

*Studies in  
the book of  
Ecclesiastes.*



*The failure of philosophy  
and seeking “under the sun.”*

By Mike Viccary

## *Dedication & acknowledgements.*

I dedicate this work to the Lord Jesus Christ. He alone is worthy of praise for he alone has done all things well.

I would like to acknowledge a number of very key people who have helped me in my efforts over the years. First I want to say a huge **thank you** to my lovely wife Helen. Without her love and great friendship, none of my writing and study would have been possible. Then I would like to thank all my five children, their spouses and their children who have been the most wonderful delight and joy for which I thank and praise God. Finally my thanks go out to all who have challenged me and who have made me think, and then think again.

All of this work is the product of my thought but it owes much to that which I have read and interacted with. I have sought to acknowledge those who I have considered throughout this work. All errors and faults are entirely mine. I hope and pray that none would be lead astray but that all would indeed come to see the great goodness of the Saviour and having seen it would embrace him for all they are worth.

The photographs are all taken by me.

**Top left:** a street in Washington DC, USA.

**Middle right:** Gemini space capsule in Smithsonian Museum, Washington DC, USA.

**Bottom left:** A view up through the walls in Berwick-upon-Tweed.

**Bottom right:** Brimham rocks North Yorkshire.

All Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version unless otherwise stated.

## **Foreword.**

A woman phones her husband at work and says “I have some good news and bad news for you darling.” The husband replies, “I am so busy just tell me the good news.” His wife replies, “The air bag works!” In the book of Ecclesiastes there are no jokes but the good news is not really evident until we reach the very end of the book. Perhaps it is not surprising that Ecclesiastes is a neglected book and is often overlooked. After all in declaring everything to be a waste of time, it appears to be so negative and despairing. What people want is something upbeat, positive and encouraging! So why should we bother with it? However such an assessment is short sighted. Especially so, as we enter a third decade of the twenty-first century where rapid change, great uncertainty, and great confusion all require some response and solution. Ecclesiastes is a book for such a time because it does two important things. First it analyses the state of the world just as it is. You might consider that a book written some three thousand years ago would be sadly out of date, but you couldn't be more wrong! We will find as we go through the book that it is not just up to date but timeless in its assessment of life and death. Secondly it repeatedly points out the error and mistake man makes in seeking for man-made solutions, and gives us the one most important thing that we all need to do. More of this when we get to the book!

And so in this book the sorry state of the world is stated both at the beginning and the end of the book, and is worked out in detail as it proceeds. We recognise in all of this that we cannot really recognise good news until we have been brought to see the reality of the bad news all around. Mankind has a propensity to look on the bright side of things. We are optimists. We do not really recognise the dire straits we find ourselves in, despite the frequency of bad news pouring out of media outlets!

Mike Viccary, April 2020.

| <u>Contents:</u>                                                   | <u>Page</u> |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| <i>Chapter 1: Introduction, analysis and outline.</i>              | 1           |
| <u>Introduction.</u>                                               | 1           |
| <u>General thoughts on Ecclesiastes.</u>                           | 3           |
| <u>New Testament references or allusions.</u>                      | 7           |
| <u>The “Preacher’s” identity.</u>                                  | 10          |
| <u>Key words and phrases.</u>                                      | 12          |
| <u>An outline based on the above thoughts.</u>                     | 19          |
| <u>Rationale and purpose.</u>                                      | 22          |
| <i>Chapter 2: All is vanity.</i>                                   | 23          |
| <u>Solomon’s thesis: vanity of vanities, all is vanity. [1:2].</u> | 24          |
| <u>Two questions answered. [1:3-11].</u>                           | 25          |
| <i>Chapter 3: The scientific method.</i>                           | 30          |
| <u>Empiricism.</u>                                                 | 30          |
| <u>Goal or aim.</u>                                                | 31          |
| <u>Assumptions.</u>                                                | 32          |
| <u>Results.</u>                                                    | 33          |
| <i>Chapter 4: Empiricism and experimentation.</i>                  | 35          |
| <u>Experiment 1. [2:1-11].</u>                                     | 36          |
| <u>Experiment 2. [2:12-26].</u>                                    | 37          |
| <i>Chapter 5: Human observations.</i>                              | 40          |
| <u>Observation 1: TIME and ETERNITY. [3:1-15].</u>                 | 41          |
| <u>Observation 2: INJUSTICE. [3:16,17].</u>                        | 44          |
| <u>Observation 3: MAN &amp; BEAST. [3:18-22].</u>                  | 44          |
| <u>Observation 4: OPPRESSION. [4:1-3].</u>                         | 45          |
| <u>Observation 5: TOIL &amp; LABOUR. [4:4-6].</u>                  | 46          |
| <u>Observation 6: LONELINESS. [4:7,8].</u>                         | 47          |
| <u>Observation 7: COMPANIONSHIP. [4:9-12].</u>                     | 47          |
| <u>Observation 8: WISDOM. [4:13-16].</u>                           | 48          |
| <u>Approaching God (interlude). [5:1-7].</u>                       | 49          |
| <u>Observation 9: CORRUPTION. [5:8-10].</u>                        | 50          |
| <u>Observation 10: WEALTH &amp; RICHES. [5:11-6:2].</u>            | 51          |

| <u>Contents:</u>                                                                    | <u>Page</u> |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| Chapter 6: <i>Wisdom – a tentative approach.</i>                                    | 53          |
| <i><u>Life without goodness is no good. [6:3-6].</u></i>                            | 53          |
| <i><u>No satisfaction – to desire is better than to gain. [6:7-9].</u></i>          | 54          |
| <i><u>Who knows what is good? [6:10-12].</u></i>                                    | 55          |
| <i><u>A good reputation is fine but death is better. [7:1].</u></i>                 | 55          |
| <i><u>Better to be in the house of mourning. [7:2-4].</u></i>                       | 56          |
| <i><u>The rebuke of the wise is better than the song of fools. [7:5,6].</u></i>     | 56          |
| <i><u>In times of oppression the end is better than the beginning. [7:7,8].</u></i> | 56          |
| <i><u>Patience is better than pride. [7:8b,9].</u></i>                              | 57          |
| <i><u>Were the former times better? [7:10].</u></i>                                 | 57          |
| <i><u>Wisdom is best. [7:11-12].</u></i>                                            | 57          |
| <i><u>Consider the work of God. [7:13-18].</u></i>                                  | 57          |
| Chapter 7: <i>Revolution – all change.</i>                                          | 60          |
| <i><u>Wisdom is elusive. [7:19-24].</u></i>                                         | 60          |
| <i><u>First recap on method and an interim conclusion. [7:25-29].</u></i>           | 62          |
| <i><u>Who is wise? [8:1].</u></i>                                                   | 66          |
| <i><u>A wise man obeys the king. [8:2-7].</u></i>                                   | 66          |
| <i><u>No escape from death. [8:8-10].</u></i>                                       | 69          |
| <i><u>When wickedness is not judged. [8:11-13].</u></i>                             | 70          |
| <i><u>When justice fails. [8:14,15].</u></i>                                        | 71          |
| <i><u>Second recap on method and an interim conclusion. [8:16-9:1].</u></i>         | 73          |
| <i><u>Death is an evil under the sun. [9:2,3a].</u></i>                             | 77          |
| <i><u>Men are wicked but living is better than dying. [9:3b-6].</u></i>             | 77          |
| <i><u>Concluding statements. [9:7-10].</u></i>                                      | 80          |
| Chapter 8: <i>Wisdom – limited for practical use.</i>                               | 82          |
| <i><u>Wisdom on time. [9:11,12].</u></i>                                            | 82          |
| <i><u>Wisdom is the best. [9:13-18].</u></i>                                        | 83          |
| <i><u>Wisdom concerning fools. [10:1-3].</u></i>                                    | 85          |
| <i><u>Wisdom concerning rulers. [10:4-7].</u></i>                                   | 86          |
| <i><u>Wisdom concerning action. [10:8-10].</u></i>                                  | 86          |
| <i><u>Wisdom concerning the mouth. [10:11-14].</u></i>                              | 87          |
| <i><u>Wisdom concerning work &amp; business. [10:15-20].</u></i>                    | 90          |

| <u>Contents:</u>                                                  | <u>Page</u> |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| <i>Chapter 9: Epistemology.</i>                                   | 92          |
| <u><i>Limits to knowledge. [11:1-6].</i></u>                      | 93          |
| <u><i>Light and darkness. [11:7,8].</i></u>                       | 94          |
| <i>Chapter 10: To conclude – the real beginning of knowledge.</i> | 96          |
| <u><i>Youth compared to old age. [11:9-12:7].</i></u>             | 96          |
| <u><i>Conclusion: all is vanity. [12:8].</i></u>                  | 101         |
| <u><i>Postscript and final application. [12:9-14].</i></u>        | 102         |
| <i>Parting thoughts.</i>                                          | 108         |

# *Chapter 1.*

## *Introduction, analysis and outline.*

### *Introduction.*

To begin our study of Ecclesiastes it would be good to have some idea of the structure and form of the book as a whole. It is always a good idea to see the whole before you look at the specific parts. We do this naturally, of course, when we meet someone for the first time. We take in the whole person, and then we home in on specific characteristics as we get to know them. However, with the book of Ecclesiastes we run into a great difficulty because there appears to be no *uniform* outline to the book as can be seen by the attempts provided by four different works shown in table 1.

This feature of the book where it refuses to fall into a neat or linear system of analysis is an important point. In a moment we will discover that there is no lack of theme or inter-connectedness in the book showing its inherent unity, but their organisation defies a natural plan. Such a characteristic of the book is important because it mirrors the way in which mankind has stumbled like a drunkard through the course of history in his search for truth. You only have to consider the Greek thinkers whose thoughts oscillated from one type of idea about existence to another, and from idealism to empiricism to see this point illustrated.<sup>1</sup> Or we could look at the change and development of modern science since 1600, or of philosophy from earlier days to note the same wayward meandering of man in his quest for discovery. However Solomon, who reigned from about 970 BC to 930 BC, had already ploughed this quest to its full and final conclusion in this work more than three centuries before the first Greek thinkers!<sup>2</sup>

In what follows we shall first consider the book in the context of the whole Bible, and specifically in connection with the book that follows it, (the Song of Songs). We shall also discuss briefly, how the New Testament interacts with the book, the identity of the writer, (*"The*

---

1 The Milesian Greeks form the start of Greek philosophy in the sixth century BC. From Thales onwards these thinkers oscillated in their view of what was the *arche*, the beginning or head of all things. Later there was an attempt at unifying these ideas into the 'four element' idea. This was rivalled by Leucippus and his pupil Democritus who offered atomism as the ground of existence. Plato and Aristotle form two bookends in thought which oscillates from idealism (the importance of mental constructions) to empiricism (the importance and centrality of observations of the real world).

2 Thales circa 624-546 BC.

*Preacher*”), and frequently repeated words or phrases. Having done this introductory work we shall then offer yet another outline in order to begin making comments.

**Table1: Four outlines for Ecclesiastes.**

| <b>Leupold<sup>3</sup></b> | <b>Fredericks &amp; Estes<sup>4</sup></b> | <b>Harbison<sup>5</sup></b> | <b>Baxter<sup>6</sup></b> |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1:1-11                     | 1:1                                       | 1:1-11                      | 1:1-11                    |
| 1:12-6:12                  | 1:2-11                                    | 1:12-2:11                   | 1:12-2:26                 |
| 1:12-2:23                  | 1:12-2:3                                  | 2:12-26                     | 1:12-18                   |
| 2:24-3:22                  | 2:4-26                                    | 3:1-15                      | 2:1-11                    |
| 4:1-16                     | 3:1-22                                    | 3:16-4:16                   | 2:12-23                   |
| 5:1-9                      | 4:1-5:9                                   | 5:1-20                      | 2:24-26                   |
| 5:10-6:12                  | 5:10-6:9                                  | 6:1-7:14                    | 3:1-5:20                  |
| 7:1-12:7                   | 6:10-7:22                                 | 7:15-8:9                    | 3:1-22                    |
| 7:1-10                     | 7:22-8:1                                  | 8:10-9:10                   | 4:1-16                    |
| 7:11-29                    | 8:2-15                                    | 9:11-10:4                   | 5:1-17                    |
| 8:1-10:20                  | 8:16-10:1                                 | 10:5-11:8                   | 5:18-20                   |
| 11:1-8                     | 10:2-20                                   | 11:9-12:14                  | 6:1-8:17                  |
| 11:9-12:7                  | 11:1-12:8                                 |                             | 6:1-12                    |
| 12:8-14                    | 12:9-14                                   |                             | 7:1-8:8                   |
|                            |                                           |                             | 8:9-14                    |
|                            |                                           |                             | 8:15-17                   |
|                            |                                           |                             | 9:1-12:12                 |
|                            |                                           |                             | 9:1-6                     |
|                            |                                           |                             | 9:7-11:8                  |
|                            |                                           |                             | 11:9,10                   |
|                            |                                           |                             | 12:1-7                    |
|                            |                                           |                             | 12:13-14.                 |

<sup>3</sup> **H. C. Leupold.** Exposition of Ecclesiastes. 1969. Evangelical Press, London.

<sup>4</sup> **D. C. Fredericks & D. J. Estes.** Ecclesiastes & The Song of Songs. 2010. Apollos, Nottingham.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.biblestudyguide.org/ebooks/harbison/ecclesiastes.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> **Sidlow Baxter.** Explore The Book. 1960. Zondervan.



### General thoughts on Ecclesiastes.

I will not attempt a thorough analysis of the book with regard to its context here, for such is beyond my ability and intentions. Instead I simply wish to offer some general insights into how we may begin to view the book and grasp its essential purpose.

There can hardly be two more important, and yet sadly neglected, books than this book of Ecclesiastes and the one following, Song of Songs. That these two books go together is clear from the way in which the books have been arranged in our Bibles, and also because one has as its title the Hebrew superlative expressed in the doubling of words (*"Song of Songs"*), and the other uses this superlative form to begin and end its work (*"vanity of vanities"*). Then also, we note that both were written (as far as human authorship is concerned) by Solomon.

These two books are found in the middle of Scripture and form a fitting end to the section on wisdom which comprises: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon. They present clearly the two types of people that Scripture categorises all humankind under, the wicked (by nature) the subject of Ecclesiastes, and the righteous (by faith) the subject of Song of Songs. Death is a constant feature and topic in Ecclesiastes, but life in all its fullness (true love) is the focus of the Song of Songs. Though the two books go together, they are very different in style and form. Ecclesiastes is a personal quest by Solomon to discover what is true wisdom using natural reason alone without recourse to revelation (i.e. *"under the sun"*). The Song of Songs is a love poem which allows us to see the deep love and experience between a great King and a poor maid. Ecclesiastes presents us with the impossible dream of life *"under the sun"* as simply being *"vanity"* in the extreme, whilst the Song of Songs leads us to deepen our relationship with the One who is lovelier than all, and who is *"chief among 10,000."*<sup>7</sup> There are a number of contrasts between the two books penned by Solomon which are worth bearing in mind:

#### Ecclesiastes

- Vanity of vanities – everything is empty, insubstantial and transient.
- These are the words of a man a "Preacher" (or philosopher) testifying about the achievements of man.
- DISCOVERY.
- The attempt of man to find out the things or works of God. (This has gone on ever since the fall of man).

#### Song of Songs

- Song of Songs – the very best of songs bar none.
- This is a song of the King of peace. It represents the relationship between the believer and the Lord.
- REVELATION.
- God's self-disclosure to those who believe. (See Hebrews 1:1-3; John 1:14,18).

---

7 Song of Songs 5:10f.

- Starts in despair, but ends on a positive note: “Fear God and keep His commandments” (Ecclesiastes 12:13), that acts as a springboard or link into the Song of Songs.
- Has reference to “under the sun,” (in the world). Looking to the earth.
- Begins on a high note of love and develops this relationship of love by the drawing of the beloved. (See Song of Songs 1:4; 2:16; 6:3; 7:10).
- With the Beloved (in Christ). Looking to heaven.

At the end of the book of Ecclesiastes we are given a summary which takes the form of a conclusion.

**13** Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man’s all. **14** For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil.<sup>8</sup>

From the opening words which are repeated at the end just before this conclusion, ( “*all is vanity*”), Solomon has been advancing the thesis that “*under the sun*” everything, without exception, is utterly vacuous and futile. This conclusion reinforces the point. To begin to be wise really you must fear God and do what He says. At the end of the day God will judge all things.

This book forms the first in a two-part work that Solomon has written.<sup>9</sup> The next book focuses attention not on what is empty and temporal, but on what is the very best and calculated to make the heart sing. Thus whilst Ecclesiastes seeks to pull down faith in this world and its ways, the Song of Songs seeks to build up what is really required: a good relationship with God. Ecclesiastes ends by instructing us to “*fear God*” (which is the beginning of wisdom), and the Song of Songs starts with a love story and the desire of the woman to be drawn away with her lover.<sup>10</sup>

There are a number of New Testament texts which illustrate this two-pronged approach which we could also sum up in the words: ***repent and believe***. Becoming saved requires first a turning away from those things which are evil and temporal, from our sin and self-reliance, and then second a wholehearted trust and a desire to seek and pursue the One who has made all things right, (Jesus Christ).

As a first example consider the words of Christ in the sermon on the mount:

<sup>8</sup> Ecclesiastes 12:13,14.

<sup>9</sup> Whilst it is true that large parts of Proverbs were from the hand of Solomon (humanly speaking), only these two books together form a unit.

<sup>10</sup> Ecclesiastes 12:13; Song of Songs 1:1-3.

**19** Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; **20** but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. **21** For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. <sup>11</sup>

The teaching is straight forward. If you focus on this world and its doings you will end up with nothing because it has within the seeds of decay and rottenness. This is what Solomon observes and declares, when he states that “*all is vanity.*” Instead we ought to lay up treasures in heaven. Thus the words of verse 19 reflect the essential teaching of the book of Ecclesiastes, and the words of verse 20 the thoughts of the Song of Songs.

Or as another example, take the words of Jesus to the Samaritan woman as recorded in John chapter 4 where we read these words:

**13** Jesus answered and said to her, “whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, **14** but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life.” <sup>12</sup>

The Lord had asked the Samaritan woman for a drink. After her astonishment at being addressed by a Jewish man, the Lord then tells her that if she knew who it was that was asking for a drink of water she would have asked Him for living water. Not quite gathering His inference, she asks how He is going to supply her with water as the well is deep and He has no pail. Then the Lord speaks the words we have quoted above. The significance of these words is surely crystal clear. The water from the well which we need to sustain earthly life needs constant replenishing, but the water of life which Christ will bring is eternal and ongoing. These words of Jesus to the Samaritan woman may be taken as simple statements corresponding to the two books at the end of the wisdom literature. Thus whilst John 3:13 is a summary of Ecclesiastes, John 3:14 is a summary of the Song of Songs. Focusing on the water for physical life is futile, for what is really necessary is the water for spiritual life. The physical must follow the spiritual and not the other way around. Our Saviour taught that this was a matter of priority in the sermon on the mount when He declared:

But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. <sup>13</sup>

---

11 Matthew 6:19-21.

12 John 4:13,14.

13 Matthew 6:33.

Then, as yet another example, consider Paul's second letter to the Corinthians where we learn about the great need to destroy all the arguments and those things that promote this world's wisdom and knowledge. Paul writes:

**4** For the weapons of our warfare *are* not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, **5** casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.<sup>14</sup>

These actions are necessary both in our personal lives, but also for the gospel's sake. Those things which oppose God and which stand as rivals must be levelled and brought down. This is, essentially, the aim of the book of Ecclesiastes because when all is said and done, everything “*under the sun*” is futile and worthless. We get the same type of idea and teaching from words the apostle John wrote:

**15** Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. **16** For all that *is* in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. **17** And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.<sup>15</sup>

It is the book of Ecclesiastes that teaches us to “*love not the world*” or the things it focuses on, because such an attitude displays evidence of not having “*the love of the Father*.”

As a polar opposite to this action of holding every thought captive to Christ and loving not the world, we note that the words Paul wrote to the Colossians depict the essence of what is necessary positively speaking:

**1** If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. **2** Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth.<sup>16</sup>

Having settled the issue of this world's true value (it is zero), the ones who have come to fear God now seek to set their minds on those things which are above. These words of Paul to the Colossians fit the essence of the teaching of the Song of Songs.

These Scriptures, (and there are probably a lot more) show the twin aspect displayed by Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs. We must repent of sin, forsake this world, die to self, take up

---

14 2Corinthians 10:4,5.

15 1John 2:15-17.

16 Colossians 3:1,2.

the cross, and then having done that, we rush to put all our hope and trust wholeheartedly in the Lord and all He has done, seeking Him for all we are worth.

### *New Testament references or allusions.*

Many commentators are of the opinion that the book of Ecclesiastes has been overlooked by New Testament writers. It may be correct to say that there are no direct quotations from Ecclesiastes but there are unmistakable connections both in thought and teaching.

To start with, we note that Solomon often mentions the idea that everything, including work, is wearisome or laborious, (see table 2). This concept stems from the curse on man found in Genesis 3, but is also expressed by the apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans:

For we know that the whole creation groans and labours with birth pangs together until now.<sup>17</sup>

This statement in Romans is not really an allusion to any statement in the book of Ecclesiastes, but the same general thought of the curse effecting wearisome toil and labour is found in both. For Solomon it is merely an observation, whereas Paul bases his statements on a theological appraisal of Genesis 3 and other texts. Such sentiments are also embedded within Christ's great call as recorded in Matthew chapter 11 where the Saviour appeals to those who “*labour*” and are “*heavy laden*.”<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps the best indication of the New Testament referring to the book of Ecclesiastes comes from the Saviour's words in connection with truly following Him after Peter's great confession. The relevant part for our discussion is as follows:

For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?<sup>19</sup>

It is more than tempting to think that the Saviour had in mind Solomon's words about there being no advantage for man under the sun:

What profit has a man from all his labour in which he toils under the sun?<sup>20</sup>

What profit has the worker from that in which he labours?<sup>21</sup>

---

17 Romans 8:22.

18 Matthew 11:28f.

19 Matthew 16:26a. See also: Mark 8:36; Luke 9:25.

20 Ecclesiastes 1:3.

21 Ecclesiastes 3:9.

And what profit has he who has laboured for the wind? <sup>22</sup>

One particularly interesting idea we find in Ecclesiastes is that things are “*crooked*,” (some are made so by God), and that none cannot be straightened.

*What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be numbered.* <sup>23</sup>

Consider the work of God; for who can make straight what He has made crooked? <sup>24</sup>

Now we get a similar idea occurring in the book of Isaiah some two to three centuries later. This time, however, the statements in Isaiah show the idea of God coming to make that which was crooked into a straight path:

Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill brought low; **the crooked places shall be made straight** and the rough places smooth.<sup>25</sup>

I will bring the blind by a way they did not know; I will lead them in paths they have not known. **I will** make darkness light before them, and **crooked places straight**. These things I will do for them, and not forsake them. <sup>26</sup>

**I will** go before you and **make the crooked places straight**; I will break in pieces the gates of bronze and cut the bars of iron. <sup>27</sup>

Although the Hebrew words used in each of these three cases is different both with respect to the one found in Ecclesiastes and to each other, the essential concept is the same. God alone can make what is “*crooked*” straight. Luke quotes Isaiah 40:4 as he introduces the ministry of John the Baptist.<sup>28</sup> Thus Solomon makes the initial statement that it is not possible to straighten out anything crooked, especially that which God has made so, and then God Himself through the prophet Isaiah comes and declares that He will do this very thing!

In the Lord's sermon on the mount, the Saviour addresses the issue of worry over things we need for life.<sup>29</sup> During the course of this teaching the Lord points to the lilies of the field and reminds people that these do not “*toil nor spin*.”<sup>30</sup> He then adds that “*even Solomon in all his glory*

---

22 Ecclesiastes 5:16.

23 Ecclesiastes 1:15.

24 Ecclesiastes 7:13.

25 Isaiah 40:4.

26 Isaiah 42:16.

27 Isaiah 45:2.

28 Luke 3:5.

29 Matthew 6:25-30. See also Luke 12:22-28.

30 Matthew 6:28.

*was not arrayed like one of these.*"<sup>31</sup> The discussion of life's toil, its work, and its worry leads the Saviour to mention Solomon, the very person who wrote the book of Ecclesiastes (humanly speaking) whose main theme is worry and the burdensome nature of life.

One other theme which seems to have its root in the book of Ecclesiastes is expressed in the phrase "*whatever you do.*" This phrase comes four times in the NKJV of the New Testament.<sup>32</sup> It may have its origin in Ecclesiastes 9:10 which reads as follows:

Whatever your hand finds to do, do *it* with your might; for *there is* no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going.<sup>33</sup>

The reference in 1Corinthians speaks about doing "*whatever*" may be done "*all to the glory of God,*" whilst those found in Colossians instruct Christians to do "*whatever*" first, "*in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him,*" and then second, they are to do it "*heartily, as to the Lord and not to men.*"

A final New Testament use of something found in the book of Ecclesiastes occurs in Christ's parable about a rich man who had many barns. The parable is found in Luke 12. In it the Saviour paints a picture of a man who is rich and who increases in riches. To accommodate his increasing wealth this man planned to build new and greater store houses. As the parable unfolds, the Saviour tells us what this man was thinking:

And I will say to my soul, "soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; **eat, drink, and be merry.**"<sup>34</sup>

The last part of the sentence highlighted in bold can only really have come from Ecclesiastes:

So I commended enjoyment, because a man has nothing better under the sun than to **eat, drink, and be merry**; for this will remain with him in his labour *all* the days of his life which God gives him under the sun.<sup>35</sup>

From this brief survey it would seem that Ecclesiastes is not as neglected by New Testament writers as it is by modern Christians!

---

31 Matthew 6:29.

32 1Corinthians 10:31; Colossians 3:17,23; 3John 1:5.

33 Ecclesiastes 9:10.

34 Luke 12:19.

35 Ecclesiastes 8:15. See also Ecclesiastes 9:7.

### The “Preacher’s” identity.

Much time is often wasted in Biblical works considering the human author of a particular text. This is usually borne out of the mistaken idea that we need to know the author before we can make sense of what is written. A moments reflection will dispel such nonsense. I have read countless novels in my brief existence and I have thoroughly enjoyed many of these without the slightest knowledge of the author save the name! It seems to me that what is far more important is that we must start with the general overarching view that all Scripture is, first and foremost, God-breathed.<sup>36</sup> The fact that the words we are about to study come direct from the mouth of God are essential to beginning an understanding of the book. In fact Ecclesiastes leads us to this idea of inspiration at the end of the book by stating that wise words are “*given by one Shepherd.*”<sup>37</sup> To be sure, God uses the human mouthpiece (without working against the personality) to bring about the writing of all that He intends. In this way we understand that what God wills and wishes to be known coincides with what the human author actually writes.

Sadly though, there are many who suggest that the human writer was not, in fact Solomon, but someone posing as the great and wise king. That such an idea is seriously entertained is quite simply, astonishing. It can only really have been suggested in order to discredit the Bible as God's holy word. If the case for another wise king was put forward that would be one thing. There is no mention in Ecclesiastes that it was actually **Solomon**, only that he was David's son, and that he was king in Jerusalem. This could imply that a later descendant of David. But such a suggestion falls to the ground immediately, for who could in all honesty fit the bill? But those who deny Solomon's authorship and opt for a later king or someone else entirely, cannot abandon the idea that somehow Solomon's character is everywhere to be seen in the book! So their only recourse is to say that someone with little influence posed as Solomon to get himself a hearing! Now it takes little effort to refute this point of view. All we have to do is ask ourselves: would the Lord God endorse such subterfuge? Would God allow an impostor to speak on His behalf? The idea is preposterous, so without hesitation we affirm that Solomon was the human penman of Ecclesiastes. At this point we must call to mind the plain fact that all of Scripture, which includes Ecclesiastes, has come from the very mouth of God, (or God-breathed).<sup>38</sup>

However wherever a book or text tells us something of the human penman, we would do well to take this into consideration. In this case, although we do not have the name of the human

---

36 2Timothy 3v16.

37 Ecclesiastes 12:11.

38 2Timothy 3:16.



author, we have sufficient detail to make his identity certain.<sup>39</sup> Thus we are told that the “*Preacher*” was king in Jerusalem and was the “*son of David*.”<sup>40</sup> This narrows things down considerably but such designations could be applied to any of the kings of Jerusalem ruling in Judah. However what makes the identity clear is the statements we get later in chapter 1 and also in chapter 2:

Look, I have attained greatness, and have gained more wisdom than all who were before me in Jerusalem.<sup>41</sup>

Yes, I had greater possessions of herds and flocks than all who were in Jerusalem before me.<sup>42</sup>

So I became great and excelled more than all who were before me in Jerusalem.<sup>43</sup>

The Preacher seems to have built far greater and more than all before him, was possessor of riches and the “*special treasure of kings*,” from far and wide, so that he was greater than all who went before him.<sup>44</sup> These statements cannot really be applied to any but Solomon.<sup>45</sup> Some of the detail within the book concerning behaviour, kings, wisdom and so on also leads us to consider Solomon as the human penman. Then, finally, at the end of the book the author's wisdom is mentioned again, this time with the added detail that he sought to teach with words of truth, and was the writer of many proverbs.<sup>46</sup>

Furthermore we discover that the writer wished his “*son*” to be careful concerning books and study which is a wearisome and laborious task. This way of speaking is very much like the way Solomon writes in Proverbs. Ecclesiastes 12:9-11 may have been written as a commendation by one who knew the Preacher. The language seems to give that impression, but my view, however, is that it is Solomon writing here. The words following seem to continue on uninterrupted and it would not make any sense for the king to end his work by appealing to someone else to utter the final conclusion. What seems to be happening here, is that after he concludes his treatise with the words: “*all is vanity*” in Ecclesiastes 12:8, he then writes referring to himself in the third person as “*The Preacher*,” so as to bring the whole into a focused conclusion for his son.

---

39 I am well aware that many commentators deny that Solomon is the human writer. This is usually to appease some mistaken view of the origin of the book at a time much later in history.

