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Highlights to Think About From This Month’s Reading

Introduction to Ecclesiastes (Ecclesiastes 1:1) Days 1-2

In the arrangement of the Hebrew Bible, Ecclesiastes is the last poetic and wisdom book within the Writings division of the Old Testament. It has been placed there as the fourth of the five Megilloth (“Scrolls,” i.e., festival scrolls), each of which is read during a different sacred occasion. In Jewish tradition, Ecclesiastes is read on the Sabbath during the Feast of Tabernacles.

The book’s title derives from its first verse, which begins in a number of English translations with the phrase “The words of the Preacher.” The Hebrew word translated “Preacher” is used as the book’s title in the Hebrew Bible—Qoheleth (sometimes spelled Qohelet or Koheleth), from a root meaning “gather” or “collect.” As one commentator notes: “The root qhl is used of ‘gathering’ or ‘assembling’ people but not of collecting things…. There are verbal forms [of that root word such as] nighal (‘to assemble, be gathered’) and highil (‘to gather an assembly’). Thus it is likely that Qoheleth is a name meaning ‘one who gathers an assembly [a convener] to address it,’ yet retaining an official force so that it can be used with the [definite] article: ‘the Qoheleth’ (7:27). The meaning is easily seen in 1 Kings 8:1[-2], where Solomon gathers (qhl) the people of Israel for worship, prayer and instruction. ‘Preacher’ is as good a translation as any” (Michael Eaton, Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary, TYNDALE OLD TESTAMENT COMMENTARIES, 1983, p. 23). Some, though, deeming “Preacher” as too religious a distinction or limited to public spoken exhortation, prefer the word “Teacher,” stressing the instructive function of the book. Yet “Preacher” can fit the public proclamation of godly wisdom, even if through writing rather than spoken address. Of course, it is possible that the book was originally delivered through a public spoken address. The Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, translated Qoheleth as Ekklesiastes, using this name as its title for the book. Derived from the word ekklesia, ‘[called-out] assembly, congregation, church,’ it simply means ‘preacher.’ [Adopted from the Greek] the Latin Ecclesiastes means ‘speaker before an assembly’” (The New Open Bible, 1990, introduction to Ecclesiastes).

Who is this unnamed Preacher? Evidence favors identifying him with King Solomon, though many modern scholars reject this notion—or at least the notion of his authorship. A few accept Solomon as the Preacher but consider the author of the book to be someone else who is quoting him, perhaps fictitiously—based, in part, on the recurrent phrase “says the Preacher.” However, the phrase “I, the Preacher” (1:12) should dispel this notion—the occurrences of “says the Preacher,” then, merely meaning the author is quoting himself in the third person as a teaching and literary device.

What factors point to Solomon? Note that he is referred to as “the son of David, king in Jerusalem” (verse 1). This could just mean the son of King David, or it could mean that the Preacher was the son of David and was himself king. In any case verse 12 says, “I, the Preacher, was king…. Now, since “son” in verse 1 can mean descendant, this on its own could indicate any king of David’s dynasty in Jerusalem. But verse 12 gives a further detail, stating, “I, the Preacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem” (emphasis added). This fits only Solomon, since every Davidic king in Jerusalem after him was king over only Judah, not Israel. But some argue that the phrase “was king” here shows that Solomon couldn’t be meant—since he was king until his death. This wording, though, would make sense from a king writing late in life after a long reign. Moreover, several commentators point out that the phrase could be translated, “I have been king,” indicating an ongoing situation, not one that had terminated before the time of writing. And some note that the meaning could be “I became king”—as an introductory statement to his exploratory pursuits thereafter, his position giving him the means for these.

A further identifier is the Preacher having said to himself: “Look, I have attained greatness, and have gained more wisdom than all who were before me in Jerusalem. My heart has understood great wisdom and knowledge” (verse 16). What later king and wisdom teacher in Jerusalem could legitimately claim to be wiser than all before him if the illustrious Solomon, the wisest ever (1 Kings 3:11-12; 4:29-34), was his ancestor? Added to unsurpassed wisdom, the Preacher’s pleasure-seeking (Ecclesiastes 2:1-3), great achievements (verses 4-6) and unparalleled wealth (verses 7-10) fit no one else but Solomon. Some take the claims of greater wisdom and wealth “than all who were before me in Jerusalem” (see 1:16; 2:7, 9) to mean there must have been numerous kings in Jerusalem before the Preacher—precluding him from being
Solomon since Solomon was preceded in Jerusalem by only his father David. Yet prior kings are not necessarily implied here—only prior wealthy and wise people. And even if prior kings are implied, it should be recognized that David and Solomon were preceded by Jebusite kings in Jerusalem.

Additionally, the proverbs in this book (for example, in Ecclesiastes 7 and 10) are similar to those of the book of Proverbs, a work of Solomon. We are told specifically that the Preacher “pondered and sought out and set in order many proverbs” (12:9). Like Proverbs, this book is addressed to “my son” (12:12)—which here could refer to an actual son or just the reader or hearer as a pupil of the wisdom teacher.

Jewish Talmudic tradition affirms Solomonic authorship of Ecclesiastes. As noted in the Bible Reading Program’s introduction to the Song of Solomon, this tradition also says that King Hezekiah and his colleagues, presumably including the prophet Isaiah, “wrote” Isaiah, Proverbs, the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes (Baba Bathra 15a). However, with the exception of Isaiah writing his own book, this wording most likely refers to scribal and editorial work in scriptural compilation and transmission (compare Proverbs 25:1). As further noted in the Bible Reading Program’s Song of Solomon introduction, the Midrash Rabbah, a Jewish commentary written before the mid-ninth century, contends that the Song was written early in Solomon’s life, Proverbs when he was somewhat older and Ecclesiastes late in his life, the explanation being that “when a man is young he composes songs; when he grows older he makes sententious remarks; and when he becomes an old man he speaks of the vanity of things.” Indeed, the perspective throughout the book of Ecclesiastes does seem to be that of an old man looking back over his life, especially considering the description of old age in 12:1-5.

In light of the emphatic righteous conclusion of the book, if Solomon wrote it near the end of his life that could seem to indicate—even though we have no record of it anywhere else in Scripture—that he eventually came to repent of his wayward years of debauchery and going along with the idolatry of his pagan wives (see 1 Kings 11). It could well be, and we would indeed hope, that Ecclesiastes is a record of Solomon looking over his life in his old age and seeing how he had strayed and finally coming to repentance. But this is by no means clear. The history about him in Kings and Chronicles has no mention of him repenting in the end. Rather we are left with an unflattering picture of him trying to assassinate Jeroboam, worshipping false gods to please his wives, overtaxing his people, and the prophetic sentence that his kingdom would be split in two because of his sins. It does seem odd for such an important person in Israel’s history to have repented and that not be recorded, when such a turnaround is recorded of less notable figures like Judah’s King Manasseh—a wicked ruler who came to a measure of repentance in his last days. Some say Solomon’s repentance is recorded—in Ecclesiastes. But there is no specific statement to that effect—only that the Preacher arrived at proper conclusions after his life investigation. Nehemiah’s later account of Solomon points out only the king’s sins in being led astray—again with no mention of repentance (Nehemiah 13:26). The Jewish historian Josephus records: “But although Solomon was become the most glorious of kings, and the best beloved by God, and exceeded in wisdom and riches those that had been rulers of the Hebrews before him, yet did not he persevere in this happy state till he died. Nay, he forsook the observation of the laws of his father, and came to an end no way suitable to our foregoing history of him . . . Nor did he imitate David, although God had twice appeared to him in his sleep, and exhorted him to imitate his father: so he died ingloriously . . . So Solomon died when he was already an old man . . . having been superior to all other kings in happiness, and riches, and wisdom, excepting that when he was growing into years he was deluded by women, and transgressed the law” (Antiquities of the Jews, Book 8, chap. 7, secs. 5, 8). So, despite the descriptions of old age in the book, perhaps Ecclesiastes was written in Solomon’s earlier years, before he was so far gone. Yet it’s still possible that Ecclesiastes represents his repentance in old age without that being recorded elsewhere, as strange at that would seem to be. Or perhaps he was regretful over the course of his life and wanted to pass on the conclusions of his investigation but remained unwilling to make the needed changes personally. Or it’s even possible that he came to a time of clarity and repentance late in life and wrote this book and then still ended up turning from God after that, as utterly horrible and tragic as that would be. There is just no way for us to know.

Again, though, a number of modern scholars reject Solomonic authorship of Ecclesiastes on various grounds. Besides those issues already addressed, some ask why Solomon would use a pseudonym rather than his own name as in Proverbs and the Song of Songs.
Perhaps, we may conjecture, he wanted to stress his role as wisdom teacher above his kingship and fame. After all, part of his point was to show the worthlessness of personal glory in this life. His most valuable contribution was not his notable reign but the wisdom and lessons he would pass on to later generations. The New American Commentary says in its introduction to the book: “The use of the name ‘the Teacher [or Preacher]’ indicates that the author is distancing himself from his role as absolute monarch and taking on the mantle of the sage. Both the name ‘the Teacher’ and the use of third person [references to himself]...allow him to do this. The device is certainly a literary success. What emerges from Ecclesiastes is not a royal pronouncement but the reflection of a wise man who ‘has been’ king. As we read the book, we are more and more absorbed in the words not of ‘King Solomon’ but of ‘Solomon—become—‘the-Teacher’”’ (Duane Garrett, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, 1993, p. 264). It could also be that if the book was written late in his life, Solomon may have been concerned that his name now had a bad association.

Or it may be that the title Preacher was simply a well-known one for Solomon in his day even though we have no record of that. Recall that Solomon gathered the nation at the time of the temple’s dedication during the fall festival season, gave a religious address to those assembled and led them in public prayer and worship. Perhaps this became a regular practice during the annual Feast of Tabernacles. Or even if not (or if such a practice lapsed during Solomon’s wayward years), it could be that the king late in his life addressed the assembled nation at the Feast with a grand speech that was recorded as “the words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem” (Ecclesiastes 1:1). Whether Solomon preached just once at the temple’s dedication, regularly at Feast-time or just once again near the end of his life with the substance of the book of Ecclesiastes, this could explain why Ecclesiastes (the words of the Preacher) came to be read among the Jews during the Feast of Tabernacles or Sukkot, besides just thematic association.

(On that note, the Jewish JPS Bible Commentary: Ecclesiastes states: “Thematic motives were suggested for reading Ecclesiastes in Sukkot. These are that Koheleth recommends rejoicing, which is the mood of Sukkot; that he declares the transience of human life, which is symbolized by a temporary booth; and that autumn is the season evocative of mortality”—Michael Fox, 2004, p. xv. We touch on this further in our comments on Ecclesiastes 12:8. Others have included a suggestion related to the rejoicing commands of the Feast in concert with the temporary wealth of second tithe being spent during it on the desires of the heart—cf. Deuteronomy 14:25-26—raising cautions from what the richest man of his day pursued and its results.)

In any case, the pseudonym of Preacher certainly does not rule out Solomon, for why would any king use a pseudonym? In Solomon’s case, we know that he did preach to the people on at least one occasion—and this was probably not an isolated incident—thus justifying the term.

Of course, some contend that the writer was not really a king at all and was presenting himself in the guise of Solomon as a literary device or surreptitious means to wider acceptance and advancement of his work. One argument is that the perspective of some passages in Ecclesiastes supposedly could not come from a king who was in a position to deal with injustice. The Expositor’s Bible Commentary lists these as: “e.g., sorrow for the oppression of the weak (4:1) and for corruption in government (5:8-9), the proper attitude to the king from the subject’s point of view (8:2-5; 10:20), and unworthy rulers who do not properly distinguish good subjects from bad (9:1-2). If Solomon felt so strongly about these wrongs, surely he would have put them right” (Stafford Wright, “Ecclesiastes,” Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Frank Gaebelien, ed., 1991, introduction to Ecclesiastes). But the same commentary then counters: “This is far from conclusive. A king or president may be aware of mismanagement by local authorities, however much he may want to rectify it. Solomon had a number of local officers (1 Kings 4:7-19); and, as always happens, complaints from his subjects would come to his notice from time to time. Unfortunately, he sagged in his moral actions as he grew older, both in the concessions he made to his pagan wives (1 Kings 11:4-6) and in his treatment of his subjects (cf. 1 Kings 12:14). Some men know what is wrong and make a profession of repentance but never clinch a decision by putting things right. With local rulers of considerable influence, Solomon probably found himself in the position of his father, David, who excused a murder with words: ‘These sons of Zeruiah are too strong for me’ (2 Sam[uel] 3:39). On the positive side, according to a fair translation of [Ecclesiastes] 5:8-9, the rule of a king is contrasted favorably with the rule of power-hungry governors and their servants”—though there is
Most scholars against Solomonic authorship argue on the basis of linguistic evidence supposedly pointing to a late date for the book—the Persian period or later. They allege a high number of Aramaic words and constructions, some taking the language as a Hebraized Aramaic. They also point to apparently Persian words—pardes (occurring in the plural in 2:5, translated “orchards” or “parks”) and pitgam (“sentence” or “decree” in 8:11). Some even see the Hebrew of the book as transitional to Mishnaic Hebrew of the late Second Temple period.

But conservative scholarship has challenged such linguistic evaluation. As The New American Commentary states: “In a major study [Daniel] Fredericks argues that Ecclesiastes cannot come from the postexilic period. His work [Qoheleth’s Language: Re-Evaluating Its Nature and Date, 1988], together with other recent studies, calls for a major reassessment of the date of the book. Fredericks contends, for example, that no grounds exist for asserting Mishnaic Hebrew influence” (p. 258). He “argues that the language is a preexilic northern dialect. He suggests that features of this dialect were later incorporated in Mishnaic Hebrew, thus the similarity with Qoheleth” (Expositor’s, introduction to Ecclesiastes). Furthermore, “Fredericks examines forty-eight alleged Aramaisms and concludes that only seven terms are of Aramaic origin, of which four are attested elsewhere in early biblical Hebrew. What Aramaisms do exist, however, by no means prove that Ecclesiastes is a late work. Aramaic itself existed from early times; and in the Bible, Aramaisms are especially likely to occur in wisdom and poetic texts” (NAC, pp. 259-260). Moreover, as noted in our introduction to the Song of Solomon (against which similar arguments have been made), Aram, ancient Syria, was incorporated into David’s empire, which Solomon inherited. He and his cosmopolitan court were no doubt familiar with its language and may have adopted terms from it into Hebrew speech.

As to the apparent Persian loanwords, this was also addressed in our introduction to the Song of Solomon, as that book also contains the word pardes. The New American Commentary further notes on Ecclesiastes: “The presence of the two Persian words seems to be irrefutable proof of a late date for the book, but here too the matter is not as settled as it appears. [Scholar Gleason] Archer says the words could be of Sanskrit origin and that they may have entered the language during Solomon’s period of extensive foreign trade…. The word pitgam alone is slender evidence since we in fact have no idea when it entered the language. Fredericks notes that Persian influence and vocabulary spread through the ancient Near East long before the establishment of the Persian Empire and that the words need not have entered Hebrew via Aramaic, as is commonly assumed” (p. 260).

Another possibility is that a later editor such as Ezra, who lived in the postexilic Persian period, updated the text of the book in places where Solomon’s language had become archaic and not readily understandable.

It should also be noted that some scholars have contended that the book’s language shows Phoenician or Canaanite influence—implying a rather early date. But “the theory of Phoenician provenance for Ecclesiastes has been rejected by scholars who argue that the peculiar linguistic features of the text are best explained in the context of biblical Hebrew” (pp. 260-261). Of course, Solomon was in a close alliance with the Phoenician king Hiram of Tyre, and we might expect some regional linguistic similarities.

Others have argued that the book was not of Hebrew origins on the basis of it never using God’s covenant name YHWH (only using Elohim, the more general name for God) nor referring to God’s relationship with Israel. Still others, though, counter that Solomon was stressing the dilemma not just of Israelites but of all human beings—and their need for a relationship with the Creator. Some also suggest that Solomon may have been writing to not just a national but an international audience, including the Aramaean and other nations then subject to him as well as his Phoenician and Egyptian allies and others beyond. Recall that the Queen of Sheba had come asking him difficult questions (1 Kings 10:1), and no doubt other rulers and dignitaries sought out his wisdom as well. Even if the substance of the book was delivered to the nation of Israel while gathered at the Feast of Tabernacles, it is possible that there were many foreign dignitaries visiting at the time. Or the book might have been written down in slightly different language from what was spoken to the people—possibly to make it more understandable to an international audience. Or maybe there were two versions, a Hebrew and an international one, that were later melded into one. There’s no way to actually know. The point is that the objections are not
unanswerable.

Gleason Archer, after examining the different opinions on the language and setting of the book, concludes: “Only one reasonable alternative remains. That period when Israel enjoyed the closest relations with Tyre and Sidon, on both the commercial and the political levels—and cultural as well (it was a Phoenician Jew [actually Phoenician Israelite, his father of Tyre and his mother of Naphtali] named Hiram [or Huram] who designed and produced all the art work connected with the temple in Jerusalem, and large numbers of Phoenician artisans and craftsmen worked under his supervision)—was unquestionably the age of Solomon, that period when wisdom literature was most zealously cultivated. This was the era when Solomon composed his Proverbs, and he may have had a hand in popularizing the venerable Book of Job. From the standpoint of linguistics, then, and from the standpoint of comparative literature and the known proclivities of the age, Solomon’s period in the tenth century B.C. must be regarded as the most likely time for the composition of Ecclesiastes” (New International Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties, 1982, pp. 257-258).

And all in all, Solomon himself is the most reasonable choice for the author of Ecclesiastes. Indeed, it just can’t be anyone else if the author’s self-references in the book are accepted at face value.

A number of scholars, though, have surmised that the book must have more than one author. One reason for this assessment is the difference of literary forms in the book, especially the insertions of groups of proverbs. The main basis for this opinion, however, is the perception that the book is inconsistent or contradictory in its messages. Expositor’s explains that “among the multiple authorship theories, the simplest postulates three writers…. The original writer (Qoheleth ‘the Preacher’) was a rebel against piety and held a pessimistic view of life in relation to God [essentially saying that serving God and righteous living are worthless]. His thoughts were toned down—or even contradicted—by an orthodox redactor [i.e., an editor with a more normative biblical view] who emended the text. He [it is supposed] belonged to the Hasidim (‘holy ones,’ ‘saints’), who were forerunners of the Pharisees. Another writer of the regular Wisdom school, a hakam (‘wise man’), incorporated a series of traditional proverbs. This is the simplest division of the book [among such theories], but others claim to have discovered more writers at work.”

The same commentary, however, does not accept this view of multiple authors. As to varying literary forms and arguments, it says: “A specific, unifying function is fulfilled by a small number of leading concepts to which Koheleth returns again and again, concepts such as ‘vanity,’ ‘striving after wind,’ ‘toil,’ ‘lot,’ etc. Nor can the modern reader escape the quite dispassionate—in contrast to Job—restrained solemnity and weight of his diction…. This commentary [Expositor’s] assumes a single writer, Qoheleth, except possibly for the closing verses [which are a subject of further debate, though the conclusion fits with the whole]. It recognizes that the author looks at life from several angles, deliberately at times raising the arguments that would occur to his readers. Nevertheless, he is always firm in his conclusions. A central argument emerges throughout the book.”

Indeed, to see that there is a single author with a consistent message, it is important that we understand what that message is. The overall point will help us to see how he makes his case in the various sections of his treatise.

People today have various ideas about the book’s meaning. Many think it a hopeless message—telling us to just accept that all is worthless, unfair and beyond our control and that there’s no point to life, at least none that we will ever understand. This notion is derived, for starters, from the opening words of the book, “‘Vanity of vanities,’ says the Preacher; ‘Vanity of vanities, all is vanity’” (Ecclesiastes 1:2). And the sentiment is affirmed throughout, even just before the conclusion (12:8). Indeed, the word “vanity” (in the sense of futility, not self-exaltation and conceit) dominates the book, appearing 38 times. It is a translation of the Hebrew hebel, which means “breath” or “vapor” (see Isaiah 57:13), signifying something insubstantial or transitory, nothingness, emptiness, worthlessness or futility. The term is used elsewhere in regard to “useless” or “worthless” idols (Psalm 31:6; Jonah 2:8). As we will see, the word in Ecclesiastes refers to trying to find happiness and meaning in the various aspects of life without a proper godly foundation and perspective.

Bible scholar Walter Kaiser Jr., in his Everyman’s Bible Commentary series book on Ecclesiastes, says: “Qoheleth was working on the problem of man’s attempt to find meaning in all aspects of God’s good world without coming to know the world’s Creator, Sustainer and final Judge. For central to all of
man’s concerns is this problem of integrating life and truth. The issue appears to have come to a head in 3:11: ‘(God) has made everything beautiful in its time; he has also put eternity {‘olam} into man’s heart so that he cannot find out what God has done from beginning to the end.’ And there the issue hangs. Man has a capacity and desire to know how all things, men, and ideas fit together—the end from the beginning—and yet he cannot know until he comes to know the One who built man in His own image with the capacity to understand who he is as a man, what he means, and what is the worth of things, even life itself. Life, in and of itself, even God’s good world with all its good, God-given gifts, is unable to deliver meaning and joy when it is appropriated in a piecemeal fashion…. Life, in and of itself, is unable to supply the key to the questions of identity, meaning, purpose, value, enjoyment, and destiny. Only in coming to know God can one begin to find answers to these questions” (Ecclesiastes: Total Life, 1979, pp. 16-17).

Archer points out: “This work is a masterpiece of philosophical insight that must be taken together as an organic whole, rather than its being taken out of context…. A careful synthetic study of Ecclesiastes brings out the true purpose and theme of its author. After he has tried every other avenue to the highest value in human life, Solomon gives his personal testimony as to the emptiness and disgust that resulted from his tasting to the full all that the world could offer him in the way of satisfaction and pleasure. It all turned out to be futile and unworthy, completely lacking in ultimate satisfaction…. The key term throughout the book is tahat hassemes (‘under the sun’). The whole perspective [not ultimately of the book but of what is being examined] is of this world. The natural man who has never taken God seriously falls into the delusion that ‘this world is all there is.’ Well then, replies the Preacher, if this world is all there is, let us find out by experience whether there is anything ultimately worthwhile in this world— anything that yields real satisfaction” (p. 254-255). Or actually rather, the Preacher says this experimentation has already been done and that no one else needs or ought to do it. He’s conveying what he’s already observed and learned, as Archer further comments: “The result of his extensive experiment, carried on under the most favorable conditions possible, was that nothing but meaninglessness and profound disappointment await the secularist materialist. All his ambitions, though fully achieved, all his lusts, though fully indulged, lead only to revulsion and nausea. For him life is [to quote Hamlet] ‘a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.’ The message that comes through loud and clear in Ecclesiastes is that true meaning in life is found only in a relationship with God. Unless there is in man’s heart a sincere regard for the will of God and an earnest desire to carry out His purposes, man’s life will end up a meaningless tragedy. ‘Although a sinner does evil a hundred times and may lengthen his life, still I know that it will be well for those who fear God, who fear Him openly’ (8:12, NASB [New American Standard Bible]). This life takes on real meaning only as an arena of opportunity for man to serve God before he steps out into eternity” (p. 255).

The NKJV Study Bible’s introduction to Ecclesiastes says: “The Book of Ecclesiastes is one of the most misunderstood books in the Bible. Christians have tended either to ignore the message of the book, or to regard it as the testimony of a man living apart from God. This is unfortunate, for the book asks relevant, searching questions about the meaning of life, and it declares the utter futility of an existence without God. Like all Scripture, the Book of Ecclesiastes benefits and edifies God’s people. Negative descriptions such as ‘cynical,’ ‘fatalistic,’ or ‘existential’ do not do the Book of Ecclesiastes justice. There is too much evidence of robust cheerfulness throughout its pages. ‘So I commended enjoyment’ (8:15) is a recurrent theme that pervades the book; in fact, the Hebrew words for ‘gladdness’ and ‘being glad’ appear seventeen times in Ecclesiastes. The underlying mood of the book is joy: finding pleasure in life despite the troubles that often plague it. Those who fear and worship God should experience this joy; they should rejoice in the gifts God has given them” (2007).

In fact, this theme is not merely recurrent but part of a refrain that appears six times throughout the book, essentially stating, “Eat and drink and enjoy the good of your labor, for it is the gift of God” (see 2:24; 3:12-13; 3:22; 5:18-19; 8:15; 9:7-9).

Because of this, some have considered that the message of the book is hedonistic—saying basically that all is meaningless anyway so just go have a good time while you’re alive. This is assuredly not what the book is advocating. Solomon does want us to recognize that God gave good things for our enjoyment and that we should avail ourselves of these. But while this is important to grasp, it is only part of the book’s message, as we are also told that “sorrow is better than laughter, for by a sad countenance the
heart is made better” (7:3). There must be regular sober reflection about the problems of life in this world so that, with right perspective and way of life, the commended enjoyment may have its proper place. Expositor’s states: “The refrains do not mean ‘Do what you will.’ Man is accountable to God, not simply to himself; he has a duty to work and moral responsibilities to society. The book contains warnings against self-indulgence that exploits others for personal advantage (e.g., 8:8-9).” Indeed, Ecclesiastes ends with a powerful mandate and warning. And that is where we should look to best understand the book’s intent.

The NKJV Study Bible is quite right in assessing the book’s themes when it states: “Sometimes it is better to read the end of a book to understand better the direction in which the book is headed. This is certainly true of Ecclesiastes. The book should be interpreted in light of its conclusion: ‘Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man’s all’ (12:13). To fear God means to revere, worship, and serve God—to turn from evil and turn in awe to the living God…. It does not involve dread, but instead a proper respect for and obedience to our Creator. Why should we respect and obey God? The Book of Ecclesiastes answers this question in its concluding verse (12:14): God will judge everyone—both the righteous and the wicked. Life cannot be lived with abandon, as if God will not see or remember the deeds of the past. For on the final day, he will call forth all men and women to account for their actions. The admonition to fear God and the expectation of divine judgment are the two great themes that conclude the book and provide an interpretive framework for the rest of it (see 12:13, 14).”

Contrary to those who think that this pious epilogue has been appended by a later writer to the end of a book with no such themes, let it be noted that these ideas are expressed earlier in the book. The need to fear God is also found in 3:14, 5:7, 7:18 and 8:12-13. And the fact of an appointed time when God will execute His justice is also mentioned in 3:17, 9:1 and 11:9.

There is the sense of an orderly argument in Ecclesiastes. Many assume the book to be a hodgepodge of thoughts, but the repeated refrains are conclusive statements that advance the case being made, showing progression, and the treatise ends with an overall summary conclusion. Some agree that there is a vague, general progression but assume various digressions throughout. Yet others are sure that what some take to be digressions are central to the point being made. Indeed, Solomon certainly knew that he was presenting difficult matters. Why would he veer off on tangents that would confuse his audience? It seems far more likely that all is on target in a unified argument.

Yet the chain of such an argument has been a matter of dispute. Many outlines have been proposed. Kaiser states: “Without citing all the scholarly apparatus, we can summarize the key divisions among scholars to be between those who argue for two sections (of equal parts: six chapters each; or unequal parts: four chapters and eight) and those who find three sections (of four chapters each)—or even four divisions…. The twofold division is based on the principle that the first part of Ecclesiastes contains the theoretical portion and the second the practical aspects of the subject. Therefore, the vanity of earthly things is established in part one, and then part two points out what duties and obligations such truth should elicit from mankind. It is true that the book becomes more practical and filled with exhortation toward the end, but the separation between doctrine and practice is not that sharp in the book. Practical applications are being made already in 2:24-26; 3:10-15, 17, 22; and 5:1-7, 18-20” (p. 20).

Kaiser favors the division into four parts, which we will also generally follow: “This division of Ecclesiastes is as follows: Part I, 1:2–2:26; II, 3:1–5:20; III, 6:1–8:15, IV, 8:16–12:14. The most obvious advantage the above fourfold division has is that each of the first three sections climaxes with a formal refrain that is given in almost identical terms: ‘To eat and drink and to realize the benefit of one’s labor’ is all a gift from God (2:24; 5:18; 8:15)” (pp. 20-21). Other occurrences of the refrain fall within these discourses rather than at the end. There are also apparently subdivisions within these major discourses. As we will see, not only should the meaning of the book be discerned from its overall conclusion, but the point of each section and subsection can be discerned from the section conclusion—each of which tell us to enjoy life as God’s gift.

As Expositor’s says: “Life in the world is subject to frustration; but man can still accept his circumstances, even enjoy them, and find strength to live life as it comes…. We are to glorify God in the common things of life; i.e., we are to make the fullest use of the present moment. There may be times of stress and strain and special calling; but the norm is to eat, drink, and live our lives as those who gladly rejoice in God’s good gifts and intend to use them to his glory. This is the theme of the refrains.”
The well-considered overall outline Kaiser presents is as follows:

I. Enjoying Life as a Gift From God (1:1–2:26)
   —Introduction (1:1-3)
   1. The Restlessness of Life Illustrated (1:4-11)
   2. The Pleasures of Life Tested (1:12–2:11)
   3. The Purposes of Life Examined (2:12-23)
   —Section Conclusion (2:24-26)

II. Understanding the All-Encompassing Plan of God (3:1–5:20)
   1. The Principle: God has a plan that embraces every man and woman and all their actions in all times (3:1-15)
   2. The Facts: The anomalies and apparent contradictions in this thesis are examined and reflected upon (3:16–4:16)
   3. The Implications: Certain cautions and warnings must be raised lest a hasty calculation lead men and women to deny the reality and existence of God’s providence and plan (5:1-17)
   —Section Conclusion (5:18-20)

III. Explaining and Applying the Plan of God (6:1–8:15)
   1. Proper evaluation of a man’s outward fortunes helps to explain the apparent inequalities of divine providence (6:1–7:15)
   2. Proper evaluation of a man’s character helps to explain the apparent inequalities in divine providence (7:16-29)
   3. The removal of a large proportion of the apparent inequalities in divine providence comes from righteous government [or rather, as we will see, dealing wisely with government] (8:1-14)
   —Section Conclusion (8:15)

IV. Removing Discouragement and Applying God’s Plan to the Lives of Believers (8:16–12:14)
   1. The remaining mystery in this subject must not diminish human joy (8:16–9:9/10)
   2. The remaining mystery in this subject must not prevent us from working with all our might [with wisdom and diligence] (9:10–11:6)
   3. The daily reminder of our imminent death and the prospect of facing our Creator and Judge should [impact] all our God-given joy and activity (11:7–12:8)
   —Section and Overall Conclusion (12:8/9-14)

Jesus Christ said of those who will follow Him, “I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). This applies not only to eternal life after death, but to life today. We find this also in the Feast of Tabernacles, and we’ve already seen a connection between the festival and this book, with its having been read on the Sabbath during the Feast. Indeed, we find this theme in the Sabbath as well. As one author writes: “The purpose of Sabbath is not simply to rejuvenate yourself in order to do more production, nor is it the pursuit of pleasure. The purpose of Sabbath is to enjoy your God, life in general, what you have accomplished in the world through his help, and the freedom you have in the gospel—the freedom from slavery to any material object or human expectation. The Sabbath is a sign of the hope that we have in the world to come” (Tim Keller, “Wisdom and Sabbath Rest,” June 28, 2011). This is right in line with the message of Ecclesiastes when properly understood. In a relationship with God through Christ—fearing God, keeping His commandments, properly considering life, enjoying God’s blessings and believing in His promises—we can experience the fulfillment human beings ultimately long for. Ecclesiastes points us in that direction.

The Incessant Dilemma (Ecclesiastes 1:2-11) Day 3

After the statement of authorship in verse 1, the next two introductory verses spell out the problem of the book. “Vanity of vanities” in verse 2, a superlative expression, seems to denote “utter emptiness.” As noted earlier, the Hebrew word for “vanity” is hebel, which literally means “breath” or “vapor.” The idea is that there is nothing there to hold—which is why we see the word seven times paired with the phrase
“grasping for the wind.” Some take hebel to imply “meaninglessness,” “pointlessness” or “senselessness”—the world seemingly being without rhyme or reason. Others opt for the sense of “worthlessness,” especially with the declaration of hebel being followed by the asking in verse 3 of “what profit” there is in this life. Still others take hebel here to mean “fleeting” or “quickly passing.” There could be this transitory sense in some of the occurrences of the word (particularly in 9:9, where “emptiness” or “meaningless” or “worthlessness” seems contrary to the point). But neither “fleeting” nor “meaningless” fits the occurrence of the word in lamenting unfair circumstances (e.g., 8:14). Perhaps “elusive” or “beyond grasping” (i.e., “incomprehensible” or “inscrutable”) fits better there—but this meaning does not apply in the concluding statement in 12:8, which is parallel to 1:2, as much has been resolved by the end. So there may be different shades of meaning for hebel in the book. However, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary takes hebel throughout the book to indicate “frustration”—not in the mere sense of minor dissatisfaction at hindrances but of having all attempts to understand or to find lasting success or meaning coming to naught, being always out of reach. That does appear to fit the various occurrences. And it also aligns with the meaning of vanity—futility—being seemingly all for nothing.

The phrase “all is vanity” in verse 2 cannot include God or His Word, so the “all” here is limited—apparently to life “under the sun” (verse 3). This expression, used also in other ancient texts, occurs 28 times in the book, along with the variant form “under heaven,” which appears three times. Considering the context of these occurrences, the phrase refers to the limitations of physical life on this earth in the here and now—that is, while God and men dwell separately, with God in heaven and men under heaven. (Man’s eternal destiny includes life on the earth, ultimately in the New Jerusalem, but we will then be with God and not confined to the earth, as we will inherit the whole of creation, including the heavens. Moreover, the earth itself will be renewed, and life upon it will be positive in every way, as God ultimately intended.)

The frustration of life in this world as described in Ecclesiastes may well be what the apostle Paul had in mind in Romans 8:20: “For the creation was subjected to futility.” The Greek word translated “futility” here in the New King James Version (“vanity” in the earlier King James Version, “frustration” in the New International Version) is mataiotes, the same word used throughout the Greek Septuagint version of Ecclesiastes. Vanity or frustration in the created realm is the consequence of sin early on—first that of Satan and the angels who followed him and later that of man just after his creation in giving in to Satan. It was Adam and Eve’s wrong choice in the Garden of Eden that subjugated humanity to the resultant problems of the world, with all since following in their footsteps.

As mentioned, the dilemma of Ecclesiastes 1:2, with hebel perhaps including a sense of seeming worthless or pointlessness, leads into the key question of verse 3: “What profit has a man from all his labor in which he toils under the sun?” In his Preaching the Word commentary volume Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters (2010), Philip Ryken notes: “The same question will come up again in chapter 3: ‘What gain has the worker from his toil?’ (v[erse] 9) The idea of gaining some profit will come up repeatedly as well; it appears nearly a dozen times in the book of Ecclesiastes (e.g., Ecclesiastes 5:9). The word ‘gain’ [or profit] (Hebrew yitron) is a commercial term ordinarily used in the context of business . . . . The goal is to turn a profit as the reward for one’s labor. Gain is the return on investment for hard work. So [the Preacher] asks the question that people have about every job: Is it worth it? Am I really accomplishing anything? What will I have to show for all my toil” (p. 24). Solomon is essentially asking, what good is this life? What’s the point?

As mentioned in our introduction, to see what Solomon is aiming at throughout this first section (1:1–2:26) we can look ahead to the section conclusion (2:24-26). We will consider it more when we come to it, but in 2:24, the first occurrence of the book’s refrain, we are informed that there is indeed good in our labor or efforts that we are to enjoy from God’s hand. Verse 26 tells us that this blessing is ultimately for those who are good or righteous in His sight—denoting His followers. But that fact is not yet in sight for the reader in chapter 1.

Following the three-verse introduction or prologue, we see that Solomon in the first subsection presents in poetic form a bleak perspective of life in this world (verses 4-11). His observations about the natural order impress on the reader the sensation of futility. First, a person’s time upon the earth is fleeting and seems to make no impact. People come and go, but the earth and its processes continue on and on—seemingly indifferent to man’s presence. Second, these processes themselves can seem
monotonous and meaningless, accomplishing nothing—such as the river constantly flowing to the sea but never filling it. If characteristic of nature, where does that leave fleeting human life? Man deems himself important on the earth—and God even decreed man’s dominion over it (Genesis 1:28; Psalm 8). So what’s going on? “Man cannot express it” in Ecclesiastes 1:8 means that people have nothing meaningful to say in response—they can’t explain it. The rest of the verse seems to say that despite all they see and hear, it is never enough to satisfy their desire to comprehend it. The benefit sought in verse 3 is not to be found in this incessant restlessness.

Verses 9-10 increase the sense of despair by saying there is nothing new under the sun. It should be recognized that this is not speaking of particular tangible items, such as new inventions. We of course have many electronic gadgets today that did not exist in the past. The statement, rather, is a general one about the ways of the world. Just as nature’s processes continue unabated, so do the ways of people on the earth—fleeting though they are. The New American Commentary explains: “The fundamental events of life (birth, marriage, work, death, etc.) remain unchanged. The desire for something new is the desire for something that alters the nature of life in the world. Cars, computers, and jet airplanes may have made some things easier and faster. For us, however, as for our predecessors, the sun rises and sets; the rivers run their courses; and people continue their endless quest for fame, power, and happiness even as they move steadily toward death” (Garrett, note on verses 9-11).

Verse 11 seems most likely to refer to not remembering people (as in the NIV) rather than not remembering things. The Bible in Basic English renders it, “There is no memory of those who have gone before, and of those who come after....” Considering the passing away of generations in verse 4, we should understand this to mean after some time has gone by. We may know various facts about some famous people in history—but we don’t remember them as we do people we know today. “Their names may or may not be remembered in the school books, but they are thought of as little more than characters of fiction, cut off from the new generations who have their own lives to live” (Expositor’s, Wright, note on 2:12-16). Moreover, “the vast majority of people never achieve lasting fame, while those who do gain nothing by it” (NAC, note on 1:11).

Solomon is highlighting man’s plight to show the need for a solution—and he will present that in due course, explaining that the answer lies in a proper relationship with God. This means living according to the whole Bible. The Preaching the Word commentary states: “To see things ‘under the sun’... is to look at them from ground level. It is to take an earthly point of view, leaving God out of it for the moment. But of course this is not the only way to look at things, or even the right way to look at them. There is a God in Heaven who rules over the sun. Therefore, we are not limited to the terrestrial [in our perspective or in help in living].... This does not mean that if we believe in God all our troubles will be over or that we will never again feel the weariness and vanity of life under the sun. For one thing, believers often forget to remember God, and when we do, we are right back ‘under the sun’ again. But Ecclesiastes does open up the possibility of an ‘above the sun’ perspective that can bring joy and refreshment to life as we learn everything matters” (Ecclesiastes, p. 31).

Indeed, the full biblical revelation shows that there is a way out of the monotony to experience something truly new that will last. The New American Commentary further points out on Ecclesiastes 1:11: “This passage is not a contradiction to the gospel but a call for it. The world is in bondage; and humanity is unable to explain, find satisfaction in, or alter it. Only the Word, who came into the world from above, can open the way of understanding and escape (John 8:23, 31-32). He has done a new thing: he has created a new covenant, given the new birth, new life, and a new commandment (Jer[emiah] 31:31-34). He gives a new name that will last forever. Everything else is old and passing away.”

When we are changed to immortal, glorified beings at the return of Jesus Christ, “our restless ears and roving eyes will be fully and finally satisfied.... Our senses will be saturated with the glory of God. This is something to remember whenever we are frustrated or angry or sad or disappointed with everything in life that is getting broken, falling apart, or going wrong. Remember that this life is not our final existence. We were made for a better world. The very fact that we are weary of life is pointing us to the only God who can satisfy our souls” (PTW, pp. 32-33).

**Intellectualism, Hedonism and Materialism (Ecclesiastes 1:12–2:11) Day 4**

Solomon now turns in this second subsection of the first major section to his own experience in grappling with the vanity of this life. His position as a great king to whom God had given greater wisdom
Solomon’s when he was pondering these issues. So he likely had to relearn some spiritual lessons. We don’t know all the answers. Other human beings have to go through. Sometimes we may throw up our hands and ask what is the point not easy to endure our hearts enough for rationalizing life’s problems and coping well with them. We indeed, God gave him increased wisdom and understanding. Solomon grew up with the truth under the tutelage of his father David. He did not start with a godless mindset. Receive His blessings in routine living. Solomon had a vast store of earthly wisdom and knowledge to draw from in considering man’s condition. The same commentary says: “If it all sounds hopeless, this means the writer is achieving his purpose. Remember that he is showing us the world from an earthly perspective—‘the best thinking that man can do on his own’” (p. 43, the ending quote taken from Derek Kidner, The Message of Ecclesiastes, The Bible Speaks Today series, 1976, p. 31).

A problem for us in reading Solomon’s discussion of wisdom here is that we immediately think of ultimate godly wisdom as found in God’s Word—“the wisdom that is from above” (James 3:17). But Solomon had a vast store of earthly wisdom and knowledge to draw from in considering man’s condition. As author Tommy Nelson states: “Now the wisdom Solomon is talking about in context is not the wisdom of God and His word; it is wisdom derived from exploring human knowledge—philosophy, religion, psychology, sociology, history, logic, and rhetoric—the best ideas that man has invented or discovered. But in the end, all an educated man can do is die an educated failure. All the learning in the world won’t help you change the human heart” (A Life Well Lived: A Study of the Book of Ecclesiastes, 2005, p. 24).

The Expositor’s Bible Commentary notes in its introduction to Ecclesiastes that “the book is not against serious thinking; it is itself a deep and thoughtful work. But it demands a recognition of the limitations of human philosophy (e.g., 3:11; 8:16-17).”

Certainly Solomon does at length turn to godly wisdom in instructing us to fear God, obey Him and receive His blessings in routine living. Yet why didn’t he realize that to start with? After all, Solomon grew up with the truth under the tutelage of his father David. He did not start with a godless mindset. Indeed, God gave him increased wisdom and understanding. But godly knowledge and wisdom are not enough for rationalizing life’s problems and coping well with them. We need God’s direct intervention in our hearts and minds and in our circumstances. Even with the spiritual perspective we may have now, it is not easy to endure the difficulties of life—and we can’t understand all the reasons behind what we and other human beings have to go through. Sometimes we may throw up our hands and ask what is the point of this present life. Yet over time we come to trust more deeply in God’s guidance and care even though we don’t know all the answers.

Moreover, in Solomon’s case it seems likely that he had already begun his drift away from God when he was pondering these issues. So he likely had to relearn some spiritual lessons. In any case, Solomon’s wisdom and knowledge carried him only so far. Hard questions and circumstances remained
unresolved, and he initially tried to tackle these intellectually. Equipped though he was, however, the effort proved ultimately fruitless.

In the king’s investigation of “madness and folly” (1:17), he plunges into the pursuit of mirth and pleasure, which he labels “madness” and “folly” (2:1-3). Life at Solomon’s court was an ongoing party. Dr. Walter Kaiser comments: “With what hilarity and laughter must the palace halls have echoed as Solomon, his courtiers, and his guests exchanged jokes, drank wine, listened to the witty merrymakers from all over the region, and feasted bountifully each day on ‘thirty measures of fine flour, sixty measures of meal, ten fat oxen, twenty oxen from the pastures, one hundred sheep, in addition to harts, roebucks, fallowdeer and fattened fowl’ (1 Kings 4:22-23)! Some estimates suggest that it would take thirty or forty thousand people to consume that much food each day. No wonder 1 Kings 4:20 says, ‘Judah and Israel were as many as the sand which is by the sea in multitude, eating and drinking, and making merry.’ The whole plan was to sample mirth, pleasure, wine and folly until he could determine what was ‘good’ for the sons of man” (Ecclesiastes: Total Life, pp. 55-56).

Solomon sought sensual gratification while, he says, “guiding my heart with wisdom.” This is surprising, for the extent of the king’s hedonistic exercise seems to have been rather foolish—indeed we know from other scriptural reports about him that he overindulged in more than food and wine. How does he maintain that there was any wisdom guiding his heart? What seems to be implied is that Solomon never wholly abandoned himself to mindless dissipation. Rather, as he experimented with various pleasures he was always thinking them over—considering their worth in making life better and in fulfilling man’s longings. Again, we should realize that the wisdom Solomon speaks of here is not ultimate godly wisdom, but rather the height of human reason employed in examining life’s opportunities. Solomon came to recognize that living for the sake of pleasure is pointless. It involves a degree of madness in trying to escape the real world with its problems—for after one has his period of fun, the problems are still there. And depending on one’s choice of amusements, his own problems could be magnified.

Consider, however, that at the conclusion of this section in Ecclesiastes 2:24-26 Solomon will advocate finding enjoyment in life. Yet, as he will make clear—especially in the book’s overall conclusion—this comes in the context of a right relationship with God, experiencing His blessings within proper boundaries as part of a life committed to Him. We will never find fulfillment in pursuing enjoyment for its own sake. True joy and happiness is the byproduct of a life properly devoted to God.

Solomon next moves on to material pursuits—accomplishments and amassing wealth and luxuries (2:4-11). He says the great building projects and acquisitions here were for himself—using the word “myself” six times in this section (verses 4-8). So this was just a different way of pursuing personal pleasure (verse 10).

In verse 8, the New King James Version has “the delights of the sons of men, and musical instruments of all kinds”—this particular “and” being interpolated, as it’s not present in the actual Hebrew. This translation, close to the earlier King James rendering, follows a traditional Jewish interpretation, but the Hebrew words rendered “musical instruments” (shiddah weshiddoth), used nowhere else in the Old Testament, are actually a matter of dispute. The ESV Archaeology Study Bible notes on verse 8 that “the Greek tradition (the Septuagint, Aquila, and Theodotion) all translate the underlying Hebrew word with terms suggesting something to do with drinking cups and/or cup-bearers.” Yet the same study Bible also explains the ESV translation of “concubines,” just as other versions translate the phrase as “concubine and concubines” (Green’s Literal Translation), “a wife and very many wives” (MKJV) or “a harem” (NIV). Expositor’s says of shiddah and its plural form shiddoth: “A Canaanite word of similar form is used to translate the Egyptian word for ‘concubine’ in a letter of [Pharaoh] Amenophis III” (footnote on verse 8). And shiddah may be derived from the Hebrew root shad, meaning “breast.” Those who see Solomon’s harem in mind here leave out the interpolated “and,” taking the concubines to be among the delights of the sons of men. A few other translations have been proposed, but in any case we know from 1 Kings 11:3 that a vast number of women (700 wives and 300 concubines) were certainly included in Solomon’s statement in Ecclesiastes 2:10: “Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I did not withhold from my heart any pleasure.”

Solomon’s statement in verse 9 that his wisdom remained with him does not mean he was acting wisely. It could mean that he always retained wisdom in his head despite what he did—that is, he always
knew better. Or the statement may have the same sense as that about guiding his heart with wisdom in verse 3, referring to him always evaluating his worldly pursuits and gains, considering whether or not they brought fulfillment. As he acknowledges in verse 11, they did not—being vanity and grasping for the wind and not containing the profit or benefit sought at the outset of the book (1:3). All that money can afford does not buy happiness. Solomon’s mention in 2:9 of being the greatest and wealthiest is important in this regard. As David Moore writes in the Holman Old Testament Commentary: “If the most powerful and wealthy man in the world could not find happiness in possessions apart from God, then the futility of pursuing such things becomes evident for the rest of us. This lesson is similar to what Solomon learned about being the wisest man in the world (…Eccl. 1:12-13, 18)” (Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Max Anders, ed., note on 2:9).

In many ways, people in affluent societies today live in better conditions than Solomon did—and in the midst of rampant godlessness. The apostle Paul prophesied of this time “when people would be ‘lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God’ (2 Timothy 3:4). Everything is offered to us. Nothing is unavailable. So are we satisfied, or do we still want more? Gregg Easterbrook…in his book The Progress Paradox, which is subtitled How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse...proves that we have more of almost everything today . . . except happiness. In fact, the more we have, the unhappier we are, because we know we will never be able to get all the new things that we want” (PTW, p. 51).

It is not wrong to enjoy the physical blessings God provides or engage in lawful material pursuits, but these must not become the focus of our lives. Moreover, we must live life to God’s glory, not our own. The Holman commentary quoted above offers counsel from Renaissance author Thomas à Kempis: “Let temporal things be used, but things eternal desired. You cannot be satisfied with any temporal good, because you were not created to enjoy these alone. Although you should possess all created good, yet you could not be happy therewith nor blessed; but in God, who created all things, consists your whole blessedness.” We must have the right foundation and parameters, trusting in God’s promises.

Indeed, as the Preaching the Word commentary points out: “If we were able to find lasting satisfaction in earthly pleasure, then we would never recognize our need for God. But satisfaction does not come in the pleasures themselves; it comes separately. Satisfaction only comes in God himself, so that our dissatisfaction may teach us to turn to him…. God is not a spoilsport. He is not trying to take pleasure away from us but to give it to us. Once we learn how to find our satisfaction in God himself, then all his other gifts become the best and truest pleasures” (p. 52, 54).

