

ECCLESIASTES

Ecclesiastes is one of the most elusive books in the Bible. Its message seems profound, but at the same time empty, gloomy and even full of boredom and despair. It seems to be a handbook of nihilism. The Hebrew keyword *hebel*, ‘meaningless,’ occurs 38 times in the book. It is the same word that is found in the verse: ‘They made me jealous by what is no God and angered me with their *worthless idols*. I will make them envious by those who are not a people; I will make them angry by a nation that has no understanding.’¹

J. Sidlow Baxter, in *Exploring the Book*, states about Ecclesiastes: ‘This book of Ecclesiastes has been a much misunderstood book. Pessimists have found material in it to bolster up their doleful hypotheses. Skeptics have claimed support from it for their contention of non-survival after death. Others have quoted it as confirming the theory of soul-sleep between the death of the body and the yet future resurrection. Besides these, many sound and sincere believers have felt it to be an unspiritually-minded composition, contradictory to the principles of the New Testament, and awkward to harmonize with belief in the full inspiration of the Bible. It is the more needful, therefore, that we should clearly grasp its real message, and understand its peculiarities. Misapprehensions such as those just mentioned come about through a wrong way of reading. People read the chapters simply as a string of verses in which each verse is a more or less independent pronouncement, instead of carefully perceiving that the verses and paragraphs and chapters and sections are the component part of a cumulative treatise. Ecclesiastes is not the only part of Scripture which is wronged by this kind of reading; but it suffers the more by it because when the links in the chain of reasoning are thus wrenched apart they lend themselves to an easy misunderstanding. Those interpretations of this or that or the other verse, which contradict the design and drift and declarations of the book as a whole, are wrong.

Authorship

In its introduction to the book, *The Pulpit Commentary* states: ‘The book is called in the Hebrew *Koheleth*, a title taken from its opening sentence, ‘The words of Koheleth, the son of David, King in Jerusalem.’ In the Greek and Latin Versions it is entitled ‘Ecclesiastes,’ which Jerome elucidates by remarking that in Greek a person is so called who gathers the congregation, or *ecclesia* ... In modern versions the name is usually ‘Ecclesiastes; or, The Preacher.’ Luther boldly gives ‘The Preacher Solomon.’ This is not a satisfactory rendering to modern ears; and, indeed, it is difficult to find a term which will adequately represent the Hebrew word. *Koheleth* is a participle feminine from a root *kahal* (whence the Greek *kale>w*, Latin *calo*, and English ‘call’), which means, ‘to call, to assemble,’ especially for religious or solemn purposes. The word and its derivatives are always applied to people, and not to things. So the term, which gives its name to our book, signifies a female assembler or collector of persons for Divine worship, or in order to address them. It can, therefore, not mean ‘Gatherer of wisdom,’ ‘Collector of maxims,’ but ‘Gatherer of God’s people’ (... 1 Kings 8:1); others make it equivalent to ‘Debater,’ which term affords a clue to the variation of opinions in the work. It is generally constructed as a masculine and without the article, but once as feminine (... Ecclesiastes 7:27, if the reading is correct), and once with the article (... Ecclesiastes 12:8). The feminine form is by some accounted for, not by supposing Koheleth to represent an office, and therefore as used abstractedly, but as being the personification of Wisdom, whose business it is to gather people unto the Lord and make them a holy congregation. In Proverbs sometimes Wisdom herself speaks (*e.g.* ... Proverbs 1:20), sometimes the author speaks of her (*e.g.* ... Proverbs 8:1, etc.). So Koheleth appears now as the organ of Wisdom, now as Wisdom herself, supporting, as it were, two characters without losing altogether his identity. At the same time, it is to be noted that Solomon, as personified Wisdom, could not speak of himself

1. Deut. 32:21

as having gotten more wisdom than all that were before him in Jerusalem (... Ecclesiastes 1:16), or how his heart had great experience of wisdom, or how he had applied his heart to discover things by means of wisdom (... Ecclesiastes 7:23, 25). These things could not be said in this character, and unless we suppose that the writer occasionally lost himself, or did not strictly maintain his assumed personation, we must fall back upon the ascertained fact that the feminine form of such words as Koheleth has no special significance (unless, perhaps, it denotes power and activity), and that such forms were used in the later stage of the language to express proper names of men ... If, as is supposed, Solomon is designated Koheleth in allusion to his great prayer at the dedication of the temple (... 1 Kings 8:23-53, 56-61), it is strange that no mention is anywhere made of this celebrated work, and the part he took therein. He appears rather as addressing general readers than teaching his own people from an elevated position; and the title assigned to him is meant to designate him, not only as one who by word of mouth instructed others, but one whose life and experience preached an emphatic lesson on the vanity of mundane things.'

Date

Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary states: 'King Solomon of Israel, a ruler noted for his great wisdom and vast riches, has traditionally been accepted as the author of Ecclesiastes. Evidence for this is strong, since Solomon fits the author's description of himself given in the book: 'I, the Preacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I set my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all that is done under heaven' (1:12-13). But some scholars claim that Solomon could not have written the book because it uses certain words and phrases that belong to a much later time in Israel's history. These objections by themselves are not strong enough to undermine Solomon's authorship. The book was probably written some time during his long reign of 40 years, from 970 to 931 B.C.' Solomon's authorship has been accepted and refuted throughout the centuries. We will not enter into the controversy in the context of this study and simply accept the most ancient traditions that attribute the book to Israel's wisest king.

The message of Ecclesiastes

The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia probably makes the best comments about the content of the book, stating: 'In the preface the speaker lays down the proposition that all things are unreal, and that the results of human effort are illusive (Eccl 1:2-3). Human generations, day and night, the wind, the streams, are alike the repetition of an unending round (vs 4-7). The same holds in regard to all human study and thinking (vs 8-11). The speaker shows familiarity with the phenomena which we think of as those of natural law, of the persistence of force, but he thinks of them in the main as monotonously limiting human experience. Nothing is new. All effort of Nature or of man is the doing again of something which has already been done.

After the preface the speaker introduces himself, and recounts his experiences. At the outset he had a noble ambition for wisdom and discipline, but all he attained to was unreality and perplexity of mind (vs 12-18). This is equally the meaning of the text, whether we translate 'vanity and vexation of spirit' or 'vanity and a striving after wind,' ('emptiness, and struggling for breath'), though the first of these two translations is the better grounded.

Finding no adequate satisfaction in the pursuits of the scholar and thinker, taken by themselves, he seeks to combine these with the pursuit of agreeable sensations-alike those which come from luxury and those which come from activity and enterprise and achievement (Eccl 2:1-12). No one could be in better shape than he for making this experiment, but again he only attains to unreality and perplexity of spirit. He says to himself that at least it is in itself profitable to be a wise man rather than a fool, but his comfort is impaired by the fact that both alike are mortal (vs 13-17). He finds little reassurance in the idea of laboring for the benefit of posterity; posterity is often not worthy (vs 18-21). One may toil unremittingly, but what is the use (vs 22,23)?

He does not find himself helped by bringing God into the problem. 'It is no good for a man that he should eat and drink and make his soul see good in his toil' (vs 24-26, as most naturally translated), even if he thinks of it as the gift of God; for how can one be sure that the gift of God is anything but luck? He sees, however, that it is not just to dismiss thus lightly the idea of God as a factor in the problem. It is true that there is a time for everything, and that everything is 'beautiful in its time.' It is also true that ideas of infinity are in men's minds, ideas which they can neither get rid of nor fully comprehend (Eccl 3:1-18). Here are tokens of God, who has established an infinite order. If we understood His ways better, that might unravel our perplexities. And if God is, immortality may be, and the solution of our problems may lie in that direction. For a moment it looks as if the speaker were coming out into the light, but doubt resumes its hold upon him. He asks himself, 'Who knoweth?' and he settles back into the darkness. He has previously decided that for a man to 'eat and drink, and make his soul enjoy good' is not worth while; and now he reaches the conclusion that, unsatisfactory as this is, there is nothing better (vs 19-22).

And so the record of experiences continues, hopeful passages alternating with pessimistic passages. After a while the agnosticism and pessimism recede somewhat, and the hopeful passages become more positive. Even though 'the poor man's wisdom is despised,' the speaker says, 'the words of the wise heard in quiet are better than the cry of him that ruleth among fools' (Eccl 9:17). He says 'Surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God' (8:12), no matter how strongly appearances may indicate the contrary.

The gnomic sections are mostly free from agnosticism and pessimism. The book as a whole sums itself up in the conclusion, 'Fear God, and keep his commandments' (Eccl 12:13).

Of course the agnostic and pessimistic utterances in Eccl are to be regarded as the presentation of one side of an argument. Disconnect them and they are no part of the moral and religious teaching of the book, except in an indirect way. At no point should we be justified in thinking of the author as really doubting in regard to God or moral obligation. He delineates for us a soul in the toils of mental and spiritual conflict. It is a delineation which may serve for warning, and which is in other ways wholesomely instructive; and in the outcome of it, it is full of encouragement. In some passages the speaker in Ecclesiastes has in mind the solution of the problems of life which we are accustomed to call Epicurean (e.g. Eccl 5:18-20; 7:16-17; 8:15; but not 2:24) - the solution which consists in avoiding extremes, and in getting from life as many agreeable sensations as possible; but it is not correct to say that he advocates this philosophy. He rather presents it as an alternative.

His conclusion is the important part of his reasoning. All things are vanity. Everything passes away. Yet (he says) it is better to read and use good words than bad words. Therefore because the Great Teacher is wise, he ever teaches the people knowledge, and in so doing he ever seeks good words, acceptable words, upright words, words of truth. 'The words of the wise are as goads; and as nails well fastened' ('climbed at the back') (Eccl 12:11). Such are the words of all the great masters. So (he ends) my son, be warned! There are many books in this world. Choose good ones. And his conclusion is: Reverence the Mighty Spirit. Keep to good principles. That is the whole duty of man. For everything at last becomes clear; and 'good' stands out clearly from 'evil.'

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, a commentary in the series of *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*, states in his introduction, under the heading 'The Enigma of Ecclesiastes,' the following: 'The major interpretative problem of Ecclesiastes is to understand its apparent internal contradiction and vicissitudes of thought. At times the Preacher seems to be gloomy, pessimistic, a skeleton at the feast; everything comes under his lashing scorn: laughter, drink, possession, sex, work, wisdom, riches, honor, children, even righteousness. Yet, at other points he urges that we should enjoy life, that there is nothing better than to eat well, enjoy our labor, receive with gladness the riches God gives us but be content if he gives none. A man, he says, should seek wisdom and knowledge, drink his wine with a merry heart, and live joyfully with the wife whom he loves. The Preacher's argument and his relationship to Israelite orthodoxy seems ambiguous. At times he appears to overthrow everything Israel stood for; at other points we see the traditional view of God as sustainer and judge of all things, who give life to men and who may be worshipped at Israel's focal point, the temple. Thus one scholar describes the Preacher as 'a rationalist, an

agnostic, a skeptic, a pessimist and a fatalist' ... others regard his work as orthodox ... or as an indirect Messianic prophecy.'

It may be helpful to remember that in the Old Testament canon, Ecclesiastes is wedged in between Proverbs and The Song of songs, making it the second volume of a trilogy attributed to King Solomon. That perspective may be helpful, particularly if we look at Ecclesiastes as 'the other side of the coin' that is shown to us in Proverbs.

Outline of the book

Michael A Eaton , in *Ecclesiastes*, gives the following outline, which we will follow throughout this study:

I. PESSIMISM: ITS PROBLEMS AND ITS REMEDY 1:1-3:22

- a. Title 1:1
- b. The pessimist's problem 1:2-2:23
 - i. The failure of secularism 1:2-11
 - ii. The failure of wisdom to satisfy secular life 1:12-18
 - iii. The failure of pleasure-seeking to satisfy secular life 2:1-11
 - iv. Life's ultimate certainty 2:12-23
- c. The alternative to pessimism: faith in God 2:24-3:22
 - i. The life of faith 2:24-26
 - ii. The providence of God 3:1-15
 - iii. The judgment of God 3:16-22

II. LIFE 'UNDER THE SUN' 4:1-10:20

- a. Life's hardships and life's companions 4:1-5:7
 - i. Oppression without comfort 4:1-3
 - ii. Lonesome rivalry and its alternatives 4:4-6
 - iii. A man without a family 4:7-8
 - iv. The blessings of companionship 4:9-12
 - v. Isolation breeding folly 4:13-16
 - vi. The approach to God 5:1-7
- b. Poverty and wealth 5:8-6:12
 - i. The poor under oppressive bureaucracy 5:8-9
 - ii. Money and its drawback 5:10-12
 - iii. Wealth – loved and lost 5:13-17
 - iv. Remedy recalled 5:18-20
 - v. Wealth and insecurity 6:1-6
 - vi. Insatiable longing 6:7-9
 - vii. An impasse 6:10-12
- c. Suffering and sin 7:1-8:1
 - i. Instruction from suffering 7:1-6
 - ii. Four dangers 7:7-10
 - iii. The need of wisdom 7:11-12
 - iv. Life under the hand of God 7:13-14
 - v. Dangers along the way 7:15-18
 - vi. The need of wisdom 7:19-22
 - vii. The inaccessibility of wisdom 7:23-24
 - viii. The sinfulness of man 7:25-29
 - ix. Who is really wise? 8:1

d. Authority, injustice and the life of faith 8:2-9:10

i. Royal authority 8:2-8

ii. Life's injustices 8:9-11

iii. The answer of faith 8:12-13

iv. The problem restated 8:14

v. The remedy recalled 8:15

vi. The enigma of life 8:16-9:1

vii. 'The sting of death' 9:2-3

viii. Where there's life, there's hope 9:4-6

ix. The remedy of faith 9:7-10

E. Wisdom and folly 9:11-10:20

i. Time and chance 9:11-12

ii. Wisdom unrecognized 9:13-16

iii. Wisdom thwarted 9:17-10:1

iv. Folly 10:2-3

v. Folly in high places 10:4-7

vi. Folly in action 10:8-11

vii. The fool's talk 10:12-14

viii. The fool's incompetence 10:15

ix. Folly in national life 10:16-20

III. THE CALL TO DECISION 11:1-12:8

a. The venture of faith 11:1-6

b. The life of joy 11:7-10

c. 'Today, when you hear his voice ...' 12:1-8

IV. EPILOGUE 12:9-14

Michael A. Eaton adds to his outline: 'This leaves the following loose ends which warn us not to assume that all of this was too rigidly in the Preacher's mind as he wrote: (i) 5:1-7 tags on the the end of 4:1-16 or introduces 5:8-6:12) but is not closely linked to either. One may speculate about a sequence of thought ... but no explicit link is found in the text. (ii) Although 3:16-22 coheres well with 2:24-3:15, it also leads into the problem of suffering in 4:1-3 (which has its own links in turn with 4:4-16). (iii) There is only a loose coherence in the minor units of 7:1-8:1 and 8:2-9:10.'

The Text

I. PESSIMISM: ITS PROBLEMS AND ITS REMEDY 1:1-3:22

A. Title 1:1

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

The Hebrew text opens with the words *dabar qoheleth*, 'The words of the Preacher.' Qoheleth is derived from the word *qahal*, meaning 'to convoke,' or 'to assemble,' 'to preach.' *The Interlinear Hebrew Bible* states that it is 'used as a 'nom de plume', Koheleth.'

The Pulpit Commentary observes about the word *Koheleth*: 'It is found nowhere else but in this book, where it occurs three times in this chapter (vers. 1, 2, 12), three times in ... Ecclesiastes 12:8, 9, 10, and once in ... Ecclesiastes 7:27. In all but one instance (viz. ... Ecclesiastes 12:8) it is used without the article, as a proper name. Jerome, in his commentary, translates it, 'Continuator,' in his version

‘Ecclesiastes.’ It would seem to denote one who gathered around him a congregation in order to instruct them in Divine lore. The feminine form is explained in various ways. Either it is used abstractedly, as the designation of an office, which it seems not to be; or it is formed as some other words which are found with a feminine termination, though denoting the names of men, indicating ... a high degree of activity in the possessor of the particular quality signified by the stem; ... or, as is most probable, the writer desired to identify Koheleth with Wisdom, though it must be observed that the personality of the author often appears, as in ... Ecclesiastes 1:16-18; 7:23, etc.; the *role* of Wisdom being for the nonce forgotten.’

About ‘son of David, king in Jerusalem,’ the commentary states: ‘The word ‘king’ in the title is shown by the accentuation to be in apposition to ‘Koheleth’ not to ‘David;’ and there can be no doubt that the description is intended to denote Solomon, though his name is nowhere actually given, as it is in the two other works ascribed to him (... Proverbs 1:1; ... Song of Solomon 1:1). Other intimations of the assumption of Solomon’s personality are found in ... Ecclesiastes 1:12, ‘I Koheleth was king,’ etc.; so in describing his consummate wisdom (... Ecclesiastes 1:13, 16; 2:15; comp. ... 1 Kings 3:12; 5:12), and in his being the author of many proverbs (... Ecclesiastes 12:9; comp. 1 Kings 4:32) — accomplishments which are not noted in the case of any other of David’s descendants. Also the picture of luxury and magnificence presented in Ecclesiastes 2. suits no Jewish monarch but Solomon. The origin of the name applied to him may probably be traced to the historical fact mentioned in ... 1 Kings 8:55, etc., where Solomon gathers all Israel together to the dedication of the temple, and utters the remarkable prayer which contained blessing and teaching and exhortation ... The term, ‘King in Jerusalem,’ or, as in ver. 12, ‘King over Israel in Jerusalem,’ is unique, and occurs nowhere else in Scripture. David is said to have reigned in Jerusalem, when this seat of government is spoken of in contrast with that at Hebron (... 2 Samuel 5:5), and the same expression is used of Solomon, Rehoboam, and others (... 1 Kings 11:42; 14:21; 15:2,10); and the phrase probably denotes a time when the government had become divided, and Israel had a different capital from Judah.’

Bible scholars are not unanimous about the assumption that ‘son of David, king in Jerusalem’ is the obvious identification of King Solomon. Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, writes: ‘*Son of David, king in Jerusalem* refers to Solomon, but the artificial name ‘Mr. Preacher’ (for so it might be paraphrased) shows that the writer is not seriously claiming to be Solomon. The book is a write-up of Solomon’s story; later we shall be told that the originator of the materials was a care writer, a wise man, a collector of proverbs (12:9-12).’

The Adam Clarke’s Commentary states: ‘[The words of the Preacher] Literally, ‘The words of Qoheleth, son of David, king of Jerusalem.’ But the Targum explains it thus: ‘The words of the prophecy, which Qoheleth prophesied; the same is Solomon, son of David the king, who was in Jerusalem. For when Solomon, king of Israel, saw by the spirit of prophecy that the kingdom of Rehoboam his son was about to be divided with Jeroboam, the son of Nebat; and the house of the sanctuary was about to be destroyed, and the people of Israel sent into captivity; he said in his word-Vanity of vanities is all that I have labored, and David my father; they are altogether vanity.’ *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* adds: ‘Solomon, although not identified by name, becomes the literary spokesman for the observations and convictions of the author. He is the king in Jerusalem who, because of his wealth, wisdom, and worldly concern, has ample opportunity to sample all of life.’

We will continue under the assumption of Solomon’s authorship of this book. The character of this book with its pessimistic and elusive references to the meaning of life, fits well the biographic information given to us in the Old Testament. Solomon was given to excesses, as demonstrated in the acquisition of his harem as well as in his pushing the limits of tolerance and wisdom. In a sense King Solomon was too smart for his own good. His tolerance led him to idolatry and his wisdom to pessimistic inconclusiveness.

B. The pessimist's problem 1:2-2:23

i. The failure of secularism 1:2-11

2 *'Meaningless! Meaningless!' says the Teacher. 'Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.'*

3 *What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun?*

4 *Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever.*

5 *The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises.*

6 *The wind blows to the south and turns to the north; round and round it goes, ever returning on its course.*

7 *All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. To the place the streams come from, there they return again.*

8 *All things are wearisome, more than one can say. The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing.*

9 *What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.*

10 *Is there anything of which one can say, 'Look! This is something new'? It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time.*

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

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, comments: 'The preacher undermines confidence in the secular view of life by inviting his readers to face some basic facts: the futility of life (v.2), the consequences for man (3), the impossibility of getting rid of the earthly realm which embodies the problem (4), and the implications all this has for man's view of nature (5-7) and history (8-11).'

There are two observations that must be made here. It has been said that the key to the understanding of each book in the Bible often hangs at the door. If applied to the book of Ecclesiastes, it must be found in the inconsistency of the opening statement: 'Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.' If everything is literally meaningless, then so is the Teacher's statement! The fact that the Teacher makes an exception for his own words ought to give us a clue to understanding his message. If the word 'meaning' has lost its meaning, it means the death of language, it means the death of thought and emotions, the death of man. So far no one in the world has accepted that premise. There is obviously one missing element in the Teacher's argument and that makes the message of the book a quest for the missing link to meaning.

Secondly, as was mentioned above, the Hebrew word *hebel* is used for the first time in Scripture in connection with idols,¹ suggesting that, if an idol embodies meaninglessness, true and ultimate meaning can only be found in God. It is the Person of God who is the meaning of life and God's revelation of Himself is expressed in the word 'meaning,' as in the New Testament word *logos*, 'Word.' To the Old Testament Jewish mind the association of God with meaning and of idols with meaninglessness must have been immediately obvious. What makes the Teacher's opening statement so enigmatic to us, must have been very clear to them. What the Teacher seems to be saying is that everything becomes meaningless when we leave God out of the picture.

The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia equated *logos* with reason and thought. From an article about *Logos* we copy: 'The doctrine of the Logos has exerted a decisive and far-reaching influence upon speculative and Christian thought. The word has a long history, and the evolution of the idea it embodies is really the unfolding of man's conception of God. To comprehend the relation of the Deity to the world has been the aim of all religious philosophy. While widely divergent views as to the Divine

1. See Deut. 32:21.

manifestation have been conceived, from the dawn of Western speculation, the Greek word *logos* has been employed with a certain degree of uniformity by a series of thinkers to express and define the nature and mode of God's revelation. *Logos* signifies in classical Greek both 'reason' and 'word.' Though in Biblical Greek the term is mostly employed in the sense of 'word,' we cannot properly dissociate the two significations. Every word implies a thought. It is impossible to imagine a time when God was without thought. Hence, thought must be eternal as the Deity. The translation 'thought' is probably the best equivalent for the Greek term, since it denotes, on the one hand, the faculty of reason, or the thought inwardly conceived in the mind; and, on the other hand, the thought outwardly expressed through the vehicle of language. The two ideas, thought and speech, are indubitably blended in the term *logos*; and in every employment of the word, in philosophy and Scripture, both notions of thought and its outward expression are intimately connected.'

Interestingly, *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines the word 'vain' as 'of no real value: idle, worthless.' Note the connection between the words 'idle' and 'idol!'

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, states about 'vanity': '*Vanity of vanities* is a Hebrew superlative: 'Utter vanity!' Vanity (*hebel*) includes (i) brevity and unsubstantiality, *emptiness* (NEB) spelt out in Job 7 where the 'vanity' (v.16, Heb.) of man's life is a 'breath' (v.7), an evaporating cloud (v.9), soon to be ended (v.8) and return no more (vv.9f.); (ii) unreliability, frailty, found also in Psalm 62 where God, a 'Rock' and a 'high tower' (v.6), is compared with man who is 'vanity' (v.9), a 'leaning wall' and a 'tottering fence' (v.3); (iii) futility, as in Job 9:29 (Heb.), where 'in vanity' means 'to no effect'; (iv) deceit (cf. Je. 16:19; Zc. 10:2). *Ecclesiastes* includes each of these emphases. All is untrustworthy, unsubstantial; no endeavor will in itself bring permanent satisfaction; the greatest joys are fleeting. Between 1:2 and 12:8 the Preacher will echo this key statement about thirty times, showing that his book is in fact its exposition. Vanity characterizes all human activity (1:14; 2:11): joy (2:1) and frustration (4:4, 7-8; 5:10) alike, life (2:17; 6:12); 9:9), youth (11:10) and death (3:19; 11:8), the destinies of wise and foolish (2:15, 19), diligent and idle (2:21, 23, 26).'

The first question asked in the quest for meaning is: 'What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun?' The Hebrew word used is *yithrown*, 'preeminence,' or 'gain.' The word is found in no other book of the Bible; it is exclusive to *Ecclesiastes*. The question takes us back to Adam's last day in paradise, when God says to him: 'Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,' Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.''¹

The fact that the question is asked indicates that something is missing. There ought to be meaning to life and to labor, but if returning to dust is all we can see, what is that meaning? Yet, everyone who has ever witnessed the birth of a baby knows that life has meaning, even if that meaning escapes definition. The Apostle John, probably, formulated the best definition of meaning, saying: 'The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.'² And obedience to the will of God is closely linked to the love of God. Jesus says: 'If you love me, you will obey what I command.'³ It is ultimately love that gives meaning to life.

The Teacher expresses the despair of returning to dust with the phrase: 'Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever.' It is not only that death makes birth meaningless, but also that all the cycles of human life do not change the condition of this present world. And the question is again,

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1. Gen. 3:17-19
 2. I John 2:17
 3. John 14:15

should it? Something must be wrong with this world in the Teacher's mind, otherwise this question also would be meaningless.

In vv.5-7, the Teacher uses the examples of the sun, the wind and the rivers, as if their existence and activity contribute to the meaninglessness of life. Who has ever looked at a sunrise or a sunset and declared it to be void of meaning? The overwhelming impression the sun at dawn or dusk makes upon us is one of awe and beauty. Even without any understanding of the solar system, we experience the beauty of the birth and death of the day. Was the Teacher the only human being who ever got tired looking at this marvel?

Some Bible scholars argue that the description of the wind changing its course from north to south actually 'refers to the approximations of the sun to the northern and southern tropics, namely, of Cancer and Capricorn.'¹ But *The Pulpit Commentary* disagrees, stating: 'The Septuagint gives, 'The sun arises, and the sun sets, and draws ... unto its place;' and then carries the idea into the following verse: 'Arising there, it proceeds southwards' etc. The Vulgate supports the rendering; but there is no doubt that the Authorized Version gives substantially the sense of the Hebrew text as accentuated.'

In v.8 the Teacher describes the effect of the endless cycles of nature upon the human mind, stating: 'All things are wearisome, more than one can say.' The Hebrew word used is *yagea*, 'tiresome,' 'full of labor.' The Teacher is bored by observing the meaningless repetition. During World War II, the Nazis invented a special kind of emotional torture by forcing the inmates of a concentration camp to do a certain job, as for instance piling up stones at a certain place, and then making them undo their labor the next day, continuing this for weeks on end. It would break the spirit of the people in forcing them to do something that was obviously meaningless.

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, observes: 'Despite the fact that creation is active to the point of inexpressible exhaustion, it is incapable of providing secular man with any lasting satisfaction. *Full of weariness* is best taken passively ('wearied') rather than actively, following its clear meaning in its other occurrences (Dt. 25:18; 2 Sa. 17:2). *All things* may be translated 'All words,' which would emphasize that the dissatisfaction of man is beyond words (cf. NAB *All speech is labored*). That thought comes in the next phrase, but here the common translation carries the argument forward more clearly. This 'under the sun' viewpoint again contrasts with that of the Old Covenant believer, who loved creation and saw in it the majesty of God's name, looked with admiration at the skies, pondered the lessons taught by animals, wind, grass and trees, and sang to the glory of God because of what he saw and heard. He saw nature sing for joy, and knew that God's control of creation was part of his redemption at the time of the exodus. Taking their cue from Solomon, the wise men also gloried in creation and used its object-lessons for their own purposes. The preacher's point is that all this is lost in an 'under the sun' viewpoint; all that is left is nature in a state of exhaustion.'

The Pulpit Commentary comments: 'Taking the word *dabar* in the sense of 'word' ... 'All words are wearisome;' *i.e.* to go through the whole catalogue of such things as those mentioned in the preceding verses would be a laborious and unprofitable task. The Targum and many modern expositors approve this rendering. But besides that, the word *yagea* implies suffering, not causing, weariness (... Deuteronomy 25:18; ... Job 3:17); the run of the sentence is unnecessarily interrupted by such an assertion, when one is expecting a conclusion from the instances given above ... The idea ... is this — Man's life is constrained by the same law as his surroundings; he goes on his course subject to influences which he cannot control; in spite of his efforts, he can never be independent. This conclusion is developed in succeeding verses. In the present verse the proposition with which it starts is explained by what follows. All things have been the object of much labor; men have elaborately examined everything; yet the result is most unsatisfactory, the end is not reached; words cannot express it, neither eye nor ear can apprehend it. This is the view of St. Jerome ... and others render, 'All things are in restless activity;' *i.e.* constant movement pervades the whole world, and yet no visible conclusion is attained. This, however true, does not seem to be the point insisted on by the author, whose intention is, as we have said, to show that man, like nature, is confined to a circle from

1. *The Adam Clarke's Commentary.*

which he cannot free himself; and though he uses all the powers with, which he is endowed to penetrate the enigma of life and to rise superior to his environments, he is wholly unable to effect anything in these matters.'

One of the surprises in my own experience after my conversion was that I began to enjoy nature in a way I never had before. The realization that the joy within caused by the presence of the Lord was related to the beauty that surrounded me because it was the Creator of creation who had taken residence within me, made me look at nature in a new way.

The poems of the nineteenth century Belgian poet priest Guido Gezelle come to mind:

'When the soul listens, everything that lives speaks a language.
Even the softest whisper is a tongue and token.
Clouds, sky and winds, paths of God's holy foot,
translate the deeply hidden word so sweetly.'

And:

'Flowers speak a language to me.
Weeds are alive for me.
Everything God created has meaning for me.'

The Teacher's conclusion in looking at the cycles of nature is a weary 'déjà vu!' The Teacher ends his observation with a statement, rendered by *The New International Version*: 'There is no remembrance of men of old, and even those who are yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow.' The Hebrew text of v.11 reads literally: 'There is no remembrance of former [things]; neither to come neither shall there of any remembrance with [those] that shall come after.' *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* accepts the reading that inserts 'things' instead of 'people.' We read: 'I believe the general meaning to be this: Multitudes of ancient transactions have been lost, because they were not recorded; and of many that have been recorded, the records are lost. And this will be the case with many others which are yet to occur. How many persons, not much acquainted with books, have supposed that certain things were their own discoveries, which have been written or printed even long before they were born!' *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* takes the view that 'men' is the better translation: 'There is no remembrance of former things. This gives the reason for the 'nothing new' of verse 10, and probably is best translated former men. Man is plagued not only by his inability to accomplish anything worth while, but also by the realization that even the memory of his efforts is soon forgotten. This is the complete answer to the question in verse 3, 'What profit hath a man?' He gains nothing, not even a memory of his struggle. The world of nature is futile; human activity is also futile.'

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, observes here: 'This stage of the argument closes by considering mankind's approach to life in the light of the pessimistic evaluation of history in vv.9f. Nihilism not only dominates his outlook, it also works itself out in life. Past events are forgotten; future events will be forgotten. Here *remembrance*, deriving from the verb 'remember,' means 'remembering and acting accordingly,' a well-attested usage. Nehemiah's prayer 'Remember me for good' (Ne. 13:31) pleads that God's actions may arise out of his past promises (cf. Gn. 40:14; Ex. 20:8). Commentators have debated whether the translation should read 'former people' (NIV, Lys¹ and others) or *former things* (RSV). The first has parallels in 2:16 and 9:15, but here vv.9f are dealing with history more generally. Aalders² ... is surely right in thinking the antitheses needless. In the light of the word ages in v.10, he wishes to translate 'former times' and to include both people and circumstances. The orthodox Israelite lived in the light of former events (Dt. 5:15; 8:2; Ps. 77:11). Later the Preacher will invite us to 'remember' our Creator (12:1),

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1. Author of a French commentary on Ecclesiastes.
 2. A Dutch theologian.

live accordingly, and ‘keep in mind’ what lies ahead (11:8). On secular premises that is all pointless. ‘Under the sun’ the past, the present and the future offer no meaning, no guide-lines. This is the logical outworking of vv.2-10, the downward spiral of despair. Secular man will confirm the maxim, ‘He who does not learn from history is destined to repeat it.’

The Teacher does not mention the word ‘death’ in v.11, but death casts its heavy shadow over what he is saying here. It is death that makes the need to remember so urgent, yet death also obliterates memory. That is the cause of nihilistic despair.

ii. The failure of wisdom to satisfy secular life 1:12-18

12 I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem.

13 I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven. What a heavy burden God has laid on men!

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

15 What is twisted cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted.

16 I thought to myself, ‘Look, I have grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge.’

17 Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind.

18 For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.

In v.12 the author re-introduces himself as King Solomon, as he had done in the opening verse of his book. Bible scholars have debated as to whether the author was King Solomon himself or someone impersonating Solomon, or someone using the name of the famous king as a pseudonym. The scope of this study does not allow us to join in the debate. But there is a certain measure of dishonesty in taking someone’s name without directly or indirectly admitting this. The fact that God allowed this book to be included in the canon of Scripture means that the Holy Spirit inspired it. That fact by itself seems to plead for Solomon’s authorship.

Bible scholars disagree also about the phrase ‘I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem.’ Some argue that it should read ‘I have been king over Israel in Jerusalem,’ indicating that the book was written by Solomon while he was the reigning monarch. He calls his God-given wisdom ‘a heavy burden.’ The Hebrew text calls it literally ‘this sore travail.’ The Hebrew word used is *inyan*, which is derived from a word meaning ‘to depress.’ In *Proverbs*, Solomon puts the principle of search for meaning in a positive context, saying: ‘It is the glory of God to conceal a matter; to search out a matter is the glory of kings.’¹ Here he shows what happens if ‘the glory of God’ is taken out of it. The same principle that marked man’s original temptation and sin in paradise is at work here. In the choice between the tree of life and the tree of knowledge, man chooses knowledge apart from life.

In *The Book of Proverbs*, which also carries the name of Solomon, the premise is ‘The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.’² Incidentally, the words are a quotation from a psalm David wrote when he was fleeing from Absalom: ‘The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding. To him belongs eternal

1. Prov. 25:2

2. Prov. 9:10

praise.’¹ As suggested earlier, Solomon shows the other side of the coin in *Ecclesiastes*, by painting a gloomy tableau of wisdom that leaves ‘the fear of the Lord’ out of the picture.

Barnes’ Notes observes about the Teacher’s use of the name for God: ‘God is named as *Elohiym* thirty-nine times in this book; a name common to the true God AND to false gods, and used by believers AND by idolaters: but the name Yahweh, by which He is known especially to the people who are in covenant with Him, is never once used. Perhaps the chief reason for this is that the evil which is the object of inquiry in this book is not at all unique to the chosen people. All creation (Rom 8) groans under it. The Preacher does not write of (or, to) the Hebrew race exclusively. There is no express and obvious reference to their national expectations, the events of their national history, or even to the divine oracles which were deposited with them. Hence, it was natural for the wisest and largest-hearted man of his race to take a wider range of observation than any other Hebrew writer before or after him. It became the sovereign of many peoples whose religions diverged more or less remotely from the true religion, to address himself to a more extensive sphere than that which was occupied by the twelve tribes, and to adapt his language accordingly.’

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, writes about v.13: ‘The Preacher *set his heart*, i.e. was sincere and earnest; *heart* (RSV *mind*), as opposed to the ‘outward appearance’ (1 Sa. 16:7), denotes the inner life, the centre of all mental, emotional and spiritual capacities. His thoroughness is also indicated by *study ... explore* (NIV; RSV *seek ... search out*). The first means to ‘search deeply’ into something, the latter ‘to search thoroughly over the widespread’; together they convey exhaustive study. *All that is done under heaven* shows that the total resources of a limited word-view are the object of study; the vertical aspect is not yet in view. Three conclusions follow. First, ‘God has appointed an unhappy task for the sons of men to do.’ The verb ‘give’ sometimes has the force of ‘appoint’ (e.g. Je. 1:5). People may live secularly in the earthly realm, but the problems they meet are ordained by the God who occupies the heavenly realm. Mankind cannot be indifferent to or detached from the futility which besets him; it is an ‘inescapable fact of one’s humanity’ ... *Business* (RSV; Heb ‘*inyan*; NIV *burden*), denoting mankind’s restlessness and vigor in the quest for meaning, derives from ‘*ânâh*, ‘to engage in something,’ ‘to be active in doing something.’ It points to the sense of compulsion behind the quest. Mankind thinks and plans. This he can scarcely avoid, for he wants to understand where his life is going. This is the burden which, by God’s decree, every man bears: the problem of life is no optional hobby.’

At this point the Teacher introduces the phrase ‘chasing after the wind,’ an expression which he will repeat nine times after this.

The Teacher quotes a proverb ‘What is twisted cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted,’ indicating that there is something wrong with creation and that the factor that would explain how this abnormality came about is hidden from view. *The Pulpit Commentary* agrees with this interpretation and states: ‘The above is probably a proverbial saying ... The Vulgate takes the whole maxim as applying only to morals: ‘Perverse men are hardly corrected, and the number of tools is infinite.’ ... The writer is not referring merely to man’s sins and delinquencies, but to the perplexities in which he finds himself involved, and extrication from which is impracticable.’ And *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* correctly observes: ‘The imperfection in the arrangements of the world result from the fall. All attempts to rectify this imperfection without recognition of the fall of man are vain. The dislocated state of all creaturely things, subject as they are to vanity, is designed to bring us, in despair of bettering them, to take refuge in God.’ It is not only obvious that something is wrong with creation, something is wrong with man also. G. K. Chesterton put this succinctly when he wrote to a newspaper: ‘Dear Sirs, In regard to your question ‘What is wrong with this world,’ I am, faithfully yours, G. K. Chesterton.’²

In the second proverb, ‘For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief,’ if a proverb it is, Solomon refers to God’s answer to his prayer at the time of his ascension to the

1. Ps. 111:10

2. Free rendering as far as I can remember it.

throne of Israel. When God appeared to him on the eve of his coronation and asked him what he wanted for a present, he answered: 'Now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?' We read: 'The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this. So God said to him, 'Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice, I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be. Moreover, I will give you what you have not asked for — both riches and honor — so that in your lifetime you will have no equal among kings.''¹

Solomon's great wisdom was a gift from God. At one point in his life, the king must have begun to forget that his wisdom was a gift; he began to act as if it were the fruit of his own endeavor. Thus, Solomon became too smart for his own good. When we come to a point in life where Satan begins to pay us compliments on our achievements, we better flee to God in order to keep the right perspective.

iii. The failure of pleasure-seeking to satisfy secular life 2:1-11

1 I thought in my heart, 'Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.' But that also proved to be meaningless.

2 'Laughter,' I said, 'is foolish. And what does pleasure accomplish?'

3 I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly — my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do under heaven during the few days of their lives.

4 I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards.

5 I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them.

6 I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees.

7 I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me.

8 I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired men and women singers, and a harem as well — the delights of the heart of man.

9 I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me.

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

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

In this section, the Teacher takes, what seems to be a scientific approach to life, subjecting himself to a series of experiments for the purpose of finding the answer to the reason for his existence. The experiments break down in four categories: humor, drugs, construction and riches.

