

Notes on
Ecclesiastes
2004 Edition
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Introduction

TITLE

The title of this book in the Hebrew text is all of verse 1. The Septuagint translation (third century B.C.) gave it the name "Ekklesiastes" from which the English title is a transliteration. This word is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word *qohelet* that the NASB translated "Preacher" in verse 1. The Hebrew word designates a leader who speaks before an assembly of people. The NIV translation "Teacher" is also a good one.

WRITER AND DATE

The commentators sometimes treat the Hebrew word *qohelet* ("Preacher"; 1:1-2, 12; 7:27; 12:8-10) as a proper name.¹ However the fact that the article is present on the Hebrew word in 12:8, and perhaps in 7:27, seems to indicate that *qohelet* is a title: "the preacher" or "the teacher."

Internal references point to Solomon as this preacher (cf. 1:1, 12—2:26; 2:4-9; 12:9). Both Jewish and Christian interpreters believed Solomon was the writer until the eighteenth century. With the rise of literary and historical Bible criticism a widespread rejection of Solomonic authorship set in. Rejection of Solomonic authorship rests mainly on linguistic factors (vocabulary and syntax) that some scholars feel were more characteristic of a time much later than Solomon's, namely, about 450-250 B.C.² Conservative scholars have refuted this linguistic argument.³ Several more or less conservative scholars have rejected Solomonic authorship.⁴ Yet there is no information in the Bible that would eliminate Solomon as the writer.

"The difficulty is that the linguistic data show that Ecclesiastes does not fit into any known section of the history of the Hebrew language. . . .

¹E.g., Robert Gordis, *Koheleth—The Man and His World*, p. 5.

²See J. Stafford Wright, "Ecclesiastes," in *Psalms-Song of Songs*, vol. 5 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, pp. 1139-43.

³See *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, s.v. "Ecclesiastes," by Gleason L. Archer; and his "The Linguistic Evidence for the Date of 'Ecclesiastes,'" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 12:3 (Summer 1969):167-81.

⁴These include Franz Delitzsch, E. W. Hengstenberg, H. C. Leupold, Edward J. Young, David A. Hubbard, and Michael A. Eaton.

"Our conclusion must be that the language of Ecclesiastes does not at present provide an adequate resource for dating."⁵

Assuming that Solomon wrote the book in its entirety, he must have done so during his lifetime and probably during his reign (971-931 B.C.). It has seemed probable to some expositors that he may have written Song of Solomon in his youth, Proverbs in his middle life, and Ecclesiastes in his old age (cf. 2:1-11; 11:9; 12:1). This theory rests on the contents of the three inspired Bible books that he evidently wrote, specifically clues in these books about the age of their writer.

"Ecclesiastes is best placed after his apostasy, when both his recent turmoil and repentance were still fresh in his mind."⁶

PURPOSE

This book helps the reader develop a God-centered worldview and recognize the dangers of a self-centered worldview. It does not describe the life of faith or teach what the responsibilities of faith in God are. It also prescribes the limits of human philosophy (cf. 3:11; 8:16-17). The book teaches that people are accountable to God and that we should avoid self-indulgence that leads to the exploitation of others for selfish gain.

"Christians may ask how the stress on using and enjoying life tallies with the NT command 'Do not love the world' (1 John 2:15). The answer is that the Teacher (Ecclesiastes) would have agreed fully with John's next statement that 'everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away' (vv. 16-17). One could hardly find a better statement than this of the whole theme of Ecclesiastes (e.g., 2:1-11; 5:10). Life in the world has significance only when man remembers his Creator (12:1).

"There always have been two kinds of teaching about the way to holiness. One is by withdrawal as far as possible from the natural in order to promote the spiritual. The other is to use and transform the natural into the expression of the spiritual. While each kind of teaching has its place, some people need one emphasis rather than the other. Ecclesiastes definitely teaches the second."⁷

"Ecclesiastes does not pretend to preach the Gospel. Rather, it encourages the reader to a God-centered worldview rather than falling victim to frustrations and unanswered questions. None of its contents has to be rejected in the light of the NT. Although the NT revelation is vastly greater than that in Ecclesiastes, the two are not devoid of similarities

⁵Ibid., *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, p. 19.

⁶Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Ecclesiastes: Total Life*, p. 31.

⁷Wright, p. 1146.

(e.g., James 4:13-17). Like the people of God in Solomon's time, believers today are subject to the unexpected changes and chances common to mankind. Yet they know that God works through every vicissitude of life. Respecting the future, which for Solomon was shrouded in a shadow land, Christians have the glorious hope of being in the presence of Christ himself (2 Cor 5:6; Phil 1:23)."⁸

MESSAGE

I believe that the message of Ecclesiastes is essentially a positive one. This may seem strange since the temporary nature of various human endeavors is such a major theme of this book. Nevertheless the total statement that Solomon made was positive.

He was saying, I believe, that even though every human endeavor lacks ultimate value, we should live life in the fear of God (i.e., with the proper recognition of Him). Furthermore we should enjoy life maximally as a gift from God. Ecclesiastes 12:13 is very similar to Proverbs 1:7 and 3:5-6. In both these books, as well as in Job, the fear of God is the prerequisite for successful living here and now.

The difference between Ecclesiastes and Proverbs is that in Ecclesiastes the emphasis is on the inability of every human endeavor to provide ultimate value. In Proverbs the emphasis is on the comparative value of living in the fear of God.

Solomon's attitude is very important for us to grasp to understand this book. He never lost sight of God's existence. He was not an atheist or even an apostate. The fact that Solomon kept God in view throughout the book enabled him to see that all is vanity under the sun. The person who disregards God does not say that. For him what is under the sun is all that is meaningful.

I do not believe Solomon did everything he said he did in rebellion against God. Some things were acts of disobedience, but many other things were experiments in living designed to discover the relative value of various experiences.

The major revelations of the book are three.

First, Ecclesiastes reveals that every human endeavor lacks ultimate value. All is vanity in that sense.

Solomon stated this thesis in 1:2.

Then Solomon supported his thesis with examples he took from nature (1:3-11).

⁸Ibid., p. 1148. See also George R. Castellino, "Qohelet and His Wisdom," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 30 (1968):25-28, reprinted in Roy B. Zuck, ed., *Reflecting with Solomon*, pp. 40-43; Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, pp. 271-79; and Gordis, pp. 122-32.

Next Solomon appealed to various human achievements to apply his thesis. He did this first by citing his own personal experiments and observations on this subject (1:12—2:17). Then he referred to facts observable by all people that confirm the same conclusion (2:18—6:9).

Solomon next showed that every human endeavor lacks ultimate value by reminding us of the limits of human wisdom (6:10—11:6). He supported these assertions also with empirical evidence (what people experience generally in life). God's will will indeed happen. However man does not know God's plan fully. Therefore man does not know exactly what will happen.

The second major revelation of this book is that people should live life in the fear of God and enjoy life as much as they can. This is really Solomon's practical conclusion to the truthfulness of the thesis that he proved in 1:3—11:6.

Since death is coming we should enjoy life now, not in disregard for God, but in the fear of God (11:7-8).

We should enjoy life in our youth while at the same time remembering that God will judge our lives (11:9-10). Moreover we should behave responsibly in our youth since old age is coming (12:1-7).

The third major revelation of the book is its statement of what true wisdom is (12:13). God intends people to rejoice, but to remember God and to live with recognition of Him (cf. Prov. 3:5-6). Failing to fear God will result in a life of vanity. To fear God and live in harmony with His will will result in a life of fullness.

Let me point out some implications of the teaching of this book.

Conviction results in conduct that produces character. That is a basic reality of life regardless of what one's convictions may be. When we have a conviction that God exists and we live under His loving authority, our conduct will be obedience to His will. Furthermore responsibility and joy will mark our character. However if we believe that God either does not exist or is not worth consideration, our conduct will be disregard of His will, and vanity will mark our character.

To dethrone God is to lose the key to life. We may pursue many human endeavors, but all we will find is vanity, lack of ultimate fulfillment. On the other hand if we enthrone God we will enter into the fullness of life (John 17:3; Ps. 16:11).

OUTLINE⁹

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⁹Compare the outlines by James S. Reitman, "The Structure and Unity of Ecclesiastes," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154:615 (July-September 1997):317-19; and "The Scope and Plan of the Book of Ecclesiastes," *The Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 29 (July 1859):419-40, reprinted in Zuck, ed., pp. 115-31.

2. The future of the wise on earth 9:11—10:11
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Exposition

I. THE INTRODUCTORY AFFIRMATION 1:1-11

The first 11 verses of the book introduce the writer, the theme of the book, and a general defense of the assertion Solomon made in the theme statement (v. 2).

A. TITLE AND THEME 1:1-2

1. The title 1:1

The author identified himself by his titles. These titles as well as other references to the writer in the book (cf. 1:12, 16; 2:4-9) point to Solomon more than to any other person.¹⁰ Later he claimed divine authority for this book (12:1).

