

Session 6:

Ecclesiastes

Other non-fiction books by the author:

Biblical Oddities

Even So, Come, Lord Jesus

Collected Sunday School Lessons (2008 – 2009)

Collected Sunday School Lessons (2010 – 2011)

Collected Sunday School Lessons (2012 - 2013)

Dinosaurs in History

Summary of Old Testament Events

Chapter Summary of the Bible

The Kings of Israel and Judah

The Lost Doctrines

Commentary on the Book of Jude

Class 1: Creation

Class 2: Abraham

Class 3: The Mosaic Law

Class 4: Supernatural Beings

Class 5: The Case for Christianity

Session 6: Ecclesiastes

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1. The Message of Ecclesiastes

Normally when I preach or teach a series on something I do topical sermons. I've taught on the Mosaic Law, and on angels and demons, and on many other subjects. I've even done a sermon on aliens. The reason I do so much topical preaching is because usually I only have a single opportunity to say something. Unless you're preaching on Ill John, there's simply no way to cover an entire book of the Bible in a single sermon.

This time, however, I'm going to engage in expository preaching. That means I'm actually going to attempt to preach through a book of the Bible – and the book that I've picked is Ecclesiastes. Now, I'm going to have to go through it a bit fast, since I only have four weeks and this book has 12 chapters. I don't have six months to spend talking about it. However, that's perfectly fine; 4 weeks is long enough to get across the point that this book is making.

I chose this book for a couple reasons. First of all, this book really doesn't get a lot of attention. It's a fairly small book, tucked between the much-more-famous Proverbs and the rather obscure Song of Solomon (which is one book that no one *ever* preaches on). One reason Ecclesiastes doesn't get a lot of attention is because it is a bit strange. People have trouble interpreting it and understanding what it's trying to say. In fact, the book has upset some people so much that there have even been calls to remove it from the canon altogether. It's not an easy book.

However, I think it's an important one. Its message is very relevant to our time, and it has something to say that we very much need to hear. It is an antidote to the materialistic culture in which we find ourselves. This book has a lot of devastating things

to say about the society we're living in. It is a wake-up call – and one we need to heed.

Book Background

The title of this book, in Hebrew, is the exact same word that is translated as “Preacher” in 1:1. In other words, “The book of Ecclesiastes” could actually be translated “The book of the Preacher”. This Preacher was a very interesting person. Most scholars have attributed this book to Solomon, and there's a lot of evidence to support that. The first verse tells us that it was written by the son of David, who was the king in Jerusalem:

Ecclesiastes 1:1: “The words of the Preacher,
the son of David, king in Jerusalem.”

We are also told that its author was very wealthy and had more wisdom than any of his predecessors:

Ecclesiastes 1:16: “I communed with mine own heart, saying, Lo, I am come to great estate, and have gotten more wisdom than all they that have been before me in Jerusalem: yea, my heart had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.”

Finally, we're told that this person collected proverbs:

Ecclesiastes 12:9: “And moreover, because the preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yea, he gave good heed, and sought out, and set in order many proverbs.”

So Ecclesiastes says that the author of this book was the son of David, was king in Jerusalem, had great wealth, had tremendous wisdom, and collected proverbs. Do we know any king who was like that? The answer is obvious: this book was most likely written by Solomon. It really couldn't be much clearer.

Now, some people argue that this book was written by someone who was *pretending* to be Solomon. Another way to put that argument is that the author was lying about his identity. I think that argument is extremely unpersuasive. First of all, there's no evidence to support it. It doesn't even make any sense: after all, if the author wasn't Solomon but wanted to make a point based on Solomon's life, all he had to do was say "Let me tell you about Solomon and some of the things he did, and how it all turned out." There's no need to lie about it and pretend to be someone you're not! Ecclesiastes 1:1 tells us that these are the words of the Preacher, and I believe that's exactly what they are. They are *not* the words of someone who was *pretending* to be the Preacher.

Book Date

When was this book written? Well, when it comes to the dates of Old Testament kings, there is a great deal of disagreement. The general consensus seems to be that Solomon died in 931 BC. Since Ecclesiastes seems to have been written at the end of his life, we can probably assume the book was written shortly before his death. That means that this book is about 3000 years old.

Book Type

The book of Ecclesiastes is what scholars call “wisdom literature”. Wisdom literature teaches people how to apply God's commands to the circumstances of everyday life. Books like Exodus and Deuteronomy told the Jews what God's commands were, but they really didn't go into the matters of practical application.

For example, the sixth commandment is as follows:

Exodus 20:13: “Thou shalt not kill.”

However, the book of Proverbs expands upon this. It gives us a bit of practical application:

Proverbs 1:10: “My son, if sinners entice thee, consent thou not.

11 If they say, Come with us, let us lay wait for blood, let us lurk privily for the innocent without cause:

12 Let us swallow them up alive as the grave; and whole, as those that go down into the pit:

13 We shall find all precious substance, we shall fill our houses with spoil:

14 Cast in thy lot among us; let us all have one purse:

15 My son, walk not thou in the way with them; refrain thy foot from their path:

16 For their feet run to evil, and make haste to shed blood.

17 Surely in vain the net is spread in the sight of any bird.

18 And they lay wait for their own blood; they lurk privily for their own lives.

19 So are the ways of every one that is greedy of gain; which taketh away the life of the owners thereof.”

As you can see, its message is essentially the same as what we find in the Ten Commandments, but it goes into much greater detail. It warns the reader not to listen to the enticement of sinners. It points out the utter folly of throwing in your lot with murderous bandits, and reveals that path leads only to death. Exodus gave the commandment; Proverbs expanded upon the application.

Proverbs is full of little bits of wisdom. For example, it encourages diligence:

Proverbs 6:9: “How long wilt thou sleep, O sluggard? when wilt thou arise out of thy sleep?

10 Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep:

11 So shall thy poverty come as one that travelleth, and thy want as an armed man.”

We find a similar command in Ecclesiastes:

Ecclesiastes 10:18: “By much slothfulness the building decayeth; and through idleness of the hands the house droppeth through.”

As you can see, wisdom literature shows people how to live out the law in the practical matters of everyday life. Ecclesiastes is not the only wisdom literature in the Bible; there is also Proverbs, Job, and parts of the book of Psalms. So if you're wondering how to live out a godly life, those books are a good place to start. They contain a great deal of very practical advice.

Knowing this gives us a hint about the purpose of

Ecclesiastes: it was intended to help you understand life so you could make godly decisions. In other words, it was written to show you how to live wisely. However, over the centuries this book has not been appreciated. People have complained that it is far too pessimistic and have even clamored for it to be removed from the Bible. They claim that it is the meaningless ramblings of a lost man who is searching for meaning – but the book's critics are quite wrong. As we will discover during the course of this study, this book has not received the appreciation that it deserves.

Book Interpretation

The normal course of business when it comes to expository preaching is to start with the first chapter and then work your way through to the end. However, in this case I can't do that. Before we can start talking about the book at all we need to create a framework for interpreting it. In other words, before we can start studying the chapters we have to understand the point that the writer was trying to make. Only then will the chapters start making sense.

You see, when it comes to Bible study, sometimes you have to step back and create an interpretive framework before you can dive into a book. A great example of this is the book of Revelation. There are four major different ways to interpret that book, and the interpretation that you pick has a tremendous impact on what you believe the book is actually saying.

For example, the **preterist** view teaches that the book of Revelation is describing the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD. It teaches that everything in Revelation has already occurred. In

fact, a full preterist will claim that Christ has already returned, the dead have already been raised, and that the final judgment has already happened. Personally, I find this view completely ridiculous. I don't see how anyone can honestly believe that the Second Coming has already happened. If it happened in 70 AD, then that means it happened while the apostle John was still alive – and yet John missed it, and the early church missed it, and everyone throughout history completely missed it until modern times when someone came up with this idea. In my opinion I believe this is the least persuasive of all the end-times views. This view is pretty common in Presbyterian and Reformed circles.

The second view is the **historical** view. It teaches that Revelation describes the key events in history that will take place between the First and Second Comings. People who interpret Revelation this way try to tie different historical events to the text. This view is clever, but I don't find it convincing. The attempts I've seen at interpreting Revelation this way seem very arbitrary. Given that you have 2000 years of world history to work with and there are no rules to constrain you, it's really not that hard to find something, somewhere that you could connect to a chapter in Revelation, if you interpret that chapter in just the right symbolic way. This view is fairly rare.

The third view is the **amillennial** view. That view says that Revelation is a symbolic look at the struggle between good and evil during the Church Age. It teaches that the antichrist, the Mark of the Beast, the Millennium, and all the rest is just symbolism and that Revelation is an allegory. This view is very common; in fact, it seems to be far more common than the premillennial view.

The final major view is **premillennialism**. This view teaches that Revelation describes the actual events that will occur during the seven-year Tribulation. That's the view that believes in a literal Rapture and a literal Mark of the Beast, and that teaches that when Christ returns He will reign over the

world for a literal thousand years. This is the view that I hold, for reasons far too complicated to get into here.

My point is that when people approach the book of Revelation, they do so from one of four different frameworks. Someone who believes that Revelation was fulfilled in 70 AD will see it *very* differently from someone who believes that Revelation describes the major historical events of the past two thousand years. Likewise, someone who believes that Revelation is an allegory will see it in a very different light from someone who believes that Revelation is describing the actual events that will take place during the Tribulation period. The framework you have chosen will drive your interpretation of the book.

The same is true for Ecclesiastes. If you believe that this book was written by a depressed atheist, that will color what you believe the book is saying. Therefore, it is vital that we take some time to figure out what the author was trying to communicate. Once we have a solid framework in place, *then* we can delve into the actual text. Otherwise you are going to completely miss the point.

