

Seven Bible Studies 2017

Poetry

October 26: Ecclesiastes 1-2 (Kevin Crittenden)

Week 43

Poetry Reading for 10/26/17

Ecclesiastes 1-2

Ecc. 1:1-2 The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

2 Vanity, of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

Good morning, All!

In answer to a steadily diminishing number of requests, I've been asked to remind folks of the reading for Ecclesiastes over the next few weeks. Which activity, on the face of it, according to the Preacher, is essentially meaningless. I mean, you've all already read Ecclesiastes. Probably many times. So why bother? Is there anything new, under the sun, to be gained?

We shall see.

I am using as a guide, "Ecclesiastes – Why Everything Matters," by Philip Graham Ryken.

Ecclesiastes is the third of the OT books in the category of wisdom, after Job and Proverbs. Its central character is named Qohelet, which can be translated as "the Teacher." However, "Preacher" may be a better translation. The Hebrew root of the word "qoheleth" literally means "to gather, collect, or assemble." So this refers to the gathering or assembly of a community of people, especially for the worship of God. Therefore, Qohelet is not so much a classroom teacher but more like a church pastor. He is preaching wisdom to a gathering of the people of God.

For our purposes, we can assume that Qohelet is Solomon, the wisest man that has ever lived, although there were probably at least 1,000 women that might, from time to time, have questioned that. As with many things, the authorship and the date are in question but the message of Ecclesiastes is probably best served by assuming Solomon wrote it.

This book honestly and painstakingly details the struggles that Qohelet had in his life, capturing the futility and frustrations of a fallen world. It is honest about the drudgery of work, the injustice of government, the dissatisfaction of foolish pleasure and the soul-sucking tedium of everyday life – "the treadmill of our existence." Think of Ecclesiastes as the only book of the Bible written on a Monday morning with only decaf coffee and no doughnuts.

It is a cautionary tale, exploring the problems that beset us if we choose what the world has to offer instead of what God has to give. Qohelet had more wisdom, more money, more pleasure, more power, more opportunities than any of us ever will. And yet, without God, it all boils down to a big "Meh."

Taxi drivers like to boast about the famous people they carry in their cabs. A story is told about one such taxi driver who said, "I had the philosopher, Bertrand Russell, in my cab the other day. I said to him, 'Bertie! What's it all about then?' Do you know, he couldn't tell me!"

So why go to the bother? Qohelet did not have to examine any of this stuff. He could have easily gone along through life, as many of us do, commuting to work (he built palaces and vineyards), eating fast food (he had frequent feasts), and watching Cheers, SNL, TMC and football (he enjoyed getting married; probably got lots of toasters and crockpots).

But he wanted, I believe, to educate his kids. We, too, having graduated from the school of Hard Knocks, want to pass along our experiences to our own kids so they don't have to make the same mistakes. Ecclesiastes, then, is Qohelet's way of passing his painfully learned wisdom along to his kids and, incidentally, to us. He is saying, "Why make your own mistakes when you can learn from an expert in misguided living like me?"

Hint: Don't be a bigamist! (A large cloud bank over Italy.)

Ecclesiastes also tackles some of the biggest questions that people have today. "What is the meaning of life? Why am I so unhappy? Does God really care? Why is there so much suffering and injustice in the world? Is life really worth living?" (Note: I, perhaps naïvely, like to believe that people wrestle with these questions on some level. Maybe that is the optimistic part of me.)

Derek Kidner writes about Qohelet: "Wisdom is his base camp, but he is an explorer. His concern is with the boundaries of life, and especially with the questions that most of us would hesitate to push too far."

Ecclesiastes also helps us worship the one true God, presenting Him as the Mighty Creator and Sovereign Lord, the transcendent and all-powerful ruler of the universe. The book teaches us how to live for God and not just for ourselves, providing us with principles needed to build a God-centered worldview.

This is a book for people unsure of WHAT to believe or not believe. It is a book for skeptics and agnostics who have embarked on an honest quest for the meaning of life, who are open to the idea of God but unsure of the Bible. Ecclesiastes can serve as a back door for believers who are wavering in their faith, as well as a gateway for some people to enter a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, a relationship that leads to eternal life.

And, therefore, it becomes the most important book that they have ever read.

What does Job say? We remember:

Job 28:28 "And he said to the human race, 'The fear of the Lord – that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding.'"

What is the message that Psalms enforces? Steven Wright just guided us through:

Psalms 111:10 "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding. To him belongs eternal praise."

What does Proverbs tell us? It says to us:

Prov 9:10-12 "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding."

And what will Ecclesiastes conclude? Can you guess?

Ecc 12:13 Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter:
Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind.

Do you see a common thread here?

The beginning of wisdom AND the conclusion of wisdom is the same.

We are reading Chapters 1 and 2 this week and right from the git-go, Qoheleth says that all is vanity. All what?

“All is vanity” says the Preacher. What is meant? The Hebrew word “hevel” refers to a breath or vapor, like smoke rising from the fire. Life is like that; ephemeral, elusive and enigmatic. It is transitory; fleeting.

James 4:14 yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.

(It rather tickles me that the modern concept of “quantum foam” is much like this mist.)

So the Preacher is alluding partly to the transience of life.

Ecc 1:4 Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever.

Used elsewhere in the book, “hevel” expresses the absurdity and futility of life in a fallen world. Thus, the Preacher can be thought of as saying “All is meaningless!”

Note that he says “all.” Not “some” or “most.” “All is vanity.” All of human existence is empty, pointless, useless and absurd.

Qoheleth had the wherewithal to pursue wisdom in all areas – money, pleasure, knowledge and power. And not only the wherewithal but the desire to do it.

Some people try to find meaning in their knowledge and intellectual prowess, but:
Ecc 1:18 For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.

Some people lose themselves in hedonism, or become workaholics or seek power by climbing the corporate ladder or going into politics. Or, even treating their spouses like chattel.

The advice given to those who are feeling down is to watch a funny movie. “Laughter is the best medicine” is advice that all of us are familiar with. I, myself, hope to develop a sense of humor someday.

However, much humor today is at the expense of others or makes liberal use of profanity and does not honor God. Henny Youngman’s famous one-liner “Take my wife . . . please!” is an example. How would you, as his wife, feel about this “humor?”

Is all humor bad? No. An example is from Proverbs, speaking of the wife of noble character:
Prov 31:25 Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come.

Qoheleth tried humor as well, found that life is no laughing matter and concluded in Eccl 2:2 - I said of laughter, "It is mad," and of pleasure, "What use is it?"

He tries alcohol, spending time with his friends Jack Daniels, Jim Beam and Old Grand Dad. Eccl 2:3 I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine—my heart still guiding me with wisdom—and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life.

How many people do you know who lubricate their way through life's troubles with a stiff drink or four? Rather than confronting the problems they face by sharing them with God and using His guidance, they crawl into a bottle. However, Qoheleth probably wasn't going on a pub crawl or drinking himself insensate. After all, he says that his heart was still guiding him with wisdom. Solomon also wrote:

Prov 20:1 Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise.

He probably was either a dilettante or a connoisseur of fine wines, using them to enhance the pleasures of the palate.

His reference to "the few days of their lives" at the end of Eccl 2:3 showcases the theme of the brevity of life. We are not long for this world. *Vita brevis gloria aeterna!*

Advertisers, the Great Manipulators, know that life is short, and rather than encourage us to live in harmony with God's will, they'd rather use our fear of death to make money. Of course, you can't take it with you. No hearses have a U-Haul trailer connected to them.

Perhaps you remember the advertisement for Schlitz beer that said: "You only go around once in life, so you've got to grab for all the gusto you can." Note the not-so-subtle imperative: "you've got to."

Solomon (I'll just call him Solomon from now on) lived the lifestyle of the rich and famous: Eccl 2:4-6 I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. 5 I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. 6 I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees.

1 King 7:1 Solomon was building his own house thirteen years, and he finished his entire house.

He was adept at horticulture and silviculture:

Song 8:11 Solomon had a vineyard at Baal-hamon; he let out the vineyard to keepers; each one was to bring for its fruit a thousand pieces of silver.

Derek Kidner says: "He creates a little world within a world; multiform, harmonious, exquisite: a secular Garden of Eden, full of civilized and agreeably uncivilized delights, with no forbidden fruits." The palace of the Preacher was Paradise regained.

To maintain all this, he needed an army of servants and flocks of animals to feed them. Eccl 2:7 I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem.

To fund all this, he amassed great wealth. Then he could hire choirs of singers to cheer him as well.

Eccl 2:8 I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the sons of man.

How many concubines?

1 King 11:3 He had 700 wives, who were princesses, and 300 concubines. And his wives turned away his heart.

Which of you men out there hasn't ever had the desire to live like this? Wouldn't you like to grab for all the gusto you can?

"He who loves not wine, women and song remains a fool his whole life long." – Martin Luther

Solomon tried it all. In doing so, he disregarded God's warning:

Ps 119:37 Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things; and give me life in your ways.

We are warned more explicitly in the New Testament:

1 John 2:16 For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world.

So what was the upshot for Solomon? What happens to people who coddle their every fleshly whim? After all, in many ways, we live better than he did with our modern conveniences. We have access to foods he did not, we can hear music anytime, grow trees and plants or visit gardens, we have dishwashers, and vacuum cleaners, washers and dryers for our clothing, ovens and stoves, instant pots and automobiles. As far as concubines and wives, well the Internet delivers women in quantity, a vast harem if you will, to the privacy of your own computer. We lack nothing worldly.

Paul had something to say about this state of affairs:

2 Tim 3:2-4 For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, 3 heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, 4 treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God,

So does having vast quantities of things bring us more happiness?

Sometimes we refer to possessions as "an Albatross around the neck;" they fix us in amber and we are trapped by them. But I'm sure that the features that you really need are in the next release.

Indeed, modern research shows that the more things that we have, the unhappier we are. Solomon didn't need to consult a research team to reach the same conclusion:

Eccl 2:11 Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

In his book "When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough," Harold Kushner tells of the wife of a very successful man who bought her a dream house. But now she "cannot understand why she goes around every morning saying to herself, 'Is this all there is to life?'"

What about wisdom? Surely wisdom is better than folly. But no, "I came to realize that the same fate overtakes them both." What will happen to us at the end? We will all die anyway. So what really is the point of being wise? Once we are dead, what good will our wisdom do us? Death is the great equalizer. Poor and rich, saints and sinners, the wise and the foolish. All will die.

Ps 49:10 For he sees that even the wise die; the fool and the stupid alike must perish and leave their wealth to others.

Confronted by his own mortality, Solomon took the question to heart:
Eccl 2:15 Then I said in my heart, "What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise?" And I said in my heart that this also is vanity.

The existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre similarly said "Life has no meaning the moment you lose the illusion of being eternal."

And, of course, when we die, we become forgotten. The memory of our existence will be erased. The Preacher says this in the beginning:

Eccl 1:11 There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after.

Have I lived a good life? A bad life? Did I care about others? Was I a selfish b****d? In not so many years, no one will know. Or care.

Alexander the Great once found the philosopher, Diogenes, standing alone in a field looking intently at a large pile of human bones. When Alexander asked Diogenes what he was doing, Diogenes replied "I am searching for the bones of your father Philip, but I cannot seem to distinguish them from the bones of the slaves."

Toil, too, is meaningless. What do people get who toil all day long? Grief and pain; even at night their minds are not at rest.

Solomon didn't have heavy commute traffic or unreasonable deadlines or bosses but he did work and in the end, hated it:

Eccl 2:18 I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me,

Leonard Woolf, British publisher, part founder of the Bloomsbury Group and husband of Virginia Woolf, had this to say about his work: "I see clearly that I have achieved practically nothing. The world today and the history of the human anthill during the past five to seven years would be exactly the same as it is if I had played Ping-Pong instead of sitting on committees and writing books and memoranda. I have therefore to make a rather ignominious confession that I must have, in a long life, ground through between 150,000 and 200,000 hours of perfectly useless work."

In our society, our self-worth is often defined by what we do, what career we have. This is why retirement is often a rude-awakening for many as the bottom drops out of their self-image. We ask new acquaintances, "So, what do you do for a living?" In other words, "Are you higher on the social ladder than I am?"

But finding meaning in work has its problems. Leland Ryken has listed some of them in an essay on business ethics:

- An anemic work ethic coexisting with an undervaluing of work;
- On the part of others, an overvaluing of work that takes the form of workaholism
- A sense of alienation from corporate goals, often accompanied by resentment against the corporation as an employer
- Working for a corporation whose ethical standards have long been suspect
- Anxiety stemming from job insecurity in a corporate milieu that feels no long-term loyalty to employees, and
- Viewing workers and work in purely economic terms as a means of production.

No matter how much fortune you amass during your life, You Can't Take It With You. You have to leave it ALL behind.

As we daily grind through our own bleak existence, whether at home, in school, or at work, we may sometimes feel the same way – life is, all in all, a bad business.

Solomon amassed an amazing amount of wealth – but he didn't know if the person who would inherit it would be a wise man or a fool (2:19). Solomon died not knowing the answer to that question but we know. 1 Kings 12 tells us of the folly of Solomon's son, Rehoboam. We toil hard so that our children can have better opportunities and a better life than we had. But there are no guarantees that our children will learn from us.

Question for you: Do you think Solomon, as wise as he was, failed Rehoboam?

Leo Tolstoy came to the same point of despair as Solomon. He wrote:
 “My question – that which at the age of fifty brought me to the verge of suicide – was the simplest of questions, lying in the soul of every man . . . a question without an answer to which one cannot live. It was: ‘What will come of what I am doing today or tomorrow? What will come of my whole life? Why should I live, why wish for anything, or do anything?’ It can also be expressed thus: Is there any meaning in my life that the inevitable death awaiting me does not destroy?”

And then there's death. The grand finale to a meaningless life and the biggest vanity of all.

So what can a person do?

Ecc 2:24-25 There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God,
 25 for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?

Here, Solomon suddenly turns positive and states what Martin Luther calls “the principle conclusion, in fact the point of the whole book.” All life is vanity and yet joy is both possible and good.

What has been missing so far is God! Without God, the pleasures of food, drink and work were all meaningless and ultimately sorrowful. With God, these all become enjoyable.

Ray Stedman asks “Isn't it strange that the more you run after life, panting after every pleasure, the less you find, but the more you take life as a gift from God's hand, responding in thankful gratitude for the delight of the moment, the more that seems to come to you?”

1 Cor 10:31 So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

Solomon is passing his experience on to us. We try to find the meaning of life on our own in various ways or in various places; maybe join an ashram in India, or drop acid or immerse

ourselves in Nietzsche or post on Facebook. Whatever, we always come up empty. We are unhappy because we feel that we will never do anything important or be anybody special.

I still fight this. I've never set foot in India and the only acid I might have dropped was in chemistry lab. And Nietzsche has too many big words. I'll cop to FB, though, but still, there is that nagging feeling that my time is limited and I've not found my true calling. Whatever that may be. Am I supposed to be doing something else more important? Do I secretly want to be known outside my circle of spouse?

Is Solomon an atheist? By no means! He believes in the power and sovereignty of God. Which makes his situation worse because his frustrations with the world extend to frustrations with Him who created it. Have you ever felt that life was not worth living, that nothing ever turns out the way you hope for and that not even God makes a difference? Then you are in the same boat as Solomon.

But - he points out the futility of earthly things to make a point by the end of the book – that we CAN find meaning if we put our hope in the everlasting God.

Prov 8:35 For those who find me find life and receive favor from the Lord.

But in Ecclesiastes, that search seems futile. Without the benefit of divine revelation, figuring out the meaning of life is as unattainable as striving after the wind.

At the end of his life, the poet Ezra Pound said "All my life I believed I knew something. But then one strange day came when I realized that I knew nothing; yes, I knew nothing. And so words became void of meaning."

Similarly, Richard Dawkins, the infamous atheist, has concluded that human existence is "neither good nor evil, neither kind nor cruel, but simply callous: indifferent to all suffering, lacking all purpose."

The Preacher concludes his own empty quest with a proverb:
Eccl 1:15 What is crooked cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted.

There are many things that we wish we could straighten out and bend back into shape – relationships, moral failings, financial troubles, disabilities, etc. Nor can we make life add up. We can't count what we don't have and maybe don't even realize what is missing.

Life is what it is and we can't do anything about it.

Anyway, Solomon becomes embittered about life; not just HIS own life but life in general.
Eccl 2:17 So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind.

Perhaps you know people who hate life because of constant physical pain or reduced circumstances or broken relationships or . . . The only way out of this depression is for them to expand their vision above the sun and beyond the grave.

Col 3:1-4 If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. 3 For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Derek Kidner writes “The function of Ecclesiastes is to bring us to the point where we begin to fear that such a comment (all is vanity) is the only honest one. So it is, if everything is dying. We face the appalling inference that nothing has meaning, nothing matters under the sun.”

Then there is that phrase “under the sun.” Where do we experience life’s futility and meaninglessness? Wherever the sun shines. But, of course, God’s domain is everywhere – including over the sun. To see things only “under the sun” is to look at things from a worldly viewpoint, omitting God. Solomon drives home the point that we cannot find satisfaction or meaning from earthly things, but only in God Himself.

IS there anything new?
Maybe not in worldly things but certainly with God.

He gives us a NEW covenant in the blood of Jesus, shed for the remission of our sins:
Luke 22:20 And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.”

He gives us a NEW life that came up from the empty tomb as Jesus arose from the dead with the power of eternal salvation.

