictable.

Interestingly, those in the cabinet who wanted peace were in the majority. They simply could not find a way to avoid the war – without social disgrace. It only takes a few moral idiots to send a nation down the wrong path.

²³ Fouled Up Beyond Belief – the clean translation.

That's a lesson for us. If you think that such "social pressure" decisions can't happen to America, I have only two words for you: "politically correct."

Old Man's Wisdom - Ecclesiastes 10:1 – 11:7

In what must surely have been a series of late night thoughts for Solomon, we have in this section a collection of proverbs. There seems to be no particular order to them, but we shall take them as they come and gather such wisdom as we can.

Fools, Rulers and OSHA

Ecclesiastes 10:1-11 NASB (1) Dead flies make a perfumer's oil stink, so a little foolishness is weightier than wisdom *and* honor. (2) A wise man's heart *directs him* toward the right, but the foolish man's heart *directs him* toward the left. (3) Even when the fool walks along the road, his sense is lacking and he demonstrates to everyone *that* he is a fool. (4) If the ruler's temper rises against you, do not abandon your position, because composure allays great offenses. (5) There is an evil I have seen under the sun, like an error which goes forth from the ruler-- (6) folly is set in many exalted places while rich men sit in humble places. (7) I have seen slaves *riding* on horses and princes walking like slaves on the land. (8) He who digs a pit may fall into it, and a serpent may bite him who breaks through a wall. (9) He who quarries stones may be hurt by them, and he who splits logs may be endangered by them. (10) If the axe is dull and he does not sharpen *its* edge, then he must exert more strength. Wisdom has the advantage of giving success. (11) If the serpent bites before being charmed, there is no profit for the charmer.

Fools

In the first three verses, Solomon gives us the local version of things we know pretty well:

- ✚ First, it only takes one mistake to wipe out the effect of a lot of good work (one “aw sh*t” = 1000 attaboys). People remember your mistakes and forget the good stuff. It takes a genuine leader to overcome this judgment.
- ✚ You can spot the wise man by the way he does things. He’s dexterous, not sinister. He has a particular style in doing things – and that style works.
- ✚ Fools, on the other hand, don’t seem to be able to walk and chew gum at the same time. In other words, fools make themselves pretty obvious. Even after they get elected.

Rulers

What do you do when the man in charge decides it’s time to “kick ass and take names?” You remain calm, that’s what you do. A wise man is first and foremost in control of himself. Such a demeanor often changes the behavior of the man in charge – who usually doesn’t realize what a fool he’s making of himself.

This point is particularly important when your leader is in fact completely unqualified for the job. Solomon calls it “an evil under the sun.” That’s his pet phrase for, “here’s a bad idea.” Local and political examples I leave to the reader. It’s tough trying to run the ship from a subordinate position.

OSHA

Solomon then points out something rather obvious: work can be dangerous. Remember, safety laws didn’t exist in those days. But safety begins with the worker, not the manager. So watch what you’re doing! (Gee, a three thousand year old safety poster.)

But what he's really talking about here is in the metaphor we still use today: sharpen the axe. It is a common mistake to assume that people will learn everything on the job that they need to know; that no additional training will ever be necessary; that once you've done, there's nothing left to learn. Rather, sharpen the axe: seek out the training and experience you need to grow on.

In short, as IBM used to put it, "THINK." As my ancestors put it, "Think. Because thinking saves work."

That last is important. You've seen it yourself: someone works very hard, often for a long time, and at the end something goes wrong and they get nothing for it. There's always someone around to tell you that you were stupid to do it that way.