The first key point I want to make is that this book is not pessimistic. It was not written by a fool and it does not give us the atheist's view of life. The reason we know this is because the book tells us that it is a book of wisdom from God:

Ecclesiastes 12:9: “And moreover, because the preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yea, he gave good heed, and sought out, and set in order many proverbs.

10 The preacher sought to find out acceptable words; and that which was written was upright, even words of truth.

11 The words of the wise are as goads, and as nails fastened by the masters of assemblies,

which are given from one shepherd."

When the Preacher wrote this book, he was trying to teach the people wisdom. He wanted to teach them something meaningful and upright. He was giving them the words of truth. More importantly, he said that these words were "given from one shepherd". That is as clear a claim to divine inspiration as you could possibly want. This book isn't the writings of a madman; it is wisdom from the True Shepherd, Jesus Christ. These are God's words, given to us for our instruction. This is a book of *wisdom*, not a book of foolishness.

In other words, this is a book of divine instruction, and we should take its words to heart. Unlike Proverbs, it has a single theme. What we need to do is figure out what that theme is so we can make sense of the text.

Since we know that this book contains wisdom from God, that point will be our anchor. The author was trying to communicate a meaningful, divine truth. But what truth was it?

Well, let's do a little more digging. The book starts out by saying that everything is vanity:

Ecclesiastes 1:2: "Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity."

This is where people start to think "See? This guy was just a depressed loser. Life is *not* vanity. He just needed antidepressants or something." The problem with this view is that Solomon isn't the only person in the Bible to make that claim. The apostle Paul said the very same thing:

Romans 8:20: "For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope, . . .

22 For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now.”

What was the creature subject to? Vanity. What was affected by this vanity? The whole creation – also known as “everything”. Paul could just as easily have said that *all is vanity*. Paul and Solomon are reminding us of a truth that we have forgotten.

The Hebrew word translated “vanity” in Ecclesiastes (Strong's #1892) means emptiness, or something that is unsatisfactory or transitory. Imagine instead that the author is saying “Unsatisfactory, saith the Preacher; everything is unsatisfactory. All of these things aren't going to last. They may endure for a while, but they will pass away.” Solomon believed that the world was unsatisfactory. The things in this world aren't going to last – they come and then they go.

If you've read your Bibles then you know that Solomon wasn't the only person to point out that the world and its contents aren't going to last forever. The book of Psalms makes the same point about life:

Psalm 39:5: “Behold, thou hast made my days as an handbreadth; and mine age is as nothing before thee: verily every man at his best state is altogether vanity. Selah.”

Psalm 144:4: “Man is like to vanity: his days are as a shadow that passeth away.”

The apostle John tells us that this world is passing away:

1 John 2:17: “And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.”

Peter tells us that everything in this world is going to be destroyed:

2 Peter 3:10: “But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.”

The apostle Paul tells us that the things that we can see are just temporal:

2 Corinthians 4:18: “While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal.”

Despite all these other passages echoing the very same point that Ecclesiastes makes, there seems to be a disconnect when we read Ecclesiastes. When Solomon points out that all of creation is subject to vanity and that the things of this world are going to pass away and be destroyed, we accuse him of being overly morose and depressing. But the fact is the rest of the Bible *makes that very same point*. The apostles were not shy about telling us that this world, and everything in it, is going to be destroyed. Nothing is going to last. Everything that we can see is just temporary. The only difference between Solomon and the apostles is that Solomon is going to spend 12 entire chapters driving this point home.

Psalm 39:5 tells us that man, even in his best state, is altogether vanity. The book of Ecclesiastes proves this statement

beyond a doubt. Solomon is going to tell us in great detail exactly *why* that is the case.

It's also worth noting that Solomon and Peter make the same argument and draw the same conclusion from it. Right after Peter tells us that the whole world is going to be destroyed, he says this:

2 Peter 3:11: “Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness,”

Peter tells us that since everything is going to be destroyed, we should spend our lives *pursuing holiness*. Guess what? After Solomon tells us that everything is vanity, he ends the book by making *that exact same point*:

Ecclesiastes 12:13: “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.

14 For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.”

Since everything is vanity, Solomon tells us that we should fear God and keep His commandments. In other words, we should pursue holiness – which is exactly what Peter said. Since everything is going to be destroyed, we should fear God and do what is right. Peter and Solomon are on the same page.

Everything Matters

Since Solomon is making the argument that “everything is vanity”, you might expect him to then say that we should live as we please because nothing really matters. However, as we have seen, Solomon actually said exactly the opposite. He warned us that even though wickedness abounds and corruption is everywhere, we should still live with care because God will judge men for their actions:

Ecclesiastes 3:16: “And moreover I saw under the sun the place of judgment, that wickedness was there; and the place of righteousness, that iniquity was there.

17 I said in mine heart, God shall judge the righteous and the wicked: for there is a time there for every purpose and for every work.”

Does Solomon believe in “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you die?” No, he does not. Instead he tells us to live with care because we *will* be judged. Wickedness may abound in high places, but the day will come when God will judge it. He advises us to respond to life by *pursuing holiness*, because the way we live our lives *matters*. The choices that we make matter. Our sins are serious business. People claim that this book is the ravings of a lost sinner, but you tell me: does that really sound like something an atheist would say? Doesn't that instead sound like *a preacher*?

So how do we respond to all of this? By living wisely and fearing God:

Ecclesiastes 5:1: “Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools: for they

consider not that they do evil.

2 Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few.

3 For a dream cometh through the multitude of business; and a fool's voice is known by multitude of words.

4 When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for he hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed.

5 Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay.

6 Suffer not thy mouth to cause thy flesh to sin; neither say thou before the angel, that it was an error: wherefore should God be angry at thy voice, and destroy the work of thine hands?"

Solomon never advocates living a careless life. Instead he always goes back to the same point: fear God. Be careful when dealing with God. Do not make rash promises or vows; if you make a vow to God then you had better do what you promised. Keep yourself from sin and live wisely. Do not be a fool, for God does not have pleasure in fools.

Solomon never says "Since all is vanity, you might as well do as you please." Instead he says "Since all is vanity, live wisely, because God will hold you accountable." That is the point that this book is trying to make.

Time And Chance

You also need to keep in mind that you don't know how

things are going to turn out:

Ecclesiastes 9:11: “I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.

12 For man also knoweth not his time: as the fishes that are taken in an evil net, and as the birds that are caught in the snare; so are the sons of men snared in an evil time, when it falleth suddenly upon them.”

You see, life can always take an unexpected turn. You may be the fastest man in the world, but that doesn't mean you're going to win the race. What if you become sick before the race? What if you get into an accident? What if you come down with appendicitis? What if something comes up and you can't make it? You may be the very best, but there are a thousand things that can happen that might prevent you from achieving what you thought you might achieve.

You don't know how long you're going to live, and you have no guarantee of success. Because of this, you need to live your life with care and make the most of each opportunity. You need to live soberly.

Solomon is not the only person who made this point. James said the same thing:

James 4:13: “Go to now, ye that say, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain:

14 Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then

vanisheth away.

15 For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that.”

You may *think* you know what tomorrow will bring, but you really don't. It would be very easy for God to bring some unexpected event into your life that changes everything.

The problem is that we tend to think that we have life under control. We believe we know what's going to happen tomorrow, and next week, and next month. We have forgotten just how small we really are. We think we know the future, but we don't.

Sow Your Seed

Solomon tells us that if we spend our time watching the signs and trying to figure out the future, we will never accomplish anything:

Ecclesiastes 11:3: “If the clouds be full of rain, they empty themselves upon the earth: and if the tree fall toward the south, or toward the north, in the place where the tree falleth, there it shall be.

4 He that observeth the wind shall not sow; and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap.

5 As thou knowest not what is the way of the spirit, nor how the bones do grow in the womb of her that is with child: even so thou knowest not the works of God who maketh all.

6 In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand: for thou

knowest not whether shall prosper, either this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good.”

Since we do not know what will happen – because *God* is the one who controls the future – we should respond by living life, being generous, and attempting to accomplish as much as we can. It may be that God will bless our efforts with success. After all, if God chooses to bless us then we *will* succeed.

The book of Psalms makes the very same point:

Psalm 127:1: “Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it: except the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain.”

The success of our efforts depends on the Lord – and who can tell what the Lord will do? That is why we should sow as much seed as possible. Who knows what the Lord will do with it?

Conclusion

In the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon is giving us a reality check. He reminds us of something that we already should have known: that this world, and the things that it contains, are going to pass away. On top of that, life isn't very fair: there are times when things *should* have worked out, and yet due to circumstances beyond your control they failed. You may think you know the future, but you really don't. Only God knows how things are going to turn out.

Since all of these things are true, Solomon commands us to honor God with our lives and live diligently. Since this world is passing away, we ought to pursue holiness. Since we don't know

how things will turn out, we should try anyway; it may be that God will bless our efforts. Even though everything is vanity, our actions still matter and God will judge us for the choices that we make.

Now that we understand the point that Solomon was making, we are ready to begin studying this book. We'll begin in chapter 1 next week.

2. All Is Vanity

Now that we understand how to interpret book of Ecclesiastes, we should find it much easier to understand what Solomon is telling us! We'll start in chapter 1 and work our way on from there.

I want to point out that although we are starting at the beginning of this book and will continue on to the end, I have taken the liberty of grouping topics together. Sometimes the author discussed the same idea several times in several places. In order to make things easier I've pulled all of those references together, so we can get a complete idea of what he has to say concerning each subject the book covers.

Nothing Satisfies

Solomon begins his investigation by asking a key question:

Ecclesiastes 1:3: "What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?"

Remember, Solomon is looking for something that is *not* vanity. He wants to find something that satisfies; something that lasts; something that is not empty. But his investigation does not go well. Instead of finding something that satisfies, all he finds are endless cycles. Generations come, and generations go:

Ecclesiastes 1:4: "One generation passeth away,

and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever.”