40 Ecclesiastes 1:1,12.

41 Ecclesiastes 1:16.

42 Ecclesiastes 2:7.

43 Ecclesiastes 2:9.

44 Ecclesiastes 2:4-9.

45 1Kings 4:30.

46 Ecclesiastes 12:9,10.

The mention of the “*one Shepherd*” is also significant because it leads us both to David who first spoke of the Lord as his Shepherd, and thence also to the Lord Jesus Himself who is that One Shepherd!

**Key words and phrases.**

Table 2 shows some of the most obvious examples of repeated words and phrases.

**Table2: Frequently occurring words or phrases in Ecclesiastes (NKJV).**

| Word or phrase        | Scripture references                                                                                             | Frequency |
|-----------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| Vanity                | 1:2,14; 2:1,11,15,17,19,21,23,26; 3:19; 4:4,7,8,16; 5:7,10; 6:2,4,9,11; 7:6,15; 8:10,14(x2); 9:9; 11:8,10; 12:8. | 30        |
| Vanity of vanities    | 1:2(x2); 12:8.                                                                                                   | 3         |
| Under the sun         | 1:3,9,14; 2:11,17,18,19,20,22; 3:16; 4:1,3,7,15; 5:13,18; 6:1,12; 8:9,15(x2),17; 9:3,6,9(x2),11,13; 10:5.        | 29        |
| Under heaven          | 1:13; 2:3; 3:1.                                                                                                  | 3         |
| Grasping for the wind | 1:14,15; 2:11,17,26; 4:4,6,16; 6:9.                                                                              | 8         |
| Wind                  | 5:16; 11:4,5.                                                                                                    | 3         |
| I have seen           | 1:14; 3:10; 5:13,18; 6:1; 7:15; 8:9; 10:5,7.                                                                     | 9         |
| I saw                 | 2:13,24; 3:16; 4:4,7,15; 8:10,17; 9:11.                                                                          | 9         |
| Toil <sup>47</sup>    | 1:3; 2:11,18,19,20,22; 4:6,8; 5:18.                                                                              | 9         |
| Labour <sup>48</sup>  | 1:3; 2:10(x2),11,19,20,21(x2),22,24; 3:8,13; 4:8,9; 5:15,16,19; 6:7; 8:15,17; 9:9; 10:15.                        | 22        |

Apart from those shown in the table, there are other important words like “wisdom,” “wise,” “fool(ish),” “madness,” “folly,” “profit,” “heart,” “better,” and “good,” all of which help towards forming some kind of division of the book into distinct sections. Various themes are frequently revisited such as: “relationships,” “work,” “death,” and, “the best course of action.” Woven throughout the book is the main idea that “under the sun,” everything (without exception) is “vanity.” So to proceed further it is important for us to grasp the basic meaning and significance of some of these frequently occurring words and phrases.

47 Translation of root Hebrew word: *`amal*.

48 Translation of root Hebrew word: *`amal*. Ecclesiastes 1:8 translates the Hebrew word: *yagea`* as “labour.” See Ecclesiastes 10:15; 12:12.

## Vanity.

The essential basic meaning of the Hebrew word *hebel* is: breath or vapour. From this notion we can take the word to imply either, having no substance, or, fleeting. The English word “*vanity*” (found in the NKJV), suggests the idea of futility or worthlessness, whilst some translations opt for the word “*futile*,” which has the sense of “incapable of producing any lasting results,” or “*pointless*.”<sup>49</sup> Some commentators insist that the rendition as “*vanity*,” or “*futility*” gives a false impression, and they demand that the primary meaning is simply: transitoriness or fleeting.<sup>50</sup> However the link between this word *hebel* and others in Scripture which denote idolatry, emptiness and worthlessness is hard to ignore. The basic meaning of a mere breath does suggest a very short moment, but it also contains the thought of there being no substance or weight, and so, by implication suggestive of being vacuous, or empty, and idolatrous as well.

For example Job in his final remonstrance with his false companions had this to say to them:

**11** “I will teach you about the hand of God; what *is* with the Almighty I will not conceal. **12** Surely all of you have seen *it*; why then do you behave with complete nonsense?”<sup>51</sup>

The last part of verse 12 reads literally as follows: “why then in vain(*vanity*) do you become vain?” The Hebrew word *hebel* is used twice in this last sentence (rendered “*vain*”), but the NKJV translators have suggested a superlative by rendering the repeated words as “*complete nonsense*.” The NASB uses the word “*foolishly*” instead, so the word *hebel*, therefore, can indicate folly or nonsense not just the idea of transitoriness.

In 2Kings 17:13f we read a concluding description of Israel and Judah's great sinfulness in following idols and rejecting God's law. In verse 15 we read these words:

And they rejected His statutes and His covenant that He had made with their fathers, and His testimonies which He had testified against them; **they followed idols, became idolaters,** and *went* after the nations who *were* all around them, *concerning* whom the Lord had charged them that they should not do like them.<sup>52</sup>

The phrase in bold could be rendered as: “They went after the vain (thing) and they became vain.” Again we have the word *hebel* given twice (put in my suggested translation as “*vain*”). Clearly the

---

49 The NET and the HCSB versions opt for “*futile*.”

50 See: **H. C. Leupold**. Exposition of Ecclesiastes. 1969. Evangelical Press, London; **D. C. Fredericks & D. J. Estes**. Ecclesiastes & The Song of Songs. 2010. Apollos, Nottingham.

51 Job 27:11,12.

52 2Kings 17:15.

translators have interpreted the word **hebel** in 2Kings 17:15 to mean “*idols*,” and so the connection with false worship is possible too. The same idea is found in Jeremiah 2:5:

Thus says the Lord: “what injustice have your fathers found in Me, that they have gone far from Me, **have followed idols, and have become idolaters?**”<sup>53</sup>

The last phrase highlighted in bold reads literally: “and have walked after the vain (**hebel**) and have become vain (**hebel**).” So clearly there is a strong connection between the word **hebel** and the concept of idolatry.

In Psalm 39:5,6 we have a description of the nature of man by David in which the word **hebel** is found in both verses.. In this Psalm David acknowledges the shortness, or transitoriness, of life, but he also makes other statements besides.

**5** Indeed, You have made my days *as* hand-breadths, and my age *is* as nothing before You; **certainly every man at his best state is but vapour.** *Selah* **6** Surely every man walks about like a shadow; surely **they busy themselves in vain**; he heaps up *riches*, and does not know who will gather them. <sup>54</sup>

The phrase outlined in bold in verse 5 is literally: “certainly all is vain(vanity) (**hebel**) all man in his best position/state.” Verse 6 then describes men as walking about “*like a shadow*,” which suggests lacking substance and presence. It then goes on to speak of the turmoil of activity that they engage in as being “*vain*” (**hebel**). Then in verse 11 of the same Psalm we read again that “*surely every man is vapour*,” (**hebel**). The Hebrew is literally: “surely vain(vanity) [are] all men.”

In Psalm 62 we have a similar thought to that of Psalm 39:11, that men, in and of themselves, are **hebel**. The NKJV reads as follows:

Surely men of low degree *are* a vapour, men of high degree *are* a lie; if they are weighed on the scales, they *are* altogether *lighter* than vapour. <sup>55</sup>

Now the literal rendition for this verse would be: “surely vain(vanity) (**hebel**) [are] the sons of Adam, lies [are] the sons of men.” There are two words used for man in this verse, and one suggests man of a more noble stance than the other, hence the NKJV translation has “*men of low degree .... men of high degree*.” Here in Psalm 62:9 there is a parallel thought expressed, for men are **hebel** and they are also “*a lie*.” Further we discover that **hebel** signifies that which has no weight or substance (“*they are altogether lighter than vapour (hebel)*”). Thus in both Psalm 39:11 and Psalm

53 Jeremiah 2:5.

54 Psalm 39:5,6.

55 Psalm 62:9.

62:9 the word *hebel* is used to suggest **men** that *are* vapour and does not merely suggest that their life span is vapour.

In Jeremiah 10 we read these words.

**14** Everyone is dull-hearted, without knowledge; every metalsmith is put to shame by an image; for his moulded image *is* falsehood, and *there is* no breath in them. **15** They *are* futile, a work of errors; in the time of their punishment they shall perish.<sup>56</sup>

At the start of the chapter Jeremiah points out that the customs of the nations are vain (*hebel*).<sup>57</sup> Here in verse 15 we discover how the idols are to be viewed. They are “*futile*,” that is *hebel*, and they are “*a work of errors*.” This means that *hebel* is put alongside the notion of idolatry and something that is false. The idols themselves are vain, or, in other words, of no lasting substance. Jeremiah 51:18 gives a similar thought where the NKJV rendition: “*they are futile, a work of errors*,” should be rendered as “they are vain (*hebel*) the work of errors.”

In Jeremiah 16 we have another use of *hebel* in connection with a description of idols.

O Lord, my strength and my fortress, my refuge in the day of affliction, the Gentiles shall come to You from the ends of the earth and say, “**surely our fathers have inherited lies, worthlessness and unprofitable things.**”<sup>58</sup>

The last part of this verse highlighted in bold should be rendered: “surely our fathers have inherited lies, vanity (*hebel*), and idols in which there is no profit.” The idols are thence described by three essential ideas. They are “*lies*,” (false and deceitful), they are “*worthlessness*,” (this is the translation of the word *hebel*), and they are idols that lead to no profit (they have no value or worth).<sup>59</sup> *Hebel* thus also signifies that which has little value or is worthless.

Our last reference comes from the book of Zechariah:

For the idols speak delusion; the diviners envision lies, and tell false dreams; they comfort in vain. Therefore *the people* wend their way like sheep; they are in trouble because *there is* no shepherd.<sup>60</sup>

In these words we are first told that the idols speak “*delusion*,” or nothing, (i.e. empty, that which is vacuous). Then we discover that the “*diviners*” (those who speak and peddle on behalf of the idols)

---

56 Jeremiah 10:14,15.

57 Jeremiah 10:3.

58 Jeremiah 16:19.

59 The NIV and the ESV give a similar translation.

60 Zechariah 10:2.

tell “*lies*” and “*false dreams*.” The outcome is that they (both the idols and the diviners) “*comfort in vain (hebel)*.” It would seem from this that the idea of being merely ephemeral is not strong enough. They bring nothing which will comfort at all! That is, there is no substance to their comfort, not just that the comfort they offer is short-lived.

This brief review of some of the places where *hebel* is used, serves to show that the word does not just signify the idea of transitoriness or a temporary state. It is closely connected with thoughts of idolatry, and it also suggests the notion of lightness and insubstantiality, hence worthlessness.

Table 2 also shows three occasions where we have the superlative or doubled expression: “*vanity of vanities*.”<sup>61</sup> The doubled expression signifies the idea that there is nothing more vain. It is similar in force to the expression: “King of kings,” which stands for the supreme and highest King over all, or the phrase: “song of songs,” which suggests the very best (bar none) of songs. Consequently, in this single expression “*vanity of vanities*” which forms bookends to Ecclesiastes, we have the idea put forth that the main subject of the work is that which is transitory and without substance. All is short-lived and without weight or substance, under the sun.

#### Under the sun.

Together with the less frequently occurring “*under heaven*,” the phrase “*under the sun*” simply indicates that which is done on earth without reference to God. A modern parallel to this would be the concept of worldliness, or the carnal Christian who is earth bound and does not have his (or her) eyes set on things above.<sup>62</sup> This does not mean that Solomon is presenting his work in a true atheistic sense, that there is no God at all. Rather he presents the work as a deist. God does feature, but He is distant and other-worldly. The phrase “*under the sun*” does not indicate the idea of *under the influence of the sun*, but beneath or below the sun which suggests the idea of distance and separation. If the work were truly atheistic then there would be no references to God whatsoever. So the fact that God is mentioned from time to time leads us to the idea of a distant view of God merely as transcendent.

#### References to God.

To begin we must note that the covenant title “Lord” (YHWH) is absent in the book of Ecclesiastes. In contrast the title “*God*” occurs 42 times in the NKJV as follows:

---

61 Ecclesiastes 1:2(x2); 12:8.

62 Romans 8:6; 1Corinthians 3:1f; Colossians 3:2.

1:13;  
 2:24,26(x2);  
 3:10,11,13,14(x2),15,17,18;  
 5:1,2(x2),4,6(x2),7,18,19(x2),20;  
 6:2(x2);  
 7:13,14,18,26,29;  
 8:2,12,13,15,17;  
 9:1,7;  
 11:5,9;  
 12:7,13,14.<sup>63</sup>

It will be observed that the title “*God*” occurs mainly in short groups or bursts and often seems to appear as an afterthought, or, at least, not the main focus or subject. These facts lend support to the idea that whilst God is acknowledged, He is distant and certainly not the personal and relational covenant Lord. It is important to recognise that Solomon is presenting God in this way because this is how He would be considered “*under the sun*,” that is, without due recognition of His demand to be known.

### *Grasping for the wind.*

This phrase is graphic and it is only to be found in Ecclesiastes. The concept of trying to get hold of the wind is ridiculous and comical. And yet it aptly describes the process by which man carries out all his tasks when God is not taken into view. This is one of Solomon's conclusions. Another similar thought can be found in the phrase “what does it profit?” that we mentioned earlier when looking at New Testament uses of ideas in Ecclesiastes. This particularly interesting phrase occurs four times in the book as follows:

[] **What profit has a man from all his labour** In which he toils under the sun? <sup>64</sup>

[] **What profit has the worker from that in which he labours?** <sup>65</sup>

[] When goods increase, They increase who eat them; So **what profit** have the owners except to see *them* with their eyes? <sup>66</sup>

[] And this also *is* a severe evil— just exactly as he came, so shall he go. And **what profit has he who has laboured for** the wind? <sup>67</sup>

---

63 The following are places where the NKJV supplies the title “God” to make sense of the translation where the title is absent in Hebrew: 2:26 (first occurrence); 5:6 (first occurrence).

64 Ecclesiastes 1:3.

65 Ecclesiastes 3:9.

66 Ecclesiastes 5:9.

67 Ecclesiastes 5:16.

Clearly the answer to these questions is none whatsoever! The Lord Jesus, as we already noted, used this idea to drive home the fact that worldly pursuits, such as those adopted briefly by Peter when Christ informed of His coming death, were not going to work.

*Method in the madness.*

The first thing to be said here, is that Ecclesiastes is a book of observations, since (from table 2), we have the phrases “*I saw,*” and “*I have seen,*” which combined occur some 18 times. The book concerns those things of life which Solomon has seen and observed with his own senses. But Solomon also presents as a deeply thoughtful enquirer as well as a keen observer for, as table 3 shows, he has a distinct method in view. Apart from the power of observation, what tools does Solomon have for this enquiry? Well we learn from table 3 that it was his “*heart,*” and his intention was to direct his heart and think within himself about the questions of life. In these two things, observations and innermost thoughts, we find Solomon's method. Does this not sound familiar? More than three centuries before the first Greek thinker, Thales of Miletus (c.624-546 BC), and nearly four centuries before the Indian philosopher Guatama Buddha (c563-483 BC) and the Chinese philosopher Confucius (551-479 BC), Solomon had thought about the great question of life and what it was all about. Not only so, but Solomon gives us a definitive answer too which has been endorsed by God by being included in His word.

**Table:3 Statements on method in Ecclesiastes (NKJV).**

| <b>Statements on method</b> | <b>Scripture references</b> | <b>Frequency</b> |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------|
| I set my heart              | 1:13,17.                    | 2                |
| I communed with my heart    | 1:16.                       | 1                |
| I said in my heart          | 2:1,15(x2) 3:17,18.         | 5                |
| I searched in my heart      | 2:3.                        | 1                |
| I turned myself to consider | 2:12.                       | 1                |
| I turned my heart           | 2:20.                       | 1                |
| I returned and considered   | 4:1.                        | 1                |
| I returned and (I saw)      | 4:7; 9:11.                  | 2                |
| I applied my heart          | 7:25; 8:9,16.               | 3                |



### **An outline based on the above thoughts.**

Despite the fact that we have already shown that Ecclesiastes does not lend itself to an easy division, nevertheless we are going to suggest one based on the notion that Solomon was writing a thesis on the vanity of life under the sun. This outline is not given as the final word on the book of Ecclesiastes and may well require some adjustment. However it seems clear that Solomon was certainly on a form of quest with defined parameters (“*under the sun*”), and he seems to have made several interim conclusions along the way about such an enquiry, before coming to a final more definitive conclusion at the end of the book. This final conclusion dovetails in nicely with the book following which was also penned (humanly speaking) by Solomon, the Song of Songs.

#### **Broad outline:**

**(A) The author's thesis stated (“all is vanity”) suggested as answers to two key questions (1:1-11).**

**(B) The aim and methodology of this enquiry (1:12-18).**

**(C) Two investigations (2:1-26).**

**(D) Ten observations (3:1-6:2).**

**(E) The good and that which is better (6:3-7:18).**

**(F) Wisdom and a reassessment on methodology (7:19-9:10).**

**(G) Worldly wisdom (9:11-10:20).**

**(H) What do we really know? (11:1-8).**

**(I) The final conclusion (11:9-12:14).**

#### **Outline in detail:**

**[#]** indicates places where the name “God” is present.

**(A) The author's thesis stated (“all is vanity”) suggested as answers to two key questions (1:1-11).**

|        |          |                                                           |
|--------|----------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| 1:1-11 |          | <b>What is the point?</b>                                 |
|        | 1:1      | <b>Introduction to the preacher: Solomon.</b>             |
|        | 1:2      | <b>The thesis stated.</b>                                 |
|        | 1:3      | <b>Question 1: What profit?</b>                           |
|        | 1:4-9    | <b>Question 1 answered: CYCLES of endless repetition.</b> |
|        | 1:10a    | <b>Question 2: What's new?</b>                            |
|        | 1:10b-11 | <b>Question 2 answered: NOTHING new under the sun.</b>    |

**(B) The aim and methodology of this enquiry (1:12-18).**

|         |          |                                                                      |
|---------|----------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1:12-18 |          | <b>Further information on the ‘teacher’ and his METHOD outlined.</b> |
|         | 1:12     | <b>The preacher king Solomon king in Jerusalem over Israel.</b>      |
|         | 1:13-14a | <b>Methodology – part 1. [#]</b>                                     |
|         | 1:14b-15 | <b>Interim conclusion 1.</b>                                         |
|         | 1:16-17a | <b>Methodology – part 2.</b>                                         |
|         | 1:17b-18 | <b>Interim conclusion 2.</b>                                         |

**(C) Two investigations (2:1-26).**

|        |         |                                                         |
|--------|---------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| 2:1-26 |         | <b>Two investigations.</b>                              |
|        | 2:1-10  | <b>FIRST ‘investigation’ – the vanity of pleasure.</b>  |
|        | 2:11    | <b>Conclusion to first investigation.</b>               |
|        | 2:12-23 | <b>SECOND ‘investigation’ – pushing the boundaries.</b> |
|        | 2:24-26 | <b>Conclusion to second investigation. [#]</b>          |

**(D) Ten observations (3:1-6:2).**

|         |          |           |                                                      |
|---------|----------|-----------|------------------------------------------------------|
| 3:1-6:2 |          |           | <b>Ten observations.</b>                             |
|         | 3:1-15   |           | <b>Observations on TIME and ETERNITY [1]. [#]</b>    |
|         |          | 3:1-11    | <b>A contrast between time and eternity.</b>         |
|         |          | 3:12-15   | <b>Two important conclusions.</b>                    |
|         | 3:16,17  |           | <b>Observations on INJUSTICE [2]. #</b>              |
|         |          | 3:16      | <b>A topsy-turvy world.</b>                          |
|         |          | 3:17      | <b>Concluding statement.</b>                         |
|         | 3:18-22  |           | <b>Observations on MAN &amp; BEAST [3]. [#]</b>      |
|         |          | 3:18-21   | <b>Death for man and beast.</b>                      |
|         |          | 3:22      | <b>Concluding statement.</b>                         |
|         | 4:1-3    |           | <b>Observations on OPPRESSION [4].</b>               |
|         |          | 4:1       | <b>No comfort for the oppressed.</b>                 |
|         |          | 4:2-3     | <b>Concluding statements.</b>                        |
|         | 4v4-6    |           | <b>Observations on TOIL &amp; LABOUR (envy) [5].</b> |
|         |          | 4:4-5     | <b>Toil brings envy.</b>                             |
|         |          | 4:6       | <b>Concluding statement.</b>                         |
|         | 4:7-8    |           | <b>Observations on LONELINESS [6].</b>               |
|         |          | 4:7-8a    | <b>The lonely work for nothing.</b>                  |
|         |          | 4:8b      | <b>Concluding statement.</b>                         |
|         | 4:9-12   |           | <b>Observations on COMPANIONSHIP [7].</b>            |
|         |          | 4:9-12a   | <b>Reasons why two are better than one.</b>          |
|         |          | 4:12b     | <b>Concluding statement.</b>                         |
|         | 4:13-16  |           | <b>Observations on WISDOM [8]</b>                    |
|         |          | 4:13-16a  | <b>Poor wise versus foolish kings.</b>               |
|         |          | 4:16b     | <b>Concluding statement.</b>                         |
|         | 5:1-7    |           | <b>Approaching God (interlude). [#]</b>              |
|         | 5:8-10   |           | <b>Observations on CORRUPTION [9].</b>               |
|         |          | 5:8-10a   | <b>Economic failures.</b>                            |
|         |          | 5:10b     | <b>Concluding statement.</b>                         |
|         | 5:11-6:2 |           | <b>Observations on WEALTH &amp; RICHES [10]. [#]</b> |
|         |          | 5:11-6:2a | <b>How to use wealth.</b>                            |
|         |          | 6:2b      | <b>Concluding statement.</b>                         |

**(E) The good and that which is better (6:3-7:18).**

|          |         |                                                                     |
|----------|---------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 6:3-7:18 |         | <b>The good and that which is better.</b>                           |
|          | 6:3-6   | <b>Life without goodness is no good.</b>                            |
|          | 6:7-9   | <b>No satisfaction – to desire is better than to gain.</b>          |
|          | 6:10-12 | <b>Who knows what is good?</b>                                      |
|          | 7:1     | <b>A good reputation is fine but death is better.</b>               |
|          | 7:2-4   | <b>Better to be in the house of mourning.</b>                       |
|          | 7:5-76  | <b>The rebuke of the wise is better than the song of fools.</b>     |
|          | 7:7-8a  | <b>In times of oppression the end is better than the beginning.</b> |
|          | 7:8b-9  | <b>Patience is better than pride.</b>                               |
|          | 7:10    | <b>Are the former times better?</b>                                 |
|          | 7:11-12 | <b>Wisdom is best.</b>                                              |
|          | 7:13-18 | <b>Consider the work of God. [#]</b>                                |

**(F) Wisdom and a reassessment on methodology (7:19-9:10).**

|           |          |                                                              |
|-----------|----------|--------------------------------------------------------------|
| 7:19-9:10 |          | <b>What is wisdom?</b>                                       |
|           | 7:19-24  | <b>Wisdom is elusive.</b>                                    |
|           | 7:25-29  | <b>First recap on method and an interim conclusion. [#]</b>  |
|           | 8:1      | <b>Who is wise?</b>                                          |
|           | 8:2-7    | <b>A wise man obeys the king. [#]</b>                        |
|           | 8:8-10   | <b>No escape from death.</b>                                 |
|           | 8:11-13  | <b>When wickedness is not judged. [#]</b>                    |
|           | 8:14-15  | <b>When justice fails. [#]</b>                               |
|           | 8:16-9:1 | <b>Second recap on method and an interim conclusion. [#]</b> |
|           | 9:2-3a   | <b>Death is an evil under the sun.</b>                       |
|           | 9:3b-6   | <b>Men are wicked but living is better than dying.</b>       |
|           | 9:7-10   | <b>Concluding statements. [#]</b>                            |

**(G) Worldly wisdom (9:11-10:20).**

|            |          |                                               |
|------------|----------|-----------------------------------------------|
| 9:11-10:20 |          | <b>Worldly wisdom.</b>                        |
|            | 9:11-12  | <b>Wisdom on time</b>                         |
|            | 9:13-18  | <b>Wisdom is the best.</b>                    |
|            | 10:1-3   | <b>Wisdom concerning fools.</b>               |
|            | 10:4-7   | <b>Wisdom concerning rulers.</b>              |
|            | 10:8-10  | <b>Wisdom concerning action.</b>              |
|            | 10:11-14 | <b>Wisdom concerning the mouth.</b>           |
|            | 10:15-20 | <b>Wisdom concerning work &amp; business.</b> |

**(H) What do we really know? (11:1-8).**

|        |        |                                 |
|--------|--------|---------------------------------|
| 11:1-8 |        | <b>What do we really know?</b>  |
|        | 11:1-6 | <b>Limits to knowledge. [#]</b> |
|        | 11:7-8 | <b>Light and darkness.</b>      |

**(I) The final conclusion (11:9-12:14).**

|            |           |                                              |
|------------|-----------|----------------------------------------------|
| 11:9-12:14 |           | <b>The final conclusion.</b>                 |
|            | 11:9-12:7 | <b>Youth compared to old age. [#]</b>        |
|            | 12:8      | <b>Conclusion: all is vanity.</b>            |
|            | 12:9-14   | <b>Postscript and final application. [#]</b> |

### **Rationale and purpose.**

The main aim of this work is to consider the book of Ecclesiastes with a view to expounding some of its main and central themes. Chief amongst these is the idea of knowledge and its limits, and the idea of enquiry or “discovery,” and its value. These twin themes are so important today because we live in an age where modern science is central in all our thinking. It is fitting to recall again the fact that Solomon, living a thousand years before Christ, examined the nature of knowledge, wisdom and enquiry fully before the early Milesian Greeks, and before any eastern philosophies such as those of Confucius or Buddha were dreamt up.<sup>68</sup> This is significant because whilst a large swathe of modern man credits Buddha or Confucius with the wisdom for life's path, the modern Western world credits modern science, whose birth began with Thales of Miletus, with ultimate sagacity. Both these streams of civilisation have neglected, at their ultimate peril, the wisdom that flowed from God via Solomon.

Although we shall endeavour to cover the whole book, some aspects will be merely highlighted so that the main themes can be considered in greater detail. It will be necessary to consider the meaning of some words and phrases as we go along.

---

<sup>68</sup> Thales of Miletus (c620-545 BC). Buddha (c563-483 BC). Confucius (551-479 BC).

## Chapter 2.

### All is vanity.

(A) The author's thesis stated ("all is vanity") suggested as answers to two key questions (1:1-11).

|        |          |                                                           |
|--------|----------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| 1:1-11 |          | <b>What is the point?</b>                                 |
|        | 1:1      | <b>Introduction to the preacher: Solomon.</b>             |
|        | 1:2      | <b>The thesis stated.</b>                                 |
|        | 1:3      | <b>Question 1: What profit?</b>                           |
|        | 1:4-9    | <b>Question 1 answered: CYCLES of endless repetition.</b> |
|        | 1:10a    | <b>Question 2: What's new?</b>                            |
|        | 1:10b-11 | <b>Question 2 answered: NOTHING new under the sun.</b>    |

#1 1 The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. 2 "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher; "vanity of vanities, all *is* vanity." 3 What profit has a man from all his labour in which he toils under the sun? 4 *One* generation passes away, and *another* generation comes; but the earth abides forever. 5 The sun also rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it arose. 6 The wind goes toward the south, and turns around to the north; the wind whirls about continually, and comes again on its circuit. 7 All the rivers run into the sea, yet the sea *is* not full; to the place from which the rivers come, there they return again. 8 All things *are* full of labour; man cannot express *it*. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. 9 That which has been *is* what will be, that which *is* done is what will be done, and *there is* nothing new under the sun. 10 Is there anything of which it may be said, "see, this *is* new"? It has already been in ancient times before us. 11 *There is* no remembrance of former *things*, nor will there be any remembrance of *things* that are to come by *those* who will come after.

As we have already discussed the issue of authorship, and concluded that there is no reason to doubt the fact that Solomon is the human author of Ecclesiastes, we shall move on to consider the form of this book. We have here the "*words of the Preacher.*" The term "*Preacher*" signifies one who gathers. It could be for the purposes of giving an address, a sermon or a lecture in a public way. Or, alternatively, it might indicate the gathering of words into some form. The statement at the end of the book lends some support to this view:

9 And moreover, because the Preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yes, he pondered and sought out *and* set in order many proverbs. 10 The Preacher sought to find acceptable words; and *what was* written *was* upright—words of truth. 11 The words of the

wise are like goads, and the words of scholars are like well-driven nails, given by one Shepherd.<sup>69</sup>

Either way the book should be taken as the words gathered for public declaration whether read or heard. Solomon desires to make known what he has discovered by painstaking and diligent research.<sup>70</sup> A sermon is most often associated with those addresses aimed at declaring what God has to say, in order to bring about some effect in those who hear it. This work of Ecclesiastes would fit into that category because of its final conclusion to fear God. However it can also be viewed as a work of philosophy or as a lecture. The way Solomon reports the results of his enquiry do read like a kind of report. It is not the same as a scientific paper, of course, but it does contain the elements of such publications, such as aims, methods and results.

**Solomon's thesis: *vanity of vanities, all is vanity.* [1:2].**

It is all a complete and utter waste of time! That is Solomon's assessment of the state of the world. In Hebrew the expression is put in duplicate, (*"vanity of vanities"*), it is then repeated, and then finally we are told that *"all is vanity"* to drive home the point! It is to be noted that this opening statement is also to be found at the end of the book.<sup>71</sup> Thus we discover that this assessment is one that encompasses the whole work. Solomon summarises what he has discovered and then the rest of the book serves to work this out in detail.