**The Frustration of Death (Ecclesiastes 2:12-23)**

In Ecclesiastes 1:17, Solomon said, “I set my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly.” Now, at the beginning of the last subsection of the first major section, he says, “I turned my heart to consider wisdom and madness and folly” (2:12)—literally, to “see” or “behold” these (Green’s Literal Translation). In this latter case, he is reflecting on what his search has revealed. The second part of verse 12 seems to mean that no one is going to come along with some great new investigation of the matter that might overturn Solomon’s conclusions—for he has seen and done it all.

So what has Solomon come to see? First, that wisdom is better—or more profitable—than folly (verse 13). A wise man can see where he’s going and what he’s doing, making sense of life choices, while the thoughtless fool can’t figure anything out, suffering more because of it (see verse 14). A thinking person can see that certain ways of living have advantages over others. It’s better to tell the truth than get caught up in lies. “And it’s better to work hard than to be lazy. Would anyone doubt that? It’s better to be faithful to your mate than to bring catastrophe to your home. So it’s best in life to live wisely and morally” (Tommy Nelson, A Life Well Lived, p. 33). Thus there is in wisdom a certain profit, as sought at the book’s outset (1:3).

Second, however, wisdom is limited. It will not shield us from what is inevitable for everyone—death, the great equalizer. “Sooner or later everyone comes to the same shocking realization: One day I am going to die; my heart will beat one last time, my lungs will exhale one final breath, and that will be the end of my days on this earth” (Preaching the Word commentary, Ryken, p. 63). Whether wise or fool, all will die and, as time passes, be forgotten (verses 14-16; compare 1:11). The Holman Old Testament Commentary notes: “If it is true that death will overtake both the fool and the wise, what is the point of trying so hard to be good? This question occurs to many ‘good people’ who quit trying to be good and
decide to go wild by engaging in reckless and destructive behavior. Others pride themselves on continuing to be ‘good’ and conclude erroneously that dependence on God is not necessary [or they hold to it only superficially]. The reality of death arrests both these types of ‘good people’ from thinking that their own efforts will bring them lasting fulfillment apart from God” and His redemption (Moore, note on 2:15).

With the stark awareness that his grand quest for wisdom was, just as the waywardness of fools, vanity and grasping for the wind, Solomon came to hate this life. It was distressing to him, for there was no escaping this realization (verse 17).

And what of his great accomplishments and acquisitions? He came to hate these too because it all seemed pointless. Death would force him to pass these on to others (verse 18). Solomon finds no satisfaction in bequeathing a legacy, for there is no way of knowing whether the legacy—intended to carry on the memory of his great deeds—will be perpetuated or squandered (verse 19). But more fundamentally, he finds it frustrating that a person who works so hard for something cannot continue enjoying it but must pass it on to others who have not worked for it at all (verse 21).

Not only did Solomon’s impressive intellect, vast wealth and great works not lead him to happiness. They actually led him to despair (verse 20)—to days of sorrow and fretful nights (verse 23). Solomon’s description of sinking into hopelessness and depression pulls the reader down with him. In verse 22 he essentially repeats his opening question of 1:3—what gain is there for all man’s efforts under the sun? All seems so utterly pointless. Only now, at this lowest, bleakest point, is he ready to begin presenting the solution to this dark and seemingly unsolvable dilemma.

The Right Perspective (Ecclesiastes 2:24-26) Day 5 (Part 2)

Having sunk to the depths of despair, a light at last dawned in Solomon’s thinking in this conclusion to the book’s first major section. He had been striving of his own accord to essentially force meaning and happiness from life. But it doesn’t work that way. Rather, Solomon at last comes to see that we must embrace the enjoyment in everyday life, realizing that it is from the hand of God (verse 24).

This includes the labor that Solomon had come to despise. Some imagine that in the paradise of Eden Adam and Eve strolled about with nothing to do. But God gave them the major work of subduing the earth and tending the vast garden (Genesis 1:28; 2:15). God Himself works, and He’s given human beings work to do also. “Unfortunately, because of Adam’s sin our work has been cursed, which turns our labor into toil and trouble. But there is still a basic goodness about work that comes from our Creator. We were made in the image of a working God, and thus we have the capacity to find his pleasure in work itself, even apart from anything that we gain by working…. The way to experience this pleasure is to work for God and not simply for ourselves” (Preaching the Word commentary, Ryken, p. 73; see 1 Corinthians 10:31; Colossians 3:23).

The statement in Ecclesiastes 2:24 about eating and drinking and enjoying good in our labor is the first of similar refrains in Ecclesiastes. As mentioned in our introduction to the book, some take these out of context as advocating a life of mere pleasure seeking. But the proper context reveals a God-centered focus. Indeed, the very fact of accepting good things in life as coming from God implies a life of faith in His providence and abiding care. Moreover, verse 26 makes clear that God’s gifts are ultimately intended for those classed as good and not for sinners. We will consider this further momentarily.

Before that, let’s look at two textual difficulties here—one in verse 24 and one in verse 25. The wording of verse 24 in most versions does not represent the actual Hebrew here. The New King James Version, for instance, has “Nothing is better for a man than that he should…” The word rendered “better” is towb or tov, which simply means “good.” This could have the comparative sense of “better” if paired with a short preposition that would mean “than” in context. Yet that word is not present. Note that “than” is in italics in the NKJV, indicating it is assumed. Most scholars believe that the word must have originally been part of the Hebrew text but has dropped out at some point—noting that other instances of the refrain in 3:12 and 8:15 do show a comparison.

“But,” as Dr. Walter Kaiser points out, “no evidence supports that assumption, even though the translators of most English versions adopted it. They reasoned that the point of Qoheleth [the Preacher] is that nothing is left for mankind but to try calmly to enjoy the present…[that] the best that man can do is to get some physical pleasure out of life while he can” (p. 45). Again, though, that is based on an assumed reading, not the actual one. The structure of the other refrain verses is worth considering but not
determinative. After all, the various occurrences of the refrain do not have the same wording anyway. Nor do they make exactly the same point. Moreover, the phrase “for a man” in 2:24 should actually be “in man” (as the preposition here is the Hebrew be, not le as in 6:12 and 8:15).

So, rather than assume missing and altered text in 2:24, we should consider whether the wording here makes sense as it is. A more literal rendering would be, “There is nothing good in man that he should eat and drink and cause his soul to see good in his labor.” Young’s Literal Translation has: “There is nothing good in a man who eateth, and hath drunk, and hath shewn his soul good in his labour.” The Holman Old Testament Commentary expresses the wording as follows: “There is nothing in man to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good.’ Or we could say it this way, ‘There is not a good {inherent} in man’ (Kaiser, 44-45). This is a powerful statement that we humans can’t create anything good on our own. We are dependent on God for any lasting goodness or fulfillment” (Moore, note on 2:18-26). Kaiser elaborates: “Thus we must conclude that even the most mundane and earthly things of life do not lie within man’s grasp to donate to himself. The source of all good, contrary to the expectations of most systems of humanism and idealism, cannot be located in man. ‘He doesn’t have it,’ as the saying goes. It is all beyond him. Rather, it must come from God. Man must get accustomed to realizing that if he is to receive satisfaction from his food and drink, that satisfaction, like all satisfaction, will have to come from the hand of God” (p. 45).

The wording of verse 25 is also disputed. The NKJV has: “For who can eat, or who can have enjoyment, more than I?” The difficulty here lies in the words “more than I?” First of all, the Hebrew here (khuts mimmenni) is generally understood to literally read “outside me,” “apart from me” or “without me.” In context, it seems odd to many that Solomon would be saying, “For…who can have enjoyment outside me?”—that is, he alone or those joined to him. It is conceivable that the meaning is “beyond me” (thus the “more than I” in the NKJV)—though this would be unusual. If this is the meaning of the verse, then it would seem Solomon is declaring himself the person best suited to analyzing the matter.

Secondly, however, most scholars believe the phrase in question should be rendered not “without me” but “without Him” or “apart from Him” (see, e.g., NIV, BBE), referring to God. They point to this rendering in the Greek Septuagint and several medieval Hebrew manuscripts that have mimmenni instead of mimmenni. The NET Bible notes: “The textual deviation is a case of simple orthographic confusion between י (yod [or yud]) and ו (vav [or waw]) as frequently happened” (note 115 on Ecclesiastes 2)—the idea being that a scribe did not extend the vav down far enough so that it looked like a yod. However, scholar Mitchell Dahood “believes that a 3rd person singular suffix –i exists in Hebrew, and that [even] without emendation the meaning is ‘without Him’ (PBQ, p. 269; Psalms, vol. 3 (1970), p. 375)” (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, Eaton, footnote on Ecclesiastes 2:25). This translation—saying that we can’t have real enjoyment apart from God—seems to best fit the context, especially if the meaning of verse 24 is that man cannot experience true enjoyment of himself. Note also the beginning of verse 26: “For God gives…” The italics in the NKJV means that the word for “God” is not actually in the original text here. More precise would be: “For He gives…” This follows well if God is the subject of verse 25.

The proper perspective here is realizing our total dependence on God—not just for gifts to enjoy but the ability to truly enjoy them and be content. The same idea is expressed in the conclusion of the next section of the book, which states that God gives people the power to enjoy what He gives (see 5:19).

Implied in all this is a relationship with God, which becomes more explicit in 2:26. As noted earlier, this verse makes clear that God’s gifts are intended for those who are good in His sight. A broader scriptural overview reveals that these are the upright—people who follow God’s ways (in line with the directive given at the end of Ecclesiastes). And the whole Bible also reveals that any goodness in man is not his own but is from God. Those who are upright are so because God has redeemed them and empowered them to obey Him. If they persist in His ways, He blesses them yet further. It is stated here that He rewards them with wisdom and knowledge and joy. This is different from Solomon’s earlier statement about human beings searching out wisdom being a burdensome task given to them by God (1:13). That referred to human learning by experimentation, observation and learning lessons the hard way. In the present statement of 2:26 Solomon is referring to the blessing of learning from God His wisdom and truth, including how to live—and how to be happy.

Solomon the Preacher is advocating “the life of faith, which does not understand everything (see ch[apter] 3) but looks for the hand of God in the events of daily life. A useful parallel is 1 Timothy 6:6-
19, with its reminder that we are to be content with food and clothing, realizing that God gives us richly
everything to enjoy. The walk with God means that we can ask for his wisdom to use life rightly and his
knowledge to understand such of his ways as he may disclose to us, and thus experience the joy of
fulfillment despite life’s difficulties (v. 26; cf. Matt 25:21; Rom 12:2; Heb 12:2; James 1:5; 3:13-18)”
(Expositor’s, note on Ecclesiastes 2:24-26).

Solomon follows in verse 26 with a warning against living contrary to God as a sinner—the first time
he addresses this matter, but it becomes an important theme through the rest of the book. This should
dispel the notion that the message of the book is that we should cast off moral restraints and
hedonistically pursue whatever we want. Unlike that of the righteous, the sinner’s burden of trying to find
fulfillment in life is unrelieved. Moreover, any apparent success of the wicked is only temporary—as all
they gather and collect will ultimately go to the righteous. We see this elsewhere from Solomon in
Proverbs 13:22: “…But the wealth of the sinner is stored up for the righteous” (compare 28:8; Job 27:16-
17). This is sometimes the outcome in life today. But the ultimate view here is of the future Kingdom of
God—when all will be set right. Far from a morose vision limited to the inequities of the present,
Ecclesiastes in several places looks forward to the time when right will prevail. This, again, is a position
of faith—trusting in God’s promises of what is to come. It answers the dilemma of leaving one’s
possessions and achievements to others because of death in 2:18-21. The righteous will ultimately be
resurrected and inherit all things—far beyond anything they gathered in this life.

Some think that the last sentence of 2:26, “This also is vanity and grasping for the wind,” refers both
to God’s gifts to the righteous and to the task He has given sinners—as some hopeless comment on the
arbitrariness of what God gives people. But there is no arbitrariness here at all. The righteous are
rewarded and sinners must relinquish what they have to the righteous. This is not vanity but perfectly just.
There is clear value in serving God. The conclusion of vanity and grasping for the wind here refers only
to the plight of the wicked. They strive and strive in heaping up acquisitions to themselves but all for
naught—as it’s ultimately going to someone else. The words “This also” here “may be translated ‘This
indeed’ (for the Hebrew gam may be used for emphasis as well as for addition” (Tyndale, note on verse
26). That is, after having called other things vanity and grasping for the wind, Solomon says of the
striving of the wicked, “This indeed is vanity and grasping for the wind.”

Our Lives Are in God’s Hands (Ecclesiastes 3:1-15)  Day 6

We come now to the second major section of the book (3:1–5:20). Once again, to see what Solomon
is aiming at, we should consider the section’s conclusion (5:18-20). As in the previous section conclusion,
we see from the refrain here that people should accept and enjoy God’s gifts in daily living—with the
additional statement that a person who does so “will not dwell unduly on the days of his life, because God
keeps him busy with the joy of his heart” (verse 20). So it would appear that a problem addressed in this
section is people dwelling unduly on the days of their lives—lamenting over life’s monotony or negative
experiences and trying to comprehend the point of it all.

This sheds light on the beautiful and masterful poem that opens this section concerning the
“seasons,” or set times, of the circumstances in life (3:1-8)—this being the first part of the opening
subsection (verses 1-15). The fact that man is subject to his circumstances is often a source of great
consternation—especially for those who have not learned to commit themselves to God’s providential
care come what may. The poem here is not a digression, but continues Solomon’s exposition of man’s
plight during this life—“under the sun” here replaced by “under heaven” (verse 1, as in 1:3 and 2:3)—and
of the way to find happiness.

One commentator explains: “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
they will have any total meaning, and we cannot stand outside the events of life and view them ‘from the
beginning to the end’ [verse 11]. All this puts mankind in his place, far from being master of his fate and
captain of his soul” (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, Eaton, note on verses 1-15).

The New American Commentary notes on these verses: “Life is composed of joy and sorrow,
building and destroying, and living and dying. Each comes at the proper time. This reminds us that we are
creatures of time and not yet able to partake of the joys of eternity. No one can be happy who has not come to grips with the reality that life is full of changes and sorrows as well as continuity and joy. We must accept that we are mortal and governed by time” (Garrett).

Some commentators believe the poem here is pessimistic or a protest—bemoaning the fact that we must resign ourselves to fate. Yet this is not the message of the passage at all. Quite the contrary, in the various circumstances, it is still our choice whether to respond to the given situation appropriately. Moreover, accepting that we are not in control of circumstances is meant to bring peace of mind—

comfort even, when we realize who is in control and that there is purpose behind it all (verse 1). Notice verse 17, which says that God will judge the righteous and the wicked, there being “a time for every purpose and for every work.” This demonstrates that the times and seasons for events are part of the great plan God is working out (see also verse 10-11, 14). This should not be taken to imply that the various times of the poem in verses 1-8 are all fixed beforehand, with God having fated all the details of people’s lives. Ecclesiastes 9:11 says that time and events, often rendered chance, happen to all. Nevertheless, God remains in ultimate control. Whenever a circumstance proceeds, it is only because He allows it. He could always intervene. And He does where His great plan is concerned—and in answer to people’s prayers. Solomon’s assessment of the times of life in 3:9-15 is a hopeful one, as we will see.

“The scope of God’s sovereignty,” notes the Preaching the Word commentary, “is further emphasized in the poem that follows, with its parallel series of related opposites. Each pair forms a merism or merismus, a figure of speech in which two polarities make up a whole. For example, when the Bible says that God created ‘the heavens and the earth’ (Genesis 1:1), it means that God created the entire universe. Similarly, each of the pairs in Ecclesiastes 3 make up a larger whole. Together, birth and death comprise the whole of human existence, weeping and laughing summarize the full range of human emotion, and so on. There is something comprehensive about each pair. There is also something comprehensive about the list as a whole. There are fourteen pairs in all, which is twice the Biblical number (seven) of perfection and completion. Not surprisingly, the pairs themselves seem to take in the whole sweep of human existence, from birth to death, from war to peace (which is where the poem ends), and everything in between” (Ryken, p. 80).

As to the specifics of the poem, the first pairing of contrasts concerns life’s beginning and ending. Some maintain that what is often rendered “a time to be born” in verse 2 should actually be “a time to bear” or “a time to give birth.” It’s not clear which is meant. The second pairing, on planting and reaping, may also correspond to life and death (especially as two pairings appear to constitute a single verse throughout the poem, and this is the way the verses have been numbered—making seven verses of two pairs each).

Planting and plucking up is also figurative in Scripture of creative and destructive acts respectively—as are the verbs in the next two pairs in verse 3 (kill/heal, break down/build up). Besides their literal meanings, these “may be figuratively used for establishing or undermining” (Tyndale, note on verses 2-3).

The actions mentioned in the poem are often understood in a moral sense. For instance, verse 3 is thought to mean that there is a time when it is right to kill. In Israel’s experience there certainly was a right time—in the cases where God ordered it, whether in war or capital punishment. Christians today are not to engage in war or execute people, being ministers of life and not death (Matthew 26:52; John 18:36; 2 Corinthians 3:6). They are, however, to kill their old sinful ways (Romans 8:13; Colossians 3:5). On the other hand, other commentators contend that these verses in Ecclesiastes 3 are not about proper behavior, considering the “everything” of verse 1 to include immoral acts of others as well. That is to say, there is a season and time for evil—and indeed, God has allotted the present age for this and with great purpose, though He does not approve of it. Still, it seems best to read the verses here as representative of everything that could confront a given individual over the course of a lifetime—rather than as things various people might do or experience. If the reader or hearer of these words is in mind in each verse, then the responses mentioned would seem to be morally permissible at appropriate times.

The next two pairs of the poem, in verse 4, bring in human emotions, “first private (weep...laugh), then public (lament...dance)” (note on verse 4).

“The following two pairs [in verse 5] 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
cannot find out what God has done from be of eternity. We feel the need for ourselves and our work to be eternal and yet are grieved to be trapped in American Commentary turns within people’s hearts a desire for eternity and yet are grieved to be trapped in

his qualification to tell us that if we can accept our lives as ultimatel one’s calling ordering of circumstances, even negative ones, leads to a beautiful work in the end. We find a New each incident “fitting,” as in 5:18 as arranged by

life. fulfillment word exist on the earth. ultimate goal in life is peace hate evil. We must war against dark spi and war and peace can exist on a personal level. Individually, personal feelings and the latter as international here with speaking or not speaking, would seem to be doing whatever is appropriate at the time. 

seamstress might also “tear” cloth for various reasons, including in the making of quilts. The sense, as scattering stones on an 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) [A 19th-century commentator] saw here an ‘old Jewish practice…of flinging stones or earth into the grave at the burial’ in the first phrase, and preparations to build a house in the second. (iv) More recent scholars have seen a sexual reference following the Midrashic interpretation (cf. GNB). The first three possibilities have often been rejected on the ground that they ‘leave the second half of the verse [about embracing] without any logical connection’…. But the second half need not have an exclusively ‘passionate meaning’…; 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” (note on Ecclesiastes 3:5).

The next two pairs, in verse 6, concern “possessions and our resolutions concerning them” (note on verse 6). Instead of “a time to gain and a time to lose,” the NIV has “a time to search and a time to give up [as lost].” “Nothing in this world is ours forever” (NAC, note on verse 6).

In the next two pairs, tearing and keeping silent “may allude to mourning and funerals. Mourners tore their clothes, and their comforters kept silent during times of grief, but people were free to repair clothes and freely converse at other times” (note on verse 7). However, with regard to sewing, a seamstress might also “tear” cloth for various reasons, including in the making of quilts. The sense, as with speaking or not speaking, would seem to be doing whatever is appropriate at the time. 

The last two pairs of contrasts in the poem, in verse 8, are arranged chiastically (or concentrically, here a-b-b-a): love, hate, war, peace. The two pairs are often differentiated by classing the first as personal feelings and the latter as international conditions. But love and hate can exist on a national level, and war and peace can exist on a personal level. Individually, Christians today must love all people and hate evil. We must war against dark spiritual forces and our own corrupted human nature. Yet the ultimate goal in life is peace. While we do experience times of peace, perfect, lasting peace does not yet exist on the earth. In placing peace last, Solomon transitions back to the point of the book. The Hebrew word for peace, shalom, means more than the absence of conflict. It includes contentment and fulfillment—what his treatise is pointing people toward.

In verses 9-15, Solomon proceeds to evaluate and deal with what he has just presented. That there is a dilemma in what he has laid out in his poem is clear from verse 9, which is essentially a restatement of the seemingly hopeless question in 1:3 and 2:22, asking what benefit one derives from his work in this life. Man and his work are subject to time and circumstances as part of the limitations of mortal life. And note “the God-given task with which the sons of men are to be occupied” (3:10). In the scheme of things as arranged by God, people have the hard task of navigating life according to changing conditions over which they have no real control—including the time of their death.

Yet an optimistic qualification is offered at the beginning of Ecclesiastes 3:11: God “has made everything beautiful in its time.” The Hebrew word rendered “beautiful” could also be translated as “fitting,” as in 5:18 (NKJV), though “beautiful” would work there as well. Some take 3:11 to mean that each incident is appropriate at its given time. That could be. Yet the “everything” here, tying back to verse 1, would seem to indicate the whole. Solomon is likely saying that when all is said and done, God’s ordering of circumstances, even negative ones, leads to a beautiful work in the end. We find a New Testament parallel in Romans 8:28: “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.” This includes circumstances before one’s calling—and the verse here will eventually apply to the human race as a whole. Solomon intends by his qualification to tell us that if we can accept our lives as ultimately the work of God, aiming toward a meaningful and beautiful result, even the difficult parts will be bearable.

But he then presents a counterqualification in the second part of Ecclesiastes 3:11. God has put within people’s hearts a desire for eternity and for comprehending all the reasons for life’s twists and turns—but we can’t figure it out. So we can’t be content with just accepting life as it is. The New American Commentary notes on this verse: “We feel like aliens in the world of time and yearn to be part of eternity. We feel the need for ourselves and our work to be eternal and yet are grieved to be trapped in time. We also desire to understand our place in the universe against the backdrop of eternity. But we cannot find out what God has done from beginning to end. That is, we are not able to discern any plan or
pattern to all of this. God’s purposes are outside our realm of control or investigation." As Isaiah 55:8-9 tells us: “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,” says the LORD. ‘For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.’” We just cannot grasp all the reasons for everything God brings about or allows to happen. We do not have the broad overview He does, seeing all the interrelations He sees and understanding all His manifold intents in any given circumstance.

We can become unduly focused on all this and end up distressed—a facet of the problem referenced in the conclusion of the current major section (5:20). Or we can embrace the solution Solomon presents in the section conclusion (5:18-20) as well as the subsection conclusion here (3:12-15)—both containing the refrain about eating and drinking and enjoying the good of one’s labor as God’s gift. As in the previous instance of the refrain at the end of the former section (2:24-26), this implies a life of faith in and acceptance of God’s providential care and blessing. The point is certainly not that we should forget our eternal longing through profligate living, as some contend. “To do good” in 3:12 refers to engaging in enjoyable pursuits as well as living morally—parallel to being among the “good” in the previous section conclusion (2:26). In fact, doing good is later equated with not sinning and being righteous (7:20; 9:2).

Some object to the focus of the refrains, deeming them selfishly oriented. But doing good, as the whole of Scripture shows, includes obeying God in helping and serving others. (We will consider more about the notion of selfishness in Ecclesiastes when we come to the current major section’s conclusion in 5:18-20.)

Note that Solomon began his conclusion to this subsection with “I know” (3:12). He followed with the refrain about enjoying life. Yet he has more to say in regard to coping with life’s changing circumstances. In verse 14, he again begins with “I know,” showing that there is more to his conclusion. He then explains that God’s work will last forever and no one can alter it. This refers back to “the work that God does from beginning to end” in verse 11—to God’s overall plan and purpose, particularly as it unfolds in the circumstances expressed in the poem about the times of life. In essence, Solomon turns the dilemma of the poem on its head! The same poem that can appear to represent a bleak and hopeless entrapment in time is reassessed as representing the surety of the overall direction of life by God—a fact we can have great confidence in. Indeed, God’s work lasting forever and being unalterable is set in sharp contrast to the vapor or vanity of human life.

Yet there are those who view this as a negative. “Some scholars see these verses as depressing and fatalistic. God does whatever he does, and there is nothing we can do about it. In the words of [one commentator] ‘God’s works steamroller over man’s puny efforts, and nothing substantially new can interrupt the awesome course of events God has ordained.’ If we cannot add anything to what God has done or take anything away from it, then there is absolutely nothing that we can do about our situation in life…. [So] is the absolute rule of God a source of hope or encouragement?” (Preaching the Word commentary, Ryken, p. 96).

The answer is right here. Continuing in verse 14, Solomon says God does it—that is, works out His great plan through circumstances far beyond human ability to grasp—so “that men should fear before Him.” It is all intended to humble man and lead him to submit to God and His ways. Yet “even at this point some scholars try to claim that God is trying ‘to frighten people into submission, not to arouse a sense of respectful awe of his power and might.’ The trouble with this interpretation is that the fear of God is one of the most positive concepts in the entire Bible. To fear God is to revere him and to tremble at his mighty power. Both the Psalms and the Proverbs say that such fear of the Lord is the very beginning of wisdom and that anyone who fails to see this is a fool (Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 1:7 and 9:10). In fact, when we get to the end of Ecclesiastes, we will discover that this is the point of the whole book. After saying everything else that he has to say, the Preacher will leave us with this simple instruction: ‘Fear God’ (Ecclesiastes 12:13)” (p. 96). In 3:15, Solomon takes things a step further. The first part of the verse acknowledges that time marches on incessantly and cyclically, just as was stated in 1:9 to illustrate the brevity and monotony of life against this backdrop. The latter part of 3:15 is variously translated, but it seems to mean that God seeks what has been passed by. In context, this could mean that God will ultimately recall and restore the lives that have been left behind by the march of time—the ultimate hope for surpassing the limitations of this life. Or it could refer, as in the NKJV, to God’s recalling of past events for the purpose of judgment. If the latter, this would serve as a warning to those who would respond to the ups and downs of life by
living immorally—and as a reinforcement of the point about the fear of God in verse 14. It would also introduce what Solomon presents at the beginning of the next subsection (see verses 16-17). Still, “the language of seeking is so positive that it suggests that God is looking to redeem the past, and not simply to render judgment. By his grace he will recover and restore what seems, from our vantage point, to be lost forever” (p. 97). Either way, the end of this subsection in 3:15 points us to the time beyond the toil of this life—to the time of the Kingdom of God—just as the end of the previous major section did in 2:26. Embracing life with this focus is the way to happiness in the here and now.

Considering the times of life, the Preaching the Word commentary asks and comments: “Do you believe in the timeliness of God, not just for the world in general but for your own case in particular? Do you trust his timing for the seasons of your own life? People often criticize God for being too late, or else too early. Yet in retrospect we discover that his agenda was better all along. Because a door was closed when we wanted it open, we ended up going a different direction, which turned out to be the right direction all along. We were not ready for the relationship we wanted when we wanted it, but only later. Something happened to change our schedule, and we ended up having an unexpected conversation that changed our whole direction in life, or maybe someone else’s direction. Sometimes being in the right place at God’s time instead of at the wrong place on your own schedule can even save your life…. It is all in the timing. Rather than insisting on having everything run according to our own schedule, we need to learn to trust God’s timetable. Know this: the Savior who was born ‘when the fullness of time had come’ (Galatians 4:4) and died for our sins at just ‘the right time’ (Romans 5:6) has a beautiful sense of timing” (p. 91).

**“Concerning the Condition of the Sons of Men” (Ecclesiastes 3:16–4:16) Day 7**

Continuing in the book’s second major section, Solomon now turns in its middle subsection (3:16–4:16) to elements of human life under the sun that might seem to contradict what he has stated thus far. He deals with four areas that constitute major obstacles to contentment—factors that could lead some to think there is no divine plan being worked out here on earth (as they might ask, “If there is a God who cares about man, how could He allow this?”). Each of the four issues is introduced with some form of the phrase “I saw” (3:16; 4:1; 4:4; 4:7).

The first issue here is injustice (3:16-22). “This unit makes an observation (v. 16), passes two comments (17, 18-21) and reaches a conclusion (22) (I saw...I said...I said...So I saw [or perceived])” (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, Eaton, note on verses 16-22). The problem here is quite egregious. If there is anywhere in society that people would expect some evidence of divine direction, it is in the matter of rendering justice, as God would seem to be intimately concerned with this. And indeed He is, as Solomon is quick to point out in verse 17. Injustice today is proof only of the failure of man’s self-rule. It is not proof that God has no control over life. He permits unrighteousness in the halls of justice for the present time, but He will set matters right in a future period of judgment. As the Preaching the Word commentary notes: “Our confidence does not lie in a justice system but in the Chief Justice himself, Jesus Christ. God has promised a day when his Son will judge the righteous and the wicked (Acts 17:30-31)…. when he will render his final verdict on all mankind” (Ryken, p. 103). Indeed, Solomon uses the language of his earlier poem about proper times for various purposes to here affirm that all is proceeding according to God’s overall plan. Verse 17 of Ecclesiastes 3 also demonstrates that the need to live righteously, avoiding wickedness, is a key message in the book.

Solomon’s next comments, comparing people with animals (verses 18-21), are seen by some as constituting a new issue. Yet he is more likely commenting on the human condition in general—initially in response to the problem he just mentioned but applicable to the other problems he raises as well. For the time being, God withholds the judgment of verse 17 so that people can come to see what they need to see about themselves. “Our present existence is a proving ground. It is a test, not simply in the sense of something we pass or fail, but also in the sense of something that demonstrates our true character. One of the purposes of life is to examine and ultimately reveal our place in the universe and our true relationship to God. This test is…for our benefit, so that we learn to recognize our mortality. Will we see ourselves for who we really are?” (PTW, p. 103).

Solomon points out that what people are to come to see is that they “by themselves” (as verse 18 can properly be rendered) are as beasts (see Green’s Literal Translation). They live under the “law of the jungle,” as it were. And within this system, all people, no matter what their behavior, meet the same end
as beasts—death (verses 19-20)—the apparent height of injustice. Of themselves people have no advantage over animals, with both breathing air to sustain life until life ceases. Neither people nor animals can escape death and deterioration, returning to dust (compare Genesis 2:7; 3:19). Some think this passage in Ecclesiastes 3 is claiming that this life is all there is for human beings—that there is no life after death. But the book of Ecclesiastes continually points to a time of future reward and judgment for all people—and states that the human spirit returns to God at death (12:7). The key to 3:18-20 is evidently the “by themselves” or “of themselves” in verse 18. It is apart from God’s intervention that people share the same end as animals. God wants people to see their dire need for Him—and life’s problems, especially death looming at the end of life, help accomplish this.

Verse 21 about the spirit of men going up (to heaven) and that of animals going down to the earth is apparently translated correctly in the NKJV. Some versions, following the Greek Septuagint, translate the verse to ask who knows whether the human spirit goes up and that of the beast goes down—implying that no one knows if this happens. Again, though, Ecclesiastes 12:7 clearly states that the human spirit returns to God at death—so 3:21 could not mean that no one knows this. The key again seems to be the “by (or of) themselves” in verse 18. Apart from God’s involvement, who would know about or give serious thought to any divergence in the paths of human and animal spirits at death? Indeed, “the generality of men cannot appreciate the difference in ultimate destiny and live as though there were no difference” (Tyndale, note on verse 21). Yet as they approach death, they are forced to think about such things.

Verse 22 is an instance of the book’s refrain, here presenting the conclusion of this unit addressing injustice: “If God is sovereign in his disposal of earthly events (3:1-15), has a purpose even in allowing human injustices (3:16-20), and holds our ultimate destiny in his hands (21), then the attitude of the wise should be joyful confidence in the pursuit of earthly responsibilities and the pleasures they bring” (note on verse 22). Where this is elsewhere shown to be God’s gift to man, it is here referred to as a person’s portion, lot or heritage—one’s share in God’s blessings to mankind (the same wording used in the refrain at the end of the present major section in 5:18). The end of the last sentence of 3:22, translated “after him” in many versions, probably “ought to be rendered ‘afterwards’” (The New American Commentary, note on verses 19-22; compare JPS Tanakh). So the sentence would not necessarily be asking how a person could know what will happen after his death—merely after the present. The point in context would seem to be that we should use the time we have as best we can—not fixating on injustices, as we don’t know how God is going to work everything out. Of course, this implies trust in God’s oversight.

The second problem Solomon mentions is oppression (4:1-3), a consequence of the problem of injustice. Man’s mistreatment of fellow man, the strong abusing the weak, is horrible—and made worse by the twice-mentioned absence of a comforter, one who could ease their pain (verse 1). This does not seem to refer to having no human companion, another problem mentioned later in the current subsection, since oppressed people may well have friends, particularly among those who are oppressed along with them. Considering that the observance is of the plight of humanity, the likely problem here is that they do not have the comforter who could truly help them—Almighty God. Some might take this fact as an indictment of God—or as proof that He is not working out some plan since He obviously doesn’t care. But God is not to blame. He cares deeply and desires to be man’s comforter, but man has rejected Him. As a consequence, all the world suffers oppression at the hands of fellow man and evil spirit forces led by Satan the devil. This, however, does not mean God has no plan at work to rescue humanity. (We might also note that those who do not have God do not typically have the kind of companions who know Scripture and God’s plan and who could therefore give the most comforting words.)

In the meantime, so bad is the suffering of mankind that Solomon came to state that it’s better to be already dead than to go on seeing and experiencing this (verse 2). In fact, he goes further in stating that it would be better to have not existed than to live and see man’s oppression (verse 3). How are we to understand these remarks? First we should note that they evidently represent his past thoughts in contemplating the matter prior to writing this book. They don’t necessarily reflect his current outlook. Indeed, Solomon later states that it’s better to be alive than dead, as there is hope in life (9:4). That would seem to contradict the thoughts here. Some see the sentiments of Ecclesiastes 4:1-3 as having come in a time of deep despair over man’s abusive treatment of fellow man, with possible use of hyperbole or exaggeration to express deep woe. Yet Solomon at the time of writing is apparently not gripped by overwhelming despair, as we may ascertain from the fact that he tells us in 5:8 not to marvel at seeing
oppression and injustice. So it seems his perspective has shifted.

Yet since Solomon does not immediately deny or qualify what he has stated in 4:2-3, his remarks leave many with the impression that he remains utterly pessimistic and hopeless. Indeed, while verse 2 can more easily be read as a past conclusion, verse 3 seems to read as a present determination—though this could well be part of what he earlier thought in verse 2 and not necessarily what he thinks now (especially as verse 1a concerning past consideration seems to introduce verses 1b-3 as part of that—note the NJKV indenting of these verses under the verse 1a header). While it may be that Solomon’s remarks in verses 2-3 represent rashly drawn, false conclusions to which he no longer adheres, we should consider the possibility that his sentiments here are valid to a certain extent. Solomon’s thought in verse 2 that it’s better to be already dead is true in some contexts (see also 7:1). In death, a person’s suffering or witness of suffering is over and he or she will be resurrected at the time of God’s intervention to set the world straight. But what about the idea in 4:3 that it would be better to have not existed in the first place? If understood to mean that non-existence is preferable to life that, dark though it may be, could end in eternal happiness, the notion is clearly false. But the statement could be true if referring to the timing of people’s existence, not whether they ever exist or not. The NIV translates this verse, “But better than both is he who has not yet been…” After the present evil age of human misrule under Satan, God will in the future free the world from oppression, leading mankind to righteousness and peace. For the vast majority of people, who are not called to God’s way and salvation during the present age, it would be preferable in a certain sense to not exist until God sets the world straight. Thus, if Solomon meant for us to take his statement in verse 3 as true (and not merely as his former despair), this is what he could have meant.

Another possibility here is that verses 2 and 3 are to be read in light of the dilemma of verse 1—having no comforter to relieve the oppression. In this case the thought would be that it’s better to be dead or to never have existed as long as man has no comforter. This is also true. Yet the condition of being without a comforter is not permanent. That brings us to an important point here.

It is often thought that the message in this unit is a completely hopeless one—grieving for the oppressed but giving no solution to dealing with the problem. But the solution is in part implicit in the repeated statement in verse 1 that there is no comforter. What we desperately need in coping with the problem of oppression is a comforter—and the ultimate Comforter is available if we will turn our lives over to His guidance and care. Eventually, humanity as a whole will experience His intervention and help. And even now, the individual who turns to God receives His help in the present to endure. Indeed, we are evidently meant to reflect on the conclusion just given in 3:22 as we proceed through the problems presented in this subsection. This will be further affirmed and expanded on in the major section conclusion in 5:18-20.

The next issue considered by Solomon as an obstacle to contentment and trusting that God has a plan for mankind is human rivalry in the working world born out of envy (4:4-6). He laments the dog-eat-dog competition that gets people nowhere—“the scramble for wealth, leadership, power or status” (Tyndale, note on verse 4). In response he offers two proverbs. They can seem contradictory, but that is because they apply to opposing circumstances. For those who might be tempted to just withdraw from the hectic rat race altogether, the point of the first proverb (verse 5) is that we have to work. A person who foolishly refuses to work comes to poverty and self-destruction, as various proverbs of Solomon also show. Later in Ecclesiastes he encourages industriousness and productivity and further denounces laziness and idleness (see 9:10; 10:18). On the other hand, the second proverb here in Ecclesiastes 4 (verse 6) is for those who go overboard in work for the great payoff it will bring. It says “that it is better to have a few things (one handful) and yet be satisfied and happy than to have many things (two handfuls) and yet be consumed with work and worries. The Teacher steers away from both idleness and slavery to work” (NAC, note on verses 5-6). Quietness in the second proverb means peaceful and composed—content “rather than always striving for more…. The quiet person has found the right balance. His hands are not folded, like the fool. He is working hard enough to have a decent handful of what he needs in life. But that is enough for him. He does not keep demanding more and more but accepts what God has given” (PTW, p. 111).

Solomon next addresses the problem of human isolation (verses 7-16). Having just cautioned against overworking for material reward, he starts with someone engaged in this pursuit who sadly has no one with whom to share (verse 8). The NKJV’s italicized phrase “But he never asks,” similar to that in the
Solomon goes on to show the seriousness of this matter by highlighting the value of companionship (verses 9-12). Two can achieve more together than one. And they support and comfort one another through hard times. Verse 12, with its “one…two…threefold” advancement, may be a proverb—or at least the third line is. “The strength of the three-ply cord was proverbial in the ancient world, as seen in Sumerian and Akkadian texts” (Tyndale, note on verse 12). The NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible gives further detail in its note on the verse: “This has a remarkable parallel in the Gilgamesh Epic, in which Gilgamesh encourages his friend Enkidu about the value of friendship: ‘Two men will not die; the towed boat will not sink, / a towrope of three strands cannot be cut.’ Both texts speak of the security that two can offer one another and then use the analogy of a three-stranded rope.” Recall that Solomon gathered wisdom from many sources, including sifting valuable concepts from ancient texts riddled with problems. And this particular idea may have become more generally proverbial so that Gilgamesh need not have been the source. Solomon was of course quite capable of coining such ideas, but the fact that this one was already around makes it likely that he was passing it on, though now in the framework of all scriptural wisdom.

In context the step up to three in verse 12 is evidently a general indication that having more friends than one is even better. This verse is sometimes used to point out the strength of marriage—the union being not just two (husband and wife) but three (including God). Though not the specific intent of the verse here (and clearly this was not in mind in the foreign parallel), the application is valid—though God is not a mere additional companion but the most needed of all. In any case, Solomon’s presentation of the value of companionship implies of course that we should seek it to avoid isolation.

Verses 13-16 are deemed by some to present a new problem, but these verses continue “to underlie the folly of self-sufficiency and growing isolation” (note on verse 13). Solomon gives the story of “a king who grows too self-confident and feels he needs no advisers. He falls from favour and a new regime takes over. Despite his humble origins, the crowd flocks to the side of the newcomer who too will grow old and be abandoned in turn to his own isolation” (note on verse 16). The phrase “the second youth” in verse 15 is better rendered “the second, the youth” (note on verse 15)—as there is only one young newcomer in the story.

We should first notice that “of all the contrasts between the two kings—youth versus age, poverty versus wealth, wisdom versus folly—the most important is their attitude toward advice.... This tragedy has been repeated many times in the history of nations.... [It also] stands as a warning to older Christians. We usually think that gray hair brings wisdom, and often it does. But whether they are young or old, the wisest Christians are the ones who listen to counsel and, if necessary, accept correction” (PTW, p. 113).

Some take the story here to be a made-up example, which is possible. Solomon saying he “saw” the throngs supporting the new king (verse 15) might seem to counter that, but this could perhaps mean he merely visualized a mental picture. On the other hand, he may have actually witnessed what he describes. The situation could refer to a regime change in a neighboring kingdom, Solomon having been present at the coronation ceremony. Alternatively, some propose that the old and foolish king was Saul and that the newcomer was David, Solomon’s father. Though David did not actually come out of prison, he did in a figurative sense, having been in hiding from Saul, who pursued him as a rebel outlaw. While in hiding, David even prayed to God, “Bring my soul out of prison” (Psalm 142:7). Of course, David’s coronation occurred before Solomon was born, yet Solomon no doubt saw great throngs supporting his father early on but later forsaking him during the revolts of Absalom and Sheba. Then again, others maintain that the old and foolish king was Solomon himself—and that the one coming out of prison to be king refers to Jeroboam, who was prophesied to be king over the northern tribes following Solomon’s death (as punishment for Solomon’s grievous sins). Solomon had tried to have Jeroboam killed, so he fled to Egypt.
(possibly qualifying as a figurative imprisonment). Perhaps Solomon was envisioning his eventual return and coronation. The Bible devotional series Geneva Bible Notes applies this illustration to Joseph, who was called out of prison to be as a king, really a vizier or prime minister, under the Egyptian pharaoh but was later forgotten under a new pharaoh (see Exodus 1:8).

Whatever is intended, however, the specific case is not actually important. What matters here is, first, the need to remain teachable. It is the meek who will ultimately inherit the earth (Psalm 37:11; Matthew 5:5). The other thing to recognize here is that this situation is typical—with the same thing ultimately befalling the younger ruler. People may think that attaining high station will ensure the love and support of many. But it won’t. Power corrupts, so that those in high office often fail to remain humble and teachable. Or they end up listening to the wrong advisors. Moreover, the crowds are fickle. They support whatever they perceive as new—or change for the sake of change—until the new gets old and something supposedly newer comes along. This is not the friendship that will stave off isolation. It is but one more example of the vanity of the human condition, pursuing nothingness.

Yet here is something else to consider. There was one wise young man, the wisest and meekest who ever lived, who was born poor in his kingdom and later came out of the prison of the grave to take over from the ruler of this world as our King, whom many rejected yet whom, in the end, all the living will follow for eternity. If we are wise and live accordingly, we will follow His example and reign with Him for eternity.

In the face of the obstacles to faith and happiness covered in this subsection—injustice, oppression, the rat race and isolation—we are implicitly told with each problem how to cope: live righteously (with future judgment in mind) and derive joy from daily work and accomplishment; seek comfort from God; work to meet needs without becoming a slave to work for a big payoff; and seek the companionship of true friends and wise counsel with a teachable spirit. In the next subsection ending in the major section conclusion (5:1-20), Solomon will go further in helping us to maintain a right perspective and live properly despite the obstacles.

Properly Approaching God (Ecclesiastes 5:1-7)

Day 8

Proceeding into the second section’s last subsection (5:1-17), Solomon now for the first time directly addresses his audience with several exhortations, starting in verses 1-7 with cautions about coming before God. As has been pointed to already, the answers to the problems of the human condition lie with Him. But the Creator and Ruler of the universe must be treated with humble reverence and submission.

The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries volume on Ecclesiastes states: “Earth’s ‘vanity’ has been recognized (1:2–2:23), but [then] considered in the light of the life God gives (2:24-26) and the assurance of his sovereignty (3:1-13). 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 needed Comforter]. 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” (Eaton, note on 5:1-7).

It’s noteworthy that, as commentator James Limburg points out, “Ecclesiastes 5 is the place in the book where the most concentrated statements about God are found, with a total of 10 occurrences of the word” (Encountering Ecclesiastes: A Book for Our Time, 2006, p. 79).

The phrase “walk prudently” (verse 1) is literally “guard your feet” (NKJV Study Bible, note on verse 1)—that is, watch your step. And the context is that of going to “the house of God.” In Solomon’s time that meant going to worship God at the temple. Today the house of God is the spiritual temple made up of His people—the Church (Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Timothy 3:15). The mention of God being in heaven (Ecclesiastes 5:2) could perhaps signify that God’s heavenly abode is intended, so that the meaning could apply generally to coming before God anywhere, even in private prayer. Yet the fact that we are then told to “draw near to hear” (verse 1) would seem to indicate a place of instruction. Of course, people of that time typically did not have their own copies of the Scriptures, so they had to go to where God’s Word was kept and proclaimed to be instructed. Today we still need to assemble to learn God’s ways, but we can also receive instruction from the Bible in private study. Moreover, the Hebrew word shema means more than “hear.” It means to attentively listen and heed, and is often translated obey.

Contrasted with hearing obediently is what we are not to do—“give the sacrifice of fools” (same
verse). Note that what follows are warnings against being rash with the mouth and to let our words be few (verses 2-7). So the rash, multitudinous words are evidently the foolish sacrifice. Consider the opposite in Hosea 14:2, which encourages words of repentance, and offering “the sacrifices [literally “calves”] of our lips”—elsewhere referred to as “the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips,” which we are to continually be offering (Hebrews 13:15).

The warning is not against lengthy prayers to God so much as it is about not being cautious and sincere in what we say—and failing to realize that we should not be making commitments we may not be able to fulfill. Solomon states, “For God is in heaven, and you on earth; therefore let your words be few” (verse 2). The point is that God is the One in heaven with the supreme vantage point and control over earthly circumstances. We are not. The New American Commentary notes on verses 1-7: “This text is similar to Deut[eronomy] 23:21-23 [about keeping vows to God], but the emphasis in Ecclesiastes is on the limitations of human knowledge and the contingency of human existence. We should be careful about making great promises to God because we do not know if our circumstances tomorrow will be what they are today. We may not be able to fulfill the vows we make. Thus our promises before God would be shown to be no more than idle boasts, and we will fall under judgment” (Garrett).

We find similar warnings against swearing and making claims about what we will do tomorrow in the New Testament, with the point made that we can’t ensure things will happen as we profess (Matthew 5:33-37; James 4:13-16; 5:12).

Furthermore, Jesus told us to address God in prayer as “our Father in heaven” (Matthew 6:9)—focusing on His sovereign position where He sits at the controls of the universe, as it were, and recognizing that we are far below Him. We are not to think more highly of ourselves than we ought to (Romans 12:3). Expositor’s states regarding Ecclesiastes 5:1-2: “In contrast to the power complexes of the previous chapter, we are brought quietly into the presence of God. Jesus may have had these verses in mind when he told the story of the two who went to the temple to pray [one a proud Pharisee who saw himself more righteous than others and one a tax collector who would not look up to heaven but prayed for mercy as a sinner] (Luke 18:9-14). Here is a keen analysis of motives in prayer and worship. We come before God in humility, recognizing his majesty and his right to our lives. We seek his guidance and listen to his words” (Wright).

The Preaching the Word commentary notes: “The Creator/creature distinction has practical implications for what we say when we worship. We need to know our place, remembering both who God is and who we are. Isaiah said in one of his famous prophecies [which we quoted earlier in our comments on Ecclesiastes 3:11], ‘My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts’ (Isaiah 55:8-9)” (Ryken, p. 123).

The statement in Ecclesiastes 5:3, “For a dream comes through much activity, and a fool’s voice is known by his many words,” is apparently a proverb—and is paralleled by the statement in verse 7: “For in the multitude of dreams and many words there is also vanity.” The meaning of both statements is debated. It should be acknowledged that an intensely busy schedule and dealing with many concerns may trigger more dreams while sleeping, yet how does that parallel a fool’s voice being known for many words in verse 3—many dreams and many words being linked together as vanity in verse 7? The New American Commentary maintains that “the word ‘dreams’ refers not to literal dreams, whether as revelations sought by sleeping in a holy place or as the disturbed sleep of one who has many anxieties. Instead, the word is used metaphorically, as in the English, ‘He has big dreams.’ Those who have many troubles may fantasize of performing great and noble acts, but their aspirations are meaningless [or amount to nothing]. Similarly, many words (which proceed from the speaker’s presumption that he is wise) mark a person a fool [see also 10:14]. Verse 7a could be translated, ‘In excess dreaming there is an abundance of both vanities and words.’ In context these proverbs mean that fools seek to advance themselves before God with great vows and promises” (note on verses 3-7).