The sun rises, then sets, then rises, then sets again:

Ecclesiastes 1:5: “The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place where he arose.”

The wind simply goes in circles:

Ecclesiastes 1:6: “The wind goeth toward the south, and turneth about unto the north; it whirleth about continually, and the wind returneth again according to his circuits.”

The waters of this world also simply go in an endless cycle:

Ecclesiastes 1:7: “All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again.”

Now, you might be thinking “Of course! That's just how the world works. Generations come and go. The sun rises and sets. That is just life.” Solomon's point is that it is *unsatisfying*. It doesn't last. The sun has to keep doing the same thing *forever*. When the rain waters the ground, the ground doesn't stay watered; instead it has to keep being watered over and over and over again. The generation that is born doesn't last; instead it dies and is replaced by another one that does more or less the same things as the previous one.

Solomon is looking for something that satisfies. He wants living water, where a man may drink and never thirst again, but

he doesn't find it. Instead all he finds in nature is an eternal hunger that is never satisfied. Nature has to keep running in endless cycles. It cannot satisfy once and for all.

In other words, the key to satisfaction – the key to finding something that *satisfies* – cannot be found in nature. Nature spends all of its time chasing its tail. It keeps doing the exact same thing over, and over, and over again.

Since Nature does not have the key, Solomon turns to Man. However, mankind is locked in the same endless cycle in which Nature finds itself. All men ever do are the same sort of things that were done by the men who came before them:

Ecclesiastes 1:9: “The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done; and there is no new thing under the sun.

10 Is there any thing whereof it may be said, See, this is new? it hath been already of old time, which was before us.

11 There is no remembrance of former things; neither shall there be any remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall come after.”

Now, Solomon is not claiming that someone invented Apple's iPhone thousands of years ago, or that Microsoft Windows was written back in the time of Moses. What he is saying is that all men ever do are the same sort of things they have always done before. Men are born, they live their lives, and they die. They get married and have children. They get angry at their political leaders. There is corruption, and war, and strife. They build cities and tear them down. The decorations may change – the clothing styles may differ from age to age – but it's just the same old thing, repeated over and over again.

Assassinations? Plagues? Intrigue? Betrayal? Success? Fame? Fortune? Mankind has been there and done that. Rags to riches? Riches to rags? All of those stories have been done before.

If you're looking for something new, you're not going to find it. Mankind keeps telling the same story over and over again. The problem is that people don't remember history. All people are really aware of are the things that happened in their lifetimes. They know relatively little about the thousands of years of history that took place before they were born. They can tell you about modern political scandals, but they know almost nothing about ancient Roman political scandals – or even the politics of the 19th century. Likewise, the generation that will be born a century from now will know very little about the politics of our era. They will believe that what they are going through is new and different, but it really isn't. It's simply the same things that have always happened.

For example, take this quote:

"I see no hope for the future of our people if they are dependent on frivolous youth of today, for certainly all youth are reckless beyond words... When I was young, we were taught to be discreet and respectful of elders, but the present youth are exceedingly [disrespectful] and impatient of restraint" (Hesiod, 8th century BC)

That isn't a modern quote; it dates back nearly 3000 years. Or take this one:

"What is happening to our young people? They disrespect their elders, they disobey their parents. They ignore the law. They riot in the streets inflamed with wild notions. Their morals are decaying. What is to become of them?"

(Plato, 5th-4th century BC)

That was said by *Plato*, 2,500 years ago. There is nothing new; people have simply forgotten the things that happened before their time.

When Solomon looks at history, all he sees is vanity. It is very unsatisfying:

Ecclesiastes 1:14: “I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit.

15 That which is crooked cannot be made straight: and that which is wanting cannot be numbered.”

This may seem rather depressing and short-sighted, but stop and think about it. Suppose you go outside and mow your lawn. Will it stay mowed forever? No, it won't; you'll have to mow it again. And again. And again. For the rest of eternity.

Or suppose you put a new roof on your house. Will it stay new forever? No, it won't; it will wear out. You'll have to put another new roof on it one day. And another – until you either sell the house or die. You can – and will – spend a lifetime maintaining your house. You'll paint it, and then have to paint it again. You'll replace the heating and air unit, and will have to replace it again. Eventually one of two things will happen: either the house will have to be continually maintained for the rest of time, or else the passage of time will destroy it and turn it back into dust.

This is what Solomon means by vanity and vexation of spirit. If you fix something it will *not* stay fixed. Whatever you do will have to be done again. You will have to keep on doing it, over and over, until you die – and then time wins, and whatever you were fixing breaks one last time and crumbles into dust. You

cannot win.

We're used to this; in fact, we are so used to it that we don't even give it a second thought. That's just how the world works. But Solomon doesn't like this; he points out how utterly futile it is. All we are doing are the same sort of things our ancestors did. All we do is fix the same problems that have been fixed by billions of other people – and ultimately we will lose and the problem will win.

This is what Solomon means when he talks about “sore travail”. We can't do anything that lasts. Whatever we do will be forgotten. It will be lost. It will be destroyed. Do you really believe that anything that you accomplish or build will last a century? How about five centuries, or ten? Do you know any of your ancestors who lived 500 years ago? Do you really believe that, 500 years from now, anyone will know that you even existed? How long will it take before every last trace of your existence is wiped from the face of the Earth?

Now, we know that Christians will live forever in Heaven, and I am not discounting that. That is a very important truth. The point that Solomon is making is that *your life is consumed with things that don't satisfy*. You are spending your life building sandcastles, and the tide is coming in and is about to wipe them all out – and most people have no idea that's what they are doing.

Since this is what life is like – and since it cannot be changed – the Bible says we ought to *pursue holiness*. This is something we talked about in the previous lesson. We ought to spend our time serving God, because that's the only meaningful thing we can do in this life. Everything else is vanity.

This is a vital truth, because our world is wrapped up in materialism. People spend huge amounts of time chasing things that, in reality, are just vanity. They don't realize what they're doing, so Solomon is dumping a bucket of cold water over their head. He is making them look at reality and showing them just

how *futile* their lives really are. They would be vastly better off if they instead pursued things that *did* matter.

Riches Do Not Satisfy

What about riches – do they satisfy? No, they do not:

Ecclesiastes 2:9: “So I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem: also my wisdom remained with me.

10 And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them, I withheld not my heart from any joy; for my heart rejoiced in all my labour: and this was my portion of all my labour.

11 Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun.

12 And I turned myself to behold wisdom, and madness, and folly: for what can the man do that cometh after the king? even that which hath been already done.”

Solomon had vast wealth, and he used that wealth to obtain anything and everything he wanted – and it didn't satisfy. The only thing he got out of it was the joy of his labor. Yet he realized that all he was doing was the same sort of things that people had done before him. Other kings had built palaces, and gardens, and cities, and had amassed wealth. Solomon wasn't doing anything new, or anything that would last. He was just repeating the actions of those who had come before him.

Solomon wanted something that would *last*. He didn't want to go through the same tired cycle again – but he realized that's all he could do.

Even worse, he realized that after spending a lifetime building things, he would be forced to leave it all behind:

Ecclesiastes 2:19: “And who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man or a fool? yet shall he have rule over all my labour wherein I have laboured, and wherein I have shewed myself wise under the sun. This is also vanity.
20 Therefore I went about to cause my heart to despair of all the labour which I took under the sun.”

For all he knew he would leave his riches to a fool who would squander it all and bring his kingdom down into ruins. As it turns out, that's exactly what happened: under the reign of Solomon's son Rehoboam, the kingdom of Israel was split in two and Solomon's wealth was lost. All of his labor and riches were squandered by a foolish son.

It's just not *satisfying* – but it is life. One day you, too, will have to turn over your life's work to someone else, and who knows what they will do with it? One day this church will be turned over to another generation, and who knows what will become of it? Not only are you trapped in a cycle of building things that have already been built before, and doing things that have been done by those who came before you, but after all that work you will be forced to give it to someone who may burn it all to the ground – and there isn't anything you can do about it.

Do you see the vanity of it all? Do you see Solomon's frustration? This is *reality*. This is what Paul is getting at when he says that all of creation is subject to vanity. Life is frustrating, and bitter, and temporary. Solomon is going to hammer this point for

9 more chapters, until we finally understand that *he is right* – and because he is right, we should therefore seek to do the will of God instead of getting wrapped up in things that are just vanity. We need to let go of our hold on the things of this world and instead grasp things that are actually meaningful.

Later in the book, Solomon makes a very wise point about riches:

Ecclesiastes 4:6: “Better is an handful with quietness, than both the hands full with travail and vexation of spirit.

7 Then I returned, and I saw vanity under the sun.

8 There is one alone, and there is not a second; yea, he hath neither child nor brother: yet is there no end of all his labour; neither is his eye satisfied with riches; neither saith he, For whom do I labour, and bereave my soul of good? This is also vanity, yea, it is a sore travail.”

He points out that it is better to have a little and be at peace, than to have much and lead a life full of trouble, stress, and pain. He talks about a man who works long hours and spends all his time amassing great wealth, and yet he never stops to ask what he is gaining. He works so hard that he can't enjoy his wealth – and yet he has no one to give it to or share it with. He has never stopped to realize that he is wasting his time. What is the point of working that hard when even *you* can't enjoy the fruits of your own labor? His greed has blinded him to the fact that his riches are enriching precisely *no one*. All of his money is not doing him – or anyone else – a bit of good. He would be far better off to cut back and lead a simpler life of peace.

Solomon warns that amassing great wealth is not the good deal that it appears to be:

Ecclesiastes 5:10: “He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with increase: this is also vanity.

11 When goods increase, they are increased that eat them: and what good is there to the owners thereof, saving the beholding of them with their eyes?

