

Ecclesiastes Commentary-Leon Hyatt

COMMENTARY ON THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES Leon Hyatt

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1. AUTHORSHIP, DATE, THEME, AND STRUCTURE

AUTHORSHIP. Until the rise of skeptical “scholarship” in the last three hundred years, Solomon was universally recognized as the author of the Book of Ecclesiastes. Those who question the authorship of Solomon never seem to be able to identify another individual who could have written the book. They just surmise that some unknown person wrote it many years after Solomon’s death. So many have made that claim that some consideration needs to be given in support of the traditional view. Four outstanding reasons may be cited.

The claim of the book itself.

The first words of the Book of Ecclesiastes claim to identify the writer. They say plainly,

Ecclesiastes 1:1 The words of the Proclaimer, son of David, king in Jerusalem.

Taken in their literal meaning, those words can apply to only one person in history. That person was Solomon. Attempts to make those words refer to someone other than Solomon have been singularly unconvincing. However, attempts have been made on three accounts:

(1) Some have claimed that the statement does not mean Solomon because the writer calls himself “the Proclaimer.” They propose that Solomon would have spoken of himself as King, speaking with authority, not as a herald seeking to gain a hearing through convincing words. Apart from the impossibility of the commentator’s supposing that he has the ability to enter into another person’s inner thoughts and determine what that person would or would not say, the claim of the critics is weak for the following reason:

The word translated “Proclaimer” has also been translated “Teacher,” “Preacher,” “Speaker,” “Spokesman,” and sometimes transliterated from the Hebrew as “Kohleth.” It is related to the Hebrew word that means “congregation” or “assembly.” It seems to refer to a person who speaks to a group of people who have gathered to hear his message. The Hebrew word for “congregation” can refer to a religious gathering or a secular gathering, and the message delivered to it also can be either. The content of the Book of Ecclesiastes does not resemble a sermon declaring moral or spiritual truth and calling people to action for God. It also does not resemble a lesson presenting facts on a particular subject. Yet it contains more emotion than would be expressed by just an intellectual address. It has all the marks of a compassionate appeal from an elder gentleman, encrusted with the experiences of life, appealing to younger men to avoid the mistakes he made and urging them to grasp onto the one truth that make life meaningful.

Before the days of newspapers, communities had men who traveled about proclaiming the latest news and

sometimes proclaiming their philosophies. The position was important to the unity of a community of that time. It was a worthy and respected position. Those who held the position often were called “heralds.” The writer of the Book of Ecclesiastes seems to have seen himself filling that kind of service as he shared conclusions he had reached from his experiences in life. Therefore, “Herald” or “Proclaimer” may be the most accurate translation into English of the word the writer used to describe himself.

The question is, Could Solomon have cast himself into that role, appealing for people’s attention, rather than commanding their obedience? At one stage in Solomon’s life, the answer to that question would have been, “No.” However, near the end of Solomon’s life God’s displeasure with his unfaithfulness (1 Kings 11:11-13) and the rise of opposition to his oppressions (1 Kings 11:14-40) humbled him and made him realize the folly and eventual failure of autocracy and of all human effort. In his earliest years as king, Solomon had a genuine faith and an humble desire to rule well with justice and mercy. As his rule grew in success and power, he abandoned that spirit and began to glory in himself and his accomplishments. However, he lived long enough to see the folly of living in that way. It is highly likely, even almost to be expected, that as he drew near to the end of his long life he returned to his humble faith and wanted to warn others against making the mistakes he had made. To do so, he would need to step down from his throne and present himself as a teacher, advisor, and proclaimer of wisdom. Doing so, made his words avoid the flavor of arrogance and enabled them to become warm-hearted advice from a man whom life had humbled into reality. The writer’s calling himself a “Proclaimer” in no ways eliminates Solomon from being the writer.

(2) Others have said that the phrases **“son of David, king in Jerusalem”** do not necessarily apply to Solomon, because the Hebrews often used the word “son” to refer to any male descendant. They say the reference could be to any one of the descendants of David who ruled as king in Jerusalem. David had nineteen direct descendants who ruled in succession as kings in Jerusalem before the remnants of the nation were carried away into captivity by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Used in its broadest sense, **“son of David, king in Jerusalem”** could refer to any one of David’s descendants who succeeded to the throne in Jerusalem. However, no descendant of David other than Solomon ever achieved the scope of accomplishments or the breadth of experience that the writer describes in this Book. We must conclude that the Book claims to have been written by Solomon. That claim is so clear that it must be accepted until it has been proven decisively to be false.