Now whenever we have words duplicated, as in this type of expression, the idea being expressed is one of extremes – a superlative. The expression *"vanity of vanities"* therefore, indicates, the very worst of vanities. The book following Ecclesiastes is called the "song of songs," which indicates the very best (bar none) of songs. Here, however, we are at the lowest point, the depth described by the word *"vanity."* We have already discussed the meaning of the Hebrew word *hebel*, which is rendered as *"vanity"* in the NKJV, and we concluded that the essential idea within this word is: fleeting, ephemeral, without weight or insubstantial. Just like a breath in the cold, it passes quickly and has no substance or weight about it. We get the same type of idea when we consider chaff and grain. The grain is solid and fruitful. This has weight and falls to the ground when the ears of wheat are winnowed and lifted up to be blown by the wind. On the other hand, the loose chaff that covers the grain is blown away because it has little weight or substance. What would contrast with *hebel*? Something that lasts and has substance or weight. The word that

---

69 Ecclesiastes 12:9-11.

70 Ecclesiastes 9:1.

71 Ecclesiastes 12:8.

matches these characteristics is glory, ***kabod***. This contrast is seen in stark reality in Paul's comment comparing our current experience with our future in heaven, in his second letter to the Corinthians:

For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding *and* eternal weight of glory.<sup>72</sup>

Solomon is only speaking of the affliction which is characterised by ***hebel***. He makes quite an astounding statement here which naturally causes us to baulk. Surely he cannot mean that everything is so empty and temporary? But of course he is right and he sets out to establish this truth and work out its implications.

### **Two questions answered. [1:3-11].**

Solomon asks two questions and answers each to establish this idea that everything is vanity. Before we consider these questions we need to re-consider the phrase “*under the sun*.” This phrase is exclusive to Ecclesiastes. It seems to indicate two ideas. First it suggests those things which occur and happen on the earth. This line of thinking can be seen in the Lord Jesus Christ's reference to the days of Noah. If you consider Genesis chapter 6 you will find that there is a graphic description of mankind's wickedness. He is evil, violent and wicked.<sup>73</sup> However when the Lord Jesus refers to this time he doesn't mention any of these things. Instead He refers to what we would consider ordinary things:

**37** But as the days of Noah *were*, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. **38** For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, **39** and did not know until the flood came and took them all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be.<sup>74</sup>

**26** And as it was in the days of Noah, so it will be also in the days of the Son of Man: **27** They ate, they drank, they married wives, they were given in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all.<sup>75</sup>

The point here is that the people are **only** concerned with things on earth. They are earthly based and not heavenly minded. To be “*under the sun*” is to be on earth.

The second idea follows on from the first, and draws our attention to that which is missing. It suggests things done without reference to the heavens. It is usually assumed that Thales of

---

<sup>72</sup> 2Corinthians 4:17.

<sup>73</sup> Genesis 6:5,11,13.

<sup>74</sup> Matthew 24:37-39.

<sup>75</sup> Luke 17:26,27.

Miletus was the first philosopher to consider things concerning the world without reference to the supernatural or gods. This is a mistake because Solomon beat Thales to this idea by some 400 years as we noted earlier! This neglect (or rejection) of the supernatural leads to rebelliousness. When people ignore God, and focus on the things of earth they show themselves up as rebels. They may not think they are acting as rebels, but, in forsaking God and His ways, they chart an independent course which is doomed to fail.

Ecclesiastes then, is a book which considers things “*under the sun*,” or without reference to the Lord God. This does not mean that Solomon forgets to mention God or does not take Him into account in certain ways at some points. What is meant is that God does not have His rightful place in the life and the things of mankind. Solomon has put God's requirements and interests in the affairs of man to one side. Where God is mentioned, the distance between man and God is emphasised.

Question 1: What profit? [1:3-9].

The first question concerns the issue of profit or fruit accrued from the toilsome labours of mankind under the sun.<sup>76</sup> When all is said and done what is the fruit? We must note here that our Lord Jesus asks this same question and it is probable that the Lord had in mind Solomon's work when He asked it.<sup>77</sup> The answer to the first question is that there is no real profit to man. The world continues on and on in its endless cycles. Each generation from father to son is passed by with no change in the state and way of things as far as this world is concerned. Verse 5 speaks of the motion of the sun from the perspective of the way humans experience it. The ancients were well known for being able to track the motion of the sun, moon and stars. They did this with such precision that they could predict eclipses. Ancient cultures were proficient astronomers.<sup>78</sup> But the repeatability of the motion of the sun was a backdrop of regularity which showed up the transitoriness of mankind. I am reminded of the song “Time” by Pink Floyd in which the endless motion of the sun unchanging is contrasted with the shortness of life.<sup>79</sup> In comparison to the short length of the life of an average man, the earth and its cyclic systems seem to carry on forever.

---

76 Ecclesiastes 1:3.

77 Matthew 16:26; Mark 8:36; Luke 9:25.

78 The Egyptian and Babylonian cultures are well known for this but ancient Megalithic peoples were too. See, for example: **Gerald S. Hawkins**. Beyond Stonehenge. 1973. Hutchison and Company Ltd. London. **Gerald S. Hawkins**. Stonehenge Decoded. (In collaboration with John B. White). 1987. Published by Dorset Press. New York. USA. **Euan Mackie**. The Megalith Builders. 1977. Published by Book Club Associates. London. **A. Thom**. Megalithic Lunar Observatories. 1971 (revised edition). Published by Oxford University at the Clarendon Press. Oxford. **A. Thom & A. Thom**. Megalithic Remains in Britain and Brittany. 1978. Published by Oxford University at the Clarendon Press. Oxford.

79 “So you run and you run to catch up with the sun but it's sinking, racing around to come up behind you again. The sun is the same in a relative way but you're older, shorter of breath and one day closer to death.”



It is not just the sun that continues on an endless cyclic route, for the pattern of the weather and the cycle of water on earth is just as relentless. There seems no end to the rain falling down to earth, washing down into the rivers, flowing into the sea, and then going back again into the atmosphere only to repeat the process. Likewise the wind rushes in repeated patterns forming circuits. We know of these but they do not seem to end, neither do they seem to have a goal or purpose. Thus nothing seems to reach an end or conclusion. All seems to continue in cycles. These ideas and thoughts are found in Buddhism and Hinduism, as well as atheistic materialism.

Solomon then proceeds to expand these thoughts forming a more universal statement. In verse 8 he suggests that everything is so deep and “*full of labour*” that it is impossible to make mention of it all. This phrase can be rendered: “all things spoken of are such as to exhaust you.”<sup>80</sup> In other words, there are countless more examples that the Preacher could adduce and speak of, but such would be a wearisome and unending task. Whatever man may do, the task is so burdensome and hard that it is inexpressible. There are not enough words to express things, and, what is more, words themselves are just not enough. It isn't just that the cycles of life continue unabated, but that whatever we may pursue or consider we cannot express them fully, and we cannot experience them fully. Work, toil, labour, which is all wearisome, is so expansive that man cannot even describe the extent and amount of it. Imagine that you have the task of counting every grain of sand! How can man do all the work required of him if he cannot even “*express it*” (i.e. name or classify it)?<sup>81</sup> The eye and the ear are unsatisfied or unsatiated. This means both that eyes and ears want more, and (more importantly) that the eyes and ears cannot really penetrate reality. In other words the eyes and ears cannot really get to what is real. They cannot see or hear deeply enough. Furthermore, whatever was done in the past by men must be redone by men in the future. The Forth Road Bridge needs to be painted and then, when that is finished, it needs to be repainted all over again! There really is nothing new under the sun.

Question 2: What's new? [1:10,11].

The second question picks up on the statement made at the end of the answer to the first (“*there is nothing new under the sun*”). If we think about this carefully we will recognise that man is not so ingenious. All the various options and ideas that may be expressed in a single generation often gets forgotten or neglected. New generations come which may re-invent these forgotten things

---

80 Literally the Hebrew reads: “All words are wearisome.”

81 Ecclesiastes 1:8.

again, and thus claim novelty, but in reality they are not new at all. Matthew Henry made the following comments in his work on this passage:

“It is an appeal to observing men, and a challenge to those that cry up modern learning above that of the ancients. Let them name any thing which they take to be new, and though perhaps we cannot make it to appear, for want of the records of former times, yet we have reason to conclude that it has been already of old time, which was before us.”<sup>82</sup>

History is a problematic discipline. It relies on documents in the main, but these are often totally missing, piecemeal and frequently biased. To say that something is truly new we would have to be sure that none before us have invented or journeyed to our “newly discovered” things. The ancient civilisations have not just been lost but utterly despoiled. What also of the civilisations before the flood? Who knows what they came up with?



The picture shows an ancestor of mine on my father's side. I discovered it shortly after my father died. There was no record of whom this man was. All I know is that the picture was taken in the 1880s from the date scribbled on the back.. I know nothing at all of this fellow. In his lifetime he may have had one or several careers. He may have had a family, or maybe not. He may have been in trouble with the law or he may have lived an exemplary life. All that he did, and all that he experienced is utterly lost. All we have remaining is this image. In the same way there are civilisations lost to us. Some have been recently discovered but we know virtually nothing about them. Who knows what they may have come up with?

In the realm of ideas and thought we might like to claim that none has come up with our modern ideas. Or we might like to say, for example, that the early Greek philosophers from Thales onwards brought in new and novel ideas. But is this really true? If you look carefully, the Greek philosophers simply borrowed from their

---

82      **Matthew Henry.** Commentary on the Whole Bible. Volume III. P984.

contemporaries, the Babylonian and Egyptian priests who borrowed from the things revealed in Scripture and handed down from what was revealed by God.<sup>83</sup> Modern science is directly linked to these ancient Greeks in their thought and cannot really escape the categories and themes that they used derived from the sources they used and so on.

However it is vital to consider this question also in the context of the whole Bible. “New” really signifies something which is not tainted by sin. Thus the work of redemption brings about a “*new creation*.”<sup>84</sup> It is fresh and vital. All that is, and all that ever has been, is not new in this sense. It is all the same because it partakes of *this world*. It may be that something novel has been produced by a subsequent generation, but in reality it is still part of this fallen world's order. Man is not really so novel at all. He is bound and constrained by his being tied to this world *under the sun*. In other words, whatever solution man proposes, whatever idea he may pursue, even if it is something never dreamt of before, it all partakes of *this world* and its ways.

Solomon has thus stated the thesis he proposes (everything is vanity), and he has given us two questions which he has answered in support of this idea. Nothing is really worthwhile, and there is no hope of anything better or new which can be of profit. The remainder of the book seeks to show these thoughts in detail, together with his methodology. As a consequence of such a desperate situation Solomon also suggests throughout his work, some pragmatic and tentative ways to deal with such a hopeless situation.

---

83 I have explored this theme elsewhere when considering the doctrine of Scripture and the first eleven chapters of Genesis. See: [www.mikeviccary.com](http://www.mikeviccary.com).

84 2Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15. See also Revelation 21.

## Chapter 3.

### The scientific method.

*(B) The aim and methodology of this enquiry (1:12-18).*

|         |          |                                                                      |
|---------|----------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1:12-18 |          | <b>Further information on the ‘teacher’ and his METHOD outlined.</b> |
|         | 1:12     | <b>The preacher king Solomon king in Jerusalem over Israel.</b>      |
|         | 1:13-14a | <b>Methodology – part 1.</b>                                         |
|         | 1:14b-15 | <b>Interim conclusion 1.</b>                                         |
|         | 1:16-17a | <b>Methodology – part 2.</b>                                         |
|         | 1:17b-18 | <b>Interim conclusion 2.</b>                                         |

**12** I, the Preacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. **13** And I set my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all that is done under heaven; this burdensome task God has given to the sons of man, by which they may be exercised. **14** I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and indeed, all *is* vanity and grasping for the wind. **15** *What is* crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be numbered. **16** I communed with my heart, saying, “Look, I have attained greatness, and have gained more wisdom than all who were before me in Jerusalem. My heart has understood great wisdom and knowledge.” **17** And I set my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is grasping for the wind. **18** For in much wisdom *is* much grief, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.

In this second section Solomon gives us his methodology. If you like, the opening section sets out the thesis and gives us a brief synopsis in support of the main idea, whereas here Solomon lets us in on how he has proceeded.

#### Empiricism.

There are two things which we need to highlight in this section. First we note that Solomon's main tool was his own heart. Notice the continued use of the personal pronoun “*I*.”<sup>85</sup> Here we observe that he is trusting in his own ingenuity rather than in the Lord or in other schemes. Notice also how he states twice that he “*set*” his heart, and once that he “*communied with*” his heart in order to find out wisdom.<sup>86</sup> Second we must mention that his work is based on observations. In verse 14 we note how he states that he had “*seen*” everything done “*under the sun.*” Both of these ideas are repeated throughout the book. In such a way then, we have a kind of scientific method.

<sup>85</sup> There are seven uses of the personal pronoun at: 1:12,13,14,16(x2),17(x2).

<sup>86</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:13,16,17.

Solomon has ruled out God's involvement in his enquiry. He has limited his investigations to what can be “*seen*” (i.e. observations), and he will use his mind, (heart) to set about understanding what wisdom, madness and folly are. One physicist-historian of science once commented that:

The scientific method, as far as it is a method, is nothing more than doing one's damndest with one's mind, no holds barred.”<sup>87</sup>

This is Solomon's method too!

And yet bathed within this method, is the forlorn feeling that such a task was hopeless because it was a “*burdensome task*” that God “*had given to the sons of man,*” that is, left man to get on with.

### **Goal or aim.**

Solomon's quest is to understand “*all that is done under heaven,*” and so it is universal in scope and approach.<sup>88</sup> This is the same as the aim of modern science. Listen, for example, to Stephen Hawking's words penned in 1988:

My goal is a complete understanding of the universe why it is as it is and why it exists at all.<sup>89</sup>

The eventual goal of science is to provide a single theory that describes the whole universe.<sup>90</sup>

A complete, consistent, unified theory is only the first step; our goal is a complete understanding of the events around us, and of our own existence.<sup>91</sup>

Hawking is by no means alone in such an understanding of the aim of science. We could point to any number of scientists and philosophers throughout the ages who share Hawking's dreams. We shall merely mention two more to prove the point. First, the philosopher Karl Popper:

What we attempt in science is to describe and (as far as possible) explain reality.<sup>92</sup>

---

87 **P. W. Bridgman**, *Reflections of a Physicist*. 1950. Philosophical Library Inc. P35. See also 1945, *Yale Review*. P444.

88 *Ecclesiastes* 1:13.

89 **Stephen Hawking**, *Reading God's Mind*. Article in *Newsweek Magazine*. June 13<sup>th</sup>1988. P39.

90 **Stephen Hawking**, *A Brief History of Time*. (From the Big Bang to Black Holes). 1988. Bantam Press. London. P10.

91 **Stephen Hawking**, *A Brief History of Time*. (From the Big Bang to Black Holes). 1988. Bantam Press. London. P169.

92 **Karl R. Popper** (philosopher of science) – quoted in: **A. F. Chalmers**, *What is this thing called Science?* 1982

Then second we have the words of Erwin Shrödinger:

I do not think I am prejudiced against the importance that science has from the purely human point of view. I had expressed by the original title of these lectures, and I have explained in the introductory passages, that I consider science an integrating part of our endeavour to answer the one great philosophical question which embraces all others, the one that Plotinus expressed by his brief: ... - who are we? And more than that: I consider this not only one of the tasks, but the task, of science, the only one that really counts.<sup>93</sup>

It is so interesting that modern science too has discounted heavenly and supernatural things and has limited its methodology to the observable and the theoretical.

But Solomon's great quest is more than merely seeking answers to questions from within all things. Whilst it is clear from verse 13 and 14 that all things are to be included, in verse 17 we find that what he really wants to understand is the nature of wisdom, madness and folly. This is very different to the aim of modern science. So what do these three themes entail? Wisdom is usually conceived of as the right use of knowledge. In contrast, both folly and madness are in opposition to wisdom. However, whereas folly is rational, madness includes the absurd and the nonsensical. Madness is without mind or thought (those deranged). Folly is defiant against what may be deemed "right." Madness is irrational and absurd. Both madness and folly oppose wisdom because neither does what is considered right. Madness opposes folly because it does not think about what it does, whereas folly does. Thus Solomon asks himself the question: how can you distinguish wisdom from folly, or wisdom from madness? Is such a thing possible "*under the sun*"? Although these themes are alien to modern science, they are by no means alien to modern intellectual pursuits. Existentialism, Post-Modernism and the modern art movements all entail absurd and nonsensical ideas. Who would deny the absurdities we read of and witness daily in modern life?<sup>94</sup>

### Assumptions.

Solomon makes a number of assertions concerning the nature of things within this expression of methodology, for which he offers little justification here. First he describes the task we are given (by God) as "*burdensome*."<sup>95</sup> Next he describes things as being "*crooked*" and as such

---

(2<sup>nd</sup> edition). The Open University Press. Milton Keynes. P159.

93 Erwin Shrodinger. Science and Humanism (Physics in our time). 1961. Cambridge University Press. p51.

94 For example, what is the nature of man? Who would have thought that modern people could assent to a range of genders rather than just male and female?

95 Ecclesiastes 1:13.

cannot be “*made straight*.”<sup>96</sup> Such descriptions fit well with the doctrine of the fall. Work is difficult and a great toil. This reflects the words of God to Adam after the fall:

17 Cursed *is* the ground for your sake; in toil you shall eat *of* it all the days of your life.  
18 Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the herb of the field.  
19 In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for dust you *are*, and to dust you shall return. (Genesis 3v17-19).<sup>97</sup>

However Solomon does not refer to this event. Rather he assumes that such a situation he describes is something we must accept as being “normal.” In effect it is just his observation of life as it is. The world is crooked and the work of man is burdensome. In this context Solomon seeks to understand wisdom, madness and folly. In a similar way modern science seeks to understand all things as being natural and normal, rather than realise that the world is under a curse.

### **Results.**

Remarkably Solomon does not display the arrogant hopefulness that modern science rejoices in. He cannot contain the outcome of his findings. Even though he has great wisdom and has attained the heights of greatness so that he can make such an enquiry, he still lets us know that there is no hope. Concerning all that is done by men he concludes that, “*all is vanity and grasping for the wind*,” and concerning his aim to know wisdom, madness and folly he perceives, “*that this also is grasping for the wind*.”<sup>98</sup> Modern scientists generally follow what is sometimes referred to as “critical realism” in their philosophical approach. This is the idea that what is discovered by scientists is truly real, but must also be opened to critical appraisal. Consequently modern scientists exhibit a kind of schizophrenic attitude. On the one hand they declaim that what they have discovered is real and true. On the other they rejoice in the tentative nature of what is claimed. Strangely their tentative but dogmatic approach tends to err on the dogmatic. If ever you claim something in opposition to modern science you will be lambasted as crazy, idiotic and nutty! Solomon's conclusions and assertions are quite different. The goal is elusive. It is “*grasping after the wind*” – a futile, hopeless and pointless exercise.<sup>99</sup>

Solomon also finds in his mental (theoretical) work that the increase of wisdom and knowledge simply increases pain and sorrow! Why is this? We have never known so much in this day with the internet and more people engaged in research than ever before, but what do we really

---

96 Ecclesiastes 1:15.

97 Genesis 3:17-19.

98 Ecclesiastes 1:4,17.

99 Ecclesiastes 1:14.

understand or realise? Nothing! We cannot solve even the most basic of problems. To prove this consider the rampant sin and violence we see across the globe. Consider the failure of governments to curb greed and to deliver peace and freedom to citizens.



# Chapter 4.

## Empiricism and experimentation.

(C) *Two investigations (2:1-26).*

|        |         |                                                         |
|--------|---------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| 2:1-26 |         | <b>Two investigations.</b>                              |
|        | 2:1-10  | <b>FIRST ‘investigation’ – the vanity of pleasure.</b>  |
|        | 2:11    | <b>Conclusion to first investigation.</b>               |
|        | 2:12-23 | <b>SECOND ‘investigation’ – pushing the boundaries.</b> |
|        | 2:24-26 | <b>Conclusion to second investigation.</b>              |

**#2** **1** I said in my heart, “come now, I will test you with mirth; therefore enjoy pleasure”; but surely, this also *was* vanity. **2** I said of laughter—“madness!”; and of mirth, “what does it accomplish?” **3** I searched in my heart *how* to gratify my flesh with wine, while guiding my heart with wisdom, and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what *was* good for the sons of men to do under heaven all the days of their lives. **4** I made my works great, I built myself houses, and planted myself vineyards. **5** I made myself gardens and orchards, and I planted all *kinds* of fruit trees in them. **6** I made myself water pools from which to water the growing trees of the grove. **7** I acquired male and female servants, and had servants born in my house. Yes, I had greater possessions of herds and flocks than all who were in Jerusalem before me. **8** I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the special treasures of kings and of the provinces. I acquired male and female singers, the delights of the sons of men, *and* musical instruments of all kinds. **9** So I became great and excelled more than all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. **10** Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart rejoiced in all my labour; and this was my reward from all my labour. **11** Then I looked on all the works that my hands had done and on the labour in which I had toiled; and indeed all *was* vanity and grasping for the wind. *There was* no profit under the sun. **12** Then I turned myself to consider wisdom and madness and folly; for what *can* the man *do* who succeeds the king?— *only* what he has already done. **13** Then I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness. **14** The wise man’s eyes *are* in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. Yet I myself perceived that the same event happens to them all. **15** So I said in my heart, “as it happens to the fool, it also happens to me, and why was I then more wise?” Then I said in my heart, “this also *is* vanity.” **16** For *there is* no more remembrance of the wise than of the fool forever, since all that now *is* will be forgotten in the days to come. And how does a wise *man* die? As the fool! **17** Therefore I hated life because the work that was done under the sun *was* distressing to me, for all *is* vanity and grasping for the wind. **18** Then I hated all my labour in which I had toiled under the sun, because I must leave it to the man who will come after me. **19** And who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will rule over all my labour in which I toiled and in which I have shown myself wise under the sun. This also *is* vanity. **20** Therefore I turned my heart and despaired of all the labour in which I had toiled under the sun. **21** For there is a man whose labour *is* with wisdom, knowledge, and skill; yet he must leave his heritage to a man who has not laboured for it. This also *is* vanity and a great evil. **22** For what has man for all his labour, and for the striving of his heart with which he has toiled under the sun? **23** For all his days *are* sorrowful, and his work burdensome; even in the night his heart takes no rest. This also *is* vanity. **24** Nothing *is* better for a man *than* that he should eat and drink, and *that*

his soul should enjoy good in his labour. This also, I saw, was from the hand of God. **25** For who can eat, or who can have enjoyment, more than I? **26** For *God* gives wisdom and knowledge and joy to a man who *is* good in His sight; but to the sinner He gives the work of gathering and collecting, that he may give to *him who is* good before God. This also *is* vanity and grasping for the wind.

So far Solomon has stated his thesis, demonstrated proofs in support, and has detailed his methodological approach. Along the way he has given us his results and conclusions. Not content with a theoretical approach (both observational and theory forming), Solomon sets out to test his thoughts with two enquiries or “experiments.” The first enquiry is centred on pleasure seeking, whilst the second focuses on true exploration – pushing back the boundaries of understanding.

Before we consider these two investigations it is worth pointing out here that this is a very self-centred enterprise. The personal pronoun “*I*” occurs 19 times in the first 10 verses of chapter 2, and 16 times from verse 12 to verse 26. Such is the nature of modern scientific research. It is all centred on personal endeavour. Do not believe the propaganda which teaches that it is for the common good. Scientists only pursue the projects they want to do!

### **Experiment 1. [2:1-11].**

Solomon's first investigation is centred on seeking pleasure. Solomon wants to know what makes a person happy. The following themes can be observed in the first 10 verses:

- Mirth (pleasure, laughter).
- Wine drinking.
- Works (architecture and landscaping).
- Possessions.
- Wealth.
- Elite status.
- Music and dancing.
- Fame and reputation.
- All pleasure.

All the senses were catered for. Or were they? He left nothing that could be desired, unexperienced. All of these are avenues, that have been pursued countless times by countless people in all cultures in an effort to be happy, all end with the same result. So what was this result? Well before his experiment really gets off the ground he comments that “*surely, this also was vanity,*” for it does

not really accomplish anything of value.<sup>100</sup> However he gives us his final conclusion on this first experiment in verse 11. It was all “*vanity and grasping for the wind,*” and there was “*no profit under the sun.*” It was an unmitigated failure. How absurd. It was all empty, vacuous, transitory and ephemeral. It was a mere grasping for wind. There was no benefit or fruit that resulted from all Solomon's effort. It was all pointless. Is this how we see things? I think not! We spend vast amounts of cash, energy and effort in pursuing these pleasures. But in reality we all know that they do not last and they do not satisfy. How many have craved the latest electronic gadget only to find that it doesn't work properly, and before you have got to grips with how it works it has become obsolete because the next newest thing is vying for attention? Or consider the goal of victory in sports. I well remember Alex Ferguson saying half an hour after Manchester United won the champions league that they had now to start all over again for the next season!<sup>101</sup> The euphoria of winning lasted barely half an hour. This is always the situation if our pleasure seeking is earth based. Does not modern experience confirm this finding? What really brings happiness? Nothing. Think of the people who have acquired wealth and have ended up depressed, sad and hopeless. Think of those who have gained fame and yet are terribly lonely, even ruining their lives by addictions. Or what of those who gain power and yet suffer terrible pangs of doubt, fear, paranoia. We could list countless examples of megalomaniacs and power crazy people. Fame and fortune doesn't produce peace and a settled nature.

### **Experiment 2. [2:12-26].**

After pleasure, Solomon turns his attention to wisdom, madness and folly. What is really worthwhile? For a while we are lead to believe that wisdom is better than folly, but then there is a serious problem which Solomon will return to again and again. What happens to all that is done “*under the sun*” when a person dies? The same event happens to the wise and the fool, they both die. What then? There is a further problem to be considered. Whatever is left by fool and wise, much, if not all, of their human endeavour is wasted and comes to nought. Such is the case with ordinary folk. I write as an uncle has just passed away. He will be greatly missed by his family but there will come a time when his name and life will not be remembered. My best friend died about four years ago. He had no family as his mother and father died many years before that. Apart from myself and a few friends I doubt that many will even know his name. Only a few manage to leave their works behind which may exert some influence on succeeding generations, but what of the countless billions whose lives have passed without any flicker of notoriety in this world?

---

100 Ecclesiastes 2:1.

101 This was back in 1999!

Taking the thought of death and the sad thought that achievements come to nought, Solomon asks what is the point of being wise? He has stated that wisdom is better than folly and will repeat this idea thought throughout the work, but ultimately what advantage does the wise have over the fool? None! Both die, and both suffer the obliteration of all that they have done. As a result Solomon comes to hate life. Everything is pointless. Nothing seems to give him hope as he contemplates life and work “*under the sun.*” Whatever he has done must be left to one who comes after him, and he is unsure what his successor will do with it. Will he build on it? Or will he overthrow everything and count it all as worthless. How many times have we seen that happening? Think of successive governments. One decides that all industry should be nationalised and under government control. The next abandons all those plans and follows a totally different plan! In the case of Solomon we know that there was never such a time of peace as the one that he reigned over. Neither was the kingdom as extensive and glorious as the time of Solomon's. However, his son Rehoboam was a terrible successor and managed to split the fragile kingdom in two with disastrous consequences.<sup>102</sup> Such a thought is vanity. Why did Solomon exercise wisdom and prudence in building up the kingdom, only for his successor to ruin it all and bring it to nothing? The very toil and labour required to bring a great project to fruition is wearisome and vanity in itself. To think that it would be left to one who would squander and ruin what has been built up is unthinkable. It leads Solomon to great despair. Perhaps he could see these seeds of despair in his son Rehoboam?

And so the two experiments have achieved but a single conclusion as stated in the opening section of this work. It is all an utter waste of time. All is vanity. But Solomon does not leave things there. Just as his first conclusion lead to a type of pragmatism, so also here at the end of the second experiment we have a recourse to a “make-do-and-mend” attitude. In these last three verses the name of God is invoked. This is only the second time we have mention of God. The first was merely a reference to the burdensome lot of man given from the hand of God.<sup>103</sup> Here again God is mentioned merely as the one who gives the reason for things to be. God is presented as distant and transcendent only. Solomon does not show God as being immanent, because he is trying to show what life is like with no direct involvement from God, that is, life “*under the sun.*” Solomon then goes on to make the claim that God gives good to those who are good, and takes from the sinner to give to the good, concluding that “*this also is vanity and grasping for the wind.*” What does he mean in saying this? Well it is clear that by concluding as he does, Solomon is not applauding the fact that the good succeed and the sinner does not. He is merely stating what happens and uses the transcendent “God” as the best explanation. And so Solomon is presenting a kind of deist view of

---

102 1Kings 12:1f.

103 Ecclesiastes 1:13.

God. He is the God who is transcendent and dispenses what He will as He sees fit, and we had better learn to live with it as best we can. Solomon is wise and has been dealt wisdom. Others have not. Is Solomon better off? Well maybe, but maybe not. All that Solomon is prepared to conclude is that a man should consider himself happy by making sure he enjoys what he eats and drinks and rejoices in his labour and lot. Make the best of a bad lot. Such is Solomon's assessment of life "*under the sun.*" Solomon is outlining what things would be like and how they appear if you take no thought of God as being immanently involved.

# *Chapter 5.*

## *Human observations.*

*(D) Ten observations (3:1-6v2).*

|         |          |           |                                                      |
|---------|----------|-----------|------------------------------------------------------|
| 3:1-6:2 |          |           | <b>Ten observations.</b>                             |
|         | 3:1-15   |           | <b>Observations on TIME and ETERNITY [1].</b>        |
|         |          | 3:1-11    | <b>A contrast between time and eternity.</b>         |
|         |          | 3:12-15   | <b>Two important conclusions.</b>                    |
|         | 3:16,17  |           | <b>Observations on INJUSTICE [2].</b>                |
|         |          | 3:16      | <b>A topsy-turvy world.</b>                          |
|         |          | 3:17      | <b>Concluding statement.</b>                         |
|         | 3:18-22  |           | <b>Observations on MAN &amp; BEAST [3].</b>          |
|         |          | 3:18-21   | <b>Death for man and beast.</b>                      |
|         |          | 3:22      | <b>Concluding statement.</b>                         |
|         | 4:1-3    |           | <b>Observations on OPPRESSION [4].</b>               |
|         |          | 4:1       | <b>No comfort for the oppressed.</b>                 |
|         |          | 4:2-3     | <b>Concluding statements.</b>                        |
|         | 4:4-6    |           | <b>Observations on TOIL &amp; LABOUR (envy) [5].</b> |
|         |          | 4:4-5     | <b>Toil brings envy.</b>                             |
|         |          | 4:6       | <b>Concluding statement.</b>                         |
|         | 4:7-8    |           | <b>Observations on LONELINESS [6].</b>               |
|         |          | 4:7-8a    | <b>The lonely work for nothing.</b>                  |
|         |          | 4:8b      | <b>Concluding statement.</b>                         |
|         | 4:9-12   |           | <b>Observations on COMPANIONSHIP [7].</b>            |
|         |          | 4:9-12a   | <b>Reasons why two are better than one.</b>          |
|         |          | 4:12b     | <b>Concluding statement.</b>                         |
|         | 4:13-16  |           | <b>Observations on WISDOM [8]</b>                    |
|         |          | 4:13-16a  | <b>Poor wise versus foolish kings.</b>               |
|         |          | 4:16b     | <b>Concluding statement.</b>                         |
|         | 5:1-7    |           | <b>Approaching God (interlude).</b>                  |
|         | 5:8-10   |           | <b>Observations on CORRUPTION [9].</b>               |
|         |          | 5:8-10a   | <b>Economic failures.</b>                            |
|         |          | 5:10b     | <b>Concluding statement.</b>                         |
|         | 5:11-6:2 |           | <b>Observations on WEALTH &amp; RICHES [10].</b>     |
|         |          | 5:11-6:2a | <b>How to use wealth.</b>                            |
|         |          | 6:2b      | <b>Concluding statement.</b>                         |

In this part of the book we have a series of ten observations and their resulting conclusions, with a brief interlude to pay homage to the transcendent God (5:1-7). I have not included the text at the start of this chapter, but have added it for each section.