We should not be making rash and foolish vows before God, particularly in attempts to bribe or bargain with God, but verses 4-6 warn that if a person does vow he should be sure to follow through. As David earlier wrote, God will receive the person “who keeps an oath even when it hurts, and does not change their mind” (Psalm 15:4, NIV). The “messenger” in Ecclesiastes 5:6 before whom the one who vowed was not to say it was made in error was most likely a priest or other person sent from the temple to
confirm or collect the vow. “The trouble was that some people tried to get out of their commitments by coming up with all kinds of lame excuses. (‘Vow? What vow? There must be some kind of mistake!’)” (PTW, p. 126). Of course we’ll all have to face the ultimate Messenger of God—Jesus Christ (Romans 14:10).

Thankfully He and the Father are merciful. “Once again we can only cast ourselves on the mercy of God, pray that he will forgive us for everything we have failed to do, and ask him to accept us through Jesus Christ. Jesus is the only one who ever kept all his promises to God, including his own vow to offer a holy sacrifice—the sacrifice of his body for our sins” (p. 126). By God’s mercy through Christ we are able to be forgiven for all our failures upon repentance and faith. And we now have help to keep our commitments to God and others. We are helped by “a Savior who knows what it means to keep a commitment, who did everything he promised to the very death” (p. 126).

Instead of lofty imaginings about ourselves, we need to get real. For as Ecclesiastes 5:7 says, the answer to vanity or frustration or fruitless or worthless life is to “fear God”—to be in humble awe and properly concerned to not incur His disappointment and judgment, deeply motivated to follow what He says, as we saw in 3:15—again, the very beginning of true wisdom. This is a preview of the conclusion of the whole book, bringing together its grand themes of vanity apart from God and the need to fear and obey Him (see 12:8, 13).

**The Right Outlook on Injustice and Gain (Ecclesiastes 5:8-17) Day 9 (Part 1)**

Continuing in the last subsection of the second major section, Solomon turns next in chapter 5 to matters previously raised that might seem to call into question God’s sovereignty and power—distracting from the healthy fear and reverence for God we must have. He starts in verse 8 with the issue of widespread injustice, earlier brought up in 3:16. The translation and point of 5:8-9 is highly disputed. One way to read verse 8 is as a corrective to systemic corruption—that everyone is answerable to someone higher up. Some, however, see the tiers of authority here as further oppression going up the chain. Others believe “watches over” here should be “watches out for,” meaning that government officials are protecting one another, thus preventing corruption from being rooted out.

Verse 9, which may be a proverb, could be read to say that all the officials are unjustly taking from the land and its produce, all the way up to the king—as a summary of the corruption, leaving the matter unresolved. However, others render the verse to say that on the whole, “a king who cultivates the field is an advantage to the land” (NASB). Some think this means a good king is an answer to the injustice in the previous verse. Others take this rendering to mean that government, even with its corruption, is better than anarchy. *The New American Commentary* states: “In an anarchic society no boundaries or property rights can be maintained, access to wells and other common resources cannot be fairly regulated, aqueducts and dikes will not be kept in good repair, and no organized resistance to ravaging armies can be offered. In short, the agricultural economy will collapse. Government may be evil, but it is a necessary evil” (Garrett, note on verse 9). Indeed, God makes the necessity of human government plain in Romans 13. But this may not be the point of the passage here.

Consider again that verse 8 of Ecclesiastes 5 could mean that there is always someone higher up in authority to deal with one practicing injustice. As one commentator notes: “There is a chain of command and this means there is a chain of responsibility. In it we may have abusers of authority but they too are under authority and on and on up the chain of command…all the way up to the very throne room of God” (Daniel Hill, “Ecclesiastes: An Old Testament Study,” GraceNotes.info, note on verse 8). This might well be the implication here, as others also believe. Dr. Walter Kaiser notes, “The highest judge of all is the One who will evaluate every judgment ever made” (*Ecclesiastes: Total Life*, p. 76).

While God is not directly mentioned here, it’s possible that He is referred to by implication in verse 9, with everyone dependent on agricultural produce—produce that is from His hand, which He may withhold in judgment against corruption. Tommy Nelson writes: “The blessing of the Lord is for all. Even a king needs the blessing of God upon the field. A king is not sovereign. He looks to God to bless the land. These wicked men must deal with those above them who must deal ultimately with a sovereign God” (*A Life Well Lived*, p. 78). Kaiser states: “Ruler and people are happiest when they both realize that they are served by the farmed fields. But should human government also fail, there is still redress from God” (p. 76). As one commentator translates the end of verse 9, “Even a king is subject to the soil” (Robert Gordis, *Koheleth—The Man and His World*, 1968, p. 166). Of course, this may not require God’s
direct judgment. If a king is corrupt or allowing corruption, proper cultivation in agriculture and the other economic fundamentals in society will suffer—as will everyone, all the way up to the king. The consequences are thus automatic.

Others maintain that a textual problem exists in verse 9 and have advocated reading the same Hebrew consonants minus the later vowel pointing with the words divided differently: “Without changing the consonants of the Hebrew text…one may read… ‘the advantage of land is in its yield, that is, if the field is cultivated for [its] yield’…. [Read this way] the verse thus makes the point that land ought not to be accumulated for its own sake but to be cultivated for what it produces—its yield” (C.L. Ceow, The Anchor Bible: Ecclesiastes, 1997, p. 204). There is in this case no mention of a king, but this wording could still conceivably serve as a metaphor for society in that it needs the right kind of care to flourish—against the injustice mentioned in the previous verse. Yet the translation remains questionable—particularly as the verse can make sense without changing the vowel pointing and word division.

Verses 10-17 give us some of the problems with wealth, starting with what may be a few proverbs. This passage could be here as part of the corrective for the corruption in verse 8—and possibly of verse 9 if that is referring to officials unjustly taking profit. Those who are all about padding their own pockets will end up with these problems of wealth accumulation. Of course, these problems exist even if the accumulation was not achieved unjustly. And it may be that these problems with wealth are here as a warning to those who respond to injustice in society by just trying to get what they can—focusing on self-reliance rather than relying on a God who continues to let bad things happen. But money is no substitute for God. And while it can be a help in life, it can also present serious burdens and difficulties. As part of the right approach and outlook, all of us should guard against setting the accumulation of wealth as life’s goal—though we do need to strive to obtain adequate income in balance with meeting spiritual needs.

In verse 10, “the topic of an insatiable appetite is addressed [again, as we saw with the miser in 4:8].… Desire always outruns possessions, no matter how vast acquisitions may grow” (NKJV Study Bible, note on 5:10). However much one has, it is never enough. Thus, “wealth is both addictive and unsatisfactory” (NAC, note on verses 10-15).

Another problem with having money is that people will take it (verse 11). As the Preaching the Word commentary notes: “The phrase ‘they increase who eat them’ refers in some sense to people who consume our wealth. It might be the oppressive government described in verses 8-9, which takes away our money through higher taxes. It might be our children or other dependents—the hungry mouths around our table. Or it might be the people who come begging for us to give them something—the spongers, the freeloaders, and the hangers-on. But no matter who they are, the more we have, the more other people try to get it. No one knew this better than King Solomon. He was the richest man in the world, but given the many thousands of people whom he had to feed (see 1 Kings 4:22-28), he almost needed to be!” (Ryken, p. 133). The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries says: “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” (Eaton, note on Ecclesiastes 5:11).

Yet another drawback of riches is not being able to sleep at night (verse 12). Some translations specify the “abundance” here as the wealth itself, so that worrying over how to safeguard and maintain it is the cause of insomnia. Others, considering the mention of what a laboring man eats, specify the abundance of the wealthy here as that of a full stomach or gluttony—bringing indigestion and poor health—in contrast to the laboring man being able to quickly fall asleep no matter what he eats. “Translations which maintain the ambiguity are best” (Tyndale, note on verse 12).

A further problem with money—Solomon calls it a severe evil or, as this may be rendered, a sickening calamity or terrible tragedy—is that it can do its owner harm (verse 13). A person who is not wise and careful in the use of wealth can suffer horribly—and we often see such stories about young Hollywood actors and musicians getting caught up in drugs and other wrong habits supported by their suddenly deep pockets. Indeed, Solomon himself was a premier example of one’s wealth funding personal destruction. Despite his earthly wisdom, which no doubt gave him tremendous financial acumen, he allowed himself to pursue many vain and immoral ventures—which he would obviously not have been able to do to the degree he did if he had not been so wealthy. Nelson asks, “Have you ever considered that one of God’s great mercies toward you is that He restricts the amount of money you make?” (p. 80).
It’s also hurtful for a person with wealth to come to rely on it. For even if one is wise and proper in using money, it can still be lost. The word translated “misfortune” in verse 14 “literally refers to a worthless task (compare 3:10)” (NKJV Study Bible, note on 5:14). It might be a bad business venture or investment or a seemingly valid decision that proves catastrophic. The problem is compounded here with the mention of a man losing it all and then having a son and not being able to adequately provide for him or leave him an inheritance. The reality is that money can be here today, gone tomorrow (see Proverbs 23:4-5)—for many reasons. Jesus warned against trusting in earthly treasure, which can decay, be consumed or destroyed, or stolen (Matthew 6:19-21). This is certainly no secure basis for happiness.

Moreover, everyone parts with accumulated wealth at death. All of us are merely stewards of whatever material substance we have in our keeping—never truly owners in this life in an ultimate sense. The words of verse 15 recall those of Job: “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD” (Job 1:21). And Paul would later affirm, “For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out” (1 Timothy 6:7). As the expression goes, “You can’t take it with you.” Or put another way, “The more you have, the more you’ll leave behind” (PTW, p. 135). Solomon labels this another severe evil or terrible tragedy (Ecclesiastes 5:16).

Nelson writes: “How much will a rich man leave? Everything. Every single dime. The only time in the Bible that God personally calls a man a fool is in Luke 12:19-20: ‘And I [a rich man] will say to my soul, “Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.” But God said to him, “You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?”’…. If you’re a person who lives for accruing wealth—thinking that it will give you status, significance, and happiness—it will actually be a blessing if God halts your progress” (p. 81).

Such pursuit will only make for a wasted life—so that there is no profit or benefit, having “labored for the wind” (Ecclesiastes 5:16). Yet some still spend themselves for this empty goal. “The ‘darkness’ in which the miser eats (v. 17) is metaphorical for isolation and joylessness” (NAC, note on 5:16–6:6). Eating would normally be done in fellowship with others, but not here—though eating could refer in a broader sense to living life (compare Amos 7:12), yet here alone. Tyndale notes on Ecclesiastes 5:17: “Preoccupation with wealth led to a gloomy life. Sickness points to the physical strain. Vexation [or sorrow] indicates the cares and frustrations that tore at his mind and heart. Wrath [or anger] tells of the times he was enraged over thwarted ambitions and schemes.” The miser will end up “a bitter old man—for who has ever heard of a happy miser?” (PTW, p. 136). Here is another awful way wealth is kept to one’s own hurt, as mentioned in verse 13.

We find the remedy in what follows.

**Keeping Busy With Joy (Ecclesiastes 5:18-20)**

At last verses 18-20 return us to the refrain of Ecclesiastes encouraging us to eat and drink and enjoy the good of one’s labor as the gift of God (see 2:24; 3:12-13, 22)—this being good and fitting or beautiful—as the conclusion to the book’s second major section that began in 3:1. This section has been about pondering God’s all-encompassing plan—the overall beautiful picture God is painting. We saw it presented with the times of life in 3:1-15. We saw problems of the human condition that can seem contrary to God’s sovereignty over life in 3:16-4:16. And now in 5:1-17 we’ve seen cautions about proper approach and outlook, without which one will lose sight of God’s overarching care and suffer worse problems.

With the section conclusion we see the viable alternative to the problems thus far presented. The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries volume on Ecclesiastes states regarding verse 18: “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 (D[uteronomy] 14:26); here it is the symbol of a contented and happy life” (Eaton, note on verse 18). And verse 19 of Ecclesiastes 5 again informs us that not only what we enjoy, but the ability to enjoy it, comes from God.

The Preaching the Word commentary puts it well: “Some scholars find these verses so completely contrary to what the Preacher has already said that they think he must be speaking sarcastically, or at least
we all try. And one big point of contemplation here is recognition of one’s own mortality. Yet the
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Finding joy in everyday living: “

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Qoheleth would most likely identify self-sacrifice as meaningless if it is motivated by any degree of self-
satisfaction. We need to remember that the author is not trying to describe the life of faith or what our
faith responsibilities are [except that He will conclude by telling us to fear God and keep His commandments]. Rather, he is contrasting a self-centered life style with a God-centered one”—in regard
to how we ponder and respond to life’s quandaries (Wright). By what the book does tell us, we can be
assured that if we spent ourselves and all our resources in trying to help all humanity and right all the
wrongs, we would still find that “what is crooked cannot be made straight” (1:15; compare 7:13). Indeed,
we ourselves would then become a burden to others. Nevertheless, the book does encourage us to be good
before God and to respond appropriately to life’s circumstances. Obviously this includes helping others in
need as we are in a position to reasonably do so. (Some believe 11:1-2 refers to charitable giving, but
while the verses could have application to that, they seem to more broadly concern diversification, as
we’ll see.)

Moreover, the commendation of the simple pleasures of life is not about the hedonistic pursuit
already shown to fail. Neither is it about self-focus. Where the refrains speak of eating and drinking, “it is
clear that what Qohelet means by this is the time spent with family and friends around a common table. It
is not the profound and expansive accomplishments of mankind that bring meaning and joy, but the
unpretentious, everyday routine of eating together. Sitting with family and friends to eat after a day’s
labor; laughing and enjoying the friendship around the table; finding a moment of cheer together;

enjoying the companionship of one’s spouse—these are the small yet profound moments in which we

recognize an even greater truth: we were created for relationship and it is in relationship with others and
God that we find true meaning and joy” (Tim Hegg, “Qohelet and Sukkot,” TorahResource.com, 2001).

Given the repeated exhortation to enjoyment in everyday life, it is astonishing that Ecclesiastes was a
motivation for austere monasticism in the Roman Catholic faith. Martin Luther, father of the Protestant
Reformation, wrote in the preface to his commentaries on Ecclesiastes of “many of the saintly and
illustrious theologians in the church, who thought that [in Ecclesiastes] Solomon was teaching what they
call ‘the contempt of the world,’ that is, contempt of things that have been created and established by
God. Among these is St. Jerome, who by writing a commentary on this book urged Blesilla [the daughter
of a certain Paula who had already adopted Jerome’s asceticism] to accept the monastic life. From this
source there arose and spread over the entire church, like a flood, that theology of the religious orders of
monasteries. It was taught that to be a Christian meant to forsake the household, the political order…to
flee to the desert, to isolate oneself from human society, to live in stillness and silence; for it was
impossible to serve God in the world” (quoted by Limburg, Encountering Ecclesiastes, p. 18). As Luther
rightly pointed out, the book actually teaches against this.

God Himself wants us to enjoy the ongoing blessings He gives us. He designed us to experience
them, and they help us to endure life. Ecclesiastes 5:20 adds a new, remarkable concept for the person
finding joy in everyday living: “For he will not dwell unduly on the days of his life, because God keeps
him busy with the joy of his heart.” This recalls the poem of the times of life at the beginning of the
section in chapter 3. Trying to gain a handle on it or make sense of it all is wearisome and futile though
we all try. And one big point of contemplation here is recognition of one’s own mortality. Yet the
difficulties and brevity of life do not overly preoccupy the minds of those who find enjoyment in life through God. (And in fact, Solomon right after the poem gave the prescription of enjoying everyday life along with properly fearing God in 3:12-15.)

The Tyndale commentary notes on 5:20: “Secular man may live a life of drudgery, but for the God-centered man it will be otherwise…. 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 [or unduly]…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 [or busy] 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.”

Luther commented that Ecclesiastes 5:18-20 gives the clue to understanding the book as a whole: “This statement is the interpreter of the entire book: Solomon intends to forbid [or help us to be rid of] vain anxieties, so that we may happily enjoy the things that are present and not care at all about the things that are in the future, lest we permit the present moment, our moment, to slip away” (quoted by Limburg, p. 66). As Limburg summarizes: “The book…is a call to avoid anxiety, to embrace joy in the everyday present where we live, and to leave the future in God’s hands…. The Teacher counsels living fully each day of one’s life, one day at a time, enjoying God’s gifts and enjoying one’s work” (p. 78). Christ also taught this principle of focusing on the present day in Matthew 6:34.

And let us consider that ultimate fullness of joy and contented peace forever awaits those who live life in service to God through Christ (Psalm 16:11; 37:1-11; John 15:11; Acts 2:28). They will at last “enter into the joy of [their] Lord” (Matthew 25:21-23). Still, abundant, joyful living (John 10:10) need not—must not—wait until then. As Ecclesiastes repeatedly affirms, it is a gift for today as well.

“Who Knows What Is Good for Man in Life…?” (Ecclesiastes 6)  

We arrive now at the third major section of Ecclesiastes (6:1–8:15). This, says Dr. Walter Kaiser in Ecclesiastes: Total Life (the outline of which we’ve been following), “is the central portion of the whole argument. Here Solomon will apply the two conclusions of the first two sections of his work (about the gifts and the plan of God) to the alleged inequalities and the apparently unfair variations in divine providence” (p. 78). As with the previous sections, this one also ends with an occurrence of the refrain commending enjoyment in daily living (8:15). Despite the presentation of further vanity or frustration, we see the positive direction of the argument.

This section’s first subsection (6:1–7:15) concerns a proper evaluation of man’s circumstances. What some possess and the difficulties some must endure should not lead us to think that God is not righteous and fair or that He is unable to effectively deal with the human condition. We see this point “developed in two complementary arguments that form two subdivisions of 6:1–7:15: 1. Prosperity is not always necessary or good (6:1-12). 2. Adversity, or affliction, is not always or necessarily evil (7:1-15)” (Kaiser, p. 80). The first subdivision here is our current reading.

Solomon gets into this matter by returning to the wealth discussion of chapter 5. There he warned that riches could perish (verse 14). Now he starts chapter 6 with reference to an evil affliction or calamitous plague he says is sadly common—a person given great wealth by God so as to have no lack, here with the addition of honor or fame, yet ultimately having no power to eat of it, i.e. experience or enjoy it (compare Isaiah 3:10), with it going to a foreigner or stranger (Ecclesiastes 6:1-2). So when it comes to wealth, all is not as it may seem. Solomon’s father David had earlier stated, “Surely they busy themselves in vain; he heaps up riches, and does not know who will gather them” (Psalm 39:6).

If the person was denied enjoyment of prosperity while it lasted, then it would seem there was a wrong focus here. Perhaps boredom set in. Or maybe there never seemed to be enough. The Expositor’s Bible Commentary notes on Ecclesiastes 6:1-2: “Without straining the interpretation, it seems that 5:19 describes the person who accepts a standard of living for which he has worked, without continually craving for more (cf. 5:10; 6:9). The man in 6:2 is more concerned with having everything he wants, and his God-given status in life allows this. But inasmuch as his heart is centered on his accumulated wealth, his tragedy comes when God allows this wealth to be taken over by a stranger” (Wright).

Solomon goes on in verses 3-6 to show how greater apparent success only magnifies the tragedy. “The three traditional conditions for happiness were wealth, long life, and many children” (Garrett, The
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New American Commentary, note on 5:16–6:6). Here we see the exaggeration of the person having a hundred children and longevity of 2,000 years—more than twice the length of time that the oldest patriarch, Methuselah, lived. But despite the long life, “his soul is not satisfied with goodness” (verse 3). This refers to the person’s physical being, including his consciousness, having no enjoyment or contentment in blessings (not to his supposed inner spiritual “soul” not being satisfied by doing good as some would interpret this—likewise verse 7).

Yet we might wonder at the added statement “or indeed he has no burial” (verse 3). Not having a proper burial was viewed as a terrible dishonor (compare what happened to King Jehoiakim in Jeremiah 22:18-19). The statement here could mean that despite the person having such a vast family, no one comes to bury or mourn him. This would mean that on top of being joyless, he would also have been unloved—which certainly could go together. Yet a wealthy person having no funeral or burial seems unlikely, as arrangements for that would likely have been secured ahead of time. Indeed, wealthy people have elaborate funerals today, and that does not mean that they lived happy, joyful lives or even that they were loved. But maybe this is speaking of the wealthy person who loses everything in verse 2. Then it’s perhaps more conceivable that he might not have a funeral, yet it still seems unlikely in Israelite culture.

Perhaps a better solution is that given in The New American Commentary in quoting another commentator: “...that the line [about burial] is not predicated on the rich man but is a proleptic [looking-ahead] reference to the miscarriage [that follows in the sentence]: ‘Even if it does not have a proper burial, I say that the stillborn is better off than he’” (same note). That is, if a man has many children and lives long but is dissatisfied, even a miscarried child with no burial is better off than that man.

In any case, Solomon says the miscarried child, which comes and goes in obscurity (verse 4) and has not seen the sun or the light of day (verse 5; compare Job 3:16; Psalm 58:8)—whether or not the burial reference is to it—is better off than a person who has lived for ages without joy. We recall that earlier in Ecclesiastes 4:3 Solomon had said it would be better to have not been born than to see the evil oppression in this world. Of course, he wrote this with understanding that there will be a future resurrection in which God’s way of life will permeate the world. Likewise, when he speaks in 6:6 of all going to one place—defined in 3:20 as returning to the dust of the earth—it is with the understanding that the dead will one day rise again in a better world. Remember that Solomon had a brother before him who died just days old, and that David had said he would meet this child in the future (2 Samuel 12:15-24). Solomon was no doubt well aware of this—and of the truth about the resurrection and the world to come, as taught to him by his father.

In the meantime, as sad as a fleeting moment of life extinguished is, even thousands of years of life with no joy is worse. The many years will come to an end at death, and what will there be to show for all that time? “Although others may have looked on with envious eyes, the truth is that the extension of life is not what it appeared to be; it was a compounded sorrow” (Kaiser, p. 81).

Solomon then gives a few proverbs to bring out some important lessons. In Ecclesiastes 6:7 we read, “All the labor of man is for his mouth, and yet the soul is not satisfied.” The mouth here directly represents both receiving sustenance and tasting—or, as the Amplified Bible brackets, “self-preservation and enjoyment.” And yet the soul—the physical, conscious person—is unfulfilled. Some take the problem here to be expending effort to satisfy one’s material wants and desires without pursuing inner spiritual fulfillment. Yet the mouth here is probably meant to convey the full breadth of experience a person might take in to live and find happiness, including mental endeavor. The point seems to be that if we pursue fulfillment directly, by whatever means, we will never be fulfilled. Happiness is the byproduct of another pursuit.

The meaning of verse 8 is a matter of dispute. As the Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries volume on Ecclesiastes points out, “Expositors differ widely on this verse” (Eaton, note on verse 8). Yet with consideration to various arguments, we may deduce the likely meaning. While the verse’s proverb is distinct from that in verse 7, the “For” at the beginning of verse 8 shows that it should be read in the context of verse 7—as does the meaning of verse 9, which ties back to verse 7. These all must go together. Verse 8 begins, “For what more has the wise man than the fool?” The context from verse 7 is that of the effort made to supply one’s needs and desires in trying to find fulfillment. Those who are “wise”—skilled and educated in how to go about this—will succeed more in meeting needs and wants than fools who make terrible life choices. But if that’s the only difference, they both end up in the same
situation of being unfulfilled.

The latter part of verse 8 then asks, as the NKJV renders it, “What does the poor man have, who knows how to walk before the living?” The concluding phrase here seems to denote those who know how to conduct themselves as needed among others. This appears to parallel the wisdom at the beginning of the verse, so that this second question is probably a more specific rephrasing of the first question—the thought rhyming of Hebrew poetry seen in other proverbs. There is evidently recognition here of the problems that wealth can bring, including trying to maintain and increase that wealth. So now we are presented with a poor man—this description fitting most people, relatively speaking (especially from Solomon’s perspective)—who is doing what it takes to continue obtaining, even if that is only to just get by, to be happy. Yet what is this person actually left with? Perhaps the latter part of the verse should be understood to mean, “What does the person of modest means who knows how to conduct himself in pursuing needs and wants ultimately have more than the fool who does not know or choose to so conduct himself?” Again, if that is all the difference, really nothing—as neither will be left fulfilled.

Verse 9 then caps off the vanity—the futility and frustrated and worthless grasping at wind—of this constant pursuit of more to satisfy longing, giving us a “better than” proverb (a common poetic form). In this case, “the sight of the eyes” is declared better than “the wandering of desire.” The sight of the eyes here must mean what is right before you that you already have rather than what you see elsewhere or that someone else has—the latter coveting fitting with wandering desire. Recall the related warning in Proverbs 27:20: “Hell [the grave] and Destruction are never full; so the eyes of man are never satisfied.” Covetousness leads to more covetousness—and ultimately destruction. This is not the way to happiness.

In its note on Ecclesiastes 6:10-12, The New American Commentary states: “This text is held together by the fourfold use of the catchword adam (’man’), here used not merely as a generic for human beings but as a term that points back to Gen[esis] 2:3.” We find the connection to creation further drawn in Ecclesiastes 7:29.

Verse 10 of Ecclesiastes 6 says that “whatever one is, he has been named already, for it is known that he is man [or Adam]; and he cannot contend with Him who is mightier than he.” This is not speaking of each person being named individually in advance. Rather it refers to all being originally given the collective name of man or, specifically, Adam—a name related to adamah, meaning red earth or soil, the ground from which the first man was formed. This goes to the very heart of the human condition. Man is of the earth and of himself cannot truly “rise above.” In fact, his body will ultimately return to the earth (12:7), so that the name “draws attention to human mortality” (same note). Consider further the fact here of being named or identified. Adam received dominion over the other creatures of the earth, which was symbolized by the fact that he named them. But Adam himself was named by God, showing God’s superiority and making it clear that the one whom man “cannot contend with . . . who is mightier than he” is God. God’s judgment and rule over life stands. People cannot contend with God in the sense of taking Him to court to debate His supposed lack of fairness. Job desired to do this but ultimately withdrew his case, recognizing God’s care and righteousness and his own lowliness and sin. Contending with God might also refer to some trying to change the universe to work how they think it should—and that obviously is not going to happen. The world is the way it is. Arguing against God or trying to change things only increases vanity or frustration. How are man’s circumstances thereby better? (verse 11).

Verse 12 then asks two questions: Who knows what is really good for man all through the course of frustrating and fleeting life? And who can tell a man what will happen afterward with him in this life under the sun? (The rendering that some versions have of “after he is gone” seems incorrect, as that appears irrelevant to the point here.) Of course, none of us can say what is always for the best and what is to follow. The answer to both questions here is God—and only God.

Looking back through the chapter, we can see how this applies. With the issue of wealth at the outset, we might think of all that we want and imagine that it’s “good” to be really prosperous. But what do we know? It’s revealed here that wealth can end up an effective curse. In verse 2 we see that the more one has, the more one has to lose. And here it is lost. Yet is even that necessarily a “bad” thing? It’s a calamitous affliction, as described. But maybe it actually saves the person from becoming worse like the utterly joyless person described in the verses that follow. And certainly the lesson is beneficial to others. The fact is, only God can say whether various circumstances in life are ultimately good or bad, as only He understands their full context and impact—and what will yet happen. Coming to accept this is to embrace
the life of faith—trusting in God’s sovereign direction and plan even though we don’t understand all the things He brings about or allows to happen in life.

The Preaching the Word commentary says this about the calamitous loss at the beginning of the chapter—and it really sums up all we’ve seen here: “If anything good can come from this unfortunate situation, it is the recognition that our possessions [like other pursuits of fulfillment] can never bring us lasting joy. The gifts that God gives us and the power to enjoy those gifts come separately. This is why having more money can never guarantee that we will find any enjoyment. Without God, we will still be discontent[ed]. It is only when we keep him at the center of our existence that we experience real joy in the gifts that God may give. The fear of the Lord is not just the beginning of knowledge; it is also the source of satisfaction” (Ryken, p. 141). Again, true happiness is not a result of directly pursuing happiness but of pursuing a right relationship with God through Christ.

“In the Day of Adversity Consider” (Ecclesiastes 7:1-15)

We now read the last part of the first subsection of the third major section. Despite the book’s several recommendations of enjoying the pleasures of everyday living, including fun and good times with others within the boundaries of God’s law, there are times when we need to get serious—particularly in facing the hard times of life as we see in this section. Remarkably, as bad as many of the negative circumstances here are, bringing suffering, they can be beneficial.

Recall that the last chapter ended with the question of who knows what is really good for man—the unstated answer being God. That question of what is good “becomes the hook on which a series of proverbs giving us some ‘good’ or ‘better’ things is hung . . . things that will prove to be more salutary than prosperity” (Walter Kaiser, Ecclesiastes: Total Life, p. 82). In fact, this is “the longest sequence of better than sayings in the Bible” (James Limburg, Encountering Ecclesiastes, p. 92).

In Ecclesiastes 7:1 we’re first told that “a good name is better than precious ointment”—the latter being “literally ‘good oil,’ meaning the highest grade of olive oil, used for medicines, perfumes, and religious anointing” (ESV Archaeology Study Bible, note on verse 1). There is poetic alliteration here in the Hebrew for ”name” and “ointment” or “perfume”—shem and shemen respectively (as noted by Kaiser, p. 83). Some contend that this line doesn’t fit the context that follows of sadness and hardship being better than laughter and celebration. But indeed it does. A good name is a reference to a good reputation established through the development of good character—which comes through trials and tests of character. Precious oils and scents were valuable commodities—luxuries for those of means to enjoy. Recall that 5:19 said it was right for the wealthy to enjoy the wealth God blessed them with. But while that is true, godly life is not all fun. It’s also hard work and building character and faith or trust in God through the hard times. And this is by far the more valuable treasure (see Romans 5:3-4; 1 Peter 1:6-7). It should be mentioned that another saying concerning perfuming ointment in Ecclesiastes 10:1 will head up another list of proverbs. In that case dead flies fouling the ointment is compared to reputation being sullied through folly.

Now note next the second part of 7:1: “And the day of death [is better than] the day of one’s birth.” Just what is meant here? Possibly, as many think, that the day an individual dies is better than the day that individual was born. Some who accept that reading see it as wholly pessimistic—in line with thoughts that one is better off dead than alive (though Ecclesiastes 9:4 says the opposite). Yet we might consider this latter part of 7:1 in the context of the first part—so that the day of death would parallel a good name. At the day of one’s birth there is no established reputation—only a clean slate. But at the day of death one has an established reputation. This could go with verse 8, “The end of a thing is better than its beginning”—as there is an accomplishment. If one has gained a good name by the end of his life, that juncture is better than birth because of what has been achieved—and the one who dies then rests from trials in unconscious death (9:5, 10) and will be rewarded in the future resurrection. On the other hand, if one has done evil and incurred a bad name, then the point of death can also be seen as better than the day of birth since this fruitless, futile life is brought to a close and the person will be raised up in a better world to face judgment and have the opportunity to make better choices. And for those who have ultimately rejected God in utter refusal to ever repent, it is better that their misery and the misery they cause others be brought to an end, with a brief final sentencing to oblivion awaiting in the future.

Yet some read this latter part of verse 1 quite differently, as referring not to the experience of one’s own birth and death but to social observances of the birth and death of others. That is, what one
experiences when someone else dies, a time of mourning and a funeral, is better than what he or she experiences as someone’s initial day of birth or annual birthday, a time of celebration. This is quite reasonable, as the line would then parallel the lines that follow: “Better to go to the house of mourning [either literally a house where someone has died or figuratively a funeral or mourning period] than to go to the house of feasting [a party or celebration], for that [the former] is the end of all men; and the living will take it to heart” (verse 2). That is to say, a funeral or mourning period has the benefit of making other people think about their own mortality. The Contemporary English Version renders the last phrase, “Funerals remind us that we all must die.” We see the same thought in the Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: “Every funeral anticipates our own” (Eaton, note on verse 2). This is a valuable reminder for everyone. In Psalm 90:12, Moses prays to God, saying, “So teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.” Thinking about our mortality—not unduly so, as mentioned in Ecclesiastes 5:20, but in balance—can motivate us to get right with God and make the best use of our time in this life.

Ecclesiastes 7:3-4 in stating that sorrow is better than laughter and that sadness makes the heart better—transitioning into wisdom versus foolishness—goes beyond the observance of a funeral or mourning period. While the passage includes this, it’s speaking of life more generally. This is not to say that laughter is bad. Ecclesiastes 9:7 later encourages us to have a “merry heart,” which Proverbs 17:22 tells us “does good, like medicine,” and laughter is part of that. But laughter in the wrong context is not helpful. Remember that Ecclesiastes 3:4 said there is a time to laugh and a time to weep. There are many mournful things in the world and in our own lives that should move us to sadness. We are not to stoically bottle up or stuff down our feelings in this regard. God expects us to “sigh and cry over all the abominations” we see in society (Ezekiel 9:4)—to cry out over the pain all must go through and for relief. We are to be remorseful and repentant over our own sins. And we are to be sorrowful over sufferings—our own and those of others. This will actually help us to feel better, as long as we do not become despondent. Being sad over problems can help us to face them, to heal and to move forward in life. Jesus said, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted” (Matthew 5:4). That will ultimately come in the Kingdom of God, but God gives us comfort today as well.

The heart of the wise being in the house of mourning (Ecclesiastes 7:4) concerns the appropriate response to life’s sorrows or trials—“the day of adversity,” as we see in verse 14. This is in contrast to the heart of fools being in the house of mirth (verse 4). Here again is something undesirable that is actually beneficial—while what we’d prefer at that time is not really good for us. This is true of trials in general that God lets us go through. They should not be viewed as some kind of proof that God is not ruling the universe and has no plan being worked out or that He doesn’t care about us. Rather, they should be kept in proper perspective—as being within God’s wise and loving purpose.

Tommy Nelson comments on Ecclesiastes 7 in A Life Well Lived: “Trials always have a very beneficial purpose. Trials show you what you are…. [and] that you can’t make it on your own. Trials perfect you. Trials bring you to the end of your physical, intellectual rope. Trials make you pray. Trials make you go to the Word. Trials make you trust…. Trials also prove you [testing your character]…. Trials also humanize you [making you sympathetic to the sufferings of others]…. They do good things in us. The only problem is that these trials are things we don’t necessarily want to experience” (pp. 94-95).

Looking back to verse 1, he points out: “Solomon says that God wants to give you a good name, not just a good time. Pain is an integral part of that process. Why? Because good times can fool you” (p. 96).

The “house of mirth” in verse 4 could refer to just good times with friends, to parties and entertaining guests or to visiting people in celebrating happy occasions—when serious matters need attending to instead. It could even refer to a tavern and going there to drink and laugh and ignore the pain. Yet this just masks it temporarily. So the mirth or laughter here is a kind of denial of reality—not facing up to problems, engaging in escapism and drowning sorrows. As Nelson writes: “Plenty of people in America are having a good time, but they are deceived. They use pleasure to dull the pain so they don’t have to acknowledge the deep needs of their souls [—of their hearts and minds]…. Why is sorrow better than laughter? Because, the text says, a person who is laughing is not really facing reality. He’s not learning anything about the nature of life; he’s just pretending that happiness will make him whole. But man’s highest purpose is not simply to enjoy life, but rather to know God” (pp. 97-98).

Of course, none of this is to say we shouldn’t laugh and have fun in life—that we should just avoid feasting and pleasure. The repeated refrain of Ecclesiastes is that we eat and drink with companionship in
enjoyment of the fruit of our labor as God’s good gifts. This definitely has its place—and not just a little, for we need it often and regularly. But this life is not—nor was it meant to be—one long party. That would not serve us well. We often need to get serious—to have life punctuated with sober reflection. Consider that we routinely eat and drink but that we should have times of fasting to draw near to God and contemplate what’s most important. And we should have far more times of serious meditation.

In verses 5-6 we see two proverbs that draw further contrast between wisdom and foolishness in reacting to life’s difficulties. The first, in verse 5, says it’s better to hear the rebuke of the wise than the song of fools. Solomon’s father David had written of the strike or rebuke of the righteous as a kindness and valuable oil not to be refused (Psalm 141:5). Solomon laid out other proverbs about the value in accepting rebuke and the harm in disdaining correction (Proverbs 13:18; 15:31-32; 27:5-6). Regarding the song of fools, Amos 6:3-7 would later decry the Israelites who were living it up, including with idle singing, while the nation was about to be invaded and the people deported. This was a distraction—a way to keep people from facing up to the real problems.

Nelson writes: “You’ve probably had someone you respect approach you and say, ‘We need to talk.’... Then he drops the bomb on you about some blind spot or area of sin in your life. Is that an enjoyable thing? Of course not…. Wouldn’t you rather listen to some random guy in a piano bar? Then you wouldn’t have to deal with it. Wouldn’t that be better than having some wise man tell you of sin in your life and direct you to change? Nobody enjoys an experience like that…. But we won’t ever be truly happy if we don’t have some wise folks who’ll come alongside us and give us a good rebuke. If we can’t take that rebuke, we’ll be failures” (p. 100). Again, what seems objectionable can be helpful, while that which seems pleasant can detract from fulfilling life’s purposes.

Verse 6 compares the laughter of the fool to the crackling of burning thorns under a pot. There is alliterative poetry in verses 5-6—with the Hebrew words for “song,” “pot” and “thorns” being shir, sir and sirim respectively (Kaiser, p. 83). The Moffatt Translation attempts to reflect this in English in verse 6: “For like nettles crackling under kettles is the cackle of a fool.” What is this meant to show? As the NKJV Study Bible points out, “Burning thorns will provide quick flames, little heat, and a lot of noise, just like the sudden outbursts of laughter among fools; there is more noise than substance” (note on verses 5-6). It might be that in context “the smirking laughter of fools is their response to the advice of the wise…. they laugh because in their eyes the wise man’s rebuke is empty—they think he has no idea what he is talking about” (Garrett, The New American Commentary, note on verses 5-6). Or the verse might just be a more general statement about a fool trying to laugh off some problem—where he won’t be laughing for long. “The simile portrays the fool as both worthless (like thorns) and about to be destroyed (burning under a pot)” (same note). So the burning thorns are also a symbol of judgment—and swift judgment, as the thorns’ flare-up is short-lived (see Psalm 58:9). As Jesus said, “Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep” (Luke 6:25).

The next verse—“Surely oppression destroys a wise man’s reason, and a bribe [or gift] debases the heart” (Ecclesiastes 7:7)—might seem out of place amid the surrounding proverbs. How does it fit in context? Let’s first note that other forms of this maxim occur elsewhere. God said through Moses, “You shall not pervert justice; you shall not show partiality, nor take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous” (Deuteronomy 16:19; compare Exodus 23:8). Here is a way that people can have their resolve broken and be turned off the right track—and that does relate to what’s being said in Ecclesiastes 7. Recall that verse 4 mentioned the heart of the wise being in the house of mourning while the heart of fools is in the house of mirth. The mourning involves trials and learning from them. But verse 7 may be warning that if the pressure—or oppression by circumstances—is too great, a person might crack. The wise man’s reason being destroyed could refer to a wise person’s thinking being twisted or to wise advice that’s been given being abandoned. The person accepting a bribe surrenders to what is desired. And it seems likely here that this is to be equated with the escapism and denial provided by the foolish laughter and fun in the house of mirth.

Matthew Henry’s Commentary presents a different analysis of verse 7, seeing here not corruption through receiving bribes but a giving heart destroyed: “Surely it is often too true that oppression makes a wise man mad. If a wise man be much and long oppressed, he is very apt to speak and act unlike himself, to lay the reins on the neck of his passions, and break out into indecent complaints against God and man, or to make use of unlawful dishonourable means of relieving himself. The righteous, when the rod of the
wicked rests long on their lot, are in danger of putting forth their hands to iniquity. Psa[Im] 125:3. When even wise men have unreasonable hardships put upon them they have much ado to keep their temper and to keep their place. It destroys the heart of a gift (so the latter clause may be read); even the generous heart that is ready to give gifts, and a gracious heart that is endowed with many excellent gifts, is destroyed by being oppressed.” Yet the bribery imagery seems more likely, given the similar expressions in the law.

Either way, Ecclesiastes 7:7 serves as encouragement to stay the course against the pressure and enticement to give in and go along with the foolishness of the world.

That fits well with the perseverance spoken of in verse 8. It states, “The end of a thing is better than its beginning; the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit.” This does not mean that it’s better for something to be over and done because it was bad. This is talking about the end of anything being better because of results—what has been achieved. The beginning has nothing to really show for it, being mainly talk and perhaps boasting. But the end reveals the outcome. Just so, in our lives before God with its hardships we need to persevere to the finish. Jesus said that “he who endures to the end will be saved” (Matthew 10:22; 24:13). In the face of life’s difficulties, we need to patiently hold out for the final outcome. We need to consider that the trials will eventually conclude and that there will be some accomplishment. In fact, we should recognize that the plan of God is progressing toward something—in each life and in the world at large. To endure we need to be patient, not proud—not self-focused on getting our own way against consideration of God and others, thinking we know best and laughing at wisdom as in verse 6. We need to trust that God knows best.

Verse 9 tells us not to go the opposite route from patience and lash out at life’s difficulties in anger. It could be anger at the world and even anger at God for things being bad. Yet we must never rush to anger, allowing ourselves to be vexed or exasperated, in which case we’ll act foolishly (Proverbs 14:17). We must wait it out. James 1:19-20 sums up, “So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God.”

The next verse, Ecclesiastes 7:10, instructs us, “Do not say, ‘Why were the former days better than these?’ For you do not inquire wisely concerning this.” Some take this to mean that we should not be glorifying the past or imagining “the good old days” when corruption was not so common—as such never existed. Yet some times in history are indeed better than later times in various respects, and certain past times in a person’s life may have been better than later times. And it could well prove instructive to explore why the shifts happened. (Solomon’s own life is a case in point.) What of the verse, then? Consider the context of going through trials and hard times. The questioner is reflecting back to before the difficulties and is really asking: “Why can’t things be the same as they were? Why do these hard times have to come along?” This is actually an accusation against God’s wise rule, asking ultimately why God wouldn’t keep life the way it was. This kind of thinking is what Solomon calls unwise. For God is doing something of vast benefit. He is working out a great plan that, as just mentioned, is progressing toward an end result. We can’t know all it entails. But we should trust the work that God is doing in our lives and in the lives of others. Keeping things the same, sparing us from all trials, would be to our great detriment and, ultimately, destruction.

Verses 11-12 continue the discussion of reacting to life’s difficulties with wisdom and also return to the matter of wealth by way of comparison. The first part of verse 11 is probably better rendered, “Wisdom is good in common with an inheritance” (see Tyndale, note on verses 11-12). That is, it’s good to have wisdom as it’s good to have an inheritance, both being “profitable” (verse 11b). The first part of verse 12 literally reads, with interpolated words in brackets, “[To be] in the shadow of wisdom [is like being] in the shadow of silver” (or money)—that is, behind a shield or protective wall, thus “defense” in the NKJV. Wisdom and money both give help and protection in life. But where knowledge or wisdom excels, or is profitable, above money is in giving life—preserving life, giving direction in how to live, and showing the way to eternal life. Money, though helpful while we have it, can dry up and disappear (compare 5:14; Proverbs 23:4-5). Those with wealth often trust in it as a fortress (Proverbs 18:11), when true security lies in God (verse 10). Solomon will later give more on wisdom as defense, surpassing strength (see Ecclesiastes 7:19; 9:16, 18). Of course, wisdom has its limits too, as we will see—except for the ultimate wisdom that trusts in God.

Verses 13-15 of Ecclesiastes 7 appear to conclude the current subsection. In looking back over
what’s been stated so far in regard to the troubles of this life, we’re told, “Consider the work of God; for who can make straight what He has made crooked?” (verse 13). It was stated in 1:15 that “What is crooked cannot be made straight.” Things are so bent out of shape in the world at large and in our personal lives that they can’t be put back humanly—we need God’s intervention. Moreover, as part of judgment and teaching man lessons for a hopeful outcome, God is actually the One who has subjected the world to frustration for the time being, just as we’re told in Romans 8:20. We must understand that the hard times we experience are ultimately from God’s hand as well as the good times. This does not mean that God causes all the bad circumstances, but He allows us to go through them for His all-wise reasons. This is also another caution against human arrogance in thinking we know better than God how He should have the world be at present, harking back to the foolish question in verse 10 of why things can’t be as they once were and the idea of a man contending with God in 6:10-12 when only He knows what is best and what the future holds.

Ecclesiastes 7:14 tells us even more directly that both good and bad times come from God—that we should be joyful over prosperity but in adversity consider and recognize that it’s from God too, as whatever happens is ultimately because He allows it and sometimes directly brings it to pass. Recall what Job said to his wife in the midst of his trial: “Shall we indeed accept good from God, and shall we not accept adversity?” (Job 2:10). Think about what happened to Job. He endured terrible things from Satan because God allowed it. In fact, God even prodded Satan into this. But it was for a transcendent purpose. Realize that God is shaping all of us to be part of His Kingdom forever. And He knows what is truly needed and best for all of us.

Notice further that Ecclesiastes 7:14 is another instance, albeit an abbreviated form, of the book’s refrain telling us to be joyful in prosperity. God wants us to enjoy the prosperity He blesses us with. But this encouragement is here presented with another focus—that God is in charge of the bad times too: “Surely God has appointed the one as well as the other.” Jeremiah would later write in Lamentations 3:38, “Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that woe and well-being proceed?” God has His reasons, but they are often inscrutable. Man can’t know all that God is working out, especially in an overall sense, as we saw in Ecclesiastes 3:11. “Therefore,” as the NIV renders the end of 7:14, “no one can discover anything about their future.” Life’s happenings are not just formulaic—just do good and be blessed or do bad and suffer. Life is unpredictable—by design.

Nelson comments: “If you’re in a time of pain and adversity right now, be patient. A day of prosperity is coming. And if you’re in a time of prosperity in which everything is great, start preparing. A day of pain and adversity is just around the corner” (p. 108). But God is working things out for the best (Romans 8:28). Nelson goes on to mention Moses, who was miraculously rescued as a child to grow up amid wealth and splendor only to lose it all when he killed an Egyptian abusing his people and had to hide in the desert for 40 years. “Why would God allow this to happen to him? Because God used all of it—even the consequences of his sin and the forty years in the desert—to prepare Moses to set His people free” (p. 110). Realize that God is preparing all of us for the future.

Ecclesiastes 7:15 is thought by some to go thematically with verses that follow, and it may, but it does naturally go with what was just stated—being the extreme example of not being able to predict what this life will bring even in terms of moral choices. Solomon says he’s seen it all in his frustrating life—reflecting here on a just man perishing and a wicked man’s life being prolonged. This goes against what we might assume would happen. But we don’t know what God is doing here or in which cases this will happen and why. We just have to trust Him, not relying on simple “this leads to that” reasoning that will be confounded. Recall that this was the wrong reasoning of Job’s friends in assuming the worst of Job to explain his suffering. Life is just not as simple as that. As the Tyndale commentary notes on verses 15-18, the believer must “face life in this world as it really is. Forewarned is forearmed (cf. 1 Pet. 4:12).”

However, Solomon still has more to say on all this. He will point out in the next subsection that no one is really innocent (Ecclesiastes 7:20). And near the end of the current major section of the book he states that even though the life of the wicked may be prolonged, things will ultimately be well with those who live life with a proper fear of God and will not be well with the wicked (see Ecclesiastes 8:12-13). The psalmist and seer Asaph, a music leader during the reign of Solomon’s father David, had earlier lamented over the prosperity of the wicked before gaining proper perspective (see Psalm 73).

Concerning the death of the righteous, Isaiah would later write that people failed to consider that this
was a way to spare them and bring them peace (Isaiah 57:1-2)—their future resurrection being in view. Of course, that can be a trial for others still living. But as this section shows, adversity is not always the worst thing. God uses trials to better us—for the great goal He is working toward. Think about the fact that the foremost just man died young in perfect righteousness and total innocence—Jesus Christ—while the wicked, the rest of the world at large, live on in sin. But Christ’s adversity, horrific as it was, was for the best—the ultimate best. Amazingly, both God the Father and Jesus Christ went through the greatest trial of all time for the benefit that would result for Them and all. The wicked are prolonged sometimes to give them opportunity to repent but more often in this age to serve as lessons to themselves and others, including the righteous. Yet the wicked are not always prolonged. And the righteous do not always perish early. It is often the other way around. We just can’t find out what God is working out—not yet while we are in this life under the sun.