The term "Preacher" (Heb. *qohelet*, NIV "Teacher") refers to a wise sage who taught the Israelites God's will. Along with the priests and prophets, the teachers were those through whom God communicated His Word to His people (cf. 12:9; Jer. 18:18; Ezek. 7:26).

2. The theme 1:2

"Vanity" (Heb. *hebel*) probably does not mean "meaningless."¹¹ As Solomon used this word in Ecclesiastes he meant lacking real substance, value, permanence, or significance.¹² "Vapor" or "breathlike" captures the idea.¹³ "All" in the context of what he proceeded to describe refers to all human endeavors (cf. v. 3). David Hubbard understood it in a slightly different way.

"Hebel stands more for human inability to grasp the meaning of God's way than for an ultimate emptiness in life. It speaks of human limitation and frustration caused by the vast gap between God's knowledge and power and our relative ignorance and impotence. The deepest issues of lasting profit, of enlightening wisdom, of ability to change life's workings, of confidence that we have grasped the highest happiness—all these are beyond our reach in Koheleth's view."¹⁴

The phrase "is vanity" is the most popular one in Ecclesiastes (cf. 1:14; 2:1, 11, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 26; 3:19; 4:4, 7, 8, 16; 5:7, 10; 6:2, 4, 9, 11, 12; 7:6, 15; 8:10, 14; 9:9; 11:8,

¹⁰See Kaiser, pp. 25-29, for a good defense of Solomonic authorship.

¹¹See Michael V. Fox, "The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qoheleth," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105:3 (September 1986):409-27, who thought "absurd" or "absurdity" best translates this word.

¹²*Hebel* appears 38 times in Ecclesiastes and only 35 other times elsewhere in the Old Testament.

¹³See Kathleen A. Farmer, *Who Knows What Is Good? A Commentary on the Books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, pp. 142-46; and Graham S. Ogden, *Qoheleth*, pp. 17-22.

¹⁴David A. Hubbard, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, pp. 21-22.

10; 12:8.¹⁵ It forms an *inclusio* with 12:8 surrounding the evidence that Solomon offered to prove that all is vanity.

This verse contains Solomon's "big idea" or proposition. It is the point he proceeded to support, prove, and apply in the chapters that follow.¹⁶ Proverbs 1:7 is such a statement in that book. This is the first hint that Solomon's viewpoint includes "exclusively the world we can observe, and that our observation point is at ground level."¹⁷

"Because it apparently contradicts other portions of Scripture and presents a pessimistic outlook on life, in a mood of existential despair, many have viewed Ecclesiastes as running counter to the rest of Scripture or have concluded that is [*sic*] presents only man's reasoning apart from divine revelation."¹⁸

". . . it is no exaggeration to say that there may be less agreement about the interpretation of Koheleth than there is about any other biblical book, even the Revelation of John!"¹⁹

B. THE FUTILITY OF ALL HUMAN ENDEAVOR 1:3-11

In this pericope Solomon gave general support to his theme (1:2). Essentially he said that it is impossible for any human endeavor to have permanent value. This section is a poem.²⁰ Solomon chose the realm of nature as the setting for his argument.

1. The vanity of work 1:3

Rather than saying, "All work is vanity," Solomon made the same point by asking this rhetorical question that expects a negative response. He used this literary device often throughout the book (cf. 2:2; 3:9; 6:8, 11-12; et al.).

"Advantage" (Heb. *yitron*) refers to what remains in the sense of a net profit. Solomon was not saying there is nothing good about work or that it is worse than being

¹⁵See H. Carl Shank, "Qoheleth's World and Life View as Seen in His Recurring Phrases," *Westminster Theological Journal* 37 (1974):65-67.

¹⁶Many writers, however, believed there is no logical development in the writer's thought, for example, Svend Holm-Nielsen, "The Book of Ecclesiastes and the Interpretation of It in Jewish and Christian Theology," *Annual of the Swedish Theological Institute* 10 (1976):48.

¹⁷Derek Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes: A Time to Mourn, and a Time to Dance*, p. 23. See also Edwin M. Good, "The Unfilled Sea: Style and Meaning in Ecclesiastes 1:2-11," in *Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays in Honor of Samuel Terrien*, pp. 59-73.

¹⁸Roy B. Zuck, "A Theology of the Wisdom Books and the Song of Songs," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 243. This essay also contains studies of the doctrines of God (pp. 246-47) and man (pp. 248-51) in Ecclesiastes. See also idem, "God and Man in Ecclesiastes," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148:589 (January-March 1991):46-56, which is an adaptation of the former essay.

¹⁹Hubbard, p. 23.

²⁰See Addison G. Wright, "The Riddle of the Sphinx: The Structure of the Book of Qoheleth," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 30 (1968):313-34.

unemployed. He only meant that all the work a person may engage in does not yield really long-term profit even though it may yield short-term profit, including financial security (cf. Mark 8:36).²¹

"Under the sun," used 29 times in Ecclesiastes and nowhere else in the Old Testament, simply means "on the earth," that is, in terms of human existence (1:9, 14; 2:11, 17, 18, 19, 20, 22; 3:16; 4:1, 3, 7, 15; 5:13, 18; 6:1, 5, 12; 8:9, 15, 17; 9:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 10:5; cf. 1:13; 2:3; 3:1). The phrase shows that the writer's perspective was universal, not limited to his own people and land.²²

"You think you have all the dishes washed and from a bedroom or a bathroom there appears, as from a ghost, another dirty glass. And even when all the dishes are washed, it is only a few hours until they demand washing again. So much of our work is cyclical, and so much of it futile."²³

2. The illustrations from life 1:4-11

To clarify his meaning and to support his contention in verse 3, Solomon cited examples from nature. Work produces nothing ultimate or truly satisfying, only what is ephemeral.

1:4 No person is permanent on the earth. The earth remains, but people die and the next generation replaces them. The point is that since man is not permanent it is obvious that his work cannot be either. While a person's work may outlive him or her (e.g., a skyscraper outlasts its builder) it will only last a little longer than he or she does. It too is only relatively permanent, not permanent as the earth is.

History does not answer the questions of ultimate meaning or purpose. These only come from divine revelation.

1:5-7 Science does not answer these questions either.

People's work is similar to the aspects of nature cited in these verses. In nature there are many things that recur in a cyclical pattern. They are never complete. For example, we never have a rainstorm that makes it unnecessary to have any more rainstorms (cf. Job 36:27-28). Our work is never complete in the sense that we never finally arrive at a condition in which no more work is necessary. There is always the need to do more work. Any homeowner can testify to this!

One writer argued that the preacher did not intend verses 5-7 to show the futility of the phenomena he recorded. He intended to show only ". . . the

²¹See John F. Genung, *Words of Koheleth*, pp. 214-15.

²²J. S. Wright, p. 1152.

²³Hubbard, p. 48.

limitations imposed on them by their allotted natures and functions, which necessitates their constant cyclical repetition."²⁴ These limitations reflect futility.

1:8-11 By saying, "there is nothing new under the sun" (v. 9), Solomon was not overlooking inventions and technological advances that have resulted in civilization's advancement through the centuries. Nevertheless these have been only innovations, not basic changes. Man still struggles with the same essential problems he has always had. This is the round of work that is a weariness to people similar to the repetitious rounds observable in nature (vv. 5-7). There appears to be a significant advance (e.g., social evolution) but that is only because people evaluate history superficially (v. 11a). We dream of futuristic utopias because we fail to see that man has made no real progress (v. 11b). Future generations will make the same mistake (v. 11c-d).

What about the doctrine of eternal rewards? The New Testament teaches that what a person does in this life, for good and for evil, affects his or her eternal state (Matt. 7:24-27; 1 Cor. 5:9-10; et al.). Is there not eternal "net profit" for believers who do good works? Solomon had an unusually broad perspective for a person living when he did. Evidently most of the Hebrews had an awareness that there is life beyond the grave. The patriarchs also had some revelation of life after death (cf. Gen. 1:27; 25:8, 17; 35:29; Ps. 16; 73; et al.).²⁵ However, Solomon evidenced no knowledge of revelation that deals with the effect a person's work has on his or her *eternal* condition. In this respect his perspective was not as broad as those of us who benefit from New Testament revelation. Solomon was correct within his frame of reference. New Testament revelation has not invalidated Solomon's assessment of life *from his perspective*.

"Koheleth knew no such scenario as Jesus gave us in the parable of talents. The old sage had no real inkling of the ultimate judgment that offered, 'well done, good and faithful servant. . . . Enter into the joy of your Lord,' and 'You wicked and lazy servant,' your destiny is 'outer darkness' with 'weeping and gnashing of teeth' (Matt. 25:21, 26, 30)."²⁶

A factor that makes our work of lasting value is God's enablement with His grace by His Spirit. Reference to either of these supernatural resources is totally absent in Ecclesiastes. This omission further highlights the fact

²⁴R. N. Whybray, "Ecclesiastes 1.5-7 and the Wonders of Nature," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 41 (June 1988):105.