**Observation 1: TIME and ETERNITY. [3:1-15].**

**#3 1** To everything *there is* a season, a time for every purpose under heaven: **2** a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck *what is* planted; **3** a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; **4** a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; **5** a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; **6** a time to gain, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; **7** a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; **8** a time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace. **9** What profit has the worker from that in which he labours? **10** I have seen the God-given task with which the sons of men are to be occupied. **11** He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end. **12** I know that nothing *is* better for them than to rejoice, and to do good in their lives, **13** and also that every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labour—it *is* the gift of God. **14** I know that whatever God does, it shall be forever. Nothing can be added to it, and nothing taken from it. God does *it*, that men should fear before Him. **15** That which is has already been, and what is to be has already been; and God requires an account of what is past.

Solomon's first observation is on time and eternity. It is not until verse 10 that Solomon declares that he has seen the task which God has given to men. Before this we have the great poem on time. It is necessary to point out that we have two different words for time here. First there is the word translated "*season*" which indicates a duration or length of time. Then second we have the word rendered "*time*" which really means an "appointment." So we have a definite date, and then also a length of time. It is the same with life. We read in Hebrews 9:27 that the day of a person's death has been "*appointed*," after which comes judgement. Here in Ecclesiastes we are being told that each activity under the sun has its set appointed time and its length of duration. The Lord God is nothing if not a stickler for time.

Thus, Solomon observes that everything has its appointed time and length of life. In verses 1 to 8 he lists 14 contrasting events or purposes which are set time limits.

|            |           |
|------------|-----------|
| Birth      | Death     |
| Planting   | Uprooting |
| Kill       | Heal      |
| Break down | Building  |
| Weep       | Laugh     |

|                  |                        |
|------------------|------------------------|
| Mourn            | Dance                  |
| Cast away stones | Gather stones          |
| Embrace          | Refrain from embracing |
| Gain             | Lose                   |
| Keep             | Throw away             |
| Tear             | Sew                    |
| Silence          | Speak                  |
| Love             | Hate                   |
| War              | Peace                  |

The selection of events and purposes seems to embrace all of life's rich tapestry. However the ordering of these and their arrangement seems to defy any logical or coherent system. The “negative” (in red) and “positive” (in blue) counterparts are randomly arranged, and whilst it all starts with birth it ends with war. The conclusion of this poem on time and life is a rhetorical question. There is no profit for the worker in his labour.

Surprisingly the remainder of this chapter focuses on what God has done. Nestled amongst the pragmatic advice are some wonderful and timeless truths, and it would be helpful to discuss these great truths lest we skate over them. Here they are:

- *“He has made everything beautiful in its time.” [3:11a].*
- *“He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end.” [3:11b].*
- *“I know that whatever God does, it shall be forever. Nothing can be added to it, and nothing taken from it. God does it, that men should fear before Him.” [3:14].*

God is still presented to us in this passage as a transcendent being. And yet for all this we find that Solomon cannot help but relate some wonderful and eternal truths concerning God.

Solomon states that God has made all things, and that He has made all things “*beautiful*” in their time. Hence all that God does is beautiful, good, wholesome and fitting. However it is not just that they are beautiful, but they are also brought to be at the right time. We sometimes miss this aspect of God's creative action. Clearly from Genesis 1 we note that God made all things “*good*” in the first six days.<sup>104</sup> However the people that exist today were not created then but in recent years. In

---

104 Genesis 1:4,10,12,18,21,25,31.



this sense God is still creating. We must make a distinction between creation from nothing (ex nihilo) and creation through time (subsequent humans and so on). When God initially created all things, all was done well and was pronounced as “good.” After the fall what God does in creating (chiefly the creation of new life) is still good or beautiful, even though it must be party to, and continue in, the environment of a fallen and cursed world. However, nothing God does can be described as being anything other than good or beautiful.

The second great statement concerns the connection between human life and God in a constitutional sense. There can be no greater truth expressed on the nature of man's composition than that which we find here. God has so made man that “*eternity*” is a very part of his heart! The word rendered “*eternity*” has the idea of a vanishing point and signifies a time out of mind, or eternity. This is one reason why man can never be satisfied with mere worldly pursuits. This is also why Paul can say that in his rebellion man has to suppress the truth lest his conscience convict him.<sup>105</sup> Now the fact that we have eternity within does not help us. It is an irritant. We know there is something *much more* to life than the mundane, but what this is who can tell? Hence no man can discover the work that God has done in so making us with eternity in our hearts. Here is one of the abiding conclusions that runs throughout this work. Man cannot discover! So much for the glory of modern science. We shall return to this theme in later sections, but for now, if we cannot discover the work of God from beginning to end, what value is our effort to understand? It is futile. It is a failure. It is an impossibility. Why then does modern science pursue this vain idea that it can get closer and closer to the truth? If we cannot discover what God has done, what hope have we? In fact what point and value is that which we think we know? In point of fact what we claim to know (or what modern science claims to know) must in truth be deemed as nonsense at best and fraudulent at worst, because it says nothing about God and His work,

The third and final great truth expressed here concerns God and His works. When He works, what He does lasts, is perfect, and needs no alterations. What God does lasts forever. How different this is to what we do! What God does is perfect. God has no plan B. What He does fits the purpose precisely. He needs to make no alterations. He adds no safety factor or margin for error. He needs to adjust nothing that He has done. All He does is perfect and pure. Why then do people challenge or judge His works? Why do people claim that the Scriptures, for example, are flawed and contain errors? Why do people pick holes in the gospel or the church? All that God does is lasting and perfect!

---

<sup>105</sup> Romans 1:18.

Solomon has given us some timeless and wonderful truths about God, but he does not work these out in any gospel sense here. Instead he pursues the pragmatic approach which the view of the world he has adopted in this work (*“under the sun”*) will lead him to. Consequently the best thing to do, is to do good and enjoy life. Such is *“the gift of God.”* He ends this section with the first mention of his final overall conclusion. God has so ordered things in His creation *“that men should fear before Him”* because *“God requires an account of what is past.”* Solomon has been working out the implications of a world without reference to God, *“under the sun,”* and has concluded that in such a state everything is pointless, useless, and a waste of time and space. And yet he cannot restrain the glimmer of the real message this book works towards, poking its way through here and there. The key point in highlighting the hopeless and wearisome state of the world is that we might fear God and consider the way of our lives.<sup>106</sup> We shall see this again spelled out clearly at the end of the book.

**Observation 2: INJUSTICE. [3:16,17].**

**16** Moreover I saw under the sun: *in* the place of judgement, wickedness *was* there; and *in* the place of righteousness, iniquity *was* there. **17** I said in my heart, “God shall judge the righteous and the wicked, for *there is* a time there for every purpose and for every work.”

What may be expected to be seen is not in fact evident. Thus, *“wickedness,”* and *“iniquity,”* take the supreme place instead of *“judgement,”* and *“righteousness.”* This is simply how things are when viewing the world *“under the sun.”* Solomon makes no argument or plea for this to be corrected. He merely concludes with the statement that God will judge both righteous and wicked at some point *“under the sun.”* Again there is no judgement made by Solomon here. Both will be judged *“for there is a time”* and an end for everything (recollecting the opening themes of chapter 3). The world as we see it, without the advantage of having God's eye and view, is that wickedness and iniquity reign, and that which is right and fair falls by the wayside. Nevertheless there will come a temporal judgement at some point in time, (*“for there is a time there for every purpose and for every work.”*).

**Observation 3: MAN & BEAST. [3:18-22].**

**18** I said in my heart, “concerning the condition of the sons of men, God tests them, that they may see that they themselves are *like* animals.” **19** For what happens to the sons of men also happens to animals; one thing befalls them: as one dies, so dies the other. Surely, they all have one breath; man has no advantage over animals, for all *is* vanity. **20** All go to one place: all are from the dust, and all return to dust. **21** Who knows the spirit of the sons of men, which goes upward, and the spirit of the

---

<sup>106</sup> Ecclesiastes 3:14.

animal, which goes down to the earth? **22** So I perceived that nothing *is* better than that a man should rejoice in his own works, for that *is* his heritage. For who can bring him to see what will happen after him?

For the third observation Solomon repeats his general method. His enquiry is centred on his personal perspective in pursuit of truth and knowledge from his own understanding and wisdom. The main import of this observation is that from the standpoint of viewing things “*under the sun*,” man is no different to the beasts, for both die. Solomon does not introduce the concept of man as made in the image of God here, because his perspective is from the point of view of the earth. He does mention that just as a beast goes into the earth so does man, but this is something **observed**, not brought forth as a piece of revealed truth.

His next point about the spirit of beast and man cannot be taken in the sense of revelation. He is not claiming that a man and a beast both have spirits and so are both spiritual. He is not declaring that both man and beast have a spirit and so are divine. Rather he is speaking of the animating essence of both “living” creatures. The whereabouts of the spirit has never been observed so it is impossible to say where the spirit may go. That is the position of the man (or woman) who views things “*under the sun*.” We may **assume** that the spirit of man “*goes upward*,” and the spirit of beasts “*goes down to the earth*,” but in actual fact we cannot be sure of this, because no one truly knows (from the perspective of “*under the sun*”).

And then Solomon makes one of his temporal, makeshift, pragmatic conclusions. Given our inability to observe what happens, we may as well enjoy what we do and work in, for no one can see the future. It is here we begin to see the honesty of Solomon's “*under the sun*” approach. Later we shall have recourse to consider the notion of the limits to human knowledge under a separate heading. Here the idea of a severe limit on what we can know is clearly uppermost in Solomon's writing. We do not know about spirit and its dwelling place, and we do not know the future.

#### **Observation 4: OPPRESSION. [4:1-3].**

**#4 1** Then I returned and considered all the oppression that is done under the sun: and look! The tears of the oppressed, but they have no comforter— on the side of their oppressors *there is* power, but they have no comforter. **2** Therefore I praised the dead who were already dead, more than the living who are still alive. **3** Yet, better than both *is he* who has never existed, who has not seen the evil work that is done under the sun.

Once again Solomon reminds us of his approach. This is a mental and theoretical exercise. Notice that “*oppression*” is described here as something which happens “*under the sun*,” but there is no discussion of what can be done about this. It is merely mentioned as an observation. Solomon

states that the dead fare better than the living, and those who never even existed are better still! This is simply a statement depicting oppression with no thought of a remedy or even a view on the injustice of oppression.

However what is most significant in this short piece is the repetition of the phrase “*they have no comfort*.” We now know that the Holy Spirit acts as the believer's Comforter or strengthener, but those who are oppressed have none to comfort and strengthen them. The powerful and the rich have the means to provide some comfort or strength to help them, but the oppressed are comfortless. This ought to make us cry out to the Lord on behalf of those who are oppressed and have no living relationship with the living God.

Solomon's observation concerning oppression could easily lead to despair. He expresses some quite woeful thoughts here, which sound like those of a depressed person. Why bother with life if there is all this oppression? The dead are better off! Note that he is not speaking of them at rest and peace in heaven. There is no thought of that since he does not know where the “*spirit*” of a man or beast will go.<sup>107</sup> And then he exclaims (absurdly) that one who has never existed is even better still! This is absurd, of course, for one who never existed cannot be described as having any advantage because they do not exist! It is a roundabout way of saying that it would be better if he had never existed in the first place. From all of these thoughts we can see that thinking deeply from the perspective of “*under the sun*” leads a person to despair and depression.

#### **Observation 5: TOIL & LABOUR. [4:4-6].**

**4** Again, **I saw** that for all toil and every skilful work a man is envied by his neighbour. This also *is* vanity and grasping for the wind. **5** The fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh. **6** Better a handful *with* quietness than both hands full, *together with* toil and grasping for the wind.

Solomon's next observation is the great vanity of envy. One man does a wonderful and skilful piece of work, but instead of profit, admiration and applause, he is envied. Monstrous! Verse 5 may be considered as a separate observation concerning the outcome of laziness, but it would seem better to include it under the observation concerning toil and labour. One works with skill and is envied, whilst another (the “*fool*” who envies) does nothing and ends up consuming “*his own flesh*.” The outcomes are very similar. Envy is a consuming passion. Note that envy is different to jealousy. A person is jealous when someone else takes away something (or someone) they love. Envy has to do with one person and their feeling towards what another has or has done. The word envy comes from the Latin *invidere* which means “to look upon with malice.” It is to look on

---

<sup>107</sup> Ecclesiastes 3:21.

another's situation and blessing with a feeling that they do not deserve such good fortune, and a settled desire to spoil it all. The seventeenth century preacher Robert South described envy in some detail. Envy is of such an “*ill quality*” that it brings “*confusion and calamity upon the envious person himself who cherishes and entertains it.*” Envy is “*like the viper, [which] gnaws out the bowels which first conceived it.*” Envy is tyrannical and so “*racks the mind of man*” that “*it ferments and boils the soul putting all the powers of it into the most restless and disorderly agitation.*”<sup>108</sup>

The (envious) fool does nothing and in so doing consumes his own body. The idea is of one who does not even consider it worthwhile to work for his food. Consequently he ends up starving to death! Solomon concludes this observation about toil and labour by advising a course of action which would avoid being envied, and which would avoid envy too. It is better not to toil with skill so that others envy you and things become unbearable. Far better is it to work simply and gain a small amount so that you can live a quiet life and not be noticed. Again we have the advice for a pragmatic life “*under the sun.*”

#### **Observation 6: LONELINESS. [4:7,8].**

7 Then I returned, and I saw vanity under the sun: 8 there is one alone, without companion: he has neither son nor brother. Yet *there is* no end to all his labours, nor is his eye satisfied with riches. *But he never asks*, “for whom do I toil and deprive myself of good?” This also *is* vanity and a grave misfortune.

The observation Solomon makes about loneliness is quite stark. What is the purpose of any toil or labour if you have no one to share it all with? For whom or what is a lonely person working? Here we can glimpse some very vital truths about the importance of relationships. No man is an island. Solomon does not write here of the doctrine of man from any revelatory position. His observation is that loneliness is not good because such a one has only work and themselves to satisfy, and this is an endless task. A lonely person who works for all hours is one who deprives himself of any good. Notably Solomon calls such a situation not just “*vanity*” but also a “*grave misfortune.*” This is a truly terrible situation to be in.

#### **Observation 7: COMPANIONSHIP. [4:9-12].**

9 Two *are* better than one, because they have a good reward for their labour. 10 For if they fall, one will lift up his companion. But woe to him *who is* alone when he falls, for *he has* no one to help him up. 11 Again, if two lie down together, they will keep warm; but how can one be warm *alone*? 12

---

108 Robert South (1634 – 1716). Twelve sermons preached upon several occasions.

Though one may be overpowered by another, two can withstand him. And a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

The seventh observation follows hard on the heels of the sixth. Whereas loneliness is not a good thing, companionship is good. Solomon works out the details of this and it would seem that these two observations are closely connected. Note how Solomon pronounces “*woe*” to the lonely one who falls, because no one can step in to help. Solomon begins this observation by pointing out that the work of two brings a “*good reward*,” compared to that of one whose labour seems to be endless. This appears to be an example of “*synergy*.” Synergy is when the outcome of two (or more) working is more than the sum of the outcomes from each. There is an “added” bonus. He then looks at two more examples, of warmth, and of protection or defence and concludes with a statement which emphasises what he has been saying. Two are better than one, but three is better still. Again this is pragmatism for life “*under the sun*.”

#### **Observation 8: WISDOM. [4:13-16].**

**13** Better a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who will be admonished no more. **14** For he comes out of prison to be king, although he was born poor in his kingdom. **15** I saw all the living who walk under the sun; they were with the second youth who stands in his place. **16** *There was no end of all the people over whom he was made king; yet those who come afterwards will not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and grasping for the wind.*

The eighth observation is made by way of comparison. A poor, but wise, youth is better than an old and stubborn foolish king. It would seem that Solomon is describing a king here who began at the lowest point, namely, as a poor prisoner. Such an one is elevated to kingship but has become complacent and stubborn. A second youth rises up with some wisdom, and the people follow this second youth. However the situation does not remain static for the ones who follow will forget the wise youth. It seems as though Solomon is contemplating what is good as he writes or muses. The wise youth is better, but then all is vacuous and wasteful because the subsequent ones will not even remember the youth who was wise. What is it all for?

Up to this point Solomon has made eight observations and it is worth reviewing these before we pass on to the interlude:

| <b>Observation</b>         | <b>Comment</b>                                                      |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>1</b> Time and eternity | There is a set time and duration for everything but God is eternal. |
| <b>2</b> Injustice         | Nothing is in its right place but God will judge in His time.       |
| <b>3</b> Man and beast     | Enjoy what you do for what do we really know?                       |

|   |                 |                                                                   |
|---|-----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 4 | Oppression      | It is better not to have existed!                                 |
| 5 | Toil and labour | Do not work too hard and be envied or too little and be consumed. |
| 6 | Loneliness      | To be lonely is a grave misfortune.                               |
| 7 | Companionship   | With two more can be done.                                        |
| 8 | Wisdom          | Is wisdom really best?                                            |

It will be seen that Solomon's observations do not lead to any coherent system or philosophy. He makes some pragmatic and practical suggestions but these do not hang coherently within any framework. The observations he makes are true as far as life "*under the sun*" goes, but they really lead us to despair.

**Approaching God (interlude). [5:1-7].**

#5 **1** Walk prudently when you go to the house of God; and draw near to hear rather than to give the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they do evil. **2** Do not be rash with your mouth, and let not your heart utter anything hastily before God. For God *is* in heaven, and you on earth; therefore let your words be few. **3** For a dream comes through much activity, and a fool's voice *is known* by *his* many words. **4** When you make a vow to God, do not delay to pay it; for *He has* no pleasure in fools. Pay what you have vowed— **5** Better not to vow than to vow and not pay. **6** Do not let your mouth cause your flesh to sin, nor say before the messenger *of God* that it *was* an error. Why should God be angry at your excuse and destroy the work of your hands? **7** For in the multitude of dreams and many words *there is* also vanity. But fear God.

Before he resumes making observations of the world "*under the sun*," Solomon gives us an interlude about approaching God. It may be thought at this point that Solomon has broken his line of thought about life "*under the sun*," by making reference to God, but this is not so. Solomon has already spoken of God in chapter 3 and here the reference is much the same as before, being concerned with things as they are without recourse to any **revelation**. Solomon cannot avoid God in his discourse because God was in all their life. However Solomon has made these observations about God, and approaching God, as though he were "*under the sun*." In our day we have militant atheists who deny the existence not just of God but of all supernatural, miracle and spirit existence. In doing so these misguided folk have not escaped to some situation where God does not exist. Even though they deny His existence they cannot help but put someone or something else in God's place. For example, evolutionary atheists revere the gods of time and chance. Other atheists may revere creation as a whole (as Romans 1 suggests). Solomon does not give us revelatory insight into God or God's house but suggests a pragmatic approach to dealing with the transcendent God. The

statement that God is in heaven whilst man is on earth suggests a great chasm between the two. This is effectively a kind of deism.<sup>109</sup> There are a series of imperative (pragmatic) commands given:

- Walk prudently
- Draw near to hear
- Do not be rash with your mouth
- Let not your heart utter anything hastily
- Let your words be few
- Do not let your mouth cause your flesh to sin

The advice given must be contrasted with what the fool does. The fool offers the sacrifice of many words which have come through his varied and random dreaming. The idea is of a man whose mind is running wild with dreams and thoughts, so much so that he cannot but pour out all he is and knows. And yet the fool does all this in sheer ignorance, not even knowing that he is doing evil. The fool rushes in and spouts his mind, making rash promises which he later reneges on. Solomon suggests that since God is in heaven (i.e. not close by and therefore out of reach), then He will not suffer fools gladly and the fool will suffer the destruction of all their work.

Instead the right minded one will be extremely cautious and careful. There is an attitude of fear here. Solomon concludes by calling for his hearers to “*fear God.*”<sup>110</sup> This is laudable but in the context of the whole book it is all that can be done. Whilst the idea of reverence towards God is clearly correct, there is no thought of being adopted into the family, or of being accepted into the heavenly kingdom. This is in stark contrast to how the Christian must behave! Of course anyone who rushes to God full of themselves and their ideas will not be heard, but the Christian is exhorted to come eagerly and boldly with confidence to the throne of grace, but this is because the Christian has received revelation of the gospel.<sup>111</sup>

#### **Observation 9: CORRUPTION. [5:8-10].**

**8** If you see the oppression of the poor, and the violent perversion of justice and righteousness in a province, do not marvel at the matter; for high official watches over high official, and higher officials are over them. **9** Moreover the profit of the land is for all; *even* the king is served from the

---

109 Deism emphasised the transcendence of God. God was considered to be creator and sustainer but in a remote way. He was one who built the mechanism of the entire universe but who having made all things, simply wound it up to work on its own.

110 Ecclesiastes 5:7.

111 Hebrews 4:16.



field. **10** He who loves silver will not be satisfied with silver; nor he who loves abundance, with increase. This also *is* vanity.

The ninth observation concerns corruption. Solomon simply makes the observation that corruption and bribery are things that occur and his hearers must not “*marvel at the matter.*”<sup>112</sup> In fact Solomon observes that sometimes this corruption is violent and that it oppresses the vulnerable. Moreover it seems to reach all levels in society, so that all officials are tainted by this vice. Corruption has to do with bribes and the love of money. One official bribes another with silver for a favour. This bribery continues from one official to another and even the king seems to be involved. All seem to take their cut in the corruption that runs society.

**Observation 10: WEALTH & RICHES. [5:11-6:2].**

**11** When goods increase, they increase who eat them; so what profit have the owners except to see *them* with their eyes? **12** The sleep of a labouring man *is* sweet, whether he eats little or much; but the abundance of the rich will not permit him to sleep. **13** There is a severe evil *which* I have seen under the sun: riches kept for their owner to his hurt. **14** But those riches perish through misfortune; when he begets a son, *there is* nothing in his hand. **15** As he came from his mother’s womb, naked shall he return, to go as he came; and he shall take nothing from his labour which he may carry away in his hand. **16** And this also *is* a severe evil— just exactly as he came, so shall he go. and what profit has he who has laboured for the wind? **17** All his days he also eats in darkness, and *he has* much sorrow and sickness and anger. **18** Here is what I have seen: *it is* good and fitting *for one* to eat and drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labour in which he toils under the sun all the days of his life which God gives him; for *it is* his heritage. **19** As for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, and given him power to eat of it, to receive his heritage and rejoice in his labour—this *is* the gift of God. **20** For he will not dwell unduly on the days of his life, because God keeps *him* busy with the joy of his heart. **#6 1** There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, and *it is* common among men: **2** A man to whom God has given riches and wealth and honour, so that he lacks nothing for himself of all he desires; yet God does not give him power to eat of it, but a foreigner consumes it. This *is* vanity, and *it is* an evil affliction.

The last observation follows on from the observation concerning corruption, for it centres on wealth and riches. If your fortunes improve watch out! With an increase in wealth comes an increase in those who demand a slice of the action! Those who note the increase will increase too, and these will take advantage of your increasing wealth. Solomon contrasts this with the life of a normal working man who does his day's work and then retires to bed exhausted and eager to sleep. In contrast the rich cannot sleep because he is worried about who may grab his treasure, or who may be working corruption! Solomon continues the theme of wealth and riches by noting that some do not benefit from their wealth and it all goes to someone else. Others may enjoy it for a time. Still

---

112 Ecclesiastes 5:8.

others may not, but the important thing for Solomon is to stay practical. The end result for Solomon is the same again, “*vanity*.”<sup>113</sup>

---

113 Ecclesiastes 6:2.

## Chapter 6.

### Wisdom – a tentative approach.

*(E) The good and that which is better (6v3-7v12).*

|          |         |                                                                     |
|----------|---------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 6:3-7:18 |         | <b>The good and that which is better.</b>                           |
|          | 6:3-6   | <b>Life without goodness is no good.</b>                            |
|          | 6:7-9   | <b>No satisfaction – to desire is better than to gain.</b>          |
|          | 6:10-12 | <b>Who knows what is good?</b>                                      |
|          | 7:1     | <b>A good reputation is fine but death is better.</b>               |
|          | 7:2-4   | <b>Better to be in the house of mourning.</b>                       |
|          | 7:5-6   | <b>The rebuke of the wise is better than the song of fools.</b>     |
|          | 7:7-8a  | <b>In times of oppression the end is better than the beginning.</b> |
|          | 7:8b-9  | <b>Patience is better than pride.</b>                               |
|          | 7:10    | <b>Were the former times better?</b>                                |
|          | 7:11-12 | <b>Wisdom is best.</b>                                              |
|          | 7:13-18 | <b>Consider the work of God.</b>                                    |

Solomon has given his investigations the best shot he could muster. However, like many a modern research project, it has come up with nothing really concrete. All is not just tentative, but “*vanity*.” At this point in his deliberations he cannot help but make some conclusions of a practical nature. The key word in this group of thoughts is the word “*better*.” Whilst Solomon is unable to determine any absolute truths, some things are surely better than others. Again I have not included the text as a whole at the start but have supplied it within each section.

#### **Life without goodness is no good. [6:3-6].**

**3** If a man begets a hundred *children* and lives many years, so that the days of his years are many, but his soul is not satisfied with goodness, or indeed he has no burial, I say *that* a stillborn child *is* better than he— **4** for it comes in vanity and departs in darkness, and its name is covered with darkness. **5** Though it has not seen the sun or known *anything*, this has more rest than that man, **6** even if he lives a thousand years twice—but has not seen goodness. Do not all go to one place?

In this opening salvo Solomon considers life without any “*goodness*.” We must pause for a moment and think about what is meant by this term. The word “*good*” is used copiously in the opening chapter of Scripture – Genesis 1.<sup>114</sup> It describes the created order before any taint of sin. We

<sup>114</sup> Genesis 1:4,10,12,18,21,25,31.

need to emphasise here that we cannot allow neither death nor sin of any kind being part of the original creation. There are those who seek to compromise by amalgamating the modern science of evolution with Scripture. Whether they attempt a compromise to accommodate the long ages or the biological changes or whatever, they do the world no good at all. God created all things over a period of six days some six thousand years ago, and sometime after this Eve was deceived and Adam fell into sin. The world was cursed as a consequence and death came to all creatures because of our first parents' original transgression. So what then can Solomon mean here? What is truly good? I suggest that it is that for which man seeks. It is that which is substantial and beneficial. Here the emphasis is on that which fulfils in verse 3, and also that which gives rest in verse 5. Solomon suggests that having a long life, or having numerous children, are not good things in and of themselves. Much more is required for the good life. Such a life is worse than that of a still-born who has never seen the light of day nor experienced anything nor gained any knowledge. By such a stark contrast Solomon levels much of modern ambition. That which is good and which is substantial and fulfilling is what is necessary for a “good” life, but Solomon does not here elaborate on the content of a good life. It is simply that without it a man is no better off than a still-born.

**No satisfaction – to desire is better than to gain. [6:7-9].**

7 All the labour of man *is* for his mouth, and yet the soul is not satisfied. 8 For what more has the wise *man* than the fool? What does the poor man have, who knows *how* to walk before the living? 9 Better *is* the sight of the eyes than the wandering of desire. This also *is* vanity and grasping for the wind.

What a man works for ends up in his stomach. This is a fruit of the curse imposed on creation by the Lord for mankind's sin. However the work does not satisfy his mind and heart. Both the wise and the fool must work to supply their sustenance, so what advantage does the wise man have who has neglected his daily toil in order to gain wisdom? Solomon comes to the interim conclusion that it is better to desire things and have them as an ambition or goal, than that something be gained and then a new desire takes its place. Solomon has highlighted the problem of mankind's life on earth. Work is only (really) for food, but this does not satisfy the heart, and so desire for things seen but not attained is better than gaining and having new desires take their place. This is a graphic description of life “*under the sun*” and all Solomon can say is that the desire for something (the “*sight of the eyes*”) is better than having many desires. Who hasn't enjoyed the longing for some “thing” at one or another time in their life? Who equally hasn't become deflated when the desire becomes a reality? The pursuit of the thing was better than the realisation of it.

**Who knows what is good? [6:10-12].**

**10** Whatever one is, he has been named already, for it is known that he *is* man; and he cannot contend with Him who is mightier than he. **11** Since there are many things that increase vanity, how *is* man the better? **12** For who knows what *is* good for man in life, all the days of his vain life which he passes like a shadow? Who can tell a man what will happen after him under the sun?