**True Righteousness and Wisdom Elusive Today (Ecclesiastes 7:16-29)**

Under the current major section of explaining and applying the plan of God (Ecclesiastes 6:1–8:15), we find that seemingly unjust circumstances for people are just that—seemingly so. We’ve already seen in this section’s first subsection an evaluation of the circumstances themselves—that prosperity is not always best and adversity is not always worst (6:1–7:15). Now in Ecclesiastes 7:16-29 we see an evaluation of the people who are supposedly suffering unjustly under God’s overall sovereignty as He works out His plan here on earth. The fact of the matter, we must understand, is that they are not innocent but are all guilty of sin—every single person (verse 20). So those considered deserving of blessing and prosperity actually aren’t. Yet God is merciful and helps those who properly strive to serve Him. And those who say the wicked should receive the punishment they deserve need to realize that this would include every person—including those perceived as righteous.

It’s not entirely clear where the new subsection begins here. In verse 15 Solomon spoke of the righteous perishing and the wicked being prolonged. We read this with the previous subsection in following Dr. Walter Kaiser’s outline of the book, as the verse demonstrates that life choices bring unpredictable results today. As was noted, some believe this verse fits better with what follows, as the next few verses also discuss righteousness and wickedness. It could be that verses 15-18—with the latter’s conclusion about fearing God (in line with the book’s overall conclusion)—are all part of the previous subsection. Then again, verse 15 is distinct from what follows. It concerns an observation by Solomon that fits with what was previously discussed, while verses 16-18 give instruction from him on how to live. The latter verses concern not just righteousness and wickedness but also wisdom and foolishness, and this discussion continues through the remainder of chapter 7—though we did see a contrast between wisdom and foolishness in the previous subsection. It could be that verses 16-18 are transitional between the previous subsection’s focus on proper evaluation of circumstances and the current one’s focus on proper evaluation of the people in those circumstances.

The moral instruction Solomon gives in verses 16-18 has been the subject of debate. He starts out saying: “Do not be overly righteous, nor be overly wise: Why should you destroy yourself? Do not be overly wicked, nor be foolish: Why should you die before your time?” Yet being righteous before God means being in line with His will—and all His commandments define righteousness (Deuteronomy 6:25; Psalm 119:172). Just what is Solomon talking about?

Some think he is advocating some kind of middle-of-the-road approach to life wherein we should not try too much to obey God while at the same time making sure to avoid being too wicked—that is, it’s fine to be a little wicked. The *Preaching the Word* commentary points out regarding such a mind-set: “This kind of thinking would have been right at home with the ancient Greek and Roman philosophers, who often advocated a life of moderation. Do not be too good or too evil, they said. Too much piety or too much iniquity will lead to an early grave. This also happens to be the way many people think today. They know better than to live a life of total wickedness because deep down they believe that God will judge people for their sins. Yet secretly they suspect that trying to be holy will take the fun out of life. Generally speaking, they try to be good, and they hope they are good enough to get by on the Day of Judgment. But their consciences are troubled too little by their sins. As long as they are not overly righteous or overly wicked, they are happy with the way they are” (Ryken, p. 166).

Yet is that what Solomon is calling for? Such thinking goes against a great deal of other biblical instruction—and to the conclusion of Solomon’s own treatise as well. He will end by telling us to “fear
God and keep His commandments, for this is man’s all” (Ecclesiastes 12:12). The same commentary asks, “After all, if God’s standard is perfection—if we are called to love him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength—then how could anyone ever be ‘overly righteous’?” The fact is, one cannot be. Jesus Christ was perfectly righteous, and we are to strive to live as He did even though we stumble. So, again, what’s being said here?

It’s stated in the Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries that “the translation too or overmuch [or overly] goes somewhat beyond the Hebrew [rabah], which means ‘greatly’ and does not express the judgment implicit in ‘too great’ or ‘overmuch’” (Eaton, note on 7:16). It concludes that “‘Do not be greatly righteous’ must be taken ironically and must refer to the way a person thinks about himself and presents himself…. This view is confirmed in the next line where the Hebrew for Do not make yourself overwise (RSV) contains a Hebrew hithpael [or reflexive word form showing the subject acting on self] 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)” (same note).

It should be pointed out that the word “overly” in “overly wise” is not translated from rabah, meaning “greatly,” but from yother, with the sense of “redundant; hence over and above...better, more (-over), over, profit” (Strong’s with Tense, Voice and Mood, H3148, e-Sword software). One possible meaning of the phrase is that we not be “wise” beyond what is actually wise—in which case “greatly righteous,” though using a different word, might have the parallel sense of being supposedly “righteous” beyond what is actually righteous. The similar phrasing of verses 16 and 17 support this. (And these may be proverbs.)

Some believe Solomon’s warning here is to avoid legalism, such as that of the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus’ day. Jesus pointed out that they were very meticulous about lesser aspects of God’s law while ignoring the weightier matters of the law (Matthew 23:23). Worse still, they promoted commandments of men whereby they made the commandments of God of no effect (15:1-9). While this gained them a great deal of self-importance and awe of their supposed holiness from others, Jesus said that such righteousness was not enough for the Kingdom of God (5:20). Thus, this focus on a great pretense of righteousness at the expense of true righteousness would lead to such destruction as Solomon mentions. But how does this fit in the context of Ecclesiastes 7? It could conceivably be a response to the righteous people perishing in verse 14—to say that they were not really righteous. However, Solomon seems to be referring to people truly reckoned as righteous perishing in that verse.

Another possibility along similar lines that would fit more with the overall message of Ecclesiastes is that “greatly righteous” denotes an attempted maintenance of a state of so-called holiness and higher thinking beyond what God requires—and thus is actually against what God desires for us, in contradiction to the message of the book. Solomon repeatedly commends enjoying the physical blessings God gives, but that is rejected by those who consider such indulgence to be wrong. The German theologian and anti-Nazi dissident Dietrich Bonhoeffer called such people “the moralists,” stating: “They assume that a man must continually be doing something decisive, fulfilling some higher purpose and discharging some ultimate duty. This represents a failure to understand that in historical human existence everything has its time (Eccl. 3), eating, drinking and sleeping as well as deliberate resolve and action, rest as well as work, purposelessness as well as the fulfillment of purpose, inclination as well as duty, play as well as earnest endeavour, joy as well as renunciation. Their presumptuous misjudgment of this creaturely existence leads either to the most mendacious hypocrisy or else to madness. It turns the moralist into a dangerous tormentor, tyrant and clown, a figure of tragi-comedy” (quoted by James Limburg, Encountering Ecclesiastes, pp. 49-50).

Bonhoeffer further wrote: “I believe that we ought to love and trust God in our lives, and in all the good things that he sends us, that when the time comes (but not before!) we may go to him with love, trust, and joy. But, to put it plainly, for a man in his wife’s arms to be hankering after the other world is, in mild terms, a piece of bad taste, and not God’s will. We ought to find and love God in what he actually gives us; if it pleases him to allow us to enjoy some overwhelming earthly happiness, we must not try to be more pious than God himself and allow our happiness to be corrupted by presumption and arrogance, and by unbridled religious fantasy which is never satisfied with what God gives…. Everything has its time…. It’s presumptuous to want to have everything at once—matrimonial bliss, the cross, and the heavenly Jerusalem, where they neither marry nor are given in marriage. ‘For everything there is a
With no relief through earthly joys, such unbalanced people would surely exhaust themselves in this vain pursuit of piety and also meet with destruction. Still, this too is likely not what Solomon is talking about in Ecclesiastes 7:16. Nonetheless, it is certainly important and worth thinking about in regard to the overall message of the book.

So, we again ask, what did Solomon probably mean here? Considering what we already saw about the translation of the second part of verse 16, perhaps it should be understood to say, “Don’t set yourself as wiser”—either wiser than you are or, looking back to verse 14, wiser than God who has set things up the way they are. In fact, the latter aspect here seems the best way to understand the verse in the immediate context of chapter 7—likewise the idea of being “greatly righteous” in the bad sense of setting oneself up in judgment of God, the worst manifestation of self-righteousness. Recall that the inquiry of verse 10 about why things must be different from the way they were implied an accusation against God’s sovereignty and plan. And in verse 15 it was just mentioned that righteous people perish while the wicked prosper. The immediate reaction of many is to call God unfair. It appears that Solomon, therefore, issues a warning in verse 16 to not set ourselves up in \textit{our own eyes} as being so righteous and wise (compare Proverbs 3:7)—effectively more righteous and wiser than God, where we think we know better than Him how things ought to be handled.

The \textit{Preaching the Word} commentary states: “Our real problem is thinking that we are more righteous than we really are. Somehow there never seems to be any shortage of people who think they are good enough for God. This leads H.C. Leupold to suspect that a ‘peculiar type of righteousness was beginning to manifest itself in Israel, an overstrained righteousness which lost sight of the ever-present sinful imperfections of men and felt strongly inclined to argue with God and to find fault with Him because He was apparently not rewarding those righteous men as they deemed they deserved to be rewarded.’ In response, the Preacher warns us not to be self-righteous. We should not think that trying to be more righteous will save us on the Day of Judgment. Nor should we think that we are so righteous that we do not deserve to suffer any adversity, that it is unfair… When we think too highly of ourselves, resting on our own righteousness, then it is easy for us to say, ‘I don’t deserve to be treated like this. Doesn’t God know who I am?’ It is also a very short step from there to saying, ‘Who does God think he is?’ So the Preacher cautions us to not be, as it were, ‘too righteous.’ In saying this, he is warning against a conceited righteousness that ‘stands ready to challenge God for His failure to reward’ us as much as we think we deserve” (pp. 166-167).

Verse 17 then answers another reaction some would have to the quandary of the righteous perishing and the wicked prospering. They might be tempted to decide there’s no point in being good and give themselves over to unrighteous living—libertinism or outright lawlessness. In telling us not to be “overly”—again “greatly”—wicked, “his point is not that it is okay for us to be a little bit wicked, as if there were some acceptable level of iniquity. When it comes to sin, even a little is too much. His point rather is that there is great danger in giving ourselves over to evil. It is one thing to sin from time to time, as everyone does. The Preacher will say as much in verse 20…. But there is a world of difference between committing the occasional sin and making a deliberate decision to pursue a lifestyle of theft, deception, lust, and greed. ‘Don’t be a fool,’ the Preacher is saying. ‘If you live in sin, you will perish’” (p. 167). Paul reminds us: “You cannot fool God, so don’t make a fool of yourself! You will harvest what you plant. If you follow your selfish desires, you will harvest destruction, but if you follow the Spirit, you will harvest eternal life” (Galatians 6:7-8, CEV).

The next verse, Ecclesiastes 7:18, then says that in the face of the apparent inequities of the unfolding of God’s plan, we need to keep hold of both cautions of verses 16-17 (possibly two proverbs Solomon has paired) to avoid destruction—not becoming self-righteous against God and not giving up doing right as not worth it and turning to evil. Notice especially the last part of verse 18: “For he who fears God will escape them all”—again previewing the conclusion of the entire book. It is the proper fear of God that will keep us from self-righteousness and from turning to evil, in both cases preserving us from destruction. Solomon gave the same prescription in Proverbs 3:7: “Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the \textit{LORD} and depart from evil.”

Looking to this counsel is to exercise true wisdom. And the next verse, another proverb, shows its value: “Wisdom strengthens the wise more than ten rulers of the city” (Ecclesiastes 7:19). The word for
The singular form had been used for the patriarch Joseph as governor in Egypt (Genesis 42:6), and Solomon uses the word for a ruler in Ecclesiastes 10:5, as even the KJV renders it. So, many see a governing council here in 7:19. Yet the word, as denoting mastery, could just refer to a powerful person—thus the KJV translation in this case. Recall that David had “mighty men” who fought for him—though the word there is the more common word gibborim, denoting strong or powerful ones, meaning warriors or leaders. Some take the term in Ecclesiastes 7:19 to likewise refer to great warriors or, more specifically, military commanders. In any case, it’s clear that the referenced men are involved in military defense. As a group of powerful men serve to defend a city, so does a wise person’s use of his wisdom strengthen him in vital ways. This recalls the mention of wisdom as a defense in verse 12—one that gives life. And Solomon will later note that wisdom is better than strength and weapons of war after giving an example of a poor wise man delivering a city by his wisdom (9:13-18).

Indeed, true wisdom—not propping oneself up as wise—is crucial to governing self and to navigating interaction with others. For no one is perfect. We must understand this. Everyone sins, as Solomon states in 7:20, repeating what he said in 1 Kings 8:46 in his dedicatory prayer at the temple (in which he also stated the need for repentance and supplication). As pointed out earlier, none of us are entitled to a blissful, problem-free life. What we actually deserve is the penalty for sin—misery and death—because we all sin. Whatever life and blessing we have is through God’s grace and mercy.

Proof? Solomon gives a simple common example, likely proverbial, of not getting too bent out of shape when others, even those you trust, badmouth you behind your back—as you know you’ve done the same thing (Ecclesiastes 7:21-22). We all have. We should also note the value of wisdom here in not taking everything too grievously as a way to weather the common difficulties of this life. “Sooner or later we are bound to overhear somebody saying something about us that may be unkind or untrue. Usually our first reaction is to get angry. What we ought to do instead is to let it go, realizing that it was never intended for us to hear anyway and may well have been spoken in a moment of weakness or misjudgment. It is foolish for us to eavesdrop. ‘If all men knew what each said of the other,’ [17th-century philosopher Blaise] Pascal darkly observed, ‘there would not be four friends in the world’” (PTW, pp. 172-173).

In verses 23-25, Solomon writes that he proved—or tested, others translate—all of this by wisdom. In the face of life’s difficulties, he determined to be wise and get to the bottom of it, but found the answers to be far out of reach—coming to see that there is no way to figure it all out. In verse 25, he mentions his seeking “to know the wickedness of folly, even of foolishness and madness,” and we saw some of his pursuit in this regard presented in the first two chapters of the book.

Verse 26 shows where his course took him: “And I find more bitter than death the woman whose heart is snares and nets, whose hands are fetters. He who pleases God shall escape from her, but the sinner shall be trapped by her.” What is he talking about here? There are a few possibilities. Considering that he just mentioned coming to know “the wickedness of folly,” the woman described in verse 26 could be a personification of that. Earlier in the prologue of the book of Proverbs (chapters 1–9), Solomon presented just such a personification—contrasting folly and wisdom as two women. It is not unreasonable that he would return to that imagery in a discussion of these two ways of thinking and acting. However, there is nothing in Ecclesiastes itself so far that makes that clear. So it may be that Solomon is here speaking of an actual woman—or of a plurality of particular women in his experience. This makes perfect sense when we think about what happened in Solomon’s life. His many wives led him away from God—even to the point of building pagan shrines for them and participating in idolatrous worship (1 Kings 11). It is hoped that Solomon at last came to his senses, with Ecclesiastes being a repudiation of his former apostasy. Another possibility regarding Ecclesiastes 7:26 is that Solomon is speaking generally of the danger of being destroyed through enticement to sexual immorality or to simply being pulled into a toxic pairing, as he also would have seen in observing others, not just his own case. Or furthermore, he could be speaking of all of the above.

In verses 27-28, Solomon makes a disturbing statement regarding his search for wisdom and understanding: “One man among a thousand I have found, but a woman among all these I have not found.” It seems he was looking for a wise or righteous person who did not disappoint him. We should not take this as some kind of measure of the spiritual caliber of men versus women in an overall sense.
This was Solomon’s personal experience. The general takeaway from the statement is that such was rare among either gender. “One man among a thousand” could refer to a single man among those Solomon knew well. Or it could refer to a handful of men among the nation. Consider that Solomon knew a few godly men, such as his father David, the prophet Nathan and Asaph the Seer. Of course, none of these were perfect. Solomon finding no women would mean that of his harem of a thousand—700 wives and 300 concubines—none were godly. The Bible presents a number of righteous women. But “apparently the Preacher-King who wrote Ecclesiastes did not know any women like that, which is what a man gets for trying to love a thousand godless women!” (PTW, pp. 177-178). We will see that he does mention living joyfully with one’s wife positively in Ecclesiastes 9:9. And recall that he ended the book of Proverbs with the description of the virtuous wife (31:10-31). But sadly he did not experience this with his vast harem.

Solomon then declares in the next verse, Ecclesiastes 7:29, regarding both men and women, “Truly, this only I have found: That God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes”—the last word here, also rendered “devices,” referring to invented ways to do wrong. The word for “man” here, as at the end of chapter 6, is adām, or actually ha-adām, “the man”—a word used in a plural sense in 7:2, so that the reference here goes back to man’s original creation in the Garden of Eden and probably means not just Adam himself but the whole human race beginning with him. Made in the image of God with no sin, the first man was initially upright—morally innocent and doing as God said. While he had not developed righteous character, as there was as yet no testing of resolve, the scripture here shows that he was not neutral in terms of morality, as God had made him to do right and reinforced that by instruction. Adam naturally obeyed at first—as did Eve. But when a test of that morality came, with stark temptation to disobey God, they sinned. Man’s nature became corrupted under the influence of Satan—and all mankind since has gone astray, with people devising ever more ways to do evil. Solomon will even note in Ecclesiastes 9:3 that human hearts are “full of evil.” Thankfully, God is in the process of recreating the human race through “the last Adam” (1 Corinthians 15:45)—Jesus Christ. Through Him we can become and remain upright.

Recall the context here of some thinking God unjust in not bringing swift punishment on evildoers and instant relief and reward to themselves along with other “good people.” Again, those of this mind are not considering the punishment that they themselves deserve every day—for we all commit some sin, at least in thought if not in word and deed. All of us have contributed to the world’s problems. As the Holman Old Testament Commentary states: “We ought to be more humble (and therefore accurate) in our self-assessment. [Early-20th-century Christian writer and philosopher] G.K. Chesterton was a good example of this. In answer to the question, ‘What’s wrong with the world?’ Chesterton said, ‘I am’” (Moore, note on Ecclesiastes 7:15-22). Thankfully, we are able to receive forgiveness from God and be reckoned as righteous before Him—but, as stated, this is by His mercy, through His plan of salvation. And those of us who’ve been forgiven should also be thankful that God did not destroy us while we were reckoned as sinners but instead led us to repentance—and continues to do so when we fall short—as He will yet do for others. To God be the glory.

**Wisely Enduring Through Man’s Rule (Ecclesiastes 8:1-15)**

We come now to the last part of the book’s third major section, which began in chapter 6, dealing with explaining and applying the plan of God in light of it seeming to be unfair. We’ve seen that what we might assume to be for the best or worst is not necessarily so (6:1–7:15) and that all bear part in the world’s problems—with no one being innocent and deserving a trouble-free life (7:16-29). Now in chapter 8, Solomon tells us to exercise wisdom and righteousness to help reduce and manage problems in many cases, maintain proper perspective and find joy in life and ultimate reward from God.

Verse 1 extols having wisdom. This certainly ties back to the previous two subsections, where we were told that wisdom is a defense that gives life and that it strengthens those who have it (7:11-12, 19). Some put 8:1 with the previous subsection, but it rather seems to be in answer to all the previous dilemma, ending with the bleak, sinful condition of man at the end of the last chapter. The wise man is able to interpret all this in a proper framework, gaining a vital sense of what God is working out despite not being able to grasp the reasons for all the challenging details. And, as the end of verse 1 tells us, this wisdom “can dispel the gloom and brighten man’s otherwise hard looks” (Walter Kaiser, Ecclesiastes: Total Life, p. 89). The change of face here also reflects a new face on the problems previously discussed. There is a serenity that comes with things starting to make sense—and with trusting that God knows what
The next set of verses concerns following kingly authority—human government—as a matter of life and death (verses 2-9). Dr. Walter Kaiser, whose overall outline we’ve been following, describes the chapter 8 subsection as follows: “The removal of a large proportion of the apparent inequalities in divine providence comes from righteous government.” This summary, however, does not appear to be quite accurate. There is no specific reference to the government being righteous here, and the verses appear to end with the problem of human rule doing harm (verse 9), which we will return to. Moreover, rarely has human government been righteous. Recall that this comes on the heels of Solomon presenting humanity as corrupt in chapter 7. So we should not expect that corrupt people coming together to form a government would result in righteous rule. Furthermore, the verses in chapter 8 do not seem to speak of human government rectifying problems so much as of us taking care to not run afoul of government (we will see similar verses in this regard in chapter 10). Of course, it is true that human government has been established by God as a check against total lawlessness, as the apostle Paul explains in Romans 13. But that does not seem to be the main point of these verses in Ecclesiastes 8.

Solomon in verse 2 says to keep the king’s command, not “My command”—he being the king. This is because the instruction referred to obeying the king in general, whoever he was—or to obeying whatever human authority was in power. ( needy to give such instruction without any self-serving appearance could be part of why Solomon referred to himself as the Preacher throughout the book rather than as king.)

Note that the obedience to the king is “for the sake of your oath to God” (same verse). Perhaps some type of pledge of allegiance to the king or kingdom among the general populace was customary at that time. Or it could be that all the men of Israel took an oath as part of the nation’s military. Or possibly the reference is to a general promise to obey God, with this including the requirement of following Israel’s divinely appointed king—or maybe even any nation’s ruler, since, as Paul later points out in Romans 13, all governing authorities are in power because of God and are to be obeyed—except when there is a conflict with God’s law, which must come first (Acts 5:29).

The mention of an oath to God may bring to mind the need to follow through on vows to God in Ecclesiastes 5. Recall that chapter 5 was the first instance of direct exhortations in the book—telling us to be careful in our approach in coming to worship God, the One in whose hands our lives are and who can help us through the present difficulties. That improves our situation in life and keeps us from ways that would make things worse for ourselves. Chapter 8 is similar. For the time being we are subject to human rule. We should respect and follow that rule, with the benefits of doing so and the avoidance of an approach that will bring more troubles on us than would otherwise ensue. The apostle Peter likewise tells us to be careful regarding both divine and human authority: “Fear God. Honor the king” (1 Peter 2:17).

The first part of Ecclesiastes 8:3 tells us not to be quick to leave the ruler. “To go from someone’s presence’ elsewhere signifies disaffection or disloyalty . . . Thus the Preacher warns against a capricious desertion of one’s post (cf. 10:4) and against persistence in any disloyalty” (Eaton, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, note on 8:2-3a). The second part of verse 3 says, “Do not take your stand for an evil thing, for he [the king] does whatever pleases him.” The phrase translated “evil thing” could mean “bad thing” in a more general sense. Some see it as a worthless cause, calamitous outcome or anything the king would not like. If moral evil is in view, perhaps the sense is becoming a civil lawbreaker. Romans 13 speaks of rulers executing wrath on evildoers. This would also seem to tie in to the warning against turning to wickedness at the end of Ecclesiastes 8:8.

The beginning of verse 5 says that the person who keeps the king’s command “will experience nothing harmful.” This does not mean nothing bad will ever happen to the person. Nor does it mean that the person will be afforded protection by the government, though he or she well may, as all do to some extent. Rather, the meaning here is that the prudent, law-abiding citizen will receive no punishment from the government—at least, generally speaking. The message here is: Do your best to stay out of trouble!

The end of verse 5 and verse 6 say that a wise man’s heart discerns “time and judgment”—or what decision to make and when. This is not speaking of understanding that there will be a future judgment from God, though that is mentioned later in chapter 8. The NIV renders the phrase in verses 5 and 6 as “proper time and procedure.” The New American Commentary notes: “The wise man thus waits for the proper moment to make his case or take a stand and does not waste his influence on a lost cause (v. 3b).
He maintains his patience, moreover, in spite of the moral burdens he carries that might otherwise cause him to act impetuously (v. 6b; ‘for the trouble of humanity is heavy upon him’ [and he wants to do something about it])” (Garrett, note on verses 2-6). Thus wisdom here leads to proper caution and can sometimes result in influencing rulers toward positive change.

Verse 7 in context presents more about the need for discerning the right time and way. If one does not know what will happen, how can he learn when it will happen? The wise are therefore observant for the opportune circumstance in which to speak or act as it presents itself.

The beginning of verse 8 says that no one can retain the spirit in the day of death. Some translate the word ruach here as “breath” (of life) rather than “spirit,” but that would not change the point here. Others see ruach here as meaning “wind,” and take the statement to mean that just as the wind is beyond our control, so is death. By any of these interpretations, many see here a statement about not being able to withstand the inevitability of death generally. But in context the wording appears to continue the warning about not getting into trouble with the government. “Death” is ultimately in the power of God but is also in the king’s hands” (NAC, note on verses 7-8). The point seems to be that if the king puts you to death for rebellion or crime, life is over. The statement “There is no release from that [or the] war” could refer figuratively to the “march into death” that all face or simply be metaphoric for “There’s no getting out of this.” Then the final line, “…and wickedness will not deliver those who are given to it,” would tie back to the turn to wrongdoing in verse 3. And this is further tied back to the warning in 7:17: “Do not be overly wicked, nor be foolish: Why should you die before your time?” A turn to lawlessness will not stave off the punishment of death. It will hasten it.

So, again, the problems of human government must be navigated with wisdom and righteousness—to improve life where possible and to avoid making matters worse than they already are.

We then come to Ecclesiastes 8:9. The words “There is” are in italics in the NKJV, showing they’ve been added to the original wording—unnecessarily in this case. And one ruling another to that one’s own hurt here is evidently a mistranslation. The Tyndale commentary notes: “‘To his hurt’ (Hebrew) is not to his own hurt (AV [Authorized or KJV]) but to the hurt of the one under the abuser of power” (note on verse 9). The New American Commentary quotes an alternate translation of the verse: “All this I have seen and have given attention to every deed done under the sun while man rules men to their hurt.” This is the terrible human condition of today.

But this is not where things end. Solomon next mentions seeing the wicked buried (verse 10). The “place of holiness” to which they had come and gone is not clear. The dead would not have been taken to the temple, for that would have been ceremonially defiling. Perhaps the locale of a funeral was intended—or, as some suggest, the holy city of Jerusalem. However, some take visiting the holy place here as having occurred repeatedly during the life of the wicked people now being buried. Where the verse says “they were forgotten,” many others render this “they were praised,” reasoning that the positive eulogizing of the wicked after all their evil must be the vanity or frustration mentioned. But this wording requires a text emendation. And the word “forgotten” does work here. Solomon in Proverbs 10:7 wrote, “The memory of the righteous is blessed, but the name of the wicked will rot.” Perhaps the frustration in Ecclesiastes 8:10 is simply that the wicked were able to die and receive a proper burial after a long life without having to face up to what they’d done—all the while having been permitted in life to be regularly in God’s temple, a sacrilege and mockery of religion. Verse 12 seems to support the past perpetuation of the wicked as the frustration, as it mentions the sinner’s days being prolonged.

Verse 11 explains why evil grows worse and worse—because justice is not swift. Many claim that the death penalty is an ineffective deterrent to capital crime today. That is because people end up sitting on death row for decades. But in the passage here we need to understand that God is the One who is not bringing His justice right away. He is instead, in great mercy, giving everyone more time to repent—and He is letting us see how far we will drift without His intervention. Yet His intervention and judgment will ultimately come. It’s just a matter of time—and probably much less time than most imagine.

Verses 12-13 show that beyond the prolonged days of the wicked today, it will be well with those who fear God but not for the wicked who do not. The wicked will not ultimately be prolonged, yet the righteous will. This comes straight from other Scripture, God stating that it would be well for those who feared and obeyed Him, with their days prolonged (Deuteronomy 5:29; 6:2, 24). As mentioned previously, the seer and psalmist Asaph, a contemporary of Solomon, wrestled with how the righteous
suffered while the wicked prospered, then stating, “When I thought how to understand this, it was too painful for me—until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I understood their end” (Psalm 73:16-17; and read all of this psalm). In fact, Solomon himself wrote elsewhere, “The fear of the LORD prolongs days, but the years of the wicked will be shortened” (Proverbs 10:27). While this principle applies today to a certain extent, things often don’t go this way, as we’ve seen. But ultimately, it will go only this way— when God sets everything right. Of that Solomon is certain. The Preaching the Word commentary notes: “Usually the Preacher tells us what he ‘saw,’ but this time he chooses a different verb and tells us something that he ‘knows.’ This is not something that he has seen from a distance, but something he has grasped with the rational conviction of his own mind. His reply ‘is not an observation, but the answer of faith.’ He believes what he cannot see—that one day all will be well for everyone who lives in the fear of God” (Ryken, p. 196).

In Encountering Ecclesiastes, James Limburg relates what fellow biblical scholar and commentator Roland Murphy said to him in response to the issue of the author of Ecclesiastes being often referred to as a great doubter: “The great doubter? No! Qoheleth was the great believer! He believed, even when there was no evidence for believing!” (quoted on p. 135).

Of the fear of God, the need for which we have already seen in the book and will see again in its conclusion (3:14; 5:7; 7:18; 12:13), the Tyndale commentary states: “In the wisdom tradition the ‘fear’ of God is the awe and holy caution that arises from realization of the greatness of God: ‘Splendour…terrible majesty…power…justice…righteousness…. Therefore men fear him’ ([Job] 37:22-24)” (note on Ecclesiastes 8:12). This is not some kind of terror of God, but a profound respect that does include, as with children who love their caring parents, a healthy fear of disappointing and, yes, incurring judgment, recalling that God chastens every son He loves (Hebrews 12:5-11). Jesus made clear that we are to fear not mere human beings who can take only our immediate lives but to fear Him who is able to remove us from existence forever (Matthew 10:28; Luke 12:4-5). Yet this is with the realization that God loves us and wants the best for us. He is not out to destroy us but to save us, as He’s said time and again. And He is patient and merciful towards us as we struggle to walk in His ways, even despite our many and ongoing failures. Still, we must not treat God flippantly or carelessly. We must always remember just who we are dealing with—and the awesome gravity of that—realizing that this is for our ultimate good. Keeping this in mind results in a deep and abiding reverence for God—loving and trusting Him while recognizing His supreme power and holiness (see Hebrews 12:28-29).

The Preaching the Word commentary goes on to state that “those who fear God are said to ‘fear before him’ (Ecclesiastes 8:12), meaning that they know they are in his presence. Most people, including many Christians, go through life hardly realizing that they are constantly in the presence of God. But the person who fears God knows that God is always near…. To live a God-fearing life is to live in constant awareness of the presence of God, who is even closer than a prayer away” (pp. 196-197).

This is the perspective that must be maintained—along with understanding what the future will bring. It will help us through the quandary that still remains for this age. Verse 14 repeats the dilemma of 7:15—the righteous suffering what wickedness is supposed to result in and the wicked receiving what righteousness is supposed to result in. Yet that is only for now. One day, God will set things right.

Then, besides the perspective we need to have and the righteous life we are to persist in, we are again given the prescription of the book’s refrain in the third major section’s conclusion—the enjoyment of life that God blesses us with: “to eat, drink, and be merry” (8:15). As has been pointed out before, some take a low view of the refrain. As the same commentary notes:

“Some…say that the Preacher is simply making the best of a bad situation, that Solomon is a cynic. If we are all going to die anyway, then why not seize the day [in a wrong sense]?... Eat, drink, and be joyful, for tomorrow we die! [Compare 1 Corinthians 15:32, where Paul used these words negatively, as in Isaiah 22:13, of those who did not believe in a resurrection and hoped only in this life.] The problem with this view is that it does not do full justice to what the Preacher says…. Notice that the Preacher is giving us a God-centered perspective and that in verse 15 he is talking about the days of our life as a gift from God. Notice as well that he mentions joy twice in this verse and describes it as something we can experience all through life….

“The Preacher is growing more and more confident about this joy…. ‘I commend joy,’ he says (Ecclesiastes 8:15), and the word he uses for ‘commend’ is a Hebrew word for praise (shabach). Yes,
there is vanity under the sun. Yes, we see injustice that is hard to accept or understand. Yes, we have a lot of hard work to do. Nevertheless, there is joy for us in the ordinary things of life—eating, drinking, and sharing fellowship with the people of God” (p. 198).

Let us be ever thankful for the days of our lives. And let us truly rejoice.

We Can’t Just Go by What We See (Ecclesiastes 8:16–9:3) Day 15

We move now into the fourth and last major section of Ecclesiastes (8:16–12:14), which concerns “removing discouragement and applying God’s plan to the lives of believers” (Walter Kaiser, Ecclesiastes: Total Life, p. 92). Despite the problems of this life, we will be told that it’s better to be alive than dead (9:4) and that it’s important to make good use of the time we have, enjoying life’s pleasures while exercising wisdom (9:5–12:7). And once again, we can look to the end of the section—in this case, of the whole book—to see what it is aiming toward. The conclusion, as we have already seen—having been pointed to several times previously—is to fear and obey God, being mindful of future judgment (12:13-14). So the enjoyment we are encouraged to have must be understood within that context and tempered accordingly.

The first subsection within this last part (8:16–9:10) tells us, in the words of Dr. Kaiser’s outline, that “the remaining mystery in this subject must not diminish human joy.” (It should be noted that his outline puts the end of this subsection in Ecclesiastes 9:9, whereas we are including the next verse, verse 10, though also considering it transitional to the next subsection.)

We start in our current reading with the beginning of the first subsection in this last major section. Here the dilemma of life ending in death for both the righteous and the wicked is again faced. It is, as always, hard to take—as is trying to reconcile life choices with life experiences generally.

The first two verses of this section, Ecclesiastes 8:16-17, remind us that the full scope of God’s plan on earth—what He is doing through bringing to pass or permitting all the various things that happen to people throughout the world—is beyond us, no matter how much we may know or understand. Solomon said as much earlier in the book, when he stated that “no one can find out the work God does from beginning to end” (3:11). Here it says that given “all the work of God…a man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun” (8:17).

The exact wording of verses 16-17 is unclear. Where the NKJV has “even though one sees no sleep day or night,” other versions differ. Some translate the Hebrew here to mean the restlessness and constant activity of all people everywhere, day and night—considering that this is too much to take in, as it surely is. However, in the agrarian times in which this was written, most people were not up at all hours of the night. (The idea could possibly be that there are always people awake doing something somewhere, especially as it is always day somewhere on a round earth, but it seems unlikely that this was a familiar enough thought to Solomon’s immediate audience in ancient Israel.) Others see the reference to Solomon himself not getting sleep as he tried to make sense of all he observed in the world—either because he was up late in pursuing this or because thinking about it so much made him unable to sleep. That’s possible, as He previously lamented trying to grasp it all and found it far out of reach (7:23-24). Still others think he is saying that he realized that anyone who would attempt this would lose out on sleep. Yet, perhaps most likely, it could be that he is saying that even if a person—even a man of wisdom—were able to go without sleep and devote all his time and energies to trying to grasp what God is doing through what happens with people, he still could not figure it out. In any case, whatever is exactly meant by the first part of the passage, the result is the same. No one can know God’s purposes in everything that happens.

Many things just can’t be known now. As the apostle Paul wrote: “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! ‘For who has known the mind of the LORD? Or who has become His counselor?’” (Romans 11:33-34). Yet God reveals what we need to know: “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law” (Deuteronomy 29:29; see also 1 Corinthians 2:4-16).

The next set of verses, in Ecclesiastes 9, continues the thought of not being able to make sense of everything in this life, as we will see.

In the first part of verse 1, Solomon says his pondering of the matter led him to declare “that the righteous and the wise and their works are in the hand of God.” Of course, all are in the hand of God in the sense that He has say over what happens to everyone, including the wicked. Of the unrepentant the
Bible says that “it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Hebrews 10:31). Yet in Ecclesiastes 9:1 the sense would seem to be positive, as the righteous and wise are specified and not the wicked—and being in God’s hand can mean being in God’s care and protection (Psalm 31:5; 95:7; John 10:28). But Solomon is about to throw in a big curve that fits with his opening contention of not being able to figure things out.

The last part of Ecclesiastes 9:1 says, “People [ha-adam, “the man” in a plural sense, mankind] know neither love nor hatred by anything they see before them.” What does this mean?

Some interpreters, looking ahead to the mention in verse 6 of the cessation of the love, hatred and envy of those who die, conclude that human emotions are in view in verse 1—with love and hate here perhaps denoting the full breadth of emotions (as opposite extremes can sometimes connote all points in between—the figure of speech called a merism or merismus, as noted in the Bible Reading Program commentary on Ecclesiastes 3:15). The idea is that people cannot tell from what is presently observable what life will yet bring in terms of what they will feel toward others or what others will feel toward them—this being a poetic way of saying that they have no idea what life holds in store just by looking at the way things are. This would fit the previous point made in 8:16-17—that what God is working out in everybody’s lives cannot be comprehended. It could also lead to what comes next in 9:2, where the righteous and wicked experience the same outcome (not just in ultimate death but in various matters)—as this would seem to be unexpected.

Others see a more direct reference at the end of verse 1 to the matter of the righteous and wicked meeting the same eventuality in verse 2. In this view, the love and hatred of verse 1 is that of God—tying back to mention of being in His hand just before. And love and hatred are understood to speak of God’s care and acceptance versus His rejection, like we see in Romans 9:13, where God says, “Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated.” The point of the end of Ecclesiastes 9:1 would then be that you can’t tell whether God accepts or rejects people based on what they go through. As Adam Clarke’s Commentary notes on this verse, “We cannot judge from the occurrences which take place in life who are the objects of God’s love or displeasure.” This idea is certainly valid, as the rest of the Bible attests. It likewise accords with the preceding point of not being able to figure out what God is doing in 8:16-17. And it fits well with the next statement in 9:2 concerning the same thing befalling both the righteous and the wicked. People having prosperity does not of itself mean that God lovingly accepts and approves of them—nor does adversity mean that God rejects them or is judging them for evil. “All things come alike to all,” verse 2 says. Recall that this was what Job’s friends failed to understand in thinking that he must have been guilty of great evil to meet with such terrible suffering. And consider that Paul used his frequent immersion in peril as a sign of his being a true apostle (2 Corinthians 11:16-33), whereas others might wrongly see those troubles as evidence of God’s displeasure with him. Now, adversity could be a result of God’s chastening, and we ought to assess that in our personal circumstances, especially if we know we’re not doing as we should. But we shouldn’t just assume that, especially with regard to others. Again, we don’t know all that God is working out and for what reasons (Isaiah 55:8-9). He has a long-term and all-encompassing yet detailed view, concerning both this life and a future resurrection, in His plans for all people.

Whether the love and hatred of verse 1 refer to the breadth of human experience to come being unknown or to God’s acceptance or rejection not being ascertainable from what happens, we are still left with the same big curve here in verse 2—that even though the righteous are in God’s hands, as verse 1 says, they meet with the same circumstances as the wicked, ultimately death. We earlier saw the matter of the righteous and wicked each receiving the outcome that should seemingly go to the other, which Solomon called vanity or frustration (7:15; 8:14). The issue in chapter 9 is not a reversal of fortune before but that both go through the same things. The “one event” or “one thing” (verses 2-3) happening to all “need not exclusively refer to death, although the passage goes on to that” (Eaton, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, note on verse 2). This is better read as “the same event” or “the same thing,” as denoting some given circumstance—and it befalls the righteous as well as the wicked. That is to say, the various things that happen to people in life happen to both the righteous and the wicked. Note again the beginning of verse 2 in the NKJV: “All things come alike to all.” Of course, this parity of outcomes ultimately includes death, and verse 3 ends with that. The ESV Archaeology Study Bible points out that “when drought, famine, plague, or war came to an ancient city, all its inhabitants—good and bad alike—
On the other hand, the outcomes for the righteous and wicked in various circumstances are not always the same. And Solomon is not saying that—or else his laments about the wicked faring better than the righteous at times would not make sense. And his recognition of the need for wisdom and righteousness—and the fact that these bring blessings—would likewise not make sense. The fact is, as Solomon well knew, God certainly does protect and deliver His people as He has promised to do—and often that means keeping us from certain harmful situations. We are encouraged to pray for God’s intervention. Yet He knows what is best. And He still often lets us go through what all the world goes through—and sometimes worse—as part of His overall care for us and others, even if it doesn’t seem that way. We must learn to trust that God knows what He’s doing. “For we walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7).

The rest of Ecclesiastes 9:2 shows that the same thing ends up occurring despite the distinctions between the righteous and the unrighteous. Yet we should note that these groups are distinguished nevertheless. The righteous, those who are good and clean before God through repentance, offer sacrifices to Him—serving Him with their time and substance—while the wicked or unclean do not. The last distinction listed is between “he who takes an oath” and “he who fears an oath.” The Expositor’s Bible Commentary says, “The contrast is between a man who is ready to speak the truth on oath and the guilty person who refuses to be put on oath” (Wright, note on verses 2-4). Alternatively, the Preaching the Word commentary sees the difference here as between the righteous entering into a holy covenant or commitment with God while the unrighteous refuse to do so (Ryken, pp. 205-206). Consider that one group here is clearly better even though you couldn’t necessarily tell that from just what happens to them in this life.

Solomon then says in verse 3, “This is an evil in all that is done under the sun: that one thing happens to all.” Is he returning to the seeming problem with divine justice, even accusing God of evil for allowing things to be this way? We’ve already seen that Solomon realizes that it will ultimately be well for the righteous and not for the wicked (8:12-13). Has he lost sight of that here? No. He recognizes that God has great reasons for allowing things to be as they are even if we cannot understand all those reasons. He also knows that God will eventually set things right. And He further knows that there are benefits to living rightly today, as already mentioned. With that in mind, a better way to understand the verse is to see the word “evil” here as referring not to moral evil on God’s part but to the situation being a bad thing to go through—a terrible thing to suffer, as an affliction. A “misery,” it has been translated (Tree of Life Version). Some think the verse is saying that what follows is the evil—the “one thing” that happens to all—death. It is of course true that death is our common enemy (1 Corinthians 15:26), and the end of the verse and the next few verses address the matter. But mention is first made of bad things in life well before death. So, again, the beginning of Ecclesiastes 9:3 is most likely saying that what has already been described—the common circumstances (plural) of the righteous and wicked—is an evil or hardship. Striving to serve God yet still going through the same things as the rest of the world who reject Him is hard to endure. And yet we must, as the whole of the book teaches.

The latter part of 9:3 magnifies the trial of life—showing life beset by the evil and madness of the hearts of men (the sons of ha-adam, the man or the human race as in verse 1) before then passing to death. Jeremiah 17:9 likewise calls the human heart “deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked.” And there is a certain madness or insanity in being led around not by sound reason and wisdom but by wayward feelings. This has been the way of things since “through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned” (Romans 5:12). Even the righteous must strive against their corrupted human nature. And then, as the wicked, they also die. Now God is by no means at fault in how things are. People have brought this condition on themselves, with God subjecting them to further frustration actually being for ultimate good. Of course, we know that death in this age is not the final end—as does Solomon. Yet it certainly does mark an end—the cessation of opportunity to act and interact in the here and now.

Thankfully, Solomon does not leave us on a down note here. The next verse (Ecclesiastes 9:4), which begins our next reading, starts with “But” and will tell us there is hope in being alive. And there is more encouragement to follow.
It’s Good to Be Alive—Make the Most of It (Ecclesiastes 9:4-10)  Days 16-17

We continue here with the last major section’s first subsection (8:16–9:10) telling us that the remaining mystery in the outworking of this life must not diminish joy. Moving into the last past of this subsection (9:4-10), some might think that with all life’s problems, and with doing right not leading to an easy ride, one might as well be dead. Recall that in Ecclesiastes 4:2, Solomon had praised those who no longer faced the world’s oppression because they were already dead—this representing either his past despair or a nuanced perspective of life without a comforter (see our commentary there for more on that).

But Solomon now tells us in Ecclesiastes 9:4 that there is advantage in being alive. Dr. Walter Kaiser writes: “Where there is life, there is hope. The actual translation of the verse is not as easy as the sense. The Hebrew and many ancient versions say, ‘What then is to be chosen? With all the living there is hope.’ There was, however, a Hebrew tradition of reading (called the Qere) this text that supposed that two letters ought to be transposed in the verb ‘to choose’ (yebuchar) to make it ‘to join’ (yechubbar), and thus the verse would read [like in the NKJV], ‘For whosoever is joined to all the living, he has hope.’…. The sense is not measurably different in either case. (Most commentators and versions have a slight preference for the latter reading)” (Ecclesiastes: Total Life, p. 97). The word “chosen” need not mean making a choice between remaining alive and allowing or causing one’s own death. It could simply mean, “What then is preferable—life or death?” The answer of course is life, for in life there can be hope (further explained in verse 5). Yet where a choice exists, we are to choose life, just as God had Moses tell the Israelites long before (see Deuteronomy 30:15-20).

The end of Ecclesiastes 9:4 strengthens the case with a proverb stating that it’s better to be a live dog than a dead lion. The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries volume on Ecclesiastes points out: “The lion, ‘mightiest of the beasts’ (Pr[overbs] 30:30), was admired in the ancient world. The dog, on the other hand, was [in Old Testament times regarded as] a despised scavenger (Ex[odus] 22:31; 1 Ki[ngs] 14:11), notorious for its uncleanness (Pr[overbs] 26:11)” (Eaton, note on Ecclesiastes 9:4). (See also 1 Samuel 17:43; 24:14; 2 Samuel 3:8; 9:8; 16:9.) Thus it’s better to be a disdain lowly wretch who’s alive rather than a person who was powerful and majestic but is now dead. The proverb at the end of Ecclesiastes 9:4 is a reminder that power and prestige in this world are temporary, yet it also presents us with the fact that life is worth living—that it’s better to be alive than dead, which means that this life is not as bleak as it may seem. In life there is cause for hope, as just stated in the first part of verse 4.

“But,” as The New American Commentary states regarding verse 5, “the reason the Teacher puts forward for choosing life is another surprise: because the living know they will die!” (Garrett, note on Ecclesiastes 9:3-6, emphasis added). Yet how is awareness of coming death a basis for hope? “The explanation is that the living may yet reckon with the reality of death and in so doing embrace the joy life has to offer” (same note). Life affords opportunity. Tommy Nelson writes in A Life Well Lived: “Solomon is saying don’t give up hope and give in to despair. Just because life is vanity does not mean it is hopeless. Life is a common blessing that God has bestowed on men. Life is better than death because at least when you’re alive, you know that one day you’re going to die, so you can change your life and make something out of it” (p. 146). Kaiser elaborates: “Solomon’s point is plain: While men are still alive there is hope—hope of preparation for meeting God, hope of living significantly, hope of doing something to the glory of God before all men personally face Him as 12:14 warns, when man will give a detailed accounting of his life to determine if it has been lived in a manner well-pleasing to God” (p. 97). So the discussion of death here is not just a restatement of the human dilemma, but a good reminder of our mortality. Contemplating the fact that this physical life will end can be very beneficial, as already presented in the beginning of chapter 7. On the other hand, as The New American Commentary further states, “no such possibility exists for those who have already died. Their time has passed” (note on 9:3-6)—at least in terms of this life.

Verse 5 further tells us that the living at least have some awareness, while “the dead know nothing,” having no awareness at all. This is reaffirmed in verse 10: “...for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going.” Most Bible commentators, errantly holding to belief in an immortal soul and conscious existence apart from the body, claim that these verses do not mean what they clearly say. For instance, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary states: “The Teacher is not teaching soul-sleep here, that the dead have no consciousness. Rather his emphasis is on the contrast between the carnal [fleshly or physical] knowledge of the living and the dead... [The dead] clearly have not the capacities
that they once had on earth” (Wright, note on verses 5-6). The same commentary further states that “the dead at that time [when Ecclesiastes was written] did not know what future they could expect”—being in a supposed underworld awaiting Christ’s resurrection to find out what awaited them. Yet Jesus said that Abraham actually looked forward to His day, and we’re later told that this father of the faithful was aware of the future reward (John 8:56; Hebrews 11:8-10). So did he forget this while in a supposed disembodied afterlife? That makes no sense.

Dr. Kaiser’s commentary says that Ecclesiastes 9:4-5 and verse 10 present “no denial of a future state”—which is true, as these verses allow for a future resurrection. But his commentary goes further in saying that there is no denial here “of personal, conscious presence with God immediately after death of the body” (p. 102). That is false. These verses very specifically deny this. What would be the point of saying the dead physical body knows nothing if the actual person is still alive and thinking as a disembodied soul? Wouldn’t that person, at least if among the righteous, be freed from burden and “in a better place”? And if the person is not righteous and will experience conscious afterlife in a hell of torment, why say there is no knowledge of anything? Why say this if the disembodied person actually will have awareness—either of bliss or agony? Some would argue that Solomon himself didn’t know about this, but they still treat his words as inspired—considering that God did not allow him to write anything wrong yet still concealed the truth of the matter from him. But his statements cannot be made to reasonably fit with their concept of an immediate conscious life after death in heaven or hell.

Some commentators take the words regarding the unconscious state of the dead in verses 5 and 10 at face value but conclude that they actually represent a wrong view. The Living Bible footnotes here, “These statements are Solomon’s discouraged opinion and do not reflect a knowledge of God’s truth on these points!” This is fallacious reasoning. How then could we trust anything else in the book? The fact is, death is compared to sleep in various passages of Scripture wherein God’s truth on these points is revealed—with the dead awaiting an awakening at the resurrection of the dead (see Isaiah 57:1-2; Daniel 12:2; Matthew 27:52; John 11:11-14; 1 Corinthians 15:6, 18, 20; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14). The dead in fact have no consciousness—like a person in a coma for months with no sense of the passage of time. The human spirit returns to God when a person dies (Ecclesiastes 12:7), but with no conscious awareness until that spirit is later placed in a new body at the resurrection. The human spirit imparts consciousness to the human brain but is not conscious of itself in the way many imagine an immortal soul being able to have disembodied awareness. Solomon states the truth—the dead know nothing. (To learn more, see our free study guides What Happens After Death? and Heaven & Hell: What Does the Bible Really Teach?)