²⁵See articles on "immortality" in Bible dictionaries and encyclopaedias.

²⁶Hubbard, p. 205.

that Solomon's viewpoint was that of earthly life without supernatural intervention.

The fact that the name "Yahweh" does not occur in the book also clarifies this perspective. Yahweh was the name God used to describe Himself in His relationships to people. The man "under the sun" in Ecclesiastes is one unaided by a personal relationship with God. Not that he was necessarily unsaved. The man in view is every man, including the Israelites. Solomon's analysis simply omitted God's enablement in the human condition. He did assume man's belief in God, however.

"Ignoring the book's title (1:1), epigrams (1:2, 12:8), and epilogue (12:9-14), one discovers that Qoheleth begins with a poem concerning the 'profit'-lessness of man's toil (1:3-11) and ends with another poem calling man to enjoy life which he can (11:9—12:7) These two poems set the tone and direction of Qoheleth's investigation and reflection. From a focus on the pointlessness of a work orientation—on the profitlessness of man's toil when it is absolutized and, thus, misguided—Qoheleth turns to argue for the importance of enjoying life from God as a gift while we can. 'Enjoyment,' not 'work,' is to be our controlling metaphor of life."²⁷

"The enigmatic character and polarized structure of the book of Qoheleth is not a defective quality but rather a deliberate literary device of Hebrew thought patterns designed to reflect the paradoxical and anomalous nature of this present world. The difficulty of interpreting this book is proportionally related to one's own readiness to adopt Qoheleth's presupposition—that everything about this world is marred by the tyranny of the curse which the Lord God placed upon all creation. If one fails to recognize that this is a foundational presupposition from which Ecclesiastes operates, then one will fail to comprehend the message of the book, and bewilderment will continue."²⁸

²⁷Robert K. Johnston, "Confessions of a Workaholic': A Reappraisal of Qoheleth," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 38 (January-March 1976):17-18.

²⁸Ardel B. Caneday, "Qoheleth: Enigmatic Pessimist or Godly Sage?" *Grace Theological Journal* 7:1 (Spring 1986):21.

II. THE FUTILITY OF WORK 1:12—6:9

A. PERSONAL OBSERVATIONS 1:12—2:17

There are four parts to this section (1:12—2:17) that fall into two pairs. Solomon first related his investigations (in 1:12-15 and 2:1-11) and then gave his evaluations of each of these experiments (in 1:16-18 and 2:12-17).

1. Solomon's investigation of human achievement 1:12-15

Solomon had unique resources for investigating life. He was the king of Israel (v. 12), and he possessed superlative wisdom (v. 13; cf. v. 16; 1 Kings 4:26-34). He says he made a comprehensive study of all kinds of human activities (v. 14). He observed that they were all a "grievous task" (v. 13; cf. 4:8; 5:14), namely, of limited value.

"Striving [chasing] after wind" (v. 14) graphically pictures the futility Solomon sought to communicate (cf. 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6; 6:9). This phrase occurs frequently in 1:12—6:9 and is a structural marker that indicates the end of a subsection of Solomon's thought (cf. 1:17; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6, 16; 6:9).

Solomon was saying that there is no type of effort or action that can produce something ultimately permanent and therefore satisfying. There is nothing people can do that will yield this, no type of work or activity.

2. Solomon's evaluation of his investigation of human achievement 1:16-18

To conduct his investigation of human achievements Solomon had employed the tool of wisdom.²⁹ However, he discovered it inadequate to turn up any truly meaningful activity. Consequently wisdom was in this respect no better than "madness and folly" (v. 17; i.e., foolish ideas and pleasures).

". . . in Scripture both 'madness' and 'folly' imply moral perversity rather than mental oddity."³⁰

Greater wisdom had only brought him greater "grief" (mental anguish) and "pain" (emotional sorrow, v. 18).

The phrase "I perceived" and its synonyms occur frequently in Ecclesiastes (cf. 1:13; 2:1, 3, 14, 15; 3:17, 18, 22; 7:25; 8:9, 16; 9:1).

²⁹Wisdom here does not refer to living life with God in view. It means using human intelligence as an instrument to ferret out truth and significance.

³⁰Kidner, p. 31.

"Heart' points to the combined use of mind and will in the quest for knowledge. Biblical Hebrew has no specific words for mind or brain. Thinking and understanding and deciding are all done by the 'heart.'"³¹

3. Solomon's investigation of pleasure 2:1-11

2:1-2 Pleasure has no ultimate value either (vv. 1-2). That is, while it has some temporary, immediate value (i.e., relieving grief and boredom) it does not produce anything permanently or ultimately worthwhile.

2:3-11 It is clear from verses 3 and 9 that Solomon's investigation of pleasure was not a mindless dive into the morass of hedonism. Wisdom guided him throughout. He evidently pursued every pleasure available to an oriental monarch (vv. 4-10).

"A sensible use of money may be a form of creativity; so Solomon expressed himself in extensive buildings and the planting of vineyards, fruit trees, and gardens (vv. 4-6)."³²

Some of this experimentation involved sin (v. 8). Solomon did not say he experienced no pleasure; he did. Nevertheless his final evaluation was that pleasure does not yield profit, real significance (v. 11).

4. Solomon's evaluation of his investigation of pleasure 2:12-17

The king realized that few people would be able to check the results of his experiments. Few if any would have the resources he had at his disposal to duplicate his experiments (v. 12). Wisdom is better than folly in some respects, but neither provides a key to discovering net profit. Consequently Solomon concluded that being wise only has temporary and limited advantages over being foolish. Ultimately there is not much difference. Both the wise man and the fool die, and their survivors forget them.

"Grievous" (4:17, Heb. *ra*) is the opposite of "advantage" (1:3, profit). It is loss. The fact that Solomon could find nothing in work or pleasure that could yield anything ultimately profitable led him to view life itself as distasteful and repugnant (v. 17).³³

B. GENERAL OBSERVATIONS 2:18—6:9

Thus far Solomon had reflected on the futility of all human endeavor generally (1:3-11) and the futility of human achievement (1:12-15) and his own achievements in particular (2:1-17). Next he turned to an evaluation of labor, his own (2:18-20) as well as that of all other people (2:21—6:9).

³¹Hubbard, p. 64.

³²J. S. Wright, p. 1156.

³³For a study of how the writer of Ecclesiastes viewed death, see James L. Crenshaw, "The Shadow of Death in Qoheleth," in *Israelite Wisdom . . .*, pp. 205-16.

1. The outcome of labor 2:18-26

In 2:18-26 the emphasis is on what happens to the fruits of labor that one accumulates over a lifetime of toil. These fruits include money and all it can buy, fame, and happiness.

2:18-21 Solomon viewed all his labor during his lifetime ("under the sun," v. 18) with despair because there was no real permanence to its fruits. He would have no control over what he had accumulated or accomplished after he died (v. 19). The idea so common today that a good job is more desirable than a bad job because it yields benefits the worker can enjoy is a very short-sighted, selfish view. It seems to contradict Solomon's conclusion, but it does not. Solomon's perspective was much more altruistic. He was thinking about what long-range changes for good could come out of all his toil?

2:22-23 In view of what comes of it all, Solomon concluded that human labor costs more pain and restlessness than it is worth.

2:24-26 Since we cannot expect really significant changes to come out of our work, the best we can do is to enjoy its fruits and find some satisfaction in the work itself (cf. 3:12, 13, 22; 5:18, 19; 8:15; 9:7, 9).³⁴ However this is possible only with God's help (vv. 24-25). Sometimes God channels the fruits of a wicked person's work into a righteous person's hands (v. 26).³⁵

". . . in themselves, and rightly used, the basic things of life are sweet and good. Food, drink and work are samples of them, and Qoheleth will remind us of others [cf. 9:7-10; 11:7-10]. What spoils them is our hunger to get out of them more than they can give; a symptom of the longing which differentiates us from the beasts, but whose misdirection is the underlying theme of this book."³⁶

In these verses Solomon implied that God's rewarding or punishing a person for his trust in God and his ethical behavior would take place before death. This is normally what happens (cf. Proverbs). Therefore Solomon's counsel is good advice. However from later revelation we learn that final judgment will take place after this life and that God's rewards are not just temporal but eternal (cf. Job's problem). Therefore as believers we

³⁴This is the first of seven passages in which the writer recommended the wholehearted pursuit of enjoyment (2:24a; 3:12; 3:22a; 5:17; 8:15a; 9:7-9a; and 11:7—12:1a), and they make the point with increasing intensity and solemnity. For a study of these passages, see R. N. Whybray, "Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 23 (1982):87-98, reprinted in Zuck, ed., *Reflecting with . . .*, pp. 203-12.

³⁵See J. Stafford Wright, "The Interpretation of Ecclesiastes," in *Classical Evangelical Essays in Old Testament Interpretation*, pp. 144-45.