This section begins with an assumed statement of fact. The opening sentence is meant to indicate a similar idea to the phrase “*there is nothing new under the sun.*” In this case the application is to man. When a new person comes into being, their name is given to them and their character and disposition is also gifted to them. Each person cannot argue with the one greater than them from whom they came. This may be a reference to parents, but could also be a reference to their true origins, i.e. God. Also in this section a vital question is asked: “*who knows what is good?*” How can we know if something is good? Here we are brought to consider the great limitations to man and his thinking. We shall have cause to revisit this theme later on. For now we note that not only is it impossible to really know what is good, it is equally impossible to know the future. You may respond by saying that you are certain of many things, such as where you were born, how old you are, who your parents are and so on. But a moment's reflection will show that actually *you* do not know these things. You accept that these things are so on the basis of testimony from others. How many mysteries and thrillers are based on deceiving a person into thinking they are something which they are not? What we “know” is not what we can know from within ourselves with no reference to any outside influence, but is dependent on some form of outside influence. Now of course, as Christians, we look at things from the perspective of knowing God. He has revealed things and His testimony is utterly trustworthy. But if we consider life from Solomon's perspective as viewed in the book of Ecclesiastes, we do not know anything. We have no anchor and no clear and unambiguous reference points.

**A good reputation is fine but death is better. [7:1].**

**#7 1** A good name *is* better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of one's birth;

In this single verse we have two comparisons. The first deals with what is “*better*” in life. The second deals with the two extremities of life. To have a good name is to have a good reputation. To be thought well of. This is considered to be better than having “*precious ointment*” or, literally, good oil. Oil was used for a variety of things. It made a person look good when mixed with other things. It was used as a food, as a fuel, as a lubricant, as a fragrance and for ritual purposes. In Biblical times oil was an essential commodity. However it was only something which adorned life's

path. If you had all the oil in the world but were thought little of, then that, so Solomon says, is a bad thing.

The second comparison concerns birth and death. Solomon considered that the day of death was better than the day of birth. This was because from birth onwards all was vanity and at least at death all the vanity under the sun was at an end.

**Better to be in the house of mourning. [7:2-4].**

**2** better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for that *is* the end of all men; and the living will take *it* to heart. **3** Sorrow *is* better than laughter, for by a sad countenance the heart is made better. **4** The heart of the wise *is* in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools *is* in the house of mirth.

The theme of death is continued by considering that mourning was better than feasting. Why feast? In the end all come to the same end. So to mourn was better because death is the only thing which was certain and sure. In such a place those left behind to mourn would at least think about their impending doom. Solomon continues by asserting that because of the vanity of the world, to sorrow is better than laughter. We exist in a vain and futile world where all is meaningless and transitory so why feast and laugh? To consider the end and death is at least better than ignoring it.

**The rebuke of the wise is better than the song of fools. [7:5,6].**

**5** *It is* better to hear the rebuke of the wise than for a man to hear the song of fools. **6** For like the crackling of thorns under a pot, so *is* the laughter of the fool. This also is vanity.

We remind ourselves that Solomon is considering what is “*better*” and not what is perfect. He has come to that point in his deliberations whereby he understands that the best he can do is to come up with some suggested practical wise courses of action. In verse 5 we find that Solomon has concluded that the rebuke of the wise is better than the song of fools. A fool's laughter is random, and consuming. There can be no value in the laughter of a fool. It is like the crackling of thorns under a pot which is being heated up. All it does is make a strange sound. The contribution of thorns to the fire is virtually nil.

**In times of oppression the end is better than the beginning. [7:7,8].**

**7** Surely oppression destroys a wise *man's* reason, and a bribe debases the heart. **8** The end of a thing *is* better than its beginning;

In these verses Solomon makes an assertion. Oppression and bribery colours a man's view point and changes his course of action. This is an observation. Solomon's advice in such a time when oppression and bribery are rife is that the end is better than the beginning. Why so? Well there is much vanity through the course of any action or path way, but when all is done it is better. This piece of advice is similar to Solomon's view that death is better than birth.

**Patience is better than pride. [7:8b,9].**

... the patient in spirit *is* better than the proud in spirit. **9** Do not hasten in your spirit to be angry, for anger rests in the bosom of fools.

Patience is a better virtue than pride which leads to anger. The angry man will live to regret many of his actions. Anger, the sense of being frustrated when things are wrong or not as you wish them to be, is the provenance and experience of the foolish. The patient man who knows that he knows little and therefore keeps calm is always going to get the better deal in life.

**Were the former times better? [7:10].**

**10** Do not say, "Why were the former days better than these?" For you do not inquire wisely concerning this.

Those who think that the former times were better have got things wrong. When you are young and things were they way you were used to, you probably did not see the error or sin in what was going on. All of life is vain whether young or old. Perception through time changes.

**Wisdom is best. [7:11-12].**

**11** Wisdom *is* good with an inheritance, and profitable to those who see the sun. **12** For wisdom *is* a defence *as* money *is* a defence, but the excellence of knowledge *is that* wisdom gives life to those who have it.

If you inherit money or goods then it is better to have wisdom so that you can benefit from the inheritance. However wisdom is better than having money because it gives "*life*" in the sense that it helps you understand or see things properly.

**Consider the work of God. [7:13-18].**

**13** Consider the work of God; for who can make straight what He has made crooked? **14** In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of adversity consider: surely God has appointed the one as well as the other, so that man can find out nothing *that will come* after him. **15** I have seen

everything in my days of vanity: there is a just *man* who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked *man* who prolongs *life* in his wickedness. **16** Do not be overly righteous, nor be overly wise: why should you destroy yourself? **17** Do not be overly wicked, nor be foolish: why should you die before your time? **18** *It is* good that you grasp this, and also not remove your hand from the other; for he who fears God will escape them all.

At the end of this section on a tentative wisdom, we have an appeal to consider “*the work of God.*” Again we are not thinking of God in His full revelation here. God is transcendent and does not seem to be intimately involved in life's everyday affairs. In this passage Solomon makes two statements about God. In the first, (verse 13), we discover that things as we see them “*under the sun*” are “*crooked,*” and these have come from God's doing (“*what He has made*”). Furthermore, none can undo this crookedness and make it “*straight.*” Solomon is simply noting that things as they appear, are all 'out of place' and not true, and no amount of effort can sort the mess out. As those who can see the whole sweep of God's revelation we know why things are all crooked but Solomon does not show this here. The second observation in connection with God is that times of “*prosperity*” and times of “*adversity*” are both “*appointed*” (literally “*made*”) by God. If good times do happen along then “*be joyful,*” that is what they are there for. But when the “*day of adversity*” comes along, then think carefully by looking in depth. The end result of the variable days of good and bad as made for us by the transcendent God lead to the thought that we are bound by the limitation of time. We just cannot discover what the future holds.

In the next four verses Solomon works out the implications of the two types of times God has made for us. We are reminded that what Solomon is declaring here is based on what he has “*seen,*” or, in other words, things based on his observations. His view point “*under the sun*” leads him to assert that his times have been “*days of vanity.*” So what does he tell us? Well he observed that one who was “*just*” died being lawful and upright, but another who was “*wicked*” had a long life in which he was free to continue his evil ways. We could multiply examples. The saying “only the good die young” illustrates this thought too. This situation is a puzzle. Why is it that those who seem to be good and lawful die, when they have done nothing in life which could lead them to death, but then others who live selfishly and greedily seem to be preserved from harm and disaster? Well Solomon notes this apparent situation and then gives his advice on the matter. If the good die young then we ought to avoid being “*overly righteous,*” or “*overly wise*”! But then he adds that we ought not to be “*overly wicked*” either so that the middle ground is Solomon's best advice for life “*under the sun.*” Such advice is clearly not Christian! We are taught in no uncertain terms elsewhere that God demands perfect righteousness. Anything less is unacceptable. This is why the sinless Saviour, Christ Jesus came to earth to live the life we could not live, and to die the death we



ought to face for our sinful ways. This is the gospel. Christ (the sinless One from heaven) is our substitute that we might be made righteous before God. But here in Ecclesiastes Solomon advocates a middle road of 'balance' between overly good and overly bad. Don't be so righteous you stick out like a sore thumb and get yourself killed! Don't be so wicked that you get on everyone's nerves and irritate them to hate you and seek your death!<sup>115</sup> If such advice were taken by the Son of Man we would have no salvation to speak of! He was so righteous and pure that the authorities hated Him and hounded Him to death! Solomon concludes, then, that since life has its good and bad days the best thing to do is to walk the safest middle-of-the-road path. At the end of verse 18 Solomon tells us that the one “*who fears God*” is the one who “*will escape them all.*” This appears to be a curious conclusion, but I think what is intended here is that such who fear God will do the best.

---

115     Adolf Hitler is a (possible) example of this latter case.

# Chapter 7.

## Revolution – all change.

*(F) Wisdom and a reassessment on methodology (7v19-9v10).*

|           |          |                                                          |
|-----------|----------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| 7:19-9:10 |          | <b>What is wisdom?</b>                                   |
|           | 7:19-24  | <b>Wisdom is elusive.</b>                                |
|           | 7:25-29  | <b>First recap on method and an interim conclusion.</b>  |
|           | 8:1      | <b>Who is wise?</b>                                      |
|           | 8:2-7    | <b>A wise man obeys the king.</b>                        |
|           | 8:8-10   | <b>No escape from death.</b>                             |
|           | 8:11-13  | <b>When wickedness is not judged.</b>                    |
|           | 8:14-15  | <b>When justice fails.</b>                               |
|           | 8:16-9:1 | <b>Second recap on method and an interim conclusion.</b> |
|           | 9:2-3a   | <b>Death is an evil under the sun.</b>                   |
|           | 9:3b-6   | <b>Men are wicked but living is better than dying.</b>   |
|           | 9:7-10   | <b>Concluding statements.</b>                            |

We have reached a part of Solomon's treatise which seems to focus on wisdom and a reassessment of the methods Solomon adopted. Again we supply the text within each section.

### **Wisdom is elusive. [7:19-24].**

**19** Wisdom strengthens the wise more than ten rulers of the city. **20** For *there is* not a just man on earth who does good and does not sin. **21** Also do not take to heart everything people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you. **22** For many times, also, your own heart has known that even you have cursed others. **23** All this I have proved by wisdom. I said, “I will be wise”; but it *was* far from me. **24** As for that which is far off and exceedingly deep, who can find it out?

There is almost a schizophrenic tone to these words. Solomon wants to accept that wisdom has good uses, (“*it strengthens the wise*”), but wisdom seems to elude his grasp (“*it was far from me*”). He begins in verse 19 by making an assertion concerning the effect of wisdom. It “*strengthens the wise*” and it is better at doing this than “*ten rulers of the city.*” The ten rulers may exercise authority over the city in an attempt to make it safe and secure, but all their effort will be nothing in comparison to the exercise of wisdom. It only takes a small (wise) voice to pipe up with a suggestion which if not followed may have lead to disaster.

In verse 20 it may appear that Solomon has changed the train of thought. However the statement he makes here is vital for what follows. There is no one who is sinless. This even applies to the “*just man*.” Such a thought is close to what we find in Romans chapter 3. However Solomon intends to illustrate the idea that we are all sinful by considering the subject of what we overhear and the presumptions we often make. Be careful of making rash conclusions concerning what you hear people saying, he informs us. People say things sometimes they do not really mean. They may be having an “off day” and venting forth. Wisdom “*under the sun*” is to step back from what is said and weigh it very carefully. This is good advice whether we are deists or theists, for we recognise that we too have had “off days” and have “*cursed others*” unfairly. When given time to reflect we may have a different view point entirely. These worldly wise things seem obvious to all, and Solomon feels that he has “*proved*” them all, but then he ends with a problem. At one time in his life he sought to “*be wise*” but such a state was impossible for him to achieve. We know that Solomon's wisdom was not something he generated from himself. It was a gift from God.<sup>116</sup> Now this fact is concealed here in Ecclesiastes. And Solomon wants his audience to realise that “*under the sun*” wisdom is “*far from*” a person. Such thoughts remind us of Job's final discourse in which he states unequivocally that wisdom is elusive and only (ultimately) to be found with God:

**12** “But where can wisdom be found? and where *is* the place of understanding? **13** Man does not know its value, nor is it found in the land of the living. **14** The deep says, ‘*it is* not in me’; and the sea says, ‘*it is* not with me.’ **15** It cannot be purchased for gold, nor can silver be weighed *for* its price. **16** It cannot be valued in the gold of Ophir, in precious onyx or sapphire. **17** Neither gold nor crystal can equal it, nor can it be exchanged for jewellery of fine gold. **18** No mention shall be made of coral or quartz, for the price of wisdom *is* above rubies. **19** The topaz of Ethiopia cannot equal it, nor can it be valued in pure gold. **20** “From where then does wisdom come? And where *is* the place of understanding? **21** It is hidden from the eyes of all living, and concealed from the birds of the air. **22** Destruction and Death say, ‘we have heard a report about it with our ears.’ **23** God understands its way, and He knows its place. **24** For He looks to the ends of the earth, *and* sees under the whole heavens, **25** To establish a weight for the wind, and apportion the waters by measure. **26** When He made a law for the rain, and a path for the thunderbolt, **27** Then He saw *wisdom* and declared it; He prepared it, indeed, He searched it out. **28** And to man He said, ‘behold, the fear of the Lord, that *is* wisdom, and to depart from evil *is* understanding’”<sup>117</sup>

Now wisdom is truly “*far off*” and elusive. Furthermore wisdom is so far off that it is “*exceedingly deep*.” Given that this is the case, “*who can find it out?*” This is the great question! Wisdom is not with man. It is not to be found anywhere on earth. It is so far away that it is not discoverable. It is so exceedingly deep that human minds and eyes cannot penetrate to it. We have no hope of gaining

---

116 1Kings 3:9,12.

117 Job 28:12-28.

wisdom unless someone come to us with it from heaven itself. Here then in a tantalising kind of way is the hope of the gospel. The question: “*who can find it out?*” points us to the hope that One may come and show us. But Solomon's aim is not that clear here. He is simply demonstrating that wisdom is truly elusive to mankind.

**First recap on method and an interim conclusion. [7:25-29].**

**25** I applied my heart to know, to search and seek out wisdom and the reason *of things*, to know the wickedness of folly, even of foolishness *and* madness. **26** And I find more bitter than death the woman whose heart *is* snares and nets, whose hands *are* fetters. He who pleases God shall escape from her, but the sinner shall be trapped by her. **27** Here is what I have found,” says the Preacher, “*adding* one thing to the other to find out the reason, **28** which my soul still seeks but I cannot find: one man among a thousand I have found, but a woman among all these I have not found. **29** Truly, this only I have found: that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.”

And so we reach a recap on method. All along Solomon has been grappling with giving practical advice for life “*under the sun*” knowing that wisdom is elusive and all of life is futile. In these verses the Preacher reassess his methods and how they are holding up to the strain imposed upon them.

In verse 25 Solomon informs us in detail concerning his motive and method. First we learn that he “*applied*” his heart or thinking. This was no mere haphazard search or seeking as you might engage in when seeking for a lost item and cannot remember where you last saw it. Solomon turns his heart this way and then that. He looks in one direction and then tries another, and another. He goes around all the options. That is what is implied in the phrase “*I applied my heart.*” To discover exactly what Solomon sought we will arrange the text of verse 25 to make this clear:

**25** I applied my heart  
to know,  
to  
search  
and seek out  
wisdom  
and the reason *of things*,  
to know  
the wickedness  
of folly,  
even of foolishness  
*and* madness.

Solomon wants to “*know*,” that is, to really experience for himself. He wants to “*search*,” which word indicates detailed exploration or an expedition. Finally he wants to “*seek out*” which phrase suggests to inquire diligently using the senses. In using these three different terms Solomon wants his audience to know that this is a serious investigation. We can imagine the detectives who painstakingly piece together all the clues and statements relating to a particular crime. Or we may imagine the modern scientist who spares no expense in seeking to understand his corner of the world. Solomon is no different. His quest is the one man has been making the world over for all time since the fall of man.

Solomon's area or particular field of interest is comprehensive. The modern scientist speaks of “*nature*,” by which he (or she) means everything that there is in the universe. Solomon's area of enquiry is no less wide, for it is defined in three ways too. He wants to fully grasp the nature of “*wisdom*.” Then further he wants to comprehend the “*reason of things*,” that is, why they are as they are. Then finally, he seeks to understand to the fullest extent the “*wickedness*” of all that is foolish, absurd or mad. In other words he wants to come to a true knowledge of what is right and wise, why things are as they are, and why their opposites are foolish madness. We see such desires in modern scientists too. They (currently) believe in evolution as the overarching paradigm for the universe and in believing this they seek to destroy all those who oppose it, including those who advocate creation. The mention of “*wisdom*,” “*folly*,” “*foolishness*,” and “*madness*” brings us back to Ecclesiastes 1:17:

And I set my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is grasping for the wind.<sup>118</sup>

Both that which is falsely boastful (i.e. vaunted), and that which is patently absurd are areas which Solomon seeks to grasp and comprehend.

Further explanation of his method is given in part of verse 27 and part of verse 28:

... *adding* one thing to the other to find out the reason, **28** which my soul still seeks ...

His method seems similar to the process of induction. By adding things bit by bit it is as though he is doing a jigsaw puzzle, the purpose of which is to see the final picture, or the “*reason*” which he is seeking.

---

118 Ecclesiastes 1:17.

In verse 26 to 28 Solomon gives us an interim conclusion, in which he uses a seductress or adulterous woman as an illustration. This woman is described as one “*whose heart is snares and nets, whose hands are fetters*” who can entice and ensnare the “*sinner*” but not the one “*who pleases God.*” Clearly such a description is employed to indicate a wayward woman who pulls men to their doom, not woman as a class. The book of Proverbs uses the same kind of illustration frequently and it is put as a representative example for the world in all its sin.<sup>119</sup> Here in Ecclesiastes we cannot help but think also of the numerous wives and concubines Solomon had. Maybe this statement is a recognition of his own folly? Well such a woman who traps a man to do what she wants becomes to that man something “*more bitter than death.*” Given that Solomon considers death to be a horrible evil this is some statement! The man trapped by such a seductress is alive but dead. Leupold suggests that the use of this illustration both here and in Proverbs is meant to point us to heathen philosophy.<sup>120</sup> In Proverbs wisdom is portrayed as a virtuous woman and contrasted with folly who is the adulteress.<sup>121</sup> However it seems better to take the adulterous woman as representing all folly and madness, whether it be heathen philosophy or any false ideas.

Solomon concludes this piece with a remarkably schizophrenic conclusion. There may be one man among a thousand who has succeeded and become wise, but not one woman amongst that number. Is Solomon showing signs of misogyny? I think not! We live in days of feminism where women have railed against patriarchal society and demanded equal rights, status and so on. Any comment made with regard to the differences between men and women is looked upon with the deepest of suspicions. Let me make it quite clear that I believe wholeheartedly that when God made mankind, He made them equal in substance. Men and women are both made in the image of God. However God did not make men and women equal in form. The roles assigned to men and women are different and each acts as compliment to the other. We must draw our anthropology (our understanding of mankind) from our knowledge of God as trinity, because man was made in God's image. When we gaze upon the wonders of Father, Son and Holy Spirit in perfect communion but differing with regard to role and how things are done, we learn that mankind (male and female) reflects such beauty with their co-equality as to nature but their diversity with regard to function. Solomon's statement is an observation of what is true in his reality “*under the sun.*” Does this mean women are less faithful? Of course not. But if we examine the sweep of history (in whatever culture and time you care to view) you will see that men outnumber women for worldly wisdom greatly.

---

119 Proverbs 7:5f.

120 **H. C. Leupold.** Exposition of Ecclesiastes. 1969. Evangelical Press, London. P173,174.

121 Proverbs 9:1-18.

I charge Solomon with a kind of schizophrenia because he claims that some have attained wisdom but then he snatches this thought away by declaring that wisdom is completely unattainable. He states in verse 28 that he is still on the quest for wisdom and the reason for things but then he adds “*but I cannot find*” it! Then to top it all he makes a conclusion which is the “*only*” thing he has “*found*,” or, in other words, that of which he is certain, namely, that whilst God made mankind perfect and true, man has “*sought out many schemes*.” This oscillation between certainty (“*I have found*”) with uncertainty (“*I cannot find*”), is a characteristic of all human intellectual pursuits, and especially of modern science. The contrast between this oscillatory and wavering knowledge, with the certainty derived from knowing God through new birth and the indwelling Spirit must not be missed. The Christian has certain definite knowledge precisely because God Himself has come down and demonstrated the truth. Solomon here is providing the opposing side which repeatedly demonstrates its limping failure and schizoid declarations.

Verse 29 is worth looking at a little more closely. It is a conclusion borne out not just from Solomon's experience, but seems to be one mankind is repeatedly making:

Truly, this only I have found: that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.<sup>122</sup>

The uprightness of God's work and action is always to be contrasted with the attempts of man to secure salvation, an answer to life, or a device for purpose. The first part is a statement about God's creation of mankind. He has made man “*upright*,” that is straight and true. We can see this from Genesis, but Solomon is making an observation of the world as it is. When a child is born they have not yet done anything which can be termed false or wayward, from the point of view of looking at things “*under the sun*.” The baby has made its entrance into the world with no record of wrong doing. However this soon changes! Of course from other Scriptures we know that all are born in sin and that the sin of Adam is imputed to all born from Adam.<sup>123</sup> However Solomon is writing from the perspective of what is observed without reference to God's presence.

The second part of Ecclesiastes 7:29 has been translated variously by different versions:

- they have sought out many schemes. [NKJV, NIV].
- they have sought out many inventions. [AKJV].
- they have sought out many devices. [NASB, YLT].

---

122 Ecclesiastes 7:29.

123 Psalm 51:5; Romans 5:12.

The word rendered “*schemes*,” “*inventions*,” or “*devices*,” comes from a Hebrew root which means, “to think, plan, calculate, invent.” The word has been translated as “*engines*,” as in “engines of war” for besieging a city.<sup>124</sup> Thus the idea is any designed, planned and built contrivance, invention, machine or scheme. All of which encompasses that which man is engaged in, whether modern science, ministry of defence procurement, schemes for government and so on.

**Who is wise? [8:1].**

**#8 1** Who *is* like a wise *man*? And who knows the interpretation of a thing? A man’s wisdom makes his face shine, and the sternness of his face is changed.

Solomon's question is left unanswered, but the criteria for finding the answer are given. One who is truly wise and “*like a wise man*” will know the interpretation of things and will have a countenance that radiates glory and not anger or consternation. There is none who answers this amongst those who are “*under the sun*,” but there is One who meets these conditions perfectly, namely, the Lord Jesus Christ. He was the Teacher who astonished the people with His wisdom:

**28** And so it was, when Jesus had ended these sayings, that the people were astonished at His teaching, **29** for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.<sup>125</sup>

The officers answered, “no man ever spoke like this Man!”<sup>126</sup>

He also was the One whose countenance was radiant and glorious:

Who being the brightness of *His* glory and the express image of His person ...<sup>127</sup>

For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to *give* the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.<sup>128</sup>

But Solomon poses the question and leaves it unanswered. Whom is like the wise?

**A wise man obeys the king. [8:2-7].**

**2** I *say*, “keep the king’s commandment for the sake of your oath to God. **3** Do not be hasty to go from his presence. Do not take your stand for an evil thing, for he does whatever pleases him.” **4** Where the word of a king *is*, *there is* power; and who may say to him, “what are you doing?” **5** He

---

124 2Chronicles 26:15. AKJV.

125 Matthew 7:28,29.

126 John 7:46.

127 Hebrews 1:3.

128 2Corinthians 4:6.



who keeps his command will experience nothing harmful; and a wise man's heart discerns both time and judgement, **6** Because for every matter there is a time and judgement, though the misery of man increases greatly. **7** For he does not know what will happen; so who can tell him when it will occur?

In this section we are given advice about how to live with rulers – in this instance with a sovereign king. Solomon recognises that there is a relationship between the king, the transcendent God and its citizens. It is very interesting to note here that the rise of deism in the UK began in seventeenth century England during the times of great turmoil where the role of the monarch, the position of the church, and the duty of the citizen were all changing rapidly. Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) in his work *Leviathan* published in 1651 advocated a new way of government based not on Scripture but on natural law. The Church of England oscillated between its roots in Rome and the more biblical leaning Puritanism, and these changes enabled the rise of independent churches, (baptist, congregational). There were also changes on the relationship between the king and the rule of law as the century advanced so that in the next century the office of prime minister became much more important.<sup>129</sup> During all of these tumultuous times there was a de facto recognition that God was sovereign over all, but this was far removed from ideal. The church did not advocate deism certainly but a move towards the distant God who was responsible simply for starting things off and letting them run their course, (like the winding up of a clock), was in the ascendancy.<sup>130</sup>

Thus God may be mentioned but only in a distant sense. Because the people at Solomon's time were under God, they were to obey their earthly ruler because God had appointed him. The advice Solomon gives is to be respectful and cautious, not hasty and petulant. The king, after all, may do as he “*pleases*.” Therefore do not counter him nor take a stand in haste. When we consider Rehoboam, Solomon's son, we see a king who was swayed by youth and not one to listen to his elders.<sup>131</sup> It is tempting to imagine that Solomon was worrying for the future of the kingship in writing these words.

Solomon then describes the power of the king and states that in obeying him you “*will experience nothing harmful*.” The advice is practical, steer clear of harm and difficulty. The wise man will have an understanding of how the king is working and ruling. He will know when to speak and challenge, (“*discerns ... time*”), and when to be silent and simply do as requested, (“*discerns judgement*”). In verse 6 Solomon recalls the ideas portrayed at the beginning of chapter 3

---

129 The history of the office is not easy to trace according to the government website: <https://history.blog.gov.uk/2012/01/01/the-institution-of-prime-minister/> but the first recognised prime minister was Sir Robert Walpole who served from 1721 to 1742.

130 Isaac Newton did much to fuel the development of deism.

131 1Kings 12:8f.

concerning time. For everything, whether it be a matter of state or an event, *“there is a time and judgement.”* Each event, each matter will have its time and its duration. And each matter or event will be judged. We can see this naturally. We look back at the past year and make a judgement. Because things went well for us and we had happy times we say “that was a good year”! However Solomon adds a note of pessimism which is in keeping with his overall theme that everything is short-lived and insubstantial (*“vanity”*). Thus he adds: *“though the misery of man increases greatly.”* This theme is also to be found in the New Testament in the writings of the apostle Paul. For example writing to Timothy he declares:

1 But know this, that in the last days\* perilous times will come... 13 But evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived.<sup>132</sup>

In opposition to the tune that ushered in the Labour Government of 1997 under Tony Blair, things are on a downward spiral, for they can only get worse.<sup>133</sup> We see this too in the days before the universal flood in Noah's days. Then things got so bad that God warned the people that He would not strive with them forever, and then told them that the world would be destroyed for their wickedness.<sup>134</sup> Why then does the misery of man increase? Solomon is simply an observer. This is a truism but he has no answer for why. The Christian can see why. In Paul's statements mentioned above the apostle also outlines the reasons for the general decline and what Christians should do about it. In short the decline comes because of sin and rebellion against God which works itself out in selfishness, and the solution is to *“continue in the things which you have learned”* despite the reality of persecution, and, in particular, to keep reading and studying the Scriptures which are given by God, the only source of truth and light in a wicked world.<sup>135</sup>

The advice about following the rulers (king) concludes with a statement highlighting one of humanity's serious limitations. This qualifies behaviour. The fact of the matter is that everyone, which includes the king, is clueless about *“what will happen.”*<sup>136</sup> None know the future, and so therefore, none can advise or counsel the king about when things may *“occur.”*<sup>137</sup> Now such statements as given in verse 7 reflect the deist view of God. God is in heaven and we are on earth so we need to get about our business and let Him get on with His. We do not know the future because we are time-bound. Of course the Christian is at an immense advantage because he (or she) knows

---

132 2Timothy 3:1,13. \*The period from Christ's first coming to His second.

133 The tune was “Things can only get better” by the pop group: D:Ream.

134 The events are recounted in Genesis 6.

135 2Timothy 3:12,14,16.

136 Ecclesiastes 8:7.

137 Ecclesiastes 8:7.

that God has revealed certain things. Solomon does not display here the faith of a Daniel who, when confronted with an impossible situation where the king wanted his advisers to tell his dream and its interpretation, called out to God for an answer, which he received in the mercy and grace of God.<sup>138</sup> Solomon presents the deist view, “*under the sun.*” We do not know in and of ourselves what will come or when it will come. This is completely true. However when modern science declares this and seeks to plot the future from its theories, it fails to recognise the supreme blessing we have in special revelation, the word of God. In this God has shown us the entire sweep of history from beginning to end, and we are blessed to be included in that alpha and omega, the beginning and the end, who is also the fulcrum of history, namely Christ Jesus the Lord.

### **No escape from death. [8:8-10].**

**8** No one has power over the spirit to retain the spirit, and no one has power in the day of death. *There is* no release from that war, and wickedness will not deliver those who are given to it. **9** All this I have seen, and applied my heart to every work that is done under the sun: *there is* a time in which one man rules over another to his own hurt. **10** Then I saw the wicked buried, who had come and gone from the place of holiness, and they were forgotten in the city where they had so done. This also *is* vanity.

Next, Solomon turns to the vexed issue of death. This subject permeates the book of Ecclesiastes which is not surprising since it presents the view of life “*under the sun.*”<sup>139</sup> Solomon declares that there is not a single man who has “*power over the spirit*” to restrain its departure on the day of death. Once again we see our limitations as humans. Once again we note that we are presented with a clear assessment of our abilities. These cut across the optimism often placed in human endeavour. For example, although much science fiction writing focuses on human problems and difficulties, it also displays great optimism too, for much of it operates on the premise that humans will crack the death problem and extend human longevity. However, in the real world since we cannot override the process of death what can we do?

It is also understandable that because death is a great problem, man has sought to place it within a more comfortable setting. And so we find that the modern doctrine of evolution has accommodated death into its myth of creation. For evolution death is simply a process which enables the next generation to advance in place of their forbears. However such myth making is folly in the extreme. Solomon describes the process of death as a “*war*,” which can hardly be seen as a something good or beneficial! Nothing can stop the march of death, not even subterfuge, and certainly not “*wickedness.*” No amount of money, no form of blackmail, no elevated position, and

138 See Daniel chapter 2.

139 Ecclesiastes 2:16; 3:2,3,19-21; 5:15,16; 6:3-6; 7:1-4,15,17,26; 8:8,13; 9:3-6,10; 12:7.

no high-born privilege will ever enable one to escape the coming of war in the heart leading to the spirit's final and eternal exile. Solomon had viewed all that was done on earth and thought about it as best and as deeply as he could. But you do not need to be the wisest man who lived to come to such a fact! However, if the wisest man on earth sought high and low, near and far to find a solution to the problem of death, how can I (or you) come up with a solution? There isn't one! This is the truth as far as "*under the sun*" is concerned.