The first experiment is in the realm of humor. *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines 'humor' as: 'a quality that appeals to a sense of the ludicrous or incongruous.' Throughout the ages humor has intrigued the human mind. *The American Peoples Encyclopedia* states: 'The nature of humor has engaged the attention of philosophers from Plato to the present time. Plato recognized the part played by the observer in lending an object its humorous or laugh-provoking qualities. So did Kant and Schopenhauer and Hobbes.' The fact that God has endued humans with the ability to laugh indicates that He created humor. The Apostle Paul seems to advocate humor when he writes to the Colossians: 'Let your conversation be always full of

1. I Kings 3:7-14

grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.’¹ Humor is the antidote God has provided for us to endure the thorns and thistles and the sweat of our brow by which we eat our food.²

There is a self-defeating element in taking a scientific approach to humor. Science lives by the fact that there are fixed laws and principles that govern everything existing. Humor lives by incongruity, which is by the fact that the laws and principles do not add up to what they are supposed to. It is tempting to indulge in giving a series of illustration at this point, but that would leave the field open too widely. Solomon’s problem was that he took himself too seriously, which disqualified him as a student of humor.

Actually, the Teacher did not study humor itself, but his reaction to it. He heard a joke and laughed and then wanted to know why he laughed. This kept him from laughing at himself, which is one of the healthiest things a person can do in life.

The second experiment consisted of inebriation. The Hebrew text reads literally: ‘I sought in my heart to give myself unto wine; yet acquainting my heart with wisdom and to lay hold on folly till I might see what was that good for the sons of men, which they should do under the heaven all the days of their life.’ We could extend the field of research to the modern problem of the use of drugs as a means of escape reality. Although in modern times alcoholism has not lost its power upon mankind, it has been rivaled by the use of marijuana, LSD, cocaine and other controlled substances.

The Bible does not condemn the use of wine in general. The psalmist recognizes God as the Creator of wine, saying: ‘He makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for man to cultivate — bringing forth food from the earth: wine that gladdens the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread that sustains his heart.’³ It is overindulgence that leads to drunkenness that is condemned. The Teacher walks a fine line in drinking just enough for the wine to have a certain effect upon his mood, but not enough to make him lose his ability to analyze the effects. Some people who have tried to do the same with modern drugs have fallen victim to the addictive powers. *The Pulpit Commentary* comments here: ‘Deliberately to enter upon a course of self-indulgence, even with a possibly good intention, must be a most perilous trial, and one which would leave indelible marks upon the soul; and not one person in a hundred would be able to stop short of ruin, The historical Solomon, by his experiment, suffered infinite loss, which nothing could compensate.’

The third experiment pertains to the construction of great projects, such as monuments, buildings, parks etc. *The Book of First Kings* testifies to the greatness of these undertakings. It has been observed that the temple is not specifically mentioned here, which some interpret as proof that Solomon is not the author of this book. Others note, however, that since the temple was not a building Solomon constructed for himself, it could not be considered as part of an experiment. *The Pulpit Commentary* states: ‘Solomon had a passion for erecting magnificent buildings. We have various accounts of his works of this nature in 1 Kings 7. and 9.; 2 Chronicles 8. There was the huge palace for himself, which occupied thirteen years in building; there was the ‘house of the forest of Lebanon,’ a splendid hall constructed with pillars of cedar; the porch of pillars; the hall of judgment; the harem for the daughter of Pharaoh. Then there were fortresses, store-cities, chariot-towns, national works of great importance; cities in distant lands which he founded, such as Tadmor in the wilderness. *I planted me vineyards*. David had vineyards and olive yards (... 1 Chronicles 27:27, 28), which passed into the possession of his son; and we read in ... Song of Solomon 8:11 of a vineyard that Solomon had in Baal-hamon, which some identify with Belamon (Judith 8:3), a place near Shunem, in the Plain of Esdraelon.’

The effect that such works would have upon the fame of Solomon is best expressed by the pagan King Nebuchadnezzar of whom we read: ‘Twelve months later, as the king was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, he said, ‘Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my

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1. Col. 4:6
 2. See Gen. 3:18,19.
 3. Ps. 104:14,15

mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?’¹ For Nebuchadnezzar this was the beginning of an extended period of lunacy. Solomon, however, saw the folly of this quest of glory, concluding that it was meaningless and amounted to ‘a chasing after the wind.’

One wonders though if initially King Solomon did not start out his building projects for the specific purpose of seeking glory for himself and that, at the conclusion, he realized that he failed to find satisfaction in it. Interestingly, the Hebrew word translated ‘orchards’ is *pardeeciyim*, which sounds like ‘paradise.’

The fourth experiment is the accumulation of wealth. It was God who made Solomon the richest man who ever lived. This was part of the coronation present. In the dream in which Solomon asked God for wisdom, God said to him: ‘I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be. Moreover, I will give you what you have not asked for — both riches and honor — so that in your lifetime you will have no equal among kings. And if you walk in my ways and obey my statutes and commands as David your father did, I will give you a long life.’² But the way Solomon presents the matter here makes it appear as if the king’s wealth was the result of his own effort. In *Proverbs*, Solomon stated: ‘The blessing of the Lord brings wealth, and he adds no trouble to it.’³ But in making the accumulation of wealth the subject of his own endeavor, Solomon inherited the trouble also. Paul’s admonition is worth inserting here: ‘People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.’⁴

The wealth Solomon acquired consisted of slaves, animals, money, musicians and women. *The New International Version* uses the word ‘harem’ for the Hebrew *shiddah*. The word, in all of Scripture, is only found in this verse and it is repeated twice. The word is variously interpreted as ‘wife,’ ‘concubine,’ or ‘musical instrument.’ *The New King James Version* reads: ‘musical instruments of all kinds.’ *The Living Bible*: ‘And then there were my many beautiful concubines.’ The Bible testifies to Solomon’s marital excesses, stating: ‘He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines.’⁵

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, comments on the last verse in this section: ‘Now he comes to ‘the morning after the night before.’ *I considered* (NIV *surveyed*) is literally ‘I faced.’ The verb means ‘to look someone in the eyes’ (Jb. 6:28) or (as here) to ‘face the facts,’ ‘turn one’s full attention.’ The Preacher is not content to put a bold face on things; he must tell it the way it is. His *hands*, denoting personal involvement and activity, had kept him pleurably occupied. The *toil* had been enjoyably strenuous. But in retrospect a verdict passed previously on wisdom (1:17-18) is now applied to pleasure. All the Preacher’s key terms combine at this point: *toil, vanity, stringing after wind, no profit, under the sun*. The pile-up of terms conveys bitter disillusionment. The morality of his project is not under consideration, for secular man is being shown the failure of his life-style, *on its own premises*.’

iv. Life’s ultimate certainty 2:12-23

12 Then I turned my thoughts to consider wisdom, and also madness and folly. What more can the king’s successor do than what has already been done?

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

1. Dan. 4:29,30
2. I Kings 3:12-14
3. Prov. 10:22
4. I Tim. 6:9,10
5. I Kings 11:3

14 *The wise man has eyes in his head, while the fool walks in the darkness; but I came to realize that the same fate overtakes them both.*

15 *Then I thought in my heart, ‘The fate of the fool will overtake me also. What then do I gain by being wise? ‘I said in my heart, ‘This too is meaningless.’*

16 *For the wise man, like the fool, will not be long remembered; in days to come both will be forgotten. Like the fool, the wise man too must die!*

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

18 *I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me.*

19 *And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the work into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless.*

20 *So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun.*

21 *For a man may do his work with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then he must leave all he owns to someone who has not worked for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune.*

22 *What does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labors under the sun?*

23 *All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is meaningless.*

In evaluating the sum of his research and achievements, the Teacher concludes that death ultimately robs life of its value. Even though there is an obvious difference between wisdom and folly, death equalizes both the wise man and the fool.

V.12 has been subject to various interpretations. The Hebrew text reads literally: ‘And I turned myself to behold madness, and wisdom, and folly: for what can the man [do] who comes after the king even that has been done already?’ *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: ‘Both the Authorized Version and Revised Version render the passage thus, though the latter, in the margin, gives two alternative renderings of the second clause, viz. *even him whom they made king long ago*, and, as in the Authorized Version margin, in *those things which have been already done*. The LXX., following a different reading, gives, ‘For what man is there who will follow after counsel in whatsoever things he employed it?’ Vulgate, ‘What is man, said I, that he should be able to follow the King, his Maker?’ [Some Bible scholars] ‘For what is the man that is to come after the king whom they made so long ago?’ *i.e.* who can have greater experience than Solomon made king in old time amid universal acclamation (... 1 Chronicles 29:22)? or, who can hope to equal his fame? — which does not seem quite suitable, as it is the abnormal opportunities of investigation given by his unique position which would be the point of the query. The Authorized Version gives a fairly satisfactory (and grammatically unobjectionable) meaning — What can any one effect who tries the same experiment as the king did? He could not do so under more favorable conditions, and will only repeat the same process and reach the same result. But the passage is obscure, and every interpretation has its own difficulty. If the *ki* with which the second portion of the passage begins (‘for what,’ etc.) assigns the reason or motive of the first portion, shows what was the design of Koheleth in contrasting wisdom and folly, the rendering of the Authorized Version is not inappropriate. Many critics consider that Solomon is here speaking of his successor, asking what kind of man he will be who comes after him — the man whom some have already chosen? And certainly there is some ground for this interpretation in vers. 18, 19, where the complaint is that all the king’s greatness and glory will be left to an unworthy successor. But this view requires the Solomonic authorship of the book, and makes him to refer to Rehoboam or some illegitimate usurper. The wording of the text is too general to admit of this explanation; nor does it exactly suit the immediate context, or duly connect the two clauses of the verse. It seems best to take the successor, not as one who comes to the kingdom, but as one who pursues similar investigations, repeats Koheleth’s experiments.’

Having stated that v.12 ‘has perplexed commentators,’ Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, writes: ‘The text as it stands may be literally translated, ‘And I turned to consider wisdom, madness and folly, for what kind of person is it who will come after the king, in the matter of what has already been done?’ ‘To

turn' means 'to turn one' attention' of 'to take up a new line of thought.' Since the Preacher has thus far shown the complete failure of both wisdom and pleasure-seeking to solve his problem, is there any reason why the king should prefer one to the other? Wisdom is traditionally the special need of the king (1 Ki. 3:5-28; Pr. 8:14-16). But the Preacher has exposed its failure. Does this mean that wisdom fails in all respects? The explanatory phrase deals with the reason why the Preacher, Solomon's ghost writer, should concern himself with the question whether wisdom is of any value at all. We may paraphrase: 'How will future kings handle the same problem I have faced? What kind of person will my successor be in his attitude to the same problems I have had to deal with?' This coheres with the Preacher's concern for the future, mentioned elsewhere (1:9-11; 2:18f, 21; 3:22; 7:14).'

One wonders if heaven will shed new light on textual problems like these. Will we search Scriptures in heaven as we have done on earth? Could we ask Solomon what he meant when he wrote or dictated this? Assuming that Solomon made it into heaven in view of the folly his tolerance led him into! Or will the real author who inspired the prophets, the Holy Spirit, lead us into all truth that has been hidden from us? We will have to wait and see.

The Teacher concludes that wisdom is better than folly, but the value turns out to be relative in view of the fact that death erases all distinctions. The Hebrew word used is *yithra*, 'to excel.' The word is only found in Ecclesiastes, as in the verse 'What *does* man *gain* from all his labor at which he toils under the sun?'¹ *The King James Version* renders it 'profit.' Wisdom is compared to light and folly to darkness. But since death equals darkness, darkness triumphs in the comparison.

Considering himself to be a wise man, Solomon does some self-evaluation, which leaves him devastated. Yet, the very fact that there is despair is significant. One cannot conclude that an equation is wrong unless there are right equations to which the one can be compared. We come back to the opening statement upon which the whole philosophy of the book is built. If everything is meaningless, there must be meaning. I recently came across an interesting quote by G. K. Chesterton: 'If there were no God, there would be no atheist.' In view of the fact that *hebel*, as we saw, is used to denote 'worthless idols,'² the quest for wisdom is ultimately a search for God. The Apostle Paul answers Solomon, saying: 'It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God — that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.'³ For Solomon death closed the door behind which God can be found. Jesus Christ opened that door in His resurrection from the dead.

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, comments on v.14: 'The Preacher now considers wisdom from the angle of its recipient. As God's gift it is light; as man's possession it is sight. *The fool* (*k^esîl*) whom we meet here for the first time is 'notorious for his babbling, his drunkenness, his tendency to evil,' one for whom wickedness is 'fun' (Pr. 10:23) and who has more interest in his own pursuits than in wisdom (Pr. 18:2). He too is characterized from two angles. He has no 'light' from God, no 'eyes' in himself. He prefigures the New Testament sinner who loves darkness (Jn. 3:19) and is darkness (Eph. 5:8). The second part of the answer follows. As a cure for the ultimate problem of life, wisdom is useless; both the wise man and the fool succumb to death. AV *event* is a good translation. The underlying word (*miqreh*) is sometimes translated *fate* (RSV and NIV), giving the impression of a 'strange fatalistic concept of God.' The Hebrew word is entirely neutral and has no sinister nuance ... In Ecclesiastes *miqreh* (or *qârâh*) refers almost always to the 'event' of death that will 'happen' to all men. On one occasion (9:11) the verb refers to what is totally unexpected from man's viewpoint. It would be a mistake to read into it a picture of God in which he is indifferent or distant.'

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1. Eccl. 1:3
 2. Deut. 32:21
 3. I Cor. 1:30

In the mind of the Old Testament Jew, existence after death seems to have been linked to remembrance of the name of the one who died. This view of eternity may have been derived from Israel's stay in Egypt. The law on the levirate marriage was incorporated into the law by Moses in order to carry on the name of the man who died without leaving behind a son. We read: 'If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband's brother shall take her and marry her and fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to her. The first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel.'¹ How far Solomon or his contemporaries believed that remembrance of a family name had any real bearing upon existence beyond death, cannot be ascertained.

When Solomon comes to the conclusion that he hates life, he admits that life ought to be enjoyable. What makes life hateful is death. So the actual object of the Teacher's hate is not life but death. If animals that are fattened for slaughter had a mind to understand, they would come to the same conclusion as the wisest king who ever lived. The fattening part is enjoyable, but the purpose for which it is done makes it into vanity. The Apostle Paul agrees with Solomon's conclusion, but he also shows that there is a way out, saying: 'We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.'² It is the fact that death will not have the last word that makes life enjoyable. David put this even more beautifully in one of his psalms: 'Because Your lovingkindness is better than life, My lips shall praise You.'³

Solomon's despair was due to the fact that he believed that his claim to fame ought to be in what he achieved. A person's worth is determined by what he is, not by what he does. What he does will be the fruit of his character and his character will be formed by his love for God. The greatest commandment is not about what we adhere to but about the source of our actions: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.'⁴ That is what gives meaning to life.

The thought that disturbed Solomon was the uncertainty about what would happen to his achievements. *The Pulpit Commentary* comments on this: 'He is disgusted to reflect upon all the trouble he has taken in life, when he thinks of what will become of the productions of his genius and the treasures which he has amassed. *Because I should leave it* (my labor, *i.e.* its results) *unto the man that shall be after me*. It is impossible that Solomon could thus have spoken of Rehoboam; and to suppose that he wrote thus after Jeroboam's attempt (... 1 Kings 2:26, etc.), and in contemplation of a possible usurper, is not warranted by any historical statement, the absolute security of the succession being all along expected, and the growing discontent being perfectly unknown to, or contemptuously disregarded by, the king. The sentiment is general, and recurs more than once; *e.g.* ... Ecclesiastes 4:8; 5:14; 6:2.' *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* disagrees here, stating: 'One hope alone was left to the disappointed worldling, the perpetuation of his name and riches, laboriously gathered, through his successor. For selfishness is mostly at the root of worldly parents' alleged providence for their children. But now the remembrance of how he himself, the piously reared child of David, had disregarded his father's dying charge (1 Chron 28:9), suggested the sad misgivings as to what Rehoboam, his son by an idolatrous Ammonitess, Naamah, should prove to be—a foreboding too fully realized (1 Kings 12; 14:21-31).'

In fact, history confirms Solomon's gloomy expectations, since the kingdom would break up in two after his death. The king may have had a flash of prophetic insight when he said this. What he did not

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1. Deut. 25:5-6
 2. Rom. 8:22,23
 3. Ps. 63:3-NKJV
 4. Deut. 6:5

understand at this point was that the breakup was the result of his own infidelity to God. If he did, he could have changed his behavior and avoided the disastrous outcome.

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, adds: ‘Hatred of life is followed by hatred of *toil* (contrast 9:9 with its portion to be enjoyed ‘all the days of your life ... and in your labor’). *Toil* varies in meaning within *Ecclesiastes*; sometimes it refers to one’s whole struggle with the problem of life (1:13), sometimes (as here) to one’s daily responsibilities. Work must be left behind, so what is the point of it? The Preacher is neither denying nor affirming an afterlife at this point; he is concerned with wisdom as an aid in a world dominated by futility. *Leave* is more precisely ‘bequeath’ (JB).’

One would get the impression that King Solomon had begun like a pauper and worked himself up to the point where he became the wisest and richest man in the world. Yet, when he was born, David’s kingdom was well established and the young Jedidiah, as the Lord called him,¹ grew up in an environment of ease and wealth. When his father, who did begin as a shepherd boy, died, Solomon became the heir of a considerable fortune. There seems to be here a tendency to give himself credit for that which he did not do. Neither his wisdom, nor his riches were the fruits of his own labor; they had been gifts of God. So why worry about leaving behind a rich heritage? Maybe the king realized that he missed something in life because he had not started out as a pauper himself. He may have experienced his enormous wealth more as a burden than a blessing. Those who do not give the credit to God, do have a problem.

C. The alternative to pessimism: Faith in God 2:24-3:22

i. The life of faith 2:24-26

24 A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God,

25 for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?

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

Bible scholars have puzzled over these verses, trying to change the statement into a question and inserting Hebrew letters, which supposedly may have been omitted in copying. Some believe that Solomon advocates an Epicurean philosophy of life. About this *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: ‘They who read Epicureanism into the text fall into the error here denounced. They take the expression, ‘eat and drink,’ in the narrowest sense of bodily pleasure, whereas it was by no means so confined in the mind of a Hebrew. To eat bread in the kingdom of God, to take a place at the heavenly banquet, represents the highest bliss of glorified man (... Luke 14:15; Revelation 19:9, etc.). In a lower degree it signifies earthly prosperity, as in ... Jeremiah 22:15, ‘Did not thy father eat and drink, and do judgment and justice? then it was well with him.’ So in our passage we find only the humiliating truth that man in himself is powerless to make his life happy or his labors successful. There is no Epicureanism, even in a modified form, in the Hebrew text as it has come down to us.’

We find in these verses the first glimmer of hope in that God is brought into the picture. Although this is not done with clear, heavily drawn lines, and although the Creator has cast His shadow over the preceding text also, there is a breakthrough of truth at this point.

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, in introducing the whole section of 2:24-3:22, states: ‘There are good reasons for seeing a major turning-point at 2:24. Three aspects of the contrast may be highlighted. (i) God is scarcely mentioned in 1:1-2:23. The only allusion to God is in 1:13, not as the answer to mankind’s problem but as its cause (‘the travail *God* gave to the sons of men’). The world is ‘subjected to vanity, not of

1. II Sam. 12:25

its own will' but of God's will (*cf.* Rom. 8:20). That, however, is no solution; it only deepens the problem. 2:24, however, introduces 'the other side to the unhappy business' ... and a new note is added. The argument in 1:1-2:23 is dominated by qualifying phrases confining our vision to the earthly realm (1:3; 13f; 2:3,11,17-20,22). In the following section, however, God is often in view. He is the source of wisdom, knowledge and joy. He is a just governor of sinner and righteous alike. He controls the cosmos not simply to guarantee its structures and its being 'subjected unto vanity' (1:13; *cf.* 3:10), but also as the originator of beauty (3:11). (ii) There is a difference in the way wisdom is viewed. In 1:16 it is man's acquisition; in 2:26 it is God's gift. Though these are complementary statements and are not necessarily to be put in opposition (*cf.* Pr. 2:1-6), it is significant that no reference to God's gift has been made hitherto. In 2:21 'wisdom and knowledge' are found in company with 'skill,' yet judged a failure; in 2:26 they are found in company with 'joy' and considered a blessing. (iii) In the earlier sections the argument has been entirely nihilistic. The Preacher's review of creation, history, life and death has ended in a picture of physical and mental anguish. There is no allusion to beauty, justice or joy. But in 2:24-3:22 we have reference to enjoyment (2:25), beauty (3:11), God's gift (3:13), security (3:14), a divine purpose in the midst of injustice (3:18) and joy despite injustice (3:22). Mankind is to enjoy the created realm. He receives such enjoyment from the hand of God. Sinner and righteous are appropriately handled by God who disposes the order of every matter under heaven. The authority which guarantees the emptiness of secularism (*cf.* 1:13) also guarantees the fruitfulness of the life of faith. We conclude on exegetical grounds that 2:24 marks a turning-point in the argument. Coherent exposition is possible if this antithesis is accepted. Having exposed the bankruptcy of our pretended autonomy, the Preacher now points to the God who occupies the heavenly realm, and to the life of faith in him. The section begins and ends with the enjoyment of the earthly realm (2:24; 3:22; *cf.* 3:13). The themes of divine authority (2:26; 3:1-8, 17), human need (2:26; 3:10a,13,18-20) and the joys of life (2:24; 3:12-13,22) form connecting links. 3:16-22, however, has links in two directions. To view the enigmas of life in the light of a divine judgment forms a fitting end to 2:24-3:15, yet the theme of unjust suffering also leads into 4:1-3 and so into the remainder of the book.'

We find the words 'A man can do nothing better than ...' in more or less the same form, three more times in this book, as in: 'I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live,'¹ in: 'So I saw that there is nothing better for a man than to enjoy his work, because that is his lot. For who can bring him to see what will happen after him?'² And in: 'So I commend the enjoyment of life, because nothing is better for a man under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany him in his work all the days of the life God has given him under the sun.'³ 'Nothing better' is the translation of the two Hebrew words '*ayin towb*. '*Ayin* has a simple negative connotation and *towb* means 'good' in the widest sense of the word. It can have the meaning of 'better,' 'beautiful,' 'joyful,' or even 'prosperity.'

The Teacher believes that fellowship with God will reverse the curse of sin. After God cursed the ground as punishment for Adam and Eve's sin, He said to Adam: 'By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.'⁴ If we cannot find enjoyment without God, it means that with Him, joy will enter into our daily activities. David confirms this when he exclaims in one of his psalms: 'You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.'⁵ And the

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1. Eccl. 3:12
 2. Eccl. 3:22
 3. Eccl. 8:15
 4. Gen. 3:19
 5. Ps. 16:11

Apostle Paul gives us some clues as to how we can enhance our experiences if our motivation is God's glory and if we are careful to express our gratitude to God. We read: 'So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.'¹ And: 'And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.'² This all confirms Jesus' Word: 'If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.'³

The Teacher differentiates between those who please God and those who are called sinners. This sounds theologically incorrect, since the Scripture declares us all to be sinners. *The New King James Version* stays closer to the Hebrew with: 'to a man who is good in His sight.' The person who confesses his sins and believes in God's forgiveness is given the status of righteousness. The sinner is the one who refuses to confess.

God's original intent for man whom He created was not that he would eat his food by the sweat of his brow, but that he would enjoy life in all its aspects. If death makes life meaningless it is because man's sin interrupted the relationship with God. Confession of sin, atonement and forgiveness restores this relationship and the joy that comes with it. God is willing to share His joy with us, as is obvious from Jesus' Words: 'If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.'⁴

ii. The providence of God3:1-15

1 There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven:

2 a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot,

3 a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build,

4 a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance,

5 a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them, a time to embrace and a time to refrain,

6 a time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to throw away,

7 a time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak,

8 a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace.

9 What does the worker gain from his toil?

10 I have seen the burden God has laid on men.

11 He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.

12 I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live.

13 That everyone may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all his toil — this is the gift of God.

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

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

The Adam Clarke's Commentary makes the following introductory remarks about these verses: 'Two general remarks may be made on the first eight verses of this chapter. 1. God by his providence governs the world, and has determined particular things and operations to particular times. In those times

1. I Cor. 10:31

2. Col. 3:17

3. John 15:5

4. John 15:10,11

such things may be done with propriety and success; but if we neglect the appointed seasons, we sin against this providence, and become the authors of our own distresses. 2. God has given to man that portion of duration called TIME; the space in which all the operations of nature, of animals, and intellectual beings, are carried on; but while nature is steady in its course, and animals faithful to their instincts, man devotes it to a great variety of purposes; but very frequently to that for which God never made time, space, or opportunity. And all we can say, when an evil deed is done, is, there was a time in which it was done, though God never made it for that purpose. To say any further on this subject is needless, as the words themselves give in general their own meaning. The Jews, it is true, see in these times and seasons all the events of their own nation, from the birth of Abraham to the present times; and as to fathers and their followers, they see all the events and states of the Christian church in them! It is worthy of remark, that in all this list there are but two things which may be said to be done generally by the disposal of God, and in which men can have but little influence: the time of birth, and the time of death. But all the others are left to the option of man, though God continues to overrule them by his providence.'

The Pulpit Commentary states about the first part of this section: 'The providence of God disposes and arranges every detail of man's life. This proposition is stated first generally, and then worked out in particular by means of antithetical sentences. In Hebrew manuscripts and most printed texts vers. 2-8 are arranged in two parallel columns, so that one 'time' always stands under another. A similar arrangement is found in ... Joshua 12:9, etc., containing the catalogue of the conquered Canaanite kings; and in ... Esther 9:7, etc., giving the names of Haman's tensions. In the present passage we have fourteen pairs of contrasts, ranging from external circumstances to the inner affections of man's being.'

Bible scholars disagree about the meaning of the message the Teachers conveys to us in these verses. Some believe that the overtone is negative and pessimistic, others that the message is positive and optimistic.

The phrase that explains the purpose of the foregoing statements seems to be v.11 which reads: 'He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.'

The Hebrew word rendered 'beautiful' is *yapheh*, which has the meaning of 'beauty,' or 'pleasant.' It is used in other verses in Scripture to describe female beauty. When Abraham went to Egypt he said to Sarah: 'I know what a *beautiful* woman you are.'¹ We read about Jacob's two wives: 'Leah had weak eyes, but Rachel was lovely in form, and *beautiful*.'² Absalom is described as an example of perfect male handsomeness: 'In all Israel there was not a man so highly praised for his *handsome* appearance as Absalom. From the top of his head to the sole of his foot there was no blemish in him.'³ And in Pharaoh's dream about the cows we read: 'When two full years had passed, Pharaoh had a dream: He was standing by the Nile, when out of the river there came up seven cows, *sleek* and fat, and they grazed among the reeds.'⁴

Another intriguing statement in v.11 is: "He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end." The Hebrew text reads literally: "Also he has set the world in their heart, so that no one can find out the work that God makes from beginning to end." "Eternity" in *The New International Version* is the rendering of the Hebrew word *owlam*, which literally means "concealed," or "the vanishing point." The idea seems to be "that which is beyond the horizon." We find it for the first time in the verse: "And the Lord God said, 'The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and

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1. Gen. 12:11
 2. Gen. 29:17
 3. II Sam. 14:25
 4. Gen. 41:1,2

eat, and live *forever*.”¹ And also in: “Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba, and there he called upon the name of the Lord, the *Eternal God*.”²

A possible interpretation seems to be that the meaning of that which happens ‘under heaven’ lies behind the horizon and is invisible for those who live on earth.

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, states about this section as a whole: ‘This section elucidates the world-view underlying the life portrayed in 2:24-26. Just as 1:2-2:23 moved from the pessimistic world-view (1:2-11) to the pessimistic daily life (1:12-2:23), so in a chiasmic movement the thought of 2:24-26 proceeds from the believer’s life to his world-view (3:1-22). Verses 1-8 lay down the basic postulate; 9:15 work out its practical implications.’ Eaton proceeds to catalogue the interpretations of various Bible scholars, whose names we will withhold here. He writes: ‘This reading takes 3:1-15 as orthodox, not, as has often been maintained, as part of the Preacher’s despair. [One scholar] maintain(s) that ‘although the passage is one of great beauty and poetry, the burden is that of protest ... Its essence is that Koheleth feels imprisoned by this sequence of times, and he rebels because this is what he must go through, though without knowing why.’ [Another scholar] similarly sees the Preacher as a fatalist whose rigid predestinarianism is an obstruction to the quest for a satisfying life; it is an example of men’s striving ‘to anticipate his time-table, but without their ever guessing everything correctly ... Koheleth regards God as the absolute and arbitrary mast of destiny.’ [A third one] says that it is ‘clear that the purpose of the whole is to emphasize the frustrating effect of time on human life and labor, whether because God has appointed the events beforehand or for some other reason.’ This is part of the truth, as indicated by certain conclusions in vv.9-15. Verse 9, 10 and 11b stress human inadequacy under God’s disposal of epochs of life. Events and characteristic seasons of time are imposed upon men: no-one chooses a time to weep. Equally, the events of life that come our way undermine our confidence that our endeavors will have any permanence. ‘Whatever may be our skill and initiative, our real masters seem to be these inexorable seasons: not only those of the calendar, but that tide of events which moves us now to one kind of action which seems fitting, now to another which puts it all into reverse.’ We are not sure that they have any total meaning, and we cannot stand outside the events of life and view them ‘from the beginning to the end.’ All this puts mankind in his place, far from being master of his fate and captain of his soul. However, there is more than one conclusion in these verses. Verses 11a, 12-15 stress that the disposal of events which humiliates men may also be the ground of their joy and security. This section may, therefore, have quite another force, contributing to the Preacher’s *solution* of the problem of life’s vanity. [A fourth scholar] is surely right: ‘too often the whole cast of the book has been determined by certain pessimistic elements, ignoring just as patent constructive elements ... Chapter three has often been interpreted as a lament of the ceaseless round of life. Instead it is part of the basic optimism of Koheleth.’

Some of the conflicting opinions mentioned above make us understand that unraveling the meaning of Solomon’s poem in these verses may be a daunting task or an elusive goal. The main factor that puts everything in perspective and at the same time prevents from coming to a final conclusion is the contrast between time and eternity. Whether *’owlam* is interpreted as ‘eternity’ or as ‘concealed’ does not make any difference at this point. God is the Creator of time and He placed us within the boundaries of time. God Himself does not live in time as we do, although, as the Word became flesh, He subjected Himself to it. Our problem is that time is the only entity we know, which makes us want to interpret eternity as ‘time without end.’ There is a dimension that would explain what eternity is, but that is not given to us. The only factor that would solve the equation is withheld. We only know that at the point of death we will move from time into eternity. ‘When we’ve been there ten thousand years ...’ is the only way we can imagine or describe it, however incorrect that may be. Whether we experience our inadequacy at this point as satisfaction or frustration is up to us. The Teacher seems to invite us to do either.

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1. Gen. 3:22
 2. Gen. 21:33

The way the Teacher's poem reads by switching back and forth in sequence between positive and negative gives it a rhythm that is both haunting and beautiful. In v.2 the positive precedes the negative: 'born' and 'die,' 'plant' and 'uproot.' In vv.3-5a the sequence is reversed: 'to kill' precedes 'to heal,' 'tear down' 'build,' 'weep,' 'laugh,' 'mourn,' 'dance,' 'scatter,' 'gather.' A similar pattern of reversals is followed through the rest of the poem. It is obvious that, although the contrast between light and darkness has its beauty, the elements that form the one and the other are not of the same kind. The contrast between being born and dying, for instance is more than the light and shadow in a picture; one stands for life, the other for death. One is identified with God and holiness, the other with Satan and sin. What the Teacher seems to be saying here is that 'He has made everything beautiful in its time' but something went terribly wrong. God did not make dying beautiful; as a matter of fact He issued a strong warning against the choice that would bring death into His beautiful creation.

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, states about vv.2 and 3: 'The most momentous events of human life are mentioned first: childbearing and death. The Hebrew here is active (*to give birth* NASV); it is doubtful whether it can be taken passively (*to be born*, AV, RSV), although Jeremiah 25:34 is sometimes cited as an example of an active infinite with passive force ('your being slaughtered,' Heb.). The next three pairs deal with various creative and destructive human activities. Each of the six verbs may be figuratively used for establishing or undermining. 'Planting the heavens' (Is. 51:16) indicates permanence and stability. *Uproot* or 'harvest' is used figuratively elsewhere of destroying a nation (Zp. 2:4; cf. the Aramaic of Dn. 7:8). *Kill* probably falls in line with this pattern (cf. its figurative use in Jb. 5:2; Pr. 1:32; 7:26). Certainly *heal* does not always refer to medical needs (cf. Is. 6:10 following up the imagery of 1:5-6; Is. 19:22; 57:19; Je. 33:6 and often elsewhere). *Tear down* is applied to the LORD when Jehoshaphat's schemes were ruined (2 Ch. 20:37; cf. Ps. 60:1). *Build* is applied to the throne of David, the city of Zion and to the land of Judah, as well as to literal construction work (cf. Pss. 89:4; 102:16). The widespread figurative uses of these verbs strongly suggest they were chosen here to express not only specific activities but all the manifold pursuits of men, creative and destructive, good and evil, benevolent and malevolent. Mankind is not self-sufficient in these activities; he is within the control of God.'

There is a lack of illustrations in vv.3-8, making the statements refer to principles that can be applied in a general way rather than referring to specific images. Yet, we tend to see pictures in which the principle can be applied. In 'kill' and 'heal' we see a living being, whether man or beast that has been injured to the point where it might be more merciful to end life than to try to extend it. Again the influence of sin comes to the foreground; without the fall there would have been no death or need for healing of sickness. 'Tear down' and 'build' rather evokes a picture of inert matter.

V.4 applies the seasons to man's emotional life. Weeping and laughing, mourning and dancing are extreme opposites expressing our reaction to the events that come our way. They express sorrow or joy. Weeping and mourning point in the direction of death, while laughing and dancing refer to the enjoyment of life. In a way the theme of v.2 regarding birth and death is repeated here. In as much as God created man with the capacity to enjoy life, He also gave us the ability to abhor the absence of it. We react to death the way we do because we understand intuitively that we were created for life and not for death. The promise that 'God will wipe away every tear from [our] eyes'¹ is meant to see us through the sufferings of our days on earth.

The Pulpit Commentary comments on v.5: 'There is no question about building or demolishing houses, as that has been already mentioned in ver. 3. Most commentators see an allusion to the practice of marring an enemy's fields by casting stones upon them, as the Israelites did when they invaded Moab (... 2 Kings 3:19, 25). But this must have been a very abnormal proceeding, and could scarcely be cited as a usual occurrence. Nor is the notion more happy that there is an allusion to the custom of flinging stones or earth into the grave at a burial — a Christian, but not an ancient Jewish practice; this, too, leaves the contrasted 'gathering' unexplained. Equally inappropriate is the opinion that the punishment of stoning is meant, or

1. Rev. 7:17; 21:4

some game played with pebbles. It seems most simple to see herein intimated the operation of clearing a vineyard of stones, as mentioned in ... Isaiah 5:2; and of collecting materials for making fences, wine-press, tower, etc., and repairing roads. *A time to embrace*. Those who explain the preceding clause of the marring and clearing of fields connect the following one with the other by conceiving that ‘the loving action of embracing stands beside the hostile, purposely injurious, throwing of stones into a field...’ It is plain that there are times when one may give himself up to the delights of love and friendship, and times when such distractions would be incongruous and unseasonable, as on solemn, penitential occasions (... Joel 2:16; ... Exodus 19:15; ... 1 Corinthians 7:5); but the congruity of the two clauses of the couplet is not obvious, unless the objectionable position of stones and their advantageous employment are compared with the character of illicit (... Proverbs 5:20) and legitimate love.’

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary states: “In light of the rest of the verse, the Jewish interpretation seems best, i.e., that this is a metaphor for the marriage act.’ And Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, adds: ‘The following two pairs deal with friendship and enmity. Four major views have been held of *to throw stones ... to gather stones*: (i) The Aramaic Targum of Ecclesiastes saw a reference to scattering stones on old building and preparing to build a new one ... (ii) Others see a reference to rendering fields unproductive by covering its surface with stones (*cf.* 2 Ki. 3:19,25; Is. 5:2). (iii) [Another scholar] saw here an ‘old Jewish practice ... of flinging stones or earth into the grave at the burial in the first phrase, and preparation to build a house, in the second. (iv) More recent scholars have seen a sexual reference following the Midrashic interpretation (*cf.* GNB¹). The first three possibilities have often been rejected on the ground that they ‘leave the second half of the verse without any logical connection ... possibly it alludes merely to showing friendship or enmity. If so, it is likely that the first pair puts the same point in national or military terms. ‘Gathering stones together’ will refer to preparing the way for a military conqueror (*cf.* Is. 62:10); casting stones will refer to military aggression by ruining an enemy’s fields.”

The reversal of sequence between positive and negative continues through the last verses. While ‘search’ and ‘keep’ can be considered to be positives, ‘give up’ and ‘throw away’ are obviously not. ‘Tear’ and ‘be silent’ fit in the negative category, while ‘mend’ and ‘speak’ are the positives in v.7. V.8 reverses the order within the same verse. ‘Love’ and ‘peace’ make a good pair, whereas ‘hate’ and ‘war’ obviously belong together.

In vv.9-14 Solomon looks back at the poem, asking himself and us what the meaning is. Vv.9 and 10 read literally in Hebrew: ‘What profit has he that works in that within he labors? I have seen the travail which God has given the sons of man to be exercised in it.’ Some of the important Hebrew words used deserve a closer look. *Yithrown* means ‘preeminence,’ or ‘gain.’ *The New International Version* renders it ‘profit.’ The word is nowhere else found in Scripture, but occurs nine times in *Ecclesiastes*. ‘Labors’ is the rendering the Hebrew word *`amel* which adds a sorrowful feature to toil. In Job it is used as ‘misery’ as in: ‘Why is light given to those in *misery*, and life to the bitter of soul?’² The Hebrew word for ‘travail’ is *`inyan*, ‘ado,’ which seems to add bother to the task. This word again is exclusively used in *Ecclesiastes* where it is consistently found in a negative context. Finally, ‘be exercised’ is the translation of the Hebrew word *`anah*, which has the primary meaning of ‘looking down,’ or ‘to depress.’ God used the word in His prophecy to Abraham about the future of his descendants: ‘Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be *enslaved and mistreated* four hundred years.’³

As we saw earlier, the Hebrew word *`owlam*, in v.11, which is rendered ‘eternity’ in *The New International Version*, is translated ‘world’ in *The Hebrew Interlinear*. *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: ‘The original meaning is ‘the hidden,’ and it is used generally in the Old Testament of the remote past, and

1. *The Good News Bible*’s rendering of v.5 reads: “the time for making love and the time for not making love.”
2. Job 3:20
3. Gen. 15:13

sometimes of the future, as ... Daniel 3:33, so that the idea conveyed is of unknown duration, whether the glance looks backward or forward, which is equivalent to our word 'eternity.' It is only in later Hebrew that the word obtained the signification of 'age' ... or 'world' in its relation to time. Commentators who have adopted the latter sense here explain the expression as if it meant that man in himself is a microcosm, a little world, or that the love of the world, the love of life, is naturally implanted in him. But taking the term in the signification found throughout the Bible, we are justified in translating it 'eternity.' The pronoun in 'their heart' refers to 'the sons of men' in the previous verse. God has put into men's minds a notion of infinity of duration; the beginning and the end of things are alike beyond his grasp; the time to be born and the time to die are equally unknown and uncontrollable. Koheleth is not thinking of that hope of immortality which his words unfold to us with our better knowledge; he is speculating on the innate faculty of looking backward and forward which man possesses, but which is insufficient to solve the problems which present themselves every day. This conception of eternity may be the foundation of great hopes and expectations, but as an explanation of the ways of Providence it fails.'