³⁶Kidner, p. 35.

can find greater satisfaction in our work itself than Solomon could. In short, later revelation has not invalidated Solomon's views but enriched them.

2. Labor and divine providence 3:1—4:3

In this section Solomon expressed his conviction that in view of God's incomprehensible workings all human toil is without permanent profit.

3:1-8 As is customary in Ecclesiastes, the writer began this section by stating a thesis (v. 1). He then proceeded to illustrate and to prove it true (vv. 2-8). "Event" (v. 1) means human activity that one engages in by deliberate choice. Each of these events has its proper time and duration.

Verses 2-8 are a poem in which the preacher listed 14 opposites.

"The fact that Solomon utilized polar opposites in a multiple of seven and began his list with birth and death is highly significant. The number seven suggests the idea of completeness and the use of polar opposites—a well-known poetic device called merism—suggests totality (cf. Ps. 139:2-3)."³⁷

The casting of stones (v. 5) probably refers to the ancient custom of destroying a farmer's field by throwing stones on it. The gathering of stones describes the clearing of stones from a field.³⁸ The fact that there are proper times for expressing love and other times for refraining from love reminds us that there are standards for sex, though this is not the only application.

"Verses 1-8 have an important connection with the theme of the book and relate closely to what precedes and to what follows. Man is to take his life day by day from the hand of God (2:24-26; 3:12-13), realizing that God has a fitting time for each thing to be done (v. 1). The significance of this section is that man is responsible to discern the right times for the right actions; and when he does the right action according to God's time, the result is 'beautiful' (v. 11)."³⁹

3:9 Another rhetorical question expects another negative response (cf. 1:3; 2:11). There is no net gain in one's toil given Solomon's perspective.

³⁷Donald R. Glenn, "Ecclesiastes," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, p. 983.

³⁸Hubbard, p. 103.

³⁹J. S. Wright, "Ecclesiastes," p. 1160. Cf. Eph. 2:10.

". . . one thing that elevates us above the animal world, in addition to the God-given sense of eternity [v. 11], is the desire to understand the whole. This accounts for all science, philosophy, and human knowledge, as well as theology."⁴⁰

3:10-11 God's plan is unfathomable. Nevertheless, God has an appropriate time for every activity (v. 11). The meaning is not, "beautiful in its own way," as the song goes. God has also placed within the heart of every person a sense of eternity and a desire to know the eternal significance of what we do (v. 11, "set eternity in their heart").

"This quest is a deep-seated desire, a compulsive drive, because man is made in the image of God to appreciate the beauty of creation (on an aesthetic level); to know the character, composition, and meaning of the world (on an academic and philosophical level); and to discern its purpose and destiny (on a theological level). . . . Man has an inborn inquisitiveness and capacity to learn how everything in his experience can be integrated to make a whole."⁴¹

"'*Eternity*' to Old Testament people was not timelessness or *absence* of time. They knew no such realm. It was, rather, *extension* of time—as far back and as far forward as one could imagine—'time in its wholeness' (JB), 'sense of time past and future' (NEB)."⁴²

We cannot grasp fully all of God's plans. Consequently because we cannot see the full consequences of our works beyond the grave our labor lacks ultimate gratification.

Verse 11 "summarizes the teacher's whole argument, and in context (3:10-15) it serves equally well as a summary for the entire wisdom corpus."⁴³

3:12-13 Solomon repeated his former counsel in view of this limited perspective (cf. 2:24). "Do good" (v. 12) should read "enjoy themselves." We could translate verse 13, "If any man eats and drinks and finds satisfaction in all his toil, it is a gift of God."⁴⁴

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 1162.

⁴¹Kaiser, p. 66.

⁴²Hubbard, pp. 106-7.

⁴³Walter C. Kaiser Jr., "Integrating Wisdom Theology into Old Testament Theology: Ecclesiastes 3:10-15," in *A Tribute to Gleason Archer*, p. 206.

⁴⁴Christian D. Ginsburg, *Song of Songs and Coheleth*, pp. 311-12.

3:14-15 Solomon described God's plans and our proper response in view of our inability to comprehend them fully. We should fear God.

3:16—4:3 A phenomenon that makes it most difficult for us to understand God's ways and respond to them properly is the problem of injustice in this life. Solomon believed God would eventually balance the scales of justice (v. 17) and that He uses injustice for His own purposes (v. 18). Probably Solomon believed judgment would take place on earth (Prov. 22:22-23), though he did not teach this explicitly. God uses injustice to remind us of our finite bestiality, among other things. We behave as beasts and die like them (vv. 18-20). "The same place" (v. 20) is the grave, not that man's future is identical to an animal's. No one can observe any differences between the future of man and animals, but God has revealed these differences. In view of these things Solomon repeated his counsel (v. 22).

God has, of course, enabled us to see what will occur after we die by giving us additional revelation after Solomon's time. The alternative response to the one Solomon advocated is despair, which reflecting on unjust oppression causes (4:1-3).

3. The motivations of labor 4:4-16

The phrase "vanity and striving after wind" (vv. 4, 16) brackets this section. This structure emphasizes the relative vapidness of everything between these statements. The main theme seems to be "the power complex common among humans and ways of reacting to it."⁴⁵

Envy of others 4:4-6

"Every labor and every skill" (v. 4) undoubtedly means every type of labor and skill rather than every individual instance of these things. This is hyperbole. Much achievement is the result of a desire to be superior. Verse 5 seems to be the opposite of verse 4.

"We pass from the rat-race with its hectic scramble for status symbols to the drop-out with his total indifference."⁴⁶

"He is the picture of complacency and unwitting self-destruction, for this comment on him points out a deeper damage than the wasting of his capital. His idleness eats away not only what he has but what he is: eroding his self-control, his grasp of reality, his capacity for care and, in the end, his self-respect."⁴⁷

⁴⁵J. S. Wright, "Ecclesiastes," p. 1165.

⁴⁶Eaton, p. 93.

⁴⁷Kidner, p. 46.

Verse 6 is the middle road between the two preceding extremes.

Greed for self 4:7-12

The reader cannot miss the folly of working just to accumulate more in this powerful description.

"Such a man, even with a wife and children, will have little time for them, convinced that he is toiling for their benefit although his heart is elsewhere, devoted and wedded to his projects."⁴⁸

Solomon commended sharing rather than hoarding by calling attention to several advantages that come from cooperating with other people (vv. 9-12).

Position and prestige 4:13-16

It is also futile to work to gain advancement and popularity.

"He has reached a pinnacle of human glory, only to be stranded there."⁴⁹

Verse 14 evidently describes the poor lad in verse 13 rather than the king. The second lad of verse 15 is the same boy who replaced the former old king. What is in view is a succession of kings none of whom fully satisfies the populace. The point is that even though a man may rise from the bottom of society—this youth had been in prison—to the top, not everyone will accept or appreciate him. Therefore since it is impossible to achieve full acceptance it is foolish to spend one's life seeking it. It is better to stay poor and wise.

We might respond by saying that some acceptance by other people is better than none, but this is an evaluation of short-term advantage. Solomon was thinking and speaking of ultimate long-term significance.

4. The perishable fruits of labor 5:1—6:9

This section emphasizes the folly of trying to find ultimate satisfaction in one's work. Solomon focused on a variety of situations that involve the fruits of labor: money and what it can buy, fame, and pleasure.

The effect of rash vows 5:1-7

"The sacrifice of fools" in view (v. 1) is a rash vow, as is clear from what follows. Verse 3 seems to compare the verbosity of a fool in making a rash vow to God and the endless dreams one often experiences after a very busy day. Much work generates many dreams,

⁴⁸Ibid., pp. 46-47.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 52.

and a fool utters too many words.⁵⁰ If a person makes a rash promise to God and then does not keep it, God may destroy the work of his hands (v. 6). Pleading with the priest ("the messenger of God," v. 6) that the vow was a mistake would not excuse the vow-maker (cf. Deut. 23:21-23).

"Our promise may involve giving to some special work of God or pledging prayer and other support for a missionary. When the representative of the work looks for the fulfillment of our promise, we must not draw back and make an excuse about not having understood what we were required to do."⁵¹

Verse 7 uses dreams to illustrate what is ephemeral. "Fear God" (v. 7) also occurs in 3:14; 7:18; 8:12, 13; and 12:13.

". . . we should try to put ourselves in a position to discover God's way to use what he has given us in our daily life."⁵²

The effect of political officials 5:8-9

The point of these verses seems to be that the fruits of one's work can also disappear as a result of taxes and unfair oppression by political rulers. A hierarchy of officials is in view. By legal and illegal means rulers squeeze money out of the populace. Even so, it is better to have government than not have it. One translation of verse 9 is, "But an advantage to a land for everyone is: a king over cultivated land."⁵³

The effect of personal covetousness 5:10-12

If a rich man is covetous, all that his increasing wealth will bring him will be the necessity of greater vigilance and more anxiety (cf. 1 Tim. 6:9-10). For example, more wealth in the home may lead to burglar alarm systems and the hassle they bring. "To look on" (v. 11) means having to keep an eye on them.