12 The sleep of a labouring man is sweet, whether he eat little or much: but the abundance of the rich will not suffer him to sleep.

13 There is a sore evil which I have seen under the sun, namely, riches kept for the owners thereof to their hurt.”

He points out that those who love money will not be satisfied with money. They will always want more money, no matter how much they have. This, too, is vanity; it is unsatisfying. They may crave money, but money *does not satisfy*. The more money they have, the more bills they amass, and the more expenses keep piling up.

And what good does all of that money really do, anyway? What have you really accomplished? You're not satisfied with what you have; you want more. Besides, having wealth brings with it all sorts of stresses and worries and concerns. The poor man doesn't have much to worry about, because he doesn't have much to lose. He can sleep peacefully at night. The rich man, though, is beset with a thousand worries. In fact, the rich are targets in ways that the poor are not. The rich have many adversaries and many problems.

Why spend your life amassing something that is only going to make your life harder and bring with it pain and stress? Why not live a simpler life of peace, so you can sleep at night and be at rest? What are you *really* gaining? Is working all those

long hours really worth it when you don't even have the time to enjoy what you've earned – and, when you *do* have the time, you can't enjoy it because you're too busy worrying about things?

After all, you can't take it with you:

Ecclesiastes 5:15: “As he came forth of his mother's womb, naked shall he return to go as he came, and shall take nothing of his labour, which he may carry away in his hand.

16 And this also is a sore evil, that in all points as he came, so shall he go: and what profit hath he that hath laboured for the wind?”

This is also unsatisfying: you can spend your entire life building up great wealth, but in the end you will die and be forced to leave it all behind. You cannot take any of it with you. You came into this world with nothing, and you will leave it with nothing. If you didn't enjoy it while you had it because you were too busy or had too many other problems, then what good did it really do you?

It is far better to enjoy what the Lord has given you, and rejoice in the work of your hands:

Ecclesiastes 5:18: “Behold that which I have seen: it is good and comely for one to eat and to drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labour that he taketh under the sun all the days of his life, which God giveth him: for it is his portion.

19 Every man also to whom God hath given riches and wealth, and hath given him power to eat thereof, and to take his portion, and to rejoice in his labour; this is the gift of God.

20 For he shall not much remember the days of his life; because God answereth him in the joy of his heart.”

Yes, you can spend your life in a fruitless and never-ending quest to obtain more – but if you will not be content with few things, you will not be content with great wealth either. Wealth does not have the power to satisfy. If you cannot be satisfied and happy *without* wealth, then you won't be satisfied *with* it either. What you really need is *contentment* – the ability to rejoice in what God has given you and be thankful for it.

If you have joy in your life, then the years you spend in this world that is full of troubles and trials will not seem that bad. They will go by quickly, because your joy will outweigh the problems.

Wisdom Does Not Satisfy

What about wisdom – does that satisfy? Sadly, no, it doesn't:

Ecclesiastes 2:13: “Then I saw that wisdom excelleth folly, as far as light excelleth darkness.

14 The wise man's eyes are in his head; but the fool walketh in darkness: and I myself perceived also that one event happeneth to them all.

15 Then said I in my heart, As it happeneth to the fool, so it happeneth even to me; and why was I then more wise? Then I said in my heart, that this also is vanity.

16 For there is no remembrance of the wise more than of the fool for ever; seeing that which now is in the days to come shall all be forgotten. And how dieth the wise man? as the fool.”

Now, Solomon is not against wisdom; in fact, the whole reason he collected proverbs in the first place was to teach people wisdom. In the book of Proverbs he repeatedly urged people to abandon foolishness and gain wisdom. Solomon is *not* pro-ignorance.

The point Solomon is making is that wisdom doesn't satisfy. You may be incredibly wise, but you are still going to die. Wise men die and foolish men die – and guess what? When you die you will be forgotten. It doesn't matter how wise you were; after enough time has passed, no one will remember that you even existed at all.

Remember, Solomon is looking for something that isn't vanity. He wants something that will satisfy – something that will last. Wisdom is great, but it doesn't last. One day you *will* die, and your wisdom will die with you and be utterly forgotten. Your wisdom will not last.

Sure, you'll be in Heaven – but that's not Solomon's focus. From the perspective of those who are on Earth, you may as well have never existed at all. You may be alive in Heaven, but no one on Earth can get to you or even knows you're there. You may still have all your wisdom in Heaven, but that wisdom isn't accessible to those who are still on Earth. Your wisdom isn't going to last any more than your riches are.

You may use your wisdom to do great and mighty things, but that still won't make your wisdom last:

Ecclesiastes 9:13: “This wisdom have I seen also under the sun, and it seemed great unto me:

14 There was a little city, and few men within it; and there came a great king against it, and besieged it, and built great bulwarks against it:

15 Now there was found in it a poor wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city; yet no

man remembered that same poor man.

16 Then said I, Wisdom is better than strength: nevertheless the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are not heard."

Just because you are wise doesn't mean you are going to get the respect you deserve. Just because you saved a city doesn't mean people will remember you, or even be grateful about it. People don't always get what they deserve, nor are they treated as they should be. This is unsatisfying – but it is life, and life is not fair.

In fact, it is very important for us to realize that life really isn't fair at all. This, too, is from the hand of God:

Ecclesiastes 7:13: "Consider the work of God: for who can make that straight, which he hath made crooked?

14 In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of adversity consider: God also hath set the one over against the other, to the end that man should find nothing after him."

We don't like to think about it, but it is true: prosperity and adversity both come from God. There is a time in life for everything – and God has no intention of explaining His plans or purposes to us.

Job is a great example of this. For a while he had great wealth, because God blessed him with prosperity. Then God decided to test Job, and allowed Satan to take away everything Job had – including his health. God brought prosperity to Job, and then God brought adversity to Job. They were both His doing, done for His purposes.

Incidentally, Job never found out why those things happened to him. God never told Job what was going on, or gave

him any kind of explanation. The same thing is true for us today: there are times when God will bring prosperity into our lives, and there are other times when He will instead bring great trials. We cannot tell what He will do or what will come next.

This is why we cannot foretell the future: the future is determined by God, and He is not going to share it with us (apart from the prophecies He has given to us). Job had no way of knowing that God was about to allow Satan to devastate his life. There was no way he could have seen that coming, and it was not caused by anything he had done.

All we can do is live by faith, accepting God's will and living faithfully. God is the one who is in control; we are responsible for being content with whatever God gives us and faithfully serving Him in all the circumstances of life. If He chooses to give some great wealth, and others a hard life of pain, is that not His doing? If Peter is to be crucified, and John is to die in peace, is that not God's decision?

Be Content

This brings Solomon to a conclusion that he repeats all throughout the book:

Ecclesiastes 2:22: “For what hath man of all his labour, and of the vexation of his heart, wherein he hath laboured under the sun?

23 For all his days are sorrows, and his travail grief; yea, his heart taketh not rest in the night. This is also vanity.

24 There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour. This also

I saw, that it was from the hand of God.”

Now, most people who read this interpret Solomon to be saying “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you die,” but that is *not* his point at all. That saying came from Epicurus, who was a Greek philosopher who lived around 300 BC. In other words, that saying arose a very long time after Solomon died. It is foolish to take a statement that was coined centuries *after* Solomon's death and assume that's what Solomon was talking about.

What he is actually saying here is quite different. Solomon points out in verse 23 that men spend their time working hard, and stressing, and being so uptight about life that they can't even sleep at night. He points out that all of that stress is a waste. Instead, people should “make his soul enjoy good in his labor”. In other words, the ability to enjoy life – despite its problems – and take pleasure in the work of our hands is a blessing from God. It is a good thing to enjoy the blessings of life and rejoice in them and thank God for them. That should be our attitude – one of gratefulness over what we have been given, for it was given to us by God.

In other words, Solomon is *not* saying that because all is vanity, our response should therefore be despair. Instead, we should focus on the fact that since these things *are* vanity, we should spend our time on things that actually matter. Instead of stressing and being upset, we should enjoy the blessings God has given to us and be thankful for them.

No matter how much work a man does, his appetite is never satisfied:

Ecclesiastes 6:7: “All the labour of man is for his mouth, and yet the appetite is not filled.”

You may have just had the most fabulous meal in the world, but guess what: you're going to get hungry again. You will

get thirsty again. Your hunger cannot be satisfied with food, and your thirst cannot be satisfied with water. This is what Solomon calls “vanity” - the food and water we consume is just not satisfying.

We would be much better off seeking something that *does* satisfy:

Isaiah 55:1: “Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

2 Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? and your labour for that which satisfieth not? hearken diligently unto me, and eat ye that which is good, and let your soul delight itself in fatness.”

And where can we find satisfaction? Where can we find the living water, that one may drink from and never thirst again? That water only comes from Christ:

John 4:13: “Jesus answered and said unto her, Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again:

14 But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.”

It is from Him and Him alone that we can find living water.

You see, those who do not have Christ truly do lead lives of utter vanity. All that they have are the things of this world, and that means everything they have will one day be taken away from them. They spend their time pursuing wealth, but it doesn't satisfy. They try to achieve great things, but their achievements

will be lost. They try to find fame, but once they die they will be quickly forgotten. Then, once they die, they will stand before an angry God and will be condemned for all their sins. They will face an unending eternity of torment. They had a brief, unsatisfying life, and face an eternity of endless pain. That is truly a terrible, unsatisfying existence.

But in Christ we can find things that *do* satisfy:

2 Corinthians 4:18: “While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal.”

In Christ there are things that are *not* temporal. There are things that do last. We can pursue holiness – *that* is meaningful. We can honor God with our lives. We can preach the gospel and seek to save the souls of men. We can share the light of Christ in a dark and broken world. We can lay up treasure in Heaven, where we will have it for all of eternity:

Matthew 6:19: “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal:

20 But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal:

21 For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

As Christians, we can fill our lives with things that are *not* vanity. Or we can continue to seek after the things of the world – things that do not and cannot satisfy. That is the choice we are faced with.