He gives us a NEW heart!
Ezek 36:26 I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

He gives us a NEW “self,” which grows in the knowledge and holiness of God.
Eph 4:22-24 You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; 23 to be made new in the attitude of your minds; 24 and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

This new self is so new that the Bible calls it a “new creation.” When we trust in God, his work in us re-creates our whole world. Do you feel that renewal of the spirit?
2 Cor 5:17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!

God is always puttering around in His workshop:
Rev 21:5 He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

This is the promise to hold on to when life drags you down and you feel like it’s just the same ol’ same ol’.

Isaiah 43:19 See, I am doing a new thing!
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?
I am making a way in the wilderness
and streams in the wasteland.

Someday, we will dwell in a new heaven and a new earth. But, some people don’t buy that; they spout sentiments which are reminiscent of the weariness of Ecclesiastes:
2 Peter 3:4 They will say, “Where is this ‘coming’ he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.”

But, of course, we are told in the Bible:

2 Peter 3:13 But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.

Our life's frustrations will not continue endlessly – we have hope in the dawning of a new day.

In one of the earliest commentaries on Ecclesiastes, Didymus the Blind wrote, "A person who is enlightened by the 'sun of righteousness' is not 'under' it but 'in' it. Thus it is said in the Gospel: 'The righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father,' not 'under' the sun."

So what about the question asked in Eccl 1:3? What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? Answer: Nothing.

Jesus asked a similar question:

Matt 16:26 What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?

Not even the entire world is compensation enough for the loss of a single soul.

Ecclesiastes was written to convince us that loving the world is futile and empty. It was written to point us back to God. Christ offers Himself as the source of all our satisfaction.

"Lord, I have all things if I have but Thee." – Christina Rossetti, "Jesus Alone"

I'll leave you this week with an excerpt from a sermon given by Freddie Fritz on Ecclesiastes:

Eutropius had fallen into disgrace. As the highest-ranking official in the Byzantine Empire (late fourth century), he served as the closest adviser to the emperor Arcadius, then ruling in Constantinople. But Eutropius abused his imperial power and aroused the anger of the empress Eudoxia, who orchestrated a campaign against him that resulted in a sentence of death.

Desperate to save his life, Eutropius slipped away from the palace and ran to the Hagia Sophia, where he clung to the altar and claimed sanctuary. Soon an angry mob of soldiers surrounded the great church, denouncing Eutropius and demanding his execution. Eventually, the crowds dispersed, but the next day was Sunday, and so they returned the following morning to see whether the pastor would give in to their demands for the execution of Eutropius.

The pastor was John Chrysostom, the famous preacher who served as the Bishop of Constantinople. As he mounted his pulpit, Chrysostom could see a church crowded with worshipers and thrill-seekers. They, in turn, could see Eutropius groveling at the altar. The great man had become a pitiable spectacle, with his teeth chattering and hopeless terror in his eyes.

The dramatic sermon Chrysostom preached that day may have been the finest he ever preached. For his text Chrysostom took Ecclesiastes 1:2 ("Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity"), and for his primary illustration he used the decline and fall of Eutropius.

Here was a man, Chrysostom noted, who had lost everything--position, wealth, freedom, safety. Only days before, he had been the second most powerful man in the world. But it was all vanity, as events had proven, for now Eutropius had become "more wretched than a chained convict, more pitiable than a menial slave, more indigent than a beggar wasting away with hunger." "Though I should try my very best," Chrysostom said, "I could never convey to you in words the agony he must be suffering, from hour to hour expecting to be butchered."

Chrysostom did not stop there, however. His purpose was not to condemn Eutropius but to save him, and also to give his listeners the gospel. To that end, he challenged his listeners to recognize the vanity of their own existence. Whether rich or poor, one day they would all have to leave their possessions behind. They too would face a day of judgment--the judgment of a holy God. Their only hope then would be the hope that they should offer to Eutropius now--mercy at the table of Christ.

The sermon must have hit its mark, for as Chrysostom came to a close, he could see tears of pity streaming down people's faces. Eutropius was spared--a life saved by the preaching of Ecclesiastes.

Because Ecclesiastes is the Word of the living God, it can have the same impact in our lives today. Ecclesiastes teaches us that there is more to life than what we can see with our eyes. Ecclesiastes warns us to live our lives in light of eternity. Ecclesiastes teaches us how to live a meaningful life.

(From a sermon by Freddy Fritz, Introduction to Ecclesiastes, 7/11/2010)

Have a great week, everyone!

Comment:

Butch O'Neal:
Thank you, brother Kevin!

Replies:

Kevin Crittenden:
You are very welcome, brother Butch!

Comment:

Jack Dyer:
Very good! Truly, Solomon's Selfish Searching and Seeking has impact for us today! Thank you for reminding us.

Comment:

Crittenden:
Thank you, Jack. His selfish quest led to his unselfish disclosure of his findings. Good can come out of our past as we are refined in the crucible of His loving chastisement.

Comment:

Marc Hermon:
Someone may ask me who is this Kevin Crittenden fella? As of December 2016, I would have said the name is "meaningless" to me. Whoever he is, nothing he has ever done has had any impact on my life or anyone I know of. And then on Dec 28th, Charles Fry messaged me that he would like to ask someone he knew to consider volunteering to be one of the 7 Bible Reading leaders. I said that would be fine since Charles was vouching for him. Kevin found his "true calling" when he replied with the following: "Sounds awesome! Would be happy to do that. So how do I (and Kathleen) get into this group? I assume that to be nominated, you need to rock suspenders. Butch and I do that." Ever since that day, for almost an entire year on Thursdays I have sat at the "Facebook Feet" of this man and read some of the most intellectually eloquent sermons on Poetry that I have ever seen. God has made Kevin

Crittenden significant in my life and I might not even get to personally meet him this side of heaven! "To the man who pleases HIM, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness.." 2:26

Replies:

Kathleen Munger Crittenden:

And Marc, to give you some context in this physical life . . . Kevin married into an Iowa family. My grandparents were Roy and Ruth Munger, and Gladys Turnquist was my dad's aunt. I knew your dad when we were teenagers. :-)

Kevin Crittenden:

<red heart emoji>

Comment:

Hermon:

Wow, Kevin! Thanks for all the laughs and the interesting lessons. You are quite a writer! Very much appreciate your thoughtful insight and big picture examinations each week. You're a blessing  the heart of Ecclesiastes: only in God does life have meaning and true pleasure.

Replies:

Kevin Crittenden:

<red heart emoji>

November 2: Ecclesiastes 3-4 (Kevin Crittenden)

Week 44

Poetry Reading for 11/02/17

Ecclesiastes 3-4

Eccl 3:1 For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

Good morning! I hope you all survived Halloween and have bagged up your left-over candy for the poor and needy. I'm poor and needy, by the way.

Do you remember Genesis Chapter 3, where Adam and Eve committed The Big Boo-boo at the urging of the serpent, and therefore got kicked out of Eden? Their lives took a nasty turn for the worse as sin entered the world. Curses and pain were introduced as well as decay and the inevitable return to dust. One can think of Ecclesiastes as being a poetic interpretation of Genesis Chapter 3 – pain and suffering and meaninglessness. Later on, we will see that in the same way, Song of Solomon can be thought of as a poetic reimagining of Genesis Chapter 2.

Everyone (well, everyone of a certain age) reading Chapter 3 of Ecclesiastes will be reminded of this song by Pete Seegar in the 50's and later popularized by The Byrds:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fHvf20Y6e0M>

Indeed, there is a time for everything and a season for every activity under the heavens. And now, speaking of activity, it is time for me to stop eating Halloween candy and get busy writing these notes.

Note the beauty of the lines in Eccl 3:1-8, each an expression of an activity and its opposite. Each pair forms a merism, a figure of speech which combines two opposites to form a totality.

For instance, when the Bible says that God created the Heavens and the earth, it means that God created the entire universe.

Each of the merisms in vv. 1-8 make up a larger whole. For instance, a time to laugh and a time to weep comprise the entirety of human emotion. Birth and death comprise the whole of human existence.

Up to this point, Solomon has been rather moody, and so we might expect that he continue in this pessimistic vein about time, complaining, perhaps, that our time on earth is too short and some things we start will never get finished, so why bother doing anything?

Time is indeed fleeting, and we cannot regain the hours that have elapsed, whether we've spent them feeding the hungry in a soup kitchen or watching Hee Haw on TV.

Horace Mann once wrote the following want ad: "Lost, yesterday, somewhere between Sunrise and Sunset, two golden hours, each set with sixty diamond minutes. No reward is offered, for they are gone forever."

But Solomon chose, rather, to write this beautiful poem on time. He has come to a proper appreciation of the sovereignty of God over time and eternity. Eccl 3:11 gives a strong affirmation of God's timeliness in ordering human events.

Eccl 3:11 He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

These pairs of verses seem to encompass the entirety of human experience, from birth to death, from war to peace and all that lies within.

Not only is God sovereign over time, there is also an orderliness to His efforts. He has a chronology.

Gen 8:22 While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease."

God does everything at just the right time.

We remember that Solomon was a great builder, planner, doer, visionary, collector and writer of proverbs, and evidently good at husbandry. He certainly had enough wives!

But his poem isn't just about human activities – these things are done by God as well.

Jer 1:12 Then the Lord said to me, "You have seen well, for I am watching over my word to perform it."

Each activity is listed with its opposite, and together both of them tell us what God does in the world.

You and I were born and you and I will someday die. These are appointments that we must keep. Both follow God's timetable. God is the Author of Life. So David praised Him:

Ps 139:13 For you formed my inward parts;
you knitted me together in my mother's womb.

God is also the One who numbers our days:

Job 14:5-6 Since his days are determined, and the number of his months is with you, and you have appointed his limits that he cannot pass,
6 look away from him and leave him alone, that he may enjoy, like a hired hand, his day.

“You cannot live any longer than the Lord has prescribed,” said Martin Luther, “nor die any sooner.” Suicide attempts often fail. Assisted suicide (euthanasia) is an attempt to circumvent God’s timetable. If you feel that God’s timetable CAN’T be circumvented, then what do you think about Cain killing Abel? Was the death of Abel according to God’s timetable or do you think that Abel would have lived a long and prosperous life without Cain’s intervention?

We learn that God is the Creator God but (remembering our merisms), He is also the Destroyer God at the right time.

Creator God planted His people as a fruitful vineyard.

Isa 5:1 Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill.

But when the people turned away from Him, Destroyer God dug up the vineyard.

Isa 5:5 And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard.
I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured;
I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down.

We must accept God in His entirety, not just the Creator God who builds us up. We must also be cognizant of arousing His wrath.

Deut 32:39 “See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me;
I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand.

There is a time for this and a time for that. How shall we spend OUR time? How shall we spend OUR lives? As followers of Christ, we don’t just look at time as measured by a clock but as measured by opportunities to serve God. So consider three practical ways to apply the message of this poem to your life of Christian discipleship:

1 – Wait for God’s timing. We need to trust in God’s sovereignty over time and that He knows the right time for everything. David knew this; he knew that whatever time it happened to be, God was still in control.

Ps 34:1 I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth.

Most of us encounter “times,” when events are out of our hands. We don’t control them as we think we should. So we get impatient, or try to push ahead of God’s schedule (any Biblical examples come to mind?) What we really need to do when we are impatient is to hurry up and wait for God.

“My times are in thy hand;
My God, I wish them there;
My life, my friends, my soul I leave
Entirely to Thy care.” - William Lloyd

2 – Live your whole life knowing that there is a time for you to die.

Well, this isn't going to be a popular sentiment and it probably won't attract a lot of people into your church. People don't want to hear bad news (and death is bad news to a lot of folks). But we need to keep in mind the message in Hebrews:

Heb 9:27 And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment,

Certainly, if death is a subject to be avoided in polite conversation, then the ensuing judgment is hardly to be thought of, let alone mentioned. Let's change the subject already.

The question, though, that should be uppermost in your thoughts is, "Am I ready for death when that time comes?" It perhaps would be easier if we knew WHEN we were going to die. But we don't. We aren't privy to that information like Hezekiah was:

Isa 38:5 Go and tell Hezekiah, 'This is what the Lord, the God of your father David, says: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will add fifteen years to your life.

When the Vicomte de Turenne was mortally wounded at the Battle of Salzbach on July 27, 1675, he wistfully said, "I did not mean to be killed today."

Certainly you can prepare for your own death as much as you can – plan your funeral, choose the hymns, write your own obituary, get your affairs in order, finish all your projects . . . and then wait for God. I think there's a British TV show called "Waiting For God" about a group of elderly people in a nursing home. But everyday that we find ourselves still living probably means that there is more work for us to do in God's vineyard.

But really, we should all be ready to die at anytime because Heaven is God's promise to every believer. If you are not feeling ready for eternity, then there is no time to lose.

2 Cor 6:2 For he says, "In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you." Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.

Reminds me of the question Harry Callahan asked. (Sort of):

Uh uh. I know what you're thinking. "Did God give me another year to live?" Well to tell you the truth in all this excitement I kinda lost track myself. But being this is most powerful and only Deity in Creation and would cast you into Hell, you've gotta ask yourself one question: "Do I feel lucky?" Well, do ya, punk?

3 – Make good use of whatever time you have.

Time is a precious commodity, given to us by God, for doing the work of His kingdom.

Stephen Olford calls it "a fragment of eternity given by God to man as a solemn stewardship."

The Bible tells us to use our time wisely:

Eph 5:15-16 Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, 16 making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.

We may sometimes feel that we are using our time wisely because we can cram more and more things into our already-busy schedule. Busyness has become a virtue in our culture. It is a well-known fact that if you want something done quickly in an office, give it to the busiest person there. But there is a time to work and a time to rest. Don't neglect your rest; if you do, your work will be shoddy.

Relationships are often tricky and we need to use our timing wisely. Having the heart of Jesus means knowing when it is time to weep and when it is time to rejoice.

Rom 12:15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

We need to have a good sense of timing to know when to speak up and when to shut up.

1Pet 3:15 but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect,

James 1:26 If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.

So, ask yourselves: Is it time to build up or tear down? Is it time to scatter or gather? Is it time to embrace or exclude? Is it time to edify or to listen? Is it time to teach or to learn?

We pray for guidance in this matter as Moses did:

Ps 90:12

So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.

Solomon now asks again, "What do workers gain from their toil?" You might ask, especially on a Monday morning, "Why should I go to work?" People invest their time and energy into work; what kind of return do they get?

Eccl 3:10 I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.

People work hard. Is it worth it? In Chapter 2, the answer was "No. The worker gets nothing at all." But here, immediately after the question, Solomon affirms the goodness of God in Eccl 3:11 "He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end."

Solomon is praising the way that God continues to rule the world – the seasons of nature and the patterns of human activity.

God "has put eternity into man's heart" – we all want to set up a PERMANENT residence and relationship with Him and He has PROMISED us this through an everlasting Covenant. Imagine! We have been promised an everlasting and permanent home with Him. But it is a Covenant. We have a part to play.

Gen 9:16 When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth."

2 Sam 7:13 He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.

God has kept His promises and continues to offer eternal life to those who accept His Son, who first loved us so much as to offer his perfect life painfully, publically, and shamefully for our intractable sins before rising from the grave with power over death.

But we're not there yet and so we keep looking to understand what it all means. Solomon looked as hard as one can look and concluded that "[man] cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end." We have a point of view but God has a complete view. [See the fable of the blind men and the elephant.]

But rather than give up on our desire for understanding, it is better to stop looking “under the sun” and realize that our desire for eternity shows that we were made for another world.

Ecc 3:12-14 I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; 13 also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil —this is God's gift to man.

14 I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him.

Solomon has gained two insights (“I perceived”), one about doing God’s business and the other about trusting in His sovereignty.

He tells us to take our short time here on earth and use it joyfully in the service of God. And he tells us to get off the couch and get busy. This is the best we can do. But he now understands that life, indeed, has meaning and joy.

Without meaning, we have the viewpoint expressed by Jean-Paul Sartre who wrote: “It was true. I had always realized it – I hadn’t any ‘right’ to exist at all. I had appeared by chance, I existed like a stone, a plant, a microbe. I could feel nothing to myself but an inconsequential buzzing. I was thinking. . . that here we are eating and drinking, to preserve our precious existence, and that there’s nothing, nothing, absolutely no reason for existing.”

As far as doing God’s work, we remember Ephesians 2:10 - For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Good works are our purpose. Let’s face it – while it is good to spend time in the Word, if that is all we do, then it is like continually sharpening an axe that will never be put to use.

And we are to do good as long as we live. There is no mandatory retirement. But if we find joy in doing good, we won’t give retirement a second thought. (Personally, I think that the subject of retirement is given short shrift – it is a major life change and I believe it would be a good study area.)

Solomon’s second insight was to trust in God’s sovereignty.

Ecc 3:14 I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him.

“Whatever God does” will endure. “Whatever God does” will be in His time, not ours. Nothing will be added to it or subtracted from it. Even if you “know what He intends to do and thus try to help Him out.”

Michael Fox says, “God’s works steamroller over man’s puny efforts, and nothing substantially new can interrupt the awesome course of events that God has ordained.”

So . . . despite our best efforts, we can do nothing about our situation in life. Why does God do this? “So that people fear before him.”

The fear of God isn’t about frightening us into submission; it is a positive concept. To fear God is to revere Him and to tremble at His mighty power. Remember:

Job 28:28 “And he said to the human race, ‘The fear of the Lord – that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding.’”