"How often have we read of an athlete—say, a boxer—whose golden moments found him surrounded by an entourage that gladly shared his wealth, but whose twilight days saw him both broke and abandoned. Wealth can carry its own frustration—that was the Preacher's apt observation."⁵⁴

⁵⁰Kaiser, *Ecclesiastes* . . . , p. 75.

⁵¹J. S. Wright, "Ecclesiastes," p. 1168.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Eaton, p. 101.

⁵⁴Hubbard, p. 140.

The effect of misfortune 5:13-17

The Hebrew expression translated "bad investment" (v. 14) refers to any misfortune that results in the loss of wealth. Striving to hoard the fruits of labor is futile because any misfortune can overtake one and reduce him or her to poverty if God permits. Death itself is such a misfortune that overtakes everyone eventually and robs him of his wealth. No one can take the fruits of his labor with him when he dies. Therefore Solomon concluded that we really gain nothing of lasting value from our labor. Verse 17 pictures the miserly workaholic.

The way to enjoy the fruits of one's labor 5:18—6:9

Again Solomon urged the enjoyment of life (v. 18; cf. 2:24-26; 3:12-13, 22), but he warned of some obstacles to that enjoyment. Solomon was not advocating hedonism but the simple enjoyment of life day by day (v. 18). In other words, he recommended that we take some time to enjoy the beautiful experiences of life as we travel down its path.

However not everyone can enjoy life for one reason or another even though one may be wealthy (6:1-2). This problem "weighs heavily on men" (NIV, v. 1; better than NASB "is prevalent among men"). Only in heaven will we find the solution to why this has been the earthly portion of various individuals. A miscarried baby (v. 3) is better off in that it has not experienced as much sorrow as the rich man who could not enjoy his wealth. The "one place" (v. 6) is the grave.

"Better to miscarry at birth than to miscarry throughout life."⁵⁵

Solomon's final word of counsel was to be content with what you have (vv. 8-9; cf. Heb. 13:5). This is the last of nine times the phrase "striving after wind" occurs (cf. 1:14, 17; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6, 16). It opened and closes the section of the book dealing with the ultimate futility of human achievement (1:12—6:9).

III. THE LIMITATIONS OF WISDOM 6:10—11:6

Clues in the text indicate the value and purpose of 6:10—11:6. The phrases "does not know" and "cannot discover" occur frequently (6:12; 7:14, 24, 28; 8:17; 19:1, 12; 10:14; 11:2, 6). Also the recurrence of "it is good" (7:18) and "is better than" (7:2, 5; 9:16, 18) helps us realize that in this section Solomon gave much practical advice on how to live. He did not let us forget that our understanding of God's ways in the present (7:13; cf. 8:17) and in the future (9:1; 10:14; 11:2) is partial. The conclusion is that we should fear God (7:18; 8:12; 12:13) and seek to please Him (7:26; cf. 2:26).

A. GOD'S SOVEREIGN FOREORDINATION OF ALL THINGS 6:10-12

In 6:10-12, Solomon returned to his theme of the immutability and inscrutability of divine providence (i.e., why God allows things to happen as they do; cf. 1:15, 19; 3:11,

⁵⁵Eaton, p. 106.

14, 22). "Named" (v. 10) refers to the practice of expressing the nature of something by giving it an appropriate name. In the ancient world people recognized that the person who named someone or something was sovereign over it. Thus God "called" what he had created day, heaven, man, etc.; and Adam named the woman, the animals, etc. Solomon's point in verse 10 is that God has sovereignly decreed the nature and essence of everything that exists. Consequently it is foolish for man to argue with God about what He has foreordained (v. 10b). More arguing only results in more futility for man (v. 11). Man does not know what is best for him or what his future holds completely (v. 12). Solomon pointed out that we are ignorant of our place in God's all-inclusive plan.

Even though we have more revelation of God's plans and purposes than Solomon did, we still are very ignorant of these things.

"The Latin saying *Solvitur ambulando* ('It is solved by walking') suggests that some problems are elucidated only as one goes forward in practical action (cf. Isa 30:21; as we go, the Lord guides)."⁵⁶

B. GOD'S INSCRUTABLE PLAN CHS. 7—8

Solomon proceeded in this section to focus on the plan of God, His decree. His point was that we cannot fathom it completely.

1. Adversity and prosperity 7:1-14

He began by exposing our ignorance of the significance of adversity and prosperity (7:1-14; cf. Job). Both of these conditions, he noted, can have good and bad effects depending on how a person responds to them. Prosperity is not always or necessarily good (cf. 6:1-12), and adversity, or affliction, is not always or necessarily evil (cf. 7:1-15). Really adversity is often a greater good than prosperity.⁵⁷

"With his sure touch the author now brings in a stimulating change of style and approach. Instead of reflecting and arguing, he will bombard us with proverbs, with their strong impact and varied angles of attack."⁵⁸

7:1 It is better to end life with a good reputation than to begin it auspiciously but then ruin it through folly. This emphasis on the importance of living wisely continues through the rest of the book (cf. 2:26; 11:9; 12:14). The mother rubbed the "good ointment" on her baby and supposedly got it off to a good start in life by doing so.

7:2-4 The point of these verses is that it is wise to bear the brevity of life in mind as one lives. The "heart," mentioned in all three verses, is where we

⁵⁶J. S. Wright, "Ecclesiastes," p. 1173.

⁵⁷Kaiser, *Ecclesiastes . . .*, pp. 80, 82.

⁵⁸Kidner, p. 64.

make moral decisions (cf. Prov. 4:23). Thoughtful rather than thoughtless living is wise (cf. Ps. 90:12). Sobriety contrasts with self-indulgence.

"A sorrow shared may bring more inner happiness than an evening with back-slapping jokers (vv. 3-4)."⁵⁹

- 7:5-6 All things considered it is wiser to live a life of thoughtful self-restraint than to pursue a life of hedonism.
- 7:7-10 Both adversity and prosperity tempt people to abandon a wise lifestyle for one of folly. The wise man's prosperity might tempt him to accept a bribe, or his adversity might tempt him to oppress others (v. 7). Impatience and pride (v. 8), anger (v. 9), and dissatisfaction (v. 10) might also lure him from the submissive attitude that is part of the way of wisdom.
- 7:11-12 Prosperity can also be a good thing, especially if the prosperous person behaves wisely. Note that the wise normally live longer than the foolish (v. 12b).
- 7:13-14 We cannot understand why God uses adversity and prosperity as He does. A man or woman of faith trusts God nonetheless (Rom. 8:28). Therefore we should enjoy the times of prosperity and remember in the times of adversity that God is in control.

The phrase "man cannot discover" or the equivalent is another structural marker in Ecclesiastes that indicates the end of a subsection in chapters 7 and 8 (cf. 7:14, 24, 28 twice; 8:17 thrice). Other key structural markers are the phrases "vanity and striving after wind" (1:14; et al.) and "man does not know" (9:1; et al.).⁶⁰

2. Righteousness and wickedness 7:15-29

Even though the righteous sometimes do not receive a reward in this life and the wicked prosper, it is still better to live righteously.

"Proper evaluation of a man's character helps to explain the apparent inequalities in divine providence."⁶¹

- 7:15-18 Solomon had observed many exceptions to the dogma of retribution (i.e., the belief that God always punishes the wicked with adversity and blesses the righteous with prosperity in this lifetime; v. 15). Therefore we should not conclude that by being righteous we can escape adversity (v. 16). The righteousness in view here seems to be self-righteousness (cf. Matt. 5:20;

⁵⁹J. S. Wright, "Ecclesiastes," p. 1174.

⁶⁰See A. G. Wright, pp. 325-26.

⁶¹Kaiser, *Ecclesiastes* . . . , p. 78.

23:1-36).⁶² We should probably translate "ruin yourself" (v. 16, Heb. *tissomem*) "be appalled, astounded."

Neither should we conclude that because God does not consistently punish the wicked in this life it is all right to sin (v. 17). One who fears God should avoid both of these extremes (v. 18). Solomon was not saying in these verses that a little wickedness and folly are good, the so-called "golden mean." Rather he advocated living life in the light of God's judgment but not falling into the trap of believing in rigid retribution. Even though Solomon was uncertain about the time God would judge, he was sure God would judge righteously.⁶³

7:19-24 Righteousness does not always protect from adversity (vv. 15-16), but wisdom will help guard us against it (v. 19).

"Wisdom is not the knowledge of accumulated facts but the inner strength that comes from a God-instructed conscience."⁶⁴

Wisdom is necessary because righteousness does not protect completely (v. 20). Solomon illustrated the fact that no one is perfectly righteous in verses 21 and 22. If you think you are perfect, just ask those closest to you if you are (v. 21). If people are honest with themselves, they will admit that they are not perfect (v. 22).