Where Ecclesiastes 9:5 says of those who die that “the memory of them is forgotten,” this is often taken to mean that other people don’t remember them. But given their own emotions persisting in the next sentence in verse 6, the statement in verse 5 most likely means that those who have died are the ones who don’t remember anything—“they don’t even have their memories,” as The Living Bible renders this (while wrongly labeling it untrue). This goes right along with the dead knowing nothing. Psalm 146:4, as properly rendered in the King James Version, tells us, “His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish.” Many render the word translated “thoughts” here as “plans”—again due to belief in an immortal soul. Concerning the persisting of feelings in the next verse in Ecclesiastes (9:6), the word rendered “envy” could mean “zeal” (NASB) or “passions” generally (GNT). Love and hate and passions—the full gamut of emotions and drives—are brought to a halt by death. Again, the description here is of full cessation of consciousness. When a person dies, there is no more thinking or feeling.

So is that all there is? Some would claim that this passage argues against a future life after death—that it denies not only consciousness apart from the body but even a future resurrection. Yet the passage doesn’t rule out a resurrection beyond this age. The statement “they have no more reward” at the end of verse 5 should be understood in light of the wording at the end of verse 6: “Nevermore will they have a share in anything done under the sun.” The point is that there is no more reward or participation in this life under the sun—while God and man are separated in this age. Again, there is no denial here of the dead being raised in a future age in the light of God. Solomon already stated that it will be well for the righteous in the end, including those who have died (8:12). That requires a future reward (see also 12:13-14). So the reward in 9:5 has to refer to what happens in this present life. Consider also that the fact of reward in this life means that this life is not all bad, as some would mischaracterize the message of
Ecclesiastes. There is a good share for us now, and the next verses encourage us to receive it—something only those still living can do. (Of course that is still in light of the fact that there is future reward in another life yet to come—the ultimate hope that Christians rely on. As Paul stated in 1 Corinthians 15:19, “If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable.”)

In the verses that follow in Ecclesiastes 9, considering that there is some reward in this life, we come back to the book’s refrain about finding enjoyment in living—but here with strong exhortation and specific directives. “Verses 7-10 of this chapter offer the longest sequence of imperative [or command] verbs, the longest set of instruction, in the entire book of Ecclesiastes” (Limburg, p. 107). Verse 7 starts with “Go”—get moving, “be up and about” (Kaiser, p. 98). “What had previously been put as advice (2:24-26; 3:12f., 22; 5:18-20) is now an urgent summons to action” (Tyndale, note on 9:7).

Given the reminder that this life will end, we should understand that the time to live joyfully is right now. Carpe diem, says a Latin proverb taken from the Roman poet Horace—“seize the day,” or, literally, “pluck the day,” as a ripe fruit. Some use this in the negative sense of just have a good time because there is no life beyond this one—the notion the apostle Paul decried in 1 Corinthians 15:32]. But Horace actually meant that we are to seize today because tomorrow is uncertain and we should not trust in plans made for later. That is very much in line with what Solomon has to say (and Solomon said it long before). Realizing the brevity of life and how quickly things can change in this world, there is great value in the present for what it offers now and for the opportunity it affords to prepare for the future. While we are alive, we should truly live as best we can.

We are told in verse 7 to eat joyfully and drink merrily “for God has already accepted your works.” What is this saying? It definitely doesn’t mean that God is fine with everything people might do—as the book and the rest of the Bible warn against wickedness facing divine judgment. Some therefore take it to mean that God is telling the righteous that they stand forgiven and accepted by Him, presumably due to their repentance and faith and striving to please Him, so they don’t need to worry about Him being indifferent or uncaring to them—as the preceding verses about the righteous and wicked experiencing the same thing could make it seem. The Tyndale commentary even states that “this almost Pauline touch is the nearest the Preacher came to a doctrine of justification by faith” (same note). However, this concept is unsubstantiated in the passage. The verse is most likely not speaking of the general spiritual standing of believers before God. The context and parallel with other occurrences of the refrain show the emphasis here to be on enjoying the good physical aspects of life that God has designed for all of us. The NIV renders the phrase in question, “God has already approved of what you do”—in terms of eating and drinking with joy. The sense is: Go enjoy things, for that is what God wants you to do. The Message paraphrases, “God takes pleasure in your pleasure.” The Preaching the Word commentary agrees: “Primarily the Preacher is saying that our eating and drinking enjoy the blessing of God. Life’s enjoyments are not guilty pleasures but godly pleasures—or at least they ought to be. A merry heart has God’s approval. It is part of his gracious will for our lives” (Ryken, p. 213).

But what of the terrible human condition just mentioned of evil and madness ending in death? We already saw in chapter 7 that fools pursue fun for escapism—that the wise are more serious. That’s certainly true. There is much to mourn over in this age. But we all still must try to enjoy ourselves when that’s appropriate, as it often is. Nelson writes: “Is Solomon telling us to bury our heads in the sand and ignore the tragic nature of life? Is he saying we should try to dull the pain with pleasure?... What is Solomon talking about? He’s saying the same thing he has already told us.... Enjoy life right now even though you got laid off yesterday. Spend some time with good friends. You don’t know why yesterday happened. You don’t know what tomorrow holds. Jesus said, ‘Tomorrow will care for itself’ (Matt[hew] 6:34). Right now, God will take care of you. And God approves of your enjoying life. That’s what the end of verse 7 means. Many Christians live as if it is a sin to enjoy life. But God created the world for us to enjoy” (pp. 146-147). He further points out that Eden, where God originally put man, is a name meaning “delight.” Again, that is what God wants for us.

Of course, enjoying pleasures in life is not the answer to life’s problems—though it is part of the answer. And it can even add to the problems if we are not careful. We must certainly be on guard in all that we do to this end, as the book later warns in Ecclesiastes 11:9, being wisely balanced in our approach.

The Preaching the Word commentary properly cautions that “there is also a deadly spiritual danger
in the pursuit of pleasure. We may get so distracted by earthly pleasures that we lose our passion for God. How tempting it is to worship the gift and forget the Giver!... Some Christians deal with this danger by self-denial.... Admittedly, there may be some pleasures that some people should deny [and there are times we should deny ourselves to give time to prayer and fasting].... In general, though, this is not the approach that the Bible teaches us to take with the good things of life. What it tells us to do instead is to receive pleasure with gratitude, returning our thanks to God. One of the best ways for us to keep the good things in life in their proper perspective is to praise the Giver for all of his gifts. 'Everything created by God is good,' the Scripture says [in a different context, though with words applicable here], ‘and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving’ (1 Timothy 4:4)” (pp. 217-218).

Likewise, 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 tells us, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” And we are to rejoice always in the Lord, Paul says (Philippians 4:4)—again, with thanksgiving (verse 6). So God wants us to enjoy life while constantly keeping Him in mind, living in accordance with His will, and giving Him thanks. Solomon doesn’t directly state the need to give thanks and praise to God in Ecclesiastes. But He likely didn’t need to, as well versed as he and the nation probably were in his father’s psalms, which gave such declaration. If he read Ecclesiastes aloud at a festival gathering, then it would probably have been accompanied by such psalms.

Considering the exhortations to enjoyment throughout Ecclesiastes and in these other passages, we should recognize that Jesus Himself applied the principle and enjoyed the good life in a balanced way while often giving thanks. In fact, He did so to the point of eliciting derision from critics, Jesus stating: “The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ But wisdom is justified by her children” (Matthew 11:19). Of course, Jesus did not overindulge or compromise Himself, as accused, but He clearly did enjoy fine meals and wine and appropriate socializing—as we all should in gratitude and moderation.

Let’s note the particulars of what we’re told to enjoy in the refrain of Ecclesiastes 9. Verse 7 again tells us to “eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart.” And verse 8 says, “Let your garments always be white, and let your head lack no oil.” As Kaiser notes: “Wine and bread, the staff of life, are frequently representative in Scripture of that which God gives to comfort and cheer us (Genesis 14:18; Judges 19:19; 1 Samuel 16:20; 25:18; Nehemiah 5:15; Ecclesiastes 10:19; Lamentations 2:12). In fact, these are mentioned alongside oil as given to man by God in Psalm 104:15: “Wine that makes glad the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread which strengthens man’s heart.” The wine gladdening the heart refers to lightening the mood and promoting positive social interaction—in moderation. There is certainly no condoning of drunkenness here, which is denounced in the next chapter (Ecclesiastes 10:17). The eating and drinking together, as in past refrains, imply companionship—enjoying good fellowship with others.

Having your garments always white referred to wearing clean, comfortable and festive clothes. Light-colored clothing reflected the heat in the warm climate of the Middle East. But of course white clothes would easily show dirt and needed to be washed more frequently. And “because ordinary people could not maintain and perpetually clean their cool and pleasant white garments as could people of wealth and rank, they reserved such clothes for especially important or festive occasions. Accordingly white garments became emblems of joy and festivity” (Kaiser, p. 99). Note the Levites adorned in white linen when David had the Ark of the Covenant brought to Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 5:12). The NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible comments: “Scholars have understood the color white to symbolize purity, festivity or elevated social status. In both Egypt (Story of Sinuhe) and Mesopotamia (Gilgamesh Epic), clean or bright garments conveyed a sense of well-being” (note on Ecclesiastes 9:8). The oil here is likewise representative of life’s luxuries. It made people more comfortable, removing the irritations of dry skin in a dry climate. It was also mixed with scents and used for perfuming—to not only look good but smell good. (We see perfumes mentioned in the parables of Ecclesiastes 7:1 and 10:1.) Anointing another with oil showed a bestowal of favor and welcome to that person.

Of course, anointing with oil also had a spiritual sense of God’s favor and investiture, though that does not seem to be the primary meaning in what Solomon is saying here. Nevertheless it could be part of the broader sense in the context of the whole of Scripture. In fact, the other physical blessings here all have spiritual parallels. White garments, being clean, signified spiritual purity or righteousness before
God, as we see in Revelation (3:4-5; 19:8). And eating and drinking can denote taking in of the spiritual nourishment God gives—as well as spiritual fellowship. Perhaps 9:8 could in that sense serve as a caution not unlike what we’ve been reading in the rest of the book: Eat and drink but “let your garments always be white” (that is, do so in a righteous manner), “and let your head lack no oil” (that is, do so directed by God’s Spirit, not all on your own). Still, that seems beyond what Solomon himself meant. Normal physical enjoyment is most likely what he intended in the immediate context, especially given what follows about enjoying life with one’s wife.

This next verse, Ecclesiastes 9:9, presents a lifetime with one’s wife in a very positive light—which helps to put Solomon’s earlier statement about not finding a good woman in 7:27-28 into fuller context. Failing to find a good woman had been his personal experience with his vast harem, but he still counseled that joy in marriage was attainable—one of God’s great blessings during this life. As he also wrote in Proverbs 18:22, “He who finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favor from the LORD.” And further positive affirmation and celebration of marital love is found in the Song of Solomon. It should be pointed out that some wrongly contend that Ecclesiastes 9:9 is not referring to marriage. The Tyndale commentary explains: “Because the term for wife here is simply ‘woman’ [that is, the Hebrew can be translated either way], and because the Heb[rew] lacks the article and could mean ‘a woman,’ it is thought by some…that the Preacher is urging sensuality without marriage. This neglects the background of Ecclesiastes in Genesis 1-11; also the style of Heb[rew] in Ecclesiastes…tends to omit the article where other writers would have it [and ‘wife whom you love’ could be understood as definite without the article]. It is, therefore, precarious to base too much upon its absence…. The companionship envisaged is life-long, not a casual liaison” (footnote on 9:9).

The wording may not seem quite so positive though, as the Preaching the Word commentary points out, telling husbands “to enjoy your wives ‘all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life’ (Ecclesiastes 9:9). This is hardly the kind of statement that a woman is hoping to find written on her anniversary card! The Preacher is no more sentimental about marriage than he is about anything else in life. But this does not make him a cynic. On the contrary, he is giving a serious view of life that makes room for joy but also faces up to the sober realities of life in a fallen world and the inevitable reality of death” (p. 215). Some see the vanity or frustration—the breath or vapor—in this verse as referring to life being fleeting or short. Yet it still seems likely to refer to the entire panoply of frustration this world presents that leads to the sudden finality of death, as in verse 3, with the directive to live joyfully with one’s spouse as a way to experience lifelong blessing in the midst of life’s troubles. Consider the seeming oxymoron of “live joyfully…all the days of your vain life.” Yet it makes sense if we recognize that every day, despite that day’s problems, we can still experience joys that marriage provides—and more so over the years, as long as we have life. And in fact, as should be encouraging to those who are not married, we can experience joys from many other God-given gifts each day and throughout life, as Solomon has just mentioned and as he will later reaffirm despite life’s vanity (see 11:8).

Interestingly, several commentaries point out that the directives to joyfully eat, drink, wear festive clothes, put on perfume oils and love one’s wife were found in other ancient sources—which makes sense when we consider that Solomon had an international empire and was a collector of wisdom. The NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible notes on Ecclesiastes 9:7-9: “These verses include some of the most remarkable parallels between a Scriptural text and other ancient Near Eastern texts found anywhere in the Bible. The ‘Song from the Tomb of King Intef,’ from the Egyptian Harpers’ Songs, confronts human mortality and offers the following advice: ‘Put myrrh on your head, / Dress in fine linen, / Anoint yourself with oils fit for a god!’ Another of the Harpers’ Songs, ‘Neferhotep I,’ has similar advice: ‘Take fine perfumes pleasing to your nostrils, with garlands, lotuses, and berries at your breast, with your sister, who is in your heart, happy at your side’ (‘sister’ here refers to one’s wife). Another strikingly similar text is in the Old Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic, where the hero laments over mortality to an ale-wife, and she gives him this advice: ‘When the gods created mankind, / For mankind they established death, / Life they kept for themselves. / You, Gilgamesh, let your belly be full, / Keep enjoying yourself, day and night! / Every day make merry, / Dance and play day and night! / Let your clothes be clean! / Let your head be washed, may you be bathed in water! / Gaze on the little one who holds your hand! / Let a wife enjoy your repeated embrace!’ Our three different sources—Babylonian, Egyptian and Israelite—have essentially the
same message: ‘In light of the brevity of life, enjoy yourself!’ This, of itself, may not be too remarkable, but the specific nature and sequence of the advice (feasting, wearing clean clothes, anointing with oils and perfumes, and enjoying one’s wife) suggests a common wisdom tradition.”

Solomon made good use in Ecclesiastes of this proverbial encouragement, but in a different way from these other sources. As the Preaching the Word commentary notes: “All of the passages where he gives this call [to enjoyment] have God at their center. This immediately distinguishes Ecclesiastes from ancient writings like The Epic of Gilgamesh. Why should we enjoy eating and drinking and working [the last item mentioned next]? In chapter 2 it is because these activities are ‘God’s gift to man’ (v. 13). The same is true in chapter 5, which also says that God keeps us ‘occupied with joy’ in our hearts (v. 20). The Preacher may be frustrated with life in this fallen world, but he still acknowledges the gifts that come from the hand of God. We see this perhaps most clearly in Ecclesiastes 9, where the Preacher tells us to enjoy bread and wine because ‘God has already approved what you do’ (v. 7)—in terms of desiring that we enjoy life, as we’ve seen (p. 213). Moreover, the next line of the Gilgamesh poem after listing the things in life to enjoy says: “These things alone are the concern of men.” Solomon, on the other hand, presents a much bigger picture as the concern of men—God having put “eternity in their hearts” (3:11)—and concludes his treatise by stating that man’s responsibility is to fear God and keep His commandments (12:13). We must enjoy God’s gifts in that context.

Deuteronomy 12, 14 and 16 instructed the Israelites to set aside a tenth of their income so the whole family could rejoice before Him at His annual festivals—enjoying grain, wine, oil and meat—with a major part of the reason being “that you may learn to fear the LORD your God always” (14:23).

In what we’ve gone over of the refrain in Ecclesiastes 9 so far (verses 7-9), we’ve seen the following enjoyment recommended: feasting, with both contentment and comfort, and marital relations and companionship (PTW, p. 213; NAC, note on verses 7-10). Then at the end of verse 9 and in verse 10 we are given another area of life from which to derive joy—work or occupation. Verse 9, again, says to “live joyfully” with one’s wife, “for that is your portion in life, and in the labor which you perform under the sun.” This might seem to read that living joyfully with one’s wife is the portion in one’s life and the portion in one’s labor. But that does not make the best sense here. Of course, enjoying one’s marriage is indeed a product of working to make a good marriage. But “labor” has been used more generally throughout the book, as we’ll recount in a moment, and the same appears true here. The verse can be more clearly read to say “live joyfully” with one’s wife “for that is your portion in life,” and also “live joyfully…in the labor which you perform under the sun [which is also one’s portion].” This transitions into verse 10 regarding working with all of our might.

As noted earlier, Dr. Kaiser’s outline has verse 10 beginning a new subsection of the last part of the book—and certainly the next subsection does build on the idea of working with all one’s strength, along with wisdom. Yet the labor at the end of verse 9, with exhortation concerning it continuing into verse 10, was clearly presented in earlier occurrences of the refrain. As noted in previous comments, Solomon stated in Ecclesiastes 2:24 that it’s not inherent within man “that his soul should enjoy good in his labor. This also, I saw, was from the hand of God.” In 3:13 he said “that every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labor—it is the gift of God.” In 3:22 he said that “nothing is better than that a man should rejoice in his own works, for that is his heritage.” In 5:18-19 he said, “It is good and fitting for one to eat and drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labor in which he toils under the sun…for it is his heritage… To receive his heritage and rejoice in his labor—this is the gift of God.” And where Solomon commended physical enjoyment in 8:15, he said, “for this will remain with him in his labor all the days of his life.” So it stands to reason that labor or work in general is again part of the refrain in chapter 9—in verse 9 to enjoy and in verse 10 as something desirable to participate in before one can’t anymore when taken in death.

Furthermore, verse 10 reiterates the point of verses 4-6—that life is better than death as the dead know nothing, with feelings and opportunities coming to an end. These verses seem to mark an inclusio—the literary device wherein specific words or themes are used as verbal “brackets” or “bookends” at the beginning and end of a passage to set it off—which is more reason to see verse 10 as going with the preceding verses and thus marking the end of the subsection here. The refrain in verses 7-10 would then be the latter half of the inclusio of verses 4-10—the inclusio itself being the latter half of the subsection from 8:16–9:10. (Additionally, the wording of verse 11, “I returned and saw…,” seems to be the start of
Concerning the enjoyment of good in man’s work, some see this as merely enjoying the fruit of one’s labor—the end product of the work or what the work earns and is able to buy. And of course there is great value in work in that regard. But there is also enjoyment to be found in work itself—despite the curse of hardship in toil that Adam brought on himself and his descendants through sin (see Genesis 3:17-19). It feels good to be productive—and that’s in “whatever your hand finds to do,” not just your career. A feeling of achievement and satisfaction comes from a job well done—and even while the job is being done, provided we are not being oppressed or overwhelmed in it. If simply doing nothing is so great, then why is the fact that in the grave there is “no work or device [no inventive way of going about things] or knowledge or wisdom [thus no expertise or skill to apply]” a negative? Clearly it is better to be active and doing things—whatever it is we can do, as best we can, for as long as we can.

Recall that laziness or idleness was decried in Ecclesiastes 4:5, as it will be again in 10:18. But also bear in mind that being a workaholic for the big payoff or reward was decried as well (4:6-8). We should strive to do well in whatever work we engage in—yet still allow time to enjoy other things and other people, along with downtime to rest and rejuvenate, as we have the freedom to do so. (God Himself set the example of rest and gave the Sabbath for this purpose. Recall from our introduction a thematic relation between the observance of the Sabbath and the refrains and conclusions of Ecclesiastes.)

Moreover, whatever work we are engaged in, we should consider that we are working for God as the One we should be seeking to please. Colossians 3:23 echoes the first part of Ecclesiastes 9:10 in saying, “And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men.” The word “heartily” here is from the Greek ek psuches, meaning “from out of one’s soul (or being)—meaning that we give it our all, including all our might. That fits with considering what we do as service to God, as we are to love and obey God with all our heart, soul (or being), mind and strength or might (Deuteronomy 6:5; Mark 12:30). Consider also that the New Testament encourages us to exhibit virtue (2 Peter 1:5) or, as the Greek word arete entails, excellence—the highest quality state that can be reached. God is a God of excellence (verse 3)—and He wants us to strive for that too. We are not to be lackadaisical and half-hearted. Romans 12:11 tells us that we should be “not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord.” We should be committed to and passionate about what we put our hand to—and, again, do our best. With God at the center of the duty and enjoyment of our work and living in general, we will keep a right focus in what we do.

Of course, not all of us have the same capacity when it comes to work. Thankfully, as noted in a popular Christian devotional, “we serve a God who loves us more than our work. We must never forget this because there may come a time when our ability to ‘do for God’ is torn from us by health or failure or unforeseen catastrophe. It is in those hours that God wants us to remember that He loves us not for what we do for Him but because of who we are: His children!” (Randy Kilgore, “Always Loved, Always Valued.” Our Daily Bread, Jan. 28, 2017, emphasis in original). This is quite true. Still, there is always something we can and must do—even if it is only to pray (and that should not be regarded in a belittled sense, as praying is one of the most important things we should be doing all the time). We don’t need to worry about what we physically can’t do. The important thing is to do what we can—and to do that with all our might.

The warning about death at the end of verse 10 is to remind us that our time is ticking away. Verses 4-5 had presented the hope of the living as the awareness of coming death—the point that in thinking about it there is an impetus to prepare for it, to do what we can. Well, your opportunity is now, Solomon says. You need to make the most of it. Carpe diem or seize the day, as we earlier saw. Paul later said in Ephesians 5:15-16 that we must be “redeeming the time, because the days are evil”—as they certainly are in this age, their distractions and problems often hindering us from progress we need to be making (see also Colossians 4:5). Let us be sure to make the most of the precious life we’re given while we still have it—enjoying with grateful hearts the wonderful gifts God gives as we strive with all of our being to serve Him in all we do.

**Despite Life’s Unpredictability, Keep Striving in Wisdom (Ecclesiastes 9:10–10:3) Day 18**

We saw in the opening of the first subsection of this last major section of the book that we can’t really figure out all that God is working out with people in His great plan. There’s a lot He hasn’t let us in on, particularly when it comes to individual lives, including our own (see 8:16–9:3). We see a little more
of that here in this second subsection (Ecclesiastes 9:10–11:6)—with things not always going as might be expected. A great deal of mystery yet remains. Outcomes in this age are uncertain. But that must not prevent us from following the directive we were given at the end of the previous subsection in Ecclesiastes 9:10—to strive to do whatever we do with all of our strength and ability. We must live boldly, yet with wisdom—including needed caution about the limitations of human ability and wisdom, and understanding of how to navigate this life. The current, second subsection is rather lengthy, yet is naturally further subdivided into three parts, as we are following in our readings (9:10–10:3; 10:4-20; 11:1-6).

As was mentioned before, Dr. Walter Kaiser’s outline of the book places verse 10 at the beginning of the present subsection. However, the verse actually appears to end the previous subsection (and comments on verse 10 are found with those covering Ecclesiastes 8:16–9:10). Yet verse 10 can be regarded as transitional, since the need to give it our all underlies much of the present subsection. This is why we are reading it again here. Still, it appears that the current subsection properly begins with verse 11, Solomon entering upon new material with the words “I returned and saw under the sun that…” This “return” is following his investigation of the previous subsection “to see the business that is done on earth” (8:16-17), where he realized that no one can really gain a handle on it all.

He had further come to see that life is quite unpredictable, considering that the righteous and wicked often have the same experiences in life all the way to ultimately ending in death (9:1-3). So he counseled that we need to be sure to enjoy life while we have it and make the most of it, doing what we can to prepare for the inevitable (verses 4-10).

Yet in all this we need to keep in mind that much that happens remains beyond our control—and Solomon now goes on in verses 11-12 to show that this life is unpredictable every which way. The fastest person doesn’t always win the race. He might trip and fall. He might get distracted. He might think he doesn’t need to exert himself. He might not even show up. We’ve probably heard the fable of the tortoise and the hare—seeing that slow and steady wins the race. But of course that won’t guarantee winning the race either. The swiftest typically do win (just look at so many of the great Olympic champions who normally do win the gold medals). And the verse does not say otherwise. It means that the swiftest do not necessarily win. Likewise, the strongest don’t always win the fight. Remember David and Goliath? And people who are wise and smart—even in matters of money—don’t always end up prosperous. They may not even manage to eke out a living. Those who can best do the job are sometimes passed over. Someone else may have had a better “in.” Or the skillful person might have just had a bad day—failing in the instance he needed to prove himself. It just goes that way sometimes. The listed qualities in verse 11 are good to have, but things don’t always fall out as expected. It just depends. Circumstances change things.

Solomon remarks, as his words are often translated, “But time and chance happen to them all” (end of verse 11—more on this in a moment). And he goes on to say that man “does not know his time,” showing that people are like fish caught in a net or birds caught in a snare—“so the sons of men are snared in an evil time, when it falls suddenly upon them” (verse 12). The reference here is to calamity, even death, but not necessarily death. It could be anything. Even if a person puts forth his or her best effort in work, strategy, knowledge and wisdom while there is life (as in verse 10), that will not guarantee success in these and shield against calamity.

The discussion of time coming upon people in verses 11-12 recalls the earlier poem about the seasons of life in chapter 3, with there being “a time for every purpose under heaven” (verse 1). The Hebrew word used in conjunction with time in 9:11, pega’, translated “chance,” does not denote randomness but simply any event that might happen. The Expositor’s Bible Commentary says that “it contains less the idea of haphazard occurrence than an event that we meet, whether anticipated or unanticipated” (Wright, note on verses 11-12). A footnote here further explains that the word “is used elsewhere only in 1 Kings 5:4, where it is qualified by ‘evil,’ i.e., some adversity that has happened. The corresponding verb [yiqreh, rendered “happen” in Ecclesiastes 9:11] is used in the sense of ‘meet,’ as in the old English ‘I chanced upon’ (e.g., 1 Sam[uel] 10:5).” Furthermore, “time and chance” in Ecclesiastes 9:11 “are not presented as two separate contingencies, but as a single factor” (NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible, note on verse 11). The reference is to meeting up with some happening at a particular time—that is, simply, circumstance.

The Holman Old Testament Commentary (Moore) quotes The NIV Application Commentary:
Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs (Iain Provan) in this regard: “The NIV’s ‘chance’ (pega’) is an unhappy choice of translation, since this word connotes an impersonal and random force, whereas Qohelet is clear throughout the book that human fate lies ultimately in God’s hands, no matter how random and impersonal what befalls us may appear. The verbal form pega’ means ‘to meet, encounter.’ A pega’ is simply something we encounter on the path of life—a circumstance or situation over which we have no control” (p. 110).

The event could possibly be random, but we must remember the context of verse 1—that whatever happens is “in the hand of God.” So with any random occurrence God is still sovereign, as it is always His decision whether to allow that occurrence to proceed or not. He can always intervene—and He does intervene for those who love and obey Him, causing all things to work together for their ultimate good (Romans 8:28). Some, with a misconception about “time and chance,” imagine the righteous could die in an accident as the victim of random occurrence apart from God’s purposes. So here would be God as the Master Potter in whose hands we are (Isaiah 64:8)—as He molds and shapes us for what He is preparing us for in His Kingdom. And then some random occurrence takes us out, with God saying, “Oops! Lost that one.” Really? Of course not. We need to realize that Ecclesiastes 9:11 does not even say there could be random occurrences. And even if it allows for that possibility, as it probably does, it is, again, always up to God whether to permit that happening. None of us are resigned to fate. Rather, we remain in the hands of our loving God.

That being said, God will allow many things to befall us that we do not anticipate. And for those in the world at large, who are unrepentant, He may allow them to be swept away by calamities not specifically directed toward them, as we see in the example Jesus gave about the Tower of Siloam falling on people who were in the wrong place at the wrong time (Luke 13:4). He warned, “Unless you repent you will all likewise perish.” This is not to say that the righteous could not have a tower fall on them, but it would only be with assurance that they remain in God’s watchful care and are ready for the future He has prepared for them in His Kingdom (compare Isaiah 57:1-2, where the death of the righteous is within God’s keeping and care).

All of this shows that while we are to live with boldness, striving with our might, doing what we can in our endeavors, this must be tempered with wisdom in maintaining a healthy sense of uncertainty. Of course we should plan, but we need to know that our plans won’t necessarily work out—so we need to be flexible. We should try to have contingency plans as prudent precaution. Still, we can’t plan for every eventuality. We can’t even imagine everything that might happen. We need to know that “the best laid plans of mice and men often go awry.” We need to recognize that whatever happens is ultimately up to God—and we don’t know all that He will decide. One of Solomon’s proverbs stated, “Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth” (Proverbs 27:1). And the apostle James expanded on this, telling us we must not boast in personal plans, which is vanity, but must keep in mind God’s sovereignty over the future (James 4:13-16). Thus, it really comes down to this: Above all, we need to maintain a right relationship with God, so that we remain in His care when the unexpected hits us. This is the very counsel the conclusion of Ecclesiastes gives us.

The proper mind-set and approach here is a part of wisdom. Despite the limitations of wisdom we’ve seen—not being able to figure everything out (8:16-17), not even always gaining needed food to eat (9:11), and still meeting with this life’s calamities and even death (verses 1-3, 10-12)—wisdom is not useless. In fact, it’s part of wisdom to understand this—that wisdom is helpful even though it can’t solve everything, as Solomon next lays out in verses 13-18.

Here he gives the case, whether actual or thought up, of a small city besieged by the forces of a great king but delivered by a poor wise man though he’s forgotten (verses 13-16). The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries volume on Ecclesiastes (Eaton) says that verse 15 might be translated to mean that a poor wise man’s wisdom possibly could have saved the city but that no one thought of him (see GNT, NEB, and NASB footnote). However, as the Preaching the Word commentary footnotes, this translation requires an interpretive choice it describes as “reading between the lines,” and without more context it seems best to go with the common translation—that the poor man did deliver the city and was then forgotten (Ryken, p. 295). Here then was a case where the battle did not go to the strong (as in verse 11)—though this may be because a battle was averted.

Something possibly like this actually occurred during the reign of David. In 2 Samuel 20:13-22,
we’re told that Sheba, who led a rebellion against David, fled to Abel of Beth Maachah, and David’s general Joab besieged the city. A wise woman came forward and worked out with Joab that if the people of Abel gave up Sheba, they would be left in peace. And so they then threw out Sheba’s head, and Joab withdrew. We don’t know that the woman’s name was forgotten at the time, but as it is not given in the account, that could be. The siege of Abel was not the exact occasion described in Ecclesiastes 9:13-16, though it could have provided a model for it.

In any case we see the poor wise man who saved the city in the present story forgotten. *Expositor’s comments*: “It was all part of the vanity and frustration of a self-centered world. Moreover, it was undoubtedly humiliating for the people to admit that they had been saved by a nobody” (note on verses 13-15). *The New American Commentary* points out that “wisdom is sought out only in desperate times; otherwise, only those who have wealth or power are in a position to demand public attention” (Garrett, note on verses 13-16).

*Expositor’s* continues: “What are we to conclude from this illustration? Certainly not that in view of the changes and chances of life we are better off not to use our gifts. It was right for the poor man to come forward and use his wisdom to thwart [or turn away] the king; it would have been right for him to do so even if he had known that his fellow citizens would not ask his advice in the future” (note on verse 16). Kaiser agrees: “Although the poor, wise man failed to profit personally from his labors, his wisdom was not profitless for others or for this world” (*Ecclesiastes: Total Life*, p. 105). Indeed, his wisdom was of great value.

Solomon says this example shows that “wisdom is better than strength” (verse 16)—a thought, perhaps a proverb, that is paralleled a couple verses later where he says that “wisdom is better than weapons of war” (verse 18). Recall also Solomon earlier presenting wisdom as a defense—and as giving more strength than 10 military leaders in a city (7:12, 19). This magnifies the directive we’re given in 9:10 to do whatever we do with our might. Clearly what we do should also be with wisdom, which is better than might. And we are to share wisdom with others—even if there is no reward or respect to follow, as with the poor man here. Where verse 16 has “nevertheless,” the word could just be “and” (Young’s Literal Translation), while some versions have “though” or “even though” (ESV). Thus the statement would mean that wisdom is better even when it’s despised and not listened to. Ultimately “the citizens were the real losers”—failing to benefit further from the poor man’s wisdom (*Expositor’s*, note on verses 17-18). Still, we see here another limitation of wisdom despite its value—that it may go unheard or unheeded.

The words of the wise are often given as quiet, thoughtful assessment, but we see them ignored and shouted over in verse 17—even by a ruler, who is thereby obstinate and foolish. The sinner of verse 18 could be such a leader disregarding the wisdom of the wise as beneath him and his courtiers—even squashing it—so that it cannot be wielded as needed for the good it would do. Wisdom offered can deliver a city and continue to give further help, but if ignored or drowned out by foolishness, the result will be ruin.

However, it’s possible that the sinner in verse 18—if going with what follows in the next verse (10:1)—is a reference to a wise man hurting his own credibility by sin, as Solomon himself had done. But, as such was not the example just given, this would if meant seem to constitute a new thought. The connection with what came before would be the superiority of wisdom over physical might yet with wisdom still having weakness—previously that it went unheeded by others and here that it sometimes goes unheeded by even those who give it.

Of course, it is also generally true that one sinner can destroy much good. One of the common tragedies of life is how one evil person can do so much harm, and even more in this modern age when a single terrorist or a few working together can kill and injure many people and wreak terrible destruction. One person in a church can do something so scandalous that it makes the whole church look bad to the public. One bad parent can create a cycle of sin and suffering that affects generations. And one person can bring terrible consequences on others. Recall what happened in the Israelite conquest of the Promised Land: “Did not Achan the son of Zerah commit a trespass in the accursed thing, and wrath fell on all the congregation of Israel? And that man did not perish alone in his iniquity” (Joshua 22:20). Sin is disastrous for the sinner and often for others—sometimes many others.

We should note that there is no narrative break between the end of Ecclesiastes 9 and the beginning
of chapter 10. But the apparently proverbial statements at the end of chapter 9, in verses 16-18 beginning with “Then I said...,” are evidently in response to the example of the poor man in the besieged city in verses 13-15, while the proverbs of chapter 10 are being used for more general observations—with 10:1 as transitional, as we’ll note more about in a moment. In fact, except for a single personal observation in chapter 10 (verses 5-7), Ecclesiastes 9:16 through to the conclusion of the book starting in 12:8 is essentially a series of proverbs and proverbial poems set in order (compare 12:9) to outline, in progressive form, how we must proceed through this life.

Moving on to chapter 10, then, Solomon here offers us a number of proverbs and a wise observation—after laying the groundwork for receiving them in what he’s been saying. As Expositor’s notes: “The Teacher has returned to the subject of wisdom being superior to folly, even when it fails to gain the recognition it deserves (9:13-18). So this is an appropriate place for another series of wise sayings (cf. 7:1-12) relating to guidance for life” (note on verse 1).

Recall that the first proverb in the earlier series of proverbs in chapter 7 said, “A good name is better than precious ointment...” (verse 1). Now we read about a fly in the ointment or, rather, dead flies (plural)—or even “flies of death,” notes commentator John Gill—as causing a bad smell and hurting the person otherwise reputed to have wisdom and honor. Clearly these two proverbs (7:1 and 10:1) are related. In the previous case, an established good reputation was as a good smell—so that interacting with others was a positive experience for them. Now the reputation is as perfume tainted by dead flies. It has become disgusting—in appearance and effect. It was highly valued, costly, and now it has become worthless—as refuse. And note that it takes only a little folly to bring this about—just as flies are small but loathsome. In modern parlance, a fly in the ointment, taken from this verse, refers to a small defect or irritant that spoils the value, enjoyment or success of something. In the proverb, it destroys a wise person’s credibility—as the end of the previous verse about a sinner destroying much good (9:18) might also relate to.

Kaiser contends that “Solomon does not refer to that trace of folly in a wise man or the lapses of the otherwise good man; he instead refers to the tendency for folly to predominate over ‘honorable wisdom,’” as was seen in 9:16-17 with wisdom shouted down and ignored (p. 106). That is, he takes this to be an issue of a government’s or ruler’s reputation where foolishness is allowed to regularly prevail over wisdom. Yet the wording of 10:1 concerns one known for wisdom allowing foolishness to prevail only a little. That does not seem to fit with the large-scale suppression of wisdom by the “ruler of fools” in 9:17—though it could indeed refer to an otherwise wise king or government giving in to folly just enough to make the rule seem abhorrent to people.

In any case, wisdom’s value being diminished through sin in 9:18 provides a transition to the consequences of a little folly in 10:1. We should note the putrefying effect of the flies here. Not only is it revolting to the senses, but rot and contamination are indeed spread throughout the ointment. We may compare this with the effects of sin—with spiritual rot and corruption being spread throughout whatever is infected. As Paul said in comparing sin to leavening—pointing out why we are to remove leaven from our lives as a symbolic measure during the Feast of Unleavened Bread—“Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?” (1 Corinthians 5:6). So it is with the sin and foolishness represented by the “flies of death.” Consider that one of the names of Satan is Beelzebub (Matthew 12:24)—meaning lord or master of flies. Indeed, he is the master of sin and foolishness—attracting people to spiritual filth, decay and death and leading them to spread all this on to others.

Allowing foolishness and sin to prevail in any situation will bring spreading corruption and ruined lives and reputations. Rulers must avoid this, as individuals clearly must as well. We must all strive for righteousness and wisdom, giving no place to wickedness and folly. When we fail in this, we must strive to set things right. Sometimes, though, our reputation may be damaged beyond recovery. Still we should work to earn back trust as much as is possible. Yet before even landing in this situation, we must always remember that it’s best to not bring harm to our reputation in the first place. And recognize that we are better able to serve God in being an example of wisdom and righteousness to others if we ourselves remain above reproach.

Again, we see in all this a limitation of wisdom despite its value—it can be negated by a little foolishness or sin. We are thus encouraged to develop and live by wisdom, but with the realization that our efforts in this will take us only so far. Maintaining a right relationship with God is paramount—which
We need wisdom to help navigate the problems of this life. Ecclesiastes 10:2 says, “A wise man’s heart is at his right hand, but a fool’s heart is at his left.” Where the heart is refers to what it is concerned with—whether things on the right or the left. Some versions have the heart inclining to either of these sides (NIV, ESV). And of course whichever way our heart leans is the way we will go. What is meant by right and left? Some see here a proclivity of the wise to value and choose right over wrong and the fool to be drawn to wrong over right, as in the God’s Word Translation. However, the contrast between right and left is not necessarily that between good and evil. The NIV Cultural Backgrounds Bible explains: “While there is no doubt that the right side was considered the place of honor and the most protected position, there is no indication that there was something negative or inherently weak or evil connected to the left side, either in the ancient Near East or Israel. It was secondary in honor and an unexpected direction from which to attack. The fool chose the path of vulnerability and lower status” (note on verse 2). Kaiser points out that “the ‘heart’ (i.e., the mind, or inner nature) of a wise man is ever ready to protect him from numerous dangers (10:2)—on his right hand…. As [18th-century commentator] Ginsburg noted, to be on one’s right was to defend or be ready to assist one, as in Psalm 16:8; 121:5” (p. 106). The Tyndale commentary further explains in its note on Ecclesiastes 10:2: “The right hand was associated with a strength which saves, supports and protects (Ps[alm] 16:8; Is[aiah] 41:13).” In the latter reference here, God holding one’s right hand equates to helping. The right hand was the place of blessing and honor (compare the blessing on Ephraim in Genesis 48:13-20) and of authority (as with Jesus beside the Father in Colossians 3:1). The left denoted what was less favored—and sometimes even disfavored (compare the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:33, 41). What this all shows is that the heart of the wise is focused on and leans toward what is more important and better, while the foolish person’s heart is set on that which is less worthwhile.

In the first part of Ecclesiastes 10:3, a fool lacking wisdom as he “walks along the way” is usually taken to mean as he walks down the street—possibly meaning that the fool is foolish even when doing the simplest of things (see the later discussion of verse 15). But walking is also a common metaphor for how one lives—one’s way of life—and “way” can refer to the course of one’s life or what he experiences. In the latter part of the verse the fool, by a literal reading, says to everyone that he is a fool, which could mean that the fool tells everyone else that they are fools. But it probably means that he communicates to or shows everyone (as in the NKJV) that he himself is a fool. Compare this with the latter part of Proverbs 13:16, where a fool lays open or flaunts or exposes his folly (see NKJV, ESV, NIV). Or Proverbs 12:23: “…The heart of fools proclaims foolishness.” The Contemporary English Version paraphrases Ecclesiastes 10:3 this way: “Fools show their stupidity by the way they live; it’s easy to see they have no sense.” Stupidity is used here to denote not lack of intelligence, but lack of wisdom in evaluating matters and then making poor life choices. So again we see that wisdom will help us to better navigate this life despite its inability to deal with all of this life’s problems.

**Matters of Authority; Proceed With Caution (Ecclesiastes 10:4-20)**

Here we read the second part of the second subsection of the last major section of the book. It starts with Ecclesiastes 10:4 giving counsel on choosing the right course for those in a particular difficult situation—of dealing with a ruler or one in authority becoming upset with them. Recall that Ecclesiastes 8:2-9 concerned not running afoul of government. Ecclesiastes 10:4 now concerns what to do when there is some point of offense. We should also note a warning at the end of the chapter about exercising great caution to not offend authorities (verse 20). It seems that these verses form the brackets of an inclusio—especially given that there are other verses about problems with human government between them. While there are some verses in this segment of the subsection (that is, in verses 4-20) that do not seem exclusive to that topic, they could still apply to it. Thus these verses constitute our current reading.

Regarding the upset ruler here in verse 4, who is perhaps flying off the handle, it’s important to maintain composure and, if in the ruler’s service, not desert one’s post—and to be careful in responding, recognizing that “conciliation pacifies great offenses” (same verse). Proverbs 16:14 gives us a parallel: “As messengers of death is the king’s wrath, but a wise man will appease it.” And Proverbs 15:1 tells us that “a soft answer turns away wrath.” As noted earlier in regard to Ecclesiastes 8:3 about not being hasty to go from the ruler’s presence, those who are distraught or incensed at the way they are being treated should not just storm off. And the book earlier warned against being quick to get angry as foolish (7:9).
Derek Kidner writes in *The Message of Ecclesiastes* regarding 10:4: “What we are invited to notice is that rather absurd human phenomenon, the huff. If one can recognize its symptoms, one will be saved some self-inflicted damage—for while it may feel magnificent to ‘resign your post’ (NEB), ostensibly on principle but actually in a fit of pride, it is in fact less impressive, more immature, than it feels. To be submissive to an autocratic master is not only the believer’s duty (as the New Testament has taught us, I Pet[er] 2:18 ff.), but may also be his wisdom, since the anger that can be mollified by deference ([Ecclesiastes 10:]4b) has itself the symptoms of a huff; and one person in that state is better than two” (p. 90). As 1 Peter 2:18-19, cited here, says: “Servants, be submissive to your masters with all fear, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh. For this is commendable, if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully.”

Of course, maybe the person the ruler comes down on is in the wrong to start with—at least in some way. Note again that Ecclesiastes 10:4 mentions pacifying great offenses, though perhaps this means pacifying even great offenses—so that the counsel applies whether one is at fault or not. *Expositor’s* states: “We should rather take an objective look at ourselves, and maybe we will find that we should apologize. Unwise people, however, lose their temper and suffer accordingly” (Wright, note on verse 4). Even if we are in the right and are suffering injustice, remember that Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers” (Matthew 5:9). And He urged being compliant in cases of maltreatment by authorities—to “turn the other cheek” (see verse 39). Paul echoed, “If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men” (Romans 12:18). This is not to say there would not come a point to necessarily flee the situation. Ecclesiastes 8:3 said not to be hasty to go; it did not say to never go. One must be prudent and cautious. Consider Solomon’s father David with Saul. David stayed until it was no longer safe.

The words of Ecclesiastes 10:4 are good counsel not just for the courtiers of a king—but for all of us in dealing with various relationships—with civil authority, with a boss at work, with parents, with one’s spouse. This does not mean that we should tolerate serious abuse, but if someone gets angry with us, even unjustly, it’s best not to cut loose. It’s better to stay calm, remaining committed to the relationship unless it becomes an unbearable situation (though of course that could happen rather quickly depending on the circumstances). Again, wisdom is valuable in helping us to avoid some problems in this life and to keep from making some problems worse.

Solomon next interjects within his series of proverbs a relevant observation about a failing he’s witnessed in human governance (verses 5-7). Clearly those at the top are not always right, and people are often not where they should be in regard to their appropriate station—whether in government or life generally. We see here rulers exalting foolish people while the nobles or the rich and princes—referring to those more suited by upbringings and experience for responsibility—are passed by (verses 5-6). Only dignitaries rode on horses, and yet here we see servants or slaves in this role, with princes walking on the ground as menials (verse 7). This is a picture of society turned upside down—not in the sense of societal justice, with rulers and aristocrats getting just desserts for abuses of power, but in a bad way of unqualified people being promoted while qualified people are rejected or ignored. Recognizing the propriety of princes serving in high positions is not an argument for nepotism—exalting people mainly because they are family or friends—as that can result in the very problem lamented of those in leadership positions being out of their depth or even bad people. Rather, as *The New American Commentary* (Garrett) notes about verses 6-7, ‘‘fools/slaves’ and ‘rich/princes’ describe not actual social status (cf. 9:13-16) but moral character: the ‘fools’ and ‘slaves’ are those unworthy of advancement, and the ‘rich’ and ‘princes’ are people of noble character”—and who, we should add, are capable of what is required. Consider Luke 12:21 about being “rich toward God”—and that the word noble can also mean virtuous. Solomon’s father David was a great king though he did not come from royalty—yet he did end up with much military and court experience before assuming the throne, and he was a man who followed God.

It’s worth pointing out that certain Egyptian texts present the exaltation of unworthy characters as a sign that society is falling apart. The *NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible* relates: “As Ecclesiastes complains of slaves on horseback, so the ‘Complaints of Khakheperresonb’ declares, ‘He who used to give commands is (now) one to whom commands are given.’ The Admonitions of Ipu-wer similarly complains, ‘Indeed, princes are hungry and perish. / Servants are served.’ These Egyptian texts are not in all respects the same as Ecclesiastes; they tend to focus on the general lawlessness in society during times
of political instability in Egypt, whereas Ecclesiastes is concerned more universally with the absurdities of human life. Still, both reflect a common way of describing a world gone wrong [or in disarray]” (note on 10:7).

Moving on to the next segment, how exactly the proverbs of verses 8-15 are meant to fit in context is not completely clear. We can see that verses 16-17, which follow these, return to the folly in verses 5-7 of having the wrong people in positions of responsibility. So verses 8-15, in between, may have been placed here to further highlight why this inaptness is a problem—that wisdom, with the strategies and cautions it provides, is required in various endeavors that leaders need to engage in (and thus having unwise people in managerial roles is dangerous and inefficient). Or perhaps these intervening verses concern how we as individuals react to the inequity of inappropriate leadership—pointing out that we ourselves need to be very careful, not doing things that would add to our difficulties or bring us harm (fitting with the inclusio theme beginning in verse 4 and ending in verse 20 about dealing cautiously with rulers). Either way there needs to be an awareness of risks. And beyond the enclosing verses about leadership problems, verses 8-15 also appear to illustrate the main subject of the current subsection of the book—living boldly with wisdom and diligence. Even though life is risky, we shouldn’t let that stop us from living. But we should be wary and take precautions.