Ps 111:10 The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever!

Prov 1:7 The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.

And at the end of Ecclesiastes, in summation: Fear God.

Martin Luther said, “This is what it means to fear God: to have God in view, to know that He looks at all our works, and to acknowledge Him as the Author of all things.”

The last part of v 15 in the NIV reads “and God will call the past to account.” This seems to align with a later verse:

Eccl 12:14 For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.

But in the ESV, 3:15 reads “That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already has been; and God seeks what has been driven away.”

This seems to be talking about things that have happened and seem to be lost and yet God seeks to find them. Perhaps God is looking to redeem the past and not simply to render judgment.

At the end of Chapter 3, Solomon tackles the issue of death. The fear of death is called thanatophobia, brought on by the knowledge that death is inevitable.

Eccl 3:19 The fate of human beings is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both. As one dies, so dies the other.”

Solomon is wondering what will happen when we die. He has noticed in v3:16 that even in the place of judgment, wickedness is there. And similarly, in the place of justice, wickedness is there. The court systems are corrupt. Innocent people are jailed. Murderers go free. And nothing can be done about it. Solomon is unhappy, not only that injustice is happening, but that it goes unpunished. When our human institutions for justice become defiled, where can righteousness be found?

Solomon once again notices the oppression in the land:

Eccl 4:1 Again I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them.

God stands firmly against oppression.

Amos preached against oppressors:

Amos 4:1 “Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are on the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to your husbands, ‘Bring, that we may drink!’

Ezek 12:22 In you they take bribes to shed blood; you take interest and profit and make gain of your neighbors by extortion; but me you have forgotten, declares the Lord God.

Zech 7:9-10 “Thus says the Lord of hosts, Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another, 10 do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart.”

Sure, we see a lot of injustice in our world today. And we wish something could be done about it. But take heart in Eccl 3:17 – “I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work.”

There is a season for everything and God’s timing includes a time for justice.

If you are impatient, listen to the words of Habakkuk:

Hab 2:3 For still the vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end—it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay.

Solomon wonders now if there is life after death. Men die just the same as the animals. All return to dust.

Eccl 3:21 Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth?

He wonders: Who knows? How can we be sure? In fact, CAN we be sure?

We know we will die. But will we live again?

Not having an answer, Solomon thinks it’s best for a person to bury themselves in work. But can work bring you lasting satisfaction?

So, in the beginning of Chpt 4, Solomon despairs again at the oppression in the world. Better not to ever have been born.

As a character on the TV show, The Sopranos, said; “It’s all a big nothing. In the end, you die in your own arms.”

Fortunately, we have the answers and therefore have hope and joy in this life because of the promise of salvation and justice to come.

2 Tim 1:10 and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel,

Eccl 4:9-10 Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil.10 For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!

Often, the OT authors would compare one thing to another. To show the path to wisdom or the way to obedience, they would make such a comparison.

1 Sam 15:22 And Samuel said, “Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams.

Solomon makes such comparisons. Maybe it is better if we’re never born than to suffer the troubles of this world. But then he gives us practical advice for living in this fallen world.

Ecc 4:4-6 Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbor. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.
5 The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh.
6 Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind.

It is better for us to live in contentment.

There are many reasons, of course, to work, but Solomon is pointing out that envy is one of them. We want the things our neighbor has. But Solomon reminds us that wanting something that God has given to someone else is vanity.

And then there's that guy who "folds his hands" and doesn't work. I project this description onto the people at intersections with their cardboard signs, asking for money, when all around us are help wanted signs. I know I'm being judgmental and it is a flaw of mine.

Solomon calls the lazy man a fool.

Derek Kidner says "[The fool] is the picture of complacency and unwitting self-destruction, for this comment on him points out a deeper damage than the wasting of his capital. His idleness eats away not only what he has but what he is: eroding his self-control, his grasp of reality, his capacity for care and, in the end, his self-respect."

But "Better a handful of quietness." Or contentment. The quiet person is done with striving after things and finds contentment in what he has and his work. Sometimes, less is more.

Is work always good? We see a trend in this country, and others, to work harder, longer, faster, smarter. People make costly sacrifices to "get ahead" in their careers and build their portfolios without considering whether it is all worth it. Solomon saw it as a warning for us all against isolation, selfishness, greed and a sinful addiction to work. Here in America, we tout our "Self-Reliance" and "Rugged Individualism."

But living and working for selfish purposes can turn the American Dream into a nightmare. "For whom am I toiling?" Not for myself, the Christian says, but for the glory of God and the good of other people, including the people I love in the family of God.

Otherwise, we might end our days like the workaholic businessman who died at the age of 51. His obituary cited coronary thrombosis but the people who knew him also knew he died of overwork. He was at the office six days a week until 8 or 9 at night. On the day of the funeral, when the company was already looking for a replacement, the president looked around the office for candidates and said "Well, who's been working the hardest?" And when a friend consoled the man's wife by saying "I know how much you will miss him," she answered, "Oh, I already have."

Ecc 4:13-16 Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice. 14 For he went from prison to the throne, though in his own kingdom he had been born poor. 15 I saw all the living who move about under the sun, along with that youth who was to stand in the king's place. 16 There was no end of all the people, all of whom he led. Yet those who come later will not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and a striving after wind.

This comparison shows us that it is better to lead with a teachable spirit than to be too proud to allow anyone to teach us at all. You can't teach an old dog or a foolish king new tricks.

In this brief story, the king will someday be forgotten. All kings will someday be forgotten. All of our illustrious movie idols and sports teams and presidents will be forgotten. Even I will someday be but a memory. OK, not even a memory. Fame is fleeting.

Derek Kidner says this new king “has reached a pinnacle of human glory, only to be stranded there. It is yet another of our human anticlimaxes and ultimately empty achievements.”

But one of the main lessons here stands out. Of all the contrasts between the two kings – youth vs. aged, poverty vs. wealth, wisdom vs. folly – the most important is their attitude towards advice. How many institutions in today’s world are saddled by older men who are set in their ways and refuse to let go?

And, are you so sure of your understanding of the Word that you have closed your mind to new ideas? These verses are an encouragement for “mature” Christians (I hesitate to use the word “elderly”) to listen to counsel. They are also an encouragement to younger Christians that they can do important work for the kingdom of God.

When he described his conversion to faith in Christ, the Reformer John Calvin said that God subdued his mind and brought it to “a teachable frame.”

A Christian, then, is a teachable follower of Christ.

Have a great week!

<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=fHvf20Y6eoM>
“Turn! Turn! Turn!”

Comment:

Butch O’Neal:
Great post, brother Kevin! Thank you!

Replies:

Kevin Crittenden:
You are welcome!

November 9: Ecclesiastes 5-6 (Kevin Crittenden)

Week 45
Poetry Reading for 11/09/17
Ecclesiastes 5-6

Eccl 5:2 Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few.

Good morning!

To begin with, please take 5 minutes to watch this short film, James 3: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-pvK3dMo5qI>

What do you notice in this film about the attitudes displayed and the words exchanged? Did you notice the great change that occurred once the family got to church? Do you think that

the “happy faces” that they put on, once they got to church, represents the reality of their lives? Or were they just pretending?

Solomon began Ecclesiastes by bemoaning the meaninglessness of our existence, but by now, he is giving us practical advice, teaching us the right way to live. He is preaching to us and he starts chapter 5 by exhorting us to have truth and reverence in our hearts when we come before God to worship Him.

Derek Kidner says that the Preacher’s admonitions are for “the well-meaning person who likes a good sing and turns up cheerfully enough for church; but who listens with half an ear, and never quite gets round to what he has volunteered to do for God.”

Solomon is talking to us, the church-goers, who sometimes allow our minds to wander, finding it hard to pay attention, finding it difficult to serve God.

Solomon tells us:

Eccl 5:1 Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they are doing evil.

Which reminds us of:

1 Sam 15:22 And Samuel said,
“Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord?
Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams.

Solomon exhorts us to listen. We need to make every effort to keep focused on what is being said from the pulpit. We don’t have paid preachers who are adept at public speaking, but use, instead, the model of mutual edification. Naturally, we will have certain speakers that we prefer over others. But every person up there, without exception, has spent time working on a sermon that will edify the body and that edification is the Word of the Living God. So we need to stop feeling judgmental or disappointed and ask ourselves:

Am I ready to listen to the voice of God?

Is my heart open to spiritual instruction?

Are my ears attentive to the message I will hear from the Bible?

Rom 10:17 So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

Solomon tells us that if we are not fully engaged in listening, then we are not offering God a sacrifice of praise but, instead, “the sacrifice of fools.”

Heb 4:2 For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened.

When we therefore go to church, let us listen:

- WITH the confidence of Solomon:

Prov 30:5 Every word of God proves true; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.

- WITH the eager anticipation of Mary

Luke 10:38-39 Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. 39 And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his teaching.

- WITH the faith of Peter

John 6:68 Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life,

Solomon now tells us to shut up. Well, not really. He tells us in v 5:2 to let our words be few. Harmful words should not find easy egress from our lips. Do you remember the interactions on Facebook during the election? The libel, the defamation, the vitriol, the accusations, the insults? Is this Christian behavior?

Remember, every time you open your mouth, your heart is on display.

Luke 6:45 The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.

"Angry words! oh, let them never
From the tongue unbridled slip;
May the heart's best impulse ever
Check them e'er they soil the lip."

James pretty well sums it up when he says:

James 1:19 Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger;

Now that Solomon has told us to watch what we say, he now tells us what to do.

Vv 5:4-5 When you make a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. 5 It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay.

Do what you say. Put your money where your mouth is. He is talking specifically about vows made before God, like the vow Asaph described in Psalm 76:11:

"Make your vows to the Lord your God and perform them; let all around him bring gifts to him who is to be feared,

Often, we make these kinds of vows in our prayers with an IF – THEN construction. IF you, God, help me through this mess, THEN I'll attend church more regularly.

And how easy it is to renege on that promise. Better not to have made it in the first place. We need to follow through; not only that, but without delay.

Charles Bridges gave some advice about making vows: "A solemn engagement advisedly made with God is a transaction needing much prayer and consideration. It should rest on the clear warrant of God's word. It should concern a matter really important, suitable, and attainable. It should be so limited, as to open a way for disentanglement under unforeseen contingencies, or altered circumstances."

V 5:7 For when dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity; but God is the one you must fear.

We began with vanity – all is vanity – and are moving to the book's conclusion: the goal of life is the fear of God. So we are moving from vanity to reverence.

Charles Bridges defined the fear of God as “ the grand fundamental of godliness.” Fearing God is recognizing His might and majesty, His grandeur, His place in Heaven and our place on earth.

T.M. Moore has written a paraphrase of Ecclesiastes 5:1-9 to drive home its spiritual lessons.

How brazen and dishonest people are
with their religion. They will go as far
with it as suits their needs; so they attend
the services and sing the hymns, and when
they have to, give a little money to
the Lord. But do they live as one should do
who's made a vow to God? Don't kid yourself.
Among their friends their faith is on the shelf....
Remember, God knows everything.
He knows our hearts when we before him bring
our worship, and you can't fool him. So take
a good look at yourself before you make
your next appearance before the Lord. And go
to listen, not to speak, for he will know
just what you need. Why, any fool can spout
a lovely prayer or sing a hymn about
his faith. His words are mindless, like a dream,
although to people looking on they seem
impressive. Not to God....
For words are cheap,
just like the dreams you have while you're asleep.
God wants your heart, my son, not just a show.
Get right with him before you to him go.

Solomon now moves inexorably on to the subject that causes so much conflict in the world-money. Would \$1,000 make you happy? \$10,000? A million? Happy for how long?

There's a favorite game that people play – it's called complete the sentence: “If I won the lottery, then . . .” Naturally, you could realize all your dreams, you see, because, as we learn on TV, the best things in life cost money. I don't mean to come across as sitting on my moral high horse – I've played this game myself.

Solomon tells us that whoever loves money is never satisfied – they always want more. And money divides the loyalties of a person; mammon or God, mammon or God. We are easily distracted by the trappings of wealth.

Matt 6:24 No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.

Solomon knows that we wage a spiritual battle with riches and therefore shows that the love of money is just vanity. He begins by talking about injustice brought about through the oppressive structures of society. No matter what form of government you have, poor people lose out. We see this now when companies, grasping for a better profit margin, force workers to neglect their families. Solomon tells us not to be so surprised – this is how things are in a fallen world. From the king downwards through the ranks, each person abuses his power.

Martin Luther says that unless there is “some Solomon to exhort and console him, government crushes the man, extinguishes him, and utterly destroys him.”

We, therefore, understanding that even the best of governments is far from perfect, live in the hope of a better administration some day.

Isa 9:6-7 For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
7 Of the increase of his government and of peace
there will be no end,
on the throne of David and over his kingdom,
to establish it and to uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time forth and forevermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

In our society today, we have a spiritual problem that author Jessie O'Neill calls "affluenza" which is "an unhealthy relationship with money." Most of us have this to some degree or other. We give thanks for what we have, then cast an eye over the fence to where the Joneses have parked their new car. And then feel guilty and inadequate that we haven't supported our families as well as we should have.

As Solomon points out, our appetite for what money can buy can never be satisfied. The only way to curb it is to be content with what God provides.

Let's say we have a bunch of money. Solomon then tells us in v. 5:11 that other people will take it from us. The more we have, the more other people (government, relatives, friends) try to take it. It will all be used up before we can use it. Vanity.

Solomon also notes in v. 5:12 that rich folks don't sleep very well. Our lifestyle is just not healthy for us. Derek Kidner points out one of the ways that we see this in the West, where almost everyone is wealthy. He looks at all our "modern exercise-machines and health clubs" and says it is "one of our human absurdities to pour out money and effort just to undo the damage of money and ease."

But, of course, there is much grief in losing money.

Eccl 5:13-14 There is a grievous evil that I have seen under the sun: riches were kept by their owner to his hurt, 14 and those riches were lost in a bad venture. And he is father of a son, but he has nothing in his hand.

We have a saying: "Here today, gone tomorrow." And "Easy come, easy go." And "Kevin and his money are soon parted." So . . . to count on money always being there is vanity.

Eccl 5:15 As he came from his mother's womb he shall go again, naked as he came, and shall take nothing for his toil that he may carry away in his hand.

We saw this idea in Job 1:21 "And he said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

And in 1 Tim 6:7 "for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world."

We can't take it with us. At some point in our lives, we must accept our mortality, that appointment with death when we shuffle off this mortal coil.

Martin Luther said "As I shall forsake my riches when I die, so I forsake them while I am living."

Randy Alcorn: "God prospers me not to raise my standard of living, but to raise my standard of giving."

We are destined for Eternity so let us travel lightly.

Solomon concludes chapter 5 as follows:

Eccl. 5:18-19 Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot. 19 Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil—this is the gift of God.

We've seen the same sentiment expressed in 1 Timothy:

1 Tim 6:17 As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy.

Solomon recognizes that our brief time on this earth is a sacred "gift of God," for which he is grateful. Notice how Solomon attributes the joy that we have in this life, including the joy that money can bring, to God. Both having things and enjoying things are gifts from God.

Eccl 5:20 For he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart.

When we learn to depend on God for our enjoyment rather than on one or more of His gifts to us, then we won't pay too much attention to nor long remember our worldly things.

I've been told that I'm supposed to cover chapters 5 AND 6 this week so, with a lot of further ado, including reinforcements in the coffee arena, we'll go on now to Ecclesiastes 6.

Eccl 6:1-2 There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, and it lies heavy on mankind: 2 a man to whom God gives wealth, possessions, and honor, so that he lacks nothing of all that he desires, yet God does not give him power to enjoy them, but a stranger enjoys them. This is vanity; it is a grievous evil.

Let's face it. Our desires exceed our capacity for satisfaction.

Jonathan Clements, in an article for the Wall Street Journal, concludes: "We may have life and liberty, but the pursuit of happiness isn't going so well. . . We constantly hanker after fancier cars and fatter paychecks – and, initially, such things boost our happiness. But the glow of satisfaction quickly fades and soon we're yearning for something else."

Dissatisfaction guaranteed.

Chapter 6 is not a happy chapter. In it, we read what the Russian poet calls "reason's icy intimations, and records of a heart in pain."

Solomon writes about the disappointments he's encountered that have left him deeply dissatisfied, followed by questions answerable only by God. Perhaps some people you know

also see life as a series of disappointing events with no discernable meaning. “What is the purpose of my pain? Is it to teach me a lesson? Why this same lesson, over and over again? Why can’t anything good ever happen to me? Does God hate me?”

Solomon starts out with the example of a man who had it all. Everything his heart desired was his for the taking. But, oddly, he couldn’t enjoy his life. Martin Luther called these verses “a description of a rich man who lacks nothing for a good and happy life and yet does not have one.”

In the end, the rich man lost everything without ever having enjoyed it.

People dream about winning the lottery – then they could have their heart’s desires. Right? But if you did win the lottery, I suspect the first thing you’d acquire are hordes of friends and relatives with chronic cases of “hours of need”. Then there are the taxes. And the phone calls, text messages, etc. from solicitors. Strangers knocking on your door. You might notice envy creeping into the attitudes of your friends. (Steinbeck’s book “The Pearl” covers this.) People would treat you differently. Not a lot of satisfaction in all that, I’m afraid.

And afterwards, the whole shootin’ match might go to strangers.

Ps 39:6 Surely a man goes about as a shadow! Surely for nothing they are in turmoil; man heaps up wealth and does not know who will gather!