From the second half of verse 9 through to the end of verse 10 the subject changes slightly to consider the death of a wicked king. This wicked king ruled over others creating "*hurt*." Whom is the one hurt? It would appear from the ambiguous nature of this phrase that both the one ruled and the one ruling comes to such harm. Imagine a king who enacts wicked laws and rules with harshness and rigour. Those under his rule suffer hurt. But what does the king himself get in return? Loyalty, honour, respect? If he is so wicked and harsh those around him may fear and may be moved to get rid of him. Now this wicked king who had once moved in and out from the place of prestige and separation, ("*place of holiness*"), from the common rabble is buried. All at once the wicked king is dead and his wickedness could not stop that event, but afterwards was he celebrated? No he was "*forgotten*"! There is, for him, no longevity of honour or celebration after death. Even those we do celebrate eventually are forgotten. In these words we can see that death really does leave everything sour and bitter. All the attempts by man to placate it or mollify it or ignore it come to nothing. We will all face that time and nothing we can do will stop it nor will alleviate its horror.

And yet the Christian gospel dispels the horror! In Christ the victory over death is assured, and:

Precious in the sight of the Lord *Is* the death of His saints.<sup>140</sup>

**When wickedness is not judged. [8:11-13].**

**11** Because the sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil. **12** Though a sinner does evil a hundred *times*, and his *days* are prolonged, yet I surely know that it will be well with those who fear God, who fear before Him. **13** But it will not be well with the wicked; nor will he prolong *his* days, *which are* as a shadow, because he does not fear before God.

Next we learn of the problem of rampant sin unchecked. When a bottle of milk is spilt onto a carpet the resulting mess is difficult to clear up. If not properly cleaned with detergents, the patch may seem to be clear but it will stink for days! Now when an "*evil work*" is not dealt with properly

---

<sup>140</sup> Psalm 116:15; 1Corinthians 15:55,56.

and speedily the outcome is that those who do such works feel free to continue to do so. If you will not be caught and punished, such 'liberty' is taken as license to continue in such sins. I think, for example, of the law against drug use, or the attitude to speeding in the UK. In some areas there is a leniency towards drug use despite the fact that possession is illegal.<sup>141</sup> Here though the idea is that things will go from bad to worse, for "*the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil.*"<sup>142</sup> We are back to Paul's statement that evil men will progress from one evil to another getting worse and worse. These are Solomon's observations about human nature. Men are, generally speaking, evil, and unless there is some restraint or law they will promote evil of a very wicked kind.

Solomon next observes that even if a "*sinner*" is allowed to do much evil "*a hundred times,*" and gets away with it with a long life of freedom, this will not last. It will only be "*well*" (or good) for those who respect and fear God, but good will not be the lot of the "*wicked.*" For these, their days will not be prolonged but will be "*a shadow*" because they do not fear God. Thus once again we see Solomon pointing towards the real final conclusion from his enquiry into all things "*under the sun,*" namely, that the only course of action is to fear God.

### **When justice fails. [8:14,15].**

**14** There is a vanity which occurs on earth, that there are just *men* to whom it happens according to the work of the wicked; again, there are wicked *men* to whom it happens according to the work of the righteous. I said that this also *is* vanity. **15** So I commended enjoyment, because a man has nothing better under the sun than to eat, drink, and be merry; for this will remain with him in his labour *all* the days of his life which God gives him under the sun.

One of the great problems people the world over observe is the lack of true justice. There are innocent who suffer and are dealt with as guilty and there are wicked heinous men who seem to live a carefree life of riches and splendour. The stock response by many is to blame God. why is this happening? If there is a "God up there in heaven" why is He allowing this injustice to have free reign? Of course such responses fail to lay the blame where it is actually due. Why does the innocent suffer and not get justice? Well it will be because some magistrate or officer of the law cannot be bothered to hold the guilty to account, or maybe they have been bribed in some way. Why does the wicked man rule the roost and live with impunity? Again it may be because the rulers are on his payroll or it suits the government to allow such a big operation to do what it wants. Justice and injustice is in the power of men. Why, then, blame God? God will one day deal with these issues but there is a greater injustice we ought to face. That is, the injustice our behaviour does

---

<sup>141</sup> Whether drug use should be illegal or not is not the issue here. My point is that when punishments are not applied, the law becomes redundant and meaningless.

<sup>142</sup> Ecclesiastes 8:11.

towards God. These thoughts are not there in Ecclesiastes, of course, but they do surface as we follow Solomon's observations.

In verse 15 Solomon gives us his advice born from his great wisdom. In the light of rampant injustice in a topsy turvy world the best thing to do is have fun! Solomon commends "*enjoyment*," which he then defines as eating, drinking and being merry. The emphasis here is very clear as the next phrase shows, for he gives us his reasoning. By enjoying life such fun will "*remain with him*" during the long days of "*labour*" that God has given him "*under the sun*." Thus the focus for Solomon is this "*life*" on earth which will end finally with the war of death.

To conclude we ought to note that the Lord Jesus alluded to these words of Ecclesiastes 8:15 when He was questioned on issues to do with possessions and covetousness. In answer to the challenges brought to Him, Jesus tells the parable of the wealthy man whose life was focused on possessions and this life.

**13** Then one from the crowd said to Him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." **14** But He said to him, "Man, who made Me a judge or an arbitrator over you?" **15** And He said to them, "Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses." **16** Then He spoke a parable to them, saying: "The ground of a certain rich man yielded plentifully. **17** And he thought within himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no room to store my crops?' **18** So he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build greater, and there I will store all my crops and my goods. **19** And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; **eat, drink, and be merry.**"' **20** But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?' **21** "So *is* he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God." **22** Then He said to His disciples, "Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; nor about the body, what you will put on. **23** Life is more than food, and the body *is more* than clothing. **24** Consider the ravens, for they neither sow nor reap, which have neither storehouse nor barn; and God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds? **25** And which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature? **26** If you then are not able to do *the* least, why are you anxious for the rest? **27** Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. **28** If then God so clothes the grass, which today is in the field and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more *will He clothe* you, O *you* of little faith? **29** "And do not seek what you should eat or what you should drink, nor have an anxious mind. **30** For all these things the nations of the world seek after, and your Father knows that you need these things. **31** But seek the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added to you."<sup>143</sup>

Christ demonstrates clearly that He has not come to make temporal judgements. Eating and drinking are essential things but when they become the focus of life then something has gone

---

143 Luke 12:13-31.

horribly wrong. We see this in Christ's depiction of the time before the flood. In Genesis 6 we read that the times were grossly wicked and violent, but when Christ describes them He simply says:

For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark.<sup>144</sup>

The point is that mankind before the flood only thought about this life. As a consequence, and because of inherent sin, the result was violence and all forms of wickedness. Solomon writing about life from the perspective of "*under the sun*" suggests using his (worldly) wisdom that the best thing to do is have a party. Well, of course, if there is no supernatural, if there is no "after-life," and if death is the end of all for an individual then such advice seems obvious. If all we have is our present life then why not enjoy it to the full? The sad thing is that such "enjoyment" is often not really enjoyment at all, and truth to be told, you can only really enjoy life when in full communion with God. He makes the things we are given in this world more joyous than ever.

**Second recap on method and an interim conclusion. [8:16-9:1].**

**16** When I applied my heart to know wisdom and to see the business that is done on earth, even though one sees no sleep day or night, **17** then I saw all the work of God, that a man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. For though a man labours to discover *it*, yet he will not find *it*; moreover, though a wise *man* attempts to know *it*, he will not be able to find *it*. **#9 1** For **I considered** all this in my heart, so that I could declare it all: that the righteous and the wise and their works *are* in the hand of God. People know neither love nor hatred *by* anything *they see* before them.

At this point Solomon comes to a second review of his method. He used all his mental faculties ("*I applied my heart*") and tried to encompass all observations ("*I saw all the work*"). As we have mentioned before, this is nothing other than the so-called scientific method. In reality it is simply humanity's capacity for gathering information and trying to make sense of it all. The scientific method, therefore, is not something special that modern science has come up with. It is simply the means by which people perceive and make sense of the world. As the physicist P. W. Bridgman makes clear:

The so-called scientific method is merely a special case of the method of intelligence ....<sup>145</sup>

Bridgman then suggests that what makes modern science a distinct subject, is its view of the subject

---

144 Matthew 24:38.

145 **P. W. Bridgman**, *Reflections of a Physicist*. 1950. Philosophical Library Inc. P370.

matter it investigates, namely “nature.” Here we discover that far from being objective, modern science has decided the issue concerning its area of enquiry. It is not God's creation but the *natural* world they study.

Now Solomon has come to a further conclusion, and it is devastating for man “*under the sun*,” and hence for modern science and all human pursuits of intelligent enquiry. First we note that the task is really too “*burdensome*,” to employ a word that Solomon uses in his opening salvo.<sup>146</sup> For even if such a quest were to engage a person day and night continuously, then still “*a man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun*.”<sup>147</sup> The task is impossible. Not content with stating this conclusion once, Solomon repeats it in more definitive terms twice more. Here are the three statements which conclude the impossibility of what we may call “discovery.”

- Even though one sees no sleep day or night, ...a man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun.
- For though a man labours to discover *it*, yet he will not find *it*.
- Moreover, though a wise *man* attempts to know *it*, he will not be able to find *it*.

The essence of these statements bear repeating. Man “*cannot find out the work*,” “*he will not find it*, and, “*he will not be able to find it*.” The impossibility of discovery is true even if man gives himself to the task continuously day and night, or if he expends all his labour in the task, or if he be the wisest of all. Now such a conclusion is really borne out by modern science itself and by all human pursuits engaged in seeking truth. I remember my PhD supervisor saying to me that he knew the tip of the tip of the iceberg about the field of research we were engaged in. Yet apart from him there were but a handful of scientists engaged in the same field. I discovered in my brief life as a research scientist that scientific enquiry never results in “the answer” to the question posed. What happens in reality is that a partial or half-answer is produced (one that would satisfy those who award grants) and then several more questions come along as well. Such divergence comes about because the things being enquired into (God's creation) are so vast and expansive none could comprehend them all. The other thing to bear in mind is that we are part of the thing we are enquiring into. In other words we can never be objective. Our 'explanations' amount simply to descriptions or analogies to things in the world.

---

146 Ecclesiastes 1:13.

147 Ecclesiastes 8:16,17.



But such a conclusion is roundly rejected by the optimism of man. Some may respond to these words by saying that I am mad! Look around and see the great benefits modern science has accrued. We can cure diseases, we have built sophisticated machines, we have stepped on the moon, we have made life healthier and given longer life spans to people, and we have done all of this through modern science. But these achievements are not the point. Man has always achieved certain things. The Egyptians built the pyramids, the Babylonians gave us names for the days of the week and were great astronomers and so on. But has anyone come up with a definitive answer to what life is all about and how we may live properly? No! Even if we take the achievements of modern science at face value we see that in reality they are vacuous. As an example consider the theory of matter. I used to teach this to my students as a secondary school science teacher. The idea of the “atom,” an uncuttable thing, was initiated by the Greeks through a 'thought experiment' and then brought into vogue by John Dalton in the early nineteenth century.<sup>148</sup> The thought experiment took the following form. Imagine an object which you could cut into two. Then imagine you cut one of the halves into a further two pieces. Then imagine you cut up one of the new two pieces into two again. How far could you keep going until you could not cut up one of the pieces you had? It was assumed that there ought to be a limit, and that was reached when the object could no longer be cut. The resulting pieces were called the 'uncuttable' or “atom” from the Greek word meaning “uncuttable.” Now John Dalton revived the idea to help in his chemistry research in the early 1800s. However by the end of the nineteenth century J. J. Thomson had split the atom and shown that it had internal structure. In the early part of the twentieth century Lord Rutherford and his students experimented on various metals and concluded that the atom was mostly empty space with a central positive nucleus and negative electrons orbiting around this. The uncuttable had become cut! But this was not the end of the story. Three sub-atomic particles were known of by 1932.<sup>149</sup> The model of the atom went through several changes through the research of various scientists and then it was found that the three particles were part of a much larger “zoo” of subatomic entities. In the 1960s and later these great varieties of particles were organised into groups, and the protons and neutrons of all atoms were systematised into what we know as “quarks.” Thus protons and neutrons which form the nuclei of atoms were themselves made up of even smaller particles known by this term “quark.” A proton is made from 2 up quarks and 1 down quark, whilst a neutron is made from 2 down quarks and 1 up quark. The story does not end here, though, because it is thought that there may be yet smaller objects. Some speculate about what are known as “strings” which are far smaller than quarks, but this is merely theoretical. The difficulty modern scientists have is that we do not

148 Leucippus and his student Democritus spoke of atoms in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC.

149 The electron, the proton and the neutron. James Chadwick identified the neutron in 1932.

have sufficient energy to delve deeper into matter, and we also have no reliable probes to make sense of what we find. In other words we are too big to look on such small items, and our viewing of them is limited by the methods we can sense the world. I have told this story to illustrate the fact that we do not have a definitive answer to the question: what is matter? We have a partial and developing answer which throws up numerous other questions. Along the way we have been able to make use of our models and findings to make various gadgets. These are useful to us but they do not have the status of being fully satisfying. After all, my smart phone is great to make calls, see my family, listen to music, purchase something online, or play a few games, but it does not satisfy my inner longing for meaning and purpose. From our brief review of the development of atomic theory we cannot conclude that what modern scientists do is to discover what is in the world. I say this because the definition of an “atom” has changed radically through the last two centuries. All of the various models proposed have their uses and values for technology (some more than others), but none of them is “the answer.”

Solomon concludes by assuring us that he “*considered all*” things deeply in his thinking, in order that he could make it known to all people (“*so that I could declare it*”). The book of Ecclesiastes is that work which he has declared. It is, in effect, his published thesis. Then Solomon gives us a particular aspect of his work that he wants to declare here. Those known as “*righteous,*” and “*wise,*” are all “*in the hand of God.*” The last sentence in the NKJV is, perhaps, not that clear (“*People know neither love nor hatred by anything they see before them*”). It has been translated in different ways:

- No man knoweth either love or hatred *by all that is* before them. AKJV.
- Neither love nor hatred doth man know, the whole [is] before them. YLT
- Whether it is love or hate, man does not know; both are before him. ESV
- But no one knows whether love or hate awaits them. NIV
- Man does not know whether *it will be* love or hatred; anything awaits him. NASB.

Again, the sense is that man is limited. He does not know what will befall him, for he is in God's hands. Again we need to grasp here that God is the transcendent, distant God and we do not know what He is up to. All we know is what we see and observe here before us in our reality “*under the sun.*”

**Death is an evil under the sun. [9:2,3a].**

2 All things *come* alike to all: one event *happens* to the righteous and the wicked; to the good, the clean, and the unclean; to him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice. as is the good, so *is* the sinner; he who takes an oath as *he* who fears an oath. 3 This *is* an evil in all that is done under the sun: that one thing *happens* to all.

Solomon again returns to the subject of death. Earlier in chapter 8:8 death is described as a “war” which we cannot avoid. Here again the thought is of an inevitable end which none can escape. The last part of verse 3 has been put with the next section but in some ways it also belongs here because it is in that sentence that we actually read of death only hinted at in verse 2 and the start of verse 3, (“*and after that they go to the dead.*”).<sup>150</sup>

Solomon expounds the phrase “all,” by listing some opposites. He uses the language of Zion which splits people into those who offer sacrifices and are clean and therefore righteous, from those who do not offer sacrifices and thus are unclean or wicked. It does not matter whether you are a sinner or a saint, wicked or righteous, clean or unclean, the same “event” happens to all. All will die. This one event that comes to all irrespective of status, Solomon describes as “*an evil ... under the sun.*” All people know this truth even though they may shudder and suppress it. People the world over have tried to explain it away or ignore it or make it more seemly. But when all is said and done, death is an “evil.”

**Men are wicked but living is better than dying. [9:3b-6].**

... Truly the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil; madness *is* in their hearts while they live, and after that *they go* to the dead. 4 But for him who is joined to all the living there is hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion. 5 For the living know that they will die; but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten. 6 Also their love, their hatred, and their envy have now perished; nevermore will they have a share in anything done under the sun.

Solomon continues on the general theme of death being an evil under the sun. He begins in this section with a statement which is fully endorsed throughout Scripture. Mankind is wicked through and through. Solomon declares here that the innermost beings of men “*are full of evil,*” and then parallels this with the thought that men's hearts contain “*madness*” all the time they are living. Is this an observation or an assessment borne from conviction of God? That the rest of the Scriptures teach the same as we noted is clear from the following examples:

---

150 Ecclesiastes 9:3.

Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man *was* great in the earth, and *that* every intent of the thoughts of his heart *was* only evil continually.<sup>151</sup>

The heart *is* deceitful above all *things*, and desperately wicked; who can know it? <sup>152</sup>

**21** For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders. **22** thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. **23** All these evil things come from within and defile a man.<sup>153</sup>

In the context of Ecclesiastes we cannot pass over Solomon's stated methodology. He tells us repeatedly that he observed a great deal "*under the sun*," and that he applied his heart to contemplate and grasp its significance. It would seem that the statements made here must be viewed as his observation and conviction based on what he observed. After all, wickedness does not hide itself. Sin always becomes obvious. The first example teaches us this because we are told that the "*Lord saw*" that the world was wicked. We may not be able to see into the heart, but as the Lord Jesus tells us that the wickedness in the heart has a habit of making itself known, for all the things inside "*proceed*" to defile us.

Thus by observation we see that all of mankind is evil and mad! Solomon's next comment is a bare fact: "*and after that they go to the dead.*" So let us review this. What are the options? We are either alive, in which case we are evil and mad, fully so, or we "*go to the dead*," and cease life. Not much to write home about is it? In his musings Solomon then decides that it is better to be alive after all, even though he has described life only in terms of evil and madness. If you are "*joined to all the living*" there is still "*hope*." But what form does this hope take? What is it like in fact? We shall find that it is a very thin hope, not the hope of the Christian as expressed elsewhere in Scripture.

First Solomon gives us a contrast. He declares that "*a living dog is better than a dead lion.*" His choice of animal is not arbitrary. Dogs in ancient times were repugnant and to be avoided at all costs. Dogs were given the refuse, or unholy meat, fit only for being thrown out.<sup>154</sup> The term "*dog*" was used to signify a male prostitute or perverse man.<sup>155</sup> To call someone a "*dog*" was thus a term of abuse or abasement.<sup>156</sup> Dogs were creatures that did "*gross*" things.<sup>157</sup> They were the lowest of the

---

151 Genesis 6:5.

152 Jeremiah 17:9.

153 Mark 7:21-23.

154 Exodus 22:31; Matthew 15:26.

155 Deuteronomy 23:18.

156 1Samuel 17:43; 24:14; 2Samuel 3:8.

157 2Kings 8:13; Proverbs 26:11.

low.<sup>158</sup> In contrast the lion was a stately and majestic animal and often stood for royalty.<sup>159</sup> Lions, of course, were powerful and to be feared.<sup>160</sup> Yet one who is worthless and of no value, like a dog, is better off in Solomon's estimation than the king or a powerful person who is dead. But why? The answer comes with the full force of pessimism that Solomon can muster! The living are better off than the dead because they at least will “*know that they will die*”! How's that for an advantage or benefit! It reminds me of the single example of a beneficial mutation used in GCSE biology specifications, namely sickle cell anaemia. The poor folk who have sickle cell anaemia do not live much beyond mid 40s but they will never suffer from malaria due to a single change in one gene responsible for haemoglobin formation. The sad thing is their red blood cells being sickle shaped mean they suffer all sorts of pain and difficulty though lack of oxygen reaching cells. To say that not suffering from malaria is a benefit is not much to offer someone who has sickle cell anaemia.

In contrast to the living (dogs) that know they will one day die, the dead (lions) “*know nothing*.” Remember that we are looking at things from the perspective of “*under the sun*,” so the dead are not alive in this world and have no more experience of it. Thus, consequently, they do not get any earthly benefits (“*they have no more reward*”) and they are soon forgotten. Memory is a wasting, fading thing, especially when it is something collectively experienced. It will not be long before all those who experienced the second world war will be gone, and those who still live will just have the anecdotes and records. Everything the dead experienced in life, whether it was of “*love*,” or of “*hatred*,” or of “*envy*” has disappeared so that they will “*nevermore ... have a share in anything done under the sun*.” Death is that final when viewed “*under the sun*.” You die and then there is nothing, nada, zip, zilch. Because the focus of Ecclesiastes is “*under the sun*” the doctrine of the resurrection is, therefore, veiled. Solomon does not want to confuse his audience. Were resurrection and heaven to be present within the book it may have given false hope to those bent on living life in the flesh. Since the doctrine of the resurrection is absent here, Solomon can give full vent to stating the drastic and dire implications of believing only in things “*under the sun*.” The only hope offered, then, is that the living at least can be certain that they will die, whilst the dead are gone, forgotten and know nothing. This is not hope at all, but it is the outcome of accepting that there is only this world of tears.

---

158 Job 30:1. See also: Philippians 3:2; Revelation 22:15.

159 See, for example: Genesis 49:6; Revelation 5:5.

160 See, for example: Numbers 23:24; 24:9.

**Concluding statements. [9:7-10].**

7 Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has already accepted your works. 8 Let your garments always be white, and let your head lack no oil. 9 Live joyfully with the wife whom you love all the days of your vain life which He has given you under the sun, all your days of vanity; for that *is* your portion in life, and in the labour which you perform under the sun. 10 Whatever your hand finds to do, do *it* with your might; for *there is* no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going.

The statements Solomon has made thus far are depressing, so what is his antidote or remedy? Well it is, in effect, a repeat of what we read earlier in Ecclesiastes 8:15: “*eat, drink, and be merry.*” This time, however, Solomon has given us reasons. He suggests that we should fill our bellies to get merry because “*God has already accepted your works.*” This reason is a curious one. The ESV and the NASB suggest that “*God has already approved*” their work or efforts. The YLT suggests that God is “*pleased*” with their work or efforts. So what is Solomon intending here? Is God satisfied with the wickedness and madness of man as described earlier? Does God take pleasure in the death of the wicked? To pose such questions is to answer them. God is not approving or pleased with the works of sinful man in any way at all. Rather what Solomon is saying is that from the perspective of “*under the sun*” God is allowing all to continue. Solomon seems to have in view the person who goes about life in a normal manner, making a living, having a family and so on. We might suggest that this is a secular view (or perhaps better, an earth-bound view) of God's long suffering, patient nature.<sup>161</sup>

In verse 8 we are given a picture of the luxurious life. If you wore white garments then you never got your hands dirty. To have a head that was drenched in oil signifies being pampered and well catered for. Verse 9 extends the thought. The advice is to live in joy and happiness with the love of your life. And yet such a picture of paradise as Solomon paints here is marred by the addenda. He ends the advice of verse 9 with a slight sting in the tail for life is still “*vain.*” In fact after the carte blanche to enjoy life which starts in verse 7, the statement made in verse 9 ends on such a negative note (“*all the days of your vain life which He has given you under the sun, all your days of vanity*”) that it is almost as if he gives hope with one hand, only to dash it with a dose of reality “*under the sun.*” It is a bit like the character in the film *The Matrix* who wants to go back into the machine and live the life provided for him by the overlords even though to do so is enslaving and unreal.

Verse 9 ends with another reason. We learned in verse 7 that the transcendent God has allowed things to be (hence has “approved” of them in a permissive way), but now we discover that

---

161 2Peter 3:9.

the situation is almost *a fait accompli*, so that nothing but acceptance is our lot, because it is just “*our portion in life*,” or what has been dealt to us.<sup>162</sup> The job and lot of mankind “*under the sun*” is simply to accept what has been dealt, to enjoy what you can, and then to die and lose everything. Such a view point is portrayed by the next verse where Solomon tells us to engage wholeheartedly in “*whatever your hand finds to do*.” It doesn't really matter what the thing your hand finds to do happens to be, for there is no real purpose since “*all is vanity*,” and “*there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave*” where we all end up. In other words expend your effort fully in this life because when you die all your effort ceases. At the same time enjoy life to the full because death ends all.

Such a pessimistic attitude is portrayed as one of a realistic optimism. Death is the one “*war*” we cannot evade nor win, and death ends all. So you might as well enjoy what you have and do the best you can.

---

162 The Alfred Lord Tennyson poem The Charge of the Light Brigade expresses a similar sentiment. The second verse of the poem shows this attitude of simply doing what has been dished out. It records these words in reference to the ones ordered to charge: “*theirs not reason why, theirs but to do and die*.”

## *Chapter 8.*

### *Wisdom – limited for practical use.*

*(G) Worldly wisdom (9:11-10:20).*

|            |          |                                               |
|------------|----------|-----------------------------------------------|
| 9:11-10:20 |          | <b>Worldly wisdom.</b>                        |
|            | 9:11-12  | <b>Wisdom on time.</b>                        |
|            | 9:13-18  | <b>Wisdom is the best.</b>                    |
|            | 10:1-3   | <b>Wisdom concerning fools.</b>               |
|            | 10:4-7   | <b>Wisdom concerning rulers.</b>              |
|            | 10:8-10  | <b>Wisdom concerning action.</b>              |
|            | 10:11-14 | <b>Wisdom concerning the mouth.</b>           |
|            | 10:15-20 | <b>Wisdom concerning work &amp; business.</b> |

Although Solomon does not stick to a definitive plan in this work, the section we are about to consider seems to offer practical worldly advice given the reality we have just discussed about death. A new direction in Solomon's thought seems to be suggested by the opening words of Ecclesiastes 9:11 *"I returned and saw."*

#### *Wisdom on time. [9:11,12].*

**11** I returned and saw under the sun that— the race *is* not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to men of understanding, nor favour to men of skill; but time and chance happen to them all. **12** For man also does not know his time: like fish taken in a cruel net, like birds caught in a snare, so the sons of men *are* snared in an evil time, when it falls suddenly upon them.

Solomon engages the reader in his practical (worldly) wisdom borne out of what he observed and thought deeply about. He begins with a piece on time. In verse 12 the premise he makes is that mankind is unaware of *"his time."* That is, mankind does not appreciate the era he lives in, nor the length of time he may have.

He opens with five illustrations which have unexpected outcomes. The first picture is *"the race."* We might expect the *"swift"* to be victor but that is not so. One whom we did not expect comes in first. Second we are brought into a *"battle"* scene and learn that the conqueror there is not the *"strong."* Third we find that being *"wise"* in life and business does not yield the expected



*“bread.”* Fourth, having a good entrepreneurial mind, (i.e. *“understanding”*), does not lead to *“riches.”* Fifth having *“skill,”* as a carpenter or craftsman, for example, does not lead to being in *“favour.”* These are observations made of real life *“under the sun.”* Where you might expect a swift, strong, wise, understanding person of skill to succeed as a matter of course, it does not happen. What then does? Well according to how Solomon sees things (*“under the sun”*) we discover that *“time and chance happen to them all.”* The word *“chance”* simply means an unconnected event or an accidental occurrence. There appears to be no causality nor reason behind the event. Such a statement could have come direct from a modern biology textbook discussing evolution! This is the mechanism that natural selection is supposed to use to make the variety we see amongst living things on earth. Time and Chance.

Thinking about all of these things from the perspective of *“under the sun”* we can observe no reason or purpose behind the way things happen. Time progresses, and the events that make up these times seem all disconnected and unrelated. Solomon then gives us a couple of similes. First mankind is likened to a *“fish taken in a cruel net.”* Second he is likened to *“birds caught in a snare.”* Both similes speak of traps which are cruel or harmful. The fish is taken out of water, and the bird is grounded from its natural environment in the air. It is tempting to see yet another pointer to death. However Solomon goes on to suggest that as a bird in a snare, and as a fish in a net, men are *“snared in an evil time.”* In other words, the times of evil happen to men unbeknown to them. These times come upon them all of a sudden. Thus *“time and chance happen to”* all because all of a sudden men are trapped in *“the evil time.”*

In all of these statements and assertions there is no mention of guilt or sin. The affairs of man seem to be random and unconnected and it all seems so unjust and unfair. Solomon wants his audience to accept that this is the way things are *“under the sun.”* Random evil events come suddenly and happen to one and all. You may have expected to get ahead by skill or virtue of strength but do not hold your breath because that isn't what happens in the real world.

### **Wisdom is the best. [9:13-18].**

**13** This wisdom I have also seen under the sun, and it *seemed* great to me: **14** *there was* a little city with few men in it; and a great king came against it, besieged it, and built great snares around it. **15** Now there was found in it a poor wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city. Yet no one remembered that same poor man. **16** Then I said: *“wisdom is better than strength. Nevertheless the poor man’s wisdom is despised, and his words are not heard.* **17** Words of the wise, *spoken* quietly, *should be* heard rather than the shout of a ruler of fools. **18** Wisdom *is* better than weapons of war; but one sinner destroys much good.”

Now, in the context of such random and chance events, Solomon reports on a wisdom that he has seen in connection with rule. He describes a situation in which a small city is about to be overrun by a besieging army governed by a “*great king*.” Whilst the siege was underway a “*poor wise man*” gets noticed and does something to bring about the city's salvation. We are not told what this “*poor wise man*” did at all. Somehow by his words or a scheme the city is delivered by an unknown, poor, but wise man. When the dust settled and everyone continued on their normal course of life this poor man was totally forgotten. What a tragedy, as far as this world's ways are considered. By all accounts the poor man should have received some recognition or reward but instead he was passed by.

Such a story, (which here is a report of a real situation because Solomon saw this), is one we could recount from all sorts of places the world over. How many junior staff members have suggested ideas which have been usurped by senior staff who then get promotion for the idea they stole? How many student researchers do all the donkey work whilst their professor gains all the accolades simply for reporting what his students had done?<sup>163</sup> Maybe you too have made some important contribution that has never been rewarded? However none come anywhere near close to the poor man born in a stable in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago. In many ways Christ, who is The Wisdom of God, has been utterly rejected and certainly doesn't receive the accolade He deserves amongst men.<sup>164</sup> To our shame this is even true in the church.