Some Bible scholars have opted for a relationship between *owlam* and an Arab word *ilham*, meaning 'wisdom.' That would suggest that God has given man the ability to comprehend the meaning of life. But it seems that the Teacher emphasizes man's inability to understand, rather than his ability. His conclusion is that the best way to live with the mystery is simply to enjoy life. That emphasis puts the focus on the positive aspects of the above poem.

The Adam Clarke's Commentary observes: 'Since God has so disposed the affairs of this world, that the great events of providence cannot be accelerated or retarded by human cares and anxieties, submit to God; make a proper use of what he has given: do thyself no harm, and endeavor as much as possible to do others good. Enjoy, and bless thyself; let others share the transient blessing: 'tis the gift of God.' *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* adds: 'Joy is the antidote to worrying care (Matt 6:34); to dare to trust joyfully in the Lord is His gift (Gal 5:22). To 'do good' is to go side by side with enjoying God's gifts, for thus a good conscience and the favor of God are retained, upon which true joy depends. Man cannot fully comprehend God's works (Eccl 3:11), but he ought joyfully to receive ('rejoice in') God's gifts, and 'do good' with them to himself and to others. This is never out of season (Gal 6:9-10). Not sensual joy and self-indulgence (Phil 4:4; James 4:16-17).'

The advice would be perfect except for the word 'toil' in v.13. Joy is not only the antidote to worry, it is also the only means that will get us through the curse that condemns us to eat our food by the sweat of our brow.¹ Only The New Testament reveals the secret of the life of fellowship with God, which allows us to 'rejoice in the Lord always.'² When the Teacher says that eating, drinking and finding satisfaction is 'the gift of God' he is not referring to the curse of the sweat of our brow but to the joy.

It is true that there can be satisfaction in labor, in working up a sweat in order to achieve. But I am not sure that this is what the Teacher has in mind here. He does point out, though, that the limitations God puts on mankind are meant to draw man to God and stand in awe of Him. Although man cannot add or subtract anything from God's eternal work, he must realize that God is greater than he is and that calls for worship. The Apostle Paul elaborated on this thought in his address to the philosophers of Athens, saying: 'From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.'³

V.15 seems to repeat the Teacher's conclusion in the first chapter: 'All things are wearisome, more than one can say. The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing. What has been will be

1. Gen. 3:19
2. Phil. 4:4
3. Acts 17:26-28

again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.’¹ But the addition ‘God will call the past to account’ changes the meaning.

‘Call to account’ is the translation of the Hebrew word *baqash*, which has the basic meaning of ‘to search out.’ Jacob uses the word when he says to his uncle Laban: ‘I did not bring you animals torn by wild beasts; I bore the loss myself. And you *demand*ed payment from me for whatever was stolen by day or night.’² The word is difficult to translate. *The New King James Version* translates the phrase: ‘And God requires an account of what is past.’ *The New Living Translation* reads: ‘God makes the same things happen over and over again.’

The Pulpit Commentary states: ‘The meaning is — God brings back to view, recalls again into being, that which was past and had vanished out of sight and mind. The sentence is an explanation of the preceding clauses, and has nothing to do with the inquisition at the day of judgment. [One Bible scholar] has followed the Septuagint, Syriac, and Targum, in translating, ‘God seeks the persecuted,’ and seeing herein an allusion to the punishment of the Egyptians for pursuing the Israelites to the Red Sea, or a general statement that God succors the oppressed. But this idea is quite alien to the intention of the passage, and injures the coherence.’

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, writes: “An addition is found here which is not found in 1:9-11: *God seeks what is pursued* or it might be translated ‘... what hurries along.’ The verb (*rdp*) normally means ‘pursue’ or ‘persecute.’ It is difficult, however, to make sense of the passage with either. Many solutions have been offered: (i) It has been taken to refer to past events (AV *what is passed*; RSV *driven away*; NASV and Berkeley *passed by*) or to God’s bringing past events back into being again (NEB *God summons each event back ...* (ii) NIV *will call the past to account* (makes it refer to judgment, a fitting preliminary to 3:16-22. (iii) NAB *restores what would otherwise be displaced* stretches the Hebrew somewhat (iv) JB *cares for the persecuted* is a legitimate translation of the Hebrew and follows IXX and Ben Sira (5:3), but scarcely fits the context. (v) Nor is it adequate to emend the text ... or remove it to the end of v.17. A different solution seems preferable. The passive/reflective of the verb is used here but scarcely anywhere else in the Old Testament (only in La. 5:5 where it means ‘persecuted’). In Later Hebrew the passive participle sometimes lost its force and means ‘quick, rapid.’ It is used for example, of a stream which ‘runs rapidly.’ If, then, the verb has lost its passive meaning, it could mean ‘hurry along.’ This fits well with 1:5-8 where the same vocabulary is used for the world hurrying around its circuits (*cf.* 1:9). *Seeks* indicates God’s watchful concern. Earlier, earthly events were portrayed as rushing along a determined course (1:5-7). Now comes an explanation: the source of earthly movements is God himself. In 1:13 the ‘unhappy business’ of man’s life was inevitable, said the Preacher, since a divine appointment lay behind it. In 3:1-3 the structure of ‘times’ was seen as a God-ordained pattern in human life. Likewise in 3:15 the hubbub of human activity is guaranteed and secure because God watches over it all every moment with providential concern.”

iii. The judgment of God 3:16-22

16 *And I saw something else under the sun: In the place of judgment — wickedness was there, in the place of justice — wickedness was there.*

17 *I thought in my heart, ‘God will bring to judgment both the righteous and the wicked, for there will be a time for every activity, a time for every deed.’*

18 *I also thought, ‘As for men, God tests them so that they may see that they are like the animals.*

19 *Man’s fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; man has no advantage over the animal. Everything is meaningless.*

1. Eccl. 1:8,9

2. Gen. 31:39

20 All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return.

21 Who knows if the spirit of man rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?'

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

As Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, observes: 'This unit makes an observation (v.16), passes two comments (17, 18-21) and reaches a conclusion (22).' This is expressed in the verbs 'I saw' (v.16), 'I thought (vv.17,18), and 'I saw' (v.21). But the conclusion ends with a question mark, which lets the statements, teasingly, hang in midair.

Solomon's first observation is again that things are not as they ought to be. He refers to 'the place of judgment' and 'the place of justice,' using the Hebrew poetical parallel. The Hebrew word for 'judgment' is *mishpat*, which refers particularly in this context to the absolute of divine law. Abraham used the word in his prayer of intercession for Sodom and Gomorrah, when he said to the Lord: 'Far be it from you to do such a thing — to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth *do right*?'¹

The Hebrew word rendered 'justice' is *tsedeq*, which refers to the same kind of absolute as that which is morally or legally right. We find it used in: 'Use *honest* scales and honest weights, an *honest* ephah and an *honest* hin. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt.'² The same thought was expressed earlier in 'What is twisted cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted,'³ where we observed that it indicated something wrong with creation and that the factor that could explain how this abnormality came about is hidden from view.

Like Abraham, we all have a concept of what the divine absolute is, even though we cannot define or fully understand it. Wickedness, Hebrew *resha'*, that which is morally wrong, is found in the place of righteousness and justice. Solomon realizes that such a condition cannot be permanent. It would be impossible for a holy God to tolerate sin throughout eternity. Consequently, there will be judgment and punishment for those responsible for wickedness and injustice. The character of God requires that.

This brings him to the second thought that God puts man to the test by withholding the one factor that would explain the puzzle. The mystery being the incongruity of wickedness at the place of justice. The Hebrew text of v.18 reads literally: 'I said in my heart concerning the estate of the sons of men, that might manifest them God, that they might see [that] they [are] beasts themselves.'

In comparing man to animal, Solomon traces their common origin to the dust of the earth. In doing so, he purposely leaves out the difference between the two species, which is that God simply spoke the animals into being, but at the creation of man, He breathed the breath of life into his nostrils, making man in His own image. Any Hebrew reader of Solomon's words would recall the text 'The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.'⁴ The Hebrew word *ruwach* can mean 'wind,' 'spirit,' or 'breath.' In the Hebrew of vv.19 and 21 the same word is used three times. But while *ruwach* refers particularly to exhaling, the Hebrew word used in the verse that speaks of God's creation of man is *neshamah*, which speaks rather of breathing in.

The Pulpit Commentary comments here: 'Koheleth explains in what respect man is on a level with the brute creation. Neither are able to rise superior to the law that controls their natural life ... *Even one thing befalleth them*. A third time is the ominous word repeated, 'One chance is to both of them.' Freethinkers perverted this dictum into the materialistic language quoted in the Book of Wisdom (2. 2): 'We

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1. Gen. 18:25
 2. Lev. 19:36
 3. Eccl. 1:15
 4. Gen. 2:7

are born at haphazard, by chance' ... But Koheleth's contention is, not that there is no law or order in what happens to man, but that neither man nor beast can dispose events at their own will and pleasure; they are conditioned by a force superior to them, which dominates their actions, sufferings, and circumstances of life. *As the one dieth, so dieth the other.* In the matter of succumbing to the law of death man has no superiority over other creatures. This is an inference drawn from common observation of exterior facts, and touches not any higher question (comp. ... Ecclesiastes 2:14, 15; 9:2,3). Something similar is found in ... Psalm 49:20, 'Man that is in honor, and understandeth not, is like the beasts that perish.' *Yea, they have all one breath (ruach).* This is the word used in ver. 23 for the vital principle, 'the breath of life,' as it is called in Genesis 6:17, where the same word is found. In the earlier record (... Genesis 2:7) the term is *nishma*. Life in all animals is regarded as the gift of God. Says the psalmist, 'Thou sendest forth thy spirit (*ruach*), they are created' (... Psalm 104:30). This lower principle presents the same phenomena in men and in brutes. *Man hath no pre-eminence above a beast; i.e.* in regard to suffering and death. This is not bare materialism, or a gloomy deduction from Greek teaching, but must be explained from the writer's standpoint, which is to emphasize the impotence of man to effect his own happiness. Taking only a limited and phenomenal view of man's circumstances and destiny, he speaks a general truth which all must acknowledge. Septuagint, 'And what hath the man more than the beast? Nothing.' *For all is vanity.* The distinction between man and beast is annulled by death; the former's boasted superiority, his power of conceiving and planning, his greatness, skill, strength, cunning, all come under the category of vanity, as they cannot ward off the inevitable blow.'

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, comments on v.18: 'After a straightforward beginning, *I said in my heart with regard to the sons of men ...* (RSV), the Hebrew becomes difficult. Probably it should continue: 'that God is making it clear to them so that they may see that they – they by themselves – are animals.' *I said in my heart:* he now reflects on God's purpose in its present continuance. Even the evil actions of men may unwillingly and unknowingly fulfill the purpose of God (*cf.* Acts 2:23 for the greatest example). Equally he maintains that the injustice of men fulfills at least one aspect of purpose of God: it provides a massive demonstration on the stage of history of our ignorance regarding our own nature and destiny. God is not indifferent to injustice (v.17); for the present it is an 'under the sun' monstrosity which reveals the essential character of fallen man (7:29). If this appears to be hard cynicism, it must be noted that the Preacher is careful to include the emphatic phrase 'they by themselves.' If, however, we lapse from the viewpoint of faith, the one element which distinguishes us from the animals is lost. *Man by himself* becomes 'a naked ape.'"

This whole section cries out for an answer, which is withheld but suggested in v.21: 'Who knows if the spirit of man rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?' Job gives the answer to Solomon's query: 'I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes — I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!'¹ Job even shares Solomon's yearning of heart.

V.22 closes this section in an enigmatic way by suggesting that there is a way, there is life after death and there is someone who can and will show the way. This is answered by Jesus: 'I am the way and the truth and the life.'² Solomon could not hear this answer or see the way, but he suspected it and he suggests that we enjoy our lot because of the hope of resurrection. The puzzle is given here and the answer is found at the end of the book. That is the way the Old and New Testament compliment each other.

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1. Job 19:25-27
 2. John 14:6

II. LIFE ‘UNDER THE SUN’ 4:1-10:20

A. Life’s hardships and life’s companions 4:1-5:7

i. Oppression without comfort 4:1-3

1 Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun: I saw the tears of the oppressed — and they have no comforter; power was on the side of their oppressors — and they have no comforter.

2 And I declared that the dead, who had already died, are happier than the living, who are still alive.

3 But better than both is he who has not yet been, who has not seen the evil that is done under the sun.

In a general introduction to this whole section, Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, writes: ‘Between 4:1 and 10:20 Ecclesiastes resembles the book of Proverbs, with short epigrams dealing with various aspects of life. Groups of sayings, however, can be clustered around particular themes. Every unit between 5:8 and 6:12 deals in some way with wealth; each unit of 4:1-16 bears on the need of companionship; chs. 9:13-10:20 directly consider the limits of wisdom and the various manifestations of folly. The book bears evidence, therefore, of structure and arrangement, although it is at times difficult to discern. It is also conspicuous that the presuppositions in 1:2-3:22 continue to underlie each theme taken up. The vanity of life ‘under the sun’ comes in for heavy fire; the life of faith in a sovereign God is urged from time to time as the only remedy. It is best, therefore, to treat the middle section of Ecclesiastes as a guide to life ‘under the sun,’ presenting a series of major issues, each in turn from the viewpoint of ‘under the sun’ limitation and from the viewpoint of faith. The Preacher faces the big issues: the hardships of life and the companionship it demands, poverty and wealth, the vexations of circumstances and of man himself, the authority of kings and authority miss-applied, the limits of wisdom and the encroachment of folly. ‘Look!’ he says in effect, ‘This is what it is really like. Can you face life in this world as it really is? There is only one way to do so.’ The various themes overlap considerably, so that several topics are considered more than once from different angles.’

About the section of 4:1-5:7, Eaton writes: ‘The dominant note in this section is the need of companionship. Successive unites deal with oppression without comforters (*and I saw ...*, 4:1-3), work is lonely (*Then I saw ...*, 4:7f.), followed by proverbs on the need of companionship (4:9-12). Then comes a brief glimpse of a lonely king (4:13-16). This leaves a section (5:1-7) which seems to belong neither to ch. 4 nor to 5:8-6:12 (which has its own unity). Perhaps the viewpoint of faith is again being brought in: there is a God in heaven opposed to earthly injustice and loneliness, the God of Israel, who is worshipped at the temple of Jerusalem.’

Barnes’ Notes adds: ‘Having arrived (Eccl 3:22) at a partial answer to his question (Eccl 1:3); namely, that there is positive good (= a portion) in that satisfaction which is found in working, Solomon now turns to the case of such happiness being interrupted and reduced to vanity by various contingencies-by oppression (Eccl 4:1-3); by envy (Eccl 4:4-6); by loneliness (Eccl 4:7-12); and by decay of working power (Eccl 4:13-16). The first two instances seem taken from the lower ranks of life, and the last two derived from the higher ranks of life.’

One of the strangest features of this section is that these are the words of the king himself. The question arises whether Solomon gives here an analysis of his own reign. If so, as an absolute monarch, he certainly would be able to do something about it. It is, however, more likely that the king speaks here about the kingdoms surrounding Israel, although history indicates that Solomon himself did not completely escape the trap of his own absolutism. If Solomon’s son, Rehoboam, could say after his father’s death: ‘My little finger is thicker than my father’s waist. My father laid on you a heavy yoke; I will make it even heavier. My father scourged you with whips; I will scourge you with scorpions,’¹ Solomon’s reign must not have been free of corruption either.

Oppression was never part of God's plan for mankind. God created man with the intent that he would submit to God's rule voluntarily on the basis of love. Such would be the personal relationship of each individual. When Adam and Eve broke their off intimacy with their Creator, their relationship with one another went bad and their offspring inherited that part of the curse. Oppression is the fruit of man's sinful nature.

So, Solomon looks at oppression which causes mankind to suffer and weep. There were tears that accompanied the labor pains of Israel's birth as a nation. While Israel was in Egypt, they were severely oppressed. When God called Moses, He said: 'I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering.'¹ But Solomon leaves God and God's compassion out of the picture, looking only down instead of up. He concludes that the corruption of human relations, which changed society from living together on a basis of mutual love into a 'dog-eat-dog' state, makes life as a whole unbearable. He deduces that not-to-be is better than to-be. We are reminded of Job's reaction to his suffering, which was intensified by the insensitivity of his 'comforters': 'After this, Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. He said: 'May the day of my birth perish, and the night it was said, "A boy is born!"'²

ii. Lonesome rivalry and its alternatives 4:4-6

4 And I saw that all labor and all achievement spring from man's envy of his neighbor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

5 The fool folds his hands and ruins himself.

6 Better one handful with tranquillity than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind.

The keyword in v.4 in the Hebrew text is *qin'ah*, 'jealousy,' or 'envy.' In this verse man can be seen as the object of envy or as the subject. *The New King James Version*, for instance, renders it: 'Again, I saw that for all toil and every skillful work a man is envied by his neighbor.' But *The New Living Translation*, similar to *The New International Version*, reads: 'Then I observed that most people are motivated to success because they envy their neighbors.'

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, observes: 'If 4:1-16 is indeed a string of units edited around the theme of companionship, the underlying concern will be the social fragmentation produced by such toil. Rivalry never produced companionship yet. The precise thought is not that work *causes* rivalry (Berkeley), but that it *stems from* rivalry. The Hebrew means 'envy towards one's neighbor' (cf. RSV) rather than 'envy from one's neighbor' (cf. AV, RV) or between 'man and man' (cf. Moffatt, NEB, JB).'

Although this sinful tendency is less brutal than the former, oppression of one's neighbor, it is just as sinful. Both are the result of man's fall into sin. It is a sin against the tenth commandment: 'You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.'³ God's original plan for mankind was a society of individuals who love one another to the point where one would be willing to give one's life for the other. Jesus modeled this for us. That is why the Apostle John writes: 'This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.'⁴ And the psalmist expresses God's delight in: 'How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!'⁵ Asaph

1. I Kings 12:10,11
1. Ex. 3:7
2. Job 3:1,2
3. Ex. 20:17
4. I John 3:16

struggled with envy, particularly because it seems that those who love God and try to obey Him enjoy less prosperity than those who ignore their Creator. He wrote: 'Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.'¹

The antidote to envy as motivation for producing result is to use God, instead of our neighbor, as our point of reference. The Apostle Paul advised: 'Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him,' and 'Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.'²

About vv.4 and 5, *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: 'Success itself is no guarantee of happiness; the malice and ill feeling which it invariably occasions are necessarily a source of pain and distress. — The connection of this verse with the preceding is this: activity, diligence, and skill indeed bring success, but success is accompanied by sad results. Should we, then, sink into apathy, relinquish work, let things slide? Nay, none but the fool (*keciyl*), the insensate, half-brutish man, doth this.'

The Hebrew text of v.5 reads literally: 'The fool folds his hands together and eats his own flesh.' Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, writes about vv.5 and 6: 'This is the opposite of v.4. We pass from the rat-race with its hectic scramble for status symbols to the drop-out with his total indifference. His condition is analyzed as self-cannibalism, *he consumes his own flesh*. To *fold the hands* is to be idle. (cf. Pr. 6:10). The *handful of quietness* is the middle way between the clamorous grasping of v.4 and the escapism of v.5. The two words for *hand* differ in the Hebrew; the second refers to hands cupped to take as much as possible (cf. Ex. 9:8). The way of wisdom will attempt much (*one handful*) but not too much (*two hands full*), and so will find life within its grasp (*one handful*) not an impossible strain (*striving for wind*). How such a life is attained is the underlying theme of Ecclesiastes. It is 'from the hand of God' (2:24), 'a gift' (5:19). A fuller exposition comes in 9:7-10; 11:1-10. Its embodiment is seen in Christ who withdrew from 'two hands full' of trouble (Mt. 12:14f.), but was noted for his 'handful of quietness' (Mt. 12:19f.).'

iii. A man without a family 4:7-8

7 Again I saw something meaningless under the sun:

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

V.8 exposes another form of jealousy, which is avarice. *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* comments: 'The man who is the center of his own existence, has neither wife, child, nor legal heir; and yet is as intent on getting money as if he had the largest family to provide for; nor does he only labor with intense application, but he even refuses himself the comforts of life out of his own gains! This is not only vanity, the excess of foolishness, but it is also sore travail.'

The drive of a workaholic is usually a hidden factor of dissatisfaction that he cannot cope with and that he tries to ignore or cover up with an excess of long hours of work. The twin of dissatisfaction is greed. It is about these two that the author of Proverbs says: 'The leech has two daughters. 'Give! Give!' they cry. There are three things that are never satisfied, four that never say, 'Enough!': the grave, the barren womb, land, which is never satisfied with water, and fire, which never says, 'Enough!''³ Jesus warned against this,

5. Ps. 133:1

1. Ps. 73:1-3

2. Col. 3:17,23,24

saying: 'Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.'¹ Few people are convinced that a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions. Who does not want to be a millionaire?

The miser in these verses is identical to the fool in the previous verses. The leech and the man who eats his own flesh both destroy themselves, without knowing that they are doing it. The interesting part in this section, however, is that the workaholic asks himself the question, 'why am I doing this?' He realizes that his efforts leave his soul dry and empty. Man is made for fellowship with God and his fellowmen. No gold or silver or any other dead material can substitute for love and life. And it is ultimately love that gives meaning to life: love of God and of one's neighbor.

iv. The blessing of companionship 4:9-12

9 Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work:

10 If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!

11 Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone?

12 Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

These verses are among the most quoted in this book. They are often applied to marriage, although the Teacher places them in a larger context than married life alone. Man's need for fellowship dates from paradise. 'The Lord God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone.''² That fact that Eve was created from a rib taken out of Adam's body emphasizes the fact that we are made for fellowship with one another. A man's love for his wife is part of his love of his own body. The Apostle Paul affirmed this when he wrote: 'No one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church— for we are members of his body. 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.''³

The Teacher states the general truth that 'two are better than one,' and three are even better. He illustrates this with five examples from work, support, comfort, safety and strength. The first example depicts a work relationship. Two heads are better than one, both for reasons of insight and productivity. But the picture may reveal more than mere financial profit. The Hebrew word rendered 'return' is *sakar*, which refers to financial benefit as well as to other forms of compensation. The first time *sakar* is used in Scripture is in the verse: 'After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: 'Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great *reward*.''⁴ God's Word to Abraham makes us realize that fellowship on a human level is an image of our relationship with God which gives value to all other relationships. That is probably the truth expressed in the proverb about the cord of three strands. If marriage is a triangle of which God is the top, the human bond is indestructible.

In the second picture one of the partners falls down and is helped up by his associate. *The Pulpit Commentary* states: 'The verse may be applied to moral falls as well as to stumbling at natural obstacles. Brother helps brother to resist temptation, while many have failed when tried by isolation who would have

3. Prov. 30:15,16

1. Luke 12:15

2. Gen. 2:18

3. Eph. 5:29-31

4. Gen. 15:1

manfully withstood if they had had the countenance and support of others.’ The Indian evangelist Sadhu Sundar Sing tells a story of a man traveling in the snow in the mountains, who finds a fellow traveler who fell down and is in danger of freezing to death. The man hoists him on his shoulders and carries him down to safety. In the process he saves himself from freezing to death, but the warmth of his body revives the fallen man and saves his life also.

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, states here: ‘The Hebrew is strictly plural (‘If they fall...’), but occasionally the plural may denote an indefinite singular and thus mean ‘If either of them should fall ...’ V.11 may refer to more than comfort. Although the first reference is to body warmth, evoking the image of a married couple sleeping together, it can be applied to a wider field with spiritual applications. *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: ‘The winter nights in Palestine are comparatively cold, and when, as in the case of the poorer inhabitants, the outer garment worn by day was used as the only blanket during sleep ... it was a comfort to have the additional warmth of a friend lying under the same coverlet.’ The commentary refers to the Mosaic Law about the subject, which reads: ‘If you take your neighbor’s cloak as a pledge, return it to him by sunset, because his cloak is the only covering he has for his body. What else will he sleep in? When he cries out to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate.’¹ The commentary adds rather wryly: ‘Solomon could have had no such experience,’ not specifying whether the reference is to the fact that Solomon had a thousand wives to keep him warm, or an abundance of cloaks to keep him covered.

The Matthew Henry’s Commentary emphasizes the spiritual implications of ‘mutual warmth,’ stating: ‘As a fellow-traveler is of use (a friend is a good substitute for a carriage) so is a bedfellow: If two lie together, they have heat. So virtuous and gracious affections are excited by good society, and Christians warm one another by provoking one another to love and to good works.’

Safety is the concern of the first part of v.12. This applies to a variety of situations. Some Bible scholars see in it a picture of highway robbery, such as occurred in *The Parable of the Good Samaritan*.² Whether such unsafe travel conditions existed during Solomon’s reign is not known. There are, of course, numerous conditions in which a double defense provides superior protection, both in the physical and spiritual realm. We think particularly of Paul’s exclamation: ‘If God is for us, who can be against us?’³

This brings us to the last image of the three-strand cord, representing indestructible strength. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* states about a threefold cord: ‘proverbial for a combination of many, e.g., husband, wife, and children (Prov 11:14); so Christians (Col 2:2,19). Christ sent forth the seventy by pairs, not singly (Luke 10:1), and promised, ‘Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them’ (Matt 18:18; cf. 19).’

v. Isolation breeding folly 4:13-16

13 Better a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer knows how to take warning.

14 The youth may have come from prison to the kingship, or he may have been born in poverty within his kingdom.

15 I saw that all who lived and walked under the sun followed the youth, the king’s successor.

16 There was no end to all the people who were before them. But those who came later were not pleased with the successor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, writes about these verses: ‘The next section has links with the themes of isolation (4:7f) and companionship (4:9-12), for v.13 continues to underline the folly of self-

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1. Ex. 22:26,27
 2. Luke 10:30-35
 3. Rom. 8:31

sufficiency and growing isolation. Attempts have been made to identify the characters of these verses, but none is entirely convincing. The scene is too commonplace. Generally in the Old Testament wisdom is reckoned to lie with increasing age and experience, and the elderly were honored accordingly (Lv. 19:32). But it is also realized that the aged may lose their wisdom (Jb. 12:20) and that the young may be wiser than their elders (Ps. 119:100). Elihu's is the balanced position, giving his elders the first hearing but not regarding them as infallible, since the Spirit of God may give wisdom beyond one's years (Jb. 32:4-11). The Preacher applies the same point to an unnamed, probably hypothetical, king. He once (*no longer*) listened to advice, but now is growingly isolated as he becomes 'wise in his own eyes' (Pr. 26:12). The whole process is unconscious, as implied by the phrase *no longer knows* (NIV; the reference to knowing is omitted in RSV, NEB). In this situation a *youth* of humble origins may outstrip him. The word is not 'teenager' but 'young man,' for it takes in Joseph at seventeen years (Gn. 37:30) and Rehoboam's advisers who were over forty (1 Ki. 12:8; 14:21).'

Barnes' Notes comments: 'These verses set forth the vanity of earthly prosperity even on a throne. Opinion as to their application is chiefly divided between considering them a parable or fiction like that of the childless man in Eccl 4:8; or as setting forth first the vicissitudes of royal life in two proverbial sayings (Eccl 4:13-14), and then (Eccl 4:15-16), the vicissitudes or procession of the whole human race, one generation giving place to another, which in its turn will be forgotten by its successor.' *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* adds: 'Often age and experience teach a man nothing. The king who himself was once poor, who arose out of prison to the throne, who caused the downfall of another, did not learn the chief lesson of his struggle-popular favor is uncertain and unpredictable. The rendering he that is born in his kingdom becomes poor suggests that the king, through his failure to learn the lessons of popularity, may someday become a pauper in his own kingdom.'

Some Bible scholars have seen in these verses a picture of Solomon's own folly. That is certainly a fitting application, but there is no scriptural proof that Solomon ever confessed his sins at the end of his life. If that were the case, a reference to such an act of repentance could hardly have been omitted, especially in *The Book of Chronicles*. Those who reject the possibility of Solomon being the author of this book find it easier to see a reference to Solomon here.

Even if Solomon wrote this about himself because the Holy Spirit gave him this prophetic insight, he could not have thought of his own son, Rehoboam as poor and coming out of prison. That picture would apply to Jeroboam whose reign began as a successful enterprise and ended in disaster.

vi. The approach to God 5:1-7

1 *Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong.*

2 *Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few.*

3 *As a dream comes when there are many cares, so the speech of a fool when there are many words.*

4 *When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow.*

5 *It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it.*

6 *Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. And do not protest to the [temple] messenger, 'My vow was a mistake.' Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands?*

7 *Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. Therefore stand in awe of God.*

As *Barnes' Notes* observes, the teacher switches here from a soliloquy to addressing an audience, advising them to realize who the One is they are facing when they enter the temple. C. S. Lewis, in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, says about Aslan, the lion who represents Christ, 'He is not a tame lion!' And the author of Hebrews warns us that 'It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.'¹

The Hebrew text of v.1¹ reads literally: 'Keep your foot when you go to the house of God, and be more ready to hear than to give: for the fools sacrifice not for they consider evil.' *The Pulpit Commentary* explains: 'To keep the foot' is to be careful of the conduct, to remember what you are about, whither you are going. There is no allusion to the sacerdotal rite of washing the feet before entering the holy place (... Exodus 30:18,19), nor to the custom of removing the shoes on entering a consecrated building, which was a symbol of reverential awe and obedient service. The expression is simply a term connected with man's ordinary life transferred to his moral and religious life.'

In introducing this section, Michael A Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, states: "Earth's 'vanity' has been recognized (1:2-2:23), but considered in the light of the life God gives (2:24-26) and the assurance of his sovereignty (3:1-15). Injustice (3:16-22) and various forms of isolation (4:1-16) have been faced. We stand in need of an altogether greater companionship. The Preacher earlier told of a God who gives a life of joy and pleasure. May he be approached? This question is now answered in terms of the house of God, obedience, sacrifice (v.1), prayer (vv.2f.), vows (v.4). But there are dangers. If God is 'in heaven,' the ruler (3:1-15) and judge (3:16-22), he cannot be approached casually. So a proverbial unit is inserted dealing with our approach to God. The first note of exhortation in Ecclesiastes comes here, and assumes God may be approached, addressed in prayer, and will receive our vows."

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary captures well the meaning of these verses, stating: 'Make sure you know what you are doing when you go to the house of God. In the phrase be more ready to hear, the author is not speaking of coming to the Temple to listen to the exposition of the Law, but rather he is cautioning against approaching the worship of God in the wrong way. The word hear often has the sense of 'obey' in the OT. The contrast is between those who come to God in obedience, that is, out of a background of ethical and moral conduct (cf. Ps 119:101), and those who are fools, that is, those who worship with unrepentant hearts.'

Barnes' Notes states: 'There is a striking resemblance between the line of thought pursued in this book and that of Asaph in Ps 73. As the Psalmist, so the Preacher, after setting forth his view of human life, takes his hearer into the house of God for an explanation and directions. If the expression 'goest to the house of God' (Eccl 4:1) has also the spiritual sense of entering into communion with God, Solomon here admonishes generally that reverence is due to God, and particularly that the 'vanity' which is mingled with the 'portion' that God assigns to every man, ought to be treated as a divine mystery, not to be made an occasion of idle thought, hasty words, and rash resolutions, but to be considered in the fear of God (Eccl. 4:1-7); that the spectacle of unjust oppression is to be patiently referred to God's supreme judgment (Eccl. 4:8-9); that mere riches are unsatisfying, bring care with them, and if hoarded are transitory (Eccl. 4:10-17); and that a man's enjoyment of his portion in life, including both labor and riches, is the gift of God (Eccl. 4:18-20).

The Teacher's advice is well illustrated in Jesus' *Parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector*. We read: 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men — robbers, evildoers, adulterers — or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.' It is not only important that we realize who God is, when we enter into His presence, but also that we recognize who we are ourselves.

There is a good deal of confusion about the phrase that reads in Hebrew: 'for the fools sacrifice not for they consider evil.'

1. Heb. 10:31

1. Actually, 5:1 in the English Bible is 4:17 in the Hebrew text.

The Hebrew word for 'fool' in this section is *keciyl*, which literally means: 'fat,' 'stupid,' or 'silly.' *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* explains about the word: 'The *kecil* is 'insolent' in religion and 'stupid or dull' in wise living (living out a religion he professes). In Ps 92:6 the first emphasis is especially prominent: 'A brutish man knoweth not; neither doth a fool understand this.' The psalmist is describing an enemy of God who knew God and His word but, seeing the wicked flourishing, reasoned that they have the right life-style Ps 92:7. They have knowledge of God but do not properly evaluate or understand what they know. The second emphasis is especially prominent in wisdom contexts: 'How long, ye simple ones, will ye love simplicity? and the scorners delight in their scorning, and fools hate knowledge?' Prov 1:22. In such contexts the person so described rejects the claims and teachings of wisdom. However, in the Bible wisdom is the practical outworking of one's religion. Therefore, even in these contexts there is a clear connotation of insolence in religion.'

The Pulpit Commentary observes: 'There is much difficulty in understanding the passage according to the received reading, and [one Bible scholar], with others, deems the text corrupt. If we accept what we now find, it is best to translate, 'They know not, so that they do evil;' *i.e.* their ignorance predisposes them to err in this matter. The persons meant are the 'fools' who offer unacceptable sacrifices. These know not how to worship God heartily and properly, and, thinking to please him with their formal acts of devotion, fall into a grievous sin.'

A few samples of different readings will demonstrate that there are difficulties in rendering the Hebrew text correctly. *The King James Version* reads: 'for they consider not that they do evil.' *The Living Bible* paraphrases the text, blending the problem into the whole sentence: 'Don't be a fool who doesn't even realize it is sinful to make rash promises to God.' *The Good News Bible*: 'It is better to go there to learn than to offer sacrifices like foolish people who don't know right from wrong.' *The New Living Translation* reads: 'It is evil to make mindless offerings to God.' *The Amplified Bible* presents the choice: 'for to draw near to hear *and* obey is better than to give the sacrifice of fools [carelessly, irreverently], too ignorant to know that they are doing evil.' *The Contemporary English Version*, less theologically correct, even reads: 'Some fools go there to offer sacrifices, even though they haven't sinned.'

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, quotes different Bible scholars' interpretations of the phrase, which vary from 'They (who obey) know not how to do evil,' and 'They do not know to do evil,' or 'they do not know except to do evil,' to '... and so they do wrong,' and '... when they do wrong,' to '... in doing wrong.' Eaton believes the last to be best grammatically.

It is difficult to read this passage and not to think about what James writes in his epistle about the sins of the tongue. We read: 'My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check. When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.'¹ We may assume that Solomon inspired James, or rather that it was the same Spirit that inspired Solomon, who worked in James also.

1. James 1:19-21; 3:2-12

Solomon sets the stage by advising us to realize Who the God is we approach. ‘God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few.’ Realizing who God is should leave us speechless. Solomon may have had his father David’s psalm in mind in which he looked up to the heavens and said: ‘When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?’¹ The distance between God and us is not just a matter of space. When we look at God’s fingers and what they produced from the endless galaxies to the tiny atoms of which we are made, we can do nothing but stand in awe. Only the fool can miss this point.

It seems that the reference to ‘a dream’ in v.3 does not fit the context of the babbling fool too well. *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: ‘The verse is meant to confirm the injunction against vain babbling in prayer. Cares and anxieties in business or other matters occasion disturbed sleep, murder the dreamless repose of the healthy laborer, and produce all kinds of sick fancies and imaginations.’”

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary remarks: ‘As much ‘business,’ engrossing the mind, gives birth to incoherent ‘dreams,’ so many words, uttered inconsiderately in prayer, give birth to and betray ‘a fool’s speech’ (Eccl 10:14). ... But Eccl 5:7 implies that the ‘dream’ is not a comparison, but the vain thoughts of the fool (sinner) (Ps 73:20), arising from multiplicity of (worldly) ‘business.’ His ‘dream’ is, that God hears him for his much speaking (Matt 6:7), independently of the frame of mind. ‘Fool’s voice’ answers to ‘dream’ in the parallel; it comes by the many ‘words’ flowing from the fool’s ‘dream.’ ‘Multitude of words’ is parallel to ‘multitude of business.’” *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* states: “The author quotes a proverb in support of his previous point. Just as a night of dreams is the result of too much preoccupation with one’s business, so nonsensical speech is the result of too many words at worship.”

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, refers to the way *The New English Bible* handles the verse. We read: “NEB loses all reference to a dream, apparently amending *hah^alôm* (the *dream*) to a hypothetical *hehâlûm*, translated ‘the sensible man’ but unattested elsewhere.” Yet, that approach seems preferable.

The “dream” pops up again in the section that deals with the making of vows. V.7 reads: “Much dreaming and many words are meaningless.” *The New Living Translation* renders this: “Talk is cheap, like daydreams and other useless activities. Fear God instead.” *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* states on this: “This difficult proverb is probably an allusion to verse 3, and the author is summing up his point. Just as too much concern over business brings dreams, so too many words spoken at worship bring rash promises and punishment by God.”

But “dream” is not the only problem in these verses. The whole reads as follows in *The Interlinear Hebrew Bible*: “[It is] better that you should not than that you should vow and not pay. Suffer not your mouth to cause your flesh to sin; neither say you before the angel that it was an error: wherefore should God be angry at your voice and destroy the works of your hands?”

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, writes about this section: “The Preacher moves to vows paid in the temple (4-7). The *vow* in ancient Israel was a promise to God, which might be part of prayer for blessing (Nu. 21:2) or a spontaneous expression of gratitude (Jon. 2:9). It might take the form of a promise of allegiance (Gn. 28:20-22), a free-will offering (Lv. 22:18) or the dedication of a child as Nazirite (I Sa. 1:11). As in the matter of prayer, haste in taking a vow is cautioned against elsewhere (Pr. 20:25). Here the Preacher warns against *delay* (cf. Dt. 23:21-23) and evasion: *Pay what you vow!* Failure in these respects is a mark of fools. Because the vow was voluntary, there was danger of its becoming a form of bribery, especially in times of distress. God does not take broken vows lightly. A broken vow may incur his judgment upon our endeavors. One who ‘swears to his own hurt and does not change’ pleases God (Ps. 15:4). Thus the *mouth* may lead the *flesh* into sin. Flesh here apparently refers to the whole man, hence RSV ... lead you into sin. It is possible that it also stresses moral frailty, a point which becomes more explicit in its New Testament usage (cf. Gal. 5:16-21) but is rare in the Old Testament.” In two footnotes to his

1. Ps. 8:3,4

comments, Eaton states: “In Ec. 5:6 it is a sacrifice at the temple that is in mind. The Preacher does not deal with a vow which was downright sinful in the first place; that is a matter for repentance rather than fulfillment.” And: “[One scholar] maintains that ‘The idea here is that something small, *i.e.* the mouth may bring guilt upon the whole, *i.e.* the entire person’ (cf. Jas. 3:5).”

The above reference to the verse in Proverbs 20:25 is worth spelling out here; it reads: “It is a trap for a man to dedicate something rashly and only later to consider his vows.”