Some commentators take the digging of a pit and breaking through a wall in verse 8 as doing something against other people—laying a trap or breaking into a home or establishment—and having this backfire (falling into the pit or getting bitten by a snake). That is the sense in what David wrote in Psalm 7: “Behold, the wicked brings forth iniquity; yes, he conceives trouble and brings forth falsehood. He made a pit and dug it out, and has fallen into the ditch which he made. His trouble shall return upon his own head, and his violent dealing shall come down on his crown” (verses 14-16; compare 9:15; 35:7). We see an even closer parallel to Ecclesiastes 10:8 in Proverbs 26:27: “Whoever digs a pit will fall into it, and he who rolls a stone will have it roll back on him.” This is likewise often taken to refer to acting against others. However, other commentators understand Ecclesiastes 10:8 in the context of verse 9, which points out the danger of different kinds of labor generally—he re giving examples involving stones and wood. The word typically translated “quarrying” in verse 9 could indeed mean quarrying, although it might mean merely uprooting or removing—as a farmer clearing stones from his field, and injuries could result from that as well as from quarrying work (NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible, note on verse 9). (It’s possible that the rolling of a stone in Proverbs 26:27 is also associated with quarrying or removing stones, though the reference there seems to be an act against others.) Still other commentators see both ideas in Ecclesiastes 10:8-9—that acts against others can backfire (verse 8) and regular work can be dangerous (verse 9). The New American Commentary states: “Verse 8 draws on the familiar axiom that those who plot evil against others often have their plans backfire on them…. But verse 9 throws in a dash of hard realism: even those who are engaged in legitimate activity, such as quarrying or wood cutting, can be hurt in the process. The significance is that those who try to serve fairly and justly may see their efforts blow up in their faces” (note on verses 8-11). This might seem a bit disjointed, but remember that the verses here are a series of poetic proverbs that could stand alone—placed together but without any narrative explanation.

We should also note again that verses 8-9 could apply to those in leadership positions—with verse 8 possibly pointing to warfare measures against enemies and verse 9 referring to major building projects. In that case, the idea would seem to be that prudent leaders are needed—and the fact that capable and careful people are not in places in leadership will spell disaster, as described here. On the other hand, these verses could apply to anyone trying to act against others (perhaps reacting to the problem leadership situation) or conducting normal, everyday labor—in which case the point would be that whatever is done involves risks, so we all have to use wisdom and be cautious.

In verse 10 we see the need for wisdom in working smarter, not just harder—which is necessary for leaders in directing the work of others, and for all of us individually in whatever it is we need to accomplish. (Included in this is taking proper precautions against the dangers of the previous verses.) If an iron implement is supposed to be sharp but is blunt, it’s going to take a lot more work to use it. The implement here is not necessarily an ax, as in the NKJV. The Hebrew word here just means “iron,” as in the earlier King James Version. It’s often thought to refer to an ax here because the previous verse mentions splitting wood. But, as already pointed out, these are a series of possibly standalone proverbs.
that have been placed together. The iron implement in verse 10 may not involve chopping wood and could just as well be a sword, chisel, saw, scythe or something else. The Easy-to-Read Version says the problem is trying “to cut with a dull knife.” The Voice translation is less specific: “If a tool is dull and no one sharpens its edge, the work will be harder…” Failure to use wisdom in using blunted tools results in wasted effort—and exertion toward exhausting one’s own strength. Part of the problem here is not realizing what is most needed or valuable for the task at hand—in this case a sharpened implement. The problem also seems to involve failing to check to see if what is to be used is in the condition it needs to be in—not enough due assessment of the situation and of the means for tackling it. And yet another part of the problem would seem to involve being too hasty in acting, failing to take the needed time to prepare for the task—in this case, sharpening the tool. To paraphrase Benjamin Franklin, if you fail to plan, you’re planning to fail. As the verse concludes, properly exercising wisdom is profitable for succeeding in an endeavor (and that includes helping to manage risks such as those mentioned in the preceding verses).

Verse 11 has been interpreted in quite different ways. A literal rendering would be something like: “If the snake bites without whispering [or being charmed], there’s no profit for a master of the tongue” (compare Young’s Literal Translation, Green’s Literal Translation and Interlinear, Strong’s and Brown- Driver-Briggs Lexicons). The master of the tongue here is often taken to be the one whispering—a snake charmer. The NIV renders this as: “If a snake bites before it is charmed, the charmer receives no fee”—that is, he doesn’t get paid. Yet profit could be meant more generally—as to merely say there is no benefit or it does no good to have a snake charmer if he doesn’t charm the snake before it strikes, as in other versions. This is thought to illustrate the danger of acting too slowly—in contrast to the opposite problem in verse 10 of acting too quickly without preparing. We have today the expression “He who hesitates is lost.” Just so, here would be someone who has taken the time to prepare in learning the skill of snake charming but doesn’t use it when needed. (It should be noted that this is not speaking of mystical enchantment but a method of holding a snake’s focus—mostly through movements.) The Preaching the Word commentary follows this interpretation, stating: “Taken together, verses 10-11 show us why we need wisdom from God. Sometimes it is important to take more time to prepare. Other times we need to act before it is too late. Wisdom comes in knowing the difference. Ovid, the famous Roman poet, is reported to have said, ‘At times it is folly to hasten, at other times, to delay. The wise do everything in its proper time’” (Ryken, p. 239).

Certainly it’s true that we should act when needed and not dawdle or linger, and 11:3-6 will tell us as much. But it’s not clear that 10:11 really intends a warning against delay. Indeed it could, like verse 10, actually warn against being hasty—in this case in terms of speech (compare Proverbs 29:20). The King James Version presents the serpent biting in verse 11 of Ecclesiastes 10, but instead of saying there is no good for a charmer in that, it says “the babbler is no better”—the latter word “better” being used instead of “profit” or “advantage” in the other interpretation. The NKJV interprets the KJV in saying “the babbler is no better.” This is saying that a person just talking and talking is no better than a snake not being charmed. The Ferrar Fenton Translation renders the verse similarly: “The serpent stings without a charm, and an unbridled tongue is the same”—the problem being uncontrolled speech. However, these renderings leave out the conditional “if” at the beginning and the term “master of the tongue”—which seems opposite to a babbler or unbridled tongue. But these versions may be accurately paraphrasing. Consider an untamed tongue being compared to a slithering uncharmed snake. James 3:8 makes a similar comparison, telling us that “no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.” So how does the phrase “master of the tongue” fit in such an interpretation of Ecclesiastes 10:11? This terminology would not designate a snake charmer but just someone who is able to speak well—and who is being analogized here to a snake charmer. The verse could read this way: “If a snake bites when not charmed (or tamed), even so there is no benefit in being a master of the tongue [if he does not tame his poisonous snake-like tongue and allows it to bite].” A person can be a trained orator yet still lash out foolishly in what he says. The point here would be to guard against hastily or carelessly saying something harmful. Rather, one should always think before speaking, as we’ll see more about in a moment. This is vital for people in positions of leadership and for all of us. And knowing that no man can truly tame the tongue, we should all pray as David did, “Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips” (Psalm 141:3).

Again, by the first interpretation of Ecclesiastes 10:11 given here of having skill but not using it
when needed—thus warning against delaying—the verse would be serving as a counterpoint to verse 10, which concerns failing to prepare and acting too quickly. But by the second interpretation of verse 11, warning against being too hasty in speech, the verse would be giving another example of acting too quickly without proper forethought and preparation as in verse 10—and we should note that this is also the point of the next few verses, 12-14, so that verse 11 might well be grouped with these thematically.

Where verse 12 says that a wise man’s words are gracious, this could also be translated to say that they bring grace or favor on the wise man himself—in contrast to the self-destruction a fool’s words bring in the second part of the verse, his own lips swallowing him up. Or the contrast could just be between a wise man’s words being kind or helpful generally and a fool’s words being harmful, ultimately of self. Verse 13 says that a fool’s words may seem merely silly at first but then, unbridled, become extreme in, effectively, raving madness. And verse 14 shows the fool talking more and more, even when he doesn’t know what he’s talking about, including acting like he knows how various matters will shake out, despite what we’ve seen about life’s unpredictability. The *Holman Old Testament Commentary* points out: “A fool commits two errors. He tends to speak rashly (Prov[erbs] 12:18) and to say too much. Both can have disastrous consequences. It is better to hold one’s tongue and wait for the best time to speak. A wise person knows when to be quiet (Eccl[esiastes] 3:7; Ja[mes] 1:19-20) . . . Another error that the fool makes is that he thinks he can figure out the future” (Moore, note on Ecclesiastes 10:14). So he’s presumptuous. He thinks he knows more than he does. And the fool’s “verbosity arises from too high a regard for his own opinions. The wise counselor, however, knows that he cannot predict the future (v. 14b,c) and thus tempers his remarks with restraint and humility” (*NAC*, note on verses 12-15). As earlier pointed out in regard to life’s uncertainties in 9:11-12, James 4:13-15 says we should not declare as matter of fact how our lives or those of others will proceed since we don’t know what will happen—we need to remember that it’s ultimately up to God. It was earlier stated in Ecclesiastes 5:3 that a fool’s voice is known by his many words. In parallel, Proverbs 15:28 says that “the heart of the righteous studies [or ponders] how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours forth evil.” And Proverbs 15:2 says, “The tongue of the wise uses knowledge rightly, but the mouth of fools pours forth foolishness” (see also 12:23). Again, this applies to those in leadership and all of us, particularly in our interaction with governing authorities. We need to think before we speak.

Continuing in Ecclesiastes 10, verse 15 speaks of fools’ labor or work. It seems to say that whatever it is they have to do wearies them because they don’t know how to go about it—not even the simplest thing like going to town. That could tie back to verse 10 about the need to work smarter with needed preparation lest the work be harder, and to the current subsection’s theme of giving it one’s all with wisdom and diligence—the fool failing on these counts and making things more difficult for himself. Or perhaps, as the *Preaching the Word* commentary contends (pp. 249-250), the fool is worn out by work because he’s fooling around when he should be working, leaving him exhausted from guilt over lack of productivity and from realization of so much work left to do that he should have done already. Conversely, the wise man is energized by work and accomplishment—doing it all with his might and enjoying good in his labor, as we see in the book’s refrains. *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* gives yet another alternative in explaining the fool’s wearying work and not knowing how to get to town: “In the context ‘work’ may relate to the many arguments of v[erse] 14 (cf. 12:12). In a fine note of sarcasm, this proverb says that a person may be so involved in arguing about the universe [or lofty matters] that he misses what the ordinary person is concerned about, namely, finding the way home” (Wright, note on Ecclesiastes 10:15). Not knowing the way could tie back to verse 3, where a fool is known for how he walks along the way. Then again, still another explanation is given by *The New American Commentary*, which says fools are here wearying others rather than themselves, stating: “Verse 15 should be [alternatively] translated, ‘The effort of fools wearies him who does not know the way to town.’ In other words, the advice of foolish counselors is so bad that they cannot even give simple directions. Their long-winded explanations only wear out the confused traveler. How much worse to take their counsel in affairs of state” (note on verses 12-15). This rendering would fit with Jesus’ warning that “if the blind leads the blind, both will fall into a ditch” (Matthew 15:14; compare Luke 6:39). While the verse doesn’t carry all these various meanings, of course, they all seem plausible as they represent true ideas in any case.

The next two verses in Ecclesiastes 10, verses 16-17, concern two divergent national destinies—woe or blessing—based on the kind of rulers a land has. And verses 18-19 appear to continue the discussion of
this matter, as we’ll see. These verses return to the evil or disaster Solomon saw in verses 5-7 of the wrong people, the foolish and unqualified, being in positions of responsibility—and come near the end of an apparent literary inclusio (verses 4-20), as earlier mentioned.

The woe or disaster in verse 16 comes when the king is a “child” or “youth” (NKJV, YLT) or, as in other versions, a “servant” or “slave” (NIV, NEB), with princes feasting in the morning. This seems to denote an inexperienced or immature ruler with other subordinate leaders who are immature in self-indulgence. According to the Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, the Hebrew na‘ar, translated “child,” here “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” (Eaton, note on verse 16). It could in Ecclesiastes 10:16 refer to “a king who acts like a child” (Tommy Nelson, p. 168).

Yet the word could alternatively refer to a servant or slave, as noted, in parallel to the servants exalted on horses in verse 7 as part of the upside-down problem of the wrong people in the wrong positions (though a clearer word for servants or slaves, abadim, is used there). And this would be a direct contrast to the blessing in verse 17 of having a king who is the son of “nobles” or, literally, of “freemen” (YLT). A footnote in the Easy-to-Read Version says, “This is a person who was never a slave and whose parents were not slaves.” The New American Commentary says that, as in verses 5-7, “once again ‘servant’ (v. 16) and ‘noble’ (v. 17) refer to the moral character of the king more than to his genealogy” (note on verses 16-17). Expositor's comments that a meaning of servant or slave for the king in verse 16 would “indicate that the king is someone who has suddenly come to the top by others and who keeps his power by letting his deputies do what they want,” while a meaning of child or lad would “indicate that the real power is that of the deputies. In any event, those under the influence of such leaders get no benefit from them” (note on verse 16). The king in verse 17 who brings blessing to the land is not led around by self-serving lower officials. Tyndale comments: “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” (note on verse 17). Perhaps there is a contrast here between being a servant or slave to foolish ways, as is too often the case, versus the free man who is not confined to this predicament.

The same commentary states that “another criterion of national wisdom is self-control”—the lack of which is seen in verse 16 with the profligate deputy rulers feasting in the morning. This is not speaking of merely having a big breakfast, for a contrast is drawn with the blessing in verse 17 of princes who “feast at the proper time—for strength and not for drunkenness.” That shows the errant feasting in verse 16 to be for the opposite—drunkenness and not for strength. This can be taken to mean either that the indulgent princes get up and “party before they have done their work” (Nelson, pp. 168-169) or that they “spend their nights banqueting into the early morning” (NKJV Study Bible, note on verse 16). Isaiah 5:11 pronounces woe on both: “Woe to those who rise early in the morning to run after their drinks, who stay up late at night till they are inflamed with wine” (NIV). Participation in winebibbing and gluttony is of course wrong (Proverbs 23:20). “Drinking in the early hours of the day marked a dissolute, slothful approach to life, with emphasis on personal indulgence” (Tyndale, note on Ecclesiastes 10:17). Indeed, it’s surely no coincidence that laziness and idleness are condemned immediately after in verse 18. And not only are the deplorable leaders of verse 16 taking advantage of the nation’s wealth, it seems they are appallingly flaunting their ability to do so. The “strength” sought in proper feasting in verse 17 includes bodily nourishment but also the promotion of a strong nation through healthy leaders and proper provision for others as well as elevated camaraderie and morale and connectedness within and with allies. Think state dinners, religious festivals, national celebrations and other special occasions—not foolishly draining state resources in drunken revelry.

As stated, verses 18-19, which are two proverbs, appear to have been placed here as further comment on the preceding verses about national mismanagement through profligate leaders in positions they aren’t suited for—although there is certainly application to the average person as well, especially if these proverbs are taken as standalone aphorisms, as they could have been used outside the present context. The problem in verse 18 is laziness or idleness, which, as noted above, ties in with the nation’s leaders wallowing in drunken feasting and evidently not getting needed work done. This results in the building decaying and the house leaking. While these could be literal problems caused by the avoidance of needed
work, they are probably also metaphorical of problems in the ruling administration and in the nation as a whole, both compared to a building or house—consider the references in Scripture to the house of David and to the house of Israel and house of Judah. Of course, in a broader context this is a problem that affects all people. “The proverb of verse 18 can obviously apply equally well to the administration of the whole state and the private economy of one’s household” (NAC, note on verses 18-20). Recall that idleness among individuals was earlier decried in Ecclesiastes 4:5. Letting down, not remaining vigilant and diligent, will result in the breakdown of our literal homes as well as our households or families and our lives in general. And the need to counter this tendency is the major theme of the current subsection of the book—working with all one’s might, giving it our all with wisdom and diligence.

The next verse here, 10:19, states, “A feast is made for laughter, and wine makes merry; but money answers everything.” This saying, by its placement here, also appears to comment on the feasting and drinking by those in charge of the national wealth in verses 16-17. But what exactly does it mean? As the Tyndale commentary notes on verse 19, “It is difficult to decide how to take this verse.” Some, it points out, see in verses 16, 17, 18 and 19 a “woe…bliss…woe…bliss” sequence, so that the laziness and breakdown in verse 18 is “concerned with the woeful results of the foolish life,” while verse 19 refers to “the happy results of the wise life” (ibid.). This would mean the feasting for laughter, the wine making merry and money answering everything (addressing all needs and wants perhaps) is viewed as a positive—corresponding to their proper use by wise leaders in verse 17. Of course, these all do have positive application in Ecclesiastes, as we’ve repeatedly seen—even money as a defense (7:12). Others, however—including the Tyndale commentary itself—disagree with this interpretation, taking verse 19 as instead a negative commentary on the licentious life of verses 16 and 18: “The failure of the slothful life is seen here: bread…wine…money is the limit of its horizon.” That is, these are the height of what immature, self-indulgent people have to live for. The Holman Old Testament Commentary agrees, stating: “Although verse 19 is somewhat enigmatic, it does seem to point to the fact that the fool believes that earthly things are the way to achieve the good life” (Moore, note on verses 16-20).

Yet there are a few other ways to view verse 19 that make sense in context. The New American Commentary sees it addressing the foolish life of indulgence and lack of industriousness of verses 16 and 18 in these terms: “Verse 19 should be rendered, ‘People prepare food for pleasure, and wine makes joyful, but money pays for both.’ The point is that at least some money is essential for enjoying life, and steps must therefore be taken to insure that the economy (be it national or personal) is sound” (note on verses 18-20). Or maybe the proverb here just means that feasting and wine make for a good time, but all this has to be paid for. This would be a warning not to squander one’s resources—which would of course apply to the national wealth as well as personal income. And this would tie in to verse 18 quite well, as it’s not just idleness that causes the house to decay, but resources going to feasting instead of being used to meet vital needs. Or yet another possibility is that verse 19 could mean that money is what allows us to feast and enjoy life—it “pays for both,” to borrow the wording proposed above—so we must work to earn to continue to experience this enjoyment, not be idle, in line with the section theme of working wisely and diligently. This, too, would apply individually and nationally.

Verse 20 apparently ends the inclusio beginning in verse 4 concerning dealing with ruling authorities. Verse 4, we earlier saw, encouraged the wise course of sticking to one’s duty and conciliatory efforts in the face of an upset or offended leader. Then serious problems with ruling officials were highlighted—being unfit for their positions and licentiously indulging in feasting and drunkenness while failing to address needs, leading to national decay and vulnerability (verses 5-7, 16-19). This could obviously lead one to curse or speak evil of such rulers. So the proverb of verse 20 again gives the wise course to follow—don’t succumb to the temptation to do that. It states, “Do not curse the king, even in your thoughts.” This might be better put: Don’t curse the king—don’t even think about doing it (compare CEV). It doesn’t mean you can’t think in your thoughts that a ruler is an awful person. But don’t think of going ahead and cursing him, with thoughts leading to actions. This is in line with God’s law, which states, “You shall not revile God, nor curse a ruler of your people” (Exodus 22:28; compare Acts 23:5). Speaking evil of rulers, even bad ones, can promote personal arrogance and hardening against authority in general, and it leads eventually to further societal breakdown, as others are influenced to despise and disregard not just the occupants of offices but the offices themselves and even the nation’s laws. Don’t let foolish leadership provoke you into disrespecting offices of authority and lashing out. It’s personally
detrimental, and you’ll actually be contributing to society’s decline. It can also pose an imminent danger.

The proverb further says not to curse the wealthy and powerful more generally, not even with assumed privacy (“even in your bedroom”), as it may get back to them, leading to serious consequences. The picture here of a bird telling the matter is a metaphor of something being overheard and passed on—and, with flight, getting around fast. It’s not meant literally, although it could be based on the fact that a number of birds can mimic human speech and repeat what people say. Since Solomon had ships that brought animals from afar, and he had great interest in animals, including birds (1 Kings 4:33; 10:22), it’s quite possible that he himself had talking birds—perhaps even in his royal bedroom at times. The earliest record of such a bird, possibly a parakeet, is from the Greek physician and historian Ctesias of the 5th century B.C. (“Talking Bird,” Wikipedia). And the metaphor was around then and before that. “Stories of ‘little birds’ who told [or were aware of] secrets are found in Aristophanes’ The Birds, a classical Greek comedy [of 414 B.C.], and the Hittite Tale of Elkuhirsa [before Solomon’s time]. The Words of Ahiqar [Assyrian, ca. 700 B.C.] assert that a word is like a bird and that one who releases it lacks sense” (NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible, note on Ecclesiastes 10:20). It’s also been suggested that the imagery here could fit with someone overhearing another and sending a written message about that by carrier pigeon. However, it’s not known if this method of communication was used in Solomon’s time. It was used by the ancient Greeks and Romans and is thought to be as old as the ancient Persians (“Pigeon Post,” Wikipedia). Yet it could be even older. Whatever the case, the image is still merely figurative of the private denigration of powerful people being eventually found out. Those initially passing it on may not even intend ill in doing so. It may be passed to one who says it to another, and that person to another—until it’s heard on a level that could bring retaliation. The course of wisdom is to not take the chance of putting oneself in jeopardy this way. Recall that one recurrent message of Ecclesiastes is that, while lamenting the frustration of this life, we should make wise decisions to avoid increasing the frustration.

**Diversify Your Efforts and Don’t Procrastinate (Ecclesiastes 11:1-6)**

Day 21

Having in Ecclesiastes 10:20 concluded his counsel on dealing with the human powers that be—both political and economic—“the Teacher moves [next at the start of chapter 11] into his concluding remarks on financial prudence” (Garrett, The New American Commentary, note on 10:18-20)—and on more broadly contending with uncertainties in living life. Yet we should again observe that, as in the transition from 9:18 to 10:1, there is no narrative break between 10:20 and 11:1. Rather, the mostly proverbial sequence begun at 9:16 continues. Yet the change of subject and the interrelatedness of the next several verses show that we have again moved into a new unit—this being our current reading.

These last admonitions about wealth and more broadly living life while coping with uncertainties in Ecclesiastes 11:1-6 form the last part of the current middle subsection beginning with or following 9:10, focused on living boldly with wisdom and diligence. As The New American Commentary states in its introductory notes on 11:1-6: “The Teacher sees two great dangers connected to the making of money. The one is to become consumed with work and the quest for wealth [4:6-8; 5:10; 6:7-9], but the other is to fall into poverty (and the suffering it entails) through laziness or misfortune [4:5; 5:13-14; 6:2; 10:18].” We must guard against both. The same commentary says that the strategy presented here against the latter threat—especially in light of the problem of unforeseen circumstances we’ve already seen (such as in 9:11-12)—is to “diversify investments” (or spread one’s resources and energies around into different enterprises and pursuits), “a safe and sane approach to financial security. It is not a program to get rich quick, but it will save one from many sleepless nights” (same note). We’ll give more consideration to this concept in going through the individual verses. We should further realize that the diversification here applies beyond financial security, as it’s a strategy for well-being more generally in “whatever your hand finds to do” (9:10). It’s important that what your hand finds to do not be just one thing, which may come to naught, but many things. Dr. Walter Kaiser explains, “Since we cannot comprehend the totality of God’s providential acts, the only proper course of action is to be diligently and wholeheartedly involved; some of this activity will succeed even if all of it does not” (Ecclesiastes: Total Life, pp. 112-113).

Solomon lists several proverbial illustrations to make his point, with a series of imperative direct exhortations among them. These start with 11:1: “Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days.” Viewing this literally, we might think, no, the bread would be soggy and by many days it would be dissolved or eaten by fish. Or, as Kaiser notes: “The ‘bread on the water’ may not be a literal reference to throwing thin cakes of bread into the water like chips of wood in the hope that those cakes
will one day turn up in some distant place where we will be—and there be in need of bread cakes! The figure may come instead from the realm of foreign commerce, wherein ships finally return with a gain after an indefinite period of time” (p. 113). This appears to make the most sense. The NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible mentions the suggestion that the verse could refer to beer brewing, with Akkadian texts presenting dates and bread thrown into water in mixing ingredients to make beer, so that the bread comes back as beer—with the servings to seven and eight in verse 2 supposedly meaning the beer is to be shared. But the same study Bible says it’s more likely that the reference is to commerce (note on verse 1). The Zondervan NIV Study Bible likewise says that Ecclesiastes 11:1 “probably means ‘Ship your grain across the sea, / for after many days you may receive a return.’ That is, be adventurous, like those who accept the risks and reap the benefits of seaborne trade. Do not always play it safe” (note on verse 1).

The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries volume on Ecclesiastes elaborates: “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[ngs] 10:22 [and see 1 Kings 9:26-28]) 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…., demands total commitment (for your bread is used in the sense of ‘goods,’ ‘livelihood,’ as in D[euteronomy] 8:3; Pr[overbs] 31:14), and has a forward look to it (you will find), a reward which requires patience (after many days)” (Eaton, note on Ecclesiastes 11:1). Proverbs 31:14, cited here, says of the virtuous woman or wife of noble character: “She is like the merchant ships. She brings her bread from afar” (World English Bible). The association of bread with shipping in another of Solomon’s works is certainly noteworthy.

Now, Kaiser and a number of other commentators take the bold venturing of resources here to be engaging in charity, arguing that this is what is also meant in the next verse about giving servings to seven and eight. But many others dispute this. Tyndale says the idea that verse 1 is “a commendation of philanthropy…. has in its favour a parallel in the Instructions of [A]nhsheshongy [from Egypt, ca. 4th cent. B.C.]: ‘Do a good deed and throw it into the river; when this dries up you shall find it.’ However, the parallel is not exact. The Hebrew reads bread rather than ‘good deeds.’ The point, therefore, is not to urge shrewd foresight in calculated philanthropy, but shrewd insight in business…. The parallel [in Proverbs 31:14, quoted above] likewise points more to the realm of commerce than philanthropy” (note on verse 1). Expositor’s concurs: “This idea of investment in charity does not belong to the Teacher’s thought elsewhere. So…we may prefer the alternative that links the meaning with vv. 4-6. ‘Nothing ventured, nothing gained,’ as a proverb says. Be like the merchant who uses his capital for trade, including trade across the seas” (note on verses 1-2). The New American Commentary says: “This is not an exhortation to charity but advice on investments. To cast bread upon the waters is to engage in commercial enterprises involving overseas trade…. Eventually the investment will pay off” (note on verses 1-2).

Yet those who see only commerce here are probably viewing the proverb too narrowly—as it can easily apply beyond the financial realm. Charitable investment may well be part of the meaning too. Indeed, this verse, along with verse 2, probably means to expend one’s efforts and resources in a variety of ways in every area of life—church, family, home, friendship, career, education, finances, charity, recreation, you name it—and, even more generally, to be outgoing and daring and do as much as we can. Put yourself out there. “Nothing ventured, nothing gained” applies to everything in life—including our service to God in all its forms. Tyndale concludes that “the Preacher probably has in mind the wider subject of obedience to his God” (note on verse 1). Of course, that should apply to the whole of life, for whatever we do is to be done heartily in service to God (Colossians 3:23). The same commentary refers to our willingness to engage in various pursuits and accept whatever results as “a venture of faith” (same note). Again, this is all part of living life boldly, giving it our all, with wisdom and diligence.

The accompanying proverb here specifically states, “Give a serving [actually, portion] to seven, and also to eight, for you do not know what evil [calamity or bad occurrence] will be on the earth” (Ecclesiastes 11:2). We’ve seen the pattern of a certain number and one more in other passages, to show that only some examples are given or to emphasize the last part of a sequence, such as “three…yes, four”
Yet, as already mentioned, Kaiser and various other commentators take verse 2, and verse 1 before it, to refer to being generous, giving liberally to others, while others see both verses in a strictly commercial sense. Some interpret verse 1 in terms of commerce but still see verse 2 as referring to charitable giving. The “evil” in that case would be a problem to eliminate or alleviate through such generosity. However, the “evil” seems more likely to be disastrous circumstances causing various undertakings or investments to fail—the multiplicity of enterprises serving as a hedge and safety net against this. After all, verse 6 counsels essentially the same thing—keep sowing seed, not knowing which will prove fruitful. In both, commercial business ventures appear to be in view, as in verse 1—though the application is broader. In this light, verse 2 is a strategy for coping with potential hardship and disappointments. As The Expositor’s Bible Commentary states, “We must use common sense in sensible planning and in eliminating as many of the uncertainties as we can” (Wright, introductory note on verses 1-6). The Zondervan NIV Study Bible says that verse 2 “probably means ‘Invest in seven ventures, yes in eight / for you do not know…’ That is, diversify your efforts because you never know which ventures may fail. ‘Don’t put your eggs all in one basket.’ Diversify your undertakings and reduce the risks.” Of course, as in verse 1, this refers to more than just finances. It concerns all areas of life. That would certainly include charitable giving and being generous. But it goes far beyond that, impacting everything we do. Where verse 1 says to put yourself out there, verse 2 says to spread yourself around—not too thinly, but giving your all in everything you set your hand to do. Some efforts will succeed and bring the return sought in verse 1. Others will prove fruitless. In all this, we do what we can, yet trusting in God for whatever successes He will grant, as what happens is ultimately up to Him.

Continuing in the same theme, verses 3-4 “warn us what will happen if we do not obey the commands of verses 1-2” (Ryken, Preaching the Word, p. 256), showing that we need to go ahead and act. Verses 3-4 state: “If the clouds are full of rain, they empty themselves upon the earth; and if a tree falls to the south or the north, in the place where the tree falls, there it shall lie. He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards the clouds will not reap.” As Expositor’s notes on these verses: “We often have to act before we can foresee all we would like to know about the future. The farmer who waits till he is completely certain of perfect weather conditions will never reap anything at all.” We don’t know what will happen if we act. But we do know what will likely happen if we do nothing—we’ll gain nothing.

Kaiser and some others see the matter of the tree falling north or south as concerning whose property it lands on and thus who gains the use of it, such as for firewood. However, it seems more likely that the concern is what harm a falling tree might do depending on which way it falls—perhaps on a building or on a portion of field where crops could be damaged (and making for a lot of extra work). The point would be that we don’t know whether or which way a tree is going to fall—to do harm or not. Similarly, looking to clouds to rain when full could represent waiting for needed rain but might instead refer to torrential downpours that would wash away topsoil. In fact, if we consider the clouds together with a fallen tree and the wind in verse 4, the description here seems to be of severe thunderstorms. Despite the possibility of crop damage, the farmer must still sow to reap. The New American Commentary states: “Verse 3 speaks of a storm and means that it is inevitable that disasters sometimes will occur. ‘If clouds are full’ means that when the time for such a calamity comes, it cannot be avoided. The proverb about trees falling simply means that whatever will happen (i.e., the inevitable) will happen” (note on verses 3-4). Eventually it’s going to storm—in the weather and in life. We can’t prevent that. Nor can we accurately forecast when it will come—or what the results will be. Whichever way a tree falls is whichever way it falls. That’s how this life is. So much is unpredictable—we have to wait until it happens to know. It’s like the 1950s song lyrics: “Que sera, sera / Whatever will be, will be / The future’s not ours to see….” And as with so much of life’s wisdom, Solomon said it a lot earlier.
Now, regarding the problem with observing and regarding the wind and clouds in verse 4, it’s not wrong to look at the weather or any conditions relevant to our lives and plan accordingly, making needed adjustments as necessary. In fact, it’s wise to be prudent and thereby avoid danger (see Proverbs 22:3; 27:12). Kaiser rightly notes about Ecclesiastes 11:4: “Of course, this proverb must not be directed against careful observation of surrounding conditions. Rather, it is aimed at the fruitless and impossible demand for absolute certainty in conditions before we act” (p. 115). The Tyndale commentary says the warning is “against procrastination…. The life of joy will not come to the waverer. His life will be a total failure”—the process of sowing to reaping indicating the totality of life (note on verse 4). And The New American Commentary further says: “Verse 4…says that one cannot use the possibility of misfortune as an excuse for inactivity. Someone who is forever afraid of storms will never get around to working his field. The Teacher in effect says, ‘Just face the fact that things may go wrong, but get out there and do your work anyway’” (note on verses 3-4). And this, of course, fits with the overall subsection theme of working with all one’s might with wisdom and diligence. Part of wisdom is being reasonably cautious. But we can only prepare for so much, and time is fleeting. When it’s “time to plant,” as in Ecclesiastes 3:2, we had best get out and plant if we want to reap. As with 11:1-2 this applies in business and in all areas of life.

Verse 5 reminds us that God is the one working everything out—and, as we’ve seen before, He does not let us know all He has in mind. The specific wording is intriguing: “As you do not know what is the way of the wind, or how the bones grow in the womb of her who is with child, so you do not know the works of God who makes everything.” Some think that, as in the King James Version, the word ruach here should be translated “spirit” and not “wind,” especially with the reference to a child in the womb. But this word was just rendered “wind” in the previous verse—and it likely still means that here, though perhaps there is an overlap, with the wind of God as His Spirit moving in the womb to produce a child. Concerning “the way of the wind,” some think, as in Expositor’s, that “it is likely that Jesus Christ has this verse in mind when he told Nicodemus, ‘The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going’ (John 3:8)—the Greek word pneuma here also meaning both wind and spirit (footnote on verse 5). Of course, Jesus said this in discussing being born anew through a spiritual process—yet likening this to the process of physical birth. In either case, all that God does in producing a child is not revealed to us. It remains beyond us. “No one can penetrate the wholeness or the specific details of His work” (Kaiser, p. 115). The end of verse 5 shows how all this fits into the context of verses 1-6, speaking of “the works of God who makes everything.” Solomon is analogizing God’s hidden and intricate masterful working in the womb to form a child to His hidden and intricate masterful working in our lives and the world around us to make us all into what He wants us to be—and what He wants the whole world to be! The calamity or adversity of verse 2 that causes ventures to fail, the storms and tree falling in verse 3—God brings these to pass or allows them for a reason, the great plan He is working out for all of us. We saw this back in 7:13-14, noting that adversity is not always bad and prosperity is not always good. God is making something—making everything—and we just have to trust that He knows what He’s doing. Thus we act, stepping out in faith—knowing that whether our ventures succeed or fail, we remain ever and always in the hand of God. We are not ultimately subject to the elements or random forces—we are subject to God and His will, which thankfully includes His love and care for us and His desire to accomplish His ultimate purpose in us and in the world at large. We’ll see more about the application of Ecclesiastes 11:5 in relation to the next verse.

This next verse, 11:6, draws the unit begun in verse 1 to a close, summing up by telling us to go ahead and sow—to work and invest as already mentioned. Verse 6 also closes the lengthy middle subsection begun at or following 9:10 regarding giving our all using wisdom and diligence. (Ecclesiastes 11:7-8, entering into a new theme, begins a new subsection, as we will see.)

Verse 6 begins with telling us to sow our seed in the morning and in the evening not to withhold our hand. Morning and evening here give us the sense of daily work and also—with the merism of opposites denoting all in between—the sense of being active all through our waking hours. The Hebrew wording rendered “Do not withhold your hand” literally means “Do not let down your hand” (Tyndale, note on verse 6). That is, don’t stop working—keep at it. Verse 1 spoke of casting bread on the waters. Here in verse 6 we have a parallel image of casting seed on the land. Some might see verse 1 as broader ventures and verse 6 as routine toil—however verse 6 still gives us the sense of diversifying our efforts through casting forth a lot of seeds to increase the odds of a better yield overall. You don’t know which will
prosper or not, the verse goes on to say. *Expositor’s* notes on verse 6, “Because the future is unknown, we must accept calculated risks and believe that though some of our ventures may fail, a sufficient number of them will succeed.” And again, this is true in business and in all areas of life. When facing all that might happen, we must not shrink back and do nothing. Rather, we must do more. As Kidner notes, pointing out a parallel with our spiritual lives: “The true response to uncertainty is a redoubling of effort, ‘making the most of the time,’ ['being'] urgent in season and out of season,’ expressed by Qoheleth in terms of the farmer and his work, and by Paul in terms of the spiritual harvest from the good seed of the gospel and works of mercy…. Cf. Eph[esians] 5:16; 2 Tim[othy] 4:2f; 2 Cor[inthians] 8:2; 9:6” (*The Message of Ecclesiastes*, The Bible Speaks Today series, p. 98).

Yes, we have to do what we can—but this is with understanding that, as the previous verse (Ecclesiastes 11:5) brought out, all is in the hands of God, in whom we must have faith. Look, verse 5 twice said “you do not know”—there the way of the wind or the works of God, the wind itself being subject to Him. The point was that we don’t know what’s going to happen, as that is in God’s purview alone. Yet verse 6 says we must invest and labor toward positive objectives anyway for, again, “you do not know”—in this case, which will prosper. Again, whether it prospers or not is up to God, whose work you do not know. “It is enough to know, as far as the progress and results of our work are concerned, that God is also at work” (Kaiser, p. 116). So we do what we can do and look to God to oversee that and everything we can do nothing about. Seeing the picture in verse 5 of a child being formed in the womb as bearing on verse 6 in terms of business entrepreneurship, *The New American Commentary* states: “Just as in pregnancy a couple can only trust God that all will turn out well, even so in business enterprises one can only leave the outcome to God. Pregnancy is the supreme example of a human endeavor, the results of which are out of human control. Again, however, the lack of certainty in financial investments indicates the wisdom of diligence and diversification (v. 6)” (note on verses 5-6). Once more, though, this application extends far beyond business. It concerns using our time, energies and resources in every area of life. We must in everything strive with our might in various ways while looking to God to see us through.

Some see no spiritual meaning here. But why would the exhortation to sow in verse 6 not concern the most important sowing we will ever do? As the apostle Paul wrote: “For he who sows to his flesh [just trying to satisfy one’s fleshly desires] will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life” (Galatians 6:8). So we might expect that the admonition to sow bears on the life of God’s spiritual people, as Kidner noted above. We must do everything we can in every way possible to fulfill the calling God has given us—both collectively and individually. For instance, God’s Church is trying all manner of ways to proclaim the truth to the world, sowing the seed of the gospel. And we must all invest our resources in that. Paul, in a verse cited by Kidner, said that “he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully” (2 Corinthians 9:6). Moreover, we must strive to do all the good we can—in righteous living, in our own spiritual study and in serving others: “Let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart” (Galatians 6:9). And always remember that, while we exert ourselves in human efforts of planting and sowing in the various ventures of life, including our spiritual work, it is “God who gives the increase” (1 Corinthians 3:7). Ecclesiastes 11:5-6 tells us the same.

Putting it all together, then, in the face of life’s uncertainties we do what we can to succeed, striving with all our might and wisdom and diligence through many avenues, looking to God all the while—trusting the final result to Him, in whose hands it is. As a popular saying advises, work as if everything depends on you, and pray as if everything depends on God. Both things are needed. “So,” as the *Preaching the Word* commentary summarizes verses 1-6 (p. 261), “cast your bread upon the waters. Give a portion to seven, or even to eight. In the morning sow your seed, and at evening withhold not your hand. What God will do, you never know; but you will never reap if you never sow!”

**Enjoy This Life While It Lasts, Removing Upset and Harm (Ecclesiastes 11:7–10) Day 22**

We come now to the start of the third subsection of the last major section of Ecclesiastes that began in 8:16 concerning “removing discouragement and applying God’s plan to the lives of believers,” per Dr. Walter Kaiser’s outline in *Ecclesiastes: Total Life*. This third subsection (11:7–12:8), the final subsection before the book’s conclusion, tells us to remember our Creator in the days of our youth (12:1), tempering enjoyment of the present with reflection on future death and divine judgment. In the words of Kaiser’s
outline, “The daily reminder of our imminent death and the prospect of facing our Creator and Judge should infect [or impact] all our God-given joy and activity” (p. 116). He puts the end of the subsection at 12:8, the book’s final vanity declaration restated from the beginning of the book (see 1:2), but he also sees 12:8 as transitional to and starting the book’s final conclusion (though there is an obvious break after this verse, as we’ll see).

Recall that we have been reading a long stretch of proverbs that began in 9:16, interrupted briefly by an observation of Solomon in 10:5-7, with apparent thematic transitions in 10:1, 10:4 and 11:1. The series of proverbs now continues, but as previously noted there is again a clear thematic transition in 11:7. We can see the unity of the new subsection (11:7-12:8) in the recurrent subject matter and related construction of three segments, each ending with “vanity.” The first segment (11:7-8) starts with rejoicing and living many years but says we need to remember the dark days ahead, ending with a declaration that what’s coming in this life is vanity. The second segment (11:9-10) tells the young to rejoice in their youth but avoid problems, being mindful of coming judgment, ending with a declaration that young life is vanity. The third segment (12:1-8) then says to remember our Creator in youth before the coming difficult days of getting older and dying, ending with the declaration that all is vanity, as at the opening of the book. (We may note that there was no use of the term vanity in the previous lengthy subsection, 9:10/11–11:6—the last mention having been amid the refrain at the end of the subsection prior to that in 9:9.)

Through this current subsection (11:7–12:8), Solomon is describing growing old—and it seems likely that he was experiencing this himself, perhaps writing Ecclesiastes late in life following, it is hoped, coming to his senses after his wayward years (though this is not certain, and he makes no mention of coming to repentance in the book). In any case, we can perhaps imagine Solomon speaking to his younger self in what is stated here. If only he had kept his Creator in mind as he grew older. Was it too late for him? Well, for enjoying all the blessings of remaining faithful over the years, yes it was too late. But for finding joy in God upon repentance, it is never too late as long as one is still willing to repent. We must all remember that. But, oh, what wasted years! What a terrible tragedy was Solomon’s life! It’s even possible that Ecclesiastes was written earlier, before his life went into depravity, and that he never came to repentance—which would be an even greater tragedy. But, again, we would hope that he did come at last to repent, with Ecclesiastes representing the wisdom he had come to the hard way—and with him now counseling the young as a father or teacher (compare “my son” in 12:12) to learn from the words of the wise and not have to go through what he did. Yet still, it’s even possible that Ecclesiastes was written after Solomon came to a time of clarity and repentance in old age with him turning away from God even after that. Of course, there is no way for us to know. The counsel of the book is still valid, even if Solomon himself failed to heed it.

Something else to take note of here is the mention in 11:7-8 of rejoicing in one’s years and the encouragement to rejoice in one’s youth in verse 9 and remove sorrow in verse 10—all in light of the repeated refrain of the book about finding enjoyment in life. The last occurrence of the refrain was at the end of the first subsection of this final major section (in 9:7-10). There was no occurrence of the refrain at 11:6, ending the second subsection of this major section. So one might think that verses 7-10 should actually come at the end of that subsection as a new and final occurrence of the refrain—though in a much different form, with a qualification to remember coming death and judgment, as we’ve also seen in the book to an extent. However, verses 7-10 do not seem directly related to the verses that come before, except perhaps to say that in whatever venture one enters into he must keep this thought in mind. Moreover, verses 7-10 quite clearly go with what follows about growing old and dying in 12:1-7, as we’ve seen. Still, 11:7-10 does seem to be related to the recurring refrain. Perhaps the wording here is meant as a warning qualification about applying the refrain instances given thus far—that in rejoicing as the refrain says, we must be mindful of coming judgment. It’s even possible that the entire final subsection here (11:7–12:8) is itself a final occurrence of the refrain with a needed lengthy qualification—and then further qualification and summary in the final conclusion of 12:8-14. In any case, the final subsection here and the summary conclusion that follows definitely help to put the book’s repeated calls for enjoyment into much needed and even vital perspective.

Going through the individual proverbial statements here, Ecclesiastes 11:7-8 starts on quite a high—with positive, upbeat affirmation—before plunging into unpleasantness. Yet that unpleasantness serves as a very valuable reminder intended for positive results. The passage begins, “Truly the light is sweet, and it
is pleasant for the eyes to behold the sun...” (verse 7). This could mean that, as we saw earlier in 9:4, it’s
good to be alive (compare 6:4, where a stillborn child “has not seen the sun”). Alternatively, beholding
the sun in 11:7 might be a reference to experiencing the good days before having to endure the dark days
to come, as that follows in the verses here (though it’s not clear if the dark times refers to worsening life
or to being dead, the former seeming more likely, as we’ll see). We may note that two things are referred
to as “sweet” in Ecclesiastes—the sleep of laborers in 5:12 and the morning light here in 11:7, waking to
a new day (these two going together). Recall the beginning of the book, where one could experience
boredom with the monotony of the sun rising each day (1:5; see verses 1-11). That thinking is gone, with
the recurring light of the sun now presented as a wonderful thing.

We might also note, as The New American Commentary points out, that “a number of scholars
compare [the beginning of 11:7 with the 5th-century-B.C. Greek playwright] Euripides, Iphigenia in
Aulis 1.1219... (“for the light is so sweet’). [Commentator] Gordis (Koheleth, 334) aptly comments:
‘There is no real likelihood of borrowing, merely a coincidence in the work of two great writers’”
(Garrett, footnote on 11:7-8). However, it’s certainly possible that there was some borrowing—whether
by Euripides from Solomon, or Euripides from traditional wisdom that started with Solomon, or by both
Euripides and Solomon from an even older common tradition.

After mentioning the pleasantness of the sunlight in verse 7, the beginning of verse 8 continues on
the high note, stating, “But if a man lives many years and rejoices in them all...” We must pause for a
moment to consider what Solomon has just said here. Contrast these words with those who think this
book is dour and that it says all of life is a big downer, presenting it as nothing but misery. How, then,
could this verse make sense? Of course, the verse is not saying that every moment is joyful. It’s simply
saying that it’s possible to rejoice in the years of this life taken as a whole—and maybe to be joyful while
going through the years (compare 9:9, where Solomon said to live joyfully with one’s wife “all the days
of your vain life which [God] has given you under the sun”). We should remember this point from 11:8
that it’s possible to enjoy one’s whole life as we continue into Solomon’s discussion of growing old. It is
still sweet to be alive, and one is able to rejoice in all his many years—even with the problems that old
age eventually brings.

But then comes the low note: “...Yet let him remember the days of darkness, for they will be many.
All that is coming is vanity.” The Expositor’s Bible Commentary (Wright) notes on verses 7-8: “It is usual
to refer to ‘the days of darkness’ only to death.... But there is no real reason to include death at all, in
view of the use of darkness to describe the effects of old age in 12:2-3”—the reference there being either
to darkening clouds for hard times or to eyes growing dim with age. Darkness was used of a bad
condition in this life in 5:17 yet of death in 6:4—and the passage about getting old ends with death and
the spirit returning to God in 12:7. In any case, after speaking of rejoicing in the years of this life, 11:8 in
its low note brings an important perspective to keep in mind—that we must enjoy this life while we can,
considering that there will be hard times to endure and that this life will end. We earlier saw that it’s wise
to contemplate our mortality (7:2-4). The statement at the end of 11:8 that all that’s coming is vanity is, as
previously noted, paralleled by the vanity declarations at the end of the next two segments in this
subsection (11:10 and 12:8). The vanity or frustration in 11:8 could conceivably refer to years of being
dead, but it most likely concerns troubles that lie ahead in this life as one gets older. In either case, it does
not deny the possibility of a happy life in a future resurrection, which the book implicitly acknowledges
in stating trust in a good outcome for the righteous (as in 8:12-13).

The next verse, 11:9, further adds to this perspective. It commands rejoicing in one’s youth and
being cheerful, as the repeated refrain of the book has shown (and this may be yet another form of the
refrain, as already mentioned), but the verse then says God will bring judgment for what is done. We have
seen this previously in the book (3:17), and we will see it again in the book’s conclusion (12:14). Thus we
must keep in mind not only the hard times that lie ahead in life and death to follow, but also remain
conscious of coming judgment and that we will give an account.

In reading Ecclesiastes 11:9, it might seem that Solomon has broken from his chain of proverbs to
now address the young directly, but the words here could have been a standalone proverb generally
applicable to the young, just as many of the sayings in the book of Proverbs are addressed to “you,” yet
meaning no one in particular, just whomever fits what is being said.

Let’s also note a few more specifics about Ecclesiastes 11:9. On the directive to let your heart cheer
you, it may be observed that Proverbs 15:13 says that “a merry heart makes a cheerful countenance,” while Ecclesiastes earlier associated a merry heart with eating and drinking in the book’s repeated refrain (see 8:15; 9:7; compare 10:19). So the sense in 11:9 seems to be that of enjoying oneself and having a good time—particularly when it’s paired with “in the days of your youth,” as with rejoicing in one’s youth mentioned in parallel just before. However, the word translated cheer more broadly means to do one good, which could also fit here. Jesus several times said to be of good cheer, though the sense in that case is to be of good courage—or to be encouraged or heartened—as God told Joshua (Joshua 1:6–7). Yet that might come within the broader sense of letting your heart do you good while young before difficult times come. (Consider John 16:33, where Jesus told His disciples, “In the world you will have tribulation [trial]; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world”—an attitude we must carry beyond youth to endure.) While the exhortation in Ecclesiastes 11:9 seems primarily to mean enjoy being young and live life to the full, that probably includes maintaining a sense of youthful optimism (as we’ll also see in verse 10), having so much life left to live and so much still to live for.