From verse 16 Solomon offers his concluding wisdom on the situation of the poor but wise man. He states that “*wisdom is better than strength*.” This is simply a shorthand way of describing what happened. The poor but wise man had no strength, no power, no position and no possessions to speak of. Yet he succeeded in preventing disaster. The “*great king*” on the other hand, had all the power, all the needed equipment and all the position and yet with all of that he fails to take the city. Now this conclusion may be a general one deduced from this particular example, but is it universally true? How often does wisdom deliver from difficulty? Not every time. Now given the truth of his generalisation that wisdom scores above strength, he laments the fact that ultimately the wisdom of this poor man is treated as worthless and his words are now ignored. Solomon declares that the “*words of the wise*” uttered in a peaceful or quiet manner ought to be heeded instead of the loud voice of “*a ruler of fools*.” One offers a steady sane view borne from careful thought, the other shouts loudest to rally fools to do his bidding. It is often said that “he who shouts

---

163 Lord Rutherford is remembered as the man who discovered the proton and made a useful model of the atom but all the work was done by his students Kurt Geiger and Ernest Marsden.

164 1Corinthians 1:30.

loudest gets heard,” and sadly this is true. Think of the clamouring voices that badger our media and parliament. How foolish is mankind!

Solomon ends this piece in verse 18 with another conclusion: “*wisdom is better than weapons of war.*” Weapons simply destroy, so wisdom (the right course of action) is always better. However wisdom requires consent for it only takes “*one sinner*” to ruin everything. Although Solomon is not pointing us to Adam, it is true of his one act of disobedience. Through Adam's sin the curse has come and all now dwell under the dominion of sin. And it is also true of all individual sins done by sinners. One simple act of disobedience causes much harm as does the single act of spilling milk on a carpet.

### **Wisdom concerning fools. [10:1-3].**

**#10 1** Dead flies putrefy the perfumer's ointment, and cause it to give off a foul odour; *so does* a little folly to one respected for wisdom *and* honour. **2** A wise man's heart *is* at his right hand, but a fool's heart at his left. **3** Even when a fool walks along the way, he lacks wisdom, and he shows everyone *that he is* a fool.

The opening statement follows on from the last thought in Ecclesiastes 9:18 that “*one sinner destroys much good.*” In the same way a dead fly that has settled on a “*perfumer's ointment*” cause the ruination of it. This is clearly because the putrefaction of the decaying insect body can spread easily throughout the ointment. This illustration is used to show that “*folly*” has the same effect as the dead flies. Whilst wisdom may be ignored and passed over by people living “*under the sun,*” (as in the case noted above), folly spreads easily permeating everything. Here Solomon has in view a person who is “*respected*” as being wise and having “*honour.*” If these display “*a little folly*” then the result is disastrous. What good and repute they may have once had is now ignored. The folly shows forth a putrefaction and foul odour that is hard to escape.

Verse 2 contrasts the disposition or position symbolically of the heart of the wise and the heart of a fool. The right hand signifies glory and power.<sup>165</sup> It is where pleasures can be found from God.<sup>166</sup> It is from where God brings deliverance and salvation.<sup>167</sup> It signifies a place of strength. Thus the left hand is a place where the opposites are found. In other words the wise man's heart is in such a place so as to focus on that which is good, (strength, pleasure, honour etc.). The heart of the fool is at his left indicating weakness, evil and dishonour. What the wise thinks and considers is diametrically opposed to the thoughts of the fool. This is evident in the life of the fool, for as he

---

165 Exodus 15:6; 1Kings 2:19; Psalm 89:13; 110:1; 118:16.

166 Psalm 16:11.

167 Psalm 17:7; 18:35; 20:6;

progresses in life (“*walks along the way*”) he does so without a thought to wise action, and so falls and stumbles and displays to all that “*he is a fool.*”

**Wisdom concerning rulers. [10:4-7].**

**4** If the spirit of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your post; for conciliation pacifies great offences. **5** There is an evil I have seen under the sun, as an error proceeding from the ruler: **6** Folly is set in great dignity, while the rich sit in a lowly place. **7** I have seen servants on horses, while princes walk on the ground like servants.

In this next brief discussion of wisdom Solomon focuses on rulers. He begins by issuing advice. If the ruler takes offence against you, the best thing to do is to remain in post and be conciliatory. The idea is that refreshing calmness acts as a pacifier. You may have occasioned great offence but through calmness and resilience you will ride out the storm. The opposite, either running away or fighting your ground, will certainly land you in more trouble.

However apart from this piece of advice to keep one's cool, Solomon reports two observations on rulers. First there is an evil he has observed whereby rulers put fools in places of honour. Interestingly Solomon contrasts the fools being given high honour with the “*rich*” being left in the lowest places. Why the rich? Well perhaps the idea is that with wealth comes ability and power. Folly cannot do anything worthwhile, whilst the rich may distribute wealth or they may provide employment (at least). This is madness. Maybe the ruler has done this to protect his position but whatever the case it is sheer folly that Solomon has witnessed. The second bad thing Solomon observes is that servants ride the horses whilst the princes must walk! In our days of equality and anti-establishment and anti-class we look at these words and say: so what? But the point is that a servant has a role and a task with a set level of honour. The prince equally has his role and his set position in the scheme of things. To ignore this is to react against what is real and normal. When things are knocked out of what is expected it becomes an obvious crack in the veneer of life. It should not be like this! Why destroy the order? Of course we may like to challenge this particular order but that isn't Solomon's point. What is folly is simply overturning order or making things topsy-turvy. In other words it is the folly of anarchy.

**Wisdom concerning action. [10:8-10].**

**8** He who digs a pit will fall into it, and whoever breaks through a wall will be bitten by a serpent. **9** He who quarries stones may be hurt by them, *and* he who splits wood may be endangered by it. **10** If the axe is dull, and one does not sharpen the edge, then he must use more strength; but wisdom brings success.

In these verses we see Solomon questioning actions that may be taken. He lists four actions that may have dire consequences, which we paraphrase below:

- If you dig a hole be careful you do not fall in.
- If you make a hole in a wall watch out for lurking serpents.
- When you cut stones from a rock-face watch out for flying debris and other harm.
- When you cut wood watch for flying pieces and splinters.

In some senses this is Solomon with his “health & safety” hat on! Essentially Solomon is pointing out that whenever we do anything there are consequences to be borne in mind. It is straight forward with simple actions as he describes here, but what of our moral choices?

The act of digging a pit is usually to set a trap. Maybe for catching animals for food, or maybe for ruining your rivals. In which case watch out that the trap you set isn't triggered for your own fall. How many times have we seen someone out-witted by their own devious ways? The classic example in Scripture is Haman who was executed on the gallows he had built for his rival.<sup>168</sup>

The purpose of breaking “*through a wall*” is to get to the other side, or possibly to effect an escape from restraint. Perhaps you are curious to see what is behind the wall. Well watch out because it may be there for your protection against snakes and serpents! Or maybe you hate being restricted and want to break free. Again watch out for things from which you have been spared.

To build a house you need stone and wood. To get the stone you need to cut it from a rock-face, but this requires care. To get wood you need to cut this into shape from trees, which again needs thought. Thus in building anything from raw materials we need to remember that there are unintended consequences which could rear their ugly heads!

In verse 10 Solomon continues the thought of splitting wood just referred to but applies it directly to wisdom. If the axe-head is blunt then you must wield it with more effort. Far better to expend some effort in making the blade sharp. This is efficiency, making sure you do not waste energy or power. In other words “*wisdom brings success.*”

### **Wisdom concerning the mouth. [10:11-14].**

**11** A serpent may bite when *it is* not charmed; the babbler is no different. **12** The words of a wise man’s mouth *are* gracious, but the lips of a fool shall swallow him up; **13** The words of his mouth begin with foolishness, and the end of his talk *is* raving madness. **14** A fool also multiplies words. No man knows what is to be; who can tell him what will be after him?

---

<sup>168</sup> Esther 7:10.

Having looked at actions, Solomon next turns to the mouth. Charmers were a special group of people among the false enchanters and sorcerers of Egypt.<sup>169</sup> They had some form of hypnotic power, using whispering and incantation, to make certain snake rise and fall at their will. But if their skill was poor or their concentration lacked then the snake could strike and bite in a moment. The translation in the NKJV is at variance with most translations.

If the serpent bites before being charmed, there is no profit for the charmer. NASB

If the serpent biteth without enchantment, then there is no advantage to a master of the tongue. YLT

If the serpent bites before it is charmed, there is no advantage to the charmer. ESV.

If a snake bites before it is charmed, the charmer receives no fee. NIV.

Surely the serpent will bite without enchantment; and a babbler is no better. AKJV.

Literally the Hebrew is:

If the serpent is not charmed it will bite, and the master of the tongue will get no profit.

The NKJV rendering simply updates the AKJV. The word that the AKJV renders as “*better*” and the NKJV supplies as “*different*” is the word used elsewhere in Ecclesiastes for “*profit*.”<sup>170</sup> The charmer with his incantations and whispering must goad the serpent into doing what he wants. Such a charmer is then referred to as “*the master of the tongue*” and I think this is supposed to be ironic. Charmers do not speak clearly but whisper and chant. This is why, I think the AKJV translators opted for the term “*babbler*,” which was perhaps influenced by the use of the Hebrew word, *ba'al*, which signifies idolatrous worship (the Baals).

Perhaps the main point in verse 11 is that it takes great skill and care to tame a snake and if you do not do it right, then the outcome is far worse than having done nothing at all. The serpent is a figure of speech used to illustrate false teachers (like the Pharisees), the devil, or any deadly subtle enemy.<sup>171</sup> You cannot really tame any of these. They must be resisted.<sup>172</sup> Consequently the teaching seems to be that engaging in enchantment or charming is a folly not to be engaged in even if you are a master of the tongue.

---

169 Isaiah 19:3. See also Psalm 58:3,4.

170 Ecclesiastes 1:3; 2:11; 3:9; 5:9,16; 10:10.

171 Genesis 3:1f; Matthew 23:33; Luke 10:19; Revelation 12:9; 20:2.

172 Hebrews 12:4; James 4:7; 1Peter 5:9.

In verse 12 Solomon starts with a contrast between the wise and the fool in terms of their speech, and then in verses 13 and 14 he concentrates further on the fool and his utterances. When a wise man speaks he brings grace or favour. There is a peace and a settled nature that comes from a wise man. The advice given is thought out and understandable. However the fool so speaks that he contradicts and confuses and in the process he “*swallows*” himself up so that none will receive what he says. The common modern expression “to eat one's words” is often used when someone has said something foolish or untrue. Here, though, the folly is so bad that the fool must consume himself not just his words. In other words the words leads to his destruction.

In the next verse (verse 13) we see that a fool is truly foolish, because he starts of with “*foolishness*” but then progresses from bad to worse ending up “*raving madness.*” There is no redeeming feature in a fool at all. Now such a progression is one we can clearly see in the progress of modern science. Having begun with the foolish notion that everything has evolved out of nothing, and man has simply come about through a gradual process of natural selection from a primordial soup, we are now in days where people can determine their own identities having rejected their God-given status and constitution. For a woman to declare that she is actually a man, or for a man to say that he is in reality non-binomial it or they seems nonsense of the highest order but such have been the claims made in recent years. Folly leads to madness. In the realm of ideas you can see such a development too. The enlightenment era began with denials of miracle and revelation in the like of Hume and Kant but then progressed to the existentialism of the twentieth century in the writings of Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. In the art world there has been an equally disturbing trajectory into the absurd. One final feature of the fool is that he is certainly not succinct! He gushes forth words with abandon.

This section ends in the second part of verse 14 with what appears to be a separate line of thinking. However it really follows on from the opening statement. We began with thoughts of charmers and enchantments. These folk were false prophets and diviners seeking to predict the future. They are connected inseparably with those who practice witchcraft, diviners, soothsayers, or those who interpret omens and so on.<sup>173</sup> The section ends with a statement which Solomon offers as advice with respect to the wisdom “*under the sun.*” It is a truth we need to accept as time-bound, earth-bound creatures. That is, none can tell the future! None can say what will happen tomorrow or even in an hour's time. Now of course, as Christians, we have the word of God which speaks of the future, and we have the Spirit of God who leads us into all truth. But these things are hidden or obscured in the book of Ecclesiastes. The prohibition of false prophecy, divination, enchantment

---

<sup>173</sup> Deuteronomy 18:10-12.

and so on which the Lord issued as a command in Deuteronomy 18 is followed by the promise of God that He would raise up a Prophet who would be The Prophet (i.e. the Messiah):

The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, from your brethren. Him you shall hear.<sup>174</sup>

But none of this is evident within Ecclesiastes in any direct sense. What Solomon does do, however, is to show up the folly and absurdity of what man does in place of accepting God's revelation. Man seeks to know by divination and enchantment. What folly! These attempts, even if they are by so-called “masters of the tongue” end up as being destructive, swallowing up the ones who utter such nonsense, they progress from simply being bad to sheer madness, and they go on and on and on and on .... But still no one knows what will be! The prognostications of modern science, which hails evolution and billions of years, come neatly within the scope of these words. How much nonsense is written about what will happen in the future as modern scientists project and extrapolate their understanding of evolution into the future!

**Wisdom concerning work & business. [10:15-20].**

**15** The labour of fools wearies them, for they do not even know how to go to the city! **16** Woe to you, O land, when your king *is* a child, and your princes feast in the morning! **17** Blessed *are* you, O land, when your king *is* the son of nobles, and your princes feast at the proper time— for strength and not for drunkenness! **18** Because of laziness the building decays, and through idleness of hands the house leaks. **19** A feast is made for laughter, and wine makes merry; but money answers everything. **20** Do not curse the king, even in your thought; do not curse the rich, even in your bedroom; for a bird of the air may carry your voice, and a bird in flight may tell the matter.

Ecclesiastes chapter 10 ends with some words concerning work and business. The thing about a fool is that his folly prevents him from doing even the most basic of things. Labour or work of any kind is a burden to them more so because they lack basic common sense, To not even know how to go to the city indicates a complete lack of awareness.

In verses 16 and 17 we get another comparison. This time the picture is of a land ruled by a child instead of one trained and reared for kingship. Children do not act responsibly. If they are left to themselves they will “*feast in the morning*” when they should be working. There is a “*proper time*” to feast and a proper reason to do so. The enjoyment of food is a part of its purpose but not the sole aim. We feast to build strength and bodily fitness and we ought not to engage in excess. This situation arises because of folly and a rejection of wisdom.

---

<sup>174</sup> Deuteronomy 18:15.



Then next in verse 18 we are brought to consider the issue of laziness in light of the fact that by “nature” everything decays. Solomon has observed that the world is tumbling and melting into disaster. To mitigate this “natural” state of decay a person has to work hard, but “*laziness*” and “*idleness*” are the province of fools. Verse 19 offers a contrast. Feasting and wine is for laughter and happiness – that is its aim for life “*under the sun*,” although it very often fails to deliver. There is nothing like having a party but if the essence of such a celebration is only for the feasting and drinking it will be empty and vacuous. Then Solomon contrasts feasting with money. As Christians we recoil from the assertion that “*money answers everything*” because we recognise that the earth is the Lord's and He has taught us to seek first His kingdom and not to be concerned with money.<sup>175</sup> But again we need to remember that Solomon is presenting the situation “*under the sun*.” In such circumstances money really does sort things out! This is the way the world works. If you want to do anything, go anywhere, or achieve anything you need capital. But, Christ went against this attitude in His very approach to life. He came in poverty, and declared that whilst “*foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests*,” the Lord Himself (“*the Son of Man*,”) had “*nowhere to lay His head*.”<sup>176</sup> When challenged to pay the temple tax He did not reach into His pocket, but performed a miracle to pay it.<sup>177</sup> In His death He was buried in a borrowed tomb.<sup>178</sup> The Lord of the whole universe, the Possessor of all things in heaven and earth never had two pennies to rub together!<sup>179</sup> But then in this world and in its system money is the means by which all things are (generally) done. As Christians we have the Lord who makes things possible for us. He gives us our jobs or opportunities and provides for every need. Praise His glorious name!

The section ends with advice on not cursing (verse 20). Inner thoughts and those thoughts expressed seemingly in quiet or secret places have the habit of taking flight. Solomon advises against cursing either the king or the rich because these are ones who rule and have money! The birds pictured here are put for gossips or spies. Those who wanted to gain advantage and favour of the king or the rich would not be beyond passing on what they may have heard. So we are advised to watch our thoughts, words and what we may wish upon those who rule and have power. Of course from a Christian point of view, we know that there is no greater Ruler or possessor of all things save God Himself. He does not need a bird to fly the news of our thoughts and pet hates. He knows instantly! But “*under the sun*” the wisest course of action is to keep quiet!

---

175 Psalm 24:1f; Matthew 6:33; 1Timothy 6:10; 2Timothy 3:2.

176 Matthew 8:20. See also Luke 9:58.

177 Matthew 17:24-27.

178 Matthew 27:57f.

179 Genesis 14:19.

## Chapter 9.

### Epistemology.

(H) *What do we really know? (11:1-8).*

|        |        |                         |
|--------|--------|-------------------------|
| 11:1-8 |        | What do we really know? |
|        | 11:1-6 | Limits to knowledge.    |
|        | 11:7-8 | Light and darkness.     |

In chapter 11 of Ecclesiastes we move into a consideration of the subject of epistemology, or how we know things. Specifically Solomon is concerned to tell us the limits to what we know. He has already noted two things man “*does not know*” in earlier sections. Man is ignorant about the future and cannot say what will come to pass.<sup>180</sup> More importantly man does not know “*his time*,” that is, its context in the whole of time.<sup>181</sup> In other words, we never really grasp history and its significance properly.

Donald Rumsfeld, the US Secretary of State for Defence once responded to a question on lack of evidence for weapons of mass destruction by carving up knowledge into three distinct groups, the known knowns, the known unknowns, and the unknown unknowns:

Reports that say that something hasn't happened are always interesting to me, because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns—the ones we don't know we don't know. And if one looks throughout the history of our country and other free countries, it is the latter category that tend to be the difficult ones.<sup>182</sup>

Epistemology focuses on what we know and how we know what we know. Rumsfeld pinpointed the fact that whilst we may know some things (and that is debatable), what is really interesting is the things we do not know and the things we do not know that we don't know. Such thoughts lead towards a state of humility if not despair.

---

180 Ecclesiastes 8:7.

181 Ecclesiastes 9:12.

182 Donald Rumsfeld, United States Secretary of Defence. Answer to a question about the lack of evidence linking the Iraqi government with the supply of weapons of mass destruction in a News Briefing.. February 12<sup>th</sup> 2002.  
<http://archive.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=2636>

**Limits to knowledge. [11:1-6].**

**#11 1** Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days. **2** Give a serving to seven, and also to eight, for you do not know what evil will be on the earth. **3** If the clouds are full of rain, they empty *themselves* upon the earth; and if a tree falls to the south or the north, in the place where the tree falls, there it shall lie. **4** He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards the clouds will not reap. **5** As you do not know what *is* the way of the wind, *or* how the bones *grow* in the womb of her who is with child, so you do not know the works of God who makes everything. **6** In the morning sow your seed, and in the evening do not withhold your hand; for you do not know which will prosper, either this or that, or whether both alike *will be* good.

We come across the phrase “*you do not know*” four times in this passage of Ecclesiastes, so the main point is to realise that “*under the sun*” our knowledge is very limited. The passage begins with the idea of sending off goods to many different places, and ends with the image of sowing or scattering seed at different times. These illustrations point to a well known fact that we must not “put all our eggs in one basket.” We should sow liberally and invest across the board. If our investment was restricted to one company who knows whether that would succeed or fail? But if we invested across the board we hope that our gains outweigh the loses.

The first limitation in knowledge is that “*we do not know what evil will be on the earth.*”<sup>183</sup> Solomon has in view the occurrence of disasters. Sudden storms on the seas, or pestilences or wars that reek havoc. Because we do not know what disasters may occur it is wise to send out goods you may be trading with (“*cast your bread upon the waters*”), onto many different boats traversing different routes. If one of them comes to fail through storm or piracy, the others may get through and you won't end up losing everything (“*for you will find it after many days*”). The figure then changes from trade of goods to providing food and sustenance. You do not know who may be in need as you prepare your daily meals. I well remember those times when our five children were all in their teens. My wife and I were never quite sure whether our evening meal would be just the two of us or somewhere around a dozen and more as the kids brought back their friends for tea! We always made sure we had plenty of stand by stuff for such occasions! And so it is always better to have several portions available.

In verse 3 Solomon makes some obvious statements. Clouds that are full of rain will empty themselves onto the earth and when something falls over it will land in the direction it falls. Why mention such obvious things? Well it would seem that the thought of a lack of knowledge is uppermost in Solomon's thinking. We do not know when the clouds may deliver their rain and we do not know which way the object (the tree) falls.

---

183 Ecclesiastes 11:2.

Two more observations are given in verse 4. One who simply watches the wind and never does anything for fear of the wind, or fear that a wind may come, is a fool. He will not sow because it is windy and will blow the seed away, or because it looks like it is going to blow strongly and may blow the seed away. Similarly the person who keeps observing the dark clouds and stays at home thinking it may rain will never go and reap the harvest.

Then in verse 5 Solomon drives the point home. We do not know “*the way of the wind*”! It is simply foolish to let worry over what the wind may or may not do constrain us to do nothing. Then Solomon brings in another thing that is **unknown**, how the child develops in the womb. Now we may challenge this verse with our superior knowledge today. Haven't embryologists shown how the foetus develops? Well they may have uncovered some things but truly no one knows how the baby forms and develops in its entirety. Then Solomon caps this theme of our limited knowledge by extending its compass and remit by saying that we “*do not know the works of God*” who is the Creator and maker of all. When we consider creation in all its vast expanse (the stars, galaxies and clusters) down to its minute detail (microbes, molecules and atoms), and then in all its diversity (tortoise, elephant, butterfly) we cannot hope to come to an appreciation of it all.

Since we are unknowing of many things we must be liberal with our sowing. Go out and sow both morning and evening. Whatever you do, do it repeatedly and in various ways, because you cannot be sure which may succeed. If both attempts succeed then you will reap a double reward, but if you do only one and that fails you will have nothing. Thus “*under the sun*” man does not know much. In light of this he must be liberal in work and effort. Try this way and that “*for you do not know which will prosper.*” This is what life is like without reference to God and His revelation. Man does not have any true knowledge. With God, however, whilst you may not know if one sowing will succeed or not, you do “*know whom [you] have believed and [are] persuaded that He is able to keep what [you] have committed to Him until that Day.*”<sup>184</sup> We know also that God is love and that nothing can separate those who love Him from such love.<sup>185</sup>

### **Light and darkness. [11:7,8].**

**7** Truly the light is sweet, and *it is* pleasant for the eyes to behold the sun; **8** but if a man lives many years *and* rejoices in them all, yet let him remember the days of darkness, for they will be many. All that is coming *is* vanity.

It is interesting that Solomon uses this image of light in opposition to darkness at this point. He has outlined where man “*under the sun*” lacks in terms of knowledge, and now he speaks of

---

184 2Timothy 1:12.

185 Romans 8:38,39; 1John 4:8.

light from the sun and the darkness of difficult days. Light was the first thing created after initial creation.<sup>186</sup> It speaks of illumination, understanding, being able to see. Thus “*truly the light is sweet.*” Not only is it good to see the sun in all its radiance, but it is far better to see the Son of God in all His beauty. This thought springs from the verse in response. It is not in the text itself. Yet Solomon is saying that to see and behold is a grand thing indeed (“*sweet*” and “*pleasant*”).

However too much of a good thing is not good. If a man lives a long life and sees the sun often, then he ought also to remember “*the days of darkness*” too. Why? Why be so pessimistic? Why not blank out the “*days of darkness*” and revel in the light of the sun? Well life “under the sun” is full of both. There are many occasions of light, sun and rejoicing, but then there are also (for all and inevitably) “*many*” times when the sun does not shine. To ignore this fact of life “under the sun” is to be foolish. You cannot bask in the days of plenty. Know that difficult days will come. All, in the end, is “*vanity.*” Once again we have this recurring thought that no matter what may happened, be it good or bad, darkness or light, ultimately it is all a mere breath, (empty, insubstantial and transient).

---

186      Genesis 1:3.

# *Chapter 10.*

## *To conclude –*

### *the real beginning of knowledge.*

*(I) The final conclusion (11:9-12:14).*

|            |           |                                          |
|------------|-----------|------------------------------------------|
| 11:9-12:14 |           | <b>The final conclusion.</b>             |
|            | 11:9-12:7 | <b>Youth compared to old age.</b>        |
|            | 12:8      | <b>Conclusion: all is vanity.</b>        |
|            | 12:9-14   | <b>Postscript and final application.</b> |

The book of Ecclesiastes ends with, a message to the young from Solomon who is now old, a restatement of the thesis, and a conclusion written as an afterword.

*Youth compared to old age. [11:9-12:7].*

**9** Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth; walk in the ways of your heart, and in the sight of your eyes; but know that for all these God will bring you into judgement. **10** Therefore remove sorrow from your heart, and put away evil from your flesh, for childhood and youth *are* vanity. **#12 1** Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth, before the difficult days come, and the years draw near when you say, “I have no pleasure in them”: **2** while the sun and the light, the moon and the stars, are not darkened, and the clouds do not return after the rain; **3** In the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men bow down; when the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look through the windows grow dim; **4** when the doors are shut in the streets, and the sound of grinding is low; when one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of music are brought low. **5** Also they are afraid of height, and of terrors in the way; when the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper is a burden, and desire fails. For man goes to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets. **6** *Remember your Creator* before the silver cord is loosed, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher shattered at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the well. **7** Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it.

Having briefly considered a man who lives a long life in verse 8, Solomon turns his thoughts to the young. Once again there is a sort of schizophrenic attitude presented. The young are to “rejoice,” but for all their enjoyment they will face “judgement.”<sup>187</sup> Of course as Christians under the Lord's guidance we know that we are to rejoice even though we live in this vale of tears. God

---

<sup>187</sup> Ecclesiastes 11:9.

has given us all things to enjoy because our ground and centre is God not self.<sup>188</sup> Our lot is to be an oasis in the desert, and to be like one who brings springs of water as they traverse the “*Valley of Baca*” (weeping).<sup>189</sup> We are new creations, and we have God in our hearts, why not rejoice! But we know that this world is still subject to “*futility*” and we await the redemption of the body.<sup>190</sup> However Solomon is not here speaking in such terms, for his view point is still “*under the sun*” and this needs to be made plain.

Solomon speaks to the youth about rejoicing, but notice the emphasis in verse 9. From a Christian stand point we rejoice in God – He is our centre – and we thank Him for all the blessings He bestows (life, health, family, provision, this world's beauty and so on). Solomon in contrast speaks about a “*heart*” enjoyment. Of course Solomon knows that there are advantages to youth such as health and vigour and freshness and so on. However Solomon suggests that their hearts would “*cheer*” them, and that they were to live their life from their own hearts, (“*walk in the ways of your heart*”). Such statements conflict superficially with what we read in the prophet Jeremiah:

The heart is deceitful above all *things*, and desperately wicked; who can know it? <sup>191</sup>

Solomon then continues to tell the youth to live on the basis of what they see (“*walk ... in the sight of your eyes*”). Is Solomon giving bad advice? It would appear not from the contrast given at the end of verse 9. The youth should enjoy their youthfulness, the exploration of inner desires and the experiences of desire which is so prevalent in the young, but there is a but! In their enjoyment from the heart they must “*know*” that there will come the time of judgement. Here is a striking contrast to the unknowns (or limits to knowledge) we discussed earlier. Solomon has observed earlier that wickedness can be found where judgement ought to dwell, (and vice versa), and this sorry state of affairs would result in the judgement of God.<sup>192</sup> However this judgement is also “*under the sun.*” because Solomon goes on to say that there is “*a time there for every purpose and for every work,*” by which he indicates that circumstances would change and the wicked will be paid back.<sup>193</sup> The only other place where judgement is discussed comes in Ecclesiastes chapter 8 where Solomon

---

188 1 Timothy 6:17.

189 Isaiah 32:15f; 35:1f; 41:19; Psalm 84:6.

190 Romans 8:20,23.

191 Jeremiah 17:9.

192 Ecclesiastes 3:16,17. It may be tempting to take the words: “*God shall judge the righteous and the wicked,*” found in Ecclesiastes 3:17 as indicating final judgement, for this is what we know from other Scriptures. However the context of the book demands that we limit this to the judgement God enacts “*under the sun.*” This is not to say that Solomon believed only in temporal judgements, but that in this book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon presents a life “*under the sun*” and so judgement is limited to temporal affairs.

193 Ecclesiastes 3:17.

links this idea with the king's commands. He states that “*a wise man's heart discerns both time and judgement,*” by which he suggests that the wise know how the king is operating, and how they, in consequence, should behave. A careful reading throughout Ecclesiastes leads to this idea of judgement “*under the sun,*” or, in other words, what is sown will be reaped in some future time. We mention this because the concept of life after death is hidden and obscure in Ecclesiastes. Solomon says, for example, that no one knows what happens to the “*spirit*” of animals or man after death, and that when a person dies that is the end, for “*the dead know nothing.*”<sup>194</sup> Thus the youth should enjoy their youth, but not with abandon because God may have cause to pay them back if they have erred and gone astray as they reach their old age.