Having money will not guarantee enjoyment but keeping God at the center of our lives allows us to experience real joy at the gifts He bestows upon us. The fear of the Lord not only is the beginning of wisdom; it is also the source of satisfaction.

Solomon then goes on to muse whether a man would be better off stillborn than suffer the disappointments that life’s good things bring him. Even the blessings of 100 sons and daughters (poor wife!) and a really long life (v 6 tells us 2,000 years), would not bring this man enjoyment of his prosperity.

Today, we work hard to build a better future for our families – we want to provide opportunities for our children that we never had. But the Teacher is telling us that even if we provided the best possible outcome for our children, it is to no avail if God is missing in their lives.

So the Teacher muses that such a man might think: “I wish I had never been born!” One commentator says “Better to miscarry at birth than to miscarry throughout life.” The reasoning is that the stillborn child is the first to die and therefore the first to find its eternal rest.

And, of course, eventually we all come to the same place of death. Karl Barth took this personally when he said, “Some day a company of men will process out to a churchyard and lower a coffin and everyone will go home; but one will not come back, and that will be me.”

So - if life is fairly joyless anyway, ennui studded with moments of stark terror, then what’s the advantage of soldiering on? Every cloud has a silver lining? It’s always darkest before the dawn? There’s a light at the end of the tunnel? These imply that something good is coming your way but, of course, there are no guarantees. Maybe nothing good is coming. Tomorrow, you’ll be another day older and deeper in debt.

At this point, Solomon wonders if we will ever be satisfied.

Eccl. 6:7-9 All the toil of man is for his mouth, yet his appetite is not satisfied. 8 For what advantage has the wise man over the fool? And what does the poor man have who knows how

to conduct himself before the living? 9 Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the appetite: this also is vanity and a striving after wind.

So if you can live to be 2,000 years old with 100 sons and daughters and everything your heart desired (up through yesterday) yet still finding yourself moping around the house 'cause you don't have something that the Joneses have, then you are the perfect American consumer. Sure, the wise man seemingly has an advantage over the fool but even wise men have unfulfilled longings, same as the fool. And the poor man, who knows how to live rightly, is still in the same boat – disappointed along with everyone else.

You would think that having sufficient food, shelter, clothing, family, friends, entertainment, coffee and pizza would be enough. Oh, and chocolate. But Desire is a whore, always wandering out to the street corner looking for something new. The “wandering of the appetite.” And it affects us all. We are always reaching for something new that we hope will satisfy us at last. But only in God will we find that fulfillment.

Philip Ryken suggests that before we go out on a spending spree, it is better to talk things over with the Father, saying “Lord, you know how empty I feel right now. Help me not to run away from my problems but to turn them over to you. Teach me that you are enough for me. And by your grace, give me the peace and the joy that you have for me in Jesus.”

But Solomon isn't to that point yet. He knows that satisfaction cannot be found, and wonders if he would be better off dead. His appetite is insatiable and now (vv. 6:10-12) he complains that life is just the same old routine, the endless rut until you die and who knows what happens after that?

There is nothing new under the sun. Humans haven't changed since the Fall. An old German proverb says “As things have been, so they still are; and as things are, so they will be.” And, as v. 10 says, “no one can contend with someone who is stronger.” The stronger one is God; no sense, then, complaining to Him, as Job did.

All of our reasoned explanations and obvious improvements to God's plans aren't going to impress Him. And the more we talk, the emptier we sound.

Romans 9:20 But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, “Why have you made me like this?”

Chapter 6 closes with a couple of questions:

Ecccl 6:12 For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow? For who can tell man what will be after him under the sun?

These are life and death questions. The first has to do with our life. What is our best possible course of action during our brief existence? How do we live a good life? And the second question is about death. What happens after death?

We seem to be back where we started in Ecclesiastes: Everything is meaningless and nobody knows what happens next.

But Solomon has been examining everything from a human perspective (under the sun). No joy there. But he has a purpose in doing so. By openly discussing our disappointments and trials in life, he opens our minds to the realization that we have a longing for God. Ecclesiastes may not answer the questions Solomon raises fully but the Bible as a whole does. In it, we

learn God's will for man, how man should live out his days and by doing so, find hope in the new life to come.

Naturally, there are naysayers.

British Humanist Association "Life leads to nothing, and every pretense that it does not is a deceit." (This itself is a statement of faith, since there is no way to prove this. A rather cold comfort, IMHO.)

Skeptics hedge their bets. They may not believe in an afterlife but realize that they cannot deny the possibility.

Rabelais "I am off in search of a great Perhaps."

Thomas Hobbes – who described his death as the "last voyage, a great leap in the dark."

But you and I, and that guy over there, know that we can take God at His word and trust in the promises that He made in the Bible. There IS a life to come. And it IS indescribably good.

John 14:2-3 In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.

Have a great week!

Comment:

Butch O'Neal:
Thank you, Kevin!

Replies:

Kevin Crittenden:
You are welcome!

Comment:

Yvonna Hartman:
Thank you. Always appreciate your thoughts.

November 16: Ecclesiastes 7-8 (Kevin Crittenden)

Week 46
Poetry Reading for 11/16/17
Ecclesiastes 7-8

Eccl 7:1-2 A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of birth.

2 It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart.

Good morning! And how is YOUR name regarded today?

At the end of Chapter 6, (which, of course, you remember clearly), Solomon asked a couple of questions. One was essentially, "What is the best way to live our lives?" Chapter 7 contains answers to that question with a series of comparisons, i.e. It is better to eat hot cereal for breakfast than Hostess Ho Hos. (S'truth!)

This series of comparisons is used by Solomon to teach us discernment in how we conduct our lives.

V 7:1 sounds a lot like Prov 22:1 "A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold," which is not surprising if Proverbs and Ecclesiastes were written by the same hand. Solomon collected proverbs, finding them useful, so uses them here and there. Anyway, back in those days, perfumes and ointments were expensive commodities; even much later in the days of Jesus when a woman, (foolishly to some), dumps a jar of nard on Jesus' head. (Matt 26:7)

It takes many years and long experience to build up a good reputation. And, as Job discovered, it can disintegrate overnight. Thus, people with truly impeccable reputations are rather rare. Perhaps rarer than nard.

So how do you build up a name for yourself over time? Certainly, by the good deeds that you do, by the encouraging words that you write or speak, by your availability and willingness to further the welfare of the church and the edification of the brethren therein. And, ALSO, these days, by what you post on Facebook, by the gossip that you engage in, by the complaints that you make, by acts of selfishness or failures to participate when needed. Think of some people you know. Do you see them as generous? Stingy? Dour? Cheerful? Critical? Encouraging? Babblers? Circumspect in speech? Truthful? Prone to fabrications? Filled with excuses? Reliable? Whatever actions you take (or don't take) affect how people see you and therefore your name.

How do you think that other people see you?

In 1786, the poet Robert Burns saw a louse on a lady's bonnet in church and wrote an ode to it. In this ode (To a Louse), he pens the immortal words:

O wad some Power the giftie gie us
To see oursels as ithers see us!
It wad frae mony a blunder free us,
An' foolish notion:
What airs in dress an' gait wad lea'e us,
An' ev'n devotion!

(Of course, as a poet, you would think he could spell better.)

Sometimes, we think we are making a humorous statement, but someone finds it hurtful and then we backpedal by saying:

"Oh, I was only kidding." No. You weren't.

"I didn't mean it." Yes. You did.

Remember, when you advertise yourself as a Christian, your actions reflect not only on YOUR name but on the name of Jesus Christ.

The second part of Eccl 7:1 ". . . and the day of death than the day of birth," could mean that Solomon is glad that his life is almost over. Or, more positively, it could be that life has been so

hard for some people that death will be a welcome relief. Since the first part of the comparison was positive, then the second part is probably the more positive interpretation as well.

After studying this verse, Didymus the Blind commented that a believer's dying day is best because it is "the end and termination of evil."

In Philippians 1:21-23, Paul couldn't decide whether life or death was best for him. "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain."

And, of course, it was a wonderful day when Christ was born, the coming of our God and King. But the better day was to be found, not in Bethlehem but in Calvary. The birth of Jesus did not save us but His death did.

But Solomon knew that the day of death was better than the day of birth, because death has more to teach us about life.

Eccl. 7:2-4 It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart.

3 Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of face the heart is made glad.

4 The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.

Matthew Henry concludes: "It will do us more good to go to a funeral than to go to a festival."

Why?

Because happy occasions do not lend themselves to thoughts of our own mortality or the all-too-brief time that we have left. A funeral, however, can cause us to reflect on our own lives; perhaps guiding us to wiser living and preparation for our own end. It is a foolish choice to depend on a long life; the wise man gets his house in order and can live out his days in peace.

Our society today is beginning(?) to regard aging as a disease and death as postponeable. This is an attractive message to our worldly culture. More time to consume the forbidden fruit; to buy more things and enjoy them. And worship them.

In secular society, wrote Susan Sontag, "death is the obscene mystery, the ultimate affront, the thing that cannot be controlled. It can only be denied." And deny it we do. We don't like to talk about death. We don't like to think about death. We send our aged into nursing homes where we allow them to founder without visitations, we tend to skip the part where we see the coffin being laid to rest, and we refer to those who die as the "departed," as if they've gone on a trip somewhere. They're not with us anymore, they're in a better place, they're at rest, they've passed away. They've done everything except what they actually did do which was to die."

We've heard the expression for death as "going the way of all flesh," but that is a misquotation of "going the way of all the earth." (1 Kings 2:2 "I am about to go the way of all the earth," he said. "So be strong, act like a man,")

Joshua 23:14 "And now I am about to go the way of all the earth, and you know in your hearts and souls, all of you, that not one word has failed of all the good things that the Lord your God promised concerning you. All have come to pass for you; not one of them has failed.

We need to embrace the subject, the fact, the necessity of death.

Martin Luther says that it is good for us to “invite death into our presence when it is still at a distance and not on the move.”

Ps 90:12 So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.

It is time to think wisely about death.

Eccl. 7:5-6 It is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools.
6 For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fools; this also is vanity.[a]

To live wisely in this world, it is advisable to listen to the rebukes of those wiser than we are. They are passing on their knowledge and experience; if we pay heed to their advice, it will be better than learning in the school of hard knocks.

As far as laughter goes, fools will laugh at most anything, funny or not. They are also prone to laughing AT others, which is certainly not godly behavior.

Luke 6:25 “Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry.
“Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.

Eccl. 7:7-8 Better is the end of a thing than its beginning, and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit.

Solomon moves on to warn us against focusing on short-term gain and to start paying attention, instead, to the long-term goal. Students wonder in their Pre-Algebra classes “Why do we have to know this stuff? We’ll never use it.” Or “Why bother planting fruit trees? It will take years before I get enough fruit to make it worthwhile.”

So why bother planting anything?

Matt 13:8 Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.

Eccl 7:10 Say not, “Why were the former days better than these?” For it is not from wisdom that you ask this.”

Things were better back in the good old days. Let us regain our former glory. This is a rather current theme in our country. We remember through rose-colored glasses that life was much simpler, much more godly, much more friendly etc. back “then.” (For certain classes of people. For others, not so much.)

But Solomon warns against focusing our attention on the past. Look forwards, he says, not backwards. Remember, when the Second Temple was going to be built – the old-timers said “Nah, it won’t be nearly as beautiful as the first.” Solomon, who built the first temple, would have cautioned these people to let bygones be bygones.

Why look forward?

Because God’s Plan is still unfolding. And we are blessed to be witnessing it. We look forward because of what is said in Romans 13:11 “Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed.”

Eccl 7:13 Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked?

Solomon had made a careful observation of the way God works. He noticed the world around him, the way there was a time for this and then a time for that. He noted how people worked and played, lived and died.

Of course no one can straighten something that God has made crooked. And by “crooked,” we don’t mean evil but rather the difficulties that we face in life. We all suffer from something; personally, I suffer(ed) from social anxiety. Some people suffer from other types of phobias. Or physical difficulties. Or difficult loss. Or tragic circumstances. One of my students lost her baby in utero. There is SOMETHING that we wish to God was straighter in our lives and would change if we could.

Job asked why good people suffer and, of course, realized that they can do nothing about it.

Paul was not spared either:

2 Cor 12:8-9 Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me.⁹ But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

When we are floundering in the midst of the crooked part, and slipping into the whirlpool of despair, then let us remember the hope that we have through the Sovereignty of God. Sure, we suffer the frustrations of life in a fallen world but God has a plan to set us free and is working all things together for our good.

Rom 8:20 For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope

Rom 8:28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

Solomon then tells us that some days will be good and some days will be bad. But God has made them both and we need to acknowledge that.

Job 2:10 But he said to her, “You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?” In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

Since God has made both good and bad days, Solomon tells us that we cannot discover anything about our future. This will put a lot of palm readers, astrologers and seers out of business. Toss out your Tarot cards and your Ouija boards; they are of no use to you; in fact, they can be detrimental to your spiritual health.

I like to know what is going to happen – it gives me a sense of security. And if I don’t know what will happen, there is a certain anxiety. If I go to a dinner party and have to sit with strangers, then what? If I have to give a sermon at church and get tongue-tied, then what? I need to learn, perhaps you need to learn, to leave our future in God’s capable hands. This is a trust issue.

Martin Luther said (and, yes, I know I’m a name-dropper. Deal with it.) “Enjoy the things that are present in such a way that you do not base your confidence on them, as though they were going to last forever . . . but reserve part of our heart for God, so that with it we can bear the day of adversity.”

And the Puritan Richard Baxter:
Take what He gives,
And praise Him still,
Through good or ill,
Who ever lives.

So . . . If God gave you something crooked, would you make it straight? Would you change your financial situation or your disability or your disease? Would you make yourself prettier or more handsome? Taller? Or would you trust God to make it straight in His own time?

Eccl. 7:15 In my vain life I have seen everything. There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evildoing.

Solomon has identified two evils that lead to destruction. Essentially, righteous people perish and wicked people prosper. This seems at odd with our expectations of a good and just God and with Deuteronomy 4:40 "Therefore you shall keep his statutes and his commandments, which I command you today, that it may go well with you and with your children after you, and that you may prolong your days in the land that the Lord your God is giving you for all time."

These injustices are a part of this world and are some of the crooked things that we wish we could straighten out. But Solomon knew we couldn't straighten them so he advises us with his practical wisdom:

Eccl 7:16-17 Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself? 17 Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time?

So is Solomon advocating a life of moderation? Don't be a goody two-shoes and don't be a felon? Avoid extremes? Was this a good policy for the church in Laodicea?

Rev 3:15-16 "I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! 16 So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.

If this is what Solomon is advocating, then he is again focusing on life under the sun and neglecting God.

However, let's consider an alternative.

When he says not to be "overrighteous," he might be saying "Don't be self-righteous." This could refer to someone only pretending to be righteous. After all, IS there a way to be too righteous? God's standard is perfection. No, the problem is (as usual) with us thinking that we are more righteous than we really are.

Strange, isn't it, that there never is any lack of people who think they are good enough for God. This thought led 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."

So the two dangers are:

- 1 – A temptation for the religious person – self-righteousness
- 2 – A temptation for the non-religious person – unrighteousness.

Both lead to destruction. And the way out is given in v. 7:18 – live in the fear of God.

We now come to Eccl 7:19-29, wisdom for the wise.

Although written over two millennia ago, Ecclesiastes echoes the questions that we (should) ask ourselves today: “What is the meaning of my life? How should I search for it? Do I know my place in the universe? Do I know who I am? Do I know what I am doing here?”

Solomon is detailing his own spiritual quest. Not having all the answers yet, he still extols the value of wisdom as a necessary part of living rightly. Here, he says that wisdom will make us strong.

Eccl 7:19 Wisdom gives strength to the wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city.

Wisdom governs our thoughts, so the wise man, who puts God at the center, knows how to think rightly about things and thus makes a capable governor.

Wisdom governs our will, so the wise man knows how to make right choices.

Wisdom governs our speech, so the words of the wise man are few but effective.

Wisdom governs our actions, so the wise man knows what to do in every situation.

That, my friend, is strength.

Solomon goes on, now, in vv. 7:21-22, to say don't take too seriously what people may be saying about you. And remember that you've badmouthed others yourself.

Pascal observed: “If all men knew what each said of the other, there would not be four friends in the world.”

Perhaps we could learn to take criticism graciously, like the wise man who said: “He didn't insult me at all; in fact, he was talking about another man: the man he thought I was.”

And our own words condemn us, our criticisms of others pointing more towards our own faults than towards anyone else's. Which bolsters v 7:20: “Indeed, there is no one on earth who is righteous, no one who does what is right and never sins.”

So let's give others a break; make allowances for them when they misspeak and offer them the same grace that we, ourselves, need so often.

Titus 3:1-2 Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, 2 to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people.

Solomon talks now about the difficulty in finding wisdom, which echoes chapter 28 in Job. He has searched diligently, testing and seeking and searching out. And here, in vv 7:23-24, he admits he's failed. “Who can discover it?”

Solomon's quest may end in failure; he is looking for wisdom that he cannot seem to find. He is unable to explain the purpose of life, or explain why everything matters.

Derek Kidner describes these verses as “the epitaph of every philosopher.”