3. Life Is Unfair

In this lesson we are going to continue our study of the book of Ecclesiastes. The point we are going to talk about is a simple one: life is *really* unfair.

The Unfairness of Injustice

For example, Solomon points out that the wickedness of the wicked is quickly forgotten:

Ecclesiastes 8:10: “And so I saw the wicked buried, who had come and gone from the place of the holy, and they were forgotten in the city where they had so done: this is also vanity.

11 Because 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.”

It bothers him that the infamy of the wicked is so quickly forgotten. If your crimes are especially heinous then they may live on for a bit longer, but eventually they will be buried in time. Solomon finds this unsatisfying. The wicked do terrible things, and then they die, and their wickedness just fades away. Criminals commit terrible crimes, and when their punishments are long delayed it just hardens them to do even more terrible things.

For example, a lot of people don't realize that the genocide of the Jews during World War II was not unique.

During World War I, the Ottoman Empire conducted a genocide of Armenians and massacred 1.5 million of them. You would think that the wholesale slaughter of that many people would be remembered, but it's been largely forgotten.

There's also Leopold II of Belgium. From 1885 to 1908 he ruled over a part of Africa that he named the Congo Free State. Under his terrible reign around *ten million* people were killed – which is more than the number of Jews that died in the Holocaust. But this genocide has been all but forgotten.

It is amazing how many times in the 20th century alone there have been hundreds of thousands of people killed. From 1986 to 1989 there was a massacre of 200,000 Kurds in Iraq. In 1972 there was a massacre of 100,000 Hutus. In 1937 there was a massacre of 300,000 Chinese in Nanking. The list goes on, and on, and on.

Do the people of the world remember these things? Not really. The older generation probably remembers some of these, but the younger people have no idea many of these events ever happened. The wicked do terribly evil things, and then they die, and their horrible deeds are forgotten.

So does Solomon recommend depression? Does he tell us just to give up and live as we please? Actually, he says just the opposite:

Ecclesiastes 8:12: “Though a sinner do evil an hundred times, and his days be prolonged, yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before him:

13 But it shall not be well with the wicked, neither shall he prolong his days, which are as a shadow; because he feareth not before God.”

Solomon tells us to abandon wickedness and choose righteousness. Being wicked is *not* a good career move. People

may forget, but God will not. Time may erase mankind's memory of your actions, but God will never forget them. The wicked will not get away with what they have done and it will not be well with them. It is far better to be righteous. Even if the righteous are persecuted and killed and the wicked prolong their lives, Solomon tells us in verse 12 that it *will* be well with those who fear God, and it will *not* be well with the wicked.

Notice that at every turn Solomon holds on to the fact that it will not be well with the wicked, and it will be well with those who fear God. Solomon uses the vanity and frustrations of life to *urge people to be holy*. We should not lose sight of that.

It's very easy to forget this, because life is full of unfairness. Things just don't turn out the way we think they should:

Ecclesiastes 8:14: “There is a vanity which is done upon the earth; that there be just men, unto whom it happeneth according to the work of the wicked; again, there be wicked men, to whom it happeneth according to the work of the righteous: I said that this also is vanity.”

Is he wrong? No, he's not; Job complained about the very same thing. Take a look:

Job 21:7: “Wherefore do the wicked live, become old, yea, are mighty in power?

8 Their seed is established in their sight with them, and their offspring before their eyes.

9 Their houses are safe from fear, neither is the rod of God upon them.

10 Their bull gendereth, and faileth not; their cow calveth, and casteth not her calf.

11 They send forth their little ones like a flock, and their children dance.”

Job and Solomon are talking about the same thing here. Just look at the great lives these wicked people are leading! Why, they lead safe and rich lives; things go well with them, and their children are happy. Their lives really could not be better. Meanwhile, the righteous are suffering terribly – they're hated, persecuted, imprisoned, and killed. How is *that* fair?

This is the reality of the world that we live in. As Solomon pointed out, it is vanity; it is not satisfying. But it is life. Since this is life, how should we respond? Well, Solomon says we should be content with what God has given to us, and rejoice in it:

Ecclesiastes 8:15: “Then I commended mirth, because a man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry: for that shall abide with him of his labour the days of his life, which God giveth him under the sun.”

As we mentioned earlier, Solomon is *not* saying “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you die”. He is not saying we should throw our holiness to the wind and indulge in whatever we want. What he *is* saying is that we should be content with what we have and rejoice in the blessings that God *has* given to us. Rather than being upset with what we do not have, we should rejoice in what we do have.

This is how the New Testament put that very same idea:

1 Timothy 6:6: “But godliness with contentment is great gain.”

If you can be content with what you have – and Solomon knows how much life can be unsatisfying – then your life will be far easier and you will be much happier. Or you can spend your

entire life stewing in bitterness, upset over all the things that didn't go your way. I think that contentment is the better choice.

Life Is Short And Unfair

Since we're talking about unfairness, we need to discuss this rather controversial section:

Ecclesiastes 7:15: "All things have I seen in the days of my vanity: there is a just man that perisheth in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man that longeth his life in his wickedness.

16 Be not righteous over much; neither make thyself over wise: why shouldest thou destroy thyself?

17 Be not over much wicked, neither be thou foolish: why shouldest thou die before thy time?

18 It is good that thou shouldest take hold of this; yea, also from this withdraw not thine hand: for he that feareth God shall come forth of them all."

Researching this passage was kind of entertaining, as commentators fell into two camps. One camp said "Solomon is teaching here that you need to sin on a regular basis, because sin makes your life better." The other camp said "Solomon can't possibly be saying that, so he must be talking about legalism or self-righteousness instead. There is just no way he is advocating sin."

Personally, I agree that Solomon is *not* advocating sin. We've already seen multiple places where Solomon urges people

to fear God, do what is right, and live wisely because they will be judged. There is no chance Solomon is saying “You need to keep a healthy amount of sin in your life.” We have quite a lot of writings from Solomon, and he never said anything remotely like that anywhere else. That is just not a statement he would agree with.

I actually have a different interpretation of this passage. Solomon's whole point in this passage is that life is not fair: people who lead righteous lives sometimes perish and die before their time, and people who lead wicked lives sometimes lead long, rich, and fabulous lives. It's madness! Why should the righteous die and the wicked live? The message that the world seems to be giving is this: if you are a holy person who fears God then you will be hunted down and killed. However, if you're a serial killer then you'll be hunted down and killed too. Therefore, if you want to lead a long life, don't be too good or too evil; instead be somewhere in the middle.

As we've already seen, Solomon finds this appalling, and I think verses 16 and 17 are meant to be a sarcastic appraisal of reality. Notice what Solomon counsels people to do: in verse 18 he says that men ought to fear God. They should accept the fact that yes, choosing to be absolutely good may well get you killed, but you need to make that choice anyway. He who fears God will “come forth of them all”. Those who fear God and do that which is right will triumph in the end.

Solomon is *not* trying to maximize the length of your life. We know this because he has written extensively about death (which we'll get to next), and he does not consider a long life to be the best thing that could ever happen to you. But Solomon is not going to hide the truth: being a good person is not going to guarantee you a long and happy life. Yet, despite that, those who fear God will win in the end.

Just to recap: Solomon is *not* advocating sin in verse 16 and 17. Instead he is just telling us the reality of the situation. If

you do not choose the road of compromise then your life will be much harder. That's just what life in this world is like. Yet, we see in verse 18 that Solomon does not advocate compromise; instead he commands us to fear God anyway.

Interestingly, the apostle Paul made this same point in the New Testament:

1 Corinthians 15:19: “If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.”

What Paul is pointing out is that being a Christian makes your life much *harder*, not easier. It subjects you to ridicule, and imprisonment, and beatings, and torture, and death. The only thing that makes living for Christ worthwhile is the resurrection. If there was no life after death – if this life is all there was – then even Paul thinks it's not worth it. Why go through all that suffering if, in the end, it's completely pointless? If there is nothing after death, then why not choose to *not* suffer in the little time you have before you shuffle off into oblivion? It is *eternal life* that makes it all worthwhile.

Death

Speaking of death, Solomon points out that life itself is vanity:

Ecclesiastes 3:18: “I said in mine heart concerning the estate of the sons of men, that God might manifest them, and that they might see that they themselves are beasts.
19 For that which befallerh the sons of men

befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them:
as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they
have all one breath; so that a man hath no
preeminence above a beast: for all is vanity.
20 All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and
all turn to dust again.”

Now, Solomon is not trying to argue that there is no afterlife, or that you just live once and die and that's it. His point is that death is a bitter and unhappy thing. Men may be wiser than animals, and God may have given mankind dominion over His creation, but in the end men die just like animals do. In other words, death is humbling. We may think that we're pretty impressive and amazing, but in the end we will die – just like an animal.

Solomon does not like death. He sees it as very unsatisfying:

Ecclesiastes 9:4: “For to him that 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 shall die: but the dead know not any thing, neither have they any more a reward; for the memory of them is forgotten.

6 Also their love, and their hatred, and their envy, is now perished; neither have they any more a portion for ever in any thing that is done under the sun.”

Solomon tells us that a live dog is better than a dead lion because the dog is *still alive*. Since it is still alive, it can still influence the things that happen in this world. The dead lion, though, is dead. It can no longer take any action at all, be it good or evil.

Verse 5 is not a denial of the afterlife; instead it is a statement of a very obvious truth. If you go down to the graveyard, dig up a corpse, and talk to it, it is going to respond? No. Can you get wisdom from it? No. Will the dead man tell you where he left his car keys? No. The corpse knows nothing. It can say nothing. It cannot love you, or hate you, or envy you. It has absolutely no portion in the events that happen under the sun, *because it is dead*. It's not going to help you.