In light of this worldly-wise advice, Solomon makes three conclusions as signalled by the connecting word of verse 10 “*therefore.*”<sup>195</sup> First Solomon informs the youth that they should “*remove sorrow*” from their hearts. This, of course, follows on from the instruction to “*rejoice*” in youthfulness given in verse 9, and it reinforces the earlier statements about the only thing for a man to do in this sorry world “*under the sun,*” that is, to “*eat, drink and be merry.*”<sup>196</sup> It is not difficult, in light of these thoughts, to see the deist view of God operating in this book. God may bring judgement in the affairs of this world through its natural operations, but He is beyond and above our reach, for we are “*under the sun.*” Second the youth is advised to “*put away evil*” from their lives. At the very best this is a reiteration of the Old Covenant position of: ***do this and you shall live,*** rather than the New Covenant principle of: ***live and you shall do this.***<sup>197</sup> Now, of course, from the Christian perspective it is impossible to put evil out of our hearts because the heart is so desperately wicked as Jeremiah makes clear. This does not stop the command to put away evil from being issued and it does nothing to render such a command unfair. The fact of the matter is that all of us should remove evil from our beings – this is right and demanded by justice – even if we are utterly powerless to do so. Here however Solomon is making the statement from the perspective of “*under the sun.*” He does not mean to remove evil in its entirety from the ***heart*** as he earlier states that no man can say he has no sin.<sup>198</sup> Instead Solomon is telling the youth to stop indulging in fleshly or bodily pursuits, (“*put away evil from your flesh*”). This is very much a “*do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,*” form of instruction.<sup>199</sup> The reason to do these two things (removing sorrow and fleshly evil) is because “*childhood and youth are vanity,*” that is temporary and lacking substance.

---

194 Ecclesiastes 3:21; 9:5.

195 Ecclesiastes 11:10-12:7.

196 Ecclesiastes 2:24; 3:12,22; 8:15.

197 Leviticus 18:5; Galatians 3:12.

198 Ecclesiastes 7:20.

199 Colossians 2:21.



The last conclusion is the longest one and it follows on nicely from the statement that *“childhood and youth are vanity.”* Thus the young should always take great thought of their *“Creator”* whilst they are still young.<sup>200</sup> Solomon insists that youth *“remember now,”* that is, at this point in time, their Maker. They are to take thought of God as Creator now because it will not be long before they get old and see *“difficult days.”* It will be worth pausing to look at this description of old age in some detail. In verse 1 the ability to take *“pleasure”* in things or in times is now gone. What once gave much cause for rejoicing doesn't any more. The old jokes have come and gone. The fun of the party is lost. The joy of anticipation has flown. Then in verse 2 we read a description in which the eyesight seems to have lost its keenness. In youth those things that give forth light were clear and easy to see, but now in old age they are *“darkened.”* The thought here is that just as the eyesight diminishes so does the inner heart of understanding. Older people are more likely to be stubborn and wish to see things as they remember them and not as they are. The use of the figure of rain and clouds is probably meant to imply refreshing in mind and understanding. Now the periods of enlightenment and refreshing seem to be infrequent where once in youth they were taken for granted. Next in verse 3 Solomon gives a series of pictures relating to the old man's general disposition. The *“keepers of the house”* probably indicate his awareness and his ability to respond or react. A city or a building had gate-keepers who prevented entrance or escape. But the old have poor discernment and lack rapid judgement. They are getting slower as the days advance. The *“strong men”* probably serves to indicate the bones and skeleton which bears the weight. The old can no longer carry their weight and take the impact and punishment that the young can. When an old person falls they are more likely to break a bone than the young who seem to bounce back. The *“grinders”* signifies teeth. As we advance in age so our teeth desert us. Instead of tearing apart a juicy steak we opt for a soup and a light salad! The figure of eyesight is repeated here (*“those that look through the windows grow dim”*) as is fitting to keep the whole picture in balance. The phrase *“the doors are shut in the streets”* may have reference to the loss of hearing which is evidenced by the phrase that follows, namely, *“and the sound of grinding is low.”* No longer can the old hear keenly so it now appears that all the doors are shut tight and the sound of life is distant. Hearing is failing so much that it is now difficult to hear your own teeth grinding the food. Next Solomon refers to insomnia. The old rise with the birds but their songs are not heard. In verse 5 we note that there is an increase both in the fear of heights, and in the perceived possibility of *“terrors in the way”* which prevent the older person from adventure and travel. Then at the end of verse 5 Solomon attends to three other signs of old age. The white hair, (*“the almond tree blossoms”*), the difficulty

---

200 Ecclesiastes 12:1.

in mobility (“*the grasshopper is a burden*”), and the diminution of sexual drive and interest (“*desire fails*”). Then the end comes, for “*man goes to his eternal home,*” that is, the grave, and those who are left “*under the sun*” go about the streets in mourning. Before pressing this thought further in verse 7, Solomon extends the imperative of remembering the Creator when young in verse 6. it must be “*before*” these signs of old age appear. In one sense the four pictures given in verse 6 indicate the lack of manual dexterity or clumsiness as bones and muscles loose their strength and vitality. Chiefly, though, these four pictures illustrate the end of life. The silver cord is broken so that the golden bowl falls and is broken irreparably. The person wishing to draw water at the well stumbles, falls, smashes the pot they were carrying for the water and they are no more. When a wheel brakes the person riding in the chariot is likely to tumble out too. When the end comes finally and the thing being carried is lost and dashed to pieces, these broken things are symbolic too of the death of the man who once possessed them. Then, in verse 7, we have a statement that peaks out from the perspective of “*under the sun.*” It reminds us instantly of Genesis 3:19 and also of Genesis 2:7 as follows:

And the Lord God formed man *of the dust* of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the *breath of life*; and man became a living being.<sup>201</sup>

Till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for *dust* you *are*, and to *dust* you shall return.<sup>202</sup>

Then the *dust* will return to the earth as it was, and the *spirit* will return to God who gave it.<sup>203</sup>

At this point Solomon appears to break with his pattern of discussing all from “*under the sun.*” Previously he has declared that “*under the sun*” none can know what happens at death.<sup>204</sup> Now he pointedly refers us back to both creation of man and his fall as recorded in Genesis. However we are not at liberty to take this in its fullest sense just yet. The body does indeed decay to the earth, and the person who was once in that body does (seemingly) vanish (as all who have known a person die can testify). Who knows what happens next? No one who operates “*under the sun.*” The conclusion that “*all is vanity*” is then given in verse 8 as if to stamp down on a more Biblical approach we have been tempted to pursue. That being said, the truth is peaking out! And such is always true of man today who seeks to build and understand life without reference to God. Man

---

201 Genesis 2:7.  
 202 Genesis 3:19.  
 203 Ecclesiastes 12:7.  
 204 Ecclesiastes 3:21.

cannot keep from now and again allowing the light of truth to peak through the cracks in their self-made edifice.<sup>205</sup>

**Conclusion: all is vanity. [12:8].**

8 “Vanity of vanities,” says the Preacher, “all *is* vanity.”

On a positive note it is nice to be able to reiterate your main thesis! I am not sure that this was what Solomon originally intended when he began his enquiries, but it is the conclusion he came to, and it is the inescapable conclusion that all must come to when they view things “*under the sun*.” In truth all lines of enquiry be they religious, scientific, philosophic or whatever come to this result. Viewed objectively, (or as far as one can be objective), there is nothing “*under the sun*” that has any substance to it, nor does it have the quality of continuance. Such a result is surely inevitable within a materialistic culture such as we inhabit today. How can a materialist view really explain life, the universe and everything? It cannot. As the mathematician Kurt Gödel showed with his incompleteness theorem, we need at least two different categories of things to explain any given system.<sup>206</sup> If we reject the spiritual realm we leave ourselves wide open to this pessimistic view of things despite the insistence to the contrary by purveyors of materialistic world views. Is there anything worthy or of value in the entirety of existence? The answer is a resounding no! That is, if you take the stand point of materialists and all those who view life merely “*under the sun*.” The Christian can say otherwise, however. There are things within creation that God has given for us as gifts. We can make sense of what we observe and experience only because we know whom they have originated from. Without the knowledge of God all would be meaningless. But knowing God the world now makes sense. This does not mean that a Christian blithely accepts all things in the world as though they come from God. Not at all! The theories of men, even the observations of men, must be taken with great care and caution. However what God reveals in creation is readily appreciated by the Christian only because of his knowledge of God. we understand the fallen and terrible world with its disasters, its predators and disease and so forth because we know that God subjected the world to “futility” because of sin. This is not the world that God originally made, but a fallen one. Then also we accept the good gifts God has freely given so that we can enjoy things in

---

205 One frequent example of this is the mention of “design” by those who advocate evolution. When they look at the detail of creation they cannot but refer to some design inherent in what they see, even though they seek earnestly to deny the Creator and smooth over their slip.

206 There are many who deny that Gödel's mathematical theorem has any bearing on philosophy or on the meaning of life. However I suggests that Gödel's theorem is just the mathematical expression of a wider truth as revealed in Scripture that two witnesses are needed to establish any truth. See Deuteronomy 17:6; 19:15. This case is similar to the scientific understanding of entropy and the second law of thermodynamics. These modern theories are simply particular ways of expressing the general fact that the world is under the curse due to sin.

this vale of tears. However our centre and fulcrum is not this world but God, for we look for the city which He is building in the heavens.

**Postscript and final application. [12:9-14].**

**9** And moreover, because the Preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yes, he pondered and sought out *and* set in order many proverbs. **10** The Preacher sought to find acceptable words; and *what was written was upright*—words of truth. **11** The words of the wise are like goads, and the words of scholars are like well-driven nails, given by one Shepherd. **12** And further, my son, be admonished by these. Of making many books *there is* no end, and much study *is* wearisome to the flesh. **13** Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man's all. **14** For God will bring every work into judgement, including every secret thing, whether good or evil.

Solomon's main treatise ends at 12:8. What follows in the rest of Ecclesiastes 12 is, what I like to refer to as, an *afterword*. This is a postscript, or a rationale for the whole. I am of the firm opinion that these words are also Solomon's. In the body of the work he refers to himself as "*The Preacher*," as one who gathers together wise words for the hearing of a gathered assembly. That it is Solomon the king throughout is clear from some of the descriptions found in the earlier chapters as we noted at the beginning of this work. The statements we have here at the end of chapter 12 also point us to Solomon as the penman of the main body of the work, for Solomon is known as the writer of many proverbs.<sup>207</sup>

This postscript falls into two sections. First from verse 9 to verse 11 we have a description of the integrity of "*The Preacher*." Second, from verse 12 to verse 14, we have the final conclusion made by a father to his son.

We discover that this "*Preacher*" was "*wise*" and because of this wisdom he sought to teach all people the right knowledge and "*words of truth*." These words of Solomon's are carefully sought out and arranged, and in this work we have attempted to give them their full force. It is very easy to import and bring in concepts and ideas we know to be true from other Scriptures to attempt an understanding of a difficult text like the book of Ecclesiastes but this is the wrong approach. I recently sat under a very godly man who took us through the book of Ecclesiastes and gave a wonderful series of addresses on the gospel and on Christ and the Christian life. However he rarely followed the arguments found in the book of Ecclesiastes but simply used phrases as springboards to other Bible texts. Now it is undoubtedly extremely important to grasp what the entire Scriptures have to say, and to see how they help us in interpreting any text we may care to study. However it is vital that we come to a text and read it carefully as a whole, looking at what the words truly say to

---

<sup>207</sup> Proverbs 1:1; 10:1; 25:1; 1Kings 4:32,33.

us first. We may know that there is a resurrection, that there is a heaven and so on, but Solomon has deliberately sidestepped this issue because he wants to show his audience the consequences of not taking God fully into account. In effect Solomon is saying to his readership: imagine a world in which God is distant and not involved in the affairs of men directly. What would such a world look like? That is the position Solomon takes and so we need to examine his arguments carefully first. That is the main import of what we read here in Ecclesiastes 12:9-11. Take what Solomon has written carefully as he intended it. Do not simply skate over the text and make it mean those things we might like to hear from elsewhere. Now these thoughts may raise a problem in the mind of the reader. Is Solomon contradicting the rest of Scripture? Well no. His purpose is to show that taking the perspective of an “*under the sun*” position does lead a person to contradictions and even denials of truth. Take for example the idea of “*eat, drink and be merry.*” This is not an attitude we are instructed to follow in the New Testament.<sup>208</sup> So why did Solomon repeatedly advocate it? Well his point is that this is what living “*under the sun*” will lead you to.

Solomon's words are not just his own. These are words he sought out and pondered over greatly as a wise man who wanted to bring truth to bear to a wide audience. But he was a man who was directly overseen by “*one Shepherd.*”<sup>209</sup> Further the words he brings are not really his own words despite the fact that he did the research and put in the long hours. These words are like “*goads*” which prod and push the audience to an intended outcome. If you live as though God were not involved, if you live life “*under the sun*” then know that your life will be empty, it will have contradictions, and it will be short and insubstantial. These thoughts are relentless throughout the work and they pummel the unsuspecting and the unthinking towards the final conclusion that everything “*under the sun*” is vanity, a waste of time and futile. They are also pictured as “*well-driven nails.*” This image hammers the point home! In Jeremiah we discover that the word of God is like a hammer.<sup>210</sup> It has to do this smashing job. Unless the obstacles and idols that obscure and oppose God are brought crashing down there is no point in preaching the gospel. Paul made this point clear that we need to bring down every argument opposed to God and hold thoughts captive to Christ.<sup>211</sup> We are reminded here that these hard words which act like goads and nails are not easy but they are given by “*one Shepherd,*” namely the Messiah Himself. And so when we look at the life of Christ we find too that He exercised this breaking up work. For example the various “*woes*” issued to the Pharisees and other leaders.<sup>212</sup>

---

208 Ecclesiastes 8:15; Luke 12:19; 1Corinthians 15:32; James 5:1f.

209 Ecclesiastes 12:11.

210 Jeremiah 23:29.

211 2Corinthians 10:5.

212 Matthew 23:1f.

Solomon then comes to the end of the matter. That this is Solomon speaking is again clear from the expression “*my son*” which is a favourite of the wise king in Proverbs.<sup>213</sup> Solomon has one final thing to say to his “*son*” who would read this treatise. It comes in two parts. First the son should avoid wasting his time on other works. The way he puts this admonishment is instructive. He does not simply say to his son that he should never read or write anything further but that the act of “*making many books*” is itself an endless task. In other words there are countless pretenders who would draw you away. How many books do we imagine there are published? It is unimaginable. One website suggests that there are: 134,021,533 volumes published.<sup>214</sup> According to Google it is slightly less at: 129,864,880.<sup>215</sup> If we say that there are about 130 million then what does that mean for the average person? Well if a person starting reading at age 5 and read a book a day and continued reading like this for 70 years unabated until they finally died through exhaustion, they would only manage:  $70 \times 365 = 25,550$  volumes. This is less than 0.02% of the total! Talk about a wearisome exercise! The reader may say that it would have been different in Solomon's day. Well perhaps The library of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh dated around the seventh century BC and discovered in the nineteenth century by Austen Henry Layard, is reported to contain about 30,000 clay tablets – more than a single person could read!<sup>216</sup> The library of Alexandria which functioned for several centuries before Christ's first advent is thought to have housed between 40,000 and 400,000 scrolls.<sup>217</sup> So why add to the already impossible stack of writing? Well there are good reasons which I leave the reader to ponder. The point made by Solomon is that there is far, far too much to read and if you embark on it you will be more than a little sore in the head! What then does Solomon say to his “*son*”? The crunch or clincher comes in verse 13, with a reason appended in verse 14:

**13** Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man's all. **14** For God will bring every work into judgement, including every secret thing, whether *good* or evil.

The end result of Solomon's great treatise showing that life “*under the sun*” is all vanity is to fear God and to keep His commands, In essence Solomon argues for a complete change of mind. We must throw off our “*under the sun*” world view, and adopt a new one which has as its catch-all “*fear God.*” This world view is defined by the addition of the statement “*and keep His*

213 Proverbs 1:8,10,15; 2:1; 3:1,11,21 etc.

214 <https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/85305/how-many-books-have-ever-been-published>

215 <https://mashable.com/2010/08/05/number-of-books-in-the-world/?europa=true>

216 <https://blog.britishmuseum.org/a-library-fit-for-a-king/>

217 <https://www.ancient.eu/article/207/what-happened-to-the-great-library-at-alexandria/>

*commandments*,” so we see that this new way of viewing life has practical implications. However the very phrase “*fear God*” has a wealth of wisdom buried deep within, and it is important to consider this first. To fear God is, first of all, to respect God. When we fear someone we know something about the person to whom we show fear. If we knew nothing of them, why fear? It may be that we have heard about someone and this induces a state of fear. What we have heard may amount to the person's character or what they have done. Imagine joining the army and before you meet the sergeant major the people in your barracks tell you something of what he is like and how he behaves. You have not met him yet but there is already an element of fear rising. He has the power over my life as a raw recruit! How should I respond to him? I had better take heed to what he says and try to please him! This is the first stage or beginnings of the fear of God. We respect God. But then to fear God is more than this. To fear God is to ground life on the knowledge of God. We come away from the fear element of the phrase (although we never leave it because God is truly awesome) and we enter into the God part of the phrase. Putting God first. Viewing life from God's perspective. No longer do we look at life from our perspective, or from the view of “*under the sun*,” but we look instead through God's eyes. If I were working for some prestigious company as an executive I would not get very far if I did not agree to the company policy on executing my job. I fear the board and the managing director (or CEO in modern parlance). My work is based upon a respect and a recognition of what the company demands and requires. I would not get far if my aims and intentions were to do what I want to do! This means I must learn the company policies and ways of doing things. I must listen to the board of directors and so on. In a much great degree to fear God is to be about God's business. This is what the Saviour Himself said when He was missing from the company with his parents and had remained in the temple at 12 years old: “*did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?*”<sup>218</sup> To fear God then is to be on-board with God and His plans. He has a plan and a mission! Are we part of this? Do we honour and fear God enough to know what His aim and intentions are?

But to fear God is more even than what we have so far mentioned. To fear God is to love God. There is something about love that borders on this fear. We see this in the great commandment God gave to the Israelites and which the Saviour reinforces:

And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.<sup>219</sup>

---

218 Luke 2:49.

219 Deuteronomy 10:12. See Matthew 22:36-40.

To fear God is to love and serve Him. He is not a capricious or malignant being – far from it. In His hand are wonders and pleasures untold. Thus the end of the matter is to fear God, that is, to organise all things around His Being. He is the Sun around which we revolve. From Him alone do we derive light and heat and health. This amounts to a radical change of view and life. Solomon has written to destroy belief and trust in life without God and “*under the sun,*” and his desire for the son of his love is that he would truly fear God. God has seen to it that Solomon's work – the first work of philosophy ever written – is in His great book that we would never place our trust in the sayings or philosophies of mere men.

The book ends with a reason to fear God. He alone is the judge of life. Up to this point we have suggested that judgements were temporal and “*under the sun.*” If all life is “*under the sun*” we can have no knowledge beyond the grave so who knows what may happen when you die? However at this point in the book, we have come beyond the end of the treatise (which ended at 12:8) and so it is more likely that the judgement mentioned here is the final judgement at the end of time. We suggest this on the basis of the scope and content of such a judgement which reads as follows: “*for God will bring every work into judgement, including every secret thing, whether good or evil..*” It isn't just that you may get paid back for wrong doing in a temporal way, because “*every work*” will be scrutinised. Further, it is not just works or the things done in the flesh but “*every secret thing*” which speaks of thoughts of the heart as well as actions done in secret. Consequently, the final judgement of man is in view here. It is for this terrible reason that we ought to fear God. He knows the beginning from the end, including every detail of my and your life. He judges correctly and knows the thoughts and intentions of the heart. So why fear anything other than God?

And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.<sup>220</sup>

Thus the book concludes with an appeal to consider God as the source of life, the aim and purpose and the rock upon which security and meaning may be found. This end forms a fitting jumping off point for the next book, the Song of Songs, which begins with the expression of s deep and passionate love:

**1** The song of songs, which *is* Solomon's. **2** Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth—for your love *is* better than wine. **3** Because of the fragrance of your good ointments, Your name *is* ointment poured forth; therefore the virgins love you. **4** Draw me away!<sup>221</sup>

---

220 Matthew 10:28.

221 Song of Songs 1:1-4.



Before we can experience the true love of God in such a way, we need to be rid of all trust and love for this world and for life “under the sun.” Have we come to this position yet?

## *Parting thoughts.*

This study is part of a general attempt to show that the Bible is superior to all philosophies, all world views, all religions, and all thoughts that mankind has ever come up with. I have, since my conversion in 1977, sought to draw my thinking and understanding from God by the power of the Holy Spirit, and from His Word as revealed in Scripture. I make no claim to infallibility whatsoever and I heartily welcome input, discussion and even correction (where necessary) from brothers and sisters in Christ. However my motivation has been drawn from several key Biblical texts. The first of these is found in Colossians:

... Christ, **3** in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.<sup>222</sup>

I have written at length on this verse elsewhere. At this juncture I simply want to establish the fact that Christ Jesus, the second person of the holy trinity, came down from heaven where He was in perfect relationship with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit, and revealed the truth perfectly.<sup>223</sup> We know that Christ Jesus was sinless, and that He is the Son of God as we have made clear. That being the case, and all Christendom acknowledges this truth, is it not deeply and thoroughly encouraging that in Christ “*are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge*”? Why else would a true “scientist” seek to look anywhere else for truth?<sup>224</sup> Being God incarnate is His wisdom and knowledge limited in any way? Surely not! As a consequence any investigation ought to begin with an appeal to Christ and it ought to continue through Christ's eyes.

A second important text which has guided me, focuses on Christ Jesus as the agent of creation. This too is found in Colossians:

And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist.<sup>225</sup>

Other translations supply the words “*all things hold together*” for the latter part of this verse.<sup>226</sup> A similar thought is expressed differently at the start of the letter to the Hebrews where we discover

---

222 Colossians 2:2,3.

223 John 1:18; 17:6,8,14,17. As He walked this earth He was still in perfect communion with the Father and the Spirit. See John 6:63; 7:37-39; 8:29; 10:30; 14:17,26; 15:26; 16:13.

224 A true “scientist” is one who seeks true knowledge. Thus to avoid Christ is to avoid truth.

225 Colossians 1:17.

226 ESV, NASB, NIV.

that the Lord Jesus is “*upholding all things by the word of His power.*”<sup>227</sup> Since Christ is the agent of creation, who upholds all things and in whom all things consist or hold together, it is not surprising to read further that creation ultimately is “*for Him.*”<sup>228</sup> Creation, therefore is not something that stands apart from Christ. This means that the gospel cannot be separated from creation too. Sadly we live in days which are schizophrenic. Christians can worship Christ and “live for Him” but without any thought or care for creation. I am not really talking about care for the environment here, although such is laudable given our creation mandate. What I am concerned about is understanding **all things**, which includes creation (the universe), from God's perspective. As a consequence of our schizophrenic society, many accept modern science and its depraved views born from darkened and truth-denying minds. The amalgam of evolution with some form of Christianity is a gross and disfigured beast! Others walk without thought and consideration and do not realise that part of a Christian's walk is to “*think God's thoughts after Him*” as Johannes Kepler once (reputedly) said. Kepler is usually known only for describing the orbit of the planets around the sun as elliptical rather than circular. However Kepler was a true believer in Christ and he felt that his work was part of glorifying God. In what way do we as believers glorify God in our work and lives? I do not simply mean that we behave ourselves and exhibit godly character. That is an essential thing we must do as believers. What I mean is how do we engage in our daily activities, our work, our play, and so on, as true Christians? How can we pursue our work in such a way as to display God's glory? Since we live in such a secularised society, the effort to declare God's praises is no mean nor small task. However we have been called to stand for Christ, not just in a moral sense as good citizens and upright characters, but as ones who have called upon God and who declare His works.<sup>229</sup> Since Christ not only created all things in the beginning, but is actively upholding them now, so that creation can be said to consist in Him, why do we live as though He is not? Why do we worship Him part time? Why are our thoughts disengaged at times from Him so that we can do our work, have some fun, or engage in some pastime? When you see a beautiful creature, or view a beautiful landscape do you not sing out in praise of God? Equally when you see the deprivation and squalor in the cities, or the ravages of war and sin, does not your heart cry out: “Lord look at your creation fallen and in need of redemption, have mercy Lord!”? Or what about your place of employment? Do you see the company or organisation you work for as fitting into God's plan and your part as doing work for God? For some, this is a relatively easy task. Perhaps you care for the sick. It is not difficult to see this as work in God's kingdom and seek the Lord for

---

227 Hebrews 1:3.

228 Colossians 1:16.

229 Psalm 9:11; 12:4; 64:9; 107:22; 11:6.

aid accordingly. For others the task is much more difficult. I think of teachers who are forced to teach a godless curriculum. How do they do it from a Christian desire to worship God with their lives? What of the banker, the accountant, the salesman, the waiter, the civil servant, and so on? Solomon's thesis is that all "*under the sun*" is empty, transient and has no substance or weight. But our work as Christians continues to eternal glory. This demands our attention for we are ambassadors of Christ.<sup>230</sup> As we work, rest and play our aim and purpose is to glorify God in all we do, think and speak.<sup>231</sup>

A third text that has formed my thinking and purpose is found in the book of Micah. It is a well known text and it sums up the true Christian life:

He has shown you, O man, what *is* good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God? <sup>232</sup>

God is not slack in making Himself known! He has done it from the very beginning and He has been merciful in speaking to humanity in many ways since the beginning of time and then supremely in the Lord Jesus Christ who is the Word of God. <sup>233</sup> As believers it is now our job to make the Lord and all that He has done known. A part of this is to show the world that God created all things, that they are under His providential care and rule, and that He is immanently involved in creation, not distant and far-removed. Further we have to make known why creation is so broken and fallen. This is what Solomon shows clearly. This world is all wrong, and must be summed up by the word "*vanity*," and the phrase, "*vanity of vanities*." If we do not show *carefully* to the world that its broken, diseased, decaying nature comes from mankind's own sin and rebellion against God, then we are condemning them to eternal disaster. Charles Darwin could never get over the loss of his daughter, and in his painstaking research he found all sorts of examples of parasitic life and of "*nature red in tooth and claw*," which he could not explain in connection with a good God.<sup>234</sup> So why wasn't there someone close to Darwin to explain the fall? The development of modern science, of which Darwin was but a part, saw to it that a right doctrine of the fall was ignored and that new

230 2Corinthians 5:20; Ephesians 6:20.

231 1Corinthians 10:31; Colossians 3:17,23.

232 Micah 6:8.

233 Isaiah 40:21; 41:4,26; 48:5,16; John 1:1f; Hebrews 1:1-4.

234 Darwin wrote the following in a letter to Asa Gray from his home in Kent (dated 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1860): "With respect to the theological view of the question; this is always painful to me.— I am bewildered.— I had no intention to write atheistically. But I own that I cannot see, as plainly as others do, & as I should wish to do, evidence of design & beneficence on all sides of us. There seems to me too much misery in the world. I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent & omnipotent God would have designedly created the *Ichneumonidæ* with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars, or that a cat should play with mice."

<https://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/letter/DCP-LETT-2814.xml> The phrase "nature red in tooth and claw" comes from Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem entitled: "In Memoriam A.H.H." 1849.

views of God's creation were supplied, which diverged bit by bit from the Biblical picture. Well suffice to say that in seeking to do the right thing (*"to do justly"*) and in operating with merciful hearts (*"to love mercy"*) surely we ought to be warning people of the truth as it is in Christ Jesus? We should declare openly that He is the Creator, the One who subjected all things to futility because of mankind's sin and rebellion in order to prevent man from going so far as to be irredeemable, and that He is the Redeemer who will one day make all things new.

A final text which I will share here to round things up, comes from Jeremiah:

The heart *is* deceitful above all *things*, and desperately wicked; who can know it?<sup>235</sup>

In truth I could have selected from a large range of texts which illustrate the point I want to make.<sup>236</sup> In short, as Jeremiah observed in words preceding the verse I have quoted, we cannot trust mankind's mind and thinking. Man's heart is: dark, futile, vain, deceitful, wicked ... and is not to be trusted!<sup>237</sup> Why then do we trust in modern science? Now I grant that God has given us minds to think. I further grant that God has revealed Himself through creation. But, and this is most essential, Solomon has proved that left to himself man will not discover truth.<sup>238</sup> He will, instead, seek out strange inventions or schemes.<sup>239</sup> This is also what the apostle Paul tells us in the first chapter of his epistle to the Romans. Mankind is of such a mind to *"suppress the truth in unrighteousness,"* to become *"futile in their thoughts,"* and is willing to exchange *"the truth of God for the lie."*<sup>240</sup> As a consequence man worships creation rather than the Creator, but as believers our privilege is to *"proclaim the praises of Him who called us"* out of the darkness of this world, and out of our unregenerate and darkened minds and into *"His marvellous light"*!<sup>241</sup> As a part of our walk we need to be constantly renewed in mind and not conformed to the way this world thinks.<sup>242</sup> Such a walk is a privilege but it is also a fight. And yet God has provided well for all of that!<sup>243</sup>

Solomon's book of Ecclesiastes is so necessary for today. Man must be made aware of the truth. Unless we come to understand the desperate state of this world and of our sorry state we will never turn, repent and believe in what the Saviour has freely done and given. Unless a person truly grasps the essence of Ecclesiastes, there is no hope that they will go on to appreciate and glory in

---

235 Jeremiah 17:9.

236 Here are a few examples: Matthew 15:19; Romans 1:21,28; Ephesians 4:18.

237 Psalm 146:3;

238 Ecclesiastes 8:16,17.

239 Ecclesiastes 7:29.

240 Romans 1:18,21,25.

241 1Peter 2:9; Colossians 1:13.

242 Romans 12:1,2; Ephesians 4:23.

243 Ephesians 6:10f; 2Peter 1:3,4.

the Song of Songs. But this is the purpose and reason for Ecclesiastes in the first place. The chief point Solomon makes is that we are to “*fear God and keep His commandments*” because this is all that is necessary!<sup>244</sup> One of the greatest freeing moments in my life was to realise that my pursuit of truth was never going to succeed until I grasped that it wasn't a theory, nor a system, nor a scheme that would do the trick, but a *person*. The realisation that Christ Jesus was not just a person in history, but the One who came from heaven, died for sins, was raised to new life and then ascended into heaven for all eternity was stunning. This moment started my relationship with God. That theme (relationship with God) is the subject of the Song of Songs. However I do not feel capable, nor at liberty, to speak on such a high subject. My life and path have been a testimony to the insufficiency of modern science (and of all man's thoughts), and to the abundance of God's goodness in and through His word by the power of the Holy Spirit.

May God bless you in your walk with Him.

Mike Viccary

April 2020.

---

244 Ecclesiastes 12:13.