And in his *Pensées*, Pascal ruminates: “When I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in the eternity before and after, the little space which I fill, and even can see, engulfed in the infinite immensity of spaces of which I am ignorant, and which know me not, I am frightened, and am astonished at being here rather than there; for there is no reason why here rather than there, why now rather than then. Who has put me here? By whose order and direction have this place and time been allotted to me? *Memoria hospitis unius diei prætereuntis.*”

That last sentence translates to the last part of the sentence in chapter 5, verse 15 of the Book of Wisdom:

Wisdom 5:15 For the hope of the wicked is as dust, which is blown away with the wind, and as a thin froth which is dispersed by the storm: and a smoke that is scattered abroad by the wind: and as the remembrance of a guest of one day that passeth by.

And, of course, those who ruminate on Rumi will be familiar with his work “The Tavern” which asks the basic questions:

“All day I think about it, then at night I say it.
Where did I come from, and what am I supposed to be doing?
I have no idea.
My soul is from elsewhere, I'm sure of that,
And I intend to end up there.

This drunkenness began in some other tavern.
When I get back around to that place,
I'll be completely sober. Meanwhile,
I'm like a bird from another continent, sitting in this aviary.
The day is coming when I fly off,
But who is it now in my ear who hears my voice?
Who says words with my mouth?

Who looks out with my eyes? What is the soul?
I cannot stop asking.
If I could taste one sip of an answer,
I could break out of this prison for drunks.
I didn't come here of my own accord, and I can't leave that way.
Whoever brought me here will have to take me home.

This poetry. I never know what I'm going to say.
I don't plan it.
When I'm outside the saying of it,
I get very quiet and rarely speak at all.”

When we, ourselves, ponder the meaning of our own existence and come up empty-handed, then we ask “What's next?” There are two choices:

- 1 Give up - which leads to despair
- 2 Admit that we don't have all the answers but realize that God does and then wait for whatever wisdom He provides. This is the way of humility and faith – what Calvin called a “learned ignorance.”

Solomon couldn't find wisdom in v 24 but continues looking anyway in v 25. No quitter, he. He was investigating the differences between the wise way and the foolish way to live and

finding his biggest disappointment in other people. Such as the v26 woman. Her heart is a trap. This may have been a real woman that Solomon knew (he knew a few), but the intervening years have been kind to her and she embodies sexual sin (as seen on TV) in today's world. Her hands are the chains of slavery.

Ambrose Bierce – “Oh, that we could fall into a woman's arms without falling into her hands.”

But there is a way out of the trap. The man who pleases God will escape her, just as Joseph did when Potiphar's wife, a cougar in today's terminology, tried it on with him.

What shall we say about Eccl 7:27-28? He found only one righteous man amongst a thousand and no righteous women. Was Solomon being sexist? We have to remember that he was also hard on men in v20 – “Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.” Even that one good guy out of a thousand was still a sinner.

Solomon was probably also speaking from his experience with his 1000 wives and concubines who came from foreign countries and engaged in pagan rituals. The hearts of these women were traps that led to Solomon's downfall (1 Kings 11:1-8)

Although Solomon evidently never met any godly women, certainly there are many in our circles. Thinking of these women in the church, Martin Luther said “there is [nothing] on earth so lovely as a woman's heart, with God's grace to guide its love.”

Solomon comes to a sad conclusion at the end of Chapter 7:

Eccl 7:29 See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.

This is an indictment of the human race, what Charles Bridges calls “a humbling testimony to the universal and total corruption of the whole race of man.”

There are no exceptions here; we all sin. Sin – the great equalizer.

Rom 5:12 Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned—

Of this, Mark Twain remarked “Whoever has lived long enough to find out what life is, knows how deep a debt of gratitude we owe to Adam, the first great benefactor of our race. He brought death into the world.”

Fortunately, Ecclesiastes does not stop here; lest we fall short of salvation. Fortunately, the Bible doesn't stop with the Creation and the Fall but goes on to teach redemption by grace. There is the first Adam but there is also the last Adam in the person of Jesus Christ:

1 Cor 15:45 Thus it is written, “The first man Adam became a living being”; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit.

Although the first Adam failed to remain upright, we can trust in the last Adam for our salvation; he will act as our intercessor, helping us stand firm at the last judgment.

And so we come to Chapter 8, wherein we are instructed to obey the king.

Eccl 8:1-2 Who is like the wise? And who knows the interpretation of a thing? A man's wisdom makes his face shine, and the hardness of his face is changed.

2 I say: Keep the king's command, because of God's oath to him.[b]

Chapter 8 teaches us wisdom that we can use when dealing with governments, whether good or evil.

Solomon asks a rhetorical question: Who is really wise and able to explain things? You might think the answer is “No one” after Solomon, himself, has just said that no one can discover wisdom. But in the last part of v1, Solomon says that a person’s face brightens with wisdom. Why would he say that if no one can find wisdom?

There must be some people that have found wisdom. Rather than saying that no one has wisdom, Solomon is saying that wisdom is rare. Few and far between are those who can tackle questions concerning the workings of God.

Some individuals do have the gift of interpretation. Think of Daniel. He matches the description given in the second half of v 1. His face shone and he looked healthy.

Dan 1:15 At the end of ten days it was seen that they were better in appearance and fatter in flesh than all the youths who ate the king's food.

Just so, as we pray to our Heavenly Father for increased wisdom, our own inner joy will be seen as radiance.

2 Cor 3:18 And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

Solomon now offers his counsel about worldly authority. “Obey the king’s command.” Of course, the king (or governments) may not rule in a godly way. This is hinted at in v 9, which indicates the abuse of power. Power, as we know, is often used in a destructive manner. “Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” –Lord Acton

Solomon’s attitudes towards political authority are described by R. N. Whybray: “on the one hand he counsels obedience and submission to it on the grounds of prudence, while on the other he does not hide the fact that he regards it as brutal and tyrannical.”

So we need to ask ourselves: How can we live in a wise and godly manner under authority?

Solomon says “Obey the king’s command.” Our first duty, then, is obedience. Jesus later said “Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” (Luke 20:25). And Paul says in Romans:

Rom 13:1 Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.

So we are to obey every godly request that the government makes of us. Pay the full measure of your taxes. Register for volunteer service. Obey traffic laws.

Closer to home, though, is our attitude of submission to our elders in the church. Let us be enthusiastic in building up the church under their leadership.

We honor God by our submission to authority.

And there may be times when it is necessary to disobey the government. In a conflict between God and man, we obey the higher authority.

Acts 5:29 But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men."

Ecc 8:6-7 For there is a time and a way for everything, although man's trouble lies heavy on him. 7 For he does not know what is to be, for who can tell him how it will be?

Here again we are reminded of God's timing and the wise person is aware of that. There is a time to submit to authority and a time to rebel against oppression. There is a time to work to save your marriage and a time to leave an abusive or adulterous spouse. There is a time to work hard to make your job situation better and a time to look for greener pastures. Should I go or should I stay.

But how do we know when the right time is? It is hard to know. The troubles and frustrations of life abound. We aren't able to see the future nor can anyone tell us. Not even esteemed prognosticators.

Death, of course, is the biggest unknown. You can build bigger barns (or bigger portfolios), but who knows if you'll be around to enjoy them.

Ecc 8:8 No man has power to retain the spirit, or power over the day of death. There is no discharge from war, nor will wickedness deliver those who are given to it.

In this verse, in view of the reference to death, Solomon is using the word "spirit" to mean the breath of life.

In time of war, soldiers are in harm's way but cannot quit the battlefield. Their responsibility is to stand and fight, as they continue to do so for this country even as you read this. One of the hardest responsibilities that governments levy on their subjects is to subject them to military service. They are to defend their country; a role that brings them into danger and with that danger comes uncertainty about the future. When our son, David, was a Navy Corpsman, he chose to go greenside, meaning he was attached to the marines and did a couple of tours with them in Iraq. He was in mortal danger, subject to ambushes, suicide bombings, IEDs . . . (all of which he experienced). Kathleen and I did not know the future and it was harrowing.

We, also, are under authority and face an uncertain future. So how shall we live?

The wise way to live is by submitting to the sovereignty of God and entrusting our lives to the authority of Jesus Christ. He is the wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:30), the King of kings (Rev 19:16), the Savior who died at His appointed time in obedience to the Father (Luke 23:46) and the Lord of eternal life (John 6:68).

"He for death is ready, who living clings to Thee."

Spoiler alert! - I'm going to die.
Worse spoiler alert! - You are going to die.
And . . . we have trouble believing it.

But attending a funeral can bring that fact into sharp focus as it probably did for Solomon. He's been ruminating about the power of worldly authority and God's sovereignty over life and death and now he's just witnessed in v 8:10 the burial of a wicked person. This increased his wisdom.

"The sight of a funeral is a very healthful thing for the soul." - Charles Spurgeon

Why? Because as Columba Stewart said, "Awareness of mortality exerts a unique power to focus the mind and heart on essentials."

Solomon saw the wicked buried and noted how they received praise in the city. This today is normal as well. Nice things are said at funerals. Don't speak ill of the dead. However, v 10 could be translated as the wicked "were forgotten in the city."

This aligns with Prov 10:7 "The memory of the righteous is a blessing, but the name of the wicked will rot."

And, again, the theme of wicked people prospering while good people suffer comes up. In this life, Solomon tells us that things seem a bit topsy-turvy. So what is the point of being righteous?

Furthermore, the lack of swift justice (v 8:11) encourages the wicked to sin even more. If, as a child, you touch a hot burner on the stove, it hurts and you quickly learn not to do that. But if, as a child, you act out and your parents make excuses for you, then what do you learn except that you can act out even more.

God is very patient with us, slow to anger, but some people use that as an implied consent to sin some more. After all, the final judgment is a lo-o-o-o-ong way off, and indeed, they think that He may not judge them at all. Maybe He will forget.

2 Pet 3:4 They [scoffers] will say, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation."

William Provine of Cornell University expresses the worldview of scoffers: "Let me summarize my views on what modern evolutionary biology tells us loud and clear -- and these are basically Darwin's views. There are no gods, no purposes, and no goal-directed forces of any kind. There is no life after death. When I die, I am absolutely certain that I am going to be dead. That's the end of me. There is no ultimate foundation for ethics, no ultimate meaning in life, and no free will for humans, either. . . . Since we know that we are not going to live after we die, there is no reward for suffering in this world. You live and you die. "

But Solomon believed that there would be a final tally of rights and wrongs after death; he believed that God would make things right in the end.

Vv 8:12-13 Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him. 13 But it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear before God.

The wicked may enjoy prosperity in this life but there are no blessings for them after the grave.

T. M. Moore offers this paraphrase of v 10: "And then they die. The funeral's nice enough: we give the guy his due; his loved ones weep; his friends all say they'll miss him; then we bury him away from sight, and everyone forgets him."

Fortunately, it will go better for those that fear God. The fear of God is what Michael Eaton calls "the awe and holy caution that arises from realization of the greatness of God."

Justice is coming. I don't know when, it's not on my calendar, but it is only a matter of time. In the meantime, Solomon commends the enjoyment of life in 8:15. Despite the sufferings of this life, we can experience genuine joy, for God is near and our day is coming.

Chapter 8 concludes with Solomon again expressing his frustration at the difficulty of understanding wisdom. Samuel Johnson felt similarly when he was working on his dictionary (published in 1755). In the preface, he wrote "I saw that one enquiry only gave occasion to another, that book referred to book, that to search was not always to find, and to find was not always to be informed; and that thus to pursue perfection was . . . to chase the sun."

Ecclesiastes is not a book that raises questions and immediately provides answers. Instead, it is a book of struggles with problems that we all face in our daily lives and by reading it, we learn to trust God even though we don't have the answers. This is how life as a Christian works; it's not just about our final reward but also about who we become along the way.

Have a great week!

Comment:

Butch O'Neal:
Thank you, Kevin!!!

Replies:

Kevin Crittenden:
You are welcome, Butch!

Comment:

Ginger Hermon:
Thanks, Kevin! So many good thoughts and lessons above.

Comment:

LuAnn Woody:
Whew! That was like an all-star bunch of thoughts. Bobby burns and mark twain and Solomon and Matthew Henry, Martin Luther . I am going to print it out for further perusal. You made so many good points about our society's attitude towards death. I have heard so many moms say they won't take their children to funerals, for fear the children will be scarred.

Replies:

Kevin Crittenden:
When I was 4 years old, I had a tonsilectomy at Letterman Hospital in San Francisco. Soon afterwards, my cousin, also 4 and my good sandbox buddy, had the same operation. Unfortunately she died during the surgery. I remember sitting in a big room with the mourning relatives and looking at Kendy, noticing how waxen and still she seemed. Being curious, I wanted to go over and touch her; I didn't really understand that she had died; death was not in my experience yet. And no, I was not allowed to go touch her or say good-bye, just cautioned to be quiet. I've stayed quiet for decades.

Comment:

Jack Dyer:
Thank you Kevin. I have not heard or read such an enlightening study of Ecclesiastes!

Replies:

Kevin Crittenden:

Thank you, Jack. Of course, I am following a guide and am mixing in my own experiences and thoughts which I hope are flowing into me from the H.S. (when I can shift my ego.)

November 23: Ecclesiastes 9-10 (Kevin Crittenden)

Week 47

Poetry Reading for 11/23/17

Ecclesiastes 9-10

Good Morning and Happy Thanksgiving!

Grab a cup of coffee and a steaming haunch of turkey, curl up on the couch and tell the kids to go outside and play while we delve further into the wisdom of Solomon. So far, we know from him that life is a dreary business, it's impossible to know for certain what God is doing and only liars claim to know the meaning of life. People, being human beings after all, are prone to want to understand God and when they, by necessity, fail, they get angry about the personal circumstances of their lives. Why did God do this and why doesn't God do that and when will He answer my prayers? C'mon, God! Tick tock!

But wisdom tells us to humbly accept that we are finite beings with limited capacity and therefore incapable of understanding everything. Francis Bacon warns us not to "draw down or submit the mysteries of God to our reason." Rather we should be more like Paul:

Rom 11:33-34 Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! 34 "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?"

Isaac Watts, in a hymn, wrote "Where reason fails, with all her powers, there faith prevails, and love adores." - from "We Give Immortal Praise"

At the beginning of Chapter 9, we see that Solomon's faith in God continues to prevail. He doesn't conclude that God is absent (Atheism) or that God has wandered off and abandoned us (Deism), or that God has contracted Alzheimer's and doesn't know what He is doing (as described by Thomas Hardy - "the dreaming, dark, dumb Thing that turns the handle of this idle Show.")

Solomon concludes that we all are in God's hands. For us, having the Word, being in God's hands is a wonderful feeling - we gain comfort and assurance. We trust in God to leave our cares, our concerns, our anxieties, our worries, the heavy burdens of our life in this fallen world - all this we can give over to the one who loves us so much that He died on the cross for us.

Solomon, of course, is ignorant of the Cross and is uncertain about what God is doing, saying in v 9:1 that "no one knows whether love or hate awaits them."

Essentially, Solomon says we don't know where we stand before God - whether he loves us (accepts us) or hates us (rejects us).

Rom 9:13 As it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."

How can we tell if God favors us? One seemingly reasonable way is to look at our earthly prosperity. If everything is coming up roses for us, then we say "God is Great!" or "God has

answered all my prayers.” We look at prosperous people and think how much God has blessed them.

But Solomon did not fall for that kind of thinking. He saw that God tends to treat everyone more or less the same. Even though some people (righteous) honor God, and other people (wicked) are scoffers, both groups suffer the same fate. Vv 9:2-3.

Matt 5:45 “. . .For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

Since there seems to be, on balance, a parity between what happens to the good and the bad, then there just doesn't seem to be any way to tell who has earned God's favor and who has not. Solomon was displeased with this situation and called it evil in v 9:3. Then, continuing on in a bad mood, he says, still in v 3, that human beings are rubbish.

Eccl 9:3 This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that the same event happens to all. Also, the hearts of the children of man are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead.

Well, gee, it all seems so futile, useless and meaningless. We accept that we are in God's hands, but can't tell if He likes us or will scourge us like Job (whom He liked! Go figure.). Now, Solomon is saying how sinful we all are. Time for another Flood? (Except God promised that He wouldn't.)

And then, of course, we die. The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly. We all die. Solomon keeps resurrecting the topic of death, giving us another memento mori (reminder of death), concluding that it is better to be alive than dead.

This is a switch from Eccl 4:2 in which he said “And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive.”

Also a change from Job's thinking in Job 3:11 “Why did I not die at birth, come out from the womb and expire?”

But living is better than dying according to Solomon. Death brings ignorance, death brings loss (remember: you can't take it with you, there are no U-Hauls attached to hearses), death brings oblivion (over time, no one will remember your name). When we consider losing all the wonderful feelings we have for our loved ones and the little joys we experience (a sunrise, that first cup of coffee, a letter from a friend, the gentle touch of your spouse, . . .) we can find joy in being alive and be reminded of the many blessings He bestows on us daily.

Yet Solomon found little to hope for in living. Sure, it's better than dying but not by much. If life only ends in death, what hope is there at all?

Ecclesiastes, of course, is part of the Bible and we look to the rest of the Bible to find that there is indeed hope because Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has gone ahead of us into glory. He has prepared the way for us by sacrificing Himself on the Cross, becoming, without doubt, as dead as any of the dead people that Solomon saw being buried. Jesus was tenderly laid in the tomb, with a heavy stone sealing the entrance but Jesus overcame Death, rolled away the stone and emerged victorious into everlasting life on the third day.

The grave is not our final destination – it is merely a way station. It would be a mistake to get on a train not knowing where you are going and then be unhappily surprised when you get there. Do what you need to do to stay on track. Consult the Scriptures for details.