(3) Some have said that the writer of Ecclesiastes was someone who researched Solomon’s writings many years after Solomon’s death and recorded his ideas but used language prevalent in his day to state them. They propose by that means to explain how the book can be about Solomon and still contain language that supposedly was typical of a later time. In that case, the opening statement of the book is a falsehood. It does not say that the book contains the ideas of Solomon but that it is the words of Solomon. If the opening words of the book make a false claim to gain a hearing, no reason exists to trust anything else that is written in the book. An honest evaluation of book is that either Solomon wrote the book or it is a forgery. If it is a forgery, it was a colossal mistake to accept it as an inspired book that belongs in the Bible. That view turns out to be not only an indictment of the truthfulness of the first words in the book but also of the good judgment of Jewish and Christian believers who almost universally accepted it as divinely inspired over the span of 2,900 years. Rejecting Solomon as the writer of Ecclesiastes is equivalent to rejecting the book as inspired truth. The Bible is clear that rejecting or changing the inspired words of God is an extremely dangerous and deadly exercise (Rev. 22:18-19).

Striking similarities between the claims of the writer and the career of Solomon. A second reason for accepting Solomon to be the writer of Ecclesiastes is the close resemblance between what the writer says about himself and what other Scriptures reveal about Solomon. Some recognize that the book claims to have been written by Solomon but go on to hold that the writer of the book was someone who only claimed to be Solomon to gain a wider hearing for what he had to say. Aside from the fact that such an attempt to steal another’s identity would be dishonest and unworthy of being included in a book of revelations from God, no one can write of the experiences of a person’s life as powerfully or as convincingly as the person himself. The descriptions that the writer of this Book gives about Solomon fit so perfectly all that is known about Solomon’s life and accomplishments that they give evidence of being testimonies of personal experiences. The descriptions of the Book parallel the life of Solomon in at least five significant ways:

(1) The writer claimed to have wisdom beyond all who had preceded him in Jerusalem (Eccl. 1:16). Solomon was recognized by God and by other rulers as superior in wisdom by all other wise men of that day. Other renowned wise men of that day actually are named in Scripture with the claim that Solomon’s wisdom was superior to theirs, show that his wisdom was not just hypothetical but universally recognized (1 Kings 3:10-13; 10:1-9).

(2) The writer claimed to have experienced the height of pleasures (Eccl. 2:1-3). Solomon enjoyed the pleasures of great power and authority (1 Kings 4:1-19; 9:15-23), servants waiting on his every need (1 Kings 2:7), entertainment from song and magnificent luxury (1 Kings 2:8b; 10:14-29), protection from his enemies (1 Kings 10:1-40), and even decadence with an unbelievable number of women (1 Kings 2:8c; 11:1-6). If a pleasure existed, good or bad, that Solomon did not experience, it is impossible to imagine what it could have been.

(3) The writer claimed to have achieved great construction projects in the city and in the countryside (Eccl. 2:4-6). Solomon's buildings transformed Jerusalem from a dull stone town into a glittering city of cedar, marble, and gold. His most magnificent construction project was the temple in Jerusalem, which made it one of the wonders of the ancient world (1 Kings 5:1-7:51).

(4) The writer claimed to have amassed great wealth (Eccl. 2:8a). Solomon's wealth dazzled the Queen of Sheba and was beyond compare even by today's standards (1 Kings 10:6-7:29).

(5) The writer claimed to have such a great breadth of experience that he could say he had seen everything in his days of breathing (7:15) and had investigated and tested it all by wisdom (7:23-25). He supported that claim by quoting two long series of proverbs, one a series of 18 proverbs about righteousness (Eccl. 7:1-22) and the other a series of 7 proverbs about wisdom (Eccl. 8:1-8). Solomon was recognized as having gained such a wide knowledge of the world and its life that intellectuals came from all over the world to learn from him. He even wrote extensively of the knowledge he had gained, being credited with composing 3,000 proverbs and 1,005 songs (1 Kings 4:29-34)

No other person known to Bible students or historians ever fitted the descriptions the writer of this book gave of himself as perfectly as King Solomon. Therefore, the most natural conclusion is that Solomon wrote this book and that in it he tells accurately of his magnificent achievements.