Various Tests

[Ecclesiastes 10:12-20 NASB](#) (12) Words from the mouth of a wise man are gracious, while the lips of a fool consume him; (13) the beginning of his talking is folly and the end of it is wicked madness. (14) Yet the fool multiplies words. No man knows what will happen, and who can tell him what will come after him? (15) The toil of a fool *so* wearies him that he does not *even* know how to go to a city. (16) Woe to you, O land, whose king is a lad and whose princes feast in the morning. (17) Blessed are you, O land, whose king is of nobility and whose princes eat at the appropriate time--for strength and not for drunkenness. (18) Through indolence the rafters sag, and through slackness the house leaks. (19) *Men* prepare a meal for enjoyment, and wine makes life merry, and money is the answer to everything. (20) Furthermore, in your bedchamber do not curse a king, and in your sleeping rooms do not curse a rich man, for a bird of the heavens will carry the sound and the winged creature will make the matter known.

Knowing a fool when you hear one

Let's start with the obvious. You know the answer to this one. When a wise man opens his mouth, his speech is gracious. There is no sense of, "I'm so smart I must be right all the time." But the real test is this: do your words come back to bite you? If that's your common experience, maybe you ought to examine your words – and the thoughts behind them (if there are any.)

The fool is noted for one other thing. A wise man may shoot his mouth off – but once he sees what he's done, he corrects it. A fool goes from bad to worse. If he's contradicted he will simply shout louder. This despite the fact that we really don't know what's going to happen next – a little humility is in order. And the fool has darn little humility.

Rotten Rulers

Solomon pictures the problem as being one when a child becomes king, but we know the problem in other forms. Someone is appointed to a position of leadership for which he is not qualified – but "the system" says it must be done. In Solomon's day, a child king. Is there a parallel in our time?

I submit there is: political correctness. For your edification, I suggest you look up the career of one Capt. Holly Graf, USN. Time magazine called her a "female Capt. Bligh." At the end she was discovered to be incompetent to command – but this was after twenty-five years as a naval officer.

Apparently she was never really qualified – but kept getting promoted, as she was a female Annapolis graduate, tagged as one who would someday become an admiral. Leaders should be well qualified.

Indeed, Solomon here gives us the difference between a true prince and a tyrant. The tyrant uses his authority for his own benefit; in this instance, to party all day and work as little as possible. Ever had a manager like that? Was he or she at all effective?

Enjoy, but ...

OK, so it's not OK for a ruler to enjoy himself once in a while? Not really true. It's not forbidden. But do so moderately – and watch your mouth as you do.

More virtues

Ecclesiastes 11:1-7 NASB (1) Cast your bread on the surface of the waters, for you will find it after many days. (2) Divide your portion to seven, or even to eight, for you do not know what misfortune may occur on the earth. (3) If the clouds are full, they pour out rain upon the earth; and whether a tree falls toward the south or toward the north, wherever the tree falls, there it lies. (4) He who watches the wind will not sow and he who looks at the clouds will not reap. (5) Just as you do not know the path of the wind and how bones *are formed* in the womb of the pregnant woman, so you do not know the activity of God who makes all things. (6) Sow your seed in the morning and do not be idle in the evening, for you do not know whether morning or evening sowing will succeed, or whether both of them alike will be good. (7) The light is pleasant, and *it is* good for the eyes to see the sun.

The virtue of charity

There is a style of giving which marks the truly charitable. Some give ostentatiously, with a “look what a wonderful guy I am” attitude. But if you give with no expectation of return – as in, giving to the poor, or giving anonymously, it is God's work to reward you for it.

The great Jewish sage of the Middle Ages, Maimonides, described his eight degrees of charity thusly, in ascending order:

He who gives grudgingly, reluctantly, or with regret.

He who gives less than he should, but gives graciously.

He who gives what he should, but only after he is asked.

He who gives before he is asked.

He who gives without knowing to whom he gives, although the recipient knows the identity of the donor.

He who gives without making his identity known.

He who gives without knowing to whom he gives, neither does the recipient know from whom he receives.

He who helps a fellowman to support himself by a gift, or a loan, or by finding employment for him, thus helping him to become self-supporting.

Such a man seeks his reward from the Lord – and the Lord is generous in such matters.

The “vision thing”

One of the best leaders I ever had often remarked, “Forecasting is very difficult – especially when it concerns the future.” There is a really good reason this is so: stuff happens. And it doesn’t always happen the way your risk analysis forecast that it would.