The corpse of the greatest and richest man who ever lived is still just a corpse. The lowliest beggar is better off because the beggar is *actually alive*. The beggar can do things; the corpse cannot. That is Solomon's point.

When you die, your ability to influence what goes on in this world is brought to an end. You no longer have any part in the things that happen under the sun. Those who are in Hell cannot come back and preach the gospel – and those in Heaven cannot either. The departed souls in Heaven may have great wisdom, but they cannot share it with the living.

Solomon sees death as a very bitter thing. People die as if they were animals. Our life comes to an end and we decay into the dust, and our ability to affect our world is brought to an end. We cannot say “I am better than you, squirrel, because you die and I do not.” We are just as mortal as the lowliest mosquito.

How should we respond to this? By being grateful for what God has given to us:

Ecclesiastes 3:22: “Wherefore I perceive that there is nothing better, than that a man should rejoice in his own works; for that is his portion: for who shall bring him to see what shall be after him?”

One point that Solomon will make later on is that it is impossible for us to know what will happen in the world after we

die. There is no way to know if things will go well, or if they will collapse. Since we can't foretell the future, all we can do is rejoice in the blessings that we have been given, and be grateful for them. Worrying about the future – about what will happen once we are gone – is an utter waste of time. We can't possibly know and we can't stop it from happening, and we have no control over it. What possible good can come from dwelling on it?

Even though Solomon hates death, there are times when he praises it:

Ecclesiastes 4:1: “So I returned, and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun: and behold the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power; but they had no comforter.

2 Wherefore I praised the dead which are already dead more than the living which are yet alive.

3 Yea, better is he than both they, which hath not yet been, who hath not seen the evil work that is done under the sun.”

In this passage Solomon points out that life is full of bitterness and pain. The reason he does this is because life really *is* full of bitterness and pain. Solomon actually goes so far to say that there is so much evil in the world that the dead are actually better off than the living, because the dead are no longer being oppressed.

Solomon is not the only person who has this particular view. The apostle Paul shared it as well:

Philippians 1:23: “For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with

Christ; which is far better:”

Did Paul say it was better to be here, in this world? No, he said that *being with Christ* is far better. We even find this same sentiment in the book of Revelation:

Revelation 14:12: “Here is the patience of the saints: here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus.
13 And I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them.”

All three of these passages are making the same point: life is full of pain and suffering. It is hard. It is much, much better to be in Heaven – a place of peace and joy – than it is to be here. Being one of the dead in Christ is much better than being alive in this world. Who said “Blessed are the dead” in verse 13? That was the Holy Spirit.

Those who are dead in Christ rest from their labors. They are at peace. They are no longer sick, or troubled, or persecuted. Their lives are *much* better than ours.

Why does Solomon say in verse 3 that those who “have not yet been” are even better off than the dead? Because they haven't experienced any suffering yet! He doesn't say it's better to not exist at all; instead he talks about those who have not yet been born – meaning that the time of their birth is still in the future. They haven't yet been troubled by the evils of the world. Who knows – if they're lucky, maybe they won't be born until the Millennium, a time characterized by total peace and harmony in a world ruled by Jesus Christ. Then much of the suffering that Solomon deplored won't be a factor at all.

Solomon also points out that those who died at birth have an advantage over those who lived long lives but have experienced nothing but pain:

Ecclesiastes 6:3: “If a man beget an hundred children, and live many years, so that the days of his years be many, and his soul be not filled with good, and also that he have no burial; I say, that an untimely birth is better than he.

4 For he cometh in with vanity, and departeth in darkness, and his name shall be covered with darkness.

5 Moreover he hath not seen the sun, nor known any thing; this hath more rest than the other.

6 Yea, though he live a thousand years twice told, yet hath he seen no good: do not all go to one place?”

Solomon makes a very simple point: no matter how long you live, you are eventually going to die. Death will claim you whether you want it to or not. Since that is the case, the life of someone who died at birth is actually more restful than the life of a 100-year-old man who knew nothing but pain and sorrow.

Why? Well, think of it this way. Which sounds better: dying at birth and then going straight to Heaven, or living a long life of pain and suffering and *then* going to Heaven? Doesn't skipping the pain and going straight to Heaven sound like a better deal? Solomon is simply pointing out the obvious – and in doing so, demonstrating just how unsatisfying life really is.

This statement seems kind of dark and depressing:

Ecclesiastes 7:1: “A good name is better than precious ointment; and the day of death than the day of one's birth.”

You might think “Man, that's dark.” But as we have seen, this isn't the only place we find this taught in the Bible. It really is far better to die and go on to be with the Lord, than it is to remain in this world of suffering and pain. For a Christian death is not defeat; it is victory. It is the conclusion – and the end of a thing is better than its beginning:

Ecclesiastes 7:8: “Better is the end of a thing than the beginning thereof: and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit.”

On the day of your birth, you are starting out on a life that will be full of pains, troubles, sorrows, and distress. On the day of your death, you are putting all of that behind you and entering Heaven, where you will experience joy and piece. Given that, is 7:1 really that surprising? Isn't that just the truth?

One of Solomon's great sources of bitterness is that it is impossible to find out what the future will hold:

Ecclesiastes 6:12: “For who knoweth what is good for man in this life, all the days of his vain life which he spendeth as a shadow? for who can tell a man what shall be after him under the sun?”

I think there are many times in life when we would have made different decisions if we had known in advance how things would turn out. The problem is that we can't know – and this, as Solomon says, is vanity. It is unsatisfying. We cannot know, in advance, how our decisions will turn out. We cannot find out what will happen after we are gone. We cannot plan for it, because there is no way to know how things will turn out. It may be that our choices will turn out well, or they may fail catastrophically; what we thought would end in victory may

instead end in defeat. This, too, is vanity; it is unsatisfying.

The Bitterness of Death

As we have seen, death really bothers Solomon. It is a recurring theme throughout the book:

Ecclesiastes 9:2: “All things come alike to all: there is one event to the righteous, and to the wicked; to the good and to the clean, and to the unclean; to him that sacrificeth, and to him that sacrificeth not: as is the good, so is the sinner; and he that sweareth, as he that feareth an oath.
3 This is an evil among all things that are done under the sun, that there is one event unto all: yea, also the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live, and after that they go to the dead.”

Solomon sees death as an incredibly bitter thing. It bothers him tremendously. You can be a wonderful, righteous person, but you are still going to die. Good people die. Evil people die. The righteous die. The wicked die. Saints die. Ax murderers die. In the end it doesn't matter: you are still going to die. It just seems so unfair; it is not satisfying. Everyone dies regardless of how they lived their lives. There is no escaping death.

Do you know who else is upset with death? That would be God:

1 Corinthians 15:26: “The last enemy that shall

be destroyed is death.”

God sees death as the enemy. Death is not a good thing; it is a bad thing. It is a very bitter pill to swallow – and it is something that, one day, God is going to end once and for all.

Now, it's not that there is no afterlife, because we know that there is. Solomon isn't trying to discredit Heaven or anything. But, really, wouldn't it be better if the righteous lived and the wicked died? Wouldn't that be more fair? Wouldn't the world be a better place if death only claimed the lives of bad people? Wouldn't you find that more satisfying? But that's not how the world is, is it?

So how does Solomon tell us to respond to all of this? By enjoying life while we have it, and making the most of it:

Ecclesiastes 9:7: “Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart; for God now accepteth thy works.

8 Let thy garments be always white; and let thy head lack no ointment.

9 Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity, which he hath given thee under the sun, all the days of thy vanity: for that is thy portion in this life, and in thy labour which thou takest under the sun.

10 Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.”

This is the same refrain we've seen all throughout this book: enjoy the life God has given to you, and be content with it. Yes, life is unfair. Yes, life is not very satisfying. But dwelling on it and being bitter about it isn't going to make it any better. If you find something to do, then do it with all your might – because

one day you will die, and that will put an end to it.

Solomon is reminding us that life is short, and we need to make the most of it. Sure, you'll live forever in Heaven – but when you're in Heaven you will not be able to help the people you left behind. If you want to work, and accomplish things, and do good, you had better do it *now*. The dead are not a source of wisdom or productivity. You need to take your mortality seriously.

The Seasons of Life

Solomon tells us that there is a time for everything:

Ecclesiastes 3:1: “To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:

2 A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which 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 together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

6 A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away;

7 A time to rend, 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.”

In other words, there are different seasons in life. Life has more than one flavor. It is not just about children being born; death is a part of it as well. It is not just about healing and building; there is also destruction as well. It is not just laughter; there is also mourning. It is not just peace; there is also war. Each of these has their own set, determined time.

Now, we may say that we don't like that reality. We wish there was just peace, and not war; that there was just life, and not death; and that there was no destruction. The good news is that one day we will live in a world that is exactly like that – a world without war or pain or sorrow. But that is not *this* world. This world is exactly like Solomon described – a world where very different things happen at different times.

But why is it like this? Why is there a time for peace, and a time for war? Why is *that* time for peace, and *that* time for war? That brings up the next point, and it is critical:

Ecclesiastes 3:10: “I have seen the travail, which God hath given to the sons of men to be exercised in it.

11 He hath made every thing beautiful in his time: also he hath set the world in their heart, so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end.”

This is another point that Solomon is going to repeat: *God is not going to tell us what is going on*. No one can figure out what God is doing. His plan is His and His alone, and He is not going to share it with us. There is a time for everything and everything has a purpose, but that purpose is not going to be shared with us.