Realism of the writer's disillusionment. A third reason for accepting Solomon as the writer of the Book of Ecclesiastes is the realistic way it describes Solomon's disillusionment over his accomplishments. One reason some give for doubting that Solomon wrote the book is that the book speaks so disparagingly about the worth of Solomon's amazing accomplishments. They believe Solomon would not have spoken in such a depressing manner about his own spectacular achievements. However, it is really the person who looks at Solomon's life from the outside who is likely to miss depressing conclusions about his life. In terms of worldly success, Solomon was the most powerful and successful king who ever ruled Israel. An observer of Solomon would have been inclined to admire and praise his achievements, not disparage them. An outside observer would be inclined to surmise that Solomon felt some regret for his mistakes, as well as much satisfaction over his achievements. It is only when Solomon's experiences are observed from the viewpoint of what they did to him inwardly that a person can recognize the damage those successes did to him spiritually. The only person who could know genuinely about those spiritual consequences was Solomon himself. The writer's disappointment with the results of his great achievements is more natural coming from Solomon himself than from anyone else. It took Solomon to be able to proclaim that none of his accomplishments had any real value at all. Only he could see clearly that all of them were empty, worthless, vain, and useless, which is exactly what the writer of Ecclesiastes said about Solomon's life. The writer's rejection of the value of his many achievements does not contradict Solomon's authorship. It supports his authorship.

Truly from a spiritual point of view, Solomon's life was a huge disappointment. He began as a young man eager to please Jehovah. When he first became king, God spoke to him directly at the high altar in Gibeon and offered him whatever he wished. Solomon did not ask for long life or riches, but for wisdom to rule and judge with justice and mercy. God was enormously pleased with Solomon's request and promised to give him not only wisdom and understanding, but also riches and honor (1 Kings 3:1-15). However, years later, Solomon came to the end of his life as a man who had married an enormous number of foreign and pagan wives, built temples to honor their gods, and accompanied them to worship in those temples (1 Kings 11:1-10). Those departures from what God challenged him to be brought a stern rebuke to him from God and a promise from God that his kingdom was going to be broken up (1 Kings 11:11-13). It also aroused opposition from enemies both foreign and domestic, which he was able to control only with brute force (1 Kings 11:14-40). The result was the division of his kingdom after his death (1 Kings 11:41-24). Even more seriously, for his unfaithfulness to God, he was denied the honor of being included in the line of believers that led to Jesus (Luke 3:30). Who else could have felt the sting of his failures more keenly than Solomon himself? Who could have known so vividly how Solomon felt about his contrasting successes and failures other than Solomon himself? And who could have dared to write about his feelings so believably other than Solomon himself? It is not remarkable, but realistic, that Solomon should have come to the end of his life disillusioned with his mad race after power and glory and willing to acknowledge that all of it was turning to dust in his hands. The gloomy view of the glory of human achievement that is expressed in this book supports the authorship of Solomon, rather than arguing against it.

Failure of theories that use vocabulary and style as arguments against Solomon's authorship. The evidence against

Solomon's authorship that is most often cited is based on the claim that some words used in the book were not used in Solomon's time and styles of writing used in the book were not in vogue until many years after Solomon died. Though those arguments often are used by critics who doubt the truthfulness of Bible statements, those types of arguments have proven again and again to be flimsy and based on more imagination than reality. Counting the number of words used in a writing and comparing it with the number of times the same word is used in another writing proves nothing. Writers are extremely versatile in varying expressions according to the point they are making, and words that a writer uses vary widely according to the topic he is discussing. It is unrealistic to imagine that a writer must use the same words in every book he writes or that writers from the same period would use the same words. Furthermore, the history of the Hebrew language is too sparse to allow anyone to know which Hebrew words were in use or which styles of writing were in vogue at a particular time. Enormous disagreement exists among scholars about when a Hebrew word began to be used. Equal disagreement exists concerning whether or not a particular word was a loan word from a foreign language and concerning when a possible loan word might have been borrowed from another language. Every theory that has been based on that type of evidence has received as much scholarly evidence against it as for it. None of those theories applied to Ecclesiastes has been able to gain widespread support. Critics have wasted a lot of effort searching for linguistic evidence that does not exist. It is much wiser to read the book of Ecclesiastes to learn what vocabulary and style of writing Solomon employed than to use the vocabulary and style of writing in the book to try to determine whether or not Solomon wrote it.

The most convincing conclusion is that the Book of Ecclesiastes is what it claims to be and that it was written by Solomon in his old age to share what his enormously successful life had taught him about the disappointments and emptiness of all human accomplishments. It is best to see Ecclesiastes as a book that Solomon wrote to urge others to find something more satisfying to be the foundation on which to build their lives than success and wealth and fame.

DATE. The date when an Old Testament book was written depends on the chronology that is used by the student. Views have varied considerably concerning the dates of Solomon's reign; however, in recent years researchers have come to much greater agreement concerning those dates. Though it must be acknowledged that some historians doubt that Solomon ever existed at all, that view is becoming increasingly rejected; and researchers have come much closer to agreeing on the dates for his reign.