One response to this is to “do the vision thing.” You spend all your time visioning (if there really should be such a verb). Every time some doubt arises, you rearrange the plans to make sure that nothing could go wrong. In short, you spend all your time “visioning” – and no time doing. It’s a great way to avoid work – and results.

Get out and work

As every stockbroker knows, the right answer to risk is to diversify – whether it’s your stock portfolio or your efforts. Don’t commit your efforts or your portfolio to one particular thing. But do commit; get out there and get the work done.

Remember Your Creator - Ecclesiastes 11:9 – 12:18

Solomon now sums up his conclusions in the last section of Ecclesiastes. Interestingly, he still holds to the theme that vanity, vanity, all is vanity -- that's the essence of life.

Youth

Ecclesiastes 11:9-10 NASB (9) Rejoice, young man, during your childhood, and let your heart be pleasant during the days of young manhood. And follow the impulses of your heart and the desires of your eyes. Yet know that God will bring you to judgment for all these things. (10) So, remove grief and anger from your heart and put away pain from your body, because childhood and the prime of life are fleeting.

Rejoice

So what does someone say to the young man? He gives him this advice:

- ✚ First he says be happy. After all, these are the days of your youth where your body gives you strength and you can chase those pleasures in life. We might also say, "to everything there is a season."
- ✚ Next, he encourages the youth to follow the desires of his heart and the wanderings of his eyes. It is to say that the youth should not be cautious. Instead, he should indeed follow his desires that lead to good things.

But remember the judgment

At first glance, this appears as if Solomon is saying each drink and be merry and take no thought for the morrow. He does not. He reminds the youth that there is judgment in this life. Doing the right things will be awarded, doing the wrong things will be punished. Beyond that there is the great judgment to come. It is the character of God that he is righteous. That righteousness demands a final judgment, at which all will be judged. Therefore the young man should watch his ways, so that he does not run afoul of the judgment of God. Indeed, the young man will answer for every one of his actions. And what should you do about that?

What to do?

Solomon answers with these three points:

- ✚ First, remove sorrow from the heart. How do you do this? I believe he is counseling him not to give way to melancholy, nor to assume that life is indeed a succession of dirges. He should view life optimistically, as if he's going to live the rest of his life in harmony with God. That at least should be his objective.
- ✚ He next recommends that you take pain away from the flesh. While this might seem to be an injunction to get drunk -- they had no other pain relievers of any real capability those days -- I suspect it actually means to avoid painful situations for your body. In other words, stay in shape, and don't misuse your body. Christians will note that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit.
- ✚ Then Solomon explains why. It is very simple: as life goes on, the body ages, and you will find the time is fleeting. Even the greatest quarterbacks retire at some time.

Remember

Solomon now gives us some of the most beautiful poetry in the Bible, to describe the rigors of old age.

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

Guess what's coming

It always seems hard for the young man to understand it, but the day is coming when your pleasure in life is not nearly as great as it once was. To be specific:

- ✚ Evil days are coming in which you will take no pleasure. To the young this seems almost incomprehensible, but to those who have been through life it is fairly obvious. There are days when the weight of your medications is greater than the weight of the world.
- ✚ Times will darken. This probably refers to the eyesight, which does deteriorate with age.
- ✚ Most important, the clouds return after the rain. What does that mean? It means that troubles don't just come and go, but the same trouble keeps coming back again and again. This is a normal characteristic of old age.

A picture of old age

Solomon now paints for us an eloquent picture of old age. See if you recognize these symptoms:

- ✚ the keepers of the house tremble. This is thought to mean that the arms grow weak.
- ✚ The strong man bowed down. This is thought to refer to the legs.
- ✚ Those that look through the windows grow dim. This is undoubtedly a reference to the failing eyesight of the aged.
- ✚ The doors are shut in the streets. The ears grow hard of hearing.
- ✚ The sound of the grinding is low. In other words the speech of the aged is very difficult to understand, as they tend to mumble quite a lot.
- ✚ One wakes up at the sound of a bird. This refers to the habit of the elderly of getting up early in the morning. There is a reason the bathroom is right next door to the bedroom.
- ✚ They are afraid of high places, that is to say, the fear of falling. They are also afraid of the terrors in the way. Do you remember the period in your life when you felt you were invincible?
- ✚ The almond tree blossoms. Almond blossoms are white, and this probably refers to the gray hair of age.
- ✚ The grasshopper is a burden. This refers to the general feebleness of old age.
- ✚ Translations of the next little section vary. Many translations say that desire fails, others mention the caperberry. The caperberry is what is now called capers. In Solomon's time these were considered to be the equivalent of today's Viagra. Some things never change.
- ✚ Finally, life and in death. The mourners, in those days professionals, are hired and wail at the funeral. The body returns to dust, and the spirit returns to God who gave it

Remember your Creator

Solomon's poetry continues. He describes the final decay of the body before death in the use metaphors.

- ✚ The silver cord is loosed. Most scholars believe this refers to the spinal cord.
- ✚ The golden bowl is broken. This corresponds to the skull.
- ✚ The pitcher is shattered at the fountain. This refers to the failing of the heart.
- ✚ The wheel is broken at the well. This may refer to the pelvis or the hips, which are often broken in old age.

What, then, does Solomon say the young man should do about this? The answer is simple: remember your Creator in the days of your youth.

Epilogue

Ecclesiastes 12:8-14 NASB (8) "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher, "all is vanity!" (9) In addition to being a wise man, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge; and he pondered, searched out and arranged many proverbs. (10) The Preacher sought to find delightful words and to write words of truth correctly. (11) The words of wise men are like goads, and masters of *these* collections are like well-driven nails; they are given by one Shepherd. (12) But beyond this, my son, be warned: the writing of many books is endless, and excessive devotion *to books* is wearying to the body. (13) The conclusion, when all has been heard, *is*: fear God and keep His commandments, because this *applies to* every person. (14) For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.

Theme

Solomon has one consistent theme throughout this work: all is vanity. He now ends his work by pointing out the duty of the wise, the value of wisdom, and the simplicity with which it should be received.

Duty of the wise

It would not be fair to lay the burden on the young people alone. Solomon now dictates responsibilities and duties of the wise. They are two:

- ✚ First, to continue to teach others the way of wisdom. If you are wise, Solomon thinks that you should teach those who are younger and less experienced than yourself. It seems only fair, and most of us remember one who taught us what we would otherwise have learned from very bitter experience.
- ✚ Wisdom is not static. Solomon expects that the wise man will continue to learn, continue to seek out wisdom, and grow in his wisdom.

Value of Wisdom

Solomon now describes the words of the wise as being goads. That's the function of a proverb; it is to provoke you to think, and having thought to produce action. There is no sense learning wisdom if you don't do something about it.

Indeed, a collection of wisdom is described as firmly driven nails. Do you not see that wisdom is to anchor your life into the stable things of God? Therefore, do not view wisdom as something to be

displayed on the wall, but rather let it be your comfort and guide, knowing what to do, even though you are really not sure because of your lack of experience. Wisdom is to anchor you in God's view of reality.

There now appears what seems to be a prophecy of the Christ to come. Solomon uses the metaphor of a shepherd to describe the source of wisdom. Of course, this can only refer to the Christ. It is a rare example of prophecy in Solomon's work.

Simplicity

The use of wisdom sometimes is thwarted by the fact that we are very zealous to read the latest and greatest hit book sold at a Christian bookstore. Walk into such a store, and you will see displays of the most recent publications in Christian thought. But is it not clear that the Christian should seek wisdom, not the latest and greatest idea? How often have you seen it, that the church chases after the latest book in psychology or in parenting or in finances? Solomon warns us against this.

Instead, Solomon gives us this advice: fear God, and keep his commandments. It really is that simple. The advice is given to us because Solomon knows that there is judgment to come. It will go well with the man who has feared God and kept his commandments. With the one who has been unwise it will not go well at all.