Of course, as already pointed out, the same verse ends with saying that youthful exuberance and escapades must be tempered with cognizance of having to give account for the choices we make. That is the context for understanding the words in the middle of the verse that parallel those given before about enjoying oneself while young: “Walk in the ways of your heart, and in the sight of your eyes.” As Kaiser notes, some wrongly take this “as a direct contradiction of Numbers 15:39b: ‘You shall…not follow after your own heart and your own eyes [after which you played the harlot (NASB)]’” (cf. Deut. 29:19; Job 31:7). Verse 9, however, is no contradiction to Numbers 15:39b or invitation to live sinfully in sensual pleasure…. [Rather] the verse is an invitation to youth to get all the cheer and joy they can out of innocent happiness. Yes, enjoy whatever you see or desire, but mark it down well and in the midst of your enjoyment remember that God will review even the quality of your pleasures and the manner in which you enjoy yourself. Verse 9 is no carte blanche or open season in which anything goes [just as with the repeated calls to enjoyment throughout the book]. Therefore, do not abuse this blessing with evil comforts and pleasures that offer no real joy. Real but innocent and pure pleasures are recommended. Life must be lived with eternity’s values in view” (p. 117). The apostle Paul would later warn against indiscriminately indulging youthful desires. He told the young evangelist Timothy to instead “flee also youthful lusts; but pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart” (2 Timothy 2:22).

There is also some interesting historical context for the end of Ecclesiastes 11. The NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible notes on “follow the ways of your heart” in verse 9: “The exhortation that we should ‘be happy’ in the context of facing the reality of death is similar to the message of the [Egyptian] Harpers’ Songs. For example, the “Song from the Tomb of King Intef,” after mourning the fact that those who have built monuments before us are now silent in their crumbling tombs, urges the audience: ‘Hence rejoice in your heart! / Forgetfulness profits you, follow your heart as long as you live!’ Similar teaching is found in the ‘Instruction of Ptahhotep’ from the Middle Kingdom period of Egypt: ‘Follow your heart as long as you live, / Do no more than is required, / do not shorten the time of “follow-the-heart.”’ The similarity of the Egyptian and Biblical exhortations to ‘be happy’ and ‘follow’ the heart is striking, although the Bible is distinctive for linking this concept to a fear of God.” We are reminded that Solomon gathered wisdom from the international world around him, yet God inspired him to select and shape what he gathered to fit within a proper biblical worldview—at least in terms of what became part of Scripture.

The reminder in verse 9 that God will bring what we do into judgment does not present God as some grim, condemning ogre, as some might imagine, for it’s clear throughout the book that God desires to bless us and wants us to find enjoyment in life. In fact, His law is the path to true happiness (Psalm 112:1; 119:1; Proverbs 29:18). And His reminding us of judgment is to help us to stay on this path, as with any loving parent. Realize too that judgment is given for good and evil (Ecclesiastes 12:14)—and that while evil brings consequences, good brings rewards. And even evil can be forgiven upon repentance, allowing us to look ahead in hope. As Kaiser notes, 11:7–9 shows that “true happiness consists of simultaneously enjoying the present and looking forward to the future” (p. 117). Moreover, in contemplating that God will judge based on His law that brings happiness, we should consider that part of what He commands, and thus of what stands under judgment, is that we properly enjoy ourselves as He gives us the means to do so. “Rab, a Jewish teacher of the third century A.D., commented, ‘Man will have to give account for
all that he saw and did not enjoy” (Expositor’s, note on verse 9). What a different light that casts on this passage.

Adding to the admonition of verse 9, verse 10 states, as the NKJV renders it, “Therefore remove sorrow from your heart, and put away evil from your flesh, for childhood and youth are vanity.” Here are negatives that prevent the commended enjoyment of life—problems we need to strive to be rid of. Instead of “sorrow,” some translate the original Hebrew word here as “care,” and they take the wording to mean that we should be carefree in a hedonistic sense of doing what we want without fear of consequences. Yet that directly contradicts what was just said in the previous verses and in the book as a whole. Given in the Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries is the meaning “vexation. The Hebrew ka’as refers to that which angers, grieves or irritates. Used elsewhere of the sin of man which ‘vexes’ God (Deuteronomy 32:19), or the ‘provocation’ of a woman by a jealous rival (1 Samuel 1:6), in Ecclesiastes it refers to the perplexity (1:18), grief (2:23; 7:3) or irritation (7:9) caused by sheer experience of life” (Eaton, note on 11:10). The point here, then, is to stop letting things get you down and upset, leading to disillusionment and cynicism. The New American Commentary, in a footnote on verses 9-10, says the meaning is to “cast away grief from yourself (over the human condition)” — that being what the whole book is about.

Thus, the directive here is really to cheer up—in line with the previous verse. Despite the problems of this life, there is much to be happy and hopeful about. Of course, God wants us to “sigh and cry” over the terrible things in this world (Ezekiel 9:4), and we already saw in Ecclesiastes 7:2-4 that there is value in mourning. But this should not be constant, to where we are continually moping and depressed. Ecclesiastes recommends enjoyment far more than it does mourning. Consider that Jesus Himself was a “man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:3), yet He was also “anointed….with the oil of gladness more than [His] companions” (Psalm 45:7; Hebrews 1:9). Despite life’s sorrows, we must not despair but must continue to rejoice in the precious gifts of life God has given us.

One way to remove vexation and sorrow is to stop doing wrong and wracking our lives with problems and guilt. Ecclesiastes 11:9 had said to enjoy life while keeping the future in mind. Problems arise when we fail to do this—forgetting the joyful rewards ahead and despairing, and forgetting the consequences for misdeeds and so giving in to temptations to sin, leading eventually to yet further despair when we do think of consequences. Expositor’s comments: “Obviously, young people face strong temptations, and vanity and frustration are as much a part of adolescence as vitality. So youth must say no as well as yes and must discard whatever damages mind or body” (note on verse 10). The second line of verse 10 seems to speak of the need to stop sinning in the NKJV wording: “Put away evil from your flesh.” However, the meaning of this verse is disputed. The NIV has: “Cast off the troubles of your body”—as the “evil” here can just mean bad or harm, and the reference to the flesh can refer to either how one uses one’s body or what happens to one’s body. Some other versions say the wording here means to remove pain from your body. The Preaching the Word commentary sees in verse 10 the removal of discouragement of the mind in the first line and removing damage to our bodies in the second line—thus taking care of mental and physical health. Certainly we should try to remain psychologically and physically healthy and avoid harm to our bodies to better experience joy in this life. Yet, as the Tyndale commentary states, the reference to flesh “portrays man in his weakness, both physical weariness (12:12) and moral frailty (5:6)” (note on 11:10). And it fits quite well in context to see putting away evil or harm away from one’s flesh as a reference to avoiding sin.

A note in the Preaching the Word commentary contends that “since ‘flesh’ ordinarily refers to the human body (not to moral weakness, as it often does in the New Testament), the ‘evil’ the Preacher has in mind is physical pain” (Ryken, p. 296). But reference to flesh can certainly apply in moral terms. Prior to Noah’s Flood, God saw that “all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth” (Genesis 6:12). And earlier in Ecclesiastes, Solomon said, “I searched in my heart how to gratify my flesh with wine” (2:3)—which clearly has moral implications. And even more to the point is what Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes 5:6, cited above in the Tyndale commentary: “Do not let your mouth cause your flesh to sin….” So the evil to remove from the flesh could well be sin. In fact, sin is a greater bad to avoid than bodily harm. Physical detriment may be unavoidable, and is sometimes even the preferred course. (Consider suffering at the hands of others for righteousness’ sake, as Jesus and many biblical heroes of faith did.) But we should always avoid sin. Of course, we should take care of our physical bodies as we are reasonably able to. In fact, being intentionally careless regarding our bodily health is itself sin—for we are to be faithful
stewards of our bodies, which along with our whole selves actually belong to God (compare Psalm 24:1; 1 Corinthians 6:12-20).

The final line of verse 10, “for childhood and youth are vanity [or frustration],” is again parallel to the other vanity declarations ending the segments of this subsection (11:8; 12:8). The wording here in 11:10 could be understood in context of the preceding statements about making the most of one’s youth while it lasts—the frustration being that youth is passing or fleeting. Or it’s possible that the vanity or frustration is the fact that youth is beset with many unwise choices and sins—requiring the counteraction just mentioned in verses 9-10 of focus on the future and removal of problems so as to rightly enjoy the time of one’s youth. A modern proverb says, “Youth is wasted on the young.” That is, youth is often spent foolishly—so by the time one is wise enough to properly appreciate and use the opportunities and abilities of youth, youth is over. Of course there is still life to live, and youth, even when misspent to some extent, will have hopefully taught us many lessons. Sadly, young people often look on themselves and their peers as far wiser than they are—and sometimes more so than those they regard as old and foolish and “trapped in the past.” While a younger person can be wiser than one who is older (see 4:13, for instance), that isn’t typically the case. And most young people come to see this as they get older themselves. Yet some still refuse to grow up. Another vanity or frustration is the obsession of many to hold on to youth in various ways. Some while growing older want to seem, and to see themselves, as much younger than they are—perhaps by their dress, immature living, associations, interests, and now medical treatments like cosmetic surgery. We should enjoy youth but not try vainly to hold on to it at all costs. As Derek Kidner writes in The Message of Ecclesiastes: “To idolize the state of youth and to dread the loss of it is disastrous; it spoils the gift even while we have it. To see it, instead, as a passing phase, ‘beautiful in its time’ but not beyond it, is to be free from its frustrations” (p. 99).

Now, what if you are an older person reading Ecclesiastes 11:9-10 and the next verse, 12:1, about remembering your Creator while young? You might think that these verses do not really apply to you. But recognize that however old you are now, you are still younger than you will yet grow to be. The admonition to enjoy life and have good cheer is still meant for you. Recall that 11:8, which began this subsection, said it’s possible to rejoice in all the years one has. But with the call to rejoicing, the reminder of coming difficulties, death and judgment also applies—as does the instruction to remove vexation and harmful elements from your life, including sin. All of us need to learn and live by these vital principles—as long as we have life yet to live, however long that might be. And for those of you who are younger, don’t assume you have all the time in the world. You may not have so much life left as it seems. Something could happen to take your life suddenly—and the end of this age is swiftly approaching. So all of us, of whatever age, need to maintain a sense of urgency about life and living as God tells us to—while we still have life and breath. This life won’t last forever. And even if there are still many years left, the years go by quickly.

Turn to God Now, Make the Most of Life While You Can (Ecclesiastes 12:1-8) Day 23-24

Moving into chapter 12, we continue with the third subsection of the last major section, now reading the last of the three segments making up the subsection. The Expositor’s Bible Commentary says of the poetry that makes up this segment: “The description in the verses that follow ranks among the finest of the world’s literature…. The onset of old age is pictured under a wide variety of metaphors, most of obvious application” (Wright, introductory note on verses 1-8). The proverbial sequence of the past few chapters continues through to a conclusion in 12:7, though the verses here are quite unlike the proverbial forms we have seen previously in the book—this passage being a much longer form. (For comparison, recall the lengthy poem about the virtuous woman at the end of the book of Proverbs.) Ecclesiastes 12:1 does not mark a new subsection, as it continues right along with the prominent theme of the last four verses (11:7-10) concerning enjoying life while young before the coming of darkening times and death. Furthermore, as already mentioned, those verses (11:7-10) may have been meant as a qualifying expansion of the book’s refrain along with chapter 12. In any case, it’s clear that verses 1-7 of chapter 12 constitute a self-contained poem within the current subsection.

It should be noted that this passage does not convey one comprehensive metaphoric picture. What’s presented here is not a continuous allegory, but a series of diverse images related in what they portray. It’s even possible that the various descriptions here—some more literal and others more figurative—were originally used in society independently from one another. Again, though, the imagery in the verses here
is put together in a masterful way to all form a cohesive unit—the “while,” “when” or “before” in each of the verses up through verse 6 all tying back to remembering your Creator in verse 1, followed “then” in verse 7 by the end of this physical life.

As pointed out, most of the imagery in this passage is obvious in what it means to convey generally, particularly given the context. Some statements, though, are not so clear—yet we may still gain a sense of what’s intended within the context of the poem. Expositor’s states: “It may be asked how the idea of inspiration can be held when there are so many possible interpretations of individual pictures. The answer is that, while attention to detail is important, the total description is what matters; and whatever the interpretation of phrases, the whole picture of decrepit old age is conveyed clearly” (footnote on verse 1). We might recall something similar with the lack of clarity one encounters in the Song of Solomon, our notes pointing out that the poetry there is often evocative—not necessarily meant to always give exact details but to convey a feeling about what’s being discussed. The same could be true here, especially as overtness in describing the deterioration of the body through the effects of old age could come across as insensitive and impolite. Still, it’s probably safe to assume that the various expressions in the poem were much better understood by Solomon’s immediate audience in his day than they are to us reading them nearly 3,000 years later. (Yet in the face of this gap we still trust that God will reveal to us whatever we truly need to know.)

“The passage begins with a nonmetaphorical statement so as to make it clear to the reader what is to follow” (note on verse 1). In the NKJV verse 1 reads, “Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth, before the difficult days come, and the years draw near when you say, ‘I have no pleasure in them.”’ As Expositor’s further notes: “The thrill of youth fades into a lack of zest for life. The statement is a general one and certainly allows for varying degrees of experience, since some people retain their zest in extreme old age.” Indeed, recall that 11:8 said it’s possible to rejoice in all the years of one’s life, though that is all too often not the case. The same commentary further points out that many of the health troubles associated with aging in chapter 12 are often not as severe in today’s advanced nations, with modern living conditions and treatments, as they were in ancient times. Still, “the point is that as we grow older, we all have some traces of these marks of age, even if they do not develop to the extremes that this chapter describes. So the Teacher is justified in reminding young people that they cannot afford to put off their faith in God their Creator until they are older” (same note).

Something else to take note of in verse 1 is that, as many commentators have observed, it says to remember your “Creators”—plural (YLT). This is often understood as a majestic plural—denoting a singular yet lofty Creator. It’s pointed out that, in parallel, the plural form “Makers” is used of God in Job 35:10 and Isaiah 54:5. Of course, we should also note that the most common name for God in Hebrew Scripture, Elohim, is plural (literally “Gods”), as is the title Adonai (“My Lords”). While a majestic sense may be possible, we should recognize that a plurality in God as Creator was noted in the very beginning of Genesis: “Then God [Elohim or “Gods”] said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness…” (Genesis 1:26). This is not a use of the “royal we,” as many contend regarding how rulers sometimes speak—as is especially clear in 3:22, where God says, “Behold, the man has become like one of Us,” showing an actual plurality. And as Ecclesiastes has harrowed back to man’s creation in Genesis a number of times, it should perhaps not be surprising to see an acknowledgement of the plurality in God as Creator that’s presented there. The New Testament more clearly reveals a plurality of Creators, explaining that God the Father created all things through the Word who became Jesus Christ (John 1:1-3, 14; Colossians 1:16-17; Hebrews 1:1-2; Ephesians 3:9, NKJV). Any of these plural forms, being names and titles for the divine family, can apply to either the Father or Christ individually (as They each bear the family name) or to both of Them together, depending on the context.

The focus here on remembering our Creator, and doing so while young, is vital. Coming to terms with life in this world, seeking to understand it and trying to find happiness—the whole point of this book—must start right here. People are looking for truth and fulfillment in all the wrong places—and in all the wrong things. Where should you turn? To your Creator, who made the world and you in it, who set things up as they are, who made the rules, who put you here for a purpose to fulfill, who has all the answers. And, as Dr. Walter Kaiser notes, in using the word remember, Solomon “is not asking for mere mental cognizance…. For example, when God ‘remembered’ Hannah (1 Sam. 1:19)…He acted decisively on her behalf, and she who was barren conceived the child Samuel. [It’s the same with God remembering
Noah and removing the floodwaters (Genesis 8:1).] So it is in our passage. To remember our Creator calls for decisive action based on recollection and reflection on all that God is and has done for us” (Ecclesiastes: Total Life, p. 118). This ties in to what we just saw in 11:9 about realizing that there will be judgment for what we do. But of course we do not just remember that. We also remember that God loves us and desires us to be part of His family forever. We remember that we owe everything to our Maker—and that He is the Source of all blessing and good who wants to grant us infinite blessing. And we don’t just reflect on that. We respond to God. We heed Him. And the time to turn to Him is now! We might imagine remembering God after a long life of waywardness—as it seems Solomon himself did. But one’s life can be so ruined by then. Remember God now. Seek Him and worship Him and obey Him today (compare Hebrews 4:7). Don’t put it off. The younger you start, the more you will experience of life as God intended—and the better off will be your time in this world, sparing you from many sorrows (recall the putting away of upset and evil or harm in Ecclesiastes 11:10). There will still be pain, of course, but that pain is far easier to bear if your life is close to God. He will be with you and give you strength through the hard times, as He has promised (for example, James 4:8; 1 Corinthians 10:13; Hebrews 13:5-6).

Continuing to the next verse, where Ecclesiastes 12:1 said to remember your Creator “before the difficult days come,” verse 2 in parallel says, “…while the sun and the light, and the moon and the stars, are not darkened, and the clouds do not return after the rain.” In saying while these things have not happened, the meaning is while they have not happened yet. The NIV renders the verse to say before the things mentioned here do happen. As pointed out earlier, the darkening here seems to parallel the coming “days of darkness” after beholding the light and the sun in 11:7-8. The wording of 12:2 could be meant figuratively to say that youth is a time of clear skies, having fewer storm clouds. “Nothing but blue skies,” a popular song says. And when the clouds do come and rain in a negative sense—as apparently in the imagery we saw in 11:3 (and as in the modern idiom of having something rain on our parade)—the troubles blow over quickly, and it doesn’t get cloudy again right away. This is in contrast to getting older, when you have one problem after another. Alternatively, on the more literal side, the darkening could refer to one’s vision being dimmed with age through cataracts or general vision loss (compare Genesis 27:1; 48:10; 1 Samuel 3:2; 4:15). The New American Commentary says, “The cloudiness of vision sounds like glaucoma. The picture of clouds ‘returning after rain’ appears to say that the vision does not clear up, in contrast to weather” (Garrett, note on Ecclesiastes 12:2). However, eyes growing dim is evidently the meaning of what follows at the end of the next verse—“those that look through the windows grow dim” (verse 3)—so a different meaning might seem more likely for verse 2. Still it’s possible that the descriptions in verses 2 and 3 were originally standalone images with overlapping meaning that were placed together in the poem. Given how well both interpretations—storms of life and eyes dimming—fit in the context of verse 2, it could be that a double meaning is intended.

Accepting a figurative storms-of-life depiction here, Derek Kidner writes: “There is a chill of winter in the air of verse 2, as the rains persist and the clouds turn daylight into gloom, and then night into pitch blackness. It is a scene sombre enough to bring home to us not only the fading of physical and mental powers but the more general desolations of old age. There are many lights that are liable then to be withdrawn, besides those of the senses and faculties as, one by one, old friends are taken, familiar customs change, and long-held hopes now have to be abandoned. All this will come at a stage when there is no longer the resilience of youth or the prospect of recovery to offset it” (The Message of Ecclesiastes, The Bible Speaks Today series, pp. 101-102). (Some have tried to specifically allegorize all the celestial bodies listed in verse 2, but that is probably going too far, such interpretation being too subjective.)

Then in verse 3 and the beginning of verse 4, the difficult days of future years are depicted with the imagery of a run-down house. Recall the mention in Ecclesiastes 10:18 of a decaying building and leaking house due to laziness that, in context, represented a nation in decline. Now in chapter 12 we have the portrayal of a falling house standing for a person growing old—the bodily keepers having grown weak and failing. Kidner writes: “In verses 3 and 4a the picture changes. Now it is no longer one of nightfall, storm and winter, but of a great house in decline. Its former glories of power, style, liveliness and hospitality can now be surmised only by contrast with their few pathetic relics. In the brave struggle to survive there is almost a more pointed reminder of decay than in a total ruin. It is still part of our own scene; our own future is facing us and we cannot avoid involvement with this foretaste of it” (p. 102).
Verse 3 begins, “In the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men bow down…” Expositor’s interprets, “The arms and hands that minister to the body begin to tremble, and the legs that once carried the body so strongly weaken and sag at the knee” (note on verse 3). Others agree on the hands that care for and defend the body but see a different meaning for the bowing strong men. Tommy Nelson writes in A Life Well Lived: “Who are your mighty men? Your shoulders. And one day they will not stand as tall and straight as they do now” (p. 186). The shoulders might well seem as strong men standing on either side of the head and supporting it. The bowing would fit with an elderly person being stooped over. The New American Commentary, while likewise agreeing on the hands, takes the strong men bowing more generally to be “the major muscle groups of the legs and back,” stating that “beyond that, it is impossible to be specific in anatomical details” (note on verse 3).

The next part of verse 3 about “the grinders ceasing because they are few” is commonly taken to mean the teeth stop chewing because so many teeth are lost as people get up in years. The metaphor is based on workers at an estate grinding flour. If taken literally one would think that these would have to work harder and not cease if they were few—yet it could be that there being so few means that the effort would not suffice anyway so that the workers give up on the task. Maybe the sense is even of a lack of grinding stones, so that not enough grain can be ground for the household as needed. (The low grinding sound in the next verse may also be related to the teeth, though it might be more literal, as we’ll discuss in a moment.) We’ve already noted, in regard to the darkening of verse 2, the end of verse 3 about those looking through the windows growing dim as referring to the eyes. The dimming may refer to the eyes not seeing well in terms of clouded vision (as in the passages earlier cited about sight diminishing with age), or the dimming could describe how the eyes appear, with perhaps loss of sparkle. In any case, the image here is not a literal one of people looking out of windows growing dim. This is an obvious metaphor—with the body still pictured as a house, here with windows to see out of, figuratively speaking.

The bodily house metaphor appears to continue into verse 4, the verse beginning, “When the doors are shut in the streets, and the sound of grinding is low…” Following from the lack of grinders meaning lack of teeth and chewing in the previous verse, Kaiser takes the doors being shut in the street here to mean that “the lips (swinging or folding doors, as the jaws of leviathan are called the ‘doors of his face’ in Job 41:14) fall into the mouth for lack of teeth. (A street is a cleft between two rows of houses.)” (p. 120). And, again based on the previous verse, he interprets the sound of grinding being low in this verse to mean that “in toothless old age, only soft foods may be eaten. Thus no noise is made, for no hard bread or parched corn [or grain] is being chewed” (ibid.).

While that is possible, a number of other commentators see the bodily house metaphor continuing but take the doors being shut to go with sound being low due to diminished hearing. Expositor’s notes on verse 4, “The other doors of the senses, the organs of hearing, gradually close, marooning the owner within the cramped house of his own body.” It’s stated in the Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries that the doors on the street being shut “will refer to the reduced access to the outside world which follows impaired hearing” (Eaton, note on verse 4). The New American Commentary likewise says: “The shutting of doors refers to the ears, as people shut doors when they want to exclude outside noise. Deafness is meant, as indicated by the sounds of grinding and singing fading out” (note on verse 4). Note that in this interpretation the low grinding sound is not due to soft chewing or, as some propose, to soft speaking, but more literally refers to outside grinding of grain, though used somewhat figuratively in a representative sense of the outside hum of daily business, the sound volume of which is now turned down. This explanation might seem to contradict the next line: “When one rises up at the sound of a bird.” The wording here seems to indicate disturbed sleep, waking at the slightest sound, maybe at the first songbirds before dawn. Tyndale comments: “So much for impaired hearing! More likely the picture is one of waking erratically in the early hours” (note on verse 4). Yet what of the bird sound if that’s the meaning? Some think the verse refers to an aging person’s voice rising up TO the sound of a high bird pitch—thus losing the deeper voice of earlier adulthood. Yet we lack evidence that, in terms of sound, ancient Hebrew “had the metaphor of up and down with the scale” (Expositor’s, footnote on verse 4). More simply, perhaps the portrayal here is of the elderly, having diminished hearing, not being able to make out particular sounds through the hubbub of the day, yet in the quiet of the night still waking at minor noises. The New American Commentary calls this “a cruel paradox of old age: one cannot hear well, but one sleeps so lightly that the slightest disturbance is sufficient to take away sleep” (note on verse...
4). The sound of a bird could even refer to mere fluttering rather than twittering.

The last line of verse 4, “and all the daughters of music are brought low,” may seem obscure, but another expression about old age from the same general period this was written probably gives us the sense of the words here. When Solomon’s father David asked the elderly Barzillai, who as a wealthy man had provided for the king, to come to Jerusalem to be honored and provided for by David in return, Barzillai responded: “How long have I to live, that I should go up with the king to Jerusalem? I am today eighty years old. Can I discern between the good and bad? Can [I] your servant taste what I eat or what I drink? Can I hear any longer the voice of singing men and singing women? Why then should your servant be a further burden to my lord the king?” (2 Samuel 19:34-35). The elements of Barzillai’s description seem to be common expressions for old age at that time. Thus, the daughters of music being brought low in Ecclesiastes 12:4 probably also refers to not being able to hear music very well when old. Specifically, “daughters of music” could refer to songs, musical compositions or the performers of these. Some think the reference is to the elderly not being able to sing anymore themselves, but with the parallel here the hearing seems more likely—following naturally after the other references to hearing in verse 4. Loss of singing ability could conceivably go with the previously mentioned idea of one’s voice rising to a bird pitch, but it seems better to take everything in verse 4 as a reference to hearing impairment.

At the beginning of verse 5 we see that not all of the poetry here is metaphor, as these words are meant quite plainly: “Also they are afraid of height, and of terrors in the way.” People often get more nervous about heights as they grow old, since diminished strength and balance means there’s a greater chance of falling. In fact the whole world can seem much more precarious and dangerous, leading to fear of potential threats in the way (in their path or in the street)—whether accidents or being jostled amid bustling traffic, mistakes leading to embarrassments, or being hurt or taken advantage of by others—and thus anxiety about just getting around (sometimes leading to staying shut in at home or in one’s room).

The next two images in verse 5 return to figurative language. First is the blossoming almond tree. Expositor’s explains, as commonly interpreted: “The almond tree pictures the white hair of age. To us it is usually the harbinger of spring, and the blossom is pink. In Palestine, however, the tree begins to blossom in midwinter; and although the petals are pink at their base, they are white towards the tip. The general impression of the tree in flower is of a white mass…. But the old man has no spring to follow so as to enjoy the fruit” (note on verse 5).

The next line in the verse has been subject to various interpretations. It literally reads, “The grasshopper [or locust] is a burden [or burdens itself].” Some favor the rendering of it becoming a burden to itself based on the reflexive verb form here, the NIV translating, “The grasshopper drags itself along”—this seeming to fit with the preceding winter imagery of the almond tree blossoming. Expositor’s notes, “Now the lively, leaping grasshopper can only drag itself along, as happens when the days grow cold, an obvious picture of old age.” Kaiser says the metaphor “describes the halting gait of the elderly as they walk along on their canes” (p. 121; compare Zechariah 8:4). However, the verse could instead be saying that a grasshopper or something it represents is a burden to an elderly person. Expositor’s further notes: “The meaning of the latter translation would be that even a small thing like a grasshopper seems unduly heavy, although it is difficult to see why a grasshopper should be singled out this way.” Maybe it’s due to the grasshopper being a common illustration for smallness, as in Numbers 13:33, where the Israelite spies compared themselves to grasshoppers before the giants in Canaan (see also Isaiah 40:22). Others have speculated that it’s the grasshopper’s chirping that is too much for the elderly person to take. Yet another possibility is that the grasshopper as a burden or weighty problem pictures a person’s youthful verdure being eaten away at by the aging process—a formerly green field now consumed (compare Joel 1:4; Amos 7:1-2). The Greek Septuagint translation takes the locust’s heaviness to mean it is “fat.” This translation seems unlikely, but it could conceivably fit with the locust having consumed the greenery of youth.

Commentator John Gill offered these possibilities regarding the grasshopper being a burden: “…Meaning either, should a grasshopper, which is very light, leap upon an aged person, it would give him pain, the least burden being uneasy to him; or, should he eat one of these creatures, the locusts being a sort of food in Judea, it would not sit well, on his stomach: or the grasshopper, being a crumpled and lean creature, may describe an old man; his legs and arms emaciated, and his shoulders, back, and hips, crumpled up and bunching out; and the locust of this name has a bunch on its backbone, like a camel….
[Another commentator] says, that the head of the thigh, or the hip bone, by the Arabians, is called ‘chagaba,’ the word here used for a locust or grasshopper; which part of the body is of principal use in walking, and found very troublesome and difficult to move in old men; and [Jewish sage] Aben Ezra interprets it of the thigh: the almond tree, by the Rabbins [or Jewish rabbis]...is interpreted of the hip bone, which stands out in old age: and the Targum [or ancient Jewish paraphrase of the Old Testament], of this and the preceding clause, is, ‘and the top of thy backbone shall bunch out, through leanness, like the almond; and the ankles of thy feet shall be swelled’” (note on verse 5). Gill further pointed out that some understand here a sexual reference corresponding to the next line in the verse, “...and desire fails.” The New American Commentary prefers the grasshopper being too heavy to lift as a hyperbole, but summarizes other ideas, stating, “Alternatively, it has been taken to refer to either bad joints, swollen ankles [following the Septuagint’s fattening], a halting walk, or impotence. The last interpretation is possible in light of the following line... [paraphrased as] ‘And desire no longer is stirred’” (note on verse 5).

Actually, the phrase typically rendered “desire fails” literally means “and the caperberry bursts forth/destroys/fails”—the same commentary seeing “fails” as most likely (footnote on verse 5). Tyndale notes that the phrase “was translated ‘the caperberry is made ineffectual’ by the LXX [or Septuagint].... No substantiation for this translation has been produced. The caperberry was apparently a stimulant to bodily appetites [an appetizer or aphrodisiac], so the essential point is unchanged” (note on verse 5). “No evidence for the aphrodisiac qualities of the caper appears prior to the medieval Jewish commentaries, however; and this interpretation is not certain” (NAC, footnote on verse 5). Some have pointed out that in a description of bodily deterioration one would expect some reference to the loss of sexual potency, especially considering the author being Solomon, with his vast harem. Still, it’s hard to know exactly what’s intended. The New American Commentary further points out that it’s possible to translate the wording as the caperberry bursting forth in bearing fruit in a literal sense, along with the almond literally blossoming and the grasshopper being heavy, or fat as in the Septuagint, with new grass and greenery to eat—this all then meaning, in a contrasting picture, that “while nature is renewed every year, the human body simply grows older and weaker” (note and footnotes on verse 5). But the same commentary concludes that “this interpretation requires an anomalous translation of the Hebrew, however, and is not to be followed” (note on verse 5). Yet this is the preferred explanation of the New Bible Commentary: Revised. The matter must remain unclear for now, but the images here seem more likely to indicate loss of vigor than revitalized vigor the aging person is missing out on.

And then the end of verse 5 tells us that, following the period of decline we’ve seen, this life at last comes to its inevitable end: “For man goes to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets.” The reference here is to death—the description of dying continuing from here through to the end of verse 7. The Hebrew for “man” at the end of verse 5 is ha-adam (the man or the human race) as in some other passages in Ecclesiastes, here tied to the reference in verse 7 taken from Genesis about dust returning to the earth, as we’ll note more about shortly. The phrase “eternal home” or “house of eternity” (or “the house of his eternity”) is not a reference to heaven, as some might imagine, but to the grave. Job had spoken of the grave as a house: “If I wait for the grave as my house, if I make my bed in the darkness...” (Job 17:13). Yet calling it man’s eternal house might seem troubling, as if to say that man’s proper place is the grave and that he will be there forever. Tyndale notes that another commentator “wonders whether it might be ‘dark house’ (on the basis of the cognate root in Ugaritic which can mean ‘to be dark’). This is a possibility, but the common Hebrew meaning ‘eternity’ is preferable” (note on verse 5). In fact, the Hebrew olam, meaning forever or eternity, has the sense of “concealed, i.e. [to] the vanishing point” (Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance, Hebrew and Chaldee Dictionary, Strong’s No. 5769), and could denote something hidden or “time out of mind” (ibid.). The original King James Version translates the phrase here as “long home,” recognizing that the state of death will not go on forever. Yet “eternal home” is still a reasonable translation, as it appears to be an idiomatic expression for the grave that’s not necessarily meant as a statement about how long the dead will actually remain dead—except, possibly, that it seems without end. As Job also said: “So man lies down and does not rise. Till the heavens are no more [at least as they exist now], they will not awake nor be roused from their sleep” (Job 14:12). Yet Job then says the dead will yet rise (verses 13-14).

Tyndale points out that “eternal home” is a term for the grave in the Egyptian Instructions of
Ankhsheshonqy—and that “it is also a Babylonian/Assyrian idiom for ‘grave’” (note and footnote on verse 5). Furthermore, the Keil & Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament says: “‘Everlasting house’ is the name for the grave of the dead, according to [Greek historian] Diodorus Siculus i. 51, also among the Egyptians, and on old Latin monuments also the expression domus aeterna [house eternal] is found” (note on 12:5). And this was despite the fact that these pagans believed in immortal afterlife for the soul in another place. Yet many believed that the souls of the dead would revisit their tombs. Of course, this idea constituted no part of what Solomon meant by his phrasing here. Recall that he plainly said there is no consciousness in death, as we’ve seen (Ecclesiastes 9:5, 10). Still, he knew this was not the ultimate end of human life. He spoke of future reward and judgment, which means that he, like Job, must have known about future resurrection. The Pulpit Commentary points out about “the house of his eternity” here: “From the expression in the text nothing can be deduced concerning Koheleth’s eschatological [end-time] views. He is speaking here merely phenomenally [or according to what the senses perceive]. Men live their little span upon the earth, and then go to what in comparison of this is an eternity [in the perspective of past ages]. Much difficulty…would be obviated if critics would remember that the meaning of such words is conditioned by the context, that e.g. ‘everlasting’ applied to a mountain and to God cannot be understood in the same sense” (note on verse 5; and compare Exodus 21:6, where olam, translated “forever,” refers in this particular case to something ongoing for the remainder of human life and not beyond). It’s also possible that “house of his eternity” is meant as a lodging or way station en route to one’s eternity.

The mourners going about the streets at the end of Ecclesiastes 12:5 is of course a reference to funeral customs—so again we return here to a literal picture. And we might note that the reference to the house of eternity together with mourners also recalls 7:2, which spoke of going to “the house of mourning” as “the end of all men” that the living take to heart, in reference to contemplating one’s own mortality when attending a funeral—a very sobering and valuable reminder for all of us.

Continuing in Ecclesiastes 12, verse 6 then carries us back into metaphor—all four images here referring to the final act of dying, as does everything from the end of verse 5 through verse 7, as mentioned before. The opening imperative in verse 6 given in various translations—“Remember your Creator” (NKJV) or “Remember him” (NIV)—is not present in the Hebrew text (thus the italics in the NKJV), but the directive is understood, as previously noted going back to verse 1, following in line with “in the days of your youth, before the difficult days come” (as it must for the wording of verse 6 to make sense). Here, it is even more direct—remember your Creator before you die.

Let’s note the four images here: “…before the silver cord is loosed, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher shattered at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the well.” Starting with the first one, the NKJV footnotes that the silver cord being “loosed” or undone, or let go of, follows the Masoretic Text scribal notes tradition of qere (what is to be read) while the kethib or ketiv (what is written) here is actually “removed”—taken away or gotten rid of. The Greek Septuagint says the cord is “broken” or snapped—perhaps influenced by the other instances of things being broken or shattered in the verse. The variance in meaning between the wording differences seems very slight. It may be that the removal of the cord leads to the breaking of the next item in the sequence, as we’ll consider further in a moment.

First, however, it should be pointed out that some imagine that the silver cord here is an ethereal, wispy, silvery cord tethering a person’s immortal soul to his physical body, and that this cord is severed when the body dies, with the disembodied, still-conscious soul then floating away to the afterlife. But imagine is the key word, there being no real basis for such a conception. Some who claim to have engaged in the occult practice of astral projection (supposed transmigration of the soul to other places or other planes of existence) or who’ve had unintentional so-called out-of-body experiences say they have seen such a cord as a lifeline tying them to their bodies. Yet there is no proof these accounts are genuine. They could be outright false reports or possibly represent hallucinations involving preconceptions, self-comforting amid diminished or warped sensory awareness, or, in the mind’s weakened, susceptible state, even demon influence—as Satan has wanted to promote the idea of an immortal soul ever since he told the big lie to Eve in the Garden of Eden that she would not die if she disobeyed God as God had said (see Genesis 3:1-4). All such notions and experiences must be held up to the light of the truth of what Scripture actually says. And Scripture compares death to sleep in which the dead wait in unawareness until a future awakening in a resurrection (Job 14:12-14; Psalm 13:3; Isaiah 26:19; Daniel 12:2; John
What we see in all the images of this verse are things broken beyond repair, as the items here are smashed. Again, the final act of dying is in view. Many take the silver cord together with the golden bowl as a singular image of a hanging bowl or hanging lamp (a bowl filled with golden olive oil for fuel) suspended by a silver or perhaps silver-coated chain. The chain breaks, whereupon the bowl plunges to the floor and shatters. It’s also possible to see here, as some suggest, the golden bowl as precious, valuable life hanging by a slender thread that will not continue to hold. This would point to the frailty of human life. When the precarious factors that maintain it give way, life slips away and is lost to obliteration in death.

The next two images are clearly tied together—the clay pitcher shattered at the fountain or spring and the wooden wheel to lower the bucket into the well or cistern broken. These images may be taken individually, or perhaps they are to be understood as parts of one image, with the breakdown of a whole water-drawing apparatus meant. In fact, some believe that the broken cord and bowl at the beginning of the verse are also part of the water-drawing equipment, making all of verse 6 one unified image. Yet a fallen and shattered lamp for the first part of the verse makes good sense in context—perhaps even giving the added image of the light being extinguished, though that is not specifically stated here. Furthermore, fallen and shattered lamps and a broken well may add to the picture of a run-down estate, in line with the deteriorating house imagery in verses 3-4 that depicted an aging person. On the other hand, a broken well on its own, with no lamp reference, could also fit with an estate gone to ruin. Yet it should be noted that the sense of verse 6 is not mere deterioration but that life has come to an end—“total collapse,” as Expositor’s notes, with nothing working anymore.

The same commentary further notes on verse 6: “Another interpretation links the pictures with parts of the body. The silver cord could be the spine, the golden bowl the head, the pitcher the heart, and the wheel the organs of digestion.” Kaiser holds such a view, stating that “the spinal marrow connecting the brain and nerves is pale and silverlike,” that the golden bowl “may be a reference to the brain because of its shape and color,” that “the failing heart, a pitcher-like receptacle, is pierced or broken, and all the life-supporting blood flows out” and that “the system of veins and arteries that carries the blood around continually like a waterwheel breaks down when the heart breaks” (p. 121). This concurs with the notes on verse 6 in Adam Clarke’s Commentary. Yet understanding the imagery this way may be fanciful, as it isn’t clear that correspondence with particular body parts is intended. (There was apparently some correspondence earlier in the poem, as we saw, but not consistently throughout it.)

It seems best to take the first part of verse 6, about the cord and bowl, as referring to the precarious factors maintaining precious life giving way and leading to death, as earlier brought out. Likewise, the broken elements of the well seem to simply mean that the various systems and mechanisms that supply life to a person and perpetuate living, generally speaking, no longer function—with the waters of life no longer able to be drawn. Tommy Nelson sees all of verse 6 as associated with a well, but his words still apply even in considering the well imagery to be limited to the latter part of the verse: “Throughout Scripture, a well is a metaphor for life. But this well is no longer being used for drawing water. Someday your body is going to wear out. You will be nothing but a dry shell of your former self” (p. 188). This transitions naturally into all that is ultimately left, as stated in the next verse—dust.

Concluding the description of death that began at the end of verse 5, verse 7 states, “Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it.” Recall that verse 5 had mentioned man, or ha-adam, going to the grave. The name adam, having the sense of “red earth,” was given to the first man, as he was taken from the ground. And here we see man as dust returning to the earth. This is clearly an allusion to the Genesis account. Genesis 2:7 had stated, “And the LORD God formed [the] man [ha-adam] of the dust of the ground [ha-adamah], and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.” And later after man sinned, God said in Genesis 3:19 that he would have a hard life ending in death in these terms: “…till you return to the ground [ha-adamah], for out of it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust you shall return.” And here in Ecclesiastes 12:7 we see specific reference to the dust returning to the earth where it came from. Likewise we saw in
Ecclesiastes 3:20 that men and animals “all go to one place: all are from the dust, and all return to the dust.” And Scripture elsewhere mentions “the dust of death” and refers to those who die as “all those who go down to the dust” (Psalm 22:15, 29).

Yet there is more to human existence than earth-based dust. Again, Solomon says in Ecclesiastes 12:7 that at death “the spirit will return to God who gave it.” Because the word for “spirit” here, ṭūḥ, can mean spirit, wind or breath, some take the wording here as a further allusion to Genesis 2:7, where God breathed into the man of dust the breath of life. And indeed it does seem to be an allusion to that, but the word for breath in Genesis 2:7 is nēshāmā, the reference there being to the physical breath. Yet when God enlivened man He gave him more than just air into his respiratory system. He gave enlightenment to his brain through non-material spirit—referred to elsewhere in Scripture as the spirit in man or the human spirit, which gives a person human understanding (see Job 32:8; 1 Corinthians 2:11; and for more read our article “The Wondrous Spirit of Man” at ucg.org/members/united-news/the-wondrous-spirit-of-man).

This spirit is not like the wrong idea of an immortal soul that remains conscious apart from the body after death. We’ve already seen that consciousness requires bodily life—whether through the body today or a resurrection body in the future, there being no consciousness in death. Thus, the human spirit is not conscious of itself, but is rather a non-physical component that imparts conscious self-awareness, intellect and personality to the human brain—the spirit and brain together forming the human mind. And it seems that the human spirit retains a person’s thoughts and memories—so that the unique person is able to be restored in a future body in the resurrection. Recall that some translate Ecclesiastes 3:21 as not knowing whether the spirit in man goes up or down to the earth as with animals. Yet it can’t mean that, for we see here in 12:7 very clearly where the spirit goes. While the physical elements of man that were taken from the earth return to the earth, the spiritual element that came from God returns to Him (see also Luke 23:46; Acts 7:59).

We should recognize that Ecclesiastes 12:7 is meant to give us a sense of finality about the end of this life. It ends the verses describing the final act of dying (verses 5-7). It ends the masterful poetry of chapter 12 about the need to remember God before getting older and dying (verses 1-7). It draws to a close the current subsection about living joyfully while life lasts, keeping in mind coming dark days and death and ultimate judgment, setting up for the summation and conclusion to follow. In verse 7 we see that the very bases of this earthly life—material existence and the spirit for contemplating and navigating it—are withdrawn by the God who gave them, the Creator we were told to remember before this happened. The opportunity is only here for a while—and then it is over.

We’ll note something further about verse 7 in commenting on the next verse, verse 8, which is the last verse in our current reading—as well as the only verse in our next reading, verse 8 being a summation of the great problem we face. We’ll also take note of where we have arrived at this point in the book.

**All This Life Is So Much Frustration—Yet It’s Not All There Is (Ecclesiastes 12:8)**

Day 25

Having just detailed the decline of old age ending in death, Solomon concludes this segment in verse 8 with a declaration of vanity, as he did at the end of the two preceding segments (11:8, 10). Yet here he goes further, lamenting: “‘Vanity of vanities,’ says the Preacher, ‘All is vanity’” (12:8). In this particular phrasing he comes back to the very words that opened his entire discussion at the beginning of the book in Ecclesiastes 1:2 (following his initial introductory note in verse 1). So the segment closing here in 12:8 is doing double duty—as both a segment ending within this final subsection and as an overall concluding lament in context of all he’s discussed in the book. It thus declares vanity in what he has just covered concerning bodily decay and dying, particularly apart from remembering our Creator in youth. But, more than that, it declares all of this life under the sun to be one great vanity, recalling the opening lament of the whole work and the numerous declarations of vanity throughout its chapters up to this last, concluding time. Yet with all that he’s covered, why is the opening problem being repeated here? It might feel to some like being punched in the gut—or being kicked while we’re down. Again, why say this again at the end of the book? It could seem that we’re right back where we started from, with the argument of the book not having gotten very far—and yet of course it has.

Let’s recall that the word “vanity” is translated from the Hebrew hebel, meaning “breath” or “vapor.” And the phrase “vanity of vanities” could be rendered “thinnest of vapors.” There is an insubstantiality here—something very difficult to grasp or hold onto. Some view this in the sense of meaning fleeting—here today, gone tomorrow. The New Testament states: “For what is your life? It is even a vapor that...
appears for a little time and then vanishes away” (James 4:14). This certainly fits with life slipping away and coming to an end in the poetry we’ve just read. There also seems to be in the use of the term hebel a sense of worthlessness and emptiness—against the desire to find some profit or benefit from this life. But the vanity or vapor seems most typically in Ecclesiastes to have the sense of frustration, as attempts to fully understand or make sense of everything ultimately prove futile, another meaning of vanity. Efforts are frustrated, expectations are frustrated, hopes and plans are frustrated, everything in this life ends in frustration, with the ultimate frustration being the end of life and opportunity. This is something we need to really understand. We should never base our hopes and dreams in this world. We should never try to derive happiness from this world. This is not to say that there is no good to be found in this world—but finding it comes only through seeking something else, Someone else, beyond this world, and receiving the blessings that only He can give.

Consider that the frustration we see in this book is the worst for those who have failed to remember their Creator and have failed to properly experience life’s joys through Him, thus squandering their opportunity. Dr. Walter Kaiser writes, “How futile to have lived and not to have known the key to living! What a waste to have died without having enjoyed life or known what it was all about. That is the tragedy of tragedies; a great waste” (Ecclesiastes: Total Life, p. 122). We might also consider that Solomon may himself have been going through some of what he detailed in the poetry on aging, while now looking ahead to the end of this life and recalling his wayward years very somberly. No doubt he was still dealing with serious regrets. Thinking of how much of his own life he had wasted, we can almost envision him sighing in declaring it all so much immense frustration—as he possibly came to repent but would now have had no time to live out life and enjoy it as God intended. This does not, however, mean that Solomon’s words here are communicating hopelessness. None of us should be hopeless even if we are turning to God in later years. It is always worth it to repent and turn our lives over to God at whatever age—though it is of course far better to do so when we are young, the whole point of the poem we’ve just been going through. And realize that Solomon is apparently writing his treatise more for others than for himself—to help them learn to not make the terrible mistakes in life that he did and that he has observed in all he’s seen. (That being said, if he did come to repentance it seems odd that he would not declare that here as an example for others—unless he had already documented this in some other writing we have no record of. However, that leads us to ask why the repentance is not mentioned elsewhere in the biblical record. Perhaps it is because he did not remain repentant or retain his proper mind-set, as terrible as that would be.)

Beyond sighing over wasted life apart from God, there may be in the “vanity of vanities” lament of verse 8 and in much of the book a sense of catharsis—a purging of emotions by allowing them to well up, giving voice to them and enabling them to be faced so as to be dealt with. As we view the negative aspects of the world and our own problems, it is understandable that we would sigh and cry out about how awful it all is. It is not even healthy to keep it all stuffed down or pretend that everything is all okay. It is needed at times to give vent to frustration in saying how frustrating life is. Solomon did so, and we feel it right along with him as we read. Of course, we are not to be complainers (Philippians 2:14). But it is right to contemplate and be mournful over the plight of the world and ourselves. We see this in the Psalms concerning particular circumstances again and again. And here in Ecclesiastes we see it concerning the whole human condition. Alas—so much frustration. But this recognition is not to leave us still upset or in despair. It is so we can move past the grief and deal with life and even enjoy it as God intended. Remember that Solomon said to cheer up and has repeatedly encouraged us to receive God’s gifts joyfully.

The Preaching the Word commentary states on the return to the vanity declaration in verse 8: “We should not think, however, that the Preacher merely repeats himself. Ecclesiastes 12:8 does bring us back to the same place where we began, but we are not the same people. Reading Ecclesiastes has given us a bigger perspective on life. The Preacher has shown us how vain life is; so when we hear him make the same statement at the end of his book, it strikes us with much greater force” (Ryken, p. 274). We have indeed seen so much. In fact, maybe the best way to understand verse 8 at this stage of the book is in light of what Solomon has been showing us throughout the book about how worthless and frustrating this life is—apart from God. The same commentary further states, “What the Preacher mainly wants us to see is how meaningless life is without God, how little joy there is under the sun if we try to leave our Creator
out of his universe” (p. 275). Moreover, the book is not quite over yet. And as we’ll see, “‘vanity’ does not get the last word, either in the Bible or in the Christian life” (p. 275).