True, there are times when we get a glimpse of this plan. There are times when we see events come together, and we

understand how one thing led to another. But this is the exception, not the rule. When disaster strikes your life, God is not going to send you a card in the mail explaining what is going on. When a loved one dies, God isn't going to call you up on your phone and go over how that fits into the bigger picture. There *is* a bigger picture, but it's His picture, and God deliberately designed the world in such a way that you will never be able to see the entire picture. All you will ever be able to glimpse, at the very most, is a small corner of it. Even the wise cannot see it:

Ecclesiastes 8:16: “When I applied mine heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done upon the earth: (for also there is that neither day nor night seeth sleep with his eyes:)
17 Then I beheld all the work of God, that a man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun: because though a man labour to seek it out, yet he shall not find it; yea farther; though a wise man think to know it, yet shall he not be able to find it.”

This is really the key problem, and a huge source of frustration: *we cannot know what God is doing*. Wise men may think that they have it figured out, but they are just fooling themselves. How do we know that? Because *God told us so*. People desperately want to put the pieces together and understand what God is doing, so that their life will make sense – but no matter how hard they try they *will* fail. It is impossible to see the plan of God – and that means we must live by faith. We have to trust a God we cannot see, and believe that the plan of God (which has not been revealed to us) is good, and right, and holy. We have to trust God.

The truth is that all of us are in His hand:

Ecclesiastes 9:1: “For all this I considered in my heart even to declare all this, that the righteous, and the wise, and their works, are in the hand of God: no man knoweth either love or hatred by all that is before them.”

We must live by faith. Since we don't know the plan, we have to trust God and believe that there is a plan. Since we don't see how things fit together, we have to trust that things do, in fact, fit together.

Solomon isn't being hopeless here. He says right there in Ecclesiastes 3:11 that God makes everything beautiful in His time. The apostle Paul says essentially the same thing:

Romans 8:28: “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.”

This is the exactly same idea. All things really do work together for good, whether we can see it or not. God really does make everything beautiful in His time – but not in *our* time. That is the catch, and that is where faith comes in.

Notice that Solomon is not saying “We can't see God's plan, so we might as well give up and die.” Instead he tells us that God is working out everything together, and we should trust Him *despite* the fact we can't see the plan. Solomon is not advocating despair; he's just reminding us that God deliberately does not give us the full picture.

That is something we need to keep in mind, because all too often we act as if we know everything and have all the pieces. When tragedy strikes, we become angry because God *obviously* blew it. The fact that we don't see the whole picture doesn't even cross our minds. We just assume that God is being

hateful and mean, because His plan isn't lining up with our plan. That is why we need to take this to heart: if we don't then we will have a very difficult time making it through life.

Solomon reminds us that God's plan cannot be shaken:

Ecclesiastes 3:14: “I know that, whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever: nothing can be put to it, nor any thing taken from it: and God doeth it, that men should fear before him.”

God has a plan, and He *will* accomplish it. We should find that tremendously comforting. There *is* a plan, and it is a good plan, and God is not going to fail or be thwarted. He will accomplish exactly what He set out to do.

4. The Proverbs of Ecclesiastes

Over the past few lessons we've covered some of the major themes of the book of Ecclesiastes. However, the book also contains a number of proverbs – short but wise statements that are worth taking a look at. We'll study a few of these and then bring our study of this book to a close.

The Old Days

Have you ever thought that things were better back in the old days? Well, Solomon has something to say about that:

Ecclesiastes 7:10: “Say not thou, What is the cause that the former days were better than these? for thou dost not enquire wisely concerning this.”

It's very common for people to say that things were better back in the old days, but the truth is this is rather short-sighted. Yes, some things were better back in the old days – and other things were very much worse. We tend to forget about all the horrifying things that happened “back in the old days” - things like slavery, for instance. World wars. The holocaust. The eugenic movements. The past is full of all sorts of horrifying things that we tend to forget about. For example, life in the south back in the 1950s and 60s was great – unless you were black. Then things weren't very great at all.

I am not trying to minimize the evil of the world we live in today, but instead put it into perspective. The world has never been a particularly good place. Let's not forget that things were once so bad that God actually regretted making mankind at all, and decided to wipe us all out. The world was so corrupt that the thoughts of everyone were evil 100% of the time:

Genesis 6:5: “And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

6 And it repented the Lord that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart.”

In other words, things were *really bad*. The only time when things were wonderful and rosy was in the Garden of Eden – and that didn't last very long. So stop and think about that the next time you're tempted to think that the past was some sort of golden era. The past had plenty of problems of its own; every age always does. And remember – one day someone will look back on *this* time and say that this was the good old days.

Women

Later in chapter 7, Solomon seems rather upset with women:

Ecclesiastes 7:27: “Behold, this have I found, saith the preacher, counting one by one, to find out the account:

28 Which yet my soul seeketh, but I find not:

one man among a thousand have I found; but a woman among all those have I not found."

That seems like a rather negative thing to say. Is Solomon really saying that all women are bad? Well, remember who is writing this. Solomon said that he could not find one woman out of 1000 who actually cared about him and looked after his welfare. I'd like to point out that the man who said this *had 1000 wives*:

1 Kings 11:1: "But king Solomon loved many strange women, together with the daughter of Pharaoh, women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Zidonians, and Hittites:

2 Of the nations concerning which the Lord said unto the children of Israel, Ye shall not go in to them, neither shall they come in unto you: for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods: Solomon clave unto these in love.

3 And he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines: and his wives turned away his heart."

So Solomon had hundreds of pagan wives, and was then upset that none of them were particularly good, godly women. What a surprise! The problem here is pretty obvious: if Solomon wanted a quality wife then maybe he should have listened to God in the first place. Things may have turned out a lot better for him if he had married *one* God-fearing woman instead of 1000 pagans. This is what happens when you go your own way; you end up reaping the consequences.

Rulers

Solomon tells us to be careful when dealing with rulers:

Ecclesiastes 8:2: “I counsel thee to keep the king's commandment, and that in regard of the oath of God.

3 Be not hasty to go out of his sight: stand not in an evil thing; for he doeth whatsoever pleaseth him.

4 Where the word of a king is, there is power: and who may say unto him, What doest thou?

5 Whoso keepeth the commandment shall feel no evil thing: and a wise man's heart discerneth both time and judgment.”

Solomon is not the only person who tells us that we ought to obey those in authority over us and treat them with respect. Paul made that same point:

Romans 13:1: “Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God.

2 Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation.

3 For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same:

4 For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath

upon him that doeth evil.”

There is no real difference between what Paul said and what Solomon said. We need to be respectful of those whom God had placed in authority over us, and as Christians we are bound to keep their commandments (as far as God's Word will allow). Those who are wise will obey their leaders.

Of course, there are times when rulers make evil commandments, and Christians must not sin no matter what the law says. But that is not the case that Solomon and Paul are talking about. As a general principle, keeping the law and being respectful of the authorities will go a long way to keeping you out of trouble.

Be Sober

Solomon also has some rather negative things to be said about mirth:

Ecclesiastes 7:2: “It is 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 lay it to his heart.

3 Sorrow is better than laughter: for by the sadness of the 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.

5 It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise, than for a man to hear the song of fools.

6 For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is

the laughter of the fool: this also is vanity.”

But let's take a closer look. Solomon is *not* saying that all laughter and mirth is bad; in fact, in Proverbs he said that a merry heart is good medicine. Solomon is not against mirth. Notice that he is talking about a specific kind of laughter: the laughter of fools. He is not impressed by the antics of dumb and dumber.

Solomon's focus here is on wisdom. He wants the heart to be made better, and he wants people to live wisely and think about what they are doing. In the house of mourning people are reminded of their mortality; they are faced with the fact that life is short and that they should make the most of the time they have been given. Sadness can actually be useful; it can have a sobering effect. It can lead to wisdom – in fact, we are told that a wise man will lay these things to heart. The wise will lead sober lives – not lives of stupidity and foolishness.

Solomon is not the only person who tells us this. The apostles said the same thing:

1 Thessalonians 5:6: “Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober.”

1 Thessalonians 5:8: “But let us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for an helmet, the hope of salvation.”

Titus 2:12: “Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world;”

1 Peter 4:7: “But the end of all things is at hand:

be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer.”

These are just a few of the passages that command us to lead careful, sober lives. God does not want us to go through life as drunken fools who refuse to take anything seriously, and who lurch from one stupid decision to another; instead He commands us to be sober, to live wisely, and to take heed to what we are doing. God is not amused by fools.

The Proverbs of Ecclesiastes

So how should we live our lives? Well, that's a good question. Ecclesiastes 10 contains a lot of general advice. In this chapter we see Solomon's love for wisdom and hatred of fools. The wisdom we find in this chapter is no different from what is in the book of Proverbs.

The author of this book tells us to be wise:

Ecclesiastes 10:1: “Dead flies cause the ointment of the apothecary to send forth a stinking savour: so doth a little folly him that is in reputation for wisdom and honour.”

This should put to rest the idea that Solomon believes we should add a little sin to our lives in order to make things easier! He does *not* believe that the wise should engage in folly. Even a little folly is a terrible thing to engage in – just like dead flies are a terrible thing to add to perfume. We should be wholly dedicated to wisdom, and should *not* seek to find some kind of “balance” between wisdom and idiocy.

Solomon tells us that fools are known by their actions:

Ecclesiastes 10:3: “Yea also, when he that is a fool walketh by the way, his wisdom faileth him, and he saith to every one that he is a fool.”

You can talk a great game, but your life will prove what sort of person you really are.

As we saw earlier, Solomon tells us that we should respect those in authority over us:

Ecclesiastes 10:4: “If the spirit of the ruler rise up against thee, leave not thy place; for yielding pacifieth great offences.”

This should be obvious, but there are times when making things worse just makes things worse. There is a lot to be said for admitting you were wrong, asking forgiveness, and yielding. Continuing in your error is not going to make things better. You need to fix your mistake, not double down on it.