Solomon now tells us (vv. 9:7-10) that we may as well make the most of our short time on earth, enjoying its many pleasures.

1 Cor 15:32 What do I gain if, humanly speaking, I fought with beasts at Ephesus? If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."

Solomon tells us this so that we may gain a balanced perspective. Life often is burdensome, thankless and frustrating. But there are times of joy as well. To everything there is a season. A time to go shopping and a time to pay taxes. If we neglect one aspect of life, then we are not living fully.

Solomon believed that all is vanity and also came to believe that there is joy in life. According to Martin Luther, the Solomon of Ecclesiastes "is not urging a life of pleasure and luxury characteristic of those who do not sense this vanity, for that would be putting oil on fire; but he is speaking of godly men, who sense the vexation and troubles of the world. It is their downcast hearts that he wants to encourage."

And we can enjoy ourselves because (v 9:7) "God has already approved what you do." Obviously this is not a blanket endorsement, which would include sinful behavior, but rather that our activities enjoy the blessing of God. The enjoyments of life are not "guilty pleasures" but are godly pleasures.

So what pleasures does Solomon mention? Contentment, comfort, and companionship. Go experience the heartfelt joy of dining with good friends; building relationships and engaging in fellowship. Wear white always (the dress-up clothes of the ancient Near East). Wear perfume – you want to smell good in a hot climate. "Enjoy life with your wife." You and she entered into a covenantal relationship before God.

Note that this last is a specific command to husbands. So married fellas, listen up! The man says to enjoy life with your wife. This means in ALL the rooms of your house. She is (or should be IMHO) your best friend. (This is another good topic for a men's group)

Husbands, try to:

Spend more time together as good friends do, in conversation, going out to dinner or movies or plays. Shopping together. Bible study together. Sit on the porch and hold hands. Share with each other the little things that were interesting to you this day.

Are you a good listener? Or do you listen with your answer running? Sometimes you need to look beyond the spoken words to the feelings underneath. And respond to that. Let her know that you have heard her in a way that opens and deepens the channels of communication.

It is natural that the spark of sexual passion that you felt in your honeymoon days is now often buried underneath the kids' dirty laundry and the unwashed dishes. Who has time for romance anymore with all the after-school activities and PTA meetings? Men – your wife may often seem harried and tired, and playing kitchee-coo with you is a million miles away in her world. So – help her out with the stuff that makes her harried and which makes her feel like she's being pulled in a hundred directions. Go to the grocery store, do the laundry, make breakfast for the kids. And her. Treat her like you did when you were courting her. Stand underneath her bedroom window at midnight and serenade her. OK, don't do that.

In general, try not taking your wife for granted. Value her as a person; let her feel your love for her every day just as you feel the love that Jesus has for us. We are special to Him every single day.

Rom 5:8 but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

We will see more of the way in which love and enjoyment go together in the Song of Songs, coming to a Facebook group near you this Dec. 3.

In the last part of v9, Solomon tells us to enjoy all our toilsome labor under the sun because that is our portion as well. We all have godly work to do and we are called to enjoy it. Also, v10, we are called to do our work to the best of our ability.

The Puritan William Perkins said, “We must take heed of two damnable sins . . . The first is idleness, whereby the duties of our callings . . . are neglected or omitted. The second is slothfulness, whereby they are performed slackly and carelessly.”

The spirit of what Solomon is saying about the pleasures of wine, women, and work is summed up by Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase in *The Message*:

“Seize life! Eat bread with gusto, Drink wine with a robust heart. Oh yes - God takes pleasure in your pleasure! Dress festively every morning. Don't skimp on colors and scarves. Relish life with the spouse you love Each and every day of your precarious life. Each day is God's gift. It's all you get in exchange for the hard work of staying alive. Make the most of each one! Whatever turns up, grab it and do it! And heartily!”

But, of course, we need to be watchful in our pursuit of pleasure lest we fall into spiritual danger. We get distracted by the gifts and ignore the Giver.

The pleasures of food can lead to gluttony (not how much you weigh, but your attitude towards food.) Thus, Phil 3:19 “Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.”

The pleasures of alcohol can (as we sadly are aware) lead to life in a drunken stupor amidst the splinters of a shattered family.

The pleasures of relationship can foster a tendency for a couple to “cocoon”, turning inwards towards each other instead of outwards in service to others.

The pleasures of work lead to a generation of workaholics, living for the money, prestige and status that work brings and avoiding the problems of dealing with their families.

Tim Keller writes, “Sin is not just the doing of bad things, but the making of good things into ultimate things. It is seeking to establish a sense of self by making something else more central to your significance, purpose, and happiness than your relationship to God.”

For some, it is tempting to avoid this spiritual danger by denying themselves ANY pleasure. This self-denial is known as asceticism and is conflated by its practitioners with godliness. They live by Col 2:21 “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch”

As in most things, including pleasure, discretion is advised.

1 Cor 10:23 “All things are lawful,” but not all things are helpful. “All things are lawful,” but not all things build up.

What does the Bible say about enjoying pleasure? What it tells us to do is to receive the good things in life with gratitude, returning our thanks to God. To keep our gifts in perspective, it is wise to praise God for all of His gifts.

1 Tim 4:4 For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving,

Elizabeth Barrett Browning:
“Earth’s crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.”

The words “Thank you, Father” should never be far from our lips.

In vv. 9:11-12, Solomon reiterates one of the frustrations of life – the same fate not only befalls “the righteous and the wicked”, as stated in v2, but also the same fate befalls those with special talents as those who do not. Having speed, strength, intellect, knowledge – any human ability - is no guarantee of success in life. Time and chance happen to us all. Tornadoes, tsunamis, volcanoes, cancer do not discriminate between their victims.

We let the words “Everything is in God’s control” pass easily from our lips but our minds balk at the fact that we don’t know what He is doing. So we cannot tell WHEN our hour will come. Solomon uses the examples of fish and birds who unknowingly meet a cruel fate; had they only known what awaited them, they could have avoided it.

We all have an appointed day. It is marked on God’s calendar and we cannot peek at it. God, in His mercy, allows us to know that such a day exists so that we may use our time wisely.

So, if there are no guarantees that our efforts will improve our lot, then why try? Why run at all if being swift is no guarantee of winning? Why bother to go to college if there is no guarantee of a better life? Why not just lapse into fatalism and just say “it is what it is?” Why take the hard road when the easy path leads to the same place?

In vv. 9:13-18, Solomon counsels us to take a different path than fatalism. He commends living wisely by giving an example (probably based on a true event) of an anonymous wise man whose sage advice saved a city from a great king. This event was something that Solomon had seen and it had greatly impressed him.

Similar examples of a person saving a city are found in 2 Sam 20:14-22 (wise woman saves Abel Beth Maakah from Joab), 2 Kings 19 (Sennacherib repulsed because Hezekiah’s prayer was heard by the Lord) and when Archimedes saved Syracuse from the Romans by sinking their ships.

Although the wise man in Solomon’s example was soon forgotten, yet his wisdom proved valuable. In vv. 13-15, wisdom is exemplified and in vv. 16-18, wisdom is prioritized. (This is better than that.) “Wisdom is better than strength,” he says. Brains are better than brawn. If we are wise, we will recognize and heed wisdom when we hear it.

Unfortunately, one bad apple can spoil the bunch and “one sinner destroys much good.” One loud-mouthed fool can spread malicious gossip in a church or on Facebook, damaging reputations that have taken years to build.

“A lie can travel half way around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes.” – Mark Twain

So now that we know how wisdom is exemplified and prioritized, HOW can we apply it in our world where “time and chance” happen to us all and life is uncertain at best? First, we give ourselves over to Jesus Christ, becoming a member of His flock, asking for forgiveness for our

sins, being washed in the precious Blood of the Lamb, subjugating our stubborn will to His, and working to the best of our abilities in His vineyards to produce a mighty harvest.

We can then simply ask God for increased wisdom if we want to be wiser.

James 1:5 If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.

And this godly wisdom has come to us primarily in the form of Jesus Christ.

1 Cor 1:30 And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption,

Let us go back to the example that Solomon used about the anonymous wise man who saved the city and see how Jesus illustrates it by His saving work. What do we know about Jesus? He was as poor as anyone, having no home (Luke 9:58), no possessions, totally dependent on God for His physical needs (Phil 4:19) and was wiser than anyone as we know from the things that He did and said. As for all the events of Jesus's earthly existence, all His achievements and miracles, how he healed the sick, raised the dead and fed the people, are they not written in the Scriptures?

By His wisdom, Jesus delivered the lost city of humanity. Satan, with all the forces at his command, the full and mighty powers of Hell, was besieging that city. Jesus, alone, saved that city through an action born of Wisdom and Compassion, an action that to us, in our limited understanding, might seem foolish. He willingly became the sacrifice for us, dying on the Cross and then rising again. He didn't raise huge armies with bigger weapons of war to outflank Satan in the plains of Armageddon but knew that "Wisdom is better than weapons of war." So simple. So effective.

Satan, of course, continues to wage war against humanity by appealing to our fleshly selves, but there is now in place a road to safety; the road that leads to the Cross. We just need to accept His outstretched hand and He will lift us up to that road. That is wisdom.

How else can we apply our wisdom after accepting Christ?

We can be thankful. We will be disappointed in life as we journey through it but let us be thankful for the many blessings God bestows on us every day.

We can be content. I'm never going to be Time's Man of the Year and I've learned to be okay with that. My ship came in but I was at the train station at the time so I've missed my chance to be a bazillionaire. Oh well. Wisdom is content with what God gives us. Or doesn't give us. I remember a story about a widow with only two mites who didn't go around bemoaning her circumstances but chose instead to donate what she had – to people richer than she was. Wow!

We can be prayerful. The Bible is filled with examples of God responding to godly prayer. If you truly need something, then God welcomes your prayerful request. Prayer reminds us that we are submissive to the One in charge; that our earthly goods are gifts from Him. Prayer is an answer to the myriad anxieties and soul-wrenching terrors that lay siege to our wellbeing:

Phil 4:6 do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

We can learn to be humble. If you notice that your speech is filled with the word “I”, then perhaps it is time for some reflection. “I am a CEO”, “I have a doctorate”, “I own a house”, “I travel the world”, “I have money”, “I have a gardener”, “I own this and that” . . . This all boils down to “I have social status.” Meh. Rather than thinking too highly of ourselves, let us learn to use our God-given talents to do His will. Our gifts flow from Him.

We can be generous. Do we really need to hold on to every last penny that we have? For me, this really is about anxiety – not trusting in God’s providence. I think you will find that people who share without reservation have much and people who share grudgingly or not at all have very little. The balance of generosity vs. securing a comfortable future for ourselves and our families would be a good discussion topic.

2 Cor 9:7 Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

We can be faithful. If there are no guarantees, if the race doesn’t always go to the swift, and if strength does not always prevail, then we might lose heart and think that nothing we do matters. But wisdom teaches us the opposite – that if our future is so unpredictable, we need to leave the results of what we do in God’s capable hands. We need to do what He has called us to do and trust Him to make use of the results. So, yes, we need to do our best.

We can be hopeful. Wisdom tells us that “time and chance happen to them all,” so the wise person puts their hope in God. What do we know about the future? That we will be secure, comfortable, surrounded by loving family and friends? Maybe. Maybe not. But we do know that Jesus is coming again. That’s not a “maybe.” And He will deliver us from whatever troubles we have.

And so we arrive at Chapter 10, which starts off with a funny odor.

V 10:1 Dead flies make the perfumer's ointment give off a stench; so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor.

Perfume was a precious and expensive commodity (nard) but the whole batch could be tainted into becoming something repugnant by introducing just a small bit of impurity. Solomon makes the point that wisdom is a precious commodity but a bit of folly ruins everything. We see how quickly one bad decision can taint a person’s life.

Derek Kidner says, “It is easier to make a stink than to create sweetness.”

An indiscretion on the part of a beloved public figure (i.e. Bill Cosby) can ruin his image forever.

Godly wisdom doesn’t just happen overnight (for me, anyway). It grows over a lifetime of quiet reflection on one’s personal experiences coupled with the careful exegesis of the Word.

Chapter 10, then, is Solomon’s injunction to avoid folly. It reads a lot like Proverbs, with a seeming hodge-podge of comparisons, proverbs, exhortations and ruminations. But through it all, two ways of living are contrasted – the foolish way and the wise way.

Do we know the difference between wisdom and folly as well as we know the difference between good and evil? Are the choices we face in life more about good and evil or about choosing wisely or otherwise? Actually the latter, right? Most of us don’t wake up wondering whether or not we should steal our neighbor’s stuff. But we might tussle with the issue of lending a goodly sum of money to a troubled relative.

A “fool” isn’t just somebody with a subpar IQ. Rather, it is someone who lacks the proper fear of God and therefore “kicks against the goads.” Thus he wanders off the straight road and gets lost or mired down or falls into the nearest watering hole.

Ps 14:1 The fool says in his heart, “There is no God.” They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds; there is none who does good.

The fool is differentiated from the wicked. The wicked are deliberately malicious, compliant with and subservient to the Devil, whereas the fool is prone to impulsive disobedience, self-centered arrogance and rash disregard for God.

The fool has no moral compass as stated in v 10:2 – the heart of the wise goes to the right and the heart of the fool goes in the opposite direction. Sort of like what Jonah did at first, going to Joppa rather than heading to Nineveh.

What direction we go in life is dependent on our heart. The heart is the core of our being. Charles Bridge defined the heart as “the center of affection – the seat of knowledge – the source of purpose and emotion – the very soul of the spiritual life.”

Our hearts can incline either to the left or to the right. Leaning upon our own understanding and drives, leaving God out of the picture, we tend to follow our fleshly lusts, putting our heads down into the mud and rooting for truffles. Nobody will be throwing pearls before us.

But, contrariwise, if we put our faith in God, then the beloved Psalm 23 tells us:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

2 He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.

3 He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.

HE leads me.

HIS is the path of wisdom.

HIS is the right path.

The fool, however, has ignored the signs and taken the wrong road. V 10:3 tells us that he is seen by all to be stupid. Like most fools, he seems to be the only one that doesn’t realize he is a fool. We’ve met these folks before – the ones that boast loudly about their great intelligence – how they are the ones in the know and patiently, with a patronizing smile, tell everyone else, “Here, let me explain this in terms that even you can understand. . .”

Prov 13:16 Every prudent man acts with knowledge, but a fool flaunts his folly.

We do best to ask for and lean on God’s wisdom rather than stubbornly go in our own direction. It’s a well-known joke in our society that men don’t know how to ask for directions, but when it comes to our lives, we need to be serious about our need for guidance.

Vv 10:4-7 now give us some practical advice for dealing with foolish people. For we WILL meet them. We may work with them, go to school with them, go bowling with them, go drinking with them . . .um . . . scratch that one, or even marry one. I’ve even heard some people opine that there are fools in government! (gasp!)

Mark Twain: "Suppose you were an idiot. And suppose you were a member of Congress. But I repeat myself."

This quote resonates with what Ecclesiastes says about political leadership. Vv 10:5-7. Folly sits in high positions of authority. How can we know when the leadership inclines to the left? Whenever society celebrates immorality, perpetrates wrongful violence, punishes righteousness, denies God or persecutes God's people.

So do we respond by rioting in the streets, breaking shop windows and setting police cars on fire? Do we shout down opposition speakers with taunts, slogans and jeers? Do we meet their boasting with our own rodomontade? Do we bomb clinics? Do we forget that God is in charge and take matters into our own hands? No. V 10:4 tells us to stay the course. Solomon recommends a gentle response that turns away wrath. This is the Biblical way of dealing with fools, not by acting as they do but by emulating the example of Jesus Christ.

One commentator says "The anger of a ruler must be soothed with a calm forbearance that neither panics in fear nor deserts in bitterness."

Ordinarily, the best response to anger, then, is to stay, not run away, and to remain calm instead of flaring up in anger yourself. Because, as Derek Kidner explains, "it is better to have only one angry person than to have two!"

The angry people in our lives could be bosses, teachers, relatives, or spouses. It is best, then, in dealing with these people, not to be intimidated or to shout back at them but to maintain a calm demeanor.

The angry people in Peter's life suggested that he stop preaching the gospel. But he recommended a response of quiet gentleness.

He told Christians to submit to the governing authorities, EVEN WHEN they were persecuting the church because by performing good works, the suffering church would "put to silence the ignorance of foolish people." (1 Peter 2:13-15)

He told servants to respect their masters, EVEN IF they were unjust, for it is a gracious thing to endure injustice. (1 Peter 2:18-19).

He told wives to submit to their husbands, EVEN IF they were unbelievers, so that by their pure and respectful conduct, they might lead their husbands to Christ. (1 Peter 3:1-2). I must commend my wife, Kathleen, for her tremendous help to me by her shining example in gentling me towards Christ.

And if we still say, "Why should I put up with this? I'm so outta here!" then we remember what Peter also said:

1 Peter 2:21 For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.

Jesus is our example: Angry rulers rose against him, angry priests and teachers of the law wanted to kill him but He didn't run away or call down fire from Heaven. No, Jesus continued His mission, calmly doing the work that He had been called to do.

1 Peter 2:23 When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.

In Vv. 10:8-9, Solomon tells us that fools often manage to hurt themselves by their foolish behavior. The world can be a dangerous place and wise people proceed with caution. Fools rush in where angels fear to tread. But, while it seems on the surface to talk about occupational hazards, which can happen to anybody, this whole section is contrasting foolish behavior with wise behavior. So when Solomon says in v 10:8, "Whoever digs a pit may fall into it," think rather of someone digging a hole to harm another.