Some have argued that Ecclesiastes should properly end with the final vanity declaration of verse 8 (saying verses 9-14 were added later), so that the descriptions of death in the verses immediately preceding verse 8 would be the last things we were originally meant to contemplate. The idea is that the book is utterly hopeless in the face of inevitable death—that the message here is that this life is all there is. That the book is telling us to try to maybe grab a little pleasure because the course of life is: we live, we suffer, we die, we’re gone forever, too bad, so sad. But of course from everything we’ve seen in the book up to here, we should realize that this assertion does not make sense. Let’s even note the context of verse 8 in following verse 7. The statement in verse 7 that the human spirit returns to God shows there is more to come. The intent of verse 7, as we saw, is indeed to show finality—the end of opportunity. God gave life and now God takes it back. It’s over. However, the fact that the spirit goes back to God and is not destroyed from existence is a cause for hope—especially in light of the various places in the book that point to a future day when God will set things right. It will be reiterated in the actual conclusion of the book to follow (which is in fact labeled the conclusion, as we will see) that a day of judgment is coming. There will, in fact, be life beyond this life today under the sun.

Now, what we just read about dying in verses 5-7 could seem to present a hopeless picture—especially following a miserable depiction of growing old, and having discussed so many other problems of this life before that. But recall that the light is still sweet, and there remains life to rejoice in (11:7-8), especially as we contemplate eternity with our Creator. Consider the following words of the aged psalmist of Psalm 71, who was likely David, Solomon’s father—which would mean Solomon knew these words. These words of seeking God in hope and trust are for all of God’s people as we grow old:

“In You, O LORD, I put my trust…. Do not cast me off in the time of old age; do not forsake me when my strength fails…. O God, You have taught me from my youth; and to this day I declare your wondrous works. Now also when I am old and grayheaded, O God, do not forsake me, until I declare Your strength to this generation, Your power to everyone who is to come…. You, who have shown me great and severe troubles, shall revive me again, and bring me up again from the depths of earth. You shall increase my greatness, and comfort me on every side” (verses 1, 9, 17-21). May we all have this wonderful, trusting attitude as we near the end of this life.

Yet there’s something important we need to realize about the poem describing old age in Ecclesiastes 12. It actually points us to the present, as we are not dead yet—and in fact neither was the psalmist when he wrote the words above. He hoped in a future resurrection, yet his words were also meant metaphorically of God’s deliverance in this life. All of us today still have opportunity remaining in our present life under the sun, so we must make the most of it.

And when this life does finally end, we know that God’s promises endure. For those who trust in God, we know that He will raise us to eternal life with a new body—and then we will be, for time without end, forever young. In light of the image of a run-down house, consider what the apostle Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:1-4: “For we know that if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed with our habitation from heaven…. that mortality may be swallowed up by life.”

Thinking about a temporary structure to be ultimately replaced by a permanent home, we may recall the Feast of Tabernacles or Sukkot—the great harvest and thanksgiving festival observed by the Israelites with temporary dwellings, branches and fruit (Leviticus 23:33-34, 39-43)—during which the book of Ecclesiastes is read in Jewish synagogues and possibly the first occasion for Solomon proclaiming the words of this book to the people of Israel, as mentioned in our introduction. The Jews call this festival “the Season of Our Rejoicing,” because of the repeated commands to rejoice during it before God with food, wine and fellowship, having gathered in the produce of labor (Deuteronomy 16:13-15). We should observe the clear parallel with the repeated refrains in Ecclesiastes about enjoyment of these through God.

The festival also fits well with the fleeting nature of life today. Commentator James Limburg puts it well in Encountering Ecclesiastes: A Book for Our Time: “Sukkot is a celebration of the beauty of things that don’t last, the little hut which is so vulnerable to wind and rain…and will be dismantled at week’s end; the ripe fruits which will spoil if not picked and eaten right away; the friends who may not be with us
for as long as we would wish; and in northern climates, the beauty of the leaves changing color as they begin the process of dying and falling from the trees. Sukkot comes in the fall. Summer is over and sometimes the evenings are already chilly with the first whispers of winter. It comes to tell us that the world is full of good and beautiful things, food and wine, flowers and sunsets and autumn landscapes and good company to share them with, but that we have to enjoy them right away because they will not last. They will not wait for us to finish other things and get around to them. It is a time to ‘eat our bread in gladness and drink our wine with joy’ (Ecclesiastes 9:7), not despite the fact that life does not go on forever but precisely because of that fact. It is a time to enjoy happiness with those we love and to realize that we are at a time in our lives when enjoying today means more than worrying about tomorrow. It is a time to celebrate the fact that we have finally learned what life is about and how to make the most of it” (p. 123, emphasis added). Of course, in observing the Feast of Tabernacles, while we are learning to appreciate our many blessings today, we are also anticipating the permanence of life and joy yet to come. (To learn more about this great festival God gave and all His other biblical festivals, read our free study guide *God’s Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*.)

Finally, we should note here concerning the vanity declaration of Ecclesiastes 12:8 that in repeating the opening statement of the second verse of the book, Solomon bookends his work, thus forming a literary construction we’ve seen earlier—an inclusio, in this case spanning most of the book. He has basically brought his treatise to an ending climax, but this is followed by a summary of the intent behind the work and what we are intended to take away from it. Yet this conclusion will not end with what the book started with. Verse 8 was the last mention of vanity or frustration. The final response will be on how to face the problem, as pointed to in many of Solomon’s prior passages.

**Words of Truth From One Shepherd (Ecclesiastes 12:8-12) Day 26**

Now we move into the final verses of this masterful work. As we’ve seen, in Ecclesiastes 12:8 Solomon returns to his opening lament from 1:2, “‘Vanity of vanities,’ says the Preacher, ‘all is vanity,’” thus making most of the book, from 1:2 to 12:8, a literary inclusio. Starting and ending a work in similar fashion is a common technique in writing and public speaking even today, as papers and speeches start with an introduction culminating in a thesis or proposition being set forth, then give supporting material, then conclude beginning with a restatement of the initial thesis and leaving off with the value of what has been said. Another way this formula is described is as follows: tell them what you’re going to tell them; tell them; then tell them what you’ve told them. Solomon began by stating that this life is vanity, emptiness or frustration. He followed with a great deal of evidence to support this proposition. And then he restated it as clearly established. Solomon has certainly shown this life to be terribly vain or frustrating.

However, other key themes run through his work as well that help us to bear up under life’s difficulties and frustrations, which is actually the point of the book. These other themes are vital: that the vanity refers to life under the sun, while man and God are separated; that in the face of life’s vanity we need to receive everyday enjoyment of life through God; and that we need to live life in the proper fear of God, with focus on what is yet to come. Indeed, Solomon does not merely leave us with the restatement of the opening lament. Yes, it ends the presentation on the scope of the problem. Yes, it’s given as a climax in cathartic vent to how bad things are, as we earlier saw. Yes, it begins a conclusion to the work, serving as a transitional verse in that regard. But no, it does not leave us with hopelessness and nothing else to think about. And no, it is not even the principal focus of the conclusion, as we are left with something else for that in what follows. The real conclusion, we are told very directly in the last two verses, is to fear and obey God, keeping future judgment in mind (verses 13-14). We will give this important ending further consideration when we come to it in our next and final reading in Ecclesiastes.

Before the last verses, though, we must give attention to the first part of the book’s epilogue here in verses 9-12. We might note here a concentric, chiastic correspondence (a-b-...-b-a) with the opening of the book. Solomon began with an introductory note in Ecclesiastes 1:1 concerning his authorship: “The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.” He then in the next verse (1:2) gave the “vanity of vanities” declaration, as mentioned above. Now at the end of the book, we see in opposite order the restatement of the “vanity of vanities” declaration in 12:8 followed by concluding notes in verses 9-12 about Solomon’s role and credentials in the presentation of the book’s material and the context for it—why he wrote it as well as the ultimate Author behind the work, as we’ll see.
Some, as pointed out earlier, argue that the book originally ended with the vanity declaration of verse 8. They typically view the Preacher not as Solomon but some later wisdom teacher—and they suggest that verses 9-12 were appended by a disciple (and that verses 13-14 may have been added later still by a Jewish moralist wanting to give the book a more biblically normative ending). Part of the basis for this is the third-person description of the Preacher—yet we have seen this in other places, including the opening words of the book and even in the final vanity declaration of verse 8. That declaration refers to the Preacher in third person, so why must the third-person reference in verses 9-12 point to a new writer? Moreover, in addressing the reader or hearer as “my son” in verse 12, the words are clearly meant to be understood as coming from the teacher. Consider further that the use of “my son” in this fashion occurs 23 times in the book of Proverbs, principally a work of Solomon, in communicating words of wisdom (see Proverbs 1:8, 10, 15; 2:1; 3:1, 11, 21; 4:1, 10, 20; 5:1, 20; 6:1, 3, 20; 7:1; 19:27; 23:15, 19, 26; 24:13, 21; 27:11). Some will claim that this use of “my son” at the end of Ecclesiastes is a pretense to make it merely look like it’s coming from Solomon or the Preacher posing as him, but there is no legitimate reason to believe this. Another factor is the absence of similar epilogues in other biblical books, but many of the Bible’s books are unique in some way. And we do find parallels in other ancient literature. The NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible comments: “The use of an epilogue in a wisdom text is also known from Egyptian literature; epilogues appear, e.g., in the ‘Instruction of Ptahhotep’ and the ‘Instruction of Any.’ As such, there is no reason to regard the conclusion to Ecclesiastes as a secondary addition to the text, as a number of scholars do, or to see it as a ‘correction’ or contradiction of the gloomy realism of the rest of the book” (note on verses 9-14).

Let’s note the particular wording in this passage, starting with verse 9: “And moreover, because the Preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yes, he pondered and sought out and set in order many proverbs.” Another argument against the Preacher who was behind the earlier part of the book having also written the words of the epilogue here is that we would not expect him to be praising himself, saying, “Hey, I’m wise.” But that’s a mischaracterization of what he’s saying. Even if he were noting himself to be wise here, the context would just mean that he knew what he should do as his duty in this regard—continue to teach and gather wisdom to share. Yet verse 9 probably actually says, as it could also be translated, that the Preacher was a wise man or sage (NASB, NLV, HCSB, JPS Tanakh, Expanded Bible)—that is, one of the wise—referring to his role and responsibility. Thus he would not be calling himself wise here but simply a wisdom teacher. Dr. Walter Kaiser notes: “We would argue that...the term ‘wise’ marked him as a member of one of the three great institutions of his day: prophet, priest, and wise man (cf. Jer. 8:8-9; 18:18; Ezek. 7:26). The designation was a technical one, marking him a member of the wise to whom God gave wisdom, just as the priest had the Law and the prophet had the Word. Therefore, his claim is no sign that he lacked modesty, for it is a claim that the wisdom in Ecclesiastes came from God in a revelation, just as the prophet’s word also was given by divine inspiration” (Ecclesiastes: Total Life, p. 123). The source of the Preacher’s wisdom is stated more overtly in verse 11. Thus, what we read in verse 9 is that Solomon, after all of his investigation and coming to terms with the vanity of this life—probably even after having wasted many years in living contrary to God—now continued in his role as a wisdom teacher, recognizing it as his responsibility not just to rule as king, but to teach the people right knowledge and words of true wisdom to remember and pass on.

Verse 10 in the NKJV reads, “The Preacher sought to find acceptable words; and what was written was upright—words of truth.” In fulfilling his role, Solomon looked through troves of ancient wisdom literature and wrote a great deal of his own, seeking and putting together just the right words to communicate what was morally upright and true. The phrase “acceptable words” here can also be rendered, as pointed out in the Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, “pleasing words (literally) ‘words of delight’)... [Yet] his words are not so pleasing that they cease to be upright” (Eaton, note on verse 10). Kaiser comments: “There was a careful composing, investigating, and arranging of the proverbs and lessons he wrote. This was no haphazard spouting of negative thoughts in negative language [as many imagine of Ecclesiastes]. On the contrary, Solomon deliberately searched for ‘pleasant words,’ or ‘words of grace’ (12:10). In no way can that be a description of the work of a pessimist, nihilist, or Epicurean [hedonist] with an ‘eat-drink-and-be-merry-for-tomorrow-we-die’ mentality. Few passages in the Bible tell us more about the literary method used by the writer. His description removes all doubt about alleged hastiness of thought and expression. The result of his searching for the right words was that he
communicated “words of truth” and not trite remarks. He wrote in “uprightness,” that is, in perfect sincerity, without any pretense” (p. 123). And the next verse shows the words to be, as with other true wisdom, from the very Source of truth.

Verse 11 says, “The words of the wise are like goads, and the words of scholars are like well-driven nails, given by one Shepherd.” Again, “the wise” [hakamim, plural] denotes wisdom teachers. The parallel description for them, translated “scholars” here, is baalé asuppoth, literally meaning “masters of collections” or “masters of assemblies”—referring either to those skilled in gathering wisdom or to public speakers before audiences. This is close in meaning to Solomon’s self-designation in the book translated as “Preacher,” Qoheleth, meaning “gatherer”—again either a collector of wisdom or one who gathers an audience to address it. The “goads” mentioned here were, as Kaiser notes, “in pastoral life…wooden rods with iron points, used to prod the oxen into action or increased speed…. Accordingly, Qoheleth’s words are designed to prod the slugglish into action. They ‘goad’ him into doing something” (pp. 123-124). The New American Commentary adds that goads were “to keep cattle moving in the right direction and so serve to represent moral guidance and stimulus in human affairs” (Garrett, note on verse 11). Yet the words are not just meant to drive forward and keep in line but to keep some things fixed in place. The well-driven nails here could be tent pegs, as Kaiser comments, “used by shepherds to fasten their tents,” the words in parallel being “‘fastened’ as definite points in the sluggard’s [everyone’s] mental furnishings to give him anchorage, stability, and perspective on life” (pp. 123-124). The NKJV Study Bible says that “the nails, or ‘pegs,’ referred to here are the same as in 2 Chr[onicles] 3:9; Jer[emiah] 10:4. These are hooks in tents [or any home] where families hung the clothes and pots needed for everyday life. Here they refer to mental hooks giving stability and perspective to life” (note on Ecclesiastes 12:11). So what we see here is that the words serve multiple helpful purposes to the one who receives them: “At one time they are pricking his conscience, perhaps with a single proverb; at another time they are fixing themselves on the memory like a central nail on which the important, everyday articles of clothing or cooking are kept” (Kaiser, p. 124). Isaiah uses the image of a secure peg on which the valuables of a house were hung as a metaphor for the Messiah on whom the hopes of the nation were fastened (Isaiah 22:22-25).

At the end of Ecclesiastes 12:11 we are told where the goads and pegs—the words of wisdom—come from. They are “given by one Shepherd.” That is to say, they all come from the same Shepherd. Now it could be imagined that the Preacher is speaking of himself—having gathered so much wisdom from others and carefully culled and shaped what was valuable and then delivering this to his audience. A pastor, as he was acting as, was a type of shepherd of people. Also, he had identified himself at the beginning of the book as “king over Israel in Jerusalem” (1:1, 12)—clearly Solomon, as we’ve seen—and kings in the ancient world were often portrayed as shepherds. Scripture presents Israel’s leaders as shepherds. However, these were said to be shepherds over God’s flock, as He was the ultimate Shepherd (see Ezekiel 34)—Solomon having “sat on the throne of the LORD as king” over Israel (1 Chronicles 29:23). Consider, furthermore, that Solomon has not referred to himself as a shepherd but as Preacher or Gatherer up to now in the book, the previous two verses even still referring to him that way. As the Preaching the Word commentary states: “What seems more likely…is that the ‘shepherd’ is none other than God himself (which is why the term is capitalized in the English Standard Version and some other translations). This is the first time that the title ‘shepherd’ has appeared in Ecclesiastes, which seems to distinguish the Shepherd from the Preacher rather than to identify the two. Furthermore, ‘Shepherd’ is one of the noble titles for God in the Old Testament, not only in Psalm 23 but also in places like Psalm 80, where he is called ‘Shepherd of Israel’ (v. 1). Thus the ‘one shepherd’ in Ecclesiastes 12 is the one and only Shepherd—God Almighty” (p. 278). What we are being told in verse 11, then, is that the wisdom that is being communicated comes from God even if collected from others, as God is the real Author of wisdom and is the One causing it to be compiled and presented for the benefit of those receiving it.

Regarding the God-given words of the wise, verse 12 as rendered in the NKJV states: “And further, my son, be admonished by these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is wearisome to the flesh.” In saying, “my son,” Solomon could have been dedicating the book to his actual son who would be king after him, who would need to continue to teach and lead people in the right way—Rehoboam (who sadly, however, did not follow a very wise course). Yet it seems more likely that Solomon was here following the style of a wisdom teacher in addressing his students, as we earlier noted about many references in the book of Proverbs. In any case, the message was meant for everyone. The
first sentence here as translated seems to make sense by itself—take heed to these valuable words from God meant to help you. But how does this relate to the next sentence about endless books and wearisome study? One possibility is that emphasis should be placed on “these”—that is, be admonished or warned by these (the words just mentioned) rather than getting lost in all of this other material. In fact, there are two other ways to read the first part of the verse that yield a similar result, though the admonition or warning is against what follows. The verse literally reads: “And further from these my son be warned…” (see YLT). As The Expositor’s Bible Commentary (Wright) points out, this could mean, “And further than those [or beyond those]…be warned….” or it could mean, “And further [in addition], from those [or beyond those]…be warned…” (see footnote on verse 12). The NIV renders this, “Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them.” Whatever the exact translation, this seems to be the sense.

Expositor’s says that verse 12 is “a warning against the vast amount of literature that is a waste of time for the reader who is really concerned to find the truth. If we take the first sentence of v[erse] 12 as warning the disciple against going beyond the inspired words of the wise (NIV, RSV), this incorporates the theme of the book. In this world there will always be mystery, and human beings can fall into all sorts of error if they try to prove what cannot be proved (e.g., 3:11, 14; 7:14). There will always be books pouring off the presses, some helpful, some agnostic, some downright anti-God” (note on Ecclesiastes 12:12). It is indeed wearying to wade through what’s out there. And that was so in Solomon’s time, as he studied what was available then. What if he saw the huge bookstores and libraries that exist today—or all that is available on the Internet? Information overload can keep us from where our focus needs to be. On the other hand, the verse is not intended to dissuade us from valuable study outside of Scripture or the writing of books of whatever genre or discipline, including Christian books. The passage here was not telling wisdom teachers, for instance, to cease from their work of study and writing, but that they and everyone stand firm on what is truly wise, as given by God. Of course, even studying Scripture can be a problem if it’s just an academic pursuit or if the focus is all wrong. And actually, mere study is not what’s being warned against here. The New American Commentary notes on verse 12 that “the contrast is not between the study of canonical [i.e., scriptural] versus noncanonical wisdom but between the failure to appreciate wisdom on the one hand and excessive zeal for study on the other.” In fact, the NASB renders “much study” as “excessive devotion” to the many books being written. In “Ecclesiastes: An Old Testament Study,” Dr. Daniel Hill explains that the word here for study or “devotion is [lahag], used only here in the O[ld] T[estament] from a rare root meaning to worship study. This is not a mere love of reading, it is a devotion to or worship of reading and study…. a result of thinking that all answers to all questions can be found in what man writes. Solomon says this type of misplaced devotion can make you very tired. Remember Eccl[esiastes] 1:18: ‘Because in much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge results in increasing pain.’ The reason: Apart from what is revealed by God you will never get the answers you are seeking” (GraceNotes.info, note on verse 12). Consider those who, as the apostle Paul described, are “always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (2 Timothy 3:7).

Before moving on from Ecclesiastes 12:9-12, we should think more on what is given in the epilogue as the basis for the Preacher’s credentials. Dr. Hill writes: “Prior to giving his final verdict on the matter of significance in life, Solomon establishes why he can give this conclusion. Now the entire book shows us why he can say these things by way of experience, but his final appeal is not to experience [but rather to wisdom from God]. So [while one may] say experience is the best teacher, it is not. 1. The personal experience of failure can show us what is wrong, but it cannot show us what is right. 2. Experience can show us what doesn’t work, but it cannot show us what does work. 3. Experience is limited to that which is under the sun, earth-bound. 4. Experience may show one thing as better, but it cannot show us God’s absolute best. 5. Experience is similar to natural revelation; it shows us our inability, our weakness, our smallness. 6. Experience can show us that there is a God who is far beyond man, the Creator of man, an absolute Sovereign. But experience cannot lead us to God’s love and God’s wisdom. 7. Only the wisdom of God can bring us to the conclusion Solomon is about to make. Only doctrine [or teaching from God] and the wisdom that comes from it can allow us to live as God designed us” (note on verses 9-12).

“The Conclusion of the Whole Matter” (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14)

At last we arrive at the last two verses of the book, the culmination of the words of truth from God that Solomon has laid out. Here the book boldly proclaims, in no uncertain terms: “Let us hear the
conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man’s all. For God
will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil” (Ecclesiastes
12:13-14). Of course, in our previous study we have already turned here many times to see where
Solomon has been going with his argument. So we know this ending well. And with the declaring of this
to be the conclusion or end of the whole matter, it would seem to mean there is nothing more to say. Yet
that was only in terms of the work of this remarkable book being communicated to us. For us, there is still
more to think over and look into more deeply—and not just in our current study but as we move forward
and continue on with life.

Let us give attention, then, to what we’re told here. First, those who claim that a later moralist added
these verses to the end of the book must contend with the fact that what is said here is essentially said
multiple times earlier in the book. There is no evidence that the earlier statements were added, though
some try to argue that they were too. They actually fit very well in their contexts. So it makes sense that
Solomon did end his work with these verses as a summation of what he wanted to leave us with—and we
are assuming that for this commentary. And not only are these the last words of the book, but they are
directly labeled as the conclusion—these being the ultimate takeaway rather than the final vanity
declaration of verse 8.

On the first exhortation in this conclusion in verse 13, the Preaching the Word commentary points
out: “This is not the first time that Ecclesiastes has told us to fear the living God. To fear God is to honor
and revere him, to worship him as God [resulting from, it should be added, a humble and cautious awe of
His omnipotence and holiness and devoted care for us, leading us to be devoted to Him]. At various
points the Preacher has told us to fear God because his work is eternal (3:14) and because he demands
holy worship (5:7). He has told us to fear God in times of adversity as well as prosperity (7:14-18). He
has told us that if we do fear God, it will go well with us (8:12). Now we are told to fear God and to obey
him because one day we will stand before him in judgment’ (Ryken, p. 280). Fear is typically an enemy
of faith because it is misplaced. We may be held back from obedience to God out of fear of difficulties
and trials, fear of ridicule by others, fear of being subject to rules we don’t really want to live by, fear of
missing out on something we desire for ourselves, whether immediate gratification or long-term plans and
ambitions. If so, we are fearing the wrong things. We need to learn to fear God above everything else. As
Derek Kidner notes, “Fear God is a call that puts us in our place, and all other fears, hopes and
admiring in their place” (The Message of Ecclesiastes, p. 107).

We are further told to keep God’s commandments. It’s stated in the Tyndale Old Testament
Commentaries: “The order of the two points (fear...keep) is significant. Conduct derives from worship. A
knowledge of God leads to obedience; not vice versa” (Eaton, note on verse 13). Actually the end of the
last sentence here is not entirely true, as obedience to God leads to greater knowledge and understanding
(Psalm 111:10)—however, it is true that we would never initially obey without some knowledge of God.
So a knowledge and fear of God must come first. It’s further noted that “this is the only place 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” (same note). Of course, while it may seem a new thought
and a brief aside, the need to obey God’s commandments naturally follows the repeated command to fear
God, as this is what a person who truly fears God will do. The book has already told us that it’s best for
people to rejoice and “to do good in their lives” (Ecclesiastes 3:12), which as noted earlier would include
doing enjoyable things but also refers to living morally in obedience to God, since doing good equates to
not sinning and to being righteous (2:26; 7:20; 9:2). In fact, the book contrasted one who fears God with a
sinner who does evil (8:12), and a sinner is one who violates God’s laws, since sin is lawlessness (1 John
3:4). Several times the book has spoken, whether overtly or implicitly, of sin and wickedness—
commandment-breaking—as something to avoid (see Ecclesiastes 2:26; 5:6; 7:17, 20, 26; 8:12-13; 9:2,
18). In telling us to not disobey God, Solomon has been telling us to instead obey God—and now the
conclusion of his book specifically states, “Keep His commandments.”

In fact, this is what we are told to do throughout Scripture. “This phrase is found over 60 times in the
Bible” (Hill, note on 12:13). And in a number of places it’s directly linked, as here, with the fear of God.
In Deuteronomy 5:29, God said of the Israelites, “Oh, that they had such a heart in them that they would
fear Me and always keep all My commandments, that it might be well with them…” They were later told, and Solomon’s words might be a condensed form of this, as we’ll consider more shortly: “And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the LORD and His statutes which I command you today for your good?” (Deuteronomy 10:12-13). We see this in other passages too (6:2, 24; 8:6; 13:4; 31:12; 1 Samuel 12:14). It results in blessing and joy. Psalm 112:1 says, “Blessed is the man who fears the LORD, who delights greatly in His commandments.” And this wasn’t just for the Israelites. In the New Testament, the apostle Peter stated: “In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him” (Acts 10:35)—righteousness being obedience to God’s commandments (Deuteronomy 6:25; Psalm 119:172). The apostle Paul said we are to be “perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (2 Corinthians 7:1). Jesus Himself gave both directives, though not together in what’s recorded. He said on one hand not to fear people who can merely kill the body, but to properly fear Him who holds our very existence in His hands—“yes, I say to you, fear Him!” (Luke 12:5; see Matthew 10:28). And at another time He said, “If you want to enter into life, keep the commandments” (Matthew 19:17). Of course, His call to “repent, and believe in the gospel” was also a call to obedience and trust in God (Mark 1:15)—as was His instruction to “seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness” (Matthew 6:33), which would result in all earthly needs being met.

After telling us to fear God and keep His commandments, the last part of Ecclesiastes 12:13 says, as rendered in the NKJV, “for this is man’s all.” The earlier King James Version said, “for this is the whole duty of man.” What is actually meant here? The Hebrew here says that this is kol-ha-adam. The word kol means “all, the whole,” and can have the sense of “totality, everything” or “any, each, every, anything” (Brown Driver Briggs, H3605, e-Sword software). And ha-adam, with the definite article as noted before, can have the sense of “the man” or “the man(kind)” used in a plural sense—the word deriving from the first man, who was named Adam. We should note that the phrase kol-ha-adam occurs earlier in Ecclesiastes. In 3:13 we’re told “that every man [kol-ha-adam] should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labor.” In 5:19 we’re told that “every man [kol-ha-adam] to whom God has given riches and wealth” and power to enjoy receives God’s gift. And in 7:2 we’re told that a funeral is “the end of all men [kol-ha-adam].” Notice that in all of these cases, the Hebrew wording could be rendered with any of these phrases: “all of mankind” or “all men” or “every man.” Yet in none of these preceding verses can it mean the whole of what constitutes or pertains to a singular man or mankind generally. The Keil and Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament notes on 12:13 “that kol-haadam never signifies the whole man, and as little anywhere the whole (the all) of a man. It signifies either ‘all men’…as at Ecc 7:2…or… ‘every man’…as at Ecc 3:13; Ecc 5:19… We shall thus have to translate [12:13]: ‘for this is every man’”—or, perhaps, “for this is all mankind.” Tyndale agrees: “The sense, therefore, is ‘This applies to everyone’” (note on verse 13). That would mean the directive to fear God and keep His commandments is not just for Israel but is a universal law for all mankind. A number of Bible versions give this sense (see Amplified, CEB, Fenton, GW, HCSB, JPS Tanakh, NAB Revised, NASB, NCV, NIRV, NIV, NLT, NRSV, TLV, Voice).

Yet it should be noticed that there is a difference between the use of the phrase kol-ha-adam in verse 13 and its uses in the earlier verses. None of the earlier cases are saying that something IS the all or whole of man (there is no actual word for “is” in the Hebrew here, but it has to be interpolated for the verse to make sense in English). Since the usage is different, and since there is no “for” or “to” before all or the whole of man, we may understand kol-ha-adam here as a construct chain wherein an “of” is understood—that is, “the all-[of] man.” Thus it’s possible that the verse can legitimately be translated, as in the NKJV and the earlier New American Bible, “man’s all.” This could have the sense of all that man is given to do, as in the KJV’s “the whole duty of man” (see also ArtScroll Stone Tanach, ASV, BRG, ESV, EXB, GNV, JB, LEB, TLB, MEV, NET, OJB, REB, RSV, WEB). Or it could mean all that human beings consist in or were created for, as other translators prefer (see CJB, CEV, GNT, ISV, NEB). The “whole duty” would correspond well with the passage in Deuteronomy 10:12-13, quoted above, where the Israelites were asked what God required of them except to fear Him, walk in His ways, love Him and serve Him, and keep His commandments. And it could well be that Solomon was giving a shortened form of this passage—yet in this case, too, the application would be to not just Israel but all mankind. The New
American Commentary, however, takes the phrase in the latter sense, interpreting as follows: “‘Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole of humanity.’ To obey God is to be truly human. Throughout his book the Teacher has investigated the situation of ‘Adam. Now, surprisingly, he affirms that the whole of humanity consists not in its mortality or ignorance but in its dependence on God [and in following Him]. And yet the conclusion is not surprising. It not only flows naturally from all that has gone before but is the book’s final look at Genesis 2–3. Humanity sought to become like God in disobeying him, but instead they lost the one thing that made them truly human” (Garrett, note on verses 13-14). We should remember in this light that Solomon earlier stated that “God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes” (Ecclesiastes 7:29). God’s purpose for man was to produce children in His own image—not just in outward form and likeness, but in inner character. We are to fear and obey God because, as the Contemporary English Version renders the last part of 12:13, “this is what life is all about.” It might even be said that this is what makes human life complete. There’s a further aspect to this matter of “man’s all” we’ll consider shortly.

Now some will object to the focus here on commandments, seeing this as some kind of legalistic expression and forced submission and wonder why there is no appeal to love as the ideal in this grand conclusion. We should understand that love is the supreme principle behind God’s commandments as a whole. The passage quoted above from Deuteronomy 10:12-13 about fearing God and obeying His commandments includes the command to love and serve God with all our heart and being. Indeed, the foremost commandments of God are the two great commandments on which all the law hangs, as Jesus explained—to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves (Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:35-40; Mark 12:28-31). The Ten Commandments show us how we are to love God and neighbor. In fact, Paul said that love is fulfilling the law (Romans 13:10). And the apostle John said, “For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome” (1 John 5:3). Thus, fearing and obeying God IS love—and, no, it’s not some oppression-driven drudgery. Rather, as was already pointed out above, Psalm 112:1 says that people are blessed and are able to find delight in fearing God and keeping His commandments. Furthermore, God’s laws bring true freedom (Psalm 119:45; James 1:25), liberating us from ways that bring harm to others and to ourselves—the whole problem with our world. Moses said “to observe...all the words of this law. For it is not a futile [empty or worthless] thing for you, because it is your life, and by this word you shall prolong your days” (Deuteronomy 32:46-47). This sounds similar to “for this is man’s all.” Against the vanity and frustration of this world, God has given us what is not futile—His laws. And this is the basis of a positive relationship with Him and fellow man.

Of course, the need to love God was not a foreign concept to Solomon. His father David had written, “Oh, love the LORD, all you his saints!” (Psalm 31:23). Yet the end of Solomon’s book here specified the commandments—as David often did too. These include and express love, but we should also note that in speaking directly of commandments the conclusion of Ecclesiastes leaves no ambiguity about what is meant. Reference to commandments shows we are not to determine this for ourselves. Love can be interpreted in various ways, and people may believe they are showing love in their feelings and actions while they are actually being contrary to God. True love is based on living by what God says to do. From a general command to love we could probably exercise reason to show kindness to another person to a certain extent. But how could someone without any knowledge of God’s laws come up with Sabbath worship as showing love to God without His revelation that this is what we should do? A foreigner in Solomon’s day hearing a general exhortation to love God might have been able to come up with ways to express that—but of course the various methods would not be enough and might well be egregious disobedience to God. Yet in hearing the more specific directive to keep God’s commandments, the response would naturally be: What commandments are these? And that would lead to seeking where these may be found.

That brings us to another vital point here—all of us need God’s revelation on how to worship and obey Him. We cannot obey God’s commandments and grow in His ways out of our own innate senses with no knowledge of Him and His will. To obey God’s commandments we have to know them. And to know them we have to know what God has revealed. In fact, to have a proper fear of Him and to learn to trust Him, we need the revelation of His Word, Holy Scripture. It is only here that we can make sense of our world and learn the right way to think and what to do. The previous verses just mentioned the
As was noted in the Bible Reading Program comments on Job 28, man cannot use his technological genius to find the true wisdom of God. It can’t be found through natural exploration (verses 1-14). “But where,” the passage continues, “can wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding? Man does not know its value, nor is it found in the land of the living” (verses 12-13). This treasure can’t be bought (verses 15-19). For, as Job explains, true wisdom comes only from God (verses 20-23). “And to man He said, ‘Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to depart from evil is understanding’” (verse 28). This is the very way Job himself had been described by God, as one who feared God and shunned evil (1:8). And it’s an exact parallel to the conclusion of Ecclesiastes—to fear God and keep His commandments. This is the path to true wisdom and understanding. Thus, if we really want to grasp the dilemma that Ecclesiastes has been dealing with—if we want to have any inkling of what of it, here is the way. And yet for now, we still can’t see everything. As Dr. Walter Kaiser notes, having pointed to Job 28: “To the degree that God reveals His plan to believers, to that degree only are they able to apprehend that much of the plan of God. Yet there is still mystery left. Only God knows entirely; we mortals know only in part” (Ecclesiastes: Total Life, p. 93). Yet this is fine, as we learn to trust God to help us and to guide things to the ultimate purpose He is working out in us and in all the world. As Solomon elsewhere wrote, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and understanding (Proverbs 1:7; 9:10; see also Psalm 111:10). And here at the close of his later work of Ecclesiastes, we find that the fear of the Lord is also the end—the conclusion of the whole matter.

Something else the conclusion here accomplishes is that it answers the opening question of the book. Recall that the prologue of the book was found in the first three verses (1:1-3). The first verse introduced the Preacher. The second verse set the tone of much that would follow with his “vanity of vanities” declaration. And in the third verse he asked, “What profit has a man from all his labor in which he toils under the sun?” (verse 3). That is, what benefit or advantage could be gained in living this life—against the emptiness and worthlessness of this life as a vapor? Solomon saw no profit or real and lasting value in what his own hands had wrought (2:11). He revisited the question a few times (2:22; 3:9; 5:16). He had asked this question in a seemingly hopeless way, as if to say, “What is the point of living?” Yet he did find profit in wisdom, despite its limitations in this life (2:13; 7:12; 10:10). Now at the end of the book the Preacher has repeated the “vanity of vanities” declaration regarding this life (12:8). This is followed by more details on his writing of the work, giving God the ultimate credit for wisdom and its communication here (verses 9-12). Then in 12:13 his book essentially sets forth the profit or benefit to be found in life—and it could be that “man’s all” or “the whole of man” is meant in this context. That is to say, all that man has as benefit (this being the further aspect of this matter of “man’s all” noted above to be considered shortly). And, though it’s not directly stated, the profit or benefit gained is essentially again said to be found in wisdom—true wisdom and all it entails, for, as pointed out above, the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom, and keeping His commandments is the path of understanding. Kaiser notes: “What is the ‘profit’ of living? What does a man get for all his work? He gets the living God! And his whole profit consists of fearing Him and obeying His Word” (p. 125)—and, it should be added, the great blessing and delight that results in, as we’ve seen (Psalm 112:1). In fearing and obeying God it will be well for us (Deuteronomy 5:29; Ecclesiastes 8:12), leading to prolonged days and being preserved alive, being for our good always (Deuteronomy 6:2, 24; Proverbs 10:27). Moreover, “those who fear Him lack nothing” (Psalm 34:9, NIV). Indeed, they have everything they need in this life (Matthew 6:25-34) and will ultimately have everything period (Revelation 21:7). Remember that Solomon said early on in Ecclesiastes that “God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy to a man who is good in His sight; but to the sinner He gives the work of gathering and collecting, that he may give to him who is good before God” (2:26). Ultimately the wicked will be gone and have nothing, as all will go to the righteous who fear God.
and keep His commandments (compare also Proverbs 10:28-30). This is the only way to true happiness, Solomon having also written, “Happy is he who keeps the law” (Proverbs 29:18). This includes experiencing all the earthly joys Solomon has commended throughout the book, as God gives His people the means to truly enjoy them as His gift. And an important part of being able to fully enjoy them is to keep them in the context of trusting God now and for eternity that is in His hands. We are later promised, “The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever” (1 John 2:17, NIV). Thus, again, the real profit or advantage in living is in fearing and obeying God, which will lead to blessing and joy forever.

Indeed, in its repeated refrain Ecclesiastes has told us again and again to rejoice in the everyday gifts and physical blessings God gives. Yet even when these are diminished, there is still always much to rejoice in with regard to our relationship with God and the future He offers us. As the prophet Habakkuk states in the hymn of faith that ends his book: “Though the fig tree may not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines; though the labor of the olive may fail, and the fields yield no food; though the flock may be cut off from the fold, and there be no herd in the stalls—yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation. The LORD is my strength; He will make my feet like deer’s feet, and He will make me walk on my high hills” (Habakkuk 3:17-19). Nehemiah 8:10 further assures us, “Do not sorrow, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.” God gives us abundant reasons for joy all through our lives today. Yet the greatest joy still awaits—when our lifetime of rightly fearing and lovingly obeying God, with ongoing repentance when we fall short, leads to these words we took note of earlier: “Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord” (Matthew 25:21). This is where following the conclusion of Ecclesiastes will take us. As David had written in Psalm 16:11, “You will show me the path of life; in your presence is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.” So there will be joy for eternity to come. Of course, knowing this gives us even more reason for rejoicing in the here and now.

And then we must further consider the last verse of Ecclesiastes. Observe that the conclusion does not end with the directive to fear God and keep His commandments or with the value of doing so. Rather, we are reminded of something else in the last verse that will help us to fear and obey God—a last attention getter to keep us on the alert and urgent about our own condition, the final verse stating, “For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil.” As with the directive to fear God, this is not the first time Ecclesiastes has told us to keep in mind God’s coming judgment. As we saw above, Solomon said in 2:26 that the sinner would have to give everything to the righteous. He said specifically in 3:17, after witnessing injustice and sin, that “God shall judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time there for every purpose and every work.” He said in 8:12-13, also cited above, that it would be well with the righteous but not with the wicked, whose days would not be prolonged. And in 11:9, in the last subsection before the epilogue, he told the young to enjoy life, though again stating specifically, “But know that for all these God will bring you into judgment.” That is, we are to temper whatever choices we might make with this important reality check.

It should be mentioned that some commentators do not believe that ultimate future judgment is intended in Ecclesiastes 12:14, since it just says “judgment” and not “the judgment,” with the definite article. They believe that judgment here and the earlier mentions just refer to God’s ongoing judgment in this life. It certainly is true that there is ongoing judgment through this life. This may have been in mind in Ecclesiastes 5:4-6, where Solomon stated that if we fail to live up to our stated commitments, God could be angry with us and destroy our works. Of course, much of God’s judgment is an ongoing evaluation and may not involve immediate chastening. God is regularly judging what we do and calling us to change and helping us to do so. God had an ongoing judgment of Israel and Judah nationally, and he sent prophets to call them on their disobedience, and He sometimes brought needed punishment. For God’s spiritual people today, His Church, we are told that “the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God” (1 Peter 4:17). Again, this judgment is ongoing. But clearly God has also spoken throughout Scripture of a period of future judgment beyond this age. In Ecclesiastes, judgment in this age could conceivably be intended in the noted time for God to judge in 3:17 and in God’s judging a young man’s works in 11:9—but ultimate future judgment would fit in these cases just as well, perhaps better.

We should especially consider God setting things right in 2:26, with the sinner losing all to the righteous, and in 8:12-13, with the righteous coming to good and the wicked not being prolonged, after
Solomon had lamented the wicked being prolonged and the righteous dying early as the vanity of this world. This could only refer to a righting of wrongs beyond the time of this world as part of God’s future judgment. And it seems likely that the final verse in the book must be looking ahead to that same time. The definite article is not necessary to designate that here, stating, “God will bring every work into the judgment.” This would be an odd way to say that God will judge every work. We might imagine something more like: “God will bring every work into judgment in the judgment.” But of course that is unnecessary. Thus the simpler wording we have, “God will bring every work into judgment,” can well apply to the judgment yet to come. Yet it’s of course also possible that ongoing judgment and evaluation in this life is intended on one level, with an eye to final determination in the future being also implied.

Note further that God will judge every secret or hidden thing, whether good or evil. Hebrews 4:13 likewise says that “there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.” Jesus also said, “But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment” (Matthew 12:36). Paul too spoke of “the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel” (Romans 2:16)—and when “the Lord comes, who will judge the world, the souls of men and the powers of the heavens” (Romans 14:10). This is noted in Jewish Bibles. But judgment from God is likewise said that “there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the day of judgment” (1 Corinthians 4:5). And Paul further writes: “Therefore we make it our aim…to be well pleasing to Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad” (2 Corinthians 5:10). The last phrase here is essentially the same as that in Ecclesiastes 12:13, “whether good or evil.”

The Preaching the Word commentary brings some good perspective on why Ecclesiastes ends on this note about judgment: “Why does Ecclesiastes tell us about the final judgment here? Because it means that everything matters. The Preacher began and ended his spiritual quest by saying that everything is vanity and that without God there is no meaning or purpose to life. ‘Is that all there is?’ he kept asking. ‘Isn’t there more to life than what I see under the sun?’ If there is no God, and therefore no final judgment, then it is hard to see how anything we do really matters. But if there is a God who will judge the world, then everything matters… At the final judgment, it will matter how we used our time, whether we wasted it on foolish pleasures or worked hard for the Lord. It will matter what we did with our money, whether we spent it on ourselves or invested it in the eternal kingdom. It will matter what we did with our bodies—what our eyes saw, our hands touched, and our mouths spoke. Whether we obeyed our father and mother will matter; so will the look we gave them and the little comment we made as we were walking away. What we did for a two-year-old will matter…. What we said about someone’s performance will matter… The proud boast and the selfless sacrifice will matter. The household task and the homework assignment will matter. The cup of water, the tear of compassion, the word of testimony—all of it matters. The final message of Ecclesiastes is not that nothing matters but that everything does. What we did, how we did it, and why we did it will all have eternal significance. The reason everything matters is because everything in the universe is subject to the final verdict of a righteous God who knows every secret” (p. 281).

Of course, this can seem quite ominous. In fact, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary points out that “the Jews did not like ending a reading with a word of judgment, and in public they repeat verse 13 after verse 14. They follow the same practice at the end of Isaiah and Malachi [and Lamentations].” The definite article is not necessary to designate that here, stating, “God will bring every work into the judgment.” This would be an odd way to say that God will judge every work. We might imagine something more like: “God will bring every work into judgment in the judgment.” But of course that is unnecessary. Thus the simpler wording we have, “God will bring every work into judgment,” can well apply to the judgment yet to come. Yet it’s of course also possible that ongoing judgment and evaluation in this life is intended on one level, with an eye to final determination in the future being also implied.

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spiritually converted, thereby receiving a deepened spiritual understanding and direct help from God in material affairs. The Spirit of God actually indwelt him, while God Himself was in him to impart certain spiritual knowledge as he no doubt learned from his father and from those who were near to God. In any case, it's certainly true that a person as gifted as Solomon was, even with the brilliance and wisdom God gave him, can still depart from God in building pagan temples, it seems likely that he was never truly spiritually converted. Despite the brilliance and wisdom God gave him, far Solomon departed from God in building pagan temples, it seems likely that he was never truly spiritually converted from God. We would hope for the former, but other possibilities exist. We cannot say for certain, and the Bible does not give us any hint. But other possibilities exist. As Ecclesiastes 7:20 told us, “For there is not a just man on earth who does good and does not sin” (compare Romans 3:23). So we might look at the conclusion of Ecclesiastes and still despair. Obey God! Easier said than done! Indeed, Paul said that the corrupted human mind is hostile to God and cannot obey Him (Romans 8:7). And even those who have been converted to and are growing in God’s way still struggle against sin (see Romans 7; 1 John 1:8, 10). But there is good news. God wants to save us and make us part of His family forever. He wants to extend to us His great mercy, and “mercy triumphs over judgment” (James 2:13). A vital key is that we must repent—turn our lives away from sin and back to obeying God—and we must continue to repent when we falter. Moreover, we must have faith toward God and receive the basis on which the forgiveness of our disobedience is made possible—the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. But this is not so that we may continue in sin. We must truly live in obedience to God. It is not enough just to know what we ought to do. We must also do it. As Paul wrote, “For not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified” (Romans 2:13; compare James 1:22). Yet it remains a challenge, and we could never succeed on our own. We need the Father and Christ living in us through the Holy Spirit to be able to continue in obedience to God. And even then we still get tripped up in sin, as already mentioned. So we must continue to repent, striving with God’s help through Christ to persevere. And as long as we do not walk away from this salvation process, we will ultimately be ushered into eternal life in God’s coming Kingdom. Paul said that he was “confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6). (To learn more, please send for or download our free study guide Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion.)

Of course, this wonderful truth and process was not yet fully revealed in Solomon’s time—though it appears the biblical patriarchs and prophets understood it to an extent. Yet even in that day, God had often called on His people to repent and be restored to a relationship with Him, to seek and receive His mercy and forgiveness. Eventually they would come to understand that the One who would ultimately judge the sins of mankind would Himself come as a man to die in payment of those sins (see John 5:22, 26-27). And then, risen from the grave, He would go on to help us to obey God’s law for the great blessings that would lead to. No, God is not some harsh, stern judge. The Father and Christ are the epitome of love (1 John 4:8, 16). And this is the character they want us to build to be like Them—the character revealed in God’s wonderful commandments.

And so, as the Tyndale commentary ends: “We leave the Preacher there. His message is not complete, for he lived before the full light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He saw ‘afar off,’ and still leaves us with some questions. How can God accept us in such a way? What is the explanation of the hideous mess of this world? On what grounds can he feel confident that some future judgment will put it all right? Is there not a missing link in all this? [Yes.] The missing link is Jesus Christ the Son of God.”

As for Solomon personally, we do not know whether he ultimately turned to God in heartfelt repentance or if he went back to his spiral into immorality and idolatry. We would hope for the former, but other biblical history would seem to indicate the latter, as horrible as that would be. Considering how far Solomon departed from God in building pagan temples, it seems likely that he was never truly spiritually converted. Despite the brilliance and wisdom God gave him, and God using him to communicate valuable spiritual truth, it may well be that Solomon never had the Holy Spirit within him, as his father David did. In any case, it’s certainly true that a person as gifted as Solomon was, even with certain spiritual knowledge as he no doubt learned from his father and from many others and even from God Himself—even having the Holy Spirit with him and guiding him to a degree —would not, without the Spirit of God actually in him, be able to endure in righteousness, especially while having such great material wealth and power. The fact is, all of us need Christ living in us through the Holy Spirit to be spiritually converted, thereby receiving a deepened spiritual understanding and direct help from God in
resisting sin and developing godly character. It is that spiritual help that will further enable us to endure in this process to the end of our physical lives to ultimately receive true salvation from sin and death and the sorrows of this age, the gift of abundant life and joy with perfect loving character in the family of God for all eternity.

The apostle Paul will answer the cry in Ecclesiastes of “All is vanity” in 1 Corinthians 15:54-58: “So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’ ‘O Death, where is your sting? O Hades [the grave], where is your victory?’ The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law [as we’ve broken it and earned its penalty of death]. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.” It is Christ’s victory that gives us victory over this life’s vanity.

In the face of the vanity and trials of this life, Paul further said in Romans 8:18-21: “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility [to vanity or frustration], not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God.” What an awesome day that will be. This is why it will all have been worth it. Moreover, God will wipe away all tears from our eyes (Revelation 21:4), and we will no longer “see through a glass, darkly,” but will have perfect understanding (1 Corinthians 13:12, KJV). Then, all that we have had to endure through this life will at last make perfect sense. As the Scottish Bible teacher Oswald Chambers noted in 1917 on the oppression of tyranny in Ecclesiastes 4:1-3, “There will come one day a personal and direct touch from God when every tear and perplexity, every oppression and distress, every suffering and pain, and wrong and injustice will have a complete and ample and overwhelming explanation” (“Shade of His Hand: Talks on the Book of Ecclesiastes,” The Complete Works of Oswald Chambers, 2000, p. 1,280). Until then, we soldier on, as Paul wrote: “Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at things which are seen, but at things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

With the victory we have through Christ, knowing that our labor is not in vain in Him and that what we go through now will all have been worth it in the end, we can truly follow the repeated recommendation of Ecclesiastes to enjoy life today. As Paul said in Philippians 4: “Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!... Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (verses 4, 6).

And now, having finished our reading of the Old Testament, we stand ready to move ahead to the background and story of Christ’s life and teachings in the New Testament—teachings that answer in a more complete way the great quandaries raised in this book, showing us the way to fear God and keep His commandments and find ultimate joy as His immortal children in His family and Kingdom without end.