"In itself, 21 f. is excellent advice, since to take too seriously what people say of us is asking to get hurt, and in any case we have all said some wounding things in our time."⁶⁵

Wisdom also has its limitations. It is not a completely reliable shield against adversity (vv. 23-24). Even Solomon with all his wisdom could not ward off all adversity. He did not have sufficient wisdom to do this, and no one else does either.

7:25-29 The connections between wisdom and righteousness on the one hand, and folly and wickedness on the other, are especially close in this pericope. As in Proverbs 1—9, Solomon personified folly as a woman (v. 26). As Solomon sought to understand wisdom (v. 25), he learned that the person

⁶²R. N. Whybray, "Qoheleth the Immoralist? (Qoh 7:16-17)," in *Israelite Wisdom . . .*, pp. 191-204; J. S. Wright, "Ecclesiastes," p. 1176; Kaiser, *Ecclesiastes . . .*, p. 86.

⁶³For a more complete defense of this interpretation, see Wayne A. Brindle, "Righteousness and Wickedness in Ecclesiastes 7:15-18," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 23:3 (Autumn 1985):243-57.

⁶⁴J. S. Wright, "Ecclesiastes," p. 1176.

⁶⁵Kidner, p. 69.

who wants to please God will escape folly and wickedness, but the person who prefers to sin will not (v. 26). Folly is worse than death (v. 26).

The "man" in view in verse 28 is the "person" who is pleasing to God (v. 26). The Hebrew word for "man" here (*adam*) is generic and refers to people rather than males in contrast to females. Solomon meant in 28b that a person who is pleasing to God is extremely rare (cf. Job 9:3; 33:23). The reference to "woman" (v. 28c) is a way of expressing in parallelism (with "man") that no one really pleases God completely. A paraphrase of verse 28b-c is, "I have found very few people who please God, no one at all really." The idea definitely is not that one out of 1,000 males pleases God, but no females at all do. This is a good example of Hebrew parallelism that, if unobserved, can lead to a bizarre interpretation.⁶⁶

"Some commentators have suggested that this woman whose heart is a snare and a trap (v. 26) is but the personification of that wickedness which is folly itself. She is the 'strange woman' of Proverbs 1-9. Perhaps this interpretation is the closest to what Solomon intended, for the topic is wisdom from 7:20 to 8:1."⁶⁷

Who is responsible for the universal failure to please God? Solomon said people are, not God (v. 29). God made us upright in the sense of being able to choose to please or not please God. Nevertheless we have all gone our own way in pursuit of "many devices." The same Hebrew word translated "devices" in verse 29 reads "explanation" in verses 25 and 27. The point is not that people have turned aside to sin, but that they have sought out many explanations. They have sought many explanations of what? In the context Solomon was talking about God's plan. Failing to understand fully God's scheme of things, people have turned aside to their own explanations of these things.

3. The value and limitations of wisdom ch. 8

This chapter begins by lauding wisdom (v. 1), and it ends by showing that it has limitations (v. 17).

"At every turn this chapter will face us with our inability to call the tune and master our affairs. On one level after another we find ourselves pinned down, hunted down and disorientated."⁶⁸

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 72, wrote, "This is one man's experience [i.e., the writer's], and he does not universalize it."

⁶⁷Kaiser, *Ecclesiastes . . .*, p. 88.

⁶⁸Kidner, p. 74.

The value of wisdom 8:1-9

In Solomon's day the king had far-reaching power over his subjects. Therefore it became imperative to avoid his wrath. We must keep this background in view because it lies behind what Solomon said in chapter 8.

- 8:1 A wise man understands things that a fool does not. Moreover he is able to behave appropriately. One's facial and general appearances reflect wise behavior (cf. Num. 6:25; Prov. 7:13).
- 8:2-4 The wise man behaves appropriately in the presence of his king. He keeps his oath of allegiance that he has made before God (v. 2). He does not resign from his service (v. 3a) or join in a revolt against the king (v. 3b). Furthermore he does not dispute the king's authority and sovereignty (v. 4).
- 8:5-7 The wise person also knows when and how to speak and act (v. 5). Often people suffer harm as a result of not knowing what will happen and when (vv. 6-7). Consequently they misdirect their words and deeds.
- 8:8-9 Verse 8 means that no one can escape the consequences of his or her own wickedness. The idea is that the king will punish him or her (v. 9). Thus it is important to have wisdom.

The limitations of wisdom 8:10-17

Wisdom can enable a person to avoid the king's wrath (vv. 2-9), but it cannot enable him or her to understand fully why God deals with people as He does (vv. 10-17).

- 8:10-14 There are two apparent inequities in verse 10. First, the wicked get an honorable burial. Second, people soon forget the godly. These verses provide instances of exceptions to the retribution doctrine.
- 8:15 In view of these contradictions Solomon again recommended the enjoyment of life, not in a pleasure-mad way but in the sense of enjoying the fruits of one's labor (cf. 2:24; 3:12-13; 5:18-19). This joy will make labor more enjoyable. We should receive each day's joys as God's good gifts and rejoice in them.
- 8:16-17 Solomon meant that even the wisest, most energetic person could not fully understand God's ways (cf. 7:14b; 28a; Matt. 6:34). This is a point he had made since 6:10.

C. MAN'S IGNORANCE OF THE FUTURE 9:1—11:6

The emphasis in this section (9:1—11:6) is on what man does not know because God has not revealed many things. Solomon also emphasized, however, that the remaining mystery in this subject (8:16-17) must not diminish human joy (9:1-9) or prevent us from working with all our might (9:10—11:6).⁶⁹ The subsections that follow begin "no one knows" or the equivalent (9:1, 12; 11:2; cf. 9:5; 10:14, 15; 11:5 twice, 6).

"Before the positive emphasis of the final three chapters can emerge, we have to make sure that we shall be building on nothing short of hard reality. In case we should be cherishing some comforting illusions, chapter 9 confronts us with the little that we know, then with the vast extent of what we cannot handle: in particular, with death, the ups and downs of fortune, and the erratic favours of the crowd."⁷⁰

1. The future of the righteous on earth 9:1-10

9:1 "All this" refers to the general pattern of God's inconsistent retribution that Solomon had discussed. Even though he could not predict whether a given person would experience prosperity or adversity, he believed all people are in God's hand. He sovereignly controls individual destiny, and He may manifest either apparent love or apparent hate toward anyone in this life.

9:2-3 In the sense just explained all share the same fate. No one knows what God may send him or her. "Clean" (v. 2) means ritually clean. Because we do not know what our fate will be we may yield to temptation to sin (v. 3). Everyone experiences both love and hate in his life, though in differing proportion, and everyone eventually dies.

9:4-6 However the inequities in life and the certainty of death should not make us give up living. Life is better than death. In the ancient Near East people despised dogs and they honored lions. Solomon's point was that it is better to be alive and have no honor than dead and enjoy honor because the living also has consciousness and hope. The living can enjoy life, but the dead cannot.

"The dead do not know anything" does not mean they are insensible. Later revelation indicates that the dead are aware of their feelings, the past, and other things (cf. Matt. 25:46; Luke 16:19-31; et al.). In the context this clause means the dead have no capacity to enjoy life as the living can.

Verses 4-6 do not contradict 4:2-3 where Solomon said the dead are better off than the living. A person who is suffering oppression may feel it is

⁶⁹Kaiser, *Ecclesiastes . . .*, p. 92.

⁷⁰Kidner, p. 80.

preferable to be dead (4:1), but when a person is dead his opportunities for earthly enjoyment are non-existent (9:4-6).

9:7-9 Again Solomon recommended the present enjoyment of the good things God allows us to experience in life (cf. 2:24-26; 3:12-13, 22; 5:18-19). This was his conclusion since our future on the earth is uncertain and since when we die we cannot enjoy these things. In particular, we should enjoy food and drink (v. 7), clean clothing and perfume (v. 8), and marital companionship (v. 9), among other of life's legitimate pleasures. Note that this list includes some luxuries as well as the necessities of life (cf. 5:19).

"God has already approved your works" (v. 7) means such enjoyment is God's will for us. This encouraging word does not contradict the fact that we are the stewards of all God entrusts to us. However it should help us realize that it is not sinful to take pleasure in what God has given us, even luxuries. We need to balance gratefulness and generosity, retaining some things and giving away others. This balance is not easy, but it is important.

9:10 Solomon's second recommendation was diligent work (cf. John 9:4). Work is a privilege that we will not have after we die. Probably toil connected with the curse on nature is in view here. We will be active in service in heaven, for example, but this will not be work as we know it now (Rev. 22:3). If you think work is not a blessing, spend some time talking with someone who has been out of work for a long time.

2. The future of the wise on earth 9:11—10:11

Solomon's emphasis in 9:2-10 was on the fact that a righteous person could not be more certain of his or her earthly future than the wicked. In 9:11—10:11 his point was that the wise cannot be more sure of his or her earthly future than the fool.