Psalm 35:7 For without cause they hid their net for me; without cause they dug a pit for my life.
[

Similarly in Psalm 7:

Psalm 7:14-16 Behold, the wicked man conceives evil and is pregnant with mischief and gives birth to lies.

15 He makes a pit, digging it out, and falls into the hole that he has made.

16 His mischief returns upon his own head, and on his own skull his violence descends.

Similarly, someone who heedlessly breaks boundaries and pushes through limits (i.e. breaking the law) may be bitten. Charles Bridges says "Evil shall fall upon the heads of its own authors."

Solomon now uses vv 10:10-11 to show a wiser way of living by using the analogies of a blacksmith and a snake-charmer. V 10:10 describes wisdom as the sharpened blade of an axe. It takes a lot of effort to cut through a tree root with a dull axe and it tires the user out quickly. This is what foolish people do – flail away at things in life without achieving much progress. Were they to grow in wisdom, then they could mend those relationships or grow in their community and have a closer walk with the Lord. How do we sharpen our blade? By taking advantage of training opportunities when they arise, opting for a prudent courtship instead of a whirlwind romance, gathering the materials you need before beginning a project, accepting help instead of stubbornly going it alone.

While v 10 seems to argue in favor of wisely taking time to prepare, v 11 seems to argue that acting too slowly is a danger. It is vitally important that the snake charmer gets down to business and charm the snake before it bites. Foolish delay can bite you.

Taken together, vv10 and 11 show that we sometimes need to take time to make solid preparations and sometimes we need to strike while the iron is hot. All to say that in every situation, we need to depend on God's wisdom.

"The doorstep to the temple of wisdom is the knowledge of our own ignorance." – Charles Spurgeon

Solomon has been contrasting the difference between wisdom and folly. In the final verses of Chapter 10, he will teach us:

Vv. 12-14,20 The wise employment of words

Vv. 16-17 The wise exercise of leadership

Vv. 18-19 The wise expenditure of effort

"Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak out and remove all doubt." – Abraham Lincoln

Prov 17:28 Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent.

Ecc 5:2 Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few.

When we speak, the mouth reveals the contents of our hearts, whether it be folly or wisdom. If our listeners hear wisdom, then we are deemed to be wise. (V 10:12). Our reputation is built up. However, translating v 12 as “The words of a wise man’s mouth win him favor” allows us to see a different aspect. The word “favor” is really the Hebrew word for “grace” (hen), favor that is undeserved. A wise person’s words show this kind of grace to others – their words are a blessing to the ones listening. So, really, v 12 isn’t so much about what WE get (our built-up reputation) but what we are able to give to OTHERS, namely, the gracious love of God.

Have you ever been in a conversation where you can’t wait to talk about your own accomplishments and achievements or to focus attention on yourself? Mostly, our conversations are attempts to BELONG to some social group or other. We desperately need to feel included; part of the In-Crowd. Part of “Those In the Know.” We want to feel important. Too often, people will use their words to tear others down in order to build themselves up. We often use our words to get something that we want. We tell jokes to build a sense of camaraderie, or use flattery to get a girl to accept a date request, or spin a web of deceit and misrepresentation in order to win favor during a job interview or to get elected. “Oh! What a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive . . .”

Do we use our words wisely as instruments of grace? Do we use our wise words to build others up and edify them? Mutual edification, then, is the way of wisdom.

Are you prone to prattle, given to gossip, largely loquacious or even vexatiously verbose? Consider the following ways to use your words more wisely. The wise person:

- Offers verbal praise and thanksgiving to God. By doing so, it reminds us of who we are. If the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, then speaking or singing worshipfully is the path to wisdom.
- Uses more words of encouragement than criticism. Nobody likes to be chastened for their faults. Rather, use words of encouragement to guide them along the road to positive change.
- Speaks “the truth with his neighbor” (Eph 4:25) He speaks what needs to be said in a loving manner. Sometimes that may mean speaking hard truths when they need to be spoken, what the Bible calls “a word in season.” (Prov 15:23)
- Speaks with gentleness, never in unrighteous anger. I close down when somebody is yelling at me. You too? Yelling is eminently unhelpful and unproductive. It is wiser to wait until emotions can be brought under control and then our words can offer healing. Prov 15:28 The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things.
- Knows how and when to say “I’m sorry” and “Please forgive me.” And mean it. Sometimes we are in the position of needing to defend ourselves but the wise person, rather than be defensive, is content to give a quiet answer and then let God bring vindication in His good time. A wise person does not lash out in anger or make cutting remarks but remembers Prov 15:1 “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”
- Speaks words of love and affection. Although “actions speak louder than words,” a wise husband makes his wife secure by verbally affirming his love. Sometimes, wisdom is as simple as saying “I love you.”

But, as we know, many people speak foolish words. We all do from time to time.

James 3:2 For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.

I don’t seem to be a perfect man and I sometimes wonder about you.

Verse 10:12 tells us that the words of a fool are self-destructive in that the lips of a fool consume him. Words can be destructive in many ways, but one example that Solomon gives is in v. 20. He says don't denigrate people in authority, even in your thoughts, even if you think you are alone, because the walls have ears and those words will come back to bite you. Most nations at that time were absolute monarchies and I'm sure the kings did not take kindly to criticism any more than our leaders do.

Of course, cursing political leaders is not an activity that is condoned for Christians – it is wrong – and that message needs to be reinforced during political election cycles.

Exodus 22:28 “You shall not revile God, nor curse a ruler of your people.” Except on Facebook? No.

And consider v 10:13: The beginning of the words of his mouth is foolishness, and the end of his talk is evil madness.

There is a progression here, a downward spiral. The fool starts out with snide remarks and descends into “evil madness,” which smacks of moral turpitude and mental instability. Do you know people who make hurtful remarks, then defend themselves by saying “Oh, I was just joking.” How long will it be before those remarks turn into outright abuse? Do you know people who sometimes tell “little white lies?” and tee-hee when you call them out for it? How long before they begin to lose the ability to know the difference between truth and falsehood?

If we are wise, we will guard our speech carefully. If foolish talk comes from our children, then we need to offer correction. In his book “War of Words”, Paul Tripp offers the following questions for self-examination:

“Listen to the talk that goes on in your home. How much of it is impatient and unkind? How often are words spoken out of selfishness and personal desire? How easily do outbursts of anger occur? How often do we bring up past wrongs? How do we fail to communicate hope? How do we fail to protect? How often do our words carry threats that we have “had it” and are about to quit? Stop and listen, and you will see how much we need to hold our talk to this standard of love, and how often the truth we profess to speak has been distorted by our sin. It is time for many of us to confess that we have not known the way of love. Our words have hindered, not helped, what the Lord is seeking to do.”

V 10:14 tells us that the words of a fool are presumptuous; they often bray loudly like a donkey, making boastful claims about what they know and what they will do but are unable or unwilling to put their money where their mouth is. They talk the talk but cannot walk the walk.

Plato once said to me, “Wise men speak because they have something to say; fools because they have to say something.”

The end of v 14 reminds us that neither the wise nor the foolish know the future. But fools often talk at length about the future – either global disasters or how they're going to strike it rich or how the current government is leading the country to ruin . . . I don't mean to sound all judgment, I've done this myself and will probably do it again. Hopefully I can catch myself and be reminded of what James said:

James 4:13-15 Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit” — 14 yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. 15 Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.”

Solomon, in v10:16, addresses the need for wisdom in government – something that he was personally familiar with. V16 can read “Woe to the land whose king was a servant . . .” or “Woe to you, O land, when your king is a child . . .” This is a picture of a kingdom run by somebody incompetent to do the job. There ARE exceptions (Josiah who took the reins at age 8). Of course, one does not need to be a child to be incompetent to rule. (Rehoboam, age 41 2 Chron 12:13) Soon, what Solomon had built up became divided.

What about these princes who feast in the morning? These folks are supposed to be running things wisely but instead, these dissolutes start the mornings – every morning – reveling in debauchery and drunkenness that would make the participants at a college frat kegger blush.

V 17 reminds us that feasting is not the problem – there is a time and purpose for that. It brings the governing body together for sustenance and communication.

The problem is with people who use their lofty position for personal pleasure.

Isa 5:11 Woe to those who rise early in the morning, that they may run after strong drink, who tarry late into the evening as wine inflames them!

Prov 23:20 Be not among drunkards or among gluttonous eaters of meat,

Drunkenness fills us with wine but empties us of the Holy Spirit.

Eph 5:18 And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit,

As for ourselves, we do best in our eating and drinking to avoid excess, exercising control by the power of the Holy Spirit. So put down that Fat Tire and those Ho-Hos.

Rom 13:14 But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

V 10:18 reminds us that it is not good to sit around feasting all the time. (Personal sigh.) We need to get off the sofa, turn off the TV and get some work done.

Well, if feasting to excess is a foolish enterprise, what about fasting? Fasting is not necessarily just about giving up food, but can be putting aside a favorite activity, like watching television, or going to restaurants, or watching movies, so that the Kingdom of God can move to the head of the queue in your life. Matthew seems to think that fasting should be a regular part of the Christian life.

Matt 6:16-18 “And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 17 But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, 18 that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

I don't think that fasting is part of the Church of Christ regimen, but certainly it is not discouraged. What do you think?

Solomon moves on to the wise expenditure of effort. In v10:15, he says, “The toil of a fool wearies him, for he does not know the way to the city.”

Wise people work efficiently; they are the go-to people when you need something done quickly and correctly. The fool gets worn out by his work because he isn't necessarily doing his job. He is the one who spends time at work surfing the internet, or walking around talking to the young women. And getting paid for it. There is a dishonesty about that which, added to the knowledge that he hasn't got much to show for the time he has been at work, causes a weariness of the soul. There are guilt feelings associated with slacking off; not only that, but the realization that all your work still needs to get done can be debilitating. Oh well, stop for a drink on the way home; that will help.

If that is the fool's mode of living, then he may never have learned the value of hard work. He's lost his way and doesn't even know how to get to the big city, although there are signposts all over the place.

Derek Kidner says, "So the picture begins to emerge of a man who makes things needlessly difficult for himself by his stupidity."

Such stupidity will prevent him from getting very far in this life and will cause him to stumble into the pit on his way to God's New Jerusalem.

V 10:18, then shows the culmination of laziness. The rafters sag, the roof leaks, mice and vermin run amok, relationships fade, opportunities are lost, self-esteem diminishes, and hope fades. Dry rot of the soul has set in. Too much to take in today, though. After all, tomorrow IS another day.

Solomon is telling us that sloth is a deadly sin. A soul that is too lazy to seek its own salvation is in real danger of being lost. And a society which increasingly shows the attitude of entitlement rather than sacrifice and responsibility is a society headed away from the Cross.

V 10:19 "Bread is made for laughter, and wine gladdens life, and money answers everything."

Living a wise life does not mean foregoing the pleasures of life. You don't need to live as some dour archimandrite in order to please God. Gatherings of family and friends, basket dinners with the brethren, get-togethers with good friends - all are conducive to building healthy relationships and putting into practice the dictum "Love one another." As far as money goes, certainly if we have enough money, we can afford our food and our wine plus the table to eat it on. Charles Bridges states that someone who has money lacks "nothing that this world can give. It supplies a thousand advantages - not only the necessities, but the conveniences, indulgences, and embellishments of life."

But money can also do something else, which is to advance the kingdom of God by supporting the ministry of your church. A wise person toils under the sun not only to support himself and his family, but to honor God by investing in His kingdom.

Have a great week and if you haven't ever done so, try a turkey and cranberry sandwich!

Comment:

Jack Dyer:

Kevin, I appreciate your thoughts. However, it must be my error reading it on my phone, but your message was cut off before you were finished (?).

Replies:

Kevin Crittenden:

Jack - I looked just now and it all seems to be there. If there is still a problem, I'd be happy to email it. Just send me a message. Thanks!

Jack Dyer:

I was able to finish reading in your reply. Thanks

Charles Fry:

There is something quirky about this post. I couldn't read it on the iPhone, had a glitch on the iPad too, but was able to read it all. I don't know why, a technical glitch.

Kathleen Munger Crittenden:

This may be because when he originally posted there was a glitch and it disappeared, so he re-posted.

Butch O'Neal:

I just finished reading it's entirety on my laptop.

Comment:

Butch O'Neal:

Thank you, Kevin!

Comment:

Kevin Crittenden:

It's probably too long.

Replies:

Butch O'Neal:

I would qualify your posts as long. But never, as too long! :)

Comment:

Marc Hermon:

Just came in from splitting logs all afternoon and read 10:9. Thankful I was never endangered. :)

Replies:

Kevin Crittenden:

Well don't push your luck! Don't quarry any stones on your property! And why are you splitting logs on Thanksgiving? Did you run out of toothpicks?

Marc Hermon:

Celebrating on Saturday

Kevin Crittenden:

Ah, one of those antiestablishment types.

Comment:

Denise Waits:

This has been one of my favorite posts for Ecclesiastes. I've made a few screenshots for self-reminders. 😊

November 30: Ecclesiastes 11-12 (Kevin Crittenden)

Week 48
Poetry Reading for 11/30/17
Ecclesiastes 11-12

Hello Again!

Today, we finish Ecclesiastes and come to the conclusion of the matter. Solomon has been wrestling with many of life's issues to find meaning in our existence and has graciously shared his findings with us.

He starts out in Chapter 11 by telling us to hedge our bets. Diversify. Spread our risk. Don't put all our eggs into one basket.

11:2 Invest in seven ventures, yes, in eight; you do not know what disaster may come upon the land.

11:1 Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days.

On the face of it, this doesn't make much sense. If I throw some bread into the nearest creek, it'll get soggy and sink or the ducks and fish will go after it. After many days, the crawdads will be all over it and why would I want to find it again anyway? Yuck! What gives, Solomon?

But, of course, this addresses something real in our lives. It addresses the investments we make, perhaps in others. Have you ever wondered whether your prayers for a friend really get answered? Or whether the money you give to a homeless person really makes a positive difference in their lives? Or whether your sharing of the gospel with an uncommitted friend or stranger will someday help lead them to Christ?

Sometimes, after a while (long or short) we actually may see that we have made a positive difference in someone's life – we see God at work in that person. We have found the bread that we cast.

So we continue to cast our bread on the water, not knowing how God will use our efforts. We may never know. But we continue to pray, continue to serve, continue to hope.

1 Cor 15:58 Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

Luke 6:38 "give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you."

V 11:2 tells us to invest in many ventures, 7 or even 8 because we don't know what disaster may befall the land.

Taken together, vv 11:1-2 may indicate the prudence of engaging in international trade, sending your products (grain) out and then waiting (many days) for fine goods from other countries to arrive. Don't be like the servant who took the one talent entrusted to him by his master and buried it in the ground. (Matt 25:14-30). Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

Solomon is telling us to be prudent in our spiritual lives. When we invest our time, our money, our talents in God's kingdom, our investments are never wasted.

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

V 11:2 reminds us not to put all our eggs into one basket. Diversify your investments, just as you diversify your stock portfolio. This protects against loss because, while some investments may go badly, others may go very well. This is prudent because "you do not know what disaster may come upon the land."

And this pertains to spiritual investments as well; to do 7 or even 8 things to spread the gospel and wait for God's ship to come in.

Solomon now talks about the weather – as do most farmers – because it is important. As we learned earlier, there is a time to plant and a time to uproot. But the one who watches the wind will not plant and the one that looks at those dark clouds in the sky will not reap. These people are risk averse – to the point that they end up doing nothing. Have you ever known people who always want to wait for the "right moment" before embarking on some project? Nothing gets done. The farmer stands out in his field, observing the heavy clouds. Over in the corner of his land, a tree has fallen down, maybe from the wind. The farmer can't do anything about the rain or the tree – those are the result of natural causes.

He does, however, have control over whether he will plant his seed or harvest his crops. But he is just standing there, observing. Waiting until conditions are better and, until then, he does no work. Just like the homeowner who lets his rafters sag and his roof leak.

What things are we putting off, either because something bad might happen or because we tend to procrastinate? How can we reach our goals if we engage in this kind of thinking? I don't want to go to the doctor because she might tell me something bad or chide me about my weight. I don't want to take that class which will help me in my job because I might want to go on vacation and the class is at an inconvenient time anyway.

And yes, the farmer could plant his seed and then see it shrivel and die in a drought. But the chances of a harvest are better if you sow than if you never plant. Time and chance happen to us all.

But we are called to step out in faith – not necessarily in our own efforts – but faith that God will use our efforts to His glory.

In v. 11:5, Solomon reminds us of the paucity of our knowledge as compared to God. Wind is used as an analogy for the mysterious purposes of God. We don't know which way the wind will blow. Jesus used the analogy of the wind when he taught Nicodemus about the mystery of regeneration:

John 3:8 The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.

Again, Solomon uses the word “wind” to describe the human spirit and wonders (v5) what divine mysteries occur in the development of a human baby. Birth was mysterious then and is mysterious now. Who can explain how the soul animates flesh and blood?

Psalms 139:14 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well.

Solomon uses the example of the development of a baby as an example of ALL the works that God does in His Creation – only He has understanding.

Job 5:9 who does great things and unsearchable, marvelous things without number:

These unsearchable, marvelous things are used as a call to faithful obedience in v6. We may not know what God is doing but we act in the faith that He knows what He is about.