Solomon says it is an evil thing to reward fools and mistreat the great:

Ecclesiastes 10:5: “There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, as an error which proceedeth from the ruler:

6 Folly is set in great dignity, and the rich sit in low place.

7 I have seen servants upon horses, and princes walking as servants upon the earth.”

Our culture is great at this: we give tremendous honor to celebrities who do not deserve it, and we completely ignore people who have a profound impact on our lives. For example, according to polling data, only about one third of people can name their member of congress. Only about a quarter of Americans can name their two senators. Yet, Americans are

completely obsessed over the intimate details of the lives of celebrities, while ignoring the actions of the people who actually get to decide what laws they have to live under and how much they pay in taxes. We are obsessed with things that make no difference, and we can't be bothered to care about things that make all the difference in the world. That's *not* a good thing.

Solomon says that if you lay a trap for another, you are the one who will be caught in it:

Ecclesiastes 10:8: “He that diggeth a pit shall fall into it; and whoso breaketh an hedge, a serpent shall bite him.

9 Whoso removeth stones shall be hurt therewith; and he that cleaveth wood shall be endangered thereby.”

Prisons are full of thieves who thought they had a foolproof get-rich-quick scheme. It's quite likely that the real fool you are going to defraud is yourself. Even if you seem to get away with it, the truth is you're not really getting away with anything at all; you will still have to answer to God for what you've done, and there is no getting out of that (apart from repentance and the blood of Christ).

Solomon praises wisdom:

Ecclesiastes 10:10: “If the iron be blunt, and he do not whet the edge, then must he put to more strength: but wisdom is profitable to direct.”

Wisdom can make your life much easier. If you use your head you can find better ways to live your life and get things done. It is a real productivity booster.

Fools, though, end up just causing even more problems:

Ecclesiastes 10:11: “Surely the serpent will bite without enchantment; and a babbler is no better.

12 The words of a wise man's mouth are gracious; but the lips of a fool will swallow up himself.

13 The beginning of the words of his mouth is foolishness: and the end of his talk is mischievous madness.

14 A fool also is full of words: a man cannot tell what shall be; and what shall be after him, who can tell him?”

Here's another way to put that: if you don't have anything wise to say, then don't say anything at all. One of the characteristics of fools is that they are full of words – words that end in madness and trouble. Don't be one of those people.

Solomon rebukes foolish rulers who spend their time getting drunk instead of taking care of the business of the kingdom:

Ecclesiastes 10:16: “Woe to thee, O land, when thy king is a child, and thy princes eat in the morning!

17 Blessed art thou, O land, when thy king is the son of nobles, and thy princes eat in due season, for strength, and not for drunkenness!”

He teaches that rulers should be sober-minded and wise – not fools who use their power to indulge themselves. Foolish, drunken rulers are a curse to the land.

Solomon hates laziness:

Ecclesiastes 10:18: “By much slothfulness the building decayeth; and through idleness of the

hands the house droppeth through.”

If you want to keep your life and possessions in good order then you need to work at it. They're not going to fix themselves!

Solomon warns us not to curse our rulers, but instead to show them respect:

Ecclesiastes 10:20: “Curse not the king, no not in thy thought; and curse not the rich in thy bedchamber: for a bird of the air shall carry the voice, and that which hath wings shall tell the matter.”

Like it or not, our rulers *are* our rulers; God is the one who put them over us, and He commands us to respect them. This doesn't mean we have to agree with all of their decisions, but we are not given liberty to curse them.

Solomon tells us to be generous because we do not know how life will turn out:

Ecclesiastes 11:2: “Give a portion to seven, and also to eight; for thou knowest not what evil shall be upon the earth.”

The truth is life is full of uncertainties. It may be that our venture will work out; it may also be that it will fail. Things may turn out well or they may fall into ruin. Since we can't know the future, the best thing to do is to be as generous as possible. Since we don't know what seeds will sprout, the wisest thing to do is to sow as many seeds as we can. That way we have a better chance of succeeding. After all, if you put all of your effort into one thing and it fails, where does that leave you?

So as you can see, Solomon was full of wisdom. This book

was not written by a fool.

Serve God While You Are Young

At the end of the book Solomon warns the youth to make good use of their lives, because old age is coming:

Ecclesiastes 11:7: “Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun:

8 But if a man live many years, and rejoice in them all; yet let him remember the days of darkness; for they shall be many. All that cometh is vanity.

9 Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes: but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment.

10 Therefore remove sorrow from thy heart, and put away evil from thy flesh: for childhood and youth are vanity.”

Young people tend to think that they will be young forever, but that is not the case. Solomon calls youth vanity because that is what it is: it does not last and it is not very satisfying. Youth comes and goes and is then replaced by old age. Solomon commands young people to serve God while they are still young, because much harder days are coming:

Ecclesiastes 12:1: “Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days

come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them;”

Solomon then spends quite a few verses explaining to the young that they are going to get old one day, and old age is not very much fun at all. Since they *are* going to grow old, the young should serve God now while they still have the opportunity. Once they get old it will be much harder for them to do the things that used to be quite easy.

Solomon compares the human body of an old man to a house. The house has quite a lot of problems:

Ecclesiastes 12:3: “In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble, and the strong men shall bow themselves, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look out of the windows be darkened,”

The keepers of the house are your hands. When you get old they start to shake, or tremble.

The strong men are your legs. Their strength wanes when old age comes.

The grinders are your teeth. As you get old you tend to lose them – especially in the days before there were dentists.

The windows are the eyes. When you get old it becomes much harder to see.

Ecclesiastes 12:4: “And the doors shall be shut in the streets, when the sound of the grinding is low, and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird, and all the daughters of musick shall be brought low,”

The doors represents your mouth; since you don't have

any teeth (especially if you lived in the days before dentists!), you tend to keep it closed. The reason “the sound of the grinding is low” is because you don't have very many teeth (if any!) to grind with.

The reason “he shall rise up at the voice of a bird” is because sleep is now harder to come by. You don't sleep as soundly as you used to, and it doesn't take much to wake you up.

The “daughters of music” is a reference to your voice. It's not what it used to be. In youth it was strong and steady; in old age it weakens and decays.

Ecclesiastes 12:5: “Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail: because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets:”

Why are they “afraid of that which is high”? Because high places are dangerous when you are old and feeble. Climbing the stairs is a risky proposition. A lot of people get hurt that way.

Why will there be fears in the way? Because it's not nearly as easy to protect yourself from danger when you are old. Your ability to fight things off, and solve problems, is greatly diminished. Being old is a risky business. It's not easy to change a tire when you're 90.

The almond tree shall flourish should probably be translated “fall off”. What falls off when you get old? Your hair. You may have had a great head of hair when you are young; not many people have that when they are old.

We are told that the grasshopper will be a burden. Grasshoppers are small things. In old age, small things become problems; small weights can bring pain. Things that wouldn't have been a problem at all when you were young now become

significant hurdles.

We are told that desires shall fail. In old age, the appetite is not what it used to be. Eating is now far more difficult, and the ability to taste food has decayed over time. The desires that you once had have now been ravaged by the march of time and your own infirmities.

Man goes to his long home – in other words, man is on his way to the grave, where he will be for a long time (but, as we know, not forever). Do I really need to explain why there are mourners in the streets?

We then get to the point of death:

Ecclesiastes 12:6: “Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern.”

The silver cord may be a reference to your spinal cord, and could be talking about the decay of the nervous system. Once your nervous system collapses, it will take your life with it.

The golden bowl is a reference to your skull, which contains your brain. Once that breaks, your life ends as well. You can't get very far without a brain.

The pitcher at the fountain and the wheel at the cistern are thought to be references to your heart. Your heart is what circulates the blood that your body needs to survive. It can be thought of as a fountain or a cistern, only instead of providing water it provides life. Once that organ breaks, life ends.

Then you return to dust:

Ecclesiastes 12:7: “Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.”

I'd like to point out that Solomon's point in all of this is *not* “Man, life sure is depressing.” He is not trying to get you down, nor is he telling you to just party the night away because you only live once. His actual point is that one day you *will* get old, so you had better make the most of your time while you have it. Serve God while you are young, because life will be much harder when you reach old age.

This is Solomon's point all throughout the book. Because life is vanity, you need to serve God. Because you don't know what will happen in the future, you need to serve God. Because you will one day get old, you need to serve God. Solomon is giving us a sobering picture of life so that we will get our priorities straight and focus on things that really matter – not on things that are irrelevant and vanity.

Earlier Solomon made the point that the heart of the wise man was in the house of mourning. In other words, the wise think about the not-so-fun aspects of life so that they can learn wisdom and take life more seriously. They think about the truth – even the hard and unpleasant truths – so that they can make wiser decisions. That is precisely what Solomon is trying to get you to do.

In Conclusion

At the end of the book Solomon repeats the fact that all is vanity:

Ecclesiastes 12:8: “Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher; all is vanity.”

But it doesn't end there. Since all is vanity, and since life is

unsatisfying, what did the writer of this book do? He sought out wisdom to teach the people how to live life wisely:

Ecclesiastes 12:9: “And moreover, because the preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yea, he gave good heed, and sought out, and set in order many proverbs.

10 The preacher sought to find out acceptable words: and that which was written was upright, even words of truth.

11 The words of the wise are as goads, and as nails fastened by the masters of assemblies, which are given from one shepherd.”

And how do you live life wisely? What is the conclusion to all of this? It's what Solomon has been saying all along. What we ought to be doing are things that are *not* vanity. We need to serve God:

Ecclesiastes 12:13: “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.

14 For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.”

Solomon does *not* conclude by saying “Life is meaningless, so just party and die.” Instead he warns us that God sees everything we do and will bring every act into judgment. He will hold us accountable for the way we have lived our lives. Because of this, we should fear God and keep His commandments. That is *not* vanity, and should be our focus throughout life.

And that is a message we ought to take to heart.