9:11-12 Wisdom does not guarantee a good job or a prosperous future. Likewise sometimes the fastest runner does not win a foot race and the stronger army does not win a battle. Usually the best succeed, but not always. The reason for this is that everyone is subject to misfortune that we cannot anticipate or control (v. 12).

9:13-16 In this illustration clearly wisdom is better than strength, but even so it does not guarantee a reward. People generally do not value wisdom as highly as wealth even though wisdom is really worth more.

9:17—10:1 Just a little folly can decrease the value of wisdom. For example, a wise person can end his opportunity to provide wisdom to others by giving foolish advice just once. This, too, is unfortunate, but it is a fact of life.⁷¹

10:2-7 A wise person may also lose his opportunity to give counsel through the error of someone else, for example, one of the rulers he has been advising. "The right" and "the left" (v. 2) are not the correct way and the incorrect way. They are not the political right and left, conservatism and liberalism, either. They are the place of protection and the place of danger (cf. Ps. 16:8; 110:5; 121:5). The "road" (v. 3) is not a literal highway but the fool's metaphorical way of life. The wise man does not quit his job when his boss gets angry with him. He maintains his composure and so gives the impression, rightly or wrongly, that his boss did not need to be angry.

"The lesson is that the self-controlled person who has less rank is really more powerful than the out-of-control supposed superior."⁷²

Unfortunately one's good work does not always receive the praise it deserves. Sometimes the promotion goes to the less qualified person because of the supervisor's caprice. Consequently the ruler's illogical decision nullifies the better worker's wisdom (vv. 5-7).

10:8-11 Improper timing can also nullify wisdom. Four different situations illustrate the fact that though wisdom is valuable in a variety of everyday tasks (vv. 8-10) one can lose its advantage if the timing is not right (v. 11).

3. The folly of criticism in view of the uncertain future 10:12-20

Since we do not know what our earthly future holds (vv. 12-15), even though governmental officials may prove reprehensible (vv. 16-19) it is not wise to criticize them (v. 20).

10:12-15 Generally wise people speak graciously, but fools destroy themselves by the way they speak. The fool continues to talk even though neither he nor anyone else can tell what the future holds. The picture here seems to be of the fool making dogmatic statements about the future. The fool also does not even perceive what is most obvious. He is so shortsighted that he sees no value in his work (v. 15a). "How to go to a city" is a figure of speech such as "when to come in out of the rain" (v. 15b). The point is that the fool is a jerk.

⁷¹The theme expressed in 9:17-18 is elaborated on in 10:1-20. See Graham S. Ogden, "Qoheleth IX 17—X 20: Variations on the Theme of Wisdom's Strength and Vulnerability," *Vetus Testamentum* 30 (1980):27-37, reprinted in Zuck, ed., *Reflecting with . . .*, pp. 331-40.

⁷²Hubbard, p. 213.

10:16-19 These proverbs show what bad effects can come from unqualified, irresponsible leadership (cf. Isa. 5:11; Acts 2:15). Verse 19 reflects the bad attitudes of the profligate leaders.

". . . the point is not that every man has his price but that every gift has its use—and silver, in the form of money, is the most versatile of all."⁷³

10:20 In spite of such bad leadership Solomon urged restraint. If you complain, those in authority may eliminate you. Corrupt officials often have supporters in the most private places who take the names and words of complainers back to their masters.

Was Solomon saying that people should submit to governmental corruption and oppression without ever speaking out? The practices of Jesus, the prophets, and the apostles cast doubt on this interpretation. Probably Solomon had conditions in view in which there is no possibility that speaking out will produce any change for the better. In this section he was addressing the fact that wise people may lose their influence because of the actions of others (10:12-20). His point was, do not endanger your future unnecessarily. He was not speaking about how to affect change in a crooked government (cf. Isa. 5:11-12; Amos 6:4-6; 2 Pet. 13-19).

"Everything that has been said about wisdom and folly points again to the main lesson of Ecclesiastes: the need to face life as it really is, and take our life day by day from the hand of a sovereign God."⁷⁴

4. Wise behavior in view of the uncertain future 11:1-6

"At last the Teacher is approaching the climax of his book. We cannot see God's whole plan, and there is nothing in this world that we can build on so as to find satisfaction or the key to the meaning of things. Yet we are to fulfill God's purpose by accepting our daily lot in life as from him and by thus pleasing him make each day a good day. But how can we please him when there is so much we cannot understand? The Teacher has already shown that certain things stand out as right or wrong, and a sensible conscience will see these as an indication of what God desires. This section gives further wise advice in the light of an uncertain future. We must use common sense in sensible planning and in eliminating as many of the uncertainties as we can."⁷⁵

Ignorance of the future should lead to diligent work, not despair.

⁷³Kidner, p. 95.

⁷⁴Eaton, p. 138.

⁷⁵J. S. Wright, "Ecclesiastes," pp. 1188-89.

11:1-2 Casting one's bread on the water (v. 1) probably refers to commercial transactions involving the transportation of commodities by ship, not to charitable acts.⁷⁶ If you follow the advice in this verse literally you will experience disappointment. It probably refers to buying and selling. Verse 2 advocates diversifying your investments rather than putting all of your resources in one investment.

"*Seven or eight*' is a Hebrew numerical formula called X, X + 1. It occurs frequently in Proverbs (chaps. 6, 30) and in the first two chapters of Amos. Here it is not to be taken literally but means 'plenty and more than plenty,' 'the widest possible diversification within the guidelines of prudence. . . .' Seven means 'plenty,' and eight means, 'Go a bit beyond that.'"⁷⁷

11:3-4 Do not wait until conditions are perfect before you go to work, but labor diligently even though conditions may appear foreboding. After all, God controls these conditions, and we cannot tell whether good or bad conditions will materialize.

11:5 "Few parents understand precisely how a baby is formed, but most follow the rules of common sense for the welfare of the mother and the unborn child. This is exactly the application that the Teacher makes here to the plan of God. Indeed, it illustrates the whole theme of the book. We cannot understand all the ways God works to fulfill his plan, but we can follow God's rules for daily living and thus help bring God's purpose to birth."⁷⁸

11:6 Since the future is in God's hands, the wise person proceeds with his work diligently hoping his efforts will yield fruit, as they usually do.

"Put in a nutshell the *theme* of the passage is this: we should use wisdom boldly and carefully, cannily yet humbly, taking joy from life while remembering that our days of joy are limited by the certainty of death."⁷⁹

IV. THE WAY OF WISDOM 11:7—12:14

In 1:12—6:9 Solomon demonstrated that all work is ultimately futile for two reasons. It does not yield anything really permanent under the sun, and we can never be sure we will enjoy the fruits of our labor before we die. In 6:10—11:6 he pointed out that we can never be sure which of our efforts will succeed because we do not know God's plans or

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 1189.

⁷⁷Hubbard, p. 227.

⁷⁸J. S. Wright, "Ecclesiastes," p. 1189.

⁷⁹Hubbard, p. 225.

what the future holds. In 11:7—12:14 he emphasized how to live acceptably before God in view of these realities.

"The Teacher has discussed how we should act in view of the uncertainties of life. We must recognize the certainties but must plan in such a way as not to be thrown off balance when the unexpected happens. Now the Teacher goes on to speak of the certainty of growing up and growing old."⁸⁰

A. JOYOUS AND RESPONSIBLE LIVING 11:7—12:7

Solomon had already advocated the enjoyment of life and responsible living in several of the preceding sections (2:24-26; 3:12-13, 22; 5:18-19; 8:15; 9:7-10). Now he stressed these points.

1. Joyful living 11:7-10

11:7-8 The first reason we should enjoy life now is that we cannot do so after we die. As Christians we realize that life beyond the grave will be much better for believers than life on this earth. Solomon would not have disputed this had he known what we do as a result of revelation given after his lifetime. For Solomon the future after death was unclear, enigmatic, and therefore vaporous (Heb. *hebel*, "futility" in v. 8) in this sense (cf. 8:10, 14). Solomon's advice to enjoy life is still good since our earthly experience is indeed short, and we will never return this way again. Even though the future is bright for the believer, the relative futility of our work and the uncertainty of our future on the earth still make joyful living now wise.

11:9-10 The second reason to enjoy life is that youth is fleeting.⁸¹ Solomon balanced his counsel to the youth to follow his or her impulses and desires with a reminder that God will judge us all eventually. Solomon probably thought of God's judgments before death (cf. 2:24-26; 7:17).

"To older people it may seem to be too risky to advise a young person to walk in the ways of his heart and the sight of his eyes. Yet the advice is coupled with a reminder of responsibility before God. This is not to take away with one hand what is given with the other because a sense of responsibility belongs to youth just as vitality does."⁸²

In all his writings Solomon never advocated sinful self-indulgence, only the enjoyment of life's legitimate pleasures and good gifts.

⁸⁰J. S. Wright, "Ecclesiastes," p. 1190.

⁸¹See Kaiser, *Ecclesiastes* . . . , p. 116.