Solomon now moves on, starting in v 11:7, to the aging process. We, as a society (and we are not alone), spend untold wealth on attempting to forestall the aging process. It hasn't worked for me, so far, and I've spent upwards of \$.50 on it. According to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, Americans alone spent over \$16B in 2016 on cosmetic surgery. God made us in His image but I guess we feel we can do better.

In her book “Drinking Problems at the Fountain of Youth,” journalist Beth Teitell writes “I know women who worked hard to get into good colleges, worked their connections to land enviable jobs, married well, produced children who could pose for Ralph Lauren ads, vacation on the right islands with the right beach towels and the right heiresses — they have fractional ownerships in Cessnas, for heaven's sake — and yet if they have furrows and hints of upper-lip lines and puppet mouth when those around them are smoother than freshly ironed Pratesi linens, what's it all worth? In a word, nothing.”

The fear of not being seen as young is rampant. We have set up a cult of youth and worship shamelessly in its temples. Around 1965, the saying “Don't trust anyone over 30” became popular. 30 was old. Young people today look horizontally to their own age group for answers to life's questions and no longer respect their elders. After all, what wisdom could you possibly hope to get from somebody that has trouble understanding a smartphone?

We fear, don't we, that when we lose our youth and beauty, then we will be discarded, no longer loved. “Will you still love me when I'm no longer young and beautiful?” – Lyric from song by Lana Del Rey. “Will you still need me, will you still feed me, when I'm sixty-four?” – Beatles. Alienation and loneliness, the great fears of the aging population.

Solomon, though, teaches us to enjoy life at whatever age we happen to be. But he doesn't hide the troubles that come with growing older. He starts out in v 11:7 by exhorting us to revel in the goodness of life, even though life is vanity. Those of us who are of a certain age, know full well that light is sweet, that many of life's little moments are sweet. We remember. And long life has given us many opportunities to build up sweet memories.

However (v8), “But let them remember the days of darkness, for there will be many.” We've had good times and hard times – there is no reason to think that our future will be any different. We will have good times and we also have an appointment with death. This is our reality. But we are not to mope around the house, saddened by our impending mortality. Rather, we let our light shine while we can and brighten the corner where we are instead of shuffling through

life, griping about our problems like some elderly people do. Greet each new day as described in Psalms 118:24 “This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it”

In v 11:9, Solomon addresses young people. While the elderly are to praise God for the length of their days, the young’uns are to praise God for the strength of their youth. To the young, the world is their oyster. The road ahead seems limitless and opportunity beckons. Dreams can come true with so many choices opening up!

However, Solomon cautions against youth as being a license to do whatever you please. There ARE consequences to living in the moment. Sure, (v9) “Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see, but know that for all these things, God will bring you into judgment.” Live, enjoy His Creation, find gladness in your senses but do it in a God-Fearing way.

That “judgment” is THE Judgment talked about in Romans 2:16: “on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.”

So live responsibly. Celebrate your youth but be mindful of Paul’s admonition in 2 Tim 2:22 - “So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.”

To wrap up Chapter 11, Solomon tells us to rid ourselves of anxiety and troubles because youth and vigor are meaningless. Inasmuch as each of us is unique, the things that vex us are unique. But whatever the situation, we are to take care to avoid discouragement from our souls and protect our physical selves. Live prudently in order to maintain optimal mental and physical health. And, guys especially, that means going to the doctor instead of trying to “tough it out.”

Easy for him to say. HOW do we banish anxiety from our hearts?

We refuse to feel sorry for ourselves.

We stop dwelling on our troubles and focus instead on counting our blessings.

We stop holding everything in and trying to appear “normal.” We open up to our trusted family and friends. I include church family – those who can see things through the clarifying lens of the Word.

We go to God in prayer and ask Him for help.

Phil 4:6-7 do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Obviously, we won’t stay young forever, even if you bathe daily, like Bathsheba, in Oil of Olay. “Youth and vigor are meaningless.” Youth is like a puff of smoke, evanescent, elusive, ephemeral. So, Solomon advises us to live free from care as long as we can.

“We worship you, Lord Christ,
Our Savior and our King,
To you our youth and strength
Adoringly we bring:
So fill our hearts, that all may view
Your life in us, and turn to you.”
- Margaret Clarkson – We Come, O Christ, To You

Chapter 12 – The Conclusion of the Matter

12:1 Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, “I have no pleasure in them”;

Solomon is exhorting young people to put God first in their lives. How easy it is to forget God when your body is youthful and the infirmities of age have not yet introduced themselves. The concept of mortality hasn't hit yet and the wonderful, beautiful, daily blessings from God are easily taken for granted. Those of us who are a little further down the road can understand, I think, these passages a little better.

The evil days have indeed drawn nearer; our senses fade, and our desire for wine, women and song gives way to a desire for regularity.

"What dreames may come, When we haue shuffle'd off this mortall coile, Must giue vs pawse."
- Shakespeare

But we can remember that EVERY day is a gift from God. And we also can remember that we need to walk in His ways, even if we need to use a cane, because, not only is He our Creator, but our Judge. Solomon is no longer just looking at things under the sun where everything by itself is meaningless but is now including That which gives meaning to everything – God.

To “Remember your Creator” doesn't mean just thinking about Him on Sundays or dropping a card to Him at Christmas, but living our lives 24/7 for Him, with Him and in Him.

Derek Kidner calls this remembrance “no perfunctory or purely mental act; it is to drop our pretense of self-sufficiency and commit ourselves to Him.”

Ecclesiastes 12:2-5 is a beautiful poem that captures the essence of growing old as we pass through the winter of our lives. The storm clouds gather more and more frequently as we age. It's just one problem after another with little time to recover in between.

About these verses, Derek Kidner says that this scene is: “somber 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.”

The analogy is made between an elderly person and a house that is crumbling with decay. In v 12:3, the “keepers of the house” are a person's arms, beginning to tremble. The “strong men” are his legs, becoming stooped with age. “The grinders” are what are left of a person's teeth. The “windows” are a person's eyes – dimmed by cataracts or macular degeneration or just plain age. The “doors” are a person's ears that no longer hear as well as they used to. The “songs” are the vocal cords that no longer can sing and the blossoms of an almond tree symbolize the hair turning white with age.

What shall I do with this absurdity -
O heart, O troubled heart - this caricature,
Decrepit age that has been tied to me
As to a dog's tail?
William Butler Yeats lamenting his aging body

Vv 12:4-5 remind us of something that elderly people already know too well: they have trouble sleeping and arise at dawn with the first birdsong. They grow more anxious and afraid along with their growing frailty. Desire, including sexual desire, fades away.

Remember what Barzillai's response was to King David when invited to the royal palace in Jerusalem?

2 Sam 19:35 I am this day eighty years old. Can I discern what is pleasant and what is not? Can your servant taste what he eats or what he drinks? Can I still listen to the voice of singing men and singing women? Why then should your servant be an added burden to my lord the king?

Death is coming. It is described in vv. 12:5-7 and we do well to remember our Creator while we still are young.

The image of the silver cord being severed evokes the Greek mythological Fates, the three sister deities, Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos. Clotho spun the thread of life, Lachesis drew lots and determined how long the thread of life would be, and Atropos used her shears to sever the thread.

The shattered pitcher and broken wheel indicate the end of life for something that has been useful but no longer is. And our bodies return to the dust of the ground while our spirit returns to God.

Psalms 22:15 my strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death.

In v 12:8, Solomon reminds us that everything is fleeting, and will soon be forgotten. All your accomplishments, your pleasures, your sufferings, the work you did, the wealth and status you accumulated. All gone. Ultimately, death makes everything meaningless if it wasn't meaningless already.

It reminds me of a news story:

JACKSONVILLE, FL- "Aladdin," a greyhound that races at the Jacksonville Dogtrack in Jacksonville, Florida, was bitterly disappointed when he finally caught the rabbit he's been chasing all these years and discovered it was mechanical.

"Boy do I feel stupid," said the greyhound. "I feel like such a fool. I've completely wasted my life chasing around this... mechanical rabbit."

Aladdin had been running at the Jacksonville track for many years and chasing various mechanical animals along the way. The notion that they all may have been fake was a huge blow to him and the other dogs. Many of them paused to ponder the meanings of their lives, and wondered what the future would be like with no animals to chase.

"All my life I've been chasing this rabbit around thinking someday I'd be able to catch it and have a...good meal," Aladdin said. "I became obsessed with it. I admit it. It was unhealthy, but that rabbit represented something to me. And now, to find out it wasn't even a real rabbit after all, well that's just devastating."

In Conclusion:

Bono of U2 wrote: "Ecclesiastes is one of my favorite books. It's a book about a character who wants to find out why he's alive, why he was created. He tries knowledge. He tries wealth. He tries experience. He tries everything. You hurry to the end of the book to find out why, and it says, 'Remember your Creator.' In a way, it's such a letdown. Yet it isn't."

Herman Melville, the author of Moby Dick, called Ecclesiastes "the truest of all books."

Thomas Wolfe described it as "the highest flower of poetry, eloquence and truth" and "the greatest single piece of writing I have known."

While Chapter 12 paints a rather somber portrait of the aging process, we elderly pensioners can find encouragement there. God doesn't stop loving us when we reach retirement age. God loves His people, through the trials of this life, into old age and beyond to the grave.

Psalms 116:15 Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.

We live in the faith that we have in His remembrance of us rather than making our salvation contingent on our remembrance of Him.

Psalms 71:17-18 O God, from my youth you have taught me, and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds. 18 So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me, until I proclaim your might to another generation, your power to all those to come.

We live in the security that Jesus will remember us ALL our days and that he will raise us up to eternal life.

John 6:39-40 And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. 40 For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."

2 Cor 5:1 For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

Must we someday become useless to the Lord? No. The Psalmist says:

Psalms 92:12-15 The righteous flourish like the palm tree and grow like a cedar in Lebanon.
13 They are planted in the house of the Lord; they flourish in the courts of our God.
14 They still bear fruit in old age; they are ever full of sap and green,
15 to declare that the Lord is upright; he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him.

Philip Ryken writes "If there is no God, then there is no Judge. If there is no Judge, then there will be no Final Judgment. If there is no Final Judgment, there is no ultimate meaning to life. Nothing matters."

This path of reasoning is used by the character, Quentin, in "After the Fall", by Arthur Miller. Quentin says,:

"You know . . . more and more I see that for many years I looked at life like a case at law. It was a series of proofs. When you are young you prove how brave you are, or smart; then, what a good lover; then, a good father; finally, how wise, or powerful, or what-the-hell-ever. But underlying it all, I see now, there was a presumption. That one moved not in a dry circle but on an upward path toward some elevation, where . . . God knows what . . . I would be justified, or even condemned. A verdict, anyway."

I think now that my disaster really began when I looked up one day—and the bench was empty. No judge in sight. And all that remained was this endless argument with oneself—this pointless litigation of existence before an empty bench. Which, of course, is another way of saying—despair.”

And indeed, Solomon found despair as well when he considered the sum of human existence without God.

The renowned film director, Ingmar Bergman, explored the idea of a world confronted with God’s desertion in his Trilogy of Faith, consisting of: Through a Glass Darkly, Winter Light, and The Silence. The films are rather chilling and dystopian.

Solomon has used a technique called “inclusio” in saying the exact same thing in 12:8 as in 1:2. However, let us not think that he is merely repeating himself. What has changed? We, the readers, have changed. We have a grander perspective on life now and so these words are more meaningful.

What have we learned?

Work is vanity (1:3), we gain nothing for our toil under the sun, human wisdom is vanity; it just increases our sorrow and vexation (1:18), it makes no difference if we are wise or foolish because we all die anyway (2:15-16), pleasure is vanity, wine, women, song, gardens, vineyards, precious metals - all for nought. (2:11). Power is vanity – no one comforts the oppressed (4:1), money is vanity – it can vanish in an instant (5:11-14) and money cannot satisfy our souls (5:10). And then there is death – the last vanity. Most of us will undergo the losses of aging (12:1) and then we return to dust (3:20)

Now Solomon isn’t completely being Debbie Downer here, because – in the face of all this – he has encouraged us to enjoy what we can (2:24), paying attention to the times for this and that (3:1-8). He has encouraged us to rejoice in the prosperity that God has bestowed (5:19, 7:14) and to enjoy our lives with our loved ones (9:9).

Solomon has shown us what a world without God is like. “Look upon my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!”

In verse 12:9, Ecclesiastes changes tone and Solomon now speaks of himself in the 3rd person as the Teacher. We’ve heard WHAT Solomon said, and now we learn HOW (v 9-10) he said it. Over the course of his life, he would have heard many wise sayings from many countries but he distilled only the most important of these into his book. This would, of course, include the Book of Proverbs.

1 Kings 4:32 He also spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs were 1,005.

Solomon wrote with clarity about the things that he had evaluated so that we could understand the message of what he wrote. But he also wrote with literary artistry, to find “words of delight” (12:10) and with intellectual integrity he uprightly wrote words of truth.

So why did Solomon write the Book of Ecclesiastes? HE took the time and trouble to figure all this stuff out. Why wouldn’t he think that others should also expend their energies on discovering the truth for themselves? The reason is given in verse 11:

V 12:11 The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd.

A “goad” is a sharp stick used by a farmer to get his stubborn oxen, children or other beasts to move in a desired direction. The words of Ecclesiastes (indeed, the entire Bible), then, act as goads to our consciences so that we are turned away from falling into sin and kept on the right spiritual path.

George Thaumaturgos said, “the mind is roused and spurred by the instructions of wise people just as much as the body is by an ox-goad being applied.”

Solomon also compares the sayings with “firmly embedded nails,” which imparts the idea of permanence. These sayings are true for all time.

The sayings, the words of the wise, are given by one Shepherd. Solomon didn’t say that the sayings and the wise words were given by the Teacher. He is making a distinction between himself and the Greatest Teacher, our Guiding Shepherd, God Almighty.

Thus, we see that Ecclesiastes is the Word of God. As such, we can not only admire them and ponder their wisdom but we must also submit to their authority.

2 Peter 1:21 For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

Ecclesiastes, then, is God’s goad for steering his herd (us) in the paths of righteousness.

There is a warning given in v 12. We need to listen to the voice of our Shepherd, and not give credence to that which is not of Him. There are SO many books – more than we could ever read, let alone study. Don’t let your Bible be just another book on your library shelf, gathering dust along with the 400 other books you have. Are you on a spiritual quest? Be like the child you once were – you asked questions because you wanted answers, not to argue about them or insist on your own answers. The Bible provides the spiritual answers you are looking for. Surrender to His will and stop being the kind of person mentioned in 2 Tim 3:7, “always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth.”

Do not settle for anything less than you find in the Bible nor should you demand more than what you find there.

Rev 22:18-19 I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, 19 and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

We are at the end now. So how should we respond to everything that has been written? Verses 13 and 14 tell us the eschatological conclusion: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.

The best we can do in this life is to come before the one true God in worship and obedience. Because we know there will someday be a Judgment, and that God will bring every deed into that judgment, then, truly, everything matters.

And what matters most is what you decide to do about Jesus Christ. He is knocking at your door, even now. Will you answer?

Rev 3:20 Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.

Soli Deo gloria!

Comment:

Jack Dyer:

Very good conclusion to this lifelong questioning!

Replies:

Kevin Crittenden Thank you, Jack. I've been really blessed and edified by being a reader leader.

Comment:

Charles Fry:

Good stuff, the themes and the exposition. My 2 cents on v6, I think we're still in metaphor of the aging body, the silvr cord and golden bowl, consider a hanging lamp, so perhaps we're thinking of the spinal cord and tanned cranium, a fall that fatally injures; the pitcher and wheel references to organ failure, perhaps heart and kidneys.

Replies:

Kevin Crittenden:

Good thoughts! I SO look forward to ageing.

Charles Fry:

Yesterday the surgeon who removed my gall bladder made reference to me being "of a certain age." 🙄🙄

Kevin Crittenden Oh yes, I've been that too. Many years ago, too! 😊

Comment:

Butch O'Neal Thank you, Kevin!!!

Replies:

Kevin Crittenden:

Thank you, Butch! It's been a good year!

Butch O'Neal:

Yes, Kevin, it certainly has! I have learned much from this study this year. We all are extremely blessed! Wonder what will be next? 😊

Comment:

LuAnn Woody Thank you for your time and effort in gathering all this information and weaving it together. It was really helpful and truly edifying.

Replies:

Kevin Crittenden You are so welcome! I certainly have been edified!

Comment:

Patty Cluney Thompson:
Amen!

Comment:

Marc Hermon

So out of curiosity I did a word count on this Week 48 Poetry post. It came out to be 620 words longer than the book of Ecclesiastes! I've enjoyed BOTH books by BOTH of these wise men. May your silver cord be long, Kevin Crittenden.

Replies:

Kevin Crittenden:

This is what happens when you get up at 5 am and have coffee. Please remember that I lean heavily on sources for guidance in what I write. I'm rather surprised that this week's submission is longer than the whole book. Maybe if I take the commercials out.

Marc Hermon:

The commercials are my favorite part!!! I've been waiting all year to hear your thoughts on the Song of Solomon!!! 😊

Kevin Crittenden Hah! I should have started with THAT one, then.

Charles Fry I didn't do a word count, but I thought John Morris probably set the record with the post for Zechariah 9-14. ;D

Comment:

Ginger Hermon

Thanks, Kevin Crittenden! Another great lesson in the books!

Comment:

Yvonna Hartman Excellent. Appreciate all of your work. Very edifying.