The date for the completion of Solomon's temple is now considered to be one of the most firmly established dates in Old Testament history. It is most often cited as 960 B.C. 1 Kings 6:38 says that it took seven years to build Solomon's temple and that it was completed in the eleventh year of Solomon's reign. First Kings 11:42 says Solomon reigned for 40 years. If 960 B.C. is the correct date for the completion of the temple, Solomon's reign was from 949 B.C. to 909 B.C. Because Ecclesiastes reviews the many accomplishments of Solomon's reign and tells how they left him disillusioned, the book must have been written near the end of his reign, probably one to five years before his death. Thus the date of its writing was between 915 B.C. and 910 B.C.

THEME. The Book of Ecclesiastes not only identifies its writer but also clearly states its theme in the beginning of the book. The writer proclaims,

Ecclesiastes 1:2 "Vanity of vanities," says the Proclaimer; "vanity of vanities. All is vanity."

Those words identify the theme of the book. The word translated "vanity" is a noun that means "air," "breath," or "vapor." It has often been translated as "vanity," "futility," "emptiness," and even as an adjective "vain" or "futile" or "meaningless." It had an impact similar to our expression, "It is all a bunch of hot air." In verse 2, it is used first in the superlative degree, which in Hebrew was indicated by doubling the noun. Thus, literally translated the words are "air of airs" or "vapor of vapors." In English we turn the noun into an adjective and translate it "most vaporous" or "completely vaporous." Slightly freer translations are "absolutely futile," "completely empty," and "totally vain." It means "absolutely useless" or "totally futile" or "no good at all." The translation that is used in this volume is the most literal rendering that is possible in English, "vanity of vanities."

Those words aptly describe how Solomon felt about his life when he saw that all his great accomplishments earned him the displeasure of God and rejection by the people. It was a valid evaluation. Solomon had wasted his great opportunities by using them to put himself ahead of God and his achievements ahead of God's blessings. That evaluation was so real and so important that writing about it was a book that needed to be written. To Solomon's credit, he had the faith and courage to write down those insights before he died. He left it for the benefit of all future generations. It is a lesson and a warning that every generation and every person needs to heed.

When a person comes near the end of life, he just naturally wants to leave behind something that will have lasting value. He soon realizes that what he can leave behind that has lasting value cannot be found in the works he has performed. A researcher might dig around and record some of his works for the sake of history, but otherwise no one will care and no one will remember. So he begins to look around for something more lasting than his human accomplishments. Solomon was going through just that kind of soul searching when he wrote the Book of Ecclesiastes. The result was depressing, because he realized he had spent most of his

energies on activities that soon would decay and lose their value. As he faced the end of his life, he was honest enough to tell how he felt about it all. In the Introduction to his book, he dove right into the subject and stated it honestly. He declared that all human knowledge and accomplishment is vanity and only trusting and obey God will last.

The theme of the book of Ecclesiastes is that every human work is empty unless it is done for God and in His will. Solomon returned to being wise when he was willing to write down those insights for our benefit.

The book sticks strictly to that one theme from beginning to end. Because Solomon wished to emphasize that all areas of life were futile without God, he covered a wide range of topics. In fact, he touched on just about every aspect of life that it is possible to imagine. He was comprehensive, because he wanted future generations to know that what he had to say was not limited in its application. It applied to everything a person can know and experience in life. Therefore, Solomon repeated the same theme over and over again concerning one aspect of life after another from the beginning of his book to the end. In the last analysis, he found it all to be vanity.

A close examination of Solomon's words shows that he was not saying the various aspects of life he mentioned had no usefulness at all, but that they are useless if trusted by themselves without relating them to God. Several times in the Book he emphasized that a person should employ everything in life sparingly for a good purpose, and he assured his readers they could find satisfaction in doing so (Eccl. 2:13; 3:1-8,12-13; 4:5-6,9-12; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:4-6; 11:4-6). For that reason, "meaningless" is not a good translation of the Hebrew word Solomon used to describe his conclusions concerning the value of the works to which he had devoted his life. Solomon was not saying that what he had done was not worth doing. Neither was he saying that human effort and learning have no meaning at all. They often have a good purpose and real value to the person who performs them. They may be necessary for continuing the person's existence and enabling him to have a measure of comfort in life. They also may be important for protecting and preserving the world over which God gave people dominion. Solomon did not advocate inactivity, lack of ambition, or laziness. He was simply saying that in the end everything a person does and accomplishes vanishes away and is forgotten. If he wants to leave behind something of truly lasting value, he will have to find it in something more than human effort.