The Hebrew word translated “messenger” is *mal’ak*, which can mean any kind of messenger: “angel,” but also “prophet, priest,” or “teacher.” Eaton comments on this word: “Hebrew draws no distinction between *messenger* and *angel*, so several interpretations are open to us here. Does the verse refer to (i) the angel of the Lord who is called in the Old Testament ‘a man’ or ‘an angel’ but is addressed as divine? Or (ii) to a prophet (Hg. 1:3; Mal. 3:1); or (iii) to a priest (Mal.2:7); or (iv) to a messenger sent by a priest? One of the last two is almost certainly correct. A voluntary offering vowed to a temple priest is unfulfilled; the temple priest or his messenger comes to enquire. ‘*Oh, it was a mistake*’ is the worshipper’s evasion. But God sees, and a careless approach to him may bring his anger upon our word and his judgment upon our works, if not immediately (cf. 8:11) at least ultimately (12:14).”

B. Poverty and wealth 5:8-6:12

In introducing this section, Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, writes: “The various proverbs of this section are bound together by the theme of poverty and wealth. We have reference to ‘the poor’ (5:8), ‘money’ (5:10), the increase of ‘good things’ (5:11), the ‘rich man’ (5:12), ‘riches’ (5:13-14), ‘riches and wealth’ (5:19; 6:2), the ‘poor man’ (6:8).”

i. The poor under oppressive bureaucracy 5:8-9

8 If you see the poor oppressed in a district, and justice and rights denied, do not be surprised at such things; for one official is eyed by a higher one, and over them both are others higher still.

9 The increase from the land is taken by all; the king himself profits from the fields.

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary observes about the whole chapter: “Here riches are viewed from three angles. Though God may give a man a certain power to enjoy wealth, yet (1) riches are the cause of much greed and injustice among government officials (Eccl 5:8-9); (2) the gaining of wealth never brings satisfaction, for the more one gets, the more one wants (5:10-12); and (3) riches are an insecure possession, for a man acquires wealth only to pass it on to others (5:13-17). So in 5:18-20 the author gives his oft repeated counsel: Enjoy life while you can.”

The picture drawn for us is one of government corruption, practiced by the lower officials, but working its way up to the top, to the king himself. God’s original intent with the nation of Israel was that it would function as a theocracy, as “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”¹ When, in the days of Samuel, the people began to demand to have a king, God said to Samuel: “It is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king.”² Thereupon Samuel issued this warning to the people: “This is what the king who will reign over you will do: He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. Some he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and others to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and still others to make weapons

1. Ex. 19:6

2. I Sam. 8:7

of war and equipment for his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. Your menservants and maidservants and the best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use. He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, and the Lord will not answer you in that day.”¹

Here, Solomon himself, the third king of Israel, looks at his kingdom and concludes that absolute power has made corruption absolute. And laconically, he says to his audience “do not be surprised at such things.” The Hebrew text reads: “Marvel not at the matter.”

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary states about the text: “*If thou seest the oppression of the poor ...* As in Eccl 3:16, so here the difficulty suggests itself. If God is so exact in even punishing hasty words (Eccl 5:1-6), why does He allow gross injustice? In the remote ‘provinces’ (Hebrew, *mediynah* jurisdiction) the ‘poor’ often had to put themselves, for protection from the inroads of Philistines, etc., under, chieftains, who oppressed them even in Solomon’s reign, and the exaction of the tribute was often attended with oppression of the poor (1 Kings 12:4). *The matter* - literally, the pleasure, or purpose (Isa 53:10). Marvel not at this dispensation of God’s will, as if He had abandoned the world. Nay, there is coming a capital judgment at last, and an earnest of it in partial punishments of sinners meanwhile (Eccl 3:17). God cannot let such things remain unpunished: for He ‘hates’ robbery (Isa 61:8).”

The Pulpit Commentary comments: “One thinks of the Persian satraps, who acted much as the Turkish pashas in later times, the petty rulers oppressing the people, and being themselves treated in the same fashion by their superiors. The whole is a system of wrong-doing, where the weaker always suffers, and the only comfort is that the oppressor himself is subject to higher supervision. The verb (*shamar*) translated ‘regardeth’ means to observe in a hostile sense, to watch for occasions of reprisal, as ... 1 Samuel 19:11; and the idea intended is that in the province there were endless plottings and counter plottings, mutual denunciations and recriminations; that such things were only to be expected, and were no sufficient cause for infidelity or despair. ‘The higher one’ is the monarch, the despotic king who holds the supreme power over all these mal-administrators and perverters of justice.”

The Hebrew text of v.9 has caused difficulties of translation and interpretation. It reads literally: “Moreover the profit of the earth is for the king himself: for all is served by the field.” Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, states: “The beginning of the verse may be translated: *And an advantage to* (or *for*, or *of*) *a land is* Then the Hebrew becomes difficult. Should it be translated ‘for all’ (AV, JB), ‘in all’ (RSV), ‘on the whole’ ..., ‘over everything’ ..., ‘after all’ (NASV, Moffatt) or ‘always’ ...? Is the word ‘served’ (Heb. *ne-âbâd*) to be attached to ‘king’ or (as the Massoretic pointing suggests) to ‘land,’ and does it have a simple adjectival sense (‘served,’ ‘cultivated’) or a permissive sense (‘allowed to be cultivated’)? This in turn leads to numerous possibilities of translation. Is the advantage ‘a king whose own lands are well tilled’ (NEB)? Or that ‘even a king is subject to the soil’ ...? Or ‘a king who has control’ (Moffatt)? Or ‘that a cultivated land has a king’ (as a counterweight to bureaucratic corruption ...)? In context the main point must be that bureaucratic officialdom does not totally override the value of kingly authority. A likely translation is therefore: ‘But an advantage to a land for everyone is: a king over cultivated land.’ This understand the ‘all’ to refer back to the poor, the officials and the higher officials of v.8; hence ‘for everyone.’ It is also possible to take ‘land’ (*sadeh*) to refer to a specific country (... , RSV). ... Another likely translation is ‘... a king over a land which is allowed to be cultivated.’ If either of these two translations is correct, the writer is sensitive to oppression (v.8) but does not hold that anarchy or violent revolution is a viable alternative.”

ii. Money and its drawbacks 5:10-12

1. I Sam. 8:11-18

10 Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income. This too is meaningless.

11 As goods increase, so do those who consume them. And what benefit are they to the owner except to feast his eyes on them?

12 The sleep of a laborer is sweet, whether he eats little or much, but the abundance of a rich man permits him no sleep.

The Pulpit Commentary introduces this whole section from vv.10-17 with the comment: “The thought of the acts of injustice and oppression noticed above, all of which spring from the craving for money, leads the bard to dwell upon the evils that accompany this pursuit and possession of wealth, which is thus seen to give no real satisfaction. Avarice has already been noticed (... Ecclesiastes 4:7-12); the covetous man now reprobated is one who desires wealth only for the enjoyment he can get from it, or the display which it enables him to make, not, like the miser, who gloats over its mere possession.”

Michael A Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, observes: “Three perennial drawbacks to wealth are crisply presented: it cannot satisfy the covetous (10); it attracts a circle of dependents (11); it disturbs one’s peace (12).”

The Hebrew text of v.10 reads literally: “He that loves silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loves abundance [with] increase: this is also vanity.” These words were spoken by the richest man who ever lived. The problem with greed is that it misses the point of what life is all about. The Apostle Paul issued strong warnings against greed. In writing to Timothy, he said: “If anyone teaches false doctrines and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, he is conceited and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction between men of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain. But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.”¹ Jesus made the most profound statement ever made on the topic of greed: “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”²

God created us in such a way that we crave for satisfaction, a craving that only He can satisfy. Even on the lower level of physical satisfaction, this is a lesson to be learned. Moses reminded the Israelites of their experience of being hungry and being satisfied with the manna God rained down from heaven. He said: “He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”³

Yet, most people would love to be a millionaire. The Scottish writer George MacDonald once said: “Do you believe that God can punish people by making them rich?” There is no sin in possessing money, but there is in the greed that is involved in the possession. John D. Rockefeller was once asked how much riches was enough. He answered: “Just a little more!”

Greed belongs to the devil. He uses it in his temptations. He even submitted Jesus to the test. We read: “Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and

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1. I Tim. 6:3-10
 2. Luke 12:15
 3. Deut. 8:3

their splendor. ‘All this I will give you,’ he said, ‘if you will bow down and worship me.’”¹ The wise Agur son of Jakeh prayed: “Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, ‘Who is the Lord?’ Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God.”²

But there is a healthy craving that God created within us to draw us to the goal He has set for our lives. God went to a lot of trouble to evoke in Adam a desire for companionship. We read how this kind of healthy “greed” was awakened in him: “The Lord God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.’ Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field. But for Adam no suitable helper was found. So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said, ‘This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called “woman,” for she was taken out of man.’ For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.”³

The sons of Korah expressed this longing in the psalm they wrote about the temple: “How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord Almighty! My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.”⁴ And David wrote beautifully about the deepest desire of his life: “One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple.”⁵ Those good cravings are the antidotes to the greed Satan wants to implant in the human heart.

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, comments on these verses: “If poverty has its problems, love of wealth is not an appropriate alternative (*cf.* Ps. 37:16). The words *money* (*kesep*, ‘silver’) and *wealth* (*hamôn*, ‘abundance, ‘plenty’) are respectively silver used as a medium of exchange, and wealth in the form of goods and possession (*cf.* Ezk. 29:19, RSV). They speak of the capital one has, while *gain* (*t^ebuw’â*, ‘income, increase, harvest’) is the hope of the further income, a ‘harvest’ in store (for the word has agricultural associations.) In general (for wisdom literature deals in generalizations) promotion anticipated is more attractive than promotion in the event. Increased wealth brings increased taxation (in more than one sense!). For riches have a knack of disappearing down a drain of increased responsibilities. An ‘extended family’ will extend a bit further with each increment; the wage-earner will see the goods but no more. A glimpse is given of two case histories. The *rich* man suffers from insomnia. Either his physique or his cares keep him awake. On the other hand a laborer, though comparatively poorer, finds that both his daily work and his freedom from care enable him to sleep soundly. The Preacher asks: whose position is preferable? The rich man’s *surfeit* (RSV) has been taken to refer to his wealth (NIV, JB; *cf.* GNB *has so much*) or his *full stomach* (NASV). Translations which retain the ambiguity are best.”

iii. Wealth-loved and lost 5:13-17

13 I have seen a grievous evil under the sun: wealth hoarded to the harm of its owner,

1. Matt. 4:8,9
2. Prov. 30:8,9
3. Gen 2:18-24
4. Ps. 84:1,2
5. Ps. 27:4

14 or wealth lost through some misfortune, so that when he has a son there is nothing left for him.

15 Naked a man comes from his mother's womb, and as he comes, so he departs. He takes nothing from his labor that he can carry in his hand.

16 This too is a grievous evil: As a man comes, so he departs, and what does he gain, since he toils for the wind?

17 All his days he eats in darkness, with great frustration, affliction and anger.

In introducing these verses, Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, writes: "We now pass to those who have had wealth and lost it. First the tale is presented; we see wealth acquired (13) and lost (14a), and man's inability to pass anything on (14b) or take anything with him (15). Then follows a grim view of the life of the one who loved and lost his wealth (16f)."

The picture of Job comes to mind, who, when stripped of everything that made life good and meaningful to him, exclaimed: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised."¹ But this is not the conclusion the Teachers comes to in these verses. It is true that for Solomon the case was hypothetical. He never lost his wealth during his life, but in a sense he left this world poorer than he came into it. At his birth God gave him the name Jedidiah.² He ended his life as an idol worshipper.³

The Teacher describes the experiences as "a grievous evil," (Hebrew: *ra chalah*). *Chalah* means literally: "to be rubbed" or "worn," "to be weak," or "sick," or "to make sick." The addition "under the sun," however, means that the heavenly perspective is purposely omitted. God is left out of the picture, which causes a reaction to be opposite to Job's.

The Hebrew of v.13 (v.12 in *The Interlinear Hebrew Bible*) reads literally: "There is a sore evil which I have seen under the sun, namely, riches kept for the owners thereof to their hurt."

Most commentators, commenting on the thought of hurt possessions can bring to the owner, concentrate on outside factors. *The Adam Clarke's Commentary*, for instance, states: "This may be the case through various causes: 1. He may make an improper use of them, and lose his health by them. 2. He may join in an unfortunate partnership and lose all. 3. His riches may excite the desire of the robber; and he may spoil him of his goods, and even take away his life. 4. Or, he may leave them to his son, who turns profligate, spends the whole, and ruins both his body and soul. I have seen this again and again." I believe that, more than material loss, it is the damage wealth can do to a person's soul that should be thought of. The Apostle Paul captures best the thought when, in writing to Timothy, he states: "People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs."⁴ And Jesus, of course, captures it best in the statement: "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?"⁵

V.14 does seem to refer to loss of wealth through one misfortune or another. But the Hebrew text is open for different interpretations. The Hebrew reads literally: "But those riches perish by evil travail ..." The Hebrew word, rendered "travail," "misfortune," (*The New International Version*), "risky investments that turn sour" (*The New Living Translation*) is the translation of the Hebrew word *`inyan*, which can be rendered "ado," "employment," or "an affair." The word only appears in *Ecclesiastes* and it is therefore

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1. Job 1:21
 2. II Sam. 12:25
 3. I Kings 11:4
 4. I Tim. 6:9,10
 5. Matt. 16:26

difficult to determine how it could be used in other contexts. In other verses in this book, the word is variously translated as “burden,” “work,” “task,” “toil,” “cares,” or “labor.”

The text introduces the thought of leaving some capital behind which may profit the son, or children in general. About this, *The Pulpit Commentary* comments: “His misery is doubled by the reflection that he has lost all hope of securing a fortune for his children, or founding a family, or passing on an inheritance to posterity. It is doubtful to whom the pronoun ‘his’ refers. Many consider that the father is meant, and the clause says that when he has begotten a son, he finds he has nothing to give him. But the suffix seems most naturally to refer to the son, who is thus left a pauper.” Thus, as the father was born naked and died in similar fashion, so the son is left naked and out in the cold.

More than the material heritage a person may leave behind, the Teacher may have had in mind another, more spiritual, legacy we all leave, or fail to leave behind at death. The thought that ought to occupy the mind of every person is how much lasting fruit we produce during life on earth.

No one lives in vain in this world. Even if we leave God out of the picture during life on earth, we contribute to the glory of God. *The Book of Proverbs* states: “The Lord works out everything for his own ends — even the wicked for a day of disaster.”¹ The Apostle Paul states: “For we will all stand before God’s judgment seat. It is written: ‘As surely as I live,’ says the Lord, ‘every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God.’”² And: “Therefore God exalted [Jesus] to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”³ This does not mean eternal salvation for every individual, but it means that even the lost will recognize the reality of God’s plan of life on which they missed out.

V.16 is a comment on v.15 about the way we enter and leave this world naked. The saying “You can’t take it with you!” says it all. So what is the importance of accumulation? The answer is “nothing!” Asaph elaborates the thought in one of his psalms where the theme is jealousy. We read: “Do not be overawed when a man grows rich, when the splendor of his house increases; for he will take nothing with him when he dies, his splendor will not descend with him. Though while he lived he counted himself blessed — and men praise you when you prosper — he will join the generation of his fathers, who will never see the light [of life]. A man who has riches without understanding is like the beasts that perish.”⁴ Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, comments on vv.15 and 16: “The verse does not say he takes *nothing* with him; he takes nothing *in his hand* (*i.e.* tangible, material possessions). With him go his character and his conscience. The Hebrew for *just as* is emphatic and may be translated ‘quite exactly as.’ What a man has in his hand at birth signifies what capital he brought with him – nothing. What he may take with him exactly corresponds. The accumulation was futile.”

iv. Remedy recalled 5:18-20

18 *Then I realized that it is good and proper for a man to eat and drink, and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given him — for this is his lot.*

19 *Moreover, when God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work — this is a gift of God.*

20 *He seldom reflects on the days of his life, because God keeps him occupied with gladness of heart.*

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1. Prov. 16:4
 2. Rom. 14:10,11
 3. Phil. 2:9-11
 4. Ps. 49:16-20

The Hebrew text of v.18, which is v.17 in *The Interlinear Hebrew Bible*, reads literally: “Behold that which I have seen: it is good and comely [for one] to eat and to drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labor that he takes under the sun all the days of his life which God gives him: for it [is] his portion.”

Michael A Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, comments on this section: “The bitterness of the life-story just sketched makes this an appropriate place for the Preacher to recall his remedy. No mention was made of God in 5:13-17; *under the sun* indicated his world-view (5:13). But the Preacher does not allow any to forget that there is another aspect to life. *Behold* introduces a different angle altogether. There is another life, equally outward, real, observable. *I have seen it*, says the Preacher. It is enjoyable in toil, not in its absence. It is a God-given provision in a brief life. *To eat and drink* is expressive of companionship, joy and satisfaction, including religious celebration (Dt. 14:26); here it is the symbol of a contented and happy life. In 1 Kings 4:20 the phrase summarizes the peaceful contentment of Solomon’s reign (*cf.* also Je. 22:15). This is the wise man’s *portion* ... Wealth in a secular context (for the word *God* is absent throughout 5:8-17) may lead to misery. But not all wealth is thereby condemned. The possibility is held out of wealth combined with power to enjoy it. Secular-minded men may assume the two invariably go together; the Preacher regards them as distinct. The secret of such a life is God’s will, for all depends on whether God gives the wealth and the power of enjoyment. On man’s side it depends on acceptance of the style of life God apportions, and awareness of the God-given nature of all wealth. The Hebrew (‘God ... makes a master/gives mastery in order to enjoy ...’) suggests that a man must be in control of his attitude to wealth rather than his attitude to wealth in control of him (*cf.* Phil. 4:12). Secular man may live a life of drudgery, but for the God-centered man it will be otherwise. The thought here is not that life will be so quiet that nothing memorable will take place ... but that life will be so occupied with jubilation that the vanity of life will be well-nigh forgotten. It is not entirely forgotten, however, for the word *much* (translated ‘overmuch’ by RSV in 7:16, a meaning suitable here) implies that life’s brevity will be kept in mind (*cf.* Ps. 90:12), but not so as to give the sleepless nights of 2:23. The Hebrew of *keeps him occupied with* is linked with the term ‘business’ that has occurred throughout Ecclesiastes. There is a business that vexes and frustrates (*cf.* 1:13; 4:8), the life given to man to live within a vain world with its kinks and gaps (*cf.* 1:15). The Preacher repeats his remedy of a God-given life of faith and joy which is even more preoccupying.”

As always in reference to toil there is the underlying thought of the curse of sin that made man to eat his food by the sweat of his brow.¹ There can be no enjoyment of toil without atonement and forgiveness. On this we have more insight than Solomon could ever have. It is what Jesus accomplished for us in dying on the cross and rising from the dead that made the Apostle Paul say: “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.”² And: “And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”³ That is the point no Old Testament saint could ever reach.

v. Wealth and its insecurity 6:1-6

1 I have seen another evil under the sun, and it weighs heavily on men:

2 God gives a man wealth, possessions and honor, so that he lacks nothing his heart desires, but God does not enable him to enjoy them, and a stranger enjoys them instead. This is meaningless, a grievous evil.

3 A man may have a hundred children and live many years; yet no matter how long he lives, if he cannot enjoy his prosperity and does not receive proper burial, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he.

1. Gen. 3:19
2. I Cor. 10:31
3. Col. 3:17

***4 It comes without meaning, it departs in darkness, and in darkness its name is shrouded.
5 Though it never saw the sun or knew anything, it has more rest than does that man—
6 even if he lives a thousand years twice over but fails to enjoy his prosperity. Do not all go to the same place?***

The “evil” in these verses is not, as *The Pulpit Commentary* assumes, the fact that God gives a man wealth, possessions and honor, but rather that he is unable to enjoy it. The Teacher does not explain why the rich man does not experience satisfaction from his riches. We only learn that someone else does. The main lesson to be drawn from this is that material possessions are unable to give the satisfaction that the human soul craves. But that is not what is stated here. What Moses said about food for the stomach can be applied to any kind of physical enjoyment. Speaking about the way God fed Israel in the desert, he stated: “[The Lord] humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”¹ And Jesus advised: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”² God created the human heart in such a way that only He could satisfy its longings.

We can see in these words how Solomon reacted to the riches and honor God bestowed upon him as the fulfillment of the dream he had in which he asked God to give him primarily wisdom. Yet, the picture does not completely fit Solomon’s experience either. He may have fathered “a hundred children,” as the man in the text, but there the comparison ends.

The Pulpit Commentary comments: “Two of the words here given, ‘riches’ and ‘honor,’ are those used by God in blessing Solomon in the vision at Gibeon (... 1 Kings 3:13); but all three are employed in the parallel passage (... 2 Chronicles 1:11). *So that he wanteth nothing for his soul of all that he desireth.* ‘His soul’ is the man himself, his personality, as ... Psalm 49:19. So in the parable (... Luke 12:19) the rich fool says to his soul, ‘Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years.’ In the supposed case the man is able to procure for himself everything which he wants; has no occasion to deny himself the gratification of any rising desire. All this comes from God’s bounty; but something more is wanted to bring happiness. *Yet God giveth him not power to eat thereof.* ‘To eat’ is used in a metaphorical sense for ‘to enjoy,’ take advantage of, make due use of The ability to enjoy all these good things is wanting, either from discontent, or moroseness, or sickness, or as a punishment for secret sin. *But a stranger eateth it.* The ‘stranger’ is not the legal heir, but an alien to the possessor’s blood, neither relation nor even necessarily a friend. For a childless Oriental to adopt an heir is a common custom at the present day. The wish to continue a family, to leave a name and inheritance to children’s children, was very strong among the Hebrews — all the stronger as the life beyond the grave was dimly apprehended. Abraham expressed this feeling when he sadly cried, ‘I go childless, and he that shall be possessor of my house is Dammesek Eliezer’ (... Genesis 15:2). The evils are two — that this great fortune brings no happiness to its possessor, and that it passes to one who is nothing to him. *An evil disease;* Septuagint, an evil as bad as the diseases spoken of in ... Deuteronomy 28:27, 28.”

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, observes: “The man under the blessing of God (5:18-20) has passed from view. We see instead one to whom God has given wealth, though there is no indication that he recognized the source of his wealth. The previous man was given ‘power to enjoy’ what he had (5:19); this one is not, and accordingly is unable to be contented. Again the man’s plight is described in general terms, leaving the reader to envisage what takes away his *power to enjoy*. Is it some calamity, or simply the playboy’s boredom? He had all a man might ask for (*cf.* 2 Ch. 1:11f., echoing the same terms), but either no appetite or no opportunity to enjoy it. *Honor* adds a note unmentioned in 5:8-20; this man has fame to go

1. Deut. 8:3

2. Matt. 6:19-21

with his wealth. The word (*kâbôḏ*) need not to be taken as a further term for wealth on the grounds that one can scarcely eat it ...; eat means 'enjoy' here (cf. Is. 3:10). His riches do not enable him personally to achieve anything: 'a stranger may enjoy them' (as the Hebrew can be translated). He cannot even feel that at least he has passed his wealth on to a son who will fulfill his father's ambitions. The clause is a contrast (*but a stranger ...*), not an explanation (*for*, NASV). What if the man of 6:1f. was cut off in his prime? The Preacher takes a further example. Another man lives a long life and has a very large family. Yet that is not guarantee of happiness, for he may die unsatisfied and unmourned. The reference to *a hundred children*, although only a generalization and an exaggeration (cf. *a thousand years*, v.6), is less extravagant than modern urbanized man might imagine (cf. Jdg. 8:30). RSV *lives many years, so that the days of his years are many* (cf. AV, RV) is needlessly repetitive. Others see here a concessive clause: 'great as may be the days of his years' (most modern translations ...). But Hebrew 'great' (*rah*) may mean 'eminent,' 'great in reputation' (cf. La. 1:1), giving the better translation 'If a man lives many years and is great as are the years of his life ...'. The man's fame is great as his years are long. Despite family, longevity and fame, life may so miscarry as to incur lifelong dissatisfaction and an unmourned death. The *soul* in AV *his soul is not filled with good* is the whole inner 'life' of man, and is used here as his capacity for feelings, inclinations, enjoyment, satisfaction. In most modern translations it is simple he. To die unburied was the mark of a despised and unmourned end (cf. Je. 22:18f. ...). Better to miscarry throughout life. *The child born dead* is compared in vv.4f. with the dissatisfied rich man of v.3. *Comes* refers to its disastrous birth (cf. 1:4). *Into vanity* may mean 'into this vain world,' but in this setting 'to no purpose' is a better translation. The *darkness* is the realm of the dead, a contrast to the real *under the sun* (cf. Ps. 58:8). It would be pressing the text unduly to take it as implying misery. The name in Hebrew thought is more than a label; it includes the personality and the character. The still-born child has no chance to develop a character or acquire a reputation. This puts negatively what v.4 said positively. The still-born child has no experience of life (*has not seen the sun*) or knowledge of this world. But the discontented rich man is worse off. The child at least has rest; he does not have to endure the conflicts of life 'under the sun.' Some translations lose the reference to rest (NASV, Moffatt, NEB; JB *never knowing rest* is an unlikely translation; it results from punctuating the Hebrew differently). The question of the long life raised in v.3 is taken up. What is the use of it if it is but prolonged misery? *A thousand years twice over* is ironic exaggeration: Methuselah's life twice over cannot satisfy if the outlook is awry. The abrupt intrusion of the next comment: *Do not all go to the same place?* brushes the question of longevity aside. The destination is common to all, no matter how long it takes to get there. *The one place* is 'Sheol,' the realm of the dead."

The question in v.6: "Do not all go to the same place?" is left unanswered, but the answer is understood as affirmative. This leaves resurrection or afterlife out of the picture. And if death would have in fact the last word, everything does become meaningless and examples could be multiplied.

This leaves the puzzling question whether the fate of a stillborn child is better than that of the victim of life's "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune." And since we are quoting Hamlet, we could ask if it is better "not to be than to be." The fact that the Teacher compares one to the other means that he considers both to have personality, otherwise the comparison would be meaningless. It is obvious that a miscarriage or death at birth is not part of God's original plan with mankind. But neither is what happens to the luckless fellow who loses all his wealth. Since death is seen as the equalizer here, it means that sin plays a role. Both the fetus and the loser were alive. The difference between one and the other is that for the baby's life ceased before it could be lived in this world. The womb was the only place it ever knew. The hapless man knew both. Since God created both the child and the man, their existence was God-given, which means that it was good. There is only one case in all of Scripture in which a person is said to be better off if he had never existed: Judas. Jesus said to him: "Woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born."

vi. Insatiable longing 6:7-9

7 All man's efforts are for his mouth, yet his appetite is never satisfied.

8 What advantage has a wise man over a fool? What does a poor man gain by knowing how to conduct himself before others?

9 Better what the eye sees than the roving of the appetite. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

Interestingly, the Hebrew word translated “appetite” is *nephesh*, which means “soul.” We find it in the verse describing the creation of Adam: “And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.”¹

The Pulpit Commentary comments: “*All the labor of man is for his mouth: i.e. for self-preservation and enjoyment, eating and drinking being taken as a type of the proper use of earthly blessings (comp; ... Ecclesiastes 2:24; 3:13, etc.; ... Psalm 128:2).* The sentiment is general, and does not refer specially to the particular person described above, though it carries on the idea of the unsatisfactory result of wealth.”

Two thoughts come to mind. The first is Moses’ statement: “Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”² Leaving God out of the picture and concentrating exclusively on the satisfaction of physical appetites will leave the human soul empty. Only God can fill our deepest longings.

The second important truth is that joy is a fruit of obedience. Jesus said to His disciples: “If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.”³ If joy becomes the sole goal of life’s search it will never be found.

On v.8, Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, comments: “Expositors differ widely on this verse. Most take the first question as purely rhetorical; some ... take it as a real question. The second half may then be a further question, or a reply to the first question: ‘That which the poor man who knows how to conduct himself also has.’ Others see a different question: ‘What advantage does the poor man have over him who knows how to ...? Or: ‘Why should a poor man know how to face life?’ The Preacher seems to ask two questions, implying a negative answer: Does the wise man have an advantage in his life? Does it help the poor man that he learns to ingratiate himself before others and so improve his lot? The last word may mean ‘life’ or ‘the living.’ The mention of *the poor man* indicates the continuance of the themes of poverty and wealth. *To walk before* someone is to live as to please him (*cf.* 1 Ki. 2:4).”

The Hebrew of v.9 reads literally: “Better [is] the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the desire: this is also vanity and vexation of spirit.” The Hebrew word for “wandering” is *halak*, which is the same word, rendered “to conduct himself,” or “to walk before” in the previous verse.

The question about the advantage of wisdom brings us back to the first test to which Adam and Eve were subjected, the test they failed. In choosing to eat the fruit from the tree of knowledge instead of from the tree of life, they separated wisdom from fellowship with God, forfeiting life. We see again what the results are when man leaves God out of the picture. Knowledge and the ability to apply it, which is wisdom, is indeed vanity if it is not seen in relationship with God. The words of the Apostle Paul fit well into this context: “It is because of [God] that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God — that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: ‘Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.’”⁴

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1. Gen. 2:7 – *King James Version*
 2. Deut. 8:3
 3. John 15:10,11

vii. An impasse 6:10-12

10 Whatever exists has already been named, and what man is has been known; no man can contend with one who is stronger than he.

11 The more the words, the less the meaning, and how does that profit anyone?

12 For who knows what is good for a man in life, during the few and meaningless days he passes through like a shadow? Who can tell him what will happen under the sun after he is gone?

The basic question in v.10 is the one David asked most eloquently in one of his psalms. Looking at the night sky into the universe, he said: "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?"¹ But where David voiced amazement at the greatness God had given to His puny creatures, Solomon concludes that man is too tiny and insignificant to face his Creator.

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, comments on v.10: "To 'give something a name' is to study or (as here) to appoint its character. Both the world (*what is*) and *man* have settled characters. *One who is stronger than he* is God. Thus the Preacher is underlining the impossibility of changing the basic character of life. Man cannot escape his limitations, nor can he completely unravel the world's anomalies (*cf.* 1:14). He may, like Job, wish to debate the matter with God, but God is altogether greater."

Barnes' Notes observes: "Or, 'That which has been named-i.e., events past or current, either (Eccl 1:9) as they present themselves to man, or (Eccl 3:15) as they are ordered by God-was long ago (i.e., was decreed, its nature and place were defined by the Almighty), and was known that it is man;' i.e., the course of events shapes the conduct and character of man, so that what he does and suffers is said to be or constitute the man. God from the beginning definitely ordained the course of events external to man, and constituted man in such a way that events materially affect his conduct and his destiny. Hence, God, by withholding from certain people the gift of contentment, and thus subjecting them to vanity, is acting according to the predetermined course of His Providence which man cannot alter (compare Rom 8:20). Others translate, 'What there is, its name is named long ago and known, that it is man;' i.e., 'What hath been and is, not only came into existence long ago (Eccl 1:9; 3:15), but also has been known and named, and is acknowledged that it, besides other things, is specially man; that man always remains the same, and cannot go beyond his appointed bounds.'"

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary writes: "It is ultimately useless to try to change things, and to wish for more than one has. Submission to the fixed order is best, since God has determined things the way they are. Man is powerless even to argue the issue."

The Pulpit Commentary states about v.10: "*That which hath been is named already*; better, *whatsoever hath been, long ago hath its name been given*. The word rendered 'already,' *kebar* (... Ecclesiastes 1:10; 2:12; 3:15; 4:2), 'long ago,' though used elsewhere in this book of events in human history, may appropriately be applied to the Divine decrees which predetermine the circumstances of man's life. This is its significance in the present passage, which asserts that everything which happens has been known and fixed beforehand, and therefore that man cannot shape his own life. No attempt is here made to reconcile this doctrine with man's free-will and consequent responsibility. The idea has already been presented in ... Ecclesiastes 3:1, etc. It comes forth in ... Isaiah 45:9, 'Shall the clay say to him that fashioneth it, What makest thou? or thy work, He hath no hands?' (comp. ... Romans 9:20); ... Acts 15:18 (according to the Textus Receptus), 'Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world.' The same idea is brought out more fully in the following clauses. Septuagint, 'If anything ever was, already

4. I Cor. 1:30,31

1. Ps. 8:3,4

hath its name been called,' which gives the correct sense of the passage. ... *And it is known that it is man.* What is meant by the Authorized Version is doubtful. If the first clause had been translated, as in the margin of the Revised Version, 'Whatsoever he be, his name was given him long ago,' the conclusion would come naturally, 'and it is known that he is man' (*Adam*), and we should see an allusion to man's name and to the ground (*adamah*) from which he was taken (... Genesis 2:7), as if his very name betokened his weakness. But the present version is very obscure. Cox gives, 'It is very certain that even the greatest is but a man, and cannot contend with him,' etc. But the Hebrew will not admit this rendering. The clause really amplifies the previous statement of man's predetermined destiny, and it should be rendered, 'And it is known what a man shall be.' Every individual comes under God's prescient superintendence. ... 'It is known what man is' But it is not the nature of man that is in question, but his conditioned state. *Neither may he contend with him that is mightier than he.* The *mightier* One is God, in accordance with the passages quoted above from Isaiah, Acts, and Romans. Some consider that death is intended, and that the author is referring to the shortness of man's life. They say that the word *taqqiph*, 'mighty' (which occurs only in Ezra and Daniel), is never used of God. But is it used of death? And is it not used of God in ... Daniel 4:3 (3:33, Hebrew), where Nebuchadnezzar says, 'How mighty are his wonders'? To bring death into consideration is to introduce a new thought having no connection with the context, which is not speaking of the termination of man's life, but of its course, the circumstances of which are arranged by a higher Power. ... With this we may compare ... 1 Corinthians 10:22, 'Do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? are we stronger than he?'

What the Teacher seems to say here is that God predestined everything in life, leaving man without choices. The question whether man has a free will has been the subject of discussion all through the history of mankind. One remarkable thing, however, is, that those who deny man's ability to choose freely do not act accordingly. They go through life making their own choices, as if God's predestination does not affect the matters they are dealing with. This brings us back again to the Genesis record in which we read how God involved Adam in His creation and made him lord over the animal world. We read: "Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field."¹ In that instant, at least, the "naming," that is the predestination of roles of the species was not determined by God but by man. There is no doubt that the coming of sin damaged man's ability to choose freely and wisely. Sin is slavery and slaves have little choice. But to say that sin eliminated man's will does not bear out in daily life either.

One of man's problems, if that is the right word to use, is that he is created in time and space. Since that is the only life he knows, he cannot understand eternity. God created time, but He is not subject to it. To say that God predetermines puts God into the framework of time, which does not correspond to the reality of eternity. But we can only speak about eternity in terms of time. We have no word or concept to conceive of anything that is outside of time and space. That is at the core of the Teacher's problem here.

The Hebrew word rendered "contend" is *diyn*, which implies the ability to judge. The idea of "striving with God" would be to take God to task. To this the Apostle Paul replies: "But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? 'Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?' ..."²

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, comments on v.12: "Previously the Preacher had asked who appreciates the nature of man's life as it goes beyond death (3:21, Heb.); now he asks who is able to point out what will truly satisfy as a basis of life. What is needed is something which will be adequate for every day (*according to the number of the days*), which will be lifelong and not merely passing (*in life*), which can cope with the inherent futility of the earthly realm (his vain life), and the brevity of man (compared to a *shadow*, as in 8:13). *Who know ...?* is followed by *Who can tell man ...?* (cf. 3:21f.). The two types of

1. Gen. 2:19,20

2. Rom. 9:20

question indicate a double problem. The generality of men have no wisdom in themselves (*Who knows ...?*); nor can others easily be found to help (*Who can tell ...?*). As Kidner puts it: 'He is left with no absolute values to live for ("what is good?"); not even any practical certainties ("what will be?") to plan for.' Like the Mosaic law (*cf.* Gal. 3:22), the Preacher is slamming every door except the door of faith."

C. Suffering and Sin 7:1 – 8:1

In introducing this section, Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, states: "The proverbial units of this section deal with aspects of life that anger or infuriate. The early proverbs deal with death or suffering (7:1-4, 7, 10, 14). Seven proverbs in 7:1-3, 5, 8, 10 are comparisons involving the words 'better than,' a common proverbial style. Since the Preacher was a collector of proverbs (12:9f.), these may be fragmentary collection of 'Better than' proverbs, though the subject-matter provides a fundamental unity. First the reader is shown the possible instructiveness of sufferings (1-6), then the dangers of trials, compromise, impatience, anger, discontent (7-10). Wisdom is indispensable (11f.); life is under the hand of God (13f.). Thus the first half of ch.7 follows up the theme of Ecclesiastes as a whole with the question: Will the life of faith survive hard and troublesome times when the 'good old days' have gone and the 'days of adversity' come? The second half of the chapter moves from the crookedness of life (13) to that of mankind (29). Basic questions touching the origin, universality, inequity and perverseness of evil are posed in a mixture of factual statement and exhortation, urging also the need for wisdom which is so rare and remote (19, 23f.) and concluding in 8:1 with a further appeal for wisdom."

i. Instruction from sufferings 7:1-6

- 1 *A good name is better than fine perfume, and the day of death better than the day of birth.*
- 2 *It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of every man; the living should take this to heart.*
- 3 *Sorrow is better than laughter, because a sad face is good for the heart.*
- 4 *The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure.*
- 5 *It is better to heed a wise man's rebuke than to listen to the song of fools.*
- 6 *Like the crackling of thorns under the pot, so is the laughter of fools. This too is meaningless.*

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary comments on this section: "To have a good name, that is, a good reputation (*cf.* Prov 3:4; 22:1), is better than having the luxury of much fine perfume. An honorable life makes a man's day of death better than his day of birth, for at the end he knows he has made something out of life."

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, observes about the opening verse: "There is no need to hold that the first half of v.1 is 'a proverbial phrase which has no relation to the content,' ... or a conventional proverb followed by an unconventional deduction We may translate: 'As a name is better than oil, so the day of death is better than the day of birth,' thus avoiding the anomaly of a dangling irrelevance. The first half may well have been a popular saying; if so, the Preacher is comparing his point (1b) with a well-known distinction (1a; *cf.* Song 1:3). Hebrew comparisons often put two statements alongside each other leaving out 'As ... so' (*cf.* Pr. 17:3). The word-play of name (*šēm*) and oil (*šemen*) is preserved in Williams' 'Better is name than nard' and Martin's 'Fair fame is better than fine perfume.' In Israel a name was no mere label but intended to express an underlying nature. What is in view is not simply a good name (which may be undeserved), but a reputation which flows from character. Such a name was highly valued; even God at the time of the exodus 'got himself a name' (Ne. 9:10). As inner character is more crucial than outer fragrance,

so is the funeral, not the rowdy birthday party, that poses the ultimate questions about life the Preacher is pressing. This severe statement arises not from despondency but from sheer realism.”

The Pulpit Commentary also suggests a translation that reflects the wordplay of the Hebrew: “Better is good favor than good flavor.” The commentary states furthermore: “We employ a metaphor like that in the clause when we speak of a man’s reputation having a good or ill odor; and the Hebrews said of ill fame that it stank in the nostrils (... Genesis 34:30; ... Exodus 5:21; see, on the opposite side, ... 2 Corinthians 2:15)”

An interpretation that circumvents the tension of the limping comparison between the two thoughts would be to place the Teacher’s observation at the time of the person’s death. The “good name” is then the reputation the deceased leaves behind, which is mentioned at the memorial service, and the “fine perfume” is that which is used to embalm the body. The “fine perfume” is then a status symbol for the rich. The dead man could afford to expensive embalment, which covers up his bad reputation. It is true that in modern Western society the dead man’s faults and failures are rarely mentioned at the time of death. But that may not have been so in ancient times. In Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, Antony begins his eulogy of the murdered emperor with the words: “Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears; I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him. The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft entered with their bones. So let it be with Caesar.”