⁸²J. S. Wright, "Ecclesiastes," p. 1191.

2. Responsible living 12:1-7

This pericope expands the ideas Solomon introduced in 11:9-10 by focusing on advancing old age and death.⁸³ These ideas are the ultimate frustration and the epitome of impermanence that we can experience.

The basic imperative 12:1

Again Solomon began with a clear statement of his point and then proceeded to prove and illustrate its truth in the verses that follow. "Remember" means to live your life with what you know about God clearly in view, not just to remember that there is a God (cf. 11:9-10; 12:13; Deut. 8:18; Ps. 119:55). "Creator" connotes God as the One to whom we are responsible because we are His creatures (cf. v. 7; Gen. 2:7; 3:19). The "evil days" are the days of old age and death (cf. 11:10; 12:2-5).⁸⁴

The coming of old age 12:2-5

Verses 2-7 are full of figures of speech that picture old age and death.⁸⁵

12:2-3 Solomon likened the evil days first to an approaching rainstorm (v. 2) that is fearful and uncertain (cf. 11:7-8). The Hebrews regarded any decline in a person's vital energy as a sign that death was beginning to set in (cf. 1 Kings 1:1-4; Ps. 18:4-5; 88:3-5).

The "watchmen of the house" (v. 3) probably refer to one's arms and hands, and the "mighty men" to the legs. The "grinding ones" are probably the teeth, and "those who look through windows" the eyes.

12:4 "The doors to the street" are probably the lips that are shut because of the absence of teeth in the mouth, "the grinding mill." The writer alluded to the inability of old people to sleep soundly as well as to their loss of hearing.

12:5 Aged individuals become more fearful of heights, traffic, and travel. The "almond tree" blossoms white as the hair of an old person. An elderly person is less sprightly in his or her movements. The "caperberry," apparently an appetite stimulant, is a poor translation that the Septuagint

⁸³See Barry C. Davis, "Ecclesiastes 12:1-8—Death, an Impetus for Life," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148:591 (July-September 1991):298-318.

⁸⁴For a study of Qoheleth's view of youth and old age, see James L. Crenshaw, "Youth and Old Age in Qoheleth," *Hebrew Annual Review* 10 (1986):1-12. He and Eaton took verses 3-5 as describing aging whereas Hubbard, Fox (*Qohelet and His Contradictions*), and Ogden believed they picture death.

⁸⁵See G. A. Barton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes*, pp. 186-91; Harry Torcszyner, "The Riddle in the Bible," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 1 (1924):125-49; Michael Leahy, "The Meaning of Ecclesiastes 12:1-5," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 19 (1952):297-300, reprinted in Zuck, ed., *Reflecting with . . .*, pp. 375-79; and Michael V. Fox, "Aging and Death in Qoheleth 12," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 42 (1988):55-77, reprinted in Zuck, ed., *Reflecting with . . .*, pp. 381-99.

introduced. The text should read "and desire fails," which gives the same meaning. Man's "dark house" (rather than "eternal home") is a reference to the grave, Sheol.⁸⁶

The coming of death 12:6-7

12:6 Solomon described the end of life first as the extinguishing of a light. The "golden bowl" is a bowl that holds a flame. When the "silver cord" that holds it breaks, the bowl crashes to the floor and the light goes out. Gold and silver express the great value of life.

The second description of death is water that one can no longer draw out of a well.

The "wording gives us a picture of the ruined apparatus plus the wheel as they have crashed down into the old cistern. So man breaks down and falls into a pit also."⁸⁷

Whereas the first figure emphasizes the value of life, this one stresses its fragile nature. The pitcher would have been clay.

12:7 This verse describes the reversal of the process by which God originally created man (Gen. 2:7; cf. Job 34:14-15; Ps. 104:29-30).

B. THE CONCLUDING SUMMARY 12:8-14

In conclusion Solomon repeated his original thesis (v. 8; cf. 1:2) and his counsel in view of life's realities (vv. 13-14). In between these statements he set forth his source of authority for writing what we have in Ecclesiastes (vv. 9-12).

12:8 All human work (1:12—6:9) and wisdom (6:10—11:6) are ultimately ephemeral (i.e., lacking ability to produce anything of ultimate substance or worth in this life).

12:9-12 The phrase "these collections" (v. 11) refers to other collections of wise sayings (e.g., Job and Proverbs). Ultimately all wisdom comes from God. "Goads" (v. 11) are prodding sticks, and people who master this wisdom literature are similar to "well-driven nails" in that they are stable and secure.

"Beyond this" (v. 12) evidently refers to beyond the wisdom literature that God has revealed, in view of verse 11. Solomon warned his disciple that

⁸⁶For reasons why "dark house" is the preferable translation of the Hebrew *bet olam*, see Ronald F. Youngblood, "Qoheleth's 'Dark House' (Eccles. 12:5)," in *A Tribute to Gleason Archer*, pp. 211-27, also reprinted in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 29:4 (December 1986), pp. 397-410.

⁸⁷H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes*, p. 286.

looking elsewhere in other books for divine wisdom would only wear him out.

"Writing was well established as a hallmark of civilization from about 3500 BC onwards."⁸⁸

This verse does not say that all study is tiring, though that is true. It means that study of books other than what God has revealed to learn wisdom is an endless, wearisome occupation. This is not to say we should avoid reading books other than the Bible. Nonetheless the main place to look when you want to find true wisdom is God's Word.

12:13-14 Solomon's concluding statement reiterated what he said earlier (2:24-26; 7:15-18; 11:9-10; 12:1) and elsewhere (Prov. 1:7; cf. Job 28:28). Trust and obedience are what everyone owes God in view of future judgment.

"Though a future judgment after death is indeed the solution to the enigma Solomon had observed in the unequal distribution of justice in human history (cf. 7:15; 8:14), no evidence suggests that Solomon believed in [i.e., was aware of] such a judgment. Life after death was as enigmatic to him (cf. 11:8) as the unequal distribution of justice. His emphasis was on *this life* ('under the sun') and its opportunities for service (cf. 9:10; 12:1-7) and enjoyment (cf. 2:24-26; 3:12, 22; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-9; 11:7-10); he thought life after death offered no such opportunities (cf. 9:5-6, 10). Therefore he did not comment on any differences *after* death between the righteous and the wicked, the wise and the fools, man and beast."⁸⁹

With the greater light of revelation that we enjoy it is even more incumbent on us to follow Solomon's counsel. We should be content to leave the enigmas of life in God's hands. We should also follow Solomon's wise counsel to enjoy life as God enables us to do so and to serve God acceptably while we can.⁹⁰

"What is the 'profit' of living? What does a man get for all his work? He gets the living God! And his whole profit consists of fearing Him and obeying His Word."⁹¹

⁸⁸Eaton, p. 155.

⁸⁹Glenn, pp. 1006-7.

⁹⁰See Greg W. Parsons, "Guidelines for Understanding and Proclaiming the Book of Ecclesiastes," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 160:638 (April-June 2003):159-73; 160:639 (July-September 2003):283-304..

⁹¹Kaiser, *Ecclesiastes . . .*, p. 125.

Conclusion

The Book of Ecclesiastes contains an argument that is very difficult to unfold because the ideas that connect succeeding portions of the text are not always easy to discover. This has led many a commentator to despair.

"A connected and orderly argument, an elaborate arrangement of parts, is as little to be looked for here as in the special portion of the Book of Proverbs which begins with chapter X., or as in the alphabetical Psalms."⁹²

One of the keys to staying with Solomon in his reasoning is to understand the perspective from which he spoke. Phrases such as "under the sun" and "advantage," and remembering how much special revelation Solomon enjoyed, are absolutely crucial to understanding what he was and was not saying. The recurrence of other key phrases such as "vanity and striving after wind," "does not know," "cannot discover," and "you do not know" also help us. They note the movements of his thought from one section and emphasis to another. The accurate understanding of key terms such as "wise," "foolish," "prosperity," "adversity," "righteous," and "wicked" also clarify Solomon's thought.

"Qoheleth's intent in his writing is to pass judgment on man's misguided endeavors at mastering life by pointing out its limits and mysteries. He would prefer that man replace such false and illusory hopes with a confidence based on the joy of creation as God's gift."⁹³

What Solomon observed about life is still as true today as it was when he lived. Neither the progress of revelation nor the progress of civilization have proved the preacher's inspired book false or his advice bad.

This book needs more popular exposition than it has received because it exposes the error of modern man's ways so effectively. Bible teachers and preachers have neglected it because it is difficult to understand and expound. Nevertheless most people in our generation live in a superficial world of unreality that Ecclesiastes cuts right through. Part of our difficulty in understanding the book is that we, too, think this way and assume Solomon was speaking on this level. However, he was dealing with the more fundamental issues of human existence that not many people think or talk about today.

⁹²Ernest W. Hengstenberg, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, p. 15. See also Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, p. 188.

⁹³Johnston, p. 26.

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