Few people will agree with the Teacher’s assessment that “the day of death is better than the day of birth.” This amounts to saying that death is better than life. Yet, when we take a closer look at the thought the Teacher’s wants to impress, we understand that the point he is making is a valid one. His main concern is the condition of the human heart. The heart of the fool seeks pleasure in order to avoid facing the reality of life. The realization that we all stand at death’s door can bring about a sense of reality. It has been said that nothing clears the head like a hanging. Jeremiah’s statement comes to mind: “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?”¹ The thought of death serves to give us a sense of accountability. The “good name” has in it the suggestion of a character that has come to grips with its own sinful tendencies. To cover up the stench of sin by the use of perfume does not help in the presence of God. It is only when we have been cleansed by the blood of Christ that our name is changed and we acquire a good testimony. As the Apostle Paul writes to the Corinthians: “For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task?”² When God smells the aroma of Christ in us, people will also.

Although death has so far only been presented as an equalizer and as the only visible end of life, there is in these verses a glimmer of hope. After all, if death is presented as “better” it cannot merely be the end of everything.

In the Hebrew text of v.6 there is a play-on-words which is lost in most translations. The Hebrew word for “thorns” and for “pot” is almost identical: *cirah* or *ciyrah*. Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, writes about this: “The pun ‘Like the sound of *sîrîm* (thorns) under the *sîr* (pot, cauldron)’ is caught by Moffatt’s *Like nettles under kettles*. Thorns were rapidly burning, easily extinguishable fuel in the ancient world (Ps. 58:9). Thus fools’ laughter is a sudden flame, a fine display of sparks, accompanied by plenty of noise, but soon spent and easily put out. The last phrase notes that the superficiality of the *fool* is part of life’s vanity, which elsewhere is said to characterize both the environment of man (1:22ff.) and man himself (6:12).”

ii. Four dangers 7:7-10

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1. Jer. 17:9
 2. II Cor. 2:15,16

7 Extortion turns a wise man into a fool, and a bribe corrupts the heart.

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

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

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

The Hebrew text of v.7 reads literally: "Surely oppression makes a wise man mad; and a gift destroys the heart." *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* states: "This has been translated with good show of reason, 'Surely oppression shall give luster to a wise man: but a gift corrupteth the heart.' The chief difference here is in the word *y-howleel*, which, from the root *haalal*, signifies to glister, irradiate, as well as to move briskly, to be mad, furious, in a rage; and certainly the former meaning suits this place best. We cannot think that the wise man-he that is truly religious, (for this is its meaning in the language of Solomon,) can be made mad by any kind of oppression; but as he trusts in God, so in patience he possesses his soul."

The Pulpit Commentary observes: "The verse begins with *ki*, which usually introduces a reason for what has preceded; but the difficulty in finding the connection has led to various explanations and evasions. The Authorized Version boldly separates the verse from what has gone before, and makes a new paragraph beginning with 'surely.'" Agreeing with this observation about the problem in connection with the word *ki*, Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, adds: "Thus vv.7-10 introduce the less beneficial effects of trials. Oppression 'makes a man mad' and may cause even a wise man to lose his head (cf. Dt. 28:33f.). Similarly the whole inner life of man may be brought to spiritual ruin by the temptations that belong to an oppressive regime. To secure a perfect parallelism some have understood *oppression* (NIV *extortion*) to refer to the exercise of it rather than the suffering under it (JB *laughter ... merriment* follows an amended text). The Preacher would thus be urging that the 'very exercise of oppression tends to infatuate and bewilder' Alternatively the Hebrew word (*ôðeq*) has been taken to mean 'bribe' or 'slander' ... this securing a synonymous parallelism. Verses 1-14, however, deal with the suffering of oppression, not its exercise. It is better, therefore, to see here not synonymous parallelism (taking the thought further). The first line, then, speaks of a pressure which oppression may exert on the faithful; the second goes further and provides an example of how a wise man may be 'made mad' by another kind of folly."

The Hebrew text of v.8 reads literally: "Better [is] the end of a thing than the beginning thereof: [and] better [is] the patient in spirit than the proud in spirit." This sounds like "All's well that ends well." But the Teacher does not mention whether the end is good or bad. *The New Living Translation* renders this as "Finishing is better than starting. Patience is better than pride."

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, observes here: "The second warning concerns patience. NAB *end of speech* takes a Hebrew word (*dâbâr*) in its other meaning, but end of a thing fits better and has the assent of most translators. In a number of passages *end* has the sense of 'outcome,' 'end-product' (cf. Pr. 14:12) and this is suitable here. The proverb implies that times of trial may be purposeful, that they are confined to limited seasons, that the end-product makes them worth while (cf. Jas. 1:2-4). Thus the reader is invited to grasp the hope of an 'outcome' to trials and to face them accordingly. This will enable him to overcome premature complaint, boasting or arrogance and thus be *patient in spirit*. The antithesis *patient ... proud* suggest that patience is an aspect of humility and impatience a proud irritation at God's ways with men (Pr. 16:5)."

The Adam Clarke's Commentary comments on this verse, stating: "Dr. Byrom gives good advice on such a subject:

'With patient mind thy course of duty run:
God nothing does, nor suffers to be done,
But thou wouldst do thyself, couldst thou but see
The end of all events, as well as HE.'

I may add, in the words of our paraphrastist:

‘Wait the result, nor ask with frantic rage
 Why God permits such things. His ways, though now
 Involved in clouds and darkness, will appear
 All right, when from thine eyes the mist is clear’d.
 Till then, to learn submission to his will
 More wisdom shows, than vainly thus to attempt
 Exploring what thou canst not comprehend,
 And God for wisest ends thinks fit to hide.’”

The question remains whether the Teacher makes the statement as a continuation of the negative insinuation that death is better than life, or if he makes us look at the results of our efforts, the harvest of the fruit of our labor. He leaves the answer to this question dangling before us as a mind teaser. The fact that “patience” is put in opposition to “pride” suggests that, more than showing us the light at the end of the tunnel, the Teacher wants to remind us that God is more interested in our attitude than our achievements. The words of the Apostle Peter come to mind, who, speaking about trials, writes: “These have come so that your faith — of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire — may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.”¹

If we become angry with God because of the troubles we go through in life, we miss the purpose for which they come our way. Faith means trusting God in the dark.

The Adam Clarke’s Commentary observes about the phrase “Why were the old days better than these?”: “This is a common saying; and it is as foolish as it is common. There is no weight nor truth in it; but men use it to excuse their crimes, and the folly of their conduct. ‘In former times, say they, men might be more religious, use more self-denial, be more exemplary.’ This is all false. In former days men were wicked as they are now, and religion was unfashionable: God also is the same now as he was then; as just, as merciful, as ready to help: and there is no depravity in the age that will excuse your crimes, your follies, and your carelessness. Among the oriental proverbs I find the following: ‘Many say, This is a corrupt age. This mode of speaking is not just; it is not the age that is corrupt, but the men of the age.’”

G. K. Chesterton once wrote a letter to the editor of a newspaper: “Dear Sirs, Regarding your question: ‘What is wrong with this world?’ I am, faithfully yours, G. K. Chesterton.”

What makes people ask the question is usually the fact that memory has a tendency to distort. Having spent part of my youth during World War II under Nazi occupation, I cannot imagine any period in my life that could be worse. “The good old days” were for me the most horrible episode imaginable.

Yet, the human tendency seems to be to idealize the past, conveniently forgetting the trouble. *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “In yearning again for the fleshpots of Egypt, the Israelites forgot the bondage and misery which were the accompaniments of those sensual pleasures.” In remembering the fleshpots and garlic of Egypt, the Israelites forgot the murder of their infant sons.

We do well to remember the words of Jesus, who, promising us His peace, said: “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”²

iii. The need of wisdom 7:11-12

11 Wisdom, like an inheritance, is a good thing and benefits those who see the sun.

12 Wisdom is a shelter as money is a shelter, but the advantage of knowledge is this: that wisdom preserves the life of its possessor.

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1. I Peter 1:7
 2. John 16:33

Michael A. Eaton, in Ecclesiastes, believing that the inheritance refers to the Promised Land, comments on these verses: (11). “The Hebrew could be translated ‘Wisdom is good with an inheritance’ or ‘... as good as an inheritance’ (Heb. *`im* meaning ‘in common with,’ ‘like’ ‘as ... as’ is found in Ps. 73:5b; Ec. 2:16 and elsewhere). In the first case the thought is that family wealth is desirable – the Bible never sees any inherent blessing in poverty – but unaccompanied by wisdom it will not sustain in times of adversity. If ‘as ... as’ is the right translation, wisdom is being compared to an inheritance: it comes supremely from the Lord (cf. Dt. 4:21), is greatly to be desired (cf. Pr. 3:13-18), and should be the inalienable possession of the people of God. (12). This should be translated: ‘To be in the shadow of wisdom is like being in the shadow of silvers; and knowledge is an advantage; wisdom keeps the life of him who has it.’ To be ‘in the shadow of silver’ refers to the protective power of wealth. Like riches, knowledge and wisdom protect, but at a deeper level.”

Interestingly, the readers’ attention is drawn here to the sun instead of the focus being on things “under the sun.” And as it had been stated about money that “you cannot take it with you,” wisdom is here represented as something that can cross the great divide into eternity.

The Pulpit Commentary states: “The inheritance spoken of is a hereditary one; the man who is ‘rich with ancestral wealth’ is enabled to employ his wisdom to good purpose, his position adding weight to his words and actions, and relieving him from the low pursuit of moneymaking. Many commentators, thinking such a sentiment alien from the context, render the particle *`im*- not ‘with,’ but ‘as’ ‘Wisdom is [as] good as an inheritance’ This is putting wisdom on rather a low platform, and one would have expected to read some such aphorism as ‘Wisdom is better than rubies’ (... Proverbs 8:11), if Koheleth had intended to make any such comparison. It appears then most expedient to take *im* in the sense of ‘moreover,’ ‘as well as,’ ‘and’ (comp. ... 1 Samuel 17:42, ‘ruddy, and (*ira*) of a fair countenance’). ‘Wisdom is good, and an inheritance is good’; both are good, but the advantages of the former, as ver. 12 intimates, far outweigh those of the latter.” It is true that, generally speaking, the words of people with money weigh heavier than the speech of the penniless, regardless of the presence of wisdom.

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary comments on v.12: “The excellency of knowledge (is, that) wisdom giveth life to them that have it. Or, as the Chaldaic, Septuagint, Syriac, and Arabic, ‘the excellency of the knowledge of wisdom giveth life’ - i.e., life in the highest sense, here and hereafter (Prov 3:18; John 17:3; 2 Peter 1:3). But the Hebrew accent supports the English version. Wisdom (religion) cannot be lost, as money can. It shields one in adversity, as well as prosperity; money, only in prosperity. The question in Eccl 7:10 implies a want of it.” Solomon’s suggestion “that wisdom preserves the life of its possessor” becomes a prophecy of New Testament truth if we see it in the light of Paul’s statement: “It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God — that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.”¹

iv. Life under the hand of God 7:13-14

13 Consider what God has done: Who can straighten what he has made crooked?

14 When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider: God has made the one as well as the other. Therefore, a man cannot discover anything about his future.

The Teacher makes it sound as if God is responsible for the evil that is in the world. A superficial glance at some biblical truth may suggest this. Job’s words to his wife: “Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?” seem to affirm this. Amos asks the question: “When disaster comes to a city, has not the Lord caused it?”² And when God called Moses, He seemed to take responsibility for Moses’ speech impediment,

1. I Cor. 1:30

saying: “Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the Lord?”¹ All this seems to contradict James’ assurance that “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.”²

Michael A. Eaton’s comment in *Ecclesiastes*, on v.13 states the issue but does not answer the question it evokes. We read: “This echoes 1:15; crookedness of the world, which is being expounded throughout, is not mere ‘fate.’ It is subject to God’s will (cf. Rom. 8:20). We may wish to quarrel with it, but we can effect no change in the basic structure of things.” But this leaves the question whether God must be seen as the author of evil hanging in midair. Our whole human nature rebels against the thought that God could be evil, or wants it to exist. A French philosopher’s conclusion was: “If there is a God he is the devil!” The only natural reaction to such statements would be atheism.

The Pulpit Comment appears to move in the right direction for finding a satisfying interpretation, without, however, achieving its goal. We read: “True wisdom is shown by submission to the inevitable. In all that happens one ought to recognize God’s work and God’s ordering, and man’s impotence. *For who can make that straight, which he hath made crooked?* The things which God hath made crooked are the anomalies, the crosses, the difficulties, which meet us in life. Some would include bodily deformities, which seems to be a piece of unnecessary literalism. Thus the Septuagint ... ‘Who will be able to straighten him whom God has distorted?’ and the Vulgate ... ‘No one can amend him whom he hath despised.’ The thought goes back to what was said in ... Ecclesiastes 1:15, ‘That which is crooked cannot be made straight;’ and in ... Ecclesiastes 6:10, man ‘cannot contend with him that is mightier than he.’ ‘As for the wondrous works of the Lord,’ says Ben-Sirs, ‘there may be nothing taken from them, neither may anything be put unto them, neither can the ground of them be found out’ (Ecclus. 18:6). We cannot arrange events according to our wishes or expectations; therefore not only is placid acquiescence a necessary duty, but the wise man will endeavor to accommodate himself to existing circumstances.”

The only thing God could be “blamed for,” if “blamed” is the word to use, is that He endowed His creatures with a free will. The only reason for this, as far as our limited understanding can comprehend this, is that love is a choice and God created living beings who He wanted to express love. The risky turn-side of this is that we all, humans and angels have the option of choosing good or evil, life or death. The crookedness the Teacher speaks about is the result of the wrong choice, first Satan’s and afterward ours. The crookedness is of our making and we are unable to straighten it ourselves. We read that Jesus said: “‘It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.’ When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, ‘Who then can be saved?’ Jesus looked at them and said, ‘With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.’”³ We may not be able to straighten out our own crookedness, but God can.

These verses speak about more than the hardships of life; they point to the purpose of trials and temptations, although this is not specifically stated. When God explained to Moses that Moses’ speech impediment was His doing, He also made him understand that he was kept that way because of the extraordinary task that God would allow him to perform. Moses found out what Jesus explained to His disciples to be the secret of His life. He said to Philip: “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work.”⁴ No one can read Moses’

2. Am. 3:6

1. Ex. 4:11

2. James 1:17

3. Matt. 19:24-26

speeches in Deuteronomy and guess that this eloquence came from a man who couldn't express himself clearly. The Apostle Paul has given the best definition of this by saying: "We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us."¹

The Adam Clarke's Commentary wisely observes: "God has balanced prosperity and adversity against each other; and were it not so, how many would put the former in the place of God himself!"

There is a blessing in the fact that "a man cannot discover anything about his future," specifically in the context of adversity. The fear of tomorrow can be paralyzing. We ought to have faith that God, who has seen us through yesterday, will be the same when we face tomorrow's issues.

Jesus says: "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."²

v. Dangers along the way 7:15-18

15 In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these: a righteous man perishing in his righteousness, and a wicked man living long in his wickedness.

16 Do not be overrighteous, neither be overwise — why destroy yourself?

17 Do not be overwicked, and do not be a fool — why die before your time?

18 It is good to grasp the one and not let go of the other. The man who fears God will avoid all [extremes].

The two words that stick out like thorns in these verses are "overrighteous" and "overwicked." They are the composite rendering of two Hebrew words *tsaddiyq rabah* and *rasha` rabah*; *tsaddiyq* meaning "righteous," *rasha`* "wrong," and *rabah* "increase." *Rabah* is found for the first time in Scripture in "So God created the great creatures of the sea and every living and moving thing with which the water teems, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them and said, 'Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth.'"³

We have no problem accepting that someone can abound in wickedness, but how could one be too righteous? There may be some "tongue-in-cheek" element in the Teacher's statement here, which is meant to catch our attention. As far as that is concerned, the author reaches his goal quite effectively. The solution to the apparent contradiction is probably in the phrase "this meaningless life of mine," Hebrew: "the days of my vanity." The Hebrew word *hebel*, "vanity," is the keyword in this book. As we have seen earlier, the first time it is used in Scripture, is in the context of idolatry: "They made me jealous by what is no God and angered me with their *worthless idols*."⁴

4. John 14:9,10

1. II Cor. 4:7

2. Matt. 6:28-34

3. Gen. 1:21,22

4. Deut. 32:21

The Pulpit Commentary observes: “The exhortation has been variously interpreted to warn against too scrupulous observance of ritual and ceremonial religion, or the mistaken piety which neglects all mundane affairs, or the Pharisaical spirit which is bitter in condemning others who fall short of one’s own standard. Cox will have it that the advice signifies that a prudent man will not be very righteous, since he will gain nothing by it, nor very wicked, as he will certainly shorten his life by such conduct. But really Koheleth is condemning the tendency to immoderate asceticism which had begun to show itself in his day — a rigorous, prejudiced, indiscreet manner of life and conduct which made piety offensive, and afforded no real aid to the cause of religion. This arrogant system virtually dictated the laws by which Providence should be governed, and found fault with divinely ordered circumstances if they did not coincide with its professors’ preconceived opinions. Such religionism might well be called being ‘righteous over much.’ *Neither make thyself over wise; ... Vulgate ... show not thyself too wise; i.e. do not indulge in speculations about God’s dealings, estimating them according to your own predilections, questioning the wisdom of his moral government. Against such perverse speculation St. Paul argues (... Romans 9:19, etc.). ‘Thou wilt say unto me, Why doth he still find fault? For who withstandeth his will? Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why didst thou make me thus?’ A good principle carried to excess may bring evil results.*”

Barnes’ Notes may have the best explanation yet of this apparent contradiction. We read: “The meaning may be best explained by a paraphrase. Solomon states how the wise man should regard the ‘crooked (Eccl 7:13) work of God’ when it bears upon him. He says in effect, ‘Do not think that thou couldst alter the two instances (described in Eccl 7:15) of such crooked work so as to make it straight, that thou art more righteous or more wise than He is Who ordained these events. To set up thy judgment in opposition to His would imply an excess of wickedness and folly, deserving the punishment of premature death. But rather it is good for thee to grasp these seeming anomalies; if thou ponder them they will tend to impress on thee that fear of God which is a part of wisdom, and will guide thee safely through all the perplexities of this life’ (compare Eccl 8:12-13). The suggestion that these verses are intended to advocate a middle course between sin and virtue is at variance with the whole tenor of the book.”

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary adds: “There cannot be over much of the righteousness which is by faith. But there is over much of the righteousness that consists in punctiliousness as to external ordinances, when these are substituted for ‘the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, faith, and the love of God’ (Matt 23:23; Luke 11:42); and when they blind a man to his utter guiltiness.”

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, says about being “overrighteous” and “overwicked”: “The Preacher holds that there is no righteous man (7:20). ‘Do not be greatly righteous’ must be taken ironically and must refer to the way a person thinks about himself and presents himself. The translation *too* or *overmuch* goes somewhat beyond the Hebrew, which means ‘greatly’ and does not express the judgment implicit in ‘too great’ or ‘overmuch.’ This view is confirmed in the next line where the Hebrew for *Do not make yourself overwise* (RSV) contains a Hebrew hithpael which may mean ‘to play the wise man’ (cf. Nu. 16:13 ‘play the part of a prince’; and 2 Sa. 13:5 ‘pretend to be ill’). Play-acting righteousness delights in the reputation of wisdom (cf. Mt. 23:7). The contrary danger is capitulation to evil. *Greatly* (RSV) *overmuch* does not imply that wickedness in moderation is acceptable! To have omitted *overmuch*, apart from breaking the parallel in v.16, would have contradicted vv.20, 29. The Preacher recognizes wickedness as a fact of human experience. The right life walks the path between two extremes, shunning self-righteousness, but not allowing one’s native wickedness to run its own course. The end-product of wickedness run riot may be an untimely death (Ps. 55:23).”

vi. The need of wisdom 7:19-22

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

20 *There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins.*

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

The Hebrew of v.19 reads literally: “Wisdom strengthens the wise more than ten [men] who are in the city.” The Hebrew word rendered “strengthen” is *ʾazaz* which means “to be stout,” or “be strong.” We find it in the verse “The Spirit of the Lord came upon him, so that he became Israel’s judge and went to war. The Lord gave Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram into the hands of Othniel, who *overpowered* him.”¹

The Teacher contrasts two kinds of power in this verse, the natural human clout of those elected to an office, who exercise authority over those under them, and the power that comes from a relationship with God. The wise man may lack the first kind of power and consequently he does not influence the course of human affairs, but he has power where it counts. Humanly speaking he may go unobserved, but God uses him for the execution of His divine plans. The words of the Apostle Paul come to mind: “For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength. Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things — and the things that are not — to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.”² And “The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.”³

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, observes about vv.19 and 20: “Both general attitude (*fear*) and detailed application (*wisdom*) are required if the right path between moral legalism and moral indifference is to be maintained ... Either way, the meaning is that wisdom in the fear of God may be greater than the collective wisdom of a group of experienced leaders. Power from within is needed, more than advice from without. The argument of vv.16-19 is brought to a climax echoing Solomon’s words in 1 Kings 8:46. It is put emphatically (with the Heb. emphatic *kî, surely*); it is a universal truth (*not a righteous man on earth*); it covers sins of omission (*does good*) and commission (*never sins*).”

The advice of v.21 is intriguing. There are two important points the Teacher wants to make here: the relative value of the spoken word and the intrinsic honor of being human. To begin with the latter, most of us take the approval of our fellowmen quite seriously. We want to be appreciated by others and seeking the honor of our peers is an important feature of life. Actually we pay more attention to the approval of others than to the approval of God. Jesus said to the people of His time: “How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God?”⁴ The main reason we ought to honor one another as human beings is that we have all been created in the image of God. Failing to recognize this in our fellowmen amounts to belittling God Himself.

The other point is the way we use words. Compared to the Word of God our human speech seems virtually devoid of meaning. The Word is God; it is His powerful arm of creation. Our speech consists of a string of syllables, most of which are used to fill empty spaces. We do not create when we utter sound. It is about this flippant use of the gift God has given to mankind that the Teacher issues his warning here. The more we fill our lives with the Word of God the less attention we will pay to what man says. God’s Word is truth; many human words are lies.

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1. Judg. 3:10
 2. I Cor. 1:25-29
 3. II Cor. 10:4,5
 4. John 5:44

In vv.21 and 22 the Teacher warns against the consequence of listening too closely to what people say. If we do, we may hear people say things about us that are less than flattering. The Hebrew word for “curse” in “you may hear your servant cursing you” is *qalal*, which can mean “to curse,” but it has the primary meaning of “making light of something.” As such we find it in the verse: “They repeated these words to David. But David said, ‘Do you think it is a *small* matter to become the king’s son-in-law? I’m only a poor man and little known.’”¹

Matthew Henry’s Commentary comments here: “Vex not thyself at men’s peevish reflections upon thee, or suspicions of thee, but be as a deaf man that hears not, Ps 38:13,14. Be not solicitous or inquisitive to know what people say of thee; if they speak well of thee, it will feed thy pride, if ill, it will stir up thy passion. See therefore that thou approve thyself to God and thy own conscience, and then heed not what men say of thee. Hearkeners, we say, seldom hear good of themselves; if thou heed every word that is spoken, perhaps thou wilt hear thy own servant curse thee when he thinks thou dost not hear him; thou wilt be told that he does, and perhaps told falsely, if thou have thy ear open to tale-bearers, Prov 29:12.”

Jesus compares this to murder, saying: “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.”² The Apostle John adds to this: “Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him.”³

vii. The inaccessibility of wisdom 7:23-24

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

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes* writes: “The argument of Ecclesiastes demands that we refer *That which is* not only to all that exists (... ‘all that is come into being), but also to the very way in which it is constituted by God. It is all that exists as God controls and decrees it that is beyond the Preacher’s comprehension. God appoints man’s life and environment (cf. 1:13; 3:10f., etc). As Moffatt puts it: *Reality is beyond my grasp*, says the Preacher. *Who can find ...?* is a rhetorical question. No-one can grasp God’s plan and purpose.”

What catches the eye is the oxymoron in these verses. The Teacher uses his wisdom to prove that wisdom cannot be obtained! We cannot really contrast human wisdom here with the divine gift of wisdom, since Solomon did receive his wisdom from God. When Solomon ascended the throne of Israel, he prayed for “a discerning heart” and God said to him: “I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be.”⁴ But like the rich young ruler who searched for eternal life and asked Jesus how to find it,⁵ so Solomon recognizes here the limitations of his wisdom and searches for the fullness of it.

The Apostle Paul answers Solomon’s question, stating that Christ is our wisdom and that we only find full understanding of God’s mysteries in a relationship with Him. Paul writes: “My purpose is that they

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1. I Sam. 18:23
 2. Matt. 5:21,22
 3. I John 3:15
 4. I Kings 3:7-12
 5. Luke 18:18-25

may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge,”¹ and “It is because of [God] that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God — that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.”²

The Matthew Henry's Commentary observes: “His searches were industrious. God had given him a capacity for knowledge above any; he set up with a great stock of wisdom; he had the largest opportunities of improving himself that ever any man had; and, (1.) He resolved, if it were possible, to gain his point: *I said, I will be wise*. He earnestly desired it as highly valuable; he fully designed it as that which he looked upon to be attainable; he determined not to sit down short of it, Prov 18:1. Many are not wise because they never said they would be so, being indifferent to it; but Solomon set it up for the mark he aimed at. When he made trial of sensual pleasures, he still thought to *acquaint his heart with wisdom* (ch. 2:3), and not to be diverted from the pursuits of that; but perhaps he did not find it so easy a thing as he imagined to keep up his correspondence with wisdom, while he addicted himself so much to his pleasures. However, his will was good; he said, *I will be wise*. And that was not all: (2.) He resolved to spare no pains (v. 25): *‘I applied my heart; I and my heart turned every way; I left no stone unturned, no means untried, to compass what I had in view. I set myself to know, and to search, and to seek out wisdom, to accomplish myself in all useful learning, philosophy, and divinity.’* If he had not thus closely applied himself to study, it would have been but a jest for him to say, *I will be wise*, for those that will attain the end must take the right way. Solomon was a man of great quickness, and yet, instead of using that (with many) as an excuse for slothfulness, he pressed it upon himself as an inducement to diligence, and the easier he found it to master a good notion the more intent he would be that he might be master of the more good notions. Those that have the best parts should take the greatest pains, as those that have the largest stock should trade most. He applied himself not only to know what lay on the surface, but to search what lay hidden out of the common view and road; nor did he search a little way, and then give it over because he did not presently find what he searched for, but he *sought it out*, went to the bottom of it; nor did he aim to know things only, but the reasons of things, that he might give an account of them.”

The Teacher reflects Job’s search for wisdom, which made him compose the following beautiful poem:

“There is a mine for silver and a place where gold is refined. Iron is taken from the earth, and copper is smelted from ore. Man puts an end to the darkness; he searches the farthest recesses for ore in the blackest darkness. Far from where people dwell he cuts a shaft, in places forgotten by the foot of man; far from men he dangles and sways. The earth, from which food comes, is transformed below as by fire; sapphires come from its rocks, and its dust contains nuggets of gold. No bird of prey knows that hidden path, no falcon’s eye has seen it. Proud beasts do not set foot on it, and no lion prowls there. Man’s hand assaults the flinty rock and lays bare the roots of the mountains. He tunnels through the rock; his eyes see all its treasures. He searches the sources of the rivers and brings hidden things to light. But where can wisdom be found? Where does understanding dwell? Man does not comprehend its worth; it cannot be found in the land of the living. The deep says, ‘It is not in me’; the sea says, ‘It is not with me.’ It cannot be bought with the finest gold, nor can its price be weighed in silver. It cannot be bought with the gold of Ophir, with precious onyx or sapphires. Neither gold nor crystal can compare with it, nor can it be had for jewels of gold. Coral and jasper are not worthy of mention; the price of wisdom is beyond rubies. The topaz of Cush cannot compare with it; it cannot be bought with pure gold. Where then does wisdom come from? Where does understanding dwell? It is hidden from the eyes of every living thing, concealed even from the birds of the air. Destruction and Death say, ‘Only a rumor of it has reached our ears.’ God understands the way to it and he alone knows where it dwells, for he views the ends of the earth and sees everything under the heavens.

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1. Col. 2:2,3
 2. I Cor. 1:30

When he established the force of the wind and measured out the waters, when he made a decree for the rain and a path for the thunderstorm, then he looked at wisdom and appraised it; he confirmed it and tested it. And he said to man, ‘The fear of the Lord — that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding.’”¹

viii. The sinfulness of man 7:25-29

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

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

27 "Look," says the Teacher, "this is what I have discovered: "Adding one thing to another to discover the scheme of things—

28 while I was still searching but not finding — I found one [upright] man among a thousand, but not one [upright] woman among them all.

29 This only have I found: God made mankind upright, but men have gone in search of many schemes."

“The scheme of things” is the translation of the Hebrew word *cheshbown*, meaning “contrivance,” or “device.” The word is only found in *Ecclesiastes*, one more time in this chapter (v.27) and another in *Ecclesiastes* 9:10, where it is rendered “planning.” Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, explains: “RSV *the sum of things* derives from a word meaning ‘to reckon’ in both the mathematical and intellectual sense, and translates it as ‘though’ in 9:10. Here the point is that the Preacher has pondered long and hard an enigma of human character. What did it all mount to?”

A superficial glance at these verses could lead to the conclusion that the Teacher was a chauvinist male, despising all women. But, as Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, observes: “Any accusation of misogyny misses the Preacher’s point, as we see from the contrasting picture of married love in 9:9.” The verse referred to reads: “Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun— all your meaningless days. For this is your lot in life and in your toilsome labor under the sun.”

The woman the Teacher has in mind is the one described in Proverbs as a prostitute, who ensnares gullible young men.² Although King Solomon probably never indulged in prostitution, he had enough understanding to speak from experience. We could consider the text before us as a confession of sorts, although there is no historical record of the king’s repentance. Solomon’s love-life became his undoing and that of the nation of Israel. His polygamy led him to spiritual idolatry of which prostitution is the physical expression.³

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary observes about these verses: “*And I find more bitter than death* - (Prov 7:26-27; 9:18.) ‘I find’ that of all my sinful follies, none has been so ruinous a snare in seducing me from God as idolatrous women (1 Kings 11:3-4; Prov 5:3-4). Since ‘God’s favor is better than life,’ she who seduces from God is ‘more bitter than death.’ [One Bible scholar] allegorizes ‘the woman’ as an ideal personage, representing ‘earthly, sensual, devilish wisdom,’ in contrast to ‘the wisdom from above’ (James 3:15,17), answering to Koheleth, the Assembling one, an ideal Female. Hence, here only in the book Qoheleth is connected with the feminine verb (Eccl 7:27). Everywhere else the Assembling one is incarnate in the person of Solomon in the masculine. The strange woman answers to ‘philosophy and vain deceit after the tradition of men’ (Col 2:8; cf. 1 Tim 6:20; contrast Prov 2:16-17 with Jer 3:4,20). I

1. Job 28:1-28

2. See Prov. 6:24; 7:10-27.

3. I Kings 11:3,4

prefer the literal sense primarily; secondarily, the literal harlot is in the wider application designed by the Spirit to be representative of all that seduce from God, the true Husband of the Church, whether worldly gain, pleasure, or wisdom so called. Compare Rev 2:20, the symbolical Jezebel.”

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, observes furthermore about v.26: “The Preacher sets out his conclusions; first, about a particular kind of woman. She is *more bitter than death*, her personality (*heart*) is dominated by the instinct of the hunter (*snare and nets*), and she is forceful in her attentions (*hands as prison fetters*). The wisdom to perceive the snare and traps is given only to one who pleases God (*cf. 2:26*).”

The Pulpit Commentary, in an effort to rehabilitate the female gender in general, has the following interesting comment on these verses: “If Solomon himself were speaking, he had indeed a bitter experience of the sin and misery into which women lead their victims (see ... 1 Kings 11:1, 4, 11). It may be thought that Koheleth refers here especially to ‘the strange woman’ of ... Proverbs 2:16, etc.; 5:3, etc.; but in ver. 28 he speaks of the whole sex without qualification; so that we must conclude that he had a very low opinion of them. It is no ideal personage whom he is introducing; it is not a personification of vice or folly; but woman in her totality, such as he knew her to be in Oriental courts and homes, denied her proper position, degraded, uneducated, all natural affections crushed or undeveloped, the plaything of her lord, to be flung aside at any moment. It is not surprising that Koheleth’s impression of the female sex should be unfavorable. He is not singular in such an opinion. One might fill a large page with proverbs and gnomes uttered in disparagement of woman by men of all ages and countries. Men, having the making of such apothegms, have used their license unmercifully; if the maligned sex had equal liberty, the tables might have been reversed. But, really, in this as in other cases the mean is the safest; and practically those who have given the darkest picture of women have not been slow to recognize the brighter side. If, for instance, the Book of Proverbs paints the adulteress and the harlot in the soberest, most appalling colors, the same book affords us such a sketch of the virtuous matron as is unequalled for vigor, truth, and high appreciation. And if, as in our present chapter, Koheleth shows a bitter feeling against the evil side of woman’s nature, he knows how to value the comfort of married life (... Ecclesiastes 4:8), and to look upon a good wife as one who makes a man’s home happy (... Ecclesiastes 9:9). Since the incarnation of our blessed Lord Jesus Christ, ‘the Seed of the woman,’ we have learned to regard woman in her true light, and to assign her that position to which she is entitled, giving honor unto her as the weaker vessel, and, at the same time, heir with us of the glorious hope and destiny of our renewed nature (... 1 Peter 3:7). *Whose heart is snares and nets*; more accurately, *who is snares, and nets in her heart*; Septuagint, ‘The woman who is a snare, and her heart nets’ ... The imagery is obvious (comp. ... Proverbs 5:4, 22: 7:22; 22:14; ... Habakkuk 1:15); the thoughts of the evil woman’s heart are nets, occupied in meditating how she may entrap and retain victims; and her outward look and words are snares that captivate the foolish.”

Reading v.28 we are tempted to dismiss Solomon as the greatest anti-feminist who ever existed. The verse is part of the Teacher’s scientific research that led him to examine different facets of human experience. The topic here is uprightness or integrity. The Hebrew word used is *yashar*, which is derived from a word meaning “straight.” The first time the word is used in Scripture is in the verse: “If you listen carefully to the voice of the Lord your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the Lord, who heals you.”¹ The Hebrew in that verse for “the Lord, who heals you” is *Yahweh rapha`*, making the phrase into a name of God.

The fact that Solomon limited his research to one thousand, if taken literally, suggests that he speaks about his harem of three hundred wives and seven hundred concubines. If this is true, we must conclude that the Teacher not only carried out his experiments in a limited circle, but also that the kind of uprightness he searched for was tainted by the kind of love he experienced in his marriages. Solomon’s love life can hardly be called marriage as God intended it between one man and one woman. We do not need to stretch our imagination to answer the question whether any of the women in Solomon’s life could really

1. Ex. 15:26

have loved him and be devoted to him as a woman in marriage ought to be. The circle of research also changes the definition of the word “uprightness.” It is not merely a characteristic of moral behavior, but an experience of oneness and unity of being one flesh and one soul. What Solomon searched for was a soul mate among his wives and he confessed that he failed to find one.

The question could be asked whose fault this was. It was Solomon who had decided to stretch the concept of marital fidelity to the limit in his gross polygamy. He searched among his wives for something he could not find in his own soul.

This leaves us with the question who the single male figure is among the thousand others. It could be the eunuch who had the charge of the king’s harem. He was upright in the sense that his physical condition made him immune to sexual temptation. The answer seems rather cheap. We could look at the statement as a prophecy regarding the Messiah. As *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* observes: “Jesus Christ alone of men fully realizes the perfect ideal of ‘man.’ ‘Chiefest among ten thousand’ (Song 5:10) Spiritual uprightness is an indispensable qualification for a right research after the wisdom in question. Solomon disqualified himself for it so long as he sinned with the strange women (Eccl 7:26).”

The Biblical Illustrator remarks about “Solomon’s estimate of woman: -- This sentence of Solomon has been often quoted to show the utter worthlessness of the female character. It is, however, an entirely worthless conclusion as regards woman when placed in her legitimate and appropriate sphere as the one sole companion of man’s life in love, cares and labors. As well might the tyrant who, by cruelty, has alienated his subjects, complain that he has failed to find loyal men, as the debauchee, who has subjected hundreds to his lust, that he had found no noble, virtuous woman. It is not thus that the commerce of love is carried on. Pearls are not to be exchanged for pebbles. The law of love which God has established is heart for heart; and the affections that are dissipated among a thousand objects must ever be without return of that which yet the soul seeks -- the undivided love. Of this fact Solomon seems to have had a dim perception when he gives those never-to-be-forgotten advises to the young man, to avoid the strange woman whose steps take hold on hell, and to live joyfully with the wife of his youth. It was not given to Solomon, wise as he was, to limn the picture of the virtuous woman, but to another king whose wisdom was derived from the inspiration of his mother. The words of Lemuel are well worthy of our attention, both as neutralizing the false impression produced by Solomon’s philosophy, and as showing what the true woman is (Prov 31:10-31).”

In his conclusion the Teacher goes back to the creation of man and God’s original intent for the person He created in His image as male and female. The verse emphasizes man’s sinful nature. What God made was good and perfect, but man separated himself from God and tries to live independently from his source “in search of many schemes.”

ix. Who is really wise? 8:1

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

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, observes here: “This verse belongs more to what precedes than to what follows, for it forms a fitting conclusion to proverbs which have appealed for wisdom in relation to suffering and sin; it is reminiscent of a similar final challenge at the end of Hosea (14:9). The Hebrew word translated *like* sometimes speaks of exact likeness to an ideal. It could be translated ‘Who is really wise ...?’. *Interpretation (pçser)* is the word well-known to students of the Qumran scrolls, where it is used of the distinctive out-of-context interpretations of the Old Testament by the Qumran community. Another form of the word (*pitron*) is used in Genesis of the interpretation of dreams (Gn. 40:5). Where, asks the Preacher, is the man who discerns his way through the problems detailed in 7:1-29, and who will interpret aright the mysteries of providence? The shining *face* generally speaks of favor (cf. Nu. 6:25). Here it speaks of the

wise man who is visibly gracious in his demeanor, and (as the next phrase says) whose gentleness is obvious in his facial expression (contrast Dt. 28:50; Dn. 8:23).”

D. Authority, Injustice and the Life of Faith 8:2-9:10

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, introduces this section with: “The justification for treating this as a single section in the Preacher’s mind is that the sequence of thought runs parallel to 1:2 – 3:22 ... He faces the grim realities of kingly authority (8:2-9) and the injustices of life (8:10-15), and perplexed with the enigma of life (8:16-17) and the ultimate certainty of death (9: 1-6), he again turns to a position of faith as the only remedy (9:7-10).”

i. Royal authority 8:2-8

2 Obey the king’s command, I say, because you took an oath before God.

3 Do not be in a hurry to leave the king’s presence. Do not stand up for a bad cause, for he will do whatever he pleases.

4 Since a king’s word is supreme, who can say to him, "What are you doing?"

5 Whoever obeys his command will come to no harm, and the wise heart will know the proper time and procedure.

6 For there is a proper time and procedure for every matter, though a man’s misery weighs heavily upon him.

7 Since no man knows the future, who can tell him what is to come?

8 No man has power over the wind to contain it; so no one has power over the day of his death. As no one is discharged in time of war, so wickedness will not release those who practice it.

The Pulpit Commentary states: “The warning implies that the writer was living under kingly, and indeed despotic, government, and it was the part of a wise man to exhibit cheerful obedience. Ben-Sira observes that wise men teach us how to serve great men (Ecclus. 8:8). Such conduct is not only prudent, but really a religious duty, even as the prophets counsel submission to Assyrian and Chaldean rulers (see ... Jeremiah 27:12; 29:7; ... Ezekiel 17:15). The liege lord, being God’s vicegerent, must be revered and obeyed. St. Paul, though he does not quote Ecclesiastes, may have had this passage in mind when he wrote (... Romans 13:1), ‘Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God,’ etc.; and (ver. 5), ‘Ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience’ sake.’ The ‘king’ in the text is understood by some to mean God, but the following clause renders this improbable, and it is wisdom in its political aspect that is here regarded. *And that in regard of the oath of God.* The *ray* is explicative; ‘in regard of,’ or ‘because of,’ as ... Ecclesiastes 3:18. ‘The oath of God’ is the oath of allegiance to the king, taken in the name of God, under his invocation (comp. ... Exodus 22:11; ... 1 Kings 2:43). So we read (... 2 Kings 11:17) of a covenant between king and people, and people and king, in the time of Jehoiada; Nebuchadnezzar made Zedekiah swear by God to be his vassal (... 2 Chronicles 36:13); and Josephus (‘Ant.,’ 12:1; 11:8. 3) relates that Ptolemy Soter, son of Lagus (following herein the example of Darius), exacted an oath from the Jews in Egypt to be true to him and his successors. We know that both Babylonian and Persian monarchs exacted an oath of fealty from conquered nations, making them swear by the gods whom they worshipped, the selection of deities being left to them.”

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, comments furthermore on v.2 and the first part of v.3: “The first few words of the Hebrew are enigmatic (reading literally ‘I – attend to the mouth of the king’) but may be paraphrased ‘I advise you, be attentive to what the king says.’ The seemingly unattached ‘I’ has perplexed

translators. Most assume that a verb such as ‘say’ or ‘counsel’ is understood (AV, RV). Others ignore the word entirely (LXX, Peshitta, Targum, RSV), amend it to ‘My son’ ..., or the sign of the accusative ..., or assume that ‘say’ has dropped out of the text The enigma is as yet unsolved, but the general sense is clear. *The mouth of the king* is not simply his commands (as in most translations), but more generally ‘what he says’ (cf. Pr. 13:3). The latter part of the verse gives the reason for the command: ... *and that on account of the oath of God* Evidently it was a custom for the king’s subjects to take an oath of loyalty. 2 Chronicles 36:13 and Ezekiel 15:13 have been cited as throwing some light on the matter, but here the oath is one taken more generally among the populace (cf. 1 Ch. 29:24 ...) A less likely view ... takes the oath as given by God to the king. Phrases elsewhere parallel to ‘oath of God’ (Ex. 22:10f.; 2 Sa. 21:7; 1 Ki. 2:42f.) make it more likely that it is an oath taken by men, but sanctioned or approved by God. A good translation of the first clause of v.3 is NASV *Do not be in a hurry to leave him*. ‘To go from someone’s presence’ elsewhere signifies disaffection or disloyalty (cf. Ho. 11:2). Thus the Preacher warns against a capricious desertion of one’s post (cf. 10:4) and against persistence in any disloyalty (RV *persist* is better than NASV *join in* or RV *delay*). It is possible, however, to punctuate otherwise and construe the grammar differently. The Hebrew verb *bâhal* may mean ‘hasten’ or ‘fear.’ If the latter be adopted, and if the opening phrase belongs to v.2, we have: ... *because of your oath be not dismayed; go from his presence* In this case v.3 warns against high office. But the parallel in 10:4 argues decisively against RSV and in favor of RV, NASV and similar translations.”

The tension in these verses is in the atmosphere of absolutism. The king here, evidently, required his subjects to pledge total allegiance to his person. Adolph Hitler used this device during his reign over the Nazi empire, by demanding such an oath of loyalty to his person from all the members of his military machine.

The amazing part of the lesson here seems to be that God wants those who do this to be true to their pledge. We tend to think that a pledge of allegiance to the devil or any of his minions can be broken without moral consequences. During the Hitler regime the choice was a matter of life and death. Paul’s command in Romans seems to confirm this. We read: “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God’s servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God’s servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience.”¹ It is not easy to come to terms with the demands of these texts. It would condemn and eliminate any kind of resistance against absolutism and amoral governing. It would also rob the Second World War from its predicate of being a “Just War.” Yet, the Bible teaches that there are instances in which civil disobedience is a must for those who belong to God. As the Apostles Peter and John stated before the Sanhedrin: “Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God.”²

Another way of looking at the text is to see it as a prophecy pointing to the Messiah. This may not have been the Preacher’s intent, but the Holy Spirit would be free to apply it as such. The words of the psalmist come to mind: “Therefore, you kings, be wise; be warned, you rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry and you be destroyed in your way, for his wrath can flare up in a moment. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.”³ To take an oath of allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ puts us under obligation to obey Him unconditionally because we love Him.

1. Rom. 13:1-5
2. Acts 4:19
3. Ps. 2:10-12

Vv.5 and 6 read like another brain teaser in this context. The mention of “time and procedure,” (*eth*, time in the sense of “now,” or “when,” and *mishpat*, rendered “procedure,” but literally meaning “a verdict”) evokes various questions about the meaning. *Barnes’ Notes* states: “The meaning is, ‘He who obeys the commandment (i.e., the word of the king, Eccl 8:4), will not be an accomplice in any act of rebellion; and if he be a wise man he discerns (literally knows) that the king’s commandment or action is liable to correction, if it be wrong, in God’s time and by God’s judgment.’ Compare Eccl 3:11,17.”

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, writes: “Previously it has been urged that life is to be lived under God’s sovereign disposal of events (3:1-15). The same idea is now applied to the difficulties of living under an autocratic king. Submission is not to be blind passivity. RSV *way* (Heb. *mišpât*) means ‘custom,’ ‘procedure’ as well as ‘verdict, judgment’; the wise man will be alert to God’s timing and ‘proper procedures,’ as were Jonathan (1 Sa. 19:4-6), Nathan (2 Sa. 12:1-14) and Esther (Est. 7:2-4). Looking for ‘times’ and ‘procedures’ is a general principle for *every matter*. The explanatory phrase, *for the calamity of man is great upon him*, has been taken to refer to (i) a burdensome punishment which rests upon man; (ii) man’s inherent weakness or evil: ‘A wise courtier will find an opportunity to execute his designs, because human weakness is widespread and an opening is sure to appear’ ... (iii) Jones’s explanation, that ‘Man has enough trouble already without asking for further difficulty through open defiance of the king. He should wait and his time will come.’ Taken within the total context of Ecclesiastes the ‘calamity’ must be human frustration, perplexity and strain at the oppressive (‘great upon man’) burden of life. Hence (RSV *although* is better translated ‘Because’ or ‘For,’ as in RV) the need to mark well the ‘times’ and ‘procedures’ of wise action.”

The Pulpit Commentary’s comment: “*Whoso keepeth the commandment shall feel no evil thing.* This is an encouragement to obedience to royal authority (comp. ... Proverbs 24:21, 22; ... Romans 13:3). The context plainly shows that it is not God’s commandment that is spoken of (though, of course, the maxim would be very true in this case), but the king’s. Nor is it necessarily a servile and unreasoning obedience that is enjoined. Koheleth is dealing with generals. Such cases as that of Daniel and the three children, where obedience would have been sinful, are not here taken into consideration. ‘Shall feel,’ literally, ‘shall know,’ *i.e.* experience no physical evil. Quiet submission to the powers that be guarantees a peaceful and happy life. Ginsburg and others translate, ‘knoweth not an evil word,’ *i.e.* is saved from abuse and reproach, which seems somewhat meager. *And a wise man’s heart discerneth (knoweth) both time and judgment.* The verb is the same in both clauses, and ought to have been so translated. The ‘heart’ includes the moral as well as the intellectual faculties; and the maxim says that the wise man bears oppression and remains unexcited even in evil days, because he is convinced that there is a time of judgment coming when all will be righted (... Ecclesiastes 12:14). The certainty of retributive justice is so strong in his mind that he does not resort to rebellion in order to rectify matters, but possesses his soul in patience, leaving the correction of abuses in God’s hands. Septuagint, ‘The wise man’s heart knoweth the time of judgment,’ making a hendiadys of the two terms ... Verse 6 – *Because*. This and the three following clauses all begin with *ki*, ‘since,’ ‘for,’ and the conjunction ought to have been similarly rendered in all the places. Thus here, *for to every purpose there is time and judgment.* Here commences a chain of argument to prove the wisdom of keeping quiet under oppression or evil rulers. Everything has its appointed time of duration, and in due course will be brought to judgment (see ... Ecclesiastes 3:1, 17; 41:14). *Therefore (for) the misery of man is great upon him.* This is a further reason, but its exact signification is disputed. Literally, *the evil of the man is heavy upon him* (comp. ... Ecclesiastes 6:1). This may mean, as in the Authorized Version, that the affliction which subjects suffer at the hand of a tyrant becomes insupportable, and calls for and receives God’s interposition. Or ‘the evil’ may be the wickedness of the despot, which presses heavily upon him, and under retributive justice will ere long bring him to the ground, and so the oppression will come to an end. This seems to be the most natural interpretation of the passage. The Septuagint, reading differently, has, ‘For the knowledge of a man is great upon him.’ Though what this means it is difficult to say.”

In the phrase “No man has power over the wind to contain it” the Hebrew word rendered “wind” is *ruwach*, which may have the primary meaning of “wind” but it is also used in the sense of “breath,” and

even of “life.” The first time we find it in Scripture is in the verse: “Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and *the Spirit* of God was hovering over the waters.”¹ But it is also in the verse: “Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden *in the cool of the day*, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden.”² Jesus carried this Hebrew concept over in His conversation with Nicodemus, when He said: “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”³

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, comments on vv.7 and 8: “The key to human perplexity is frustration and ignorance concerning the future. In this we can find help neither in ourselves nor from anyone else. Four limitations to all authority are set forth (in v.8). First, ‘no man is master over the spirit, to confine the spirit.’ Some have understood the clause to be identical in meaning to the next, but since the third and fourth are distinct, the first two are best taken as distinct also. The meaning ‘confine’ is well established; it is used of ‘locking up’ cattle and ‘confining’ a prisoner (1 Sa. 6:10; Je. 32:2f.). The cognate noun (*kele*) means ‘prison.’ No prison can be found which will hold the spirit, the inner life of man, with its longings, impulses and convictions. Our Lord drew a similar distinction (Mt. 10:28). Second, *there is no master over the day of death*. This puts negatively the positive point (3:2) that death is within God’s appointed ‘times.’ Third, ‘there is no release in war.’ *As the* indicates (in the Hebrew), *the war* in mind is death (hence AV *that war*). This is one realm where ‘every man must advance; and every man must advance alone, to single combat; and every man in succession must fall.’ ... Fourth, ‘wickedness will not deliver its owner.’ The deliverance envisaged is that from death. No measure, foul or fair, will rescue from this intrusion. Kingly authority meets its match here.”

ii. Life’s injustices 8:9-11

9 *All this I saw, as I applied my mind to everything done under the sun. There is a time when a man lords it over others to his own hurt.*

10 *Then too, I saw the wicked buried — those who used to come and go from the holy place and receive praise in the city where they did this. This too is meaningless.*

11 *When the sentence for a crime is not quickly carried out, the hearts of the people are filled with schemes to do wrong.*

The repetition of the theme of a scientific research into the matter seems to indicate that the Teacher needed a reminder of the goal of his endeavor. It is as if he asks himself the question: “What am I doing this for?” King Solomon takes a new look at the absolute power with which he ruled over the people of Israel. He exercised that power “under the sun,” meaning that he did not see himself as a king ruling by the grace of God. The conclusion is that exercise of such power without the realization that it is delegated by a higher authority is self destructive. “Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely,” said Lord Acton.

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, disagrees with the above. He writes: “So in summarizing his observations in 8:2-8 the Preacher also starts a new line of thought. Again we see his careful observation (*I observed*) combined with shrewd evaluation (*applying my mind*), his breadth of view (*All this ... all that is done*) and his earthbound horizon (*under the sun*). The Hebrew wording (*... a time when man lords it ...*) recalls 3:1-15 with its assurance concerning God’s control of all of the seasons of life. ‘To his hurt’ (Heb.) is

1. Gen. 1:2
2. Gen. 3:8
3. John 3:8

not to *his own hurt* (AV) but to the hurt of the one under the abuser of power. Two passages containing the same verb 'lord it' (*ḏâlat*) illustrate the point (Ne. 5:15; Est. 9:1)."

The Pulpit Commentary takes a more conciliatory view, stating: "Most modern commentators consider that the hurt is that of the oppressed subject; but it is possible that the sense is intentionally ambiguous, and the injury may be that which the despot inflicts, and that which he has to suffer. Both these have been signified above."

The New International Version states in a footnote to the words "to his own hurt": "Some Hebrew manuscripts and Septuagint ... ; most Hebrew manuscripts *and are forgotten*." That reading suggests that the hurt consists in a loss of eternity, which, in the public mind, meant no longer being remembered. Once a person's name is no longer carried on in his offspring that person could, just as well, never have been born.

That kind of philosophy of life would provide a link to the following verse in which the wicked is buried, that is forgotten, and that in spite of a reputation of goodness and godliness in the person's lifetime. This sounds more like a judgment from above, a divine assessment, as opposite to the public opinion expressed in the previous verse.

The Hebrew of v.10 reads literally: "And so I saw the wicked who had come and gone from the place of the holy buried, and they were forgotten in the city where they had done: this [is] also vanity."

The New Living Translation renders this: "I have seen wicked people buried with honor. Yet they were the very ones who frequented the Temple and are now praised in the same city where they committed their crimes! This, too, is meaningless."

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, observes: "In the Hebrew this is 'one of the most difficult passages in the book.' The final phrase, *This also is vanity*, requires that the passage be reporting something frustrating or vexatious. The preceding and following verses (9, 11-12a) make it likely that this is pointing out some injustice. Only in vv.12b-13 is any statement of faith introduced. RSV grasps the gist, but the details are debatable. The following comments are based mainly on RSV, with variant interpretations in the footnotes. The opening phrase (RSV *Then*) is used elsewhere in Esther 4:6, where it apparently means 'In such circumstances.' Here we may translate: 'And in such a case I saw the wicked buried.' A proper burial was part of honorable treatment in ancient Israel, and its omission was considered a great misfortune (Je. 16:6). Even criminals (Dt. 21:22f.) suicides (2 Sa. 17:23) and enemies of the nation (Jos. 8:29) were generally buried (hence the ferocity of Am. 2:1). The preacher is troubled by the honor that comes to the wicked. The Hebrew continues: '... and they came and from the holy place they went.' RSV takes this to mean: they went *in and out of the holy place* [Jerusalem], *and were praised in the city where they had done such things*. This involves a minute emendation of *w'yeštakku'hu* ('they were forgotten') to *w'yištabb'hu* ('they were praised'), which is almost certainly correct. The Hebrew letters *beth* and *kaph* are similar; there is support in the ancient version and in some Hebrew manuscripts. The verse is dealing with and injustice (they were praised), not a rightful retribution (they were forgotten)."

The Pulpit Commentary comments: "Koheleth is troubled by apparent anomalies in God's moral government. He notes *the prosperity of the godless and the misery of the righteous*, God's abstention and the seeming impunity of sinners make men incredulous of Providence; but God is just in reward and punishment, as the end will prove. Meantime, returning to his old maxim, he advises men patiently to acquiesce in things as they are, and to make the best of life. *And so ... then*, in like manner, under the same circumstances (... Esther 4:16). The writer notes some apparent exceptions to the law of retribution of which he has just been speaking, the double particle at the beginning of the verse implying the connection with the preceding statement. *I saw the wicked buried*. 'The wicked' are especially the despots (ver. 9). These are carried to their graves with every outward honor and respect, like the rich man in the parable, who 'died, and was buried' (... Luke 16:22). Such men, if they had received their due reward, far from having a pompous and magnificent funeral (which would befit only a good and honored life), would have been buried with the burial of an ass (comp. ... Isaiah 14:19; ... Jeremiah 22:19). So far the Authorized Version is undeniably correct. What follows is as certainly inaccurate as it is unintelligible. *Who had come and gone from the place of the holy*; literally, *and they came, and from the place of the holy they went*. The first verb seems to mean,

'they came to their rest,' they died a natural death. The words, in themselves ambiguous, are explained by the connection in which they stand (comp. ... Isaiah 57:2). [One scholar] renders, 'they came into being,' and explains it with the following clause, 'they went away from the holy place,' as one generation coming and another going, in constant succession. But if, as we suppose, the paragraph applies to the despot, such an interpretation is unsuitable. [Another scholar's] idea, that oppressive despots 'come again' in the persons of their wicked children, is wholly unsupported by the text. The verse admits and has received a dozen explanations differing more or less from one another. A good deal depends upon the manner in which the succeeding clause is translated, *And they were forgotten in the city where they had so done*. As the particle rendered 'so' (*ken*) may also mean 'well,' 'rightly,' we get the rendering, 'even such as acted justly,' and thus introduce a contrast between the fate of the wicked man who is honored with a sumptuous funeral, and that of the righteous whose name is cast out as pollution and soon forgotten. So [a third scholar] ('Job and Solomon') gives, 'And in accordance with this I have seen ungodly men honored, and that too in the holy place (the temple, ... Isaiah 18:7), but those who had acted rightly had to depart, and were forgotten in the city.' Against this interpretation, which has been adopted by many, it may reasonably be argued that in the same verse *ken* would hardly be used in two different senses, and that there is nothing in the text to indicate a change of subject. It seems to me that the whole verse applies to the wicked man. He dies in peace, he leaves the holy place; the evil that he has done is forgotten in the very city where he had so done, *i.e.* done wickedly. 'The place of the holy' is Jerusalem (... Isaiah 48:2; ... Matthew 27:53) or the temple (... Matthew 24:15). He is removed by death from that spot, the very name of which ought to have cried shame on his crimes and impiety. The expression seems to picture a great procession of priests and Levites accompanying the corpse of the deceased tyrant to the place of burial, while the final clause implies that no long lamentation was made over him, no monument erected to his memory (see the opposite of this in the treatment of Josiah, ... 2 Chronicles 35:24, 25). They who consider 'the righteous' to be the subject of the last clauses see in the words, 'from the holy place they departed,' an intimation that these were excommunicated from the synagogue or temple, or banished from the promised land, on account of their opinions. I would translate the passage thus: *In like manner have I seen the wicked buried, and they came to their rest, and they went from the holy place, and were forgotten in the city where they had so (wickedly) acted*. The versions have followed various readings. Thus the Septuagint: 'And then I saw the impious brought unto graves, and from the holy place; and they departed and were praised in the city, because they had so done;' Vulgate, 'I have seen the impious buried, who also, while they still lived, were in the holy place, and were praised in the city as if men of just doings.' Commenting on this version, St. Gregory writes, 'The very tranquility of the peace of the Church conceals many under the Christian name who are beset with the plague of their own wickedness. But if a light breath of persecution strikes them, it sweeps them away at once as chaff from the threshing-floor. But some persons wish to bear the mark of Christian calling, because, since the name of Christ has been exalted on high, nearly all persons now look to appear faithful, and from seeing others called thus, they are ashamed not to seem faithful themselves; but they neglect to be that which they boast of being called. For they assume the reality of inward excellence, to adorn their outward appearance; and they who stand before the heavenly Judge, naked from the unbelief of their heart, are clothed, in the sight of men, with a holy profession, at least in words' ('Moral.,' 25:26). *This is also vanity*. The old refrain recurs to the writer as he thinks on the prosperity of the wicked, and the conclusions which infidels draw therefrom. Here is another example of the vanity that prevails in all earthly circumstances."

This seems enough attention paid to a problem text that cannot be rewritten.

iii. The answer of faith 8:12-13

12 Although a wicked man commits a hundred crimes and still lives a long time, I know that it will go better with God-fearing men, who are reverent before God.

13 Yet because the wicked do not fear God, it will not go well with them, and their days will not lengthen like a shadow.

Solomon must have known Asaph, the worship leader under his father David. There is no indication that Asaph continued his ministry under Solomon's reign. But Asaph's psalms must have been well-known to the king and he may have received the inspiration for the above verses from the lines of Asaph: "When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny. Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin. How suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors! As a dream when one awakes, so when you arise, O Lord, you will despise them as fantasies."¹ The right perspective on life's problems comes always from the sanctuary. It is from the viewpoint of fellowship with God that we understand some of the mystery of His dealings with man.

Our problem, which is the reason for the brazenness of wickedness, is the time factor. If punishment for sin were always instantaneous, it would satisfy our sense of justice. Our impatience often blurs our understanding. We cannot image how God, who lives and operates in eternity, does not operate under the laws and demands of time. We live in a chronological system which God created but to which He is not a subject. The Apostle Peter gives the best answer to this problem: "But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."²

Every person's conscience gives him sufficient warning that the evil he does is not acceptable to God or beneficial to himself. The mistaken impression that God is not affected by our sins, because He does not react to them instantaneously, makes him believe that he can continue undetected. God often uses measures that fill up and He closes the case when the measure is full. It would take the Amorites four centuries to fill up theirs.³ Instead of being shocked by this, they took it as a license of liberty to sin. Such is man's folly!

If we could but understand that sin robs us of the glory of God, we would live life more cautiously. Taking Paul's definition of sin: "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,"⁴ and understanding that God intends to share His glory with us, we can see how much we miss out on both in life below and in eternity if we keep on living in sin, without ever repenting and accepting God's atonement in Christ. The New Jerusalem, the bride of Christ, will shine with the glory of God.⁵ If that vision does not kindle in us a desire for holiness, we fail to understand what life is all about.

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, observes about vv.12 and 13: "It is noteworthy that, whereas the Preacher so often says 'I have seen ... I saw' (8:9f), here his reply is introduced by *I know*. The injustices of life are open for all to see; the Preacher's reply is not an observation, but the answer of faith. Equally, he is certain that, despite the delay, calamity will finally befall the sinner. Though he may 'lengthen (his days)' (v.12, Heb.), the judgment falling upon him is that he *will not lengthen his days!* The paradox has been elucidated in various ways. Some see a quotation ... or the hand of a redactor ... [One scholar] sees a play on words which may be paraphrased: 'though he go on long (in sin) he shall not make his days long.' This is possible, since 'his days' occurs in the Hebrew of v.13 but not of v.12. The present writer believes that the Preacher 'drops the veil of secularism' ... and puts the two statements side by side to be deliberately

1. Ps. 73:16-20
2. II Peter 3:8,9
3. Gen. 15:16
4. Rom. 3:23
5. Rev. 21:11

provocative. It is typical of the duality which pervades Ecclesiastes: from the ‘under the sun’ viewpoint the sinner is infuriating in his long survival; from the perspective of faith time looks different and the Preacher cannot imagine sin endlessly unrebuked and unjudged (cf. Jas. 4:13f.). The paradox also raises the possibility of a life after death, where the sinner will no longer go on in his sin. This is confirmed in that a *shadow* is a figure of the insecurity of human life (cf. Pss. 102:11; 109:23). In the light of this, AV *neither shall he prolong his days which are as a shadow* (cf. RV) is preferable to RSV *neither will he prolong his days like a shadow*. This accords with the context, and the verse can only mean that the unrighteous will not flourish beyond the grave (cf. Pss. 49; 73; Ec. 3:16-21; 12:14).”

iv. The problem restated 8:14

14 There is something else meaningless that occurs on earth: righteous men who get what the wicked deserve, and wicked men who get what the righteous deserve. This too, I say, is meaningless.

In spite of the heading given to this verse, this is not quite a restatement of the problem mentioned above in which the sinner had a long and apparently happy life. The problem here is not the time factor, but the limited perspective. What the wicked deserves is, obviously, suffering and hardship. The limitation is the fact that the Teacher can only observe what happens “on earth,” which is the equivalent of “under the sun.” Jesus’ parable of Lazarus and the rich man reveals what happens in the afterlife. There father Abraham explains to the rich man in hell: “Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony.”¹ The Teacher believes that people ought to receive what is due to them while they are still on earth.

There is also a lack of understanding that, as believers, we live in enemy territory. In the words of the Apostle John: “We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one.”² It is our resistance against the evil one that makes us the target of his attacks. We must not lose sight of the fact that “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.”³

What is meaningless is not the way God deals with human sin and righteousness, but what the devil does in rewarding those who will spend eternity with him in separation from God.

The Hebrew text reads literally: “There is a vanity which is done upon the earth; that there be just men to whom it happens according to the work of the wicked; again there be wicked men to whom it happens according to the work of the righteous: I said this also [is] vanity.” The Hebrew verb “to happen” is *naga*, which literally means “to touch,” “to lay the hand upon,” or “to strike,” in the sense of to punish. If we see the hand of God in the touch, we understand that there is a great difference between the result of being touched by God as to whether one is righteous or evil. For the righteous, the touch of God in adverse circumstances means a world of difference between despair and hope of glory. To be touched by God in wickedness, even if it seems to result in outward gain, leads to disaster unless there is repentance. It has been said that God can punish someone by making him rich.

v. The remedy recalled 8:15

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

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1. Luke 16:17
 2. I John 5:19
 3. Acts 14:22

The Hebrew of this verse reads literally: “Then I commended mirth because a man has no better [thing] under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry: for that shall abide with him of his labor which God gives his life under the sun.” Whether we consider the Preacher’s advice here as a tongue-in-cheek recommendation, or as a serious conclusion, depends on the perspective we attribute to “under the sun.” If it refers to what the options are when God is left out of the picture, that is the best advice that can be given. If eating and drinking are seen as God’s gifts under the circumstances, it changes the tone of the admonition.

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary comments: “For that shall abide with him - ‘abide’ - Hebrew, adhere; not for ever, but it is the only sure good to be enjoyed from earthly labors (equivalent to ‘of his labor the days of his life’). Still, the language resembles the skeptical precept (1 Cor 15:32), introduced only to be refuted. But the ‘mirth’ commended is more probably that of the cheerful saint, who, instead of fretting himself about seeming anomalies (Eccl 8:14), and discontentedly complaining in self-righteousness, as if he were treated unjustly, makes the best of present mercies. This is the only abiding good from earthly toils (1 Tim 6:6).” The embedded Scripture references read: “I fought wild beasts in Ephesus for merely human reasons, what have I gained? If the dead are not raised, ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.’” And: “But godliness with contentment is great gain.”

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, opines: “The Preacher does not try to unravel the enigma completely. Rather he presents a practical solution, along lines now familiar. Again he is concerned about earthy life (*under the sun*), commends joy (*cf.* 2:26; 3:12; 5:18,20 and contentment (*to eat and drink; cf.* 2:24f.; 3:13; 5:18). This is to be our encouragement amid daily life and activity, a life-long (*through the days of life*) close companion (*go with him* translates Heb. *yilwennû*, ‘cleave to him,’ ‘join on to him’). The secret of it all is: it is God-given.”

vi. The enigma of life 8:16 – 9:1

16 *When I applied my mind to know wisdom and to observe man’s labor on earth — his eyes not seeing sleep day or night—*

17 *then I saw all that God has done. No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. Despite all his efforts to search it out, man cannot discover its meaning. Even if a wise man claims he knows, he cannot really comprehend it.*

9:1 *So I reflected on all this and concluded that the righteous and the wise and what they do are in God’s hands, but no man knows whether love or hate awaits him.*

Obviously, the division that lands the concluding thought in these verses into a new chapter is as artificial as it is misleading. Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, comments: “The Hebrew is obscure. After the opening, ‘When I gave my heart to ...’ comes a parenthetical remark (‘For neither in the day nor in the night do one’s eyes see sleep’). The sense is completed in v.17 (‘Then I saw ...’). Again the Preacher sees that man’s problem gives him restless days and sleepless night (*cf.* 2:23).”

The New Living Translation may make most sense here with the rendering: “In my search for wisdom and in my observation of people’s burdens here on earth, I discovered that there is ceaseless activity, day and night. I realized that no one can discover everything God is doing under the sun. Not even the wisest people discover everything, no matter what they claim. This, too, I carefully explored: Even though the actions of godly and wise people are in God’s hands, no one knows whether God will show them favor.”

According to *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* the meaning of these verses is: “This is the state of probation; and in it neither can the wicked be punished, nor the righteous rewarded. But eternity is at hand;

and then shall every man receive according to his works. He that spends his life in eat, drink, and play, will find in that day that he has lost the time in which he could have prepared for eternity.”

About the last verse, the first one in the new chapter, Eaton states: “This might be translated: ‘Now, I have taken all this to heart and explain it that righteous men, wise men, and their deeds are in the care of God. Man does not know whether it will be love or hatred; everything awaits him.’ The first word is little more than ‘Well now’; it is neither an explanation (AV *For*) nor a contrast (RSV *But*). RSV *in the hand of* is a well-known expression meaning ‘at the disposal of’ (Gn. 14:20; 16:6, *etc.*), ‘under the supervision of’ (Gn. 9:2, *etc.*), or ‘in the care of’ (best here; *cf.* Est. 2:3, 8; Jb. 12:10; Ps. 31:5, *etc.*). If, as is widely thought, the second half refers to God’s acceptance or rejection of men, the thought will be that ‘it takes more than observation to discover how He is disposed toward us’ But the love and hatred mentioned a few sentences later (v.6) are clearly human. Nor does this view cohere easily with statements elsewhere that the righteous have an assurance of God’s approval (*cf.* 2:24; 3:12f.; 5:19f. 9:7-19). More likely, the point is that the treatment the righteous will receive is unknown; who can tell what the future will bring? Righteousness and wisdom have not built-in guarantees of an easy life. The Hebrew *before them*, meaning ‘awaiting them,’ is a rare usage; but though its reference may be spatial (Gn. 32:21, *etc.*), there is no reason why it should not also be temporal.”

vii. The sting of death 9:2-3

2 All share a common destiny — the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean, those who offer sacrifices and those who do not. As it is with the good man, so with the sinner; as it is with those who take oaths, so with those who are afraid to take them.

3 This is the evil in everything that happens under the sun: The same destiny overtakes all. The hearts of men, moreover, are full of evil and there is madness in their hearts while they live, and afterward they join the dead.

The New International Version, evidently, follows the Septuagint and the Vulgate, because, according to a footnote “Hebrew does not have *and the bad*.” The Hebrew words rendered “clean” and “unclean” are *tahowr* and *tame*. Both have the main meaning of ceremonial clean or unclean, as is obvious from the first instances in Scriptures in which they are used. *Tahowr* is first found in: “Take with you seven of every kind of *clean* animal, a male and its mate, and two of every kind of unclean animal, a male and its mate, and also seven of every kind of bird, male and female, to keep their various kinds alive throughout the earth.”¹ And we find *tame*’ in “Or if a person touches anything ceremonially *unclean* — whether the carcasses of *unclean* wild animals or of *unclean* livestock or of *unclean* creatures that move along the ground — even though he is unaware of it, he has become *unclean* and is guilty.”² “Unclean” in the first reference is not the same word as below. The Hebrew has “not clean” at that place.

We could question the Teacher’s theology at this point, asking why he believes that “the righteous” ought not to die. This is particularly questionable since the righteous person is the one who is ceremonial righteous, not necessarily perfect in character. His righteousness comes from the fact that his unrighteousness has been atoned for by the death of a sacrificial animal, symbolizing his guilt and the punishment he ought to have received in his own person.

The way the Teacher puts it makes it sound as if the evil is in the way God treats His subjects, without making a difference in man’s character. Yet, Solomon’s father, David, prophesied: “All have turned aside, they have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one.”³ Isaiah confirms

1. Gen. 7:2,3

2. Lev. 5:2

this in the statement: “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”¹ And the Apostle Paul states without exception: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”²

The Teacher is correct, however, in qualifying death as an evil. Death is both the enemy of man and of God. Death is “the last enemy.”³ That is why there will be a resurrection. As Jesus said to His contemporaries: “But about the resurrection of the dead — have you not read what God said to you, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not the God of the dead but of the living.”⁴

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, comments on v.3: “Death is not a ‘natural’ phenomenon to the Preacher, but an invincible *evil*. Also linked with *evil* is *madness*, connected elsewhere with glib frivolity (2:2), corruption in society (7:7), folly (10”12f.), self-justifying disobedience (1 Sa. 13:13) and inclinations to violence (1 Sa.26:21) or pride (2 Sa. 24:1); its usage suggests, therefore, a moral wildness that is impetuous and irrational. The problem of our fallen nature (*cf.* 7:29) is universal, for *evil* is ascribed to the *sons of men* in general. It characterizes the whole inner nature of man (*the heart*), irremediable (life-long, while they live), dominant (we are full of it). The grimmest aspect (the ‘sting,’ 1 Cor. 15:56) of death is found here, for with such a heart are we brought ‘to judgment ... to his eternal home ... to God (11:9; 12:5,7).”

viii. Where there’s life, there’s hope 9:4-6

4 Anyone who is among the living has hope—even a live dog is better off than a dead lion!

5 For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no further reward, and even the memory of them is forgotten.

6 Their love, their hate and their jealousy have long since vanished; never again will they have a part in anything that happens under the sun.

The ambiguity of these verses is their most arresting feature. The word “hope” in our vocabulary is one with a positive and encouraging content. In the way the Teacher uses it, it becomes almost a vehicle of despair. What he seems to be saying is that the object of hope of the living is that death awaits them as the equalizer of all things.

The illustration says it all, at least in the context of the time it is placed. The teacher is not speaking of pets, which is the category in which we would place man’s best friend. The dog in Old Testament times was a scavenger, an emblem of uncleanness. The lion represents life in its most powerful form. In the picture the animal that ought to die is alive and the one that ought to live is dead. And that is the background against which the word “hope” is used.

A closer look, however, will reveal greater depth than a casual glance would anticipate. In the catalogue of evils that characterize life, we find love, hate and jealousy. In this death has the advantage over life in that those elements that poisoned life have also ceased to exist. In using another illustration we could present a person who is suffering from an incurable disease. The only hope of deliverance from the cancer that ravages the body is death. The death of the body will mean the death of cancer also.

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3. Ps. 14:3
 1. Isa. 53:6
 2. Rom. 3:23
 3. I Cor. 15:26
 4. Matt. 22:31,32

In a way the Teacher goes back to the days following our first parents' fall into sin. At Adam and Eve's expulsion from Paradise, we read: "And the Lord God said, 'The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.' So the Lord God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life."¹ So Adam was forcefully removed from the garden, and the presence of supernatural beings, cherubim, prevented him from returning. Paradise was not taken away from man; man was driven out of the garden into a world that would become more and more hostile to him. The issue was the tree of life. It turns out that this tree had been the most important feature of the Garden of Eden. It always was, but man had paid no attention to it. Eating from the tree of life would have meant a conscious choice, an act of surrender to God. Adam and Eve had enjoyed Paradise, but they had never responded to the love of God. They were sinless, but not ripe. After the fall this surrender was no longer an option. God could not accept fallen man as he is. This would have compromised God's absolute holiness. It would have made God less God, which would have had disastrous consequences for all of heaven and earth. The only solution for man is death. Death was his only hope.

Fortunately, that is not the only way the Bible gives content to the word "hope." It is true that when the cancer dies, the body dies also, but when God brings the body back to life in the resurrection, the cancer remains dead. God's ultimate solution to man's problem of sin is in the death of His Son Jesus Christ.

The Apostle Paul has given us some wonderful definitions of the word "hope" in its new context, showing that hope means bodily resurrection. We read: "We ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved."² Hope is connected to our final destination in glory, as is evident from: "To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory."³ Paul identifies Christ with hope, writing to Timothy: "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope ..."⁴ In his letter to Titus, Paul equates hope with resurrection, saying: "For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope — the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good."⁵

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, comments on v.6: "Among earthly experiences which will cease are *love* and *hate*. The next word often means *zeal* (NASV) or *jealousy* (NIV), but here a more general term, such as GNB *their passions*, suits the context. The phrase *under the sun* confirms that the previous verse have in view the irreparable loss of earthly life. One's *portion* (AV) or *share* (RSV) is the measure of joy and satisfaction that come through one's daily activities (*cf.* 3:22; 5:18, where it is sometimes translated *lot*), found not in self-centered pleasures (2:1-11) but only when taken as the gift of God (3:22; 5:19). The Preacher repeatedly warns that it cannot be recaptured after death. Here is the strongest statement of the point: at death its passing is total (*no more*) and permanent (*for ever*)."

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1. Gen. 3:22-24
 2. Rom. 8:23,24
 3. Col. 1:27
 4. I Tim. 1:1
 5. Titus 2:11-14

ix. The remedy of faith 9:7-10

7 Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for it is now that God favors what you do.

8 Always be clothed in white, and always anoint your head with oil.

9 Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun— all your meaningless days. For this is your lot in life and in your toilsome labor under the sun.

10 Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom.

Eaton's heading of this section renders it the most positive interpretation, which does not seem to be completely warranted by the modifier "meaningless." The Hebrew word used here is *hebel*, "vanity," which is the theme word of this book, as is stated in the opening verse: "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless."¹ The comment Michael A. Eaton gives here in *Ecclesiastes* reads: "A note of imperious exhortation breaks in: *Go ...!* What had previously been put as advice (2:24-26; 3:12f., 22; 5:18-20) is now an urgent summons to action. The believer must give himself to a contended life ... and to a joyful life (*cf.* also 11:9). The basis of contentment is that *God has already approved what you do.* This almost Pauline touch is the nearest the Preacher came to a doctrine of justification by faith. Man has but to receive contentment as God's gift (*cf.* 3:13); God will approve of him and his works. The believer is not struggling for acceptance; he is 'already' accepted. On that basis (moving from Paul to James, one might say) the wise man 'works with all his might (9:10).'"

The Pulpit Commentary observes: "This is not an injunction to lead a selfish life of Epicurean pleasure; but taking the limited view to which he here confines himself, the Preacher inculcates the practical wisdom of looking at the bright side of things; he says in effect (though he takes care afterwards to correct a wrong impression which might be given), 'Let us eat and drink; for to-morrow we die' (... 1 Corinthians 15:32). We have had the same counsel in ... Ecclesiastes 2:24; 3:12, 13, 22; 5:18; 8:15."

Yet, it is difficult to read these verses and not suppose a touch of irony that colors the content. If life in its totality is meaningless, the enjoyment of it would be meaningless also. The paradox of finding "God" and "under the sun" in the same phrase must be the key to understanding the Teacher's statement. One cannot leave God out of the picture and keep Him in it at the same time! Again, we must conclude that what makes life as a whole meaningless is the absence of God.

For obvious reasons, I have never seen v.9 used as an appropriate verse for a wedding ceremony. Not only would the negative content be frowned upon, but also the mainly masculine emphasis would not go over well in our emancipated modern society. Only the bridegroom is addressed in this verse and the question would arise "what about the bride?" If a marriage relationship would only be for male enjoyment "under the sun," it would indeed be meaningless. It is Paul's interpretation of marriage that gives to conjugal relations its true value. The Apostle said: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' This is a profound mystery — but I am talking about Christ and the church."²

1. Eccl. 1:2
2. Eph. 5:31,32

E. Wisdom and Folly 9:11 – 10:20

In his general introduction to this section, Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, writes: “In the opinion of many commentators there is no sustained argument in these verses. [One Bible scholar] speaks of the ‘variety of subject matter and the lack of logical organization in this section.’ [Another] complained, ‘How much time, thought and paper have been wasted in order to connect this verse-group with the preceding!’ A few scholars, however ... have attempted to trace an argument. [One] thought ‘that the author is writing coherent discourse and has logical sequence of thought.’ The truth of the matter is not easily determined. Certainly attempts to trace a detailed argument have been unconvincing; on the other hand coherence of argument is different from coherence of subject-matter. If the former is not in evidence in these verses, the latter is to a large extent, for each unit deals directly in some way with folly or wisdom.”

i. Time and chance 9:11-12

11 I have seen something else under the sun: The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favor to the learned; but time and chance happen to them all.

12 Moreover, no man knows when his hour will come: As fish are caught in a cruel net, or birds are taken in a snare, so men are trapped by evil times that fall unexpectedly upon them.

The most striking word in these verses is the word “chance,” Hebrew word *pega`*, which is derived from a word meaning “impact.” The word only appears one other time in Scripture where Solomon, answering King Hiram of Tyre, writes: “You know that because of the wars waged against my father David from all sides, he could not build a temple for the Name of the Lord his God until the Lord put his enemies under his feet. But now the Lord my God has given me rest on every side, and there is no adversary or disaster.”¹

The Pulpit Commentary observes: “Our English word ‘chance’ conveys an erroneous impression. What is meant is rather ‘incident,’ such as a calamity, disappointment, unforeseen occurrence. All human purposes are liable to be changed or controlled by circumstances beyond man’s power, and incapable of explanation. A hand higher than man’s disposes events, and success is conditioned by superior laws which work unexpected results.” The term “act of God” as used by insurance companies to indicate events beyond human control would explain the matter quite sufficiently. When questioned, however, most insurance companies would deny any spiritual connotation in the use of the phrase.

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary comments: “Chance - seemingly, really Providence. But as man cannot ‘find it out’ (Eccl 3:11), he needs ‘with all might’ to use opportunities. Duties are ours; events, God’s (Ps 31:15, ‘My times are in thy hand’) Chance is not a power independent of God; but is that which happens to man independently of his control. If God be our friend, the powers arrayed against us, however formidable they look, cannot destroy us. If it depended on human strength, the people of God could not withstand their foes.”

The Teacher’s premise is that the swift ought to win the race and the strong the battle. The wise and brilliant minds should be rewarded according to their giftedness. But that is not how life deals with its subjects. The Hebrew word for “favor” is *chen*, which is sometimes rendered “grace,” in the sense of graciousness. As such we find it in Proverbs in: “Listen, my son, to your father’s instruction and do not forsake your mother’s teaching. They will be a garland to *grace* your head and a chain to adorn your neck.”²

1. I Kings 5:3,4
2. Prov. 1:8,9

This time Solomon does not go so far as to say that this is part of life's "vanity," but the limitation "under the sun" leaves open the possibility that there may be rewards in the afterlife.

Fanny Crosby borrowed Solomon's words in her hymn *Victory through Grace*, in the lines: "Not to the strong is the battle, not to the swift is the race. Yet to the true and the faithful victory is promised through grace." This opens the window to Paul's majestic statement about the Christian's options in adversity: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: 'For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."¹

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, comments here: "Two factors may upset all human calculations. First, *time* limits us, an echo of the teaching throughout Ecclesiastes that the seasons of our life are in the hand of God; this is a warrant for faith but also a death-blow for self-confidence. Second, *chance* is the unexpected event which may throw the most accomplished off course, despite the most thoroughly prepared schemes."

Most likely, the "hour" in v.12 is the time of a person's death. Yet, *The Pulpit Commentary* suggests that "it may include any misfortune or accident." "Evil times" may in fact cover more than the final day of a person's life. The Teacher sees man trapped in life in the same way as a fish in a net or a bird in a snare. Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, agrees, saying: "One's *evil time* might be thought to refer exclusively to the time of death, as [one Bible scholar] suggests (*cf.* 7:17). But since in other places (*cf.* 8:5-7) the Preacher envisages the flow of events working against all a man's aims and hopes, *evil time* may well refer to other calamities besides the final one."

But if we go through life, not keeping in mind that we are merely passing through and that our days are limited, we lack a sense of realism. We all ought to pray Moses' prayer: "Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom."² We tend to think that death is something that only happens to other people. Some of the psalmists answer Solomon's predicament in singing about the New Testament hope of resurrection. We read: "Our God is a God who saves; from the Sovereign Lord comes escape from death."³ And: "We have escaped like a bird out of the fowler's snare; the snare has been broken, and we have escaped. Our help is in the name of the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth."⁴

ii. Wisdom unrecognized 9:13-16

13 *I also saw under the sun this example of wisdom that greatly impressed me:*

14 *There was once a small city with only a few people in it. And a powerful king came against it, surrounded it and built huge siegeworks against it.*

15 *Now there lived in that city a man poor but wise, and he saved the city by his wisdom. But nobody remembered that poor man.*

16 *So I said, "Wisdom is better than strength." But the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are no longer heeded.*

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1. Rom. 8:35-39
 2. Ps. 90:12
 3. Ps. 68:20
 4. Ps. 124:7,8

Bible scholars have argued about whether the example the Teacher uses here is fact or parable. *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* states: "Those who spiritualize this passage, making the little city the CHURCH, the few men the APOSTLES, the great king the DEVIL, and the poor wise man JESUS CHRIST, abuse the text. But the Targum is not less whimsical: 'The little city is the human body; few men in it, few good affections to work righteousness; the great king, evil concupiscence, which, like a strong and powerful king, enters into the body to oppress it, and besieges the heart so as to cause it to err; built great bulwarks against it-evil concupiscence builds his throne in it wheresoever he wills, and causes it to decline from the ways that are right before God; that it may be taken in the greatest nets of hell, that he may burn it seven times, because of its sins. But there is found in it a poor wise man-a good, wise, and holy affection, which prevails over the evil principle, and snatches the body from the judgment of hell, by the strength of its wisdom. Yet, after this deliverance, the man did not remember what the good principle had done for him; but said in his heart, I am innocent,' etc."

The author does not state here that the conclusion of his observation is another example of the vanity of life. He merely states that he is "greatly impressed." It has been argued that the Hebrew text, which is rendered "he saved the city by his wisdom," can also be translated: "he might have saved . . .," implying that it could have happened, but did not. That reading would actually fit better in the lesson the Teacher wants us to draw from the story. It would give full strength to the conclusion: "But the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are no longer heeded." If the wisdom of the poor man was effective, but remained unrewarded, the lesson would be that of previous sections in which it was stated that good is seldom rewarded and sin rarely punished during life on earth. The reward intended would be the appreciation of fellow humans, not God's recognition of human achievement. We are left with the unasked question "what do we seek?"

Whether the story is hypothetical or the wise man's wisdom saved the city or could have saved it, is not the most important lesson to be learned. There is the antithesis of power and wisdom, which leads to the question which is greater. A classic example is the remark Joseph Stalin made to Winston Churchill, when the latter mentioned the Pope in a series of allies in the confrontation of Nazism. Stalin asked contemptuously: "The Pope, how many divisions does he have?" Stalin forgot Paul's statement: "The foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength."¹

iii. Wisdom thwarted 9:17-10:1

17 The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouts of a ruler of fools.

18 Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.

10:1 As dead flies give perfume a bad smell, so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor.

The point the Teacher makes in these three verses is that folly is contagious and wisdom is not. We could take this a step further and say that sin is contagious and holiness is not. The prophet Haggai gave a good illustration of the principle when he said: "This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'Ask the priests what the law says: If a person carries consecrated meat in the fold of his garment, and that fold touches some bread or stew, some wine, oil or other food, does it become consecrated?' The priests answered, 'No.' Then Haggai said, 'If a person defiled by contact with a dead body touches one of these things, does it become defiled?' 'Yes,' the priests replied, 'it becomes defiled.'"²

It all comes down to the fact that when Adam and Eve sinned, their nature changed from innocent to sinful. They bequeathed this to their offspring, making that every human being born comes into the world

1. I Cor. 1:25

2. Hag. 2:11-13

with a sinful nature. The only person exempt was the man Jesus Christ. He alone could say: “Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?”¹ No one could touch a leper without becoming defiled. But Jesus remained uncontaminated when He touched a leper. Actually, the leper became pure when Jesus touched him.²

The Teacher indicates that characteristics of wisdom are quietness, power and sweetness. Wisdom is soft-spoken; it is stronger than human violence and it emits a pleasant aroma. It is the devil’s tactic to increase the volume when the numbers are small. A minority can influence public opinion by shouting down a majority. Demagogues know this and use the principle to their advantage. Hitler and Mussolini were clear examples in the events that led to the Second World War.

Although the point the Teacher makes in v.18 remains valid, the sinful nature of man will not defeat the wisdom of God. In the same way as sin did not contaminate Jesus, so no human power can eliminate the strength of God’s wisdom. The Apostle Paul emphasizes this. Writing to the Corinthians, he says: “Though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds.”³

Paul also has something to say about the smell of holiness and of sin. In the same epistle to the Corinthians, he writes: “For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life.”⁴ Although man’s sinful nature permeates all aspects of life on earth in this present age, it is not permanent. Sin and death, well illustrated in the picture of the dead fly, are not eternal. God’s solution to human sin in the atonement of Jesus Christ is.

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, states about 10:1: “Despite the chapter division, this verse continues the themes of the previous verses, on a more individual level. The two halves are a comparison and may be translated, ‘As dead flies...so a little folly...’ The proverb underlines the fragrance of the wise man’s character (*performer’s oil...wisdom and honor*). Yet only a small mistake makes the smell of his folly greater than the fragrance of his wisdom. Again the proverb warns the reader not to place an ultimate trust even in wisdom. Life must be taken day by day from the hands of God. There is security nowhere else, not even in wisdom. Folly (*sekel*) or a fool (*sâkâl*) is associated with wickedness (7:17) and is the opposite of wisdom (2:19). It results from an inner deficiency of the personality (v.2) which becomes obvious to observers (v.3), especially in the fool’s speech (v.14). Elsewhere the foolish are said to be ‘skilled in doing evil’ (Je. 4:22) and to be characterized by moral insensitivity (cf. Je. 5:21). It is a moral rather than an intellectual complaint.”

In a footnote Eaton explains: “The Heb. may be translated ‘dead flies’ or ‘deadly flies.’ Analogy of usage (cf. Heb of 1 Sa. 5:11; Pss. 7:13; 18:5; Pr. 14:27) points to the latter and is adopted by [some scholars]. Yet the proverb is much better taken as stressing the smallness of the putrefying influence rather than its deadliness. The analogy of usage is not sufficient to outweigh what is required by the thrust of the argument.”

The Pulpit Commentary adds: “The Hebrew expression is literally, ‘flies of death,’ which may mean either ‘dead flies,’ as in our version and the Vulgate ... or ‘deadly, poisonous flies,’ as in the Septuagint The latter rendering seems preferable, if we regard the use of similar compound phrases, e.g. ‘instruments of death’ (... Psalm 7:14: [13]); ‘snares of death’ (... Psalm 18:5); and in New Testament Greek ‘the death stroke’ (... Revelation 13:3, 12). The flies meant are such as are poisonous in their bite, or carry infection with them. Such insects corrupt anything which they touch — food, ointment, whether they perish where they alight or not. They, as the Hebrew says, *make to stink, make to ferment, the oil of the*

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1. John 8:46
 2. See Matt. 8:2-4.
 3. II Co. 10:3,4
 4. II Cor. 2:15,16

perfumer. The singular verb is here used with the plural subject to express the unity of the individuals, ‘flies’ forming one complete idea.”

Finally, it must be observed that it is not a large amount of corruption that is needed to spoil. As in Jesus’ parable of the woman baking bread,¹ it is only a small amount of yeast that makes the bread rise. Paul’s warning concurs with this: ‘A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough.’² A person’s whole life and ministry can be spoiled by one moment of folly.

iv. Folly 10:2-3

2 *The heart of the wise inclines to the right, but the heart of the fool to the left.*

3 *Even as he walks along the road, the fool lacks sense and shows everyone how stupid he is.*

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, states: “The rest of the section (10:2-20) considers *folly*, describing it first in general terms.”

In modern terms v.2 would be a reference to one’s political inclination, either as conservative or liberal. But that can hardly be what is meant here. The Hebrew text of v.2 reads literally: “A wise man’s heart [is] at his right hand; but a fool’s heart at his left.”

The Pulpit Commentary observes: “There is here no reference to the classical use of right and left, as ominous of success and disaster, which is never found in the Old Testament. The right hand is the place of honor, the left of inferiority, as a matter of fact, not of superstition and luck. The symbolism is intimated in Christ’s account of the judgment (... Matthew 25:31, etc.). But in the present passage we should best paraphrase — The wise man’s heart, his understanding and sentiments, lead him to what is right and proper and straightforward; the fool’s heart leads him astray, in the wrong direction. The former is active and skilful, the latter is slow and awkward. One, we may say, has no left hand, the other has no right. To be at the right hand is to be ready to help and guard. “The Lord is at thy right band,” to protect thee, *says* the psalmist (... Psalm 110:5). The wise *man’s* mind shows him how to escape dangers and direct his course safely; the fool’s mind helps him not to any good *purpose*, causes him to err and miss his best object.”

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, writes: “Folly is traced to a fault in the *heart*, the invisible inner side of man’s life contrasted with the face (7:3), hand, (7:26) and body (11:10), part of our outer visible being (*cf.* 1 Sa. 16:7). It includes the mind, for ‘to give the heart’ to something is to study it (1:13,17; 8:9,16). The nature of the *heart* produces the problems the Preacher wrestles with. On the one hand ‘eternity’ is set within it; we cannot be content with the limitations of the world (3:11); yet it is an evil (8:11; 9:3) and defective hear (10:2). However, God may so deal with us that the heart is occupied with joy (5:20); the heart may be ‘put right’ (7:3); it may be ‘wise’ (8:5). The dubious anatomy ... is deliberate and humorous, as is often the case in wisdom literature, AV and RV translate accurately *A wise man’s heart is at his right hand...*”

The Hebrew of v.3 reads literally: “Yea, also when he who is a fool walks by the way, his wisdom fails [him], and he says to everyone that he [is] a fool.” We could say that a fool can be recognized by the way he walks, meaning that he does not even have to say anything. His whole demeanor breathes foolishness. Our body-language says often more about us than what our mouth says. *The Pulpit Commentary* observes rather dryly: “If he remained at home he might keep his real ineptitude concealed; but such persons as he are unconscious of their inanity, and take no pains to hide it; they go where, they act as, their foolish heart prompts them.”

1. Matt. 13:33

2. Gal. 5:9

v. Folly in high places 10:4-7

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

5 *There is an evil I have seen under the sun, the sort of error that arises from a ruler:*

6 *Fools are put in many high positions, while the rich occupy the low ones.*

7 *I have seen slaves on horseback, while princes go on foot like slaves.*

V.4 seems to be less fitting in the context of folly. If we want to cling to unity of thought in this section, the interpretation could be the advice not to be a fool in the face of the ruler's wrath. The Hebrew of this verse reads literally: "If the spirit of the ruler rise up against you, leave not your place; for yielding pacifies great offence." Bible scholars have had problems in interpreting the text.

The Pulpit Commentary comments: "The idea seems to be that a statesman or councilor gives wise advice to a monarch, which the latter takes in bad part, and shows strong resentment against the person who offered it. Now, when a man knows himself to be in the right, and yet finds his counsel rejected, perhaps with scorn and reproach added, he is naturally prone to feel sore, and to show by some overt act his sense of the ill treatment which he has received. But what says wisdom? *Leave not thy place (makom)*; i.e. position, post, office. Do not hastily resign the situation at court to which you have been appointed. Some, not so suitably, take the expression, 'leave thy place,' figuratively, as equivalent to 'give way to anger, renounce the temper which becomes you, lose your self-possession.'" Quoting Pope Gregory, the commentary continues: "As though he had said in plain words, 'If thou perceivest the spirit of the tempter to prevail against thee in aught, quit not the lowliness of penitence;' and that it was the abasement of penitence that he called 'our place,' he shows by the words that follow, 'for healing [Vulgate] pacifieth great offences.' For what else is the humility of mourning, save the remedy of sin?"

The Adam Clarke's Commentary gives this interesting comment: "If the king get incensed against thee. [Leave not thy place] Humble thyself before him, that is thy place and duty; for yielding to him, and not standing stoutly in thy defense, pacifieth great offences: and then, when his anger is appeased, he will hear anything in thy justification, if thou have anything to offer. This is good advice to a child in reference to his parents, and to an inferior of any kind in reference to his superiors. Several of the fathers understood this differently, If the spirit of the ruler-the influence of Satan-hath risen up against and prevailed over thee, to bring thee into some sin; leave not thy place-do not despair of God's mercy; humble thyself before him, and seek pardon through the Son of his love, and this will be *marpee'*, a remedy or cure even for *ch^aTaa'iym g^adowliym*, great errors or sins. All this is true in itself, whether found in this text or not."

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, comments on v.5: "The passage turns to observable (*I have seen*) evils behind the warning of v.4. Some versions soften the statement (NIV sort of; RSV as it were), but the Hebrew is more likely asseverate ('truly,' 'really') than comparative ('like,' 'as it were.'). [One scholar] holds that the *ruler* is God, arguing that (i) the context makes this plausible; (ii) the Hebrew word (*šallîṭ*) is different from that in v.4 (*môšçl*) and indicates two kinds of ruler; (iii) the definite article in Hebrew points in the same direction; (iv) *šallîṭ* is used of God in Daniel 4:17,25,32; 5:21. To which it may be replied (i) the change of work is merely stylistic variation; (ii) the usage in Daniel is not significant; if *melek* ('king') may be used of both earthly (Is. 6:1) and heavenly (Is. 6:5) *šallîṭ* kingship, may vary in usage similarly; (iii) the article refers to the one ruler on the throne at any one time; (iv) the determining factor is the context, which does not support [that scholar's] contention. It is concerned with folly in national leadership. It is also unlikely that the Preacher would speak of 'something like an oversight' proceeding from God."

The two Hebrew words in v.6 that depict the contrast that is so shocking to the Teacher are *cekel*, "folly," and *ashiyr* "rich." The first refers more to a mentality than to a person. The word is not found anywhere else in Scripture. The second word can also be rendered "noble," which would make the comparison more suitable. *The New King James Version* sticks closer to the original with: "There is an evil I have seen under the sun, As an error proceeding from the ruler: Folly is set in great dignity, While the rich sit in a lowly place." *The New Living Translation* reads: "Kings and rulers make a grave mistake when they

give great authority to foolish people and low positions to people of proven worth. I have even seen servants riding horseback like princes—and princes walking like servants!” V.7 illustrates the statement made in v.6.

What makes the Teacher’s comparison less than palatable to us is the way he uses the class distinction as an indicator of moral values. The assumption seems to be that casts in society are God-given. It sounds as if to be rich or to be a prince means to be righteous and to be a slave stands for being immoral. Maybe the Teacher’s intent is to shock us. If God is in fact the ruler, we know that He shows a preference for underdogs. The words of the Apostle Paul come to mind: “Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things — and the things that are not — to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God — that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: ‘Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.’”¹

vi. Folly in action 10:8-11

8 Whoever digs a pit may fall into it; whoever breaks through a wall may be bitten by a snake.

9 Whoever quarries stones may be injured by them; whoever splits logs may be endangered by them.

10 If the ax is dull and its edge unsharpened, more strength is needed but skill will bring success.

11 If a snake bites before it is charmed, there is no profit for the charmer.

The snake is mentioned twice in the six pictures the Teacher draws here for us. *The Pulpit Commentary* introduces these verses with: “The connection with what has preceded is not closely marked, but is probably to be found in the bearing of the maxims on the conduct of the wise man who has incurred the resentment of a ruler, and might be inclined to disaffection and revolt. They are intentionally obscure and capable of a double sense — a necessary precaution if the writer lived under Persian despots.” The reference to a “Persian despot” suggests that Solomon would not be the writer.

One of the problems of interpretation seems to be that the activities mentioned (digging a pit, breaking through a wall, working in a quarry, splitting logs or charming snakes) are legitimate in themselves. And the question arises as to the reason for the warning. The intent seems to be malice. *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “The ‘pit’ (*gummats*) is such a one as was made to capture wild animals, and the maker of it is supposed to approach it incautiously, and to fall into it. But the scope of our passage is rather to speak of what may possibly occur than to insist on the Nemesis that inevitably overtakes transgressors. Its object is to inspire caution in the prosecution of dangerous undertakings, whether the enterprise be the overthrow of a tyrant, or any other action of importance, or whether, as some suppose, the arraignment of the providential ordering of events is intended, in which case there would be the danger of blasphemy and impatience.”

In *Proverbs*, the author uses the same image to illustrate what happens to malicious people. We read: “If a man digs a pit, he will fall into it; if a man rolls a stone, it will roll back on him.”²

The Matthew Henry’s Commentary sees the images as parables representing the desire of some to change the God-given order of society. We read: “Let neither prince nor people violently attempt any changes, nor make a forcible entry upon a national settlement, for they will both find it of dangerous consequence, which he shows here by four similitudes, the scope of which is to give us a caution not to

1. I Cor. 1:26-31

2. Prov. 26:27

meddle to our own hurt. Let not princes invade the rights and liberties of their subjects; let not subjects mutiny and rebel against their princes.”

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, comments: “Vindictiveness has its own built-in penalties. The imagery is similar in Jeremiah 18:18-22. The malicious endeavors of men, often willful and requiring much trouble (*digs a pit ... breaks through a wall*), have a rebound which may be apposite (*He...falls in*), unexpected (8b), and deadly (bitten by a snake). Thus was Haman hanged on his own gallows (Est. 7:9f.)” The imbedded reference to Jeremiah reads: “They said, ‘Come, let’s make plans against Jeremiah; for the teaching of the law by the priest will not be lost, nor will counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophets. So come, let’s attack him with our tongues and pay no attention to anything he says.’ Listen to me, O Lord; hear what my accusers are saying! Should good be repaid with evil? Yet they have dug a pit for me. Remember that I stood before you and spoke in their behalf to turn your wrath away from them. So give their children over to famine; hand them over to the power of the sword. Let their wives be made childless and widows; let their men be put to death, their young men slain by the sword in battle. Let a cry be heard from their houses when you suddenly bring invaders against them, for they have dug a pit to capture me and have hidden snares for my feet.”

About v.9 Eaton comments: “It may be thought that more constructive activities such as quarrying stones and chopping logs are safer than the malicious activities of v.8. Two more proverbs warn against the false assumption: all life has its inherent dangers.”

The Keil and Delitzsch Commentary states about v.10: “This proverb of iron, i.e., iron instruments, to pierce ... is one of the most difficult in the Book of Koheleth-linguistically the most difficult, because scarcely anywhere else are so many peculiar and unexampled forms of words to be found.”

One of the problem Hebrew words is *chayil*, here rendered “strength.” It can mean “force” in different contexts, such as people, resources, army, wealth, virtue or valor. We see the gamut of uses in the following verses: “They carried off all their *wealth* and all their women and children, taking as plunder everything in the houses.”¹ “And if you know of any among them with special *ability*, put them in charge of my own livestock.”² “The Egyptians — all Pharaoh’s horses and chariots, horsemen and *troops* — pursued the Israelites and overtook them as they camped by the sea near Pi Hahiroth, opposite Baal Zephon.”³ “Edom will be conquered; Seir, his enemy, will be conquered, but Israel will grow *strong*.”⁴

Some Bible scholars interpret the verse as if someone tries to overthrow a tyrant without making sufficient preparation, giving the opposite party time to strengthen his army. Others see in it a continuation of the log-splitting in the previous verse. The lesson to be drawn from it may be that wisdom consists in counting the cost, which is what Jesus emphasized in His admonition: “Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’ Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Will he not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.”⁵ But we can hardly assume that the Teacher foresaw the consequences of discipleship, which does not mean that the Holy Spirit didn’t!

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1. Gen. 34:29
 2. Gen. 47:6
 3. Ex. 14:9
 4. Num. 24:18
 5. Luke 14:28-33

About the last verse in this section, Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, comments: “The opposite danger is envisaged: one who is able to handle a difficult matter (a charmer) fails for lack of promptitude (*the serpent bites...before charmed*). Slackness may nullify inherent skill.”

There seems, however, to be more involved here than being fast. The Hebrew text is intriguing; we read: “Surely a snake will bite without enchantment; and a babbler is no better.” The Hebrew word rendered “enchantment” is *lachash*, which has the primary meaning of “a whisper.” It can also mean a private prayer or an incantation. Isaiah uses the word in different context, meaning either “an orator,”¹ “an amulet”² or “a prayer.”³ Jeremiah uses it in the context of charming vipers.⁴

The word rendered “babbling” in the Hebrew text, “charmer” in *The New International Version*, is a double in Hebrew word: *ba'al lashown*, literally meaning “lord of the tongue.” It depends upon the context in which it is used as to what the meaning is. It is difficult to look at this verse and not think of an application in relationship with the one who is called “that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray.”⁵ *The Keil and Delitzsch Commentary* observes here: “This name for the charmer, one of many, is not unintentional; the tongue is an instrument, as iron is, v. 10: the latter must be sharp, if it would not make greater effort necessary; the former, if it is to gain its object, must be used at the right time.”

vii. The fool’s talk 10:12-14

12 Words from a wise man’s mouth are gracious, but a fool is consumed by his own lips.

13 At the beginning his words are folly; at the end they are wicked madness —

14 and the fool multiplies words. No one knows what is coming — who can tell him what will happen after him?

The New International Version’s “is consumed by his own lips” is the translation of a single Hebrew word *bala’*, which literally means “to make away with,” specifically by swallowing. It is what the fish did to Jonah.⁶

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, comments: “All wisdom writings deal with the tongue sooner or later, for the character of one’s talk is the acid test of wisdom, the ‘small rudder’ that steers the ship (Jas. 3:4f.). *Wise* words are said to be *gracious*; the Hebrew says they are ‘grace,’ embodying all that is gracious or kindly (cf. Ps. 45:2; Pr. 22:11 where the same word is used): appropriate (Pr. 15:23; 25:11), helpful (Eph. 4:29; Col. 3:8), likeable (Pr. 25:12,15). *Words* may *devour* (literally swallow up,’ (cf. Ps.52:4). They consume the fool’s reputation (v.3), his character (Jas. 3:6), his impact for good (Eph. 4:29), and finally the man himself (Mt. 12:36f). The source of the fool is talk is traced to the inner character (cf. Mt. 12:34), the *folly* that has been expounded earlier (cf. 10:2f. and the whole of 9:17 – 10:20). Its *end* (outcome; cf. 7:8) is *wicked madness* (RSV, NIV), an irrationality which is morally perverse. The Preacher now points to the arrogance of the fool’s speech. His verbosity is not founded on any esoteric wisdom or knowledge. He has no knowledge of the present, let alone the future. Nor can any man give him any knowledge of the future. Yet he speaks with conviction on such things.”

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1. Isa. 3:3
 2. Isa. 3:20
 3. Isa. 26:16
 4. Jer. 8:17
 5. Rev. 12:9; 20:2
 6. Jonah 1:17

The Pulpit Commentary adds: “*The words of a wise man’s mouth are gracious; literally, are grace ... i.e. they not only are pleasing in form and manner, but they conciliate favor, produce approbation and good will, convince and, what is more, persuade. So of our blessed Lord it was said, ‘All bare him witness, and wondered at the gracious words ... which proceeded out of his mouth’ (... Luke 4:22; ... Psalm 45:2).* In distinction from the unready man, who, like the snake charmer in the preceding verse, suffers-by reason of his untimely silence, the wise man uses his speech opportunely and to good purpose. (A different result is given in ... Ecclesiastes 9:11.) *But the lips of a fool will swallow up himself.* This is a stronger ex-prosaic, than ‘ruin’ or ‘destroy.’ Speaking without due forethought, he compromises himself says what he has shamefully to withdraw, and brings punishment on his own head (... Proverbs 10:8, 21; 18:7).”

The Teacher speaks here primarily about human speech, comparing the way the wise use words and what fools do with them. He does not go back far enough to trace the origin of speech. God invented the word; He even became the Word. We read in the opening verses of the Bible how God used the word to create out of nothing: “And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.”¹ When Satan tempted Eve he did this by attacking first of all the Word of God. “Did God really say?”² In describing Satan, Jesus says of him: “He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”³ In order to understand the background of speech of the wise and of the fool, we must trace the word back to its source.

viii. The fool’s incompetence 10:15

15 A fool’s work wearies him; he does not know the way to town.

The Hebrew text of this verse reads literally: “The labor of the foolish wearies every one of them, because he knows not [how] to go to the city.” Bible scholars have come up with different explanations for the fool’s ignorance about going to town. *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “Not to know the way to the city is probably a proverbial saying expressive of gross ignorance concerning the most obvious matters. How should one, who fails in the knowledge open to all experience, be able to investigate and give an opinion about abstruse questions (comp. ... Isaiah 35:8)? For the last clause other interpretations have been proposed, such as, the fool knows not how to transact public business (which is introducing a modern idea); the oppressed peasant knows not the way to the town where he might obtain redress; he is so foolish that he does not understand where he may find patrons whom he may bribe to plead his cause; he is an Essene, who avoids cities; he cannot make his way to the new Jerusalem, the city of God. But these artificial explanations are to be rejected, while the simple interpretation given above is plainly consistent with the context. The lesson is not to meddle with things too high, especially when you are ignorant of the commonest matters. A little wisdom would prevent endless and useless trouble.”

The imbedded reference to Isaiah reads: “And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness. The unclean will not journey on it; it will be for those who walk in that Way; wicked fools will not go about on it.”

It does not seem illogical, however, to see more in this verse than merely a reference to ignorance about carrying out business. The fool’s problem is that he does not understand what life is all about. He has no clue why God allowed him to be born in this world. The Psalmist’s observation about people wandering in the desert fits him well. If the fool could take the Psalmist’s advice and cry out to the Lord, he would find the way, as we read in the Psalms: “Some wandered in desert wastelands, finding no way to a city where

1. Gen. 1:3
2. Gen. 3:1
3. John 8:44

they could settle. They were hungry and thirsty, and their lives ebbed away. Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He led them by a straight way to a city where they could settle. Let them give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men, for he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things.”¹

ix. Folly in national life 10:16-20

16 *Woe to you, O land whose king was a servant and whose princes feast in the morning.*

17 *Blessed are you, O land whose king is of noble birth and whose princes eat at a proper time — for strength and not for drunkenness.*

18 *If a man is lazy, the rafters sag; if his hands are idle, the house leaks.*

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

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

In introducing these verses, Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, writes: “The whole section reaches a rhetorical climax. Already the Preacher has viewed wisdom and folly in their bearing upon the nation as a whole (10:4-7). Now the cruciality of the issue is pleaded as he weighs up the two ways through life which point to two national destinies: the way of disaster (*Woe...*, v.16) and the way of safety (*Blessed...*, v.17).”

The Hebrew of v.16 reads literally: “Woe to you o land when your king is a child and your princes eat in the morning.” The Hebrew word rendered “child,” “servant” in *The New International Version*, is *na`ar*, which means “boy.” The connotation “servant” seems to be implied. We find it in the latter sense in the verse: “Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a *servant*, who hurried to prepare it.”² The Hebrew word for “noble” is *chor*, which literally means “white or pure,” referring to character. It is generally translated “noble,” as in: “There at Riblah the king of Babylon slaughtered the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes and also killed all the *nobles* of Judah.”³

Eaton observes about this: “A nation’s first need is a mature leader. RSV *is a child* refers not to age but to general maturity. The term often means ‘servant’ In 1 Kings 3:7 Solomon considers himself ‘a child’ and recognizes his immaturity as a disadvantage to be remedied only by God-given wisdom. *The son of free men* is one whose position in society enables him to act with an independent spirit. The contrast, therefore, is not so much between young and old as between a mature, bold approach to life and an immature, servile manner. Another criterion of national wisdom is self-control. Drinking in the early hours of the day marked a dissolute, slothful approach to life, with emphasis on luxury and personal indulgence. As we have frequently seen (*e.g.* 9:7-10) personal enjoyment had a place for the Preacher; and the antithesis to indulgence here is not asceticism, but self-control. The mark of such pleasure is that it is to be enjoyed ‘in a state of strength,’ not ‘in a state of drunkenness.’ The enjoyment of life’s pleasures as the outworking of a position of wisdom-strength is a mark of national bliss; the pseudo-enjoyment of self-centered indulgence is a mark of national danger.”

The Hebrew text of v.18 reads literally: “By much slothfulness the building decays; and through idleness of the hands the house drops through.” The general consensus of Bible scholars is that the topic is still the nation, not just a single building. The Hebrew word for “slothfulness” is *atslah*, but it is used in the text as *ba`atsaltayim*, making it a double. Some translate it as “two idle hands.” The “ship of state” is in need of repairs but no one cares or moves a finger. The prophet Amos speaks of similar conditions in the

1. Ps. 107:4-9
2. Gen. 18:7
3. Jer. 39:6

Northern Kingdom at a later date. The tent of David is in disrepair, but no one care, except God. We read: “Woe to you who are complacent in Zion, and to you who feel secure on Mount Samaria, you notable men of the foremost nation, to whom the people of Israel come! You put off the evil day and bring near a reign of terror. You lie on beds inlaid with ivory and lounge on your couches. You dine on choice lambs and fattened calves. You strum away on your harps like David and improvise on musical instruments. You drink wine by the bowlful and use the finest lotions, but you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph. ‘In that day I will restore David’s fallen tent. I will repair its broken places, restore its ruins, and build it as it used to be, so that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations that bear my name,’ declares the Lord, who will do these things.”¹

Some Bible scholars find it difficult to see the connection between v.19 and the preceding texts. If the deplorable condition of the country is due to indifference of its leaders, this verse may depict their attitude and lifestyle. It is not unusual to see corruption in leadership and illegal use of state funds for personal enrichment. The Teacher describes the feasting of the nobles and refers to the means employed. It is not so much the use of wine that is condemned here but the means used to pay for the excessive use of it. It is while the upper class is feasting that the rest of the country is suffering.

This leaves us with the last and most intriguing verse of the chapter, v.20. The Hebrew reads literally: “Do not in your thoughts and in your bedroom curse the king: and in your bedroom curse not the rich for a bird of the air shall carry the voice, and that which has wings shall carry the matter.” There are two different Hebrew words which are translated “bedroom.” The first is *cheder*, which refers to the place, “an apartment,” the second is *mishkab*, a bed, which can refer to sleep or that which is done in bed. The second word may express the way we sometimes use it when we say: “He went to bed with her.”

The Pulpit Commentary comments: “Under the above mentioned circumstances, a man might be tempted to abuse and curse these ill-conditioned rulers. Koheleth warns against this error; it is dangerous to give way to it (comp. ... Exodus 22:28). In ... Ecclesiastes 8:2 the motive for submission to the king is placed on religious grounds; in the present passage the ground is prudence, regard for personal safety, which might be compromised by plain speaking, especially when one has to do with such depraved and unscrupulous persons. We may compare David’s generous conduct to his cruel persecutor Saul, whom he spared because he was the Lord’s anointed (... 1 Samuel 24:6, 10; 26:9, etc.; ... 2 Samuel 1:14) ... To encourage such thoughts in the mind is to run the risk of openly expressing them at some unguarded moment; for ‘out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh.’”

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, observes: “Neither the king nor the leadership of a nation (*the rich*) must give rise to foolish anger in the wise man’s life. The verse challenges us to remain calm in days of national sloth, immaturity and indulgence, and calls for a submissive approach to authority, giving an expedient reason for obedience. The word translated *thoughts* has been rendered ‘repose’ or ‘bedroom,’ but the common translation is perfectly justified. ‘A little bird told me’ is a proverb which appears in a variety of forms and cultures, including Aristophanes’ *The Birds* and the Hittite *Tale of Elkuhirsu*. Everything that has been said about wisdom and folly points again to the main lesson of Ecclesiastes: the need to face life as it really is, and take our life day by day from the hand of a sovereign God.”

III. THE CALL TO DECISION 11:1-12:8

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, in introducing this section, writes: “Already the book of Ecclesiastes has had an element of exhortation, for the life of faith has been not merely described but commended. The life of indifference and unbelief has been placed against it on the scales and been found wanting. Now the preacher calls for a verdict. Often the proverbs of ch. 11 have been treated by expositors

1. Amos 6:1,3-6;11,12

as merely a series of shrewd maxims concerning everyday life, dealing only with commerce or sensible agricultural methods (1, 4, 6). It is necessary, however, to understand the over-all thrust as going beyond that, for the Preacher is concerned not merely with details, but with life as a whole. The following factors support this approach. First, the section is bound together by sustained exhortation, indicating that the whole section is concerned with decisive obedience. Second, the note of command comes to an impressive and sustained climax in 12:1-7. It is noteworthy that the passage constitutes a single sentence in English translation. The repeated 'before...before...before (1, 2, 6) rivets our mind to the initial command 'Remember your Creator.' Third, the whole section highlights the nature of commitment to Israelite theism. Through a series of minor appeals in ch. 11 flows the theme of faith in the Creator God who is in control of men and their affairs. These epigrammatic commands add up to a grand total underlined in 12:1-8. The whole section is a sustained call to decision, presented in such a way as to call attention to the nature of that decision. We must respond to God without delay, in whole-hearted faith, whether life is adverse or comfortable, for we are marching towards the day of our death. The Preacher uses homely images in emphasizing the urgency of his message. Modern thinkers might prefer at times to use abstract terms, and we must not miss the Preacher's point in our enjoyment of his picturesque style. For the whole section, coming at this particular point in the book and achieving an elegiac climax of rare beauty in 12:1-7, calls with great urgency for faith in the Preacher's God, the God of Israel."

A. The venture of faith 11:1-6

1 Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it again.

2 Give portions to seven, yes to eight, for you do not know what disaster may come upon the land.

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

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

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

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

The Pulpit Commentary states here: "Approaching the end of his treatise, Koheleth, in view of apparent anomalies in God's moral government, and the difficulties that meet man in his social and political relations, proceeds to give his remedies for this state of things. Leaving alone unanswerable questions, man's duty and happiness are found in activity, especially in doing all the good in his power, for he knows not how soon he himself may stand in need of help. This is *the first remedy for the perplexities of life*. The wise man will not charge himself with results."

Literally taken, the recommendation to throw bread upon the water seems irreconcilable to the assurance that it will not be lost but found again after several days. People who throw bread on water nowadays mainly do it to feed ducks or fish. It is not unreasonable to look for further meaning beyond the poetic words, which is what most interpreters do.

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary observes: "There is no certain explanation of this proverb. Traditionally, it has been seen as an exhortation to liberality or charity, which one is to cast (lit., (send forth) before others without any immediate realization of gain, but which will return someday to reward its giver (cf. Luke 16:9). But perhaps the verse is to be read. 'Cast your bread upon the waters (strange though this may seem), yet you may find it after many days.' Read thus, it refers to the uncertainty of this life, in which even an apparently unwise action may yield reward."

According to *The Adam Clarke's Commentary*, "The Targum understands it of giving bread to poor sailors." *Barnes' Notes* comments: "There ought to be no division between Eccl 10:20 and Eccl 11:1. As if

in contrast to the self-indulgence described in Eccl 10:16-19, the opposite virtue, readiness to give to others, is inculcated. The use of the word 'bread' in both Eccl 10:19 ... and Eccl 11:1 points the contrast. Verse 1. The verse means: 'Show hospitality, even though the corresponding return of hospitality to you may seem improbable; nevertheless, be hospitable in faith.' Compare Luke 14:13-14; Heb 13:2. Some interpreters (not unreasonably) understand by 'bread' the seed from the produce of which bread is made. Seed cast upon the fertile soil flooded by the early rains would be returned to the sower in autumn with large increase."

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, seeks the meaning in mercantile shipping, stating: "The first proverb crystallizes the essence of the Preacher's appeal: it is a call to a venture of faith. The allusion is to the element of trust in much ancient business. Ships on commercial voyages might be long delayed before any profit resulted. Yet one's goods had to be committed to them. Solomon's fleet which brought back 'gold, silver, ivory, apes and peacocks' (1 Ki. 10:22) sailed once in three years. Similarly the Preacher has called his readers to take life as from the hand of God, and to enjoy it despite its trials and perplexities. Such a life contains within it the elements of trust and adventure (*Cast*), demands total commitment (for *your bread* is used in the sense of 'goods,' livelihood,' as in Dt. 8:3; Pr. 31:14), and has a forward look to it (*you will find*), a reward which requires patience (*after many days*)."

Looking at the various interpretations of the verse, the overall conclusion leaves us with a puzzle. There is an element of risk-taking, of doing things that go against human logic. There is a recognition that some things, rather many, are beyond our control. But faith takes into account that God is in control of everything. That fact gives us the assurance that what we give away liberally in this life on earth will yield a harvest in eternity that is way out of proportion to what could be expected here below. "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."¹ And: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."²

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary remarks: "The very argument which covetous men use against liberality—namely, that bad times may come—the wise man uses for it. The only gain which you can ensure to yourself in the prospect of bad times, which may rob you of all your earthly goods, is that heavenly gain which you make by now giving liberally to the poor, and to the cause of God."

The Hebrew word for "portion" in v.2 is *cheleq*, which literally means "smoothness of speech," or "allotment." *The King James Version* sometimes renders it "flattery." But in the context of Ecclesiastes it means "portion." The word is used for the first time in the verse where Abraham, after defeating the army of five kings, says to the king of Sodom: "I will accept nothing but what my men have eaten and the *share* that belongs to the men who went with me — to Aner, Eshcol and Mamre. Let them have their *share*."³ It is also used in the verse: "The Lord said to Aaron, 'You will have no inheritance in their land, nor will you have any *share* among them; I am your *share* and your inheritance among the Israelites."⁴

Jesus' *Parable of the Crooked Manager* comes to mind. In that case the Hebrew meaning of "smoothness" is evident in the slick way the manager uses his master's business relations to invest in his own future. Jesus comments on the story: "I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings."⁵

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1. Luke 6:38
 2. Matt. 6:19-21
 3. Gen. 14:24
 4. Num. 18:20
 5. Luke 16:9

The Pulpit Commentary comments on the mentality of the crooked manager, (if that is what the Preacher advertises here): “It seems a low motive on which to base charitable actions; but men act on such secondary motives every day, and the moralist cannot ignore them. In the Book of Proverbs secondary and worldly motives are largely urged as useful in the conduct of life St. Paul reminds us that we some day may need a brother’s help (... Galatians 6:1).” The same commentary continues: “The Fathers have spiritualized the passage, so as to make it of Christian application, far away indeed from Koheleth’s thought. Thus St. Gregory: ‘By the number *seven* is understood the whole of this temporal condition... this is shown more plainly when the number *eight* is mentioned after it. For when another number besides follows after seven, it is set forth by this very addition, that this temporal state is brought to an end and closed by eternity. For by the number *seven* Solomon expressed the present time, which is passed by periods of seven days. But by the number *eight* he designated eternal life, which the Lord made known to us by his resurrection. For he rose in truth on the Lord’s day, which, as following the seventh day, *i.e.* the sabbath, is found to be the eighth from the creation. But it is well said, ‘Give portions,’ etc. As if it were plainly said, ‘So dispense temporal goods, as not to forget to desire those that are eternal. For thou oughtest to provide for the future by well-doing, who knowest not what tribulation succeeds from the future judgment.’”

The connection of v.3 and following with the preceding verses is not very obvious and has puzzled Bible scholars. Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, writes: “Some understand the point of this verse to be: God’s plan is relentless, therefore carry on regardless ... Others: Imitate the generosity of the clouds, your destiny cannot be changed after death (Luther). Others: One cannot control nature, so be prepared for the worst.” Eaton continues by quoting others who observe that “the two form a chiasmus: rain – wind – wind – rain. The first picture is a storm with heavy rain and violent wind. The second seems to be an uprooted tree. The point is not that the tree could not be moved, but that its fall could not have been anticipated. ... The sudden fall of the tree thus contrasts with the gathering of the storm-clouds, which can be watched with apprehension. The two points involved, therefore seem to be: Mankind cannot control the difficulties of life, (i) even when he anticipates them, and (ii) because often there are totally unexpected events. These points are made in terms of the farmer’s problems, but the over-all unit of 11:1 – 12:8 gives them wider application.”

The Pulpit Commentary states about v.3: “This verse is closely connected with the preceding paragraph. The misfortune there intimated may fall at any moment; this is as certain as the laws of nature, unforeseen, uncontrollable. When the clouds are overcharged with moisture, they deliver their burden upon the earth, according to laws which man cannot alter; these are of irresistible necessity, and must be expected and endured. And if the tree fall toward the south, etc.; or, it may be, *in the south*; *i.e.* let it fall where it will; the particular position is of no importance. When the tempest overthrows it, it lies where it has fallen. When the evil day comes, we must bend to the blow, we are powerless to avert it; the future can be neither calculated nor controlled. The next verse tells how the wise man acts under such circumstances. Christian commentators have argued from this clause concerning the unchangeable state of the departed — that there is no repentance in the grave; that what death leaves them judgment shall find them. Of course, no such thought was in Koheleth’s mind; nor do we think that the inspiring Spirit intended such meaning to be wrung from the passage. Indeed, it may be said that, as it stands, the clause does not bear this interpretation. The fallen or felled tree is not at once fit for the master’s use; it has to be exposed to atmospheric influences seasoned, tried. It is not left in the place where it lay, nor in the condition in which it was; so that, if we reason from this analogy, we must conceive that there is some ripening, purifying process in the intermediate state. St. Gregory speaks thus: ‘For when, at the moment of the falling of the human being, either the Holy Spirit or the evil spirit receives the soul departed from the chambers of the flesh, he will keel, it with him for ever without change, so that neither, once exalted, shall it be precipitated into woe, nor, once plunged into eternal woes, any further arise to take the means of escape.’”

In vv.4-6 the Teacher wants us to draw the right conclusion of the fact that most issues in life are beyond human control, but that this fact does not dismiss us of our obligation to take responsibility for our own actions. There is a difference between being cautious and reckless. The fact that we cannot understand

the mystery of birth does not mean that women should not get pregnant and that children ought not to be born. The fact that there will be storms and floods does not mean that we must not sow and reap.

B. The life of joy 11:7-10

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

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

9 Be happy, young man, while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see, but know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment.

10 So then, banish anxiety from your heart and cast off the troubles of your body, for youth and vigor are meaningless.

It is painful to have chosen an outline for Ecclesiastes from a trusted author like Michael A. Eaton and then come to the conclusion that one does not really agree with his interpretation. That is the point we seem to have come to now. It is difficult to see in the section before us nothing but a celebration of life as Eaton proposes. What the Teacher says here corresponds with the witty remark George Bernard Shaw made about youth: "Youth is a wonderful thing; it is too bad it is wasted on young people!"

The Teacher stands here as an old man, looking back upon his own life, remembering how easy and painless it used to be. Looking forward, the only visible future is death, which he declares to be totally meaningless. The picture that would illustrate his philosophy would be of a musician on death row, who has been informed of the time of his execution and to whom the prison guard says: "Why don't you play us some nice music!"

That is the first reaction we feel in looking at the Teacher's utterances. Another way is to see the enjoyment he advertises here as a protest against death. As if the musician takes up his instrument in the face of death and plays his most beautiful tones as a remonstrance in the same way as a martyr singing psalms while being burned at the stake. Whether we can read this in the Preacher's words or not I do not know, but it would be the interpretation I prefer.

If "Everything to come is meaningless" refers to death, we could interpret this positively in the sense that, if death were in fact the end of everything, life would be meaningless. To live life meaningfully in the hope of the resurrection would indeed be the ultimate way to protest the devil's propaganda. Taking a second deeper look at the Teacher's pessimistic words make us believe that he may want us to contradict him. That is not a bad method of teaching if the class to be taught consists of intelligent students.

A note of warning to the youthful audience the Teacher envisions here is that youth is not a lasting condition. This fact is not something many young people take into consideration. As we grow up and we feel our physical energy and mental capacity increasing, we may conceive the thought that life is a continuous upswing. Old age takes many by surprise. Some of us get over the hill and enjoy the view, but that is not the general reaction to physical and mental wear that creeps up on us. The problem with youth is that the future is blocked from view; the wisdom of old age is in a rearview mirror.

The Pulpit Commentary comments: "The apodosis begins with 'rejoice,' and the translation is, *For if a man live many years, he ought to rejoice in them all.* Koheleth has said (ver. 7) that life is sweet and precious; now he adds that it is therefore man's duty to enjoy it; God has ordained that he should do so, whether his days on earth be many or few. *Yet let him remember the days of darkness.* The apodosis is continued, and the clause should run, *And remember,* etc. 'The days of darkness' do not mean times of calamity as contrasted with the light of prosperity, as though the writer were bidding one to be mindful of the prospect of disastrous change in the midst of happiness; nor, again, the period of old age distinguished from the glowing light of youth The days of darkness signify the life in Hades, far from the light of the

sun, gloomy, uncheered. The thought of this state should not make us hopeless and reckless, like the sensualists whose creed is to 'eat and drink, for tomorrow we die' (... 1 Corinthians 15:82...), but rouse us to make the best of life, to be contented and cheerful, doing our daily duties with the consciousness that this is our day of labor and joy, and that 'the night cometh when no man can work' (... John 9:4). Wisely says Beu-Sira, 'Whatsoever thou takest in hand, remember the end, and thou shalt never do amiss' (Ecclus. 7:36). ... *For they shall be many; rather, that they shall be many.* This is one of the things to remember. The time in Sheol will be long. How to be passed — when, if ever, to end — he says not; he looks forward to a dreary protracted period, when joy shall be unattainable, and therefore he bids men to use the present, which is all they can claim. *All that cometh is vanity.* All that comes after this life is ended, the great future, is nothingness; shadow, not substance; a state from which is absent all that made life, and over which we have no control. Koheleth had passed the sentence of vanity on all the pursuits of the living man; now he gives the same verdict upon the unknown condition of the departed soul (comp, ... Ecclesiastes 9:5). Till the gospel had brought life and immortality to light, the view of the future was dark and gloomy. So we read in Job (10:21, 22), 'I go whence I shall not return, even to the land of darkness and of the shadow of death; a land of thick darkness, as darkness itself; a land of the shadow of death, without any order, and where the light is as darkness.' ... Ver. 9. — *Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth.* Koheleth continues to inculcate the duty of rational enjoyment. 'In youth' is during youth; not in the exercise of, or by reason of, thy fresh, unimpaired powers. The author urges his hearers to begin betimes to enjoy the blessing with which God surrounds them. Youth is the season of innocent, unalloyed pleasure; then, if ever, casting aside all tormenting anxiety concerning an unknown future, one may, as it is called, enjoy life. *Let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth.* Let the lightness of thy heart show itself in thy bearing and manner, even as it is said in Proverbs (... Proverbs 15:13), 'A merry heart maketh a cheerful countenance.' *Walk in the ways of thine heart* (comp. ... Isaiah 57:17). Where the impulses and thoughts of thy heart lead thee. The wording looks as if the personal identity, the 'I,' and the thought were distinct. We have a similar severance in ... Ecclesiastes 7:25, only there the personality directs the thought, not the thought the 'I,' *And in the sight of thine eyes.* Follow after that on which thy eyes fix their regard (... Ecclesiastes 2:10); for, as Job says (... Job 31:7), 'The heart walketh after the eyes.' ... To counteract the supposed evil teaching, some have credited Koheleth with stern irony. He is not recommending pleasure, say they, but warning against it. 'Go on your way,' he cries, 'do as you list, sow your wild oats, live dissolutely, but remember that retribution will some day overtake you.' But the counsel is seriously intended, and is quite consistent with many other passages which teach the duty of enjoying life as man's lot and part (see ... Ecclesiastes 2:24; 3:12,13,22; 5:18; 8:15, etc.). The seeming opposition between the recommendation here and in ... Numbers 15:39 is easily reconciled. The injunction in the Pentateuch, which was connected with a ceremonial observance, ran thus: 'Remember all the commandments of the Lord, and do them; and that ye go not about after your own heart, and your own eyes, after which ye used to go awhoring.' Here unlawful pleasures, contrary to the commandments, are forbidden; Ecclesiastes urges the pursuit of innocent pleasures, such as will stand scrutiny. ... It is not Epicureanism, even in a modified form, that is here encouraged. For moderate and lawful pleasure Koheleth has always uttered his sanction, but the pleasure is to be such as God allows. This is to be accepted with all gratitude in the present, as the future is wholly beyond our ken and our control; it is all that is placed in our power, and it is enough to make life more than endurable. And then to temper unmixed joy, to prove that he is not recommending mere sensuality, to correct any wrong impression which the previous utterances may have conveyed, the writer adds another thought, a somber reflection which shows the religious conclusion to which he is working up. *But know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment (mishpat).* It has been doubted what is meant by 'judgment,' whether present or future, men's or God's. It has been taken to mean — God will make thy excesses prove scourges, by bringing on thee sickness, poverty, a miserable old age; or these distresses come as the natural consequences of youthful sins; or obloquy shall follow thee, and thou shall meet with deserved censure from thy fellow-men. But every one must feel that the solemn ending of this paragraph points to something more grave and important than any such results as those mentioned above, something that is concerned with that indefinable future which is ever looming in

the dim horizon. Nothing satisfies the expected conclusion but a reference to the eternal judgment in the world beyond the grave. Shadowy and incomplete as was Koheleth's view of this great assize, his sense of God's justice in the face of the anomalies of human life was so strong that he can unhesitatingly appeal to the conviction of a coming inquisition, as a motive for the guidance of action and conduct. That in other passages he constantly apprehends earthly retribution, as the Pentateuch taught, and as his countrymen had learned to expect (see ... Ecclesiastes 2:26; 3:17; 7:17, 18), is no argument that he is not here rising to a higher view. Rather, the fact that the doctrine of temporal reward and punishment is found by experience to fail in many cases (comp. ... Ecclesiastes 8:14) has forced him to state his conclusion that this life is not the end-of-everything, and that there is another existence in which actions shall be tried, justice done, retribution awarded. The statement is brief, for he knew nothing more than the fact, and could add nothing to it. His conception of the soul's condition in Sheol (see ... Ecclesiastes 9:5,6,10) seems to point to some other state or period for this final judgment; but whether a resurrection is to precede this awful trial is left in uncertainty here, as elsewhere in the Old Testament."

C. 'Today, when you hear his voice ...' 12:1-8

1 Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, "I find no pleasure in them"—

2 before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark, and the clouds return after the rain;

3 when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men stoop, when the grinders cease because they are few, and those looking through the windows grow dim;

4 when the doors to the street are closed and the sound of grinding fades; when men rise up at the sound of birds, but all their songs grow faint;

5 when men are afraid of heights and of dangers in the streets; when the almond tree blossoms and the grasshopper drags himself along and desire no longer is stirred. Then man goes to his eternal home and mourners go about the streets.

6 Remember him — before the silver cord is severed, or the golden bowl is broken; before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, or the wheel broken at the well,

7 and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

8 "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Everything is meaningless!"

These verses are among the most outstanding examples of poetry. Poetic expression has reached a pinnacle of beauty here and that in a subject that is one of deterioration and frailty which ends in death. The Teacher manages to make old age and death look beautiful, while at the same time exclaiming that it is man's enemy that robs life of his meaning and beauty.

We must note that the words are addressed to young people. That is the reason some Bible scholars complain about the chapter division here, claiming that the opening words of chapter twelve are actually part of chapter eleven.

The advice is "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth." The Hebrew word for Creator used here is *bowr^a eykaa* which is a plural form of the verb *bara'*, "to create." We find it in the first verse of the Bible: "In the beginning God *created* the heavens and the earth."¹ The general gist of the advice seems to be that a relationship with the Creator is best begun early in life. It is true that most people who enter into a lifelong relationship with God do so during childhood or adolescence. Accepting Christ later in life or toward the end is not impossible, but it is not common and more difficult.

1. Gen. 1:1

The advice places the following verses into a dark and bad light, depicting old age as something undesirable, although unavoidable. It has been said that the only antidote against growing old is to die young, which is not a desirable alternative.

It must be noted that the Teacher's description of old age pertains to physical deterioration. There is no poetic equivalent in the text for mental decline, which, however, can accompany the former. That cerebral capacity can diminish may be a warning implied in the advice to begin remembering God while still young. There is no guarantee to the young person that he will have the ability to turn to God toward the end of life. That is the period the Teacher calls "the days of trouble," Hebrew: *yowm ra*, "evil day." The word *yowm* may actually refer to "the heat of the day." It is about this "evil day" that the Teacher bursts out in a poetic language that is unparalleled in all of Scripture!

The Pulpit Commentary states: "The phrase refers to the grievances and inconveniences of old age, which are further and graphically described in the following verses, though whether the expressions therein used regard literal anatomical facts, or are allegorical representations of the gradual decay of the faculties, has been greatly disputed. Probably both opinions contain a partial truth."

There may be a veiled reference to mental decline in the words that qualify life's last days on earth in the phrase: "I find no pleasure in them." The Hebrew word for "pleasure" is *chephets*, which refers to "pleasure," "desire," or "delight." It is the time when the joy of living is not longer there, because the body no longer reacts to the normal stimuli. Then follows a list of failure of bodily functions. About this, *The Pulpit Commentary* writes: "Under these figures the evil days spoken of above, the advent and infirmities of old age, are represented. It would be endless and unprofitable to recount the explanations of 'the terms used in the following verses. Every commentator, ancient and modern, has exerted his ingenuity to force the poet's language into the shape which he has imagined for it. But ... there are at least two distinct lines of interpretation which have found favor with the great majority of expositors. One of these regards the imagery as applicable to the effects of a heavy storm upon a house and its inmates, explaining every detail under this notion; the other regards the terms used as referring to the man himself, adumbrating the gradual decay of old age, the various members and powers that are affected being represented under tropes and images, Both interpretations are beset with difficulties, and are only with some straining and accommodation forced into a consistent harmony. But the latter seems to us to present fewer perplexities than the other, and we have adopted it here. At the same time, we think it expedient to give the other view, together with our own, as there is much to be said in its favor, and many great writers have declared themselves on its side."

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary states: "These verses are probably, then, an allegory on the decay of old age and the approach of death. The figures of the sun, the light, the moon, the stars, and the clouds depict old age as a storm that gathers and obscures the light and the heavenly bodies, so that there is no warmth or brightness, that is, no enjoyment of life."

The Adam Clarke's Commentary observes about the advice to young people: "There is another consideration which should weigh with you: should you live to old age, it is a very disadvantageous time to begin to serve the Lord in. Infirmities press down both body and mind, and the oppressed nature has enough to do to bear its own infirmities; and as there is little time, so there is generally less inclination, to call upon the Lord. Evil habits are strengthened by long continuance; and every desire and appetite in the soul is a strong hold for Satan. There is little time for repentance, little for faith, none for obedience. The evil days are come, and the years in which you will feelingly be obliged to say, Alas! 'we have no pleasure in them;' and, what is worse, the heart is hardened through the deceitfulness of sin."

The first mention is light that diminishes, which probably refers to eyesight. We remember Jesus' words about the eye: "Your eye is the lamp of your body. When your eyes are good, your whole body also is full of light. But when they are bad, your body also is full of darkness. See to it, then, that the light within you is not darkness. Therefore, if your whole body is full of light, and no part of it dark, it will be completely lighted, as when the light of a lamp shines on you."¹ Jesus takes physical eyesight as an image of spiritual insight, which maybe a truth present in the Teacher's poem also. We express the same spiritual meaning in

the phrase: “I see the light.” Since there is another mention of the eyes in the following verse, “those looking through the windows,” eyesight here may be more referring to insight than to sight.

The Matthew Henry’s Commentary observes about the first image: “The decays and infirmities of old age are here elegantly described in figurative expressions, which have some difficulty in them to us now, who are not acquainted with the common phrases and metaphors used in Solomon’s age and language; but the general scope is plain—to show how uncomfortable, generally, the days of old age are. First, Then the sun and the light of it, the moon and the stars, and the light which they borrow from it, will be darkened. They look dim to old people, in consequence of the decay of their sight; their countenance is clouded, and the beauty and luster of it are eclipsed; their intellectual powers and faculties, which are as lights in the soul, are weakened; their understanding and memory fail them, and their apprehension is not so quick nor their fancy so lively as it has been; the days of their mirth are over (light is often put for joy and prosperity) and they have not the pleasure either of the converse of the day or the repose of the night, for both the sun and the moon are darkened to them. Secondly, Then the clouds return after the rain; as, when the weather is disposed to wet, no sooner has one cloud blown over than another succeeds it, so it is with old people, when they have got free from one pain or ailment, they are seized with another, so that their distempers are like a continual dropping in a very rainy day. The end of one trouble is, in this world, but the beginning of another, and deep calls unto deep. Old people are often afflicted with defluxions of rheum, like soaking rain, after which still more clouds return, feeding the humor, so that it is continually grievous, and therein the body, as it were, melts away.”

V.3 probably refers to the arms, “the keepers of the house,” the legs, or the shoulders “the strong men,” the teeth, “the grinders” that “are few,” and “those looking through the windows,” the eyes.

V.4 pertains to hearing, or its deficiency, contrasting beautifully the hearing of everyday sounds and understanding of conversation with the faint sounds that disturb sleep. *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* understands “the doors to the street” to refer to the lips. We read: “The doors—the lips, which are the doors by which the mouth is closed. Be shut in the streets—The cavities of the cheeks and jaws, through which the food may be said to travel before it is fitted by mastication or chewing to go down the esophagus into the stomach. The doors or lips are shut to hinder the food in chewing from dropping out; as the teeth, which prevented that before, are now lost.” But since most of the verse refers to sound, the ears seem to be the topic of the verse rather than the lips.

About the phrase “when men rise up at the sound of birds,” *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “This is a very difficult sentence, and has been very variously explained. It is usually taken to mean that the old man sleeps lightly and awakes (for ‘rises up’ may mean no more than that) at the chirrup of a bird. The objection to this interpretation is that it destroys the figurative character of the description, introducing suddenly the personal subject. Of course, it has another signification in the picture of the terror-stricken household; and many interpreters who thus explain the allegory translate the clause differently. Thus [one Bible scholar] renders, ‘The swallow rises to shriek,’ referring to the habits of that bird in stormy weather. But there are grammatical objections to this translation, as there are against another suggestion, ‘The bird (of ill omen) raises its voice.’ We need not do more than refer to the mystical elucidation which detects here a reference to the resurrection, the voice of the bird being the archangel’s trumpet which calls the dead from their graves. Retaining the allegory, we must translate the clause, ‘He [or, ‘it,’ *i.e.* the voice] rises to the bird’s voice;’ the old man’s voice becomes a ‘childish treble,’ like the piping of a little bird. The relaxation of the muscles of the larynx and other vocal organs occasions a great difference in the pitch or power of tone (compare what Hezekiah says ... Isaiah 38:14, ‘Like a crane or a swallow so did I chatter,’ though there it is the low murmur of sorrow and complaint that is meant).”

The Hebrew text of the latter portion of v.4 contains a reference that seems to be almost mythological, like the muses of the Greek mythology. It reads literally: “and shall be brought low all

1. Luke 11:34-36

daughters of the music.” There is an intriguing antithesis between the sound of the bird that keeps the old person from his sleep and the bird’s singing that can no longer be heard.

V.5 seems to suggest that old age comes with diminishing self-confidence. Fear creeps in where poise was present. Few people in their eighties volunteer for skydiving. (Excuse the anachronism). Older people use their canes to go out; some are afraid they will fall. The blossoming of the almond tree is not a reference to youth but to gray or white hair. For a dark-haired race like the Jews white hair was a sure sign of age. In The Book of Proverbs, Solomon wrote: “Gray hair is a crown of splendor; it is attained by a righteous life.”¹ And: “The glory of young men is their strength, gray hair the splendor of the old.”² The dragging grasshopper probably refers to failing gait in walking.

The word “desire” in v.5 is not the same as “pleasure” in v.1. The Hebrew word *'abiyownah* refers to the caperberry. *The New Living Translation* renders this: “the caperberry no longer inspires sexual desire.”

In the last part of the verse metaphors are dispensed with: “Then man goes to his eternal home and mourners go about the streets.” The Hebrew text reads: “because man goes to his long home, and the mourners go about in the street.” The Hebrew word, rendered “eternal” in *The New International Version* is *'owlam*, which literally means “(something) concealed,” or “the vanishing point.” The word is first used in the verse: “And the Lord God said, ‘The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.’”³

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, observes: “The explanation for this decay is now given: man is *en route* to a new home. Various expressions stress different aspects of the climax of decay which is death. First, the Hebrew participle *is going* underlines that ‘the going is a continuous act of dissolution which may involve many years in the case of some people’ ... Thus death is the climax of a process which begins in life – a Pauline touch (Rom. 8:10; Phil. 3:21). Second, the transition is irreversible, since it leads to an *eternal home*, a phrase found in the Egyptian Instructions of ‘Onchshonqy ... Third, the sadness inevitably linked with the process of dying is stressed literally, *the wailers go about outside*.” One objection to Eaton’s suggestion that a process, rather than an incident is emphasized, is the mention of the mourners. They are only employed when a person is actually deceased.

In v.6 the text returns to poetry in its most exquisite form. “Remember” is a reminder addressed to young people, a repeat of the admonition with which the chapter began. Then the actual moment of death is described, about which Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, writes: “The beauty of the words has a practical purpose: ‘Poetry begins in delight and ends in wisdom’ (Robert Frost). The final act of dying is pictured in four expressions, which divide into two pairs. In the first pair a golden bowl is attached to a silver cord or chain. When the chain *is removed* (Hebrew; a variant reading is *is unbound*) the bowl falls and is irreparably damaged. The image points to the value of life (*silver ... gold*), and the drama in the end of a life whose pieces cannot be put together again. The second pair of images visualizes a pitcher lowered into a well by a rope running round a wheel. Death is the smashing of the jar. The terse Hebrew ‘The wheel breaks into the well’ may be expanded ‘The wheel breaks so as to crash down into the well.’ The precise wording ‘gives us a picture of the ruined apparatus plus the wheel as they have crashed down into the old cistern ...’”

The image of the human soul as a device for drawing water out of a well is beautiful beyond imagination. It evokes truths that only the Holy Spirit could reveal to the human mind. For people who get their water from a faucet that connects them to a city-wide system, the picture lacks the meaning that it had for those in Solomon’s day and later, who would draw their water from wells. Water is essential for life. Here life is identified with the drawing of water.

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1. Prov. 16:31
 2. Prov. 20:29
 3. Gen. 3:22

In the New Testament the symbol is transferred from physical to spiritual life. We think particularly of the conversation of Jesus with the woman at the well in Samaria. Jesus said to her: “‘If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.’ ‘Sir,’ the woman said, ‘you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? ‘Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?’ Jesus answered, ‘Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.’”¹ In Solomon’s picture death is depicted as a breakdown at the well. David describes life in fellowship with God as drinking from God’s fountain: “You give them drink from your river of delights. For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light.”²

Not many Bible scholars agree with the above interpretation. *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* see in Solomon’s picture the breakdown of physical aspect, such as the severance of the spinal cord and aorta. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* partly agrees, stating: “The figure represents an expensive gold and silver lamp hung from the ceiling. Its chain is snapped so that it comes crashing to the ground. The oil spills out of the broken bowl, and the light is gone. Light is the symbol of life. The pitcher and the wheel continue the same idea, but from the symbolism of the drawing of water. The pitcher is broken, and so it can contain no more water, that is, life; the wheel is broken, so that water can no longer be drawn.”

In the last line of v.7 the Teacher returns to the Genesis account of man’s creation and demise, although in reversed order: “The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.”³ “By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.”⁴

The statement: “Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Everything is meaningless!” is more than a repetition of the theme of the book with which the Teacher had opened. It is even more than a beautiful frame that encloses the whole message of the book. In connection with the opening statement we commented that Solomon wanted to provoke a reaction to the meaning of life. We mentioned that “If everything is literally meaningless, then so is the Teacher’s statement! The fact that the Teacher makes an exception for his own words ought to give us a clue to understanding his message. If the word ‘meaning’ has lost its meaning, it means the death of language, it means the death of thought and emotions, the death of man. So far no one in the world has accepted that premise. There is obviously one missing element in the Teacher’s argument and that makes the message of the book a quest for the missing link to meaning.”

Here the statement is made at the end of life on earth. In the first chapter of the book Solomon stood at the cradle, here he stands at a graveside and he pronounces life as a whole meaningless. And if a graveyard is all that is left of life under the sun, then life is devoid of meaning.

The Pulpit Commentary observes about v.8: “It has been much questioned whether this verse is the conclusion of the treatise or the commencement of the epilogue. For the latter conclusion it is contended that it is only natural that the beginning of the final summing-up should start with the same words as the opening of the book (... Ecclesiastes 1:2); and that thus the conjunction ‘and,’ with which ver. 9 begins, is readily explained. But the treatise is more artistically completed by regarding this solemn utterance as the conclusion of the whole, ending with the same burden with which it began — the nothingness of earthly things. Koheleth has labored to show this, he has pursued the thought from beginning to end, through all circumstances and conditions, and he can only re-echo his melancholy refrain. *Vanity of vanities, saith the*

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1. John 4:10-14
 2. Ps. 36:8,9
 3. Gen. 2:7
 4. Gen. 3:19

Preacher. He does not follow the destiny of the immortal spirit; it is not his purpose to do so; his theme is the fragility of mortal things, their unsatisfying nature, the impossibility of their securing man's happiness: so his voyage lands him at the point whence he set forth, though he has learned and taught faith in the interval. If all is vanity, there is behind and above all a God of inflexible justice, who must do right, and to whom we may safely trust our cares and perplexities. *Koheleth,* "Preacher," here has the article, *the Koheleth*, as if some special reference was made to the meaning of the name — he who has been debating, or haranguing, or gathering together, utters finally his careful verdict. This is the sentence of the ideal Solomon, who has given his experiences in the preceding pages."

IV. EPILOGUE 12:9-14

9 *Not only was the Teacher wise, but also he imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs.*

10 *The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true.*

11 *The words of the wise are like goads, their collected sayings like firmly embedded nails — given by one Shepherd.*

12 *Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them. Of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body.*

13 *Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole [duty] of man.*

14 *For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.*

Bible scholars have argued whether the author identifies himself as King Solomon in this epilogue or whether he reveals that he impersonated the famous king. *The Pulpit Commentary* states: "The author throws aside his disguise, and speaks of his object in composing the book, with a glance at the historical Solomon whom he had personated. That he uses the third person in relation to himself is nothing uncommon in historical memoirs, etc. Thus Daniel writes; and St. John, Thucydides, Xenophon, Caesar, mask their personality by dropping their identity with the author (comp. also ... Ecclesiastes 1:2; 7:27). The attestation that follows is compared with that at the end of St. John's Gospel (... John 21:24), and is plainly intended to confirm the authority of the writer, and to enforce on the hearer the conviction that, though Solomon himself did not compose the work, it has every claim to receive attention, and possesses intrinsic value."

Another question is whether this epilogue is from the same hand as the rest of the book, or whether an editor added it as a note of explanation. "Not only was the Teacher wise, but also he imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs." If Solomon wrote those words, he cannot be accused of an excess of humility. On the other hand, the fact that Solomon's wisdom was a gift from God,¹ and denying that one has received a gift is not a demonstration of humility either.

In the reference to the many proverbs the author of Ecclesiastes wrote, he could be identified as the author of *The Book of Proverbs*. The testimony of Solomon's life also states: "He spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five."²

Michael A. Eaton, in *Ecclesiastes*, states on v.11: "The goad (*dorbânâ*) is mentioned in the Old Testament only here and in 1 Samuel 13:21 (*dorbân*). It was probably a large sharp-pointed stake used to prod an animal. The nail (*maæmer*, elsewhere spelled with a different sibilant, *masmer*) ranged from the large gold nails used in Solomon's temple (2 Ch. 3:9) to the smaller iron nails used for 'doors ... and ... clamps' (1 Ch. 22:3). The two words speak of the twofold effect of the Preacher's words, which stimulate to

1. I Kings 4:29

2. I Kings 4:32

action and establish teaching in the memory. The phrase ‘masters of assemblies/collection’ (Heb.) is probably correctly rendered *collected sayings* (RSV). The Hebrew idiom ‘master of x’ is used to mean ‘a person or thing whose dominant characteristic is x.’ The meaning here depends on whether people (assemblies) or things (collections) are in mind. The latter is more likely because of the parallelism: *The saying of the wise...goads...collected sayings...nails*. The *Shepherd* has been taken to refer to the king (cf. 1 Sa. 25:7) or to God himself (cf. Pss. 23:1; 80:1). The latter is more likely, since the name ‘Preacher’ has already been given to the originator of the material of the book (vv.9f). Although his words are the result of his own reflections, at the same time they come from God. There is here, therefore, a doctrine of inspiration. The Preacher (or his editor) is conscious of his own activity (v.10) with regard to both the form (v.9) and the content (v.10) of his work; yet he contends that the finished product is the word of God as well as the word of man. There are different kinds of inspiration within Scripture. Some involve a high degree of personal involvement and reflection on the part of the inspired writer; at the other end of the scale is the writer who records a revelation presented by an angelic messenger, which may totally bewilder the recipient. Wisdom-inspiration is un-dramatic in its mode; the world of the Spirit and the reflection of the writer from an inseparable continuum. Wise men as well as prophets ‘moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God’ (2 Pet. 1:21).”

The admonition “Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them” reminds us of the warning the Apostle John issues at the end of *Revelation*: “I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.”¹ But it seems that in the context of Ecclesiastes the warning does not refer to tampering with the inspired Word of God.

The addition: “Of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body” sounds more like “writers’ fatigue” than spiritual admonition. But there is more depth in Solomon’s observation than appears on the surface. The Teacher does not merely say that teaching and learning are occupations that are physically exhausting, however true that may be. He may be referring here to the way knowledge entered this world by the door of sin. There may be a reference to the tree in Paradise that was called “the tree of knowledge of good and evil.” Satan succeeded in making our first parents fall by eating its fruit, thus severing knowledge from fellowship with God. The source of all knowledge must be knowledge of God. In His last prayer for His disciples, Jesus said: “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”² Knowing Jesus Christ means being connected to the source of wisdom. In writing to the Colossians, the Apostle Paul stated: “My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”³ If that is what the Teacher is saying here to his son, he breaks through all the limitations he had imposed upon his own writing by considering everything from the perspective of “under the sun.” He draws our gaze to that which is beyond and eternal. Again, in the words of the Apostle Paul: “So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”⁴

The Pulpit Commentary comments on the last two verses of the book: “Perhaps the passage is best translated, *The end of the matter, when all is heard, is this*. The first word of this verse, *soph*, ‘end,’ is printed in the Hebrew text in large characters, in order to draw attention to the importance of what is coming.

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1. Rev. 22:18,19
 2. John 17:3
 3. Col. 2:2,3
 4. II Cor. 4:18

And its significance is rightly estimated. These two verses guard against very possible misconception, and give the author's real and mature conclusion. When this is received, all that need be said has been uttered. *Fear God (ha-Elohim), and keep his commandments.* This injunction is the practical result of the whole discussion. Amid the difficulties of the moral government of the world, amid the complications of society, varying and opposing interests and claims, one duty remained plain and unchanging — the duty of piety and obedience. *For this is the whole duty of man.* The Hebrew is literally, 'This is every man,' which is explained to mean, 'This is every man's duty.' ... For this man was made and placed in the world; this is his real object, the chief good which he has to seek, and which alone will secure contentment and happiness. The obligation is put in the most general terms as applicable to the whole human family; for God is not the God of the Jews only, but of Gentiles also (... Romans 3:29). **Ver. 14.** — The great duty just named is here grounded upon the solemn truth of a future judgment. *For God shall bring every work into judgment.* It will then be seen whether this obligation has been attended to or not. The judgment has already been mentioned (... Ecclesiastes 11:9); it is here more emphatically set forth as a certain fact and a strong motive power. The old theory of earthly retribution had been shown to break down under the experience of practical life; the anomalies which perplexed men's minds could only be solved and remedied by a future judgment under the eye of the omniscient and unerring God. *With every secret thing.* The Syriac adds, 'and manifest thing.' The Septuagint renders, 'with everything that has been overlooked' — a very terrible, but true, thought. The doctrine that the most secret things shall be revealed in the *dies irae* is often brought forward in the New Testament, which makes plain the personal nature of this final investigation, which the earlier Scriptures invest with a more general character (see ... Romans 2:16; 14:12; ... 1 Corinthians 4:5). So this wonderful book closes with the enunciation of a truth found nowhere else so clearly defined in the Old Testament, and thus opens the way to the clearer light shed upon the awful future by the revelation of the gospel."

Michael A. Eaton ends his commentary of *Ecclesiastes* with the observation: "The reader is urged to *keep his commandments*. The order of the two points (*fear...keep*) is significant. Conduct derives from worship. A knowledge of God leads to obedience, nor vice versa. This is the only place in *Ecclesiastes* where the *commands* of God are mentioned. The body of the book has simply placed two alternative views of life over against each other and the life of faith has been commended. Now in the epilogue, almost as an aside, it is pointed out that such a life will have implications. It must not be restricted to the Mosaic law. It refers to all that is known to be God's will. The last phrase reads literally: 'For this is the whole of man.' Elsewhere in *Ecclesiastes*, however, the 'whole of the man' is a Hebrew idiom for 'every man' (*cf.* 3:13; 5:10). The sense, therefore, is 'This applies to everyone.'"

"God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil." The Hebrew word rendered "every hidden thing" is *'alam*, which means: "to veil from sight." We find the word in Moses' psalm: "You have set our iniquities before you, our *secret* sins in the light of your presence." An appropriate response to this would be David's prayer: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."¹ Paul's words come to mind: "But everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for it is light that makes everything visible."² The Greek can be interpreted to read that everything upon which the light of God shines becomes light. The grace of God turns our night to day, our darkness into light. That is where faith comes in. For Jesus said about God's judgment upon our lives: "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed

1. Ps. 139:23,24

2. Eph. 5:13,14

over from death to life.”¹ For those who have crossed over from death to life while living on earth, nothing is meaningless; all is filled with the meaning of God’s glory.

Toccoa Falls, GA. September 26, 2009

1. John 5:24