The greatest example of the truthfulness of Solomon's words is the magnificent temple he built in Jerusalem. It was an architectural marvel, an unequaled display of wealth, and a seemingly unassailable fortress. Furthermore, it was built to the glory and praise of the one true God Almighty and Eternal. But over the years of its existence, it was robbed of its beauty and splendor several times, it was neglected and allowed to deteriorate into shambles more than once, and in the end it was torn down stone by stone and even the stones carried away until only a few stones from one side of the foundation remain today to form an unceasing place of mourning for the Jewish people. Solomon's greatest accomplishment has become the greatest source of sorrow for the most persecuted people in the history of the world. The reason Solomon's temple was so completely destroyed was that, while Solomon was building it, he was neglecting the only treasure that will last forever and in doing so set an example that eventually caused his whole nation to put other gods ahead of the true God. However, near the end of Solomon's life, long before the temple was neglected or destroyed, God showed him that it was just one example that all human achievements are temporary and vanish away like the wind.

Solomon's emphasis in the Book of Ecclesiastes was that in the end everything a person does in life accomplishes nothing that is lasting. All his efforts are like a vapor no one can catch or hold onto. Human achievements come for a time but soon vanish away. Every experience and every accomplishment in a person's life ultimately is disappointing and empty without God. Anything not used for God becomes only a responsibility to carry, even a burden to bear. It is just a yesterday memory or an object to behold that has lost its luster. Therefore, the one action that can give meaning to any and all aspects of life is to trust and obey God.

No doubt, making that emphasis was the reason Solomon called himself "the Proclaimer." He was not asking people to listen to his words on the basis of his position, power, authority, learning, achievements, wealth, or honor, but on the basis of what experience had taught him about what gives real value to a person's life. The insights that came from his experiences, not his worldly accomplishments, made his words worth hearing. He spoke as a proclaimer of truth, not as a king or a dispenser of justice. Indeed, he was right at last. He had come to realize that knowing and obeying God were the only values that would last beyond a person's life. He wrote down those insights, and they above everything else Solomon accomplished have remained to instruct and inspire the world from that day until this. Solomon finally declares that abiding truth at the end of his book by saying, "

Eccl 12:13 One last word [now that] all has been heard. Fear God, and keep His commandments,

Eccl 12:14 for this is the all in all for the man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden one, whether [it was] good or bad.

STRUCTURE. The structure of the Book of Ecclesiastes is uniform throughout. Solomon takes up one aspect of life after another and one by one declares each and every one to be futile. He gives reasons why each aspect becomes a vanity without God, and he varies his reasons as they apply to each aspect separately. The constant repetition of the same theme does not become

monotonous, because Solomon shows intimate acquaintance with each aspect of life and presents living, realistic reasons why each one brought him disappointment without being repetitious or tedious. In doing so, he covers a vast array of topics and a wide breadth of experiences, but he never strays from his theme that each one fades into vanity without God.

Some writers fail to follow the clue that Solomon gave in the beginning of his book about the theme that ties all of his observations into one unified whole. Those writers see each various topic as an independent emphasis and, therefore, miss the marvelous unity of the whole book. Most writers tend to outline the book as a series of disjointed thoughts on a host of topics that have no real relationship to each other. Many go so far as to collect seemingly similar statements throughout the book and to present them as keys to the purpose and views of the writer. They end up with a confusing array of unrelated bits of advice that have no clear, compelling message. Sadly, they miss one of the most gripping messages of the Bible, written by the one person in history who was most capable of declaring it. For Solomon's breathtaking revelation of what alone has real value in life, they substitute a disjointed array of scattered thoughts of their own making.

The outline of the Book that is suggested and used throughout this commentary shows that, far from being a collection of unconnected proverbial statements, the Book of Ecclesiastes is a powerful commentary on how making the wrong emphasis in life destroys all the good that a person accomplishes. In a striking and effective way, Solomon related a vast array of knowledge to that one unifying theme. The outline of the book that is followed throughout this commentary clarifies how all the parts of the Book fit into that one unwavering emphasis.

In the Book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon examines eleven important aspects of life and explains the reasons why each one is empty when enjoyed by itself apart from God. Solomon's comments on those eleven aspects of life form eleven major sections of the Book. Those eleven sections are preceded by a brief Introduction and followed by a brief but vital Conclusion. That outline of the Book is followed in the chapters in the commentary. Sub-topics in each chapter show that Solomon developed his discussion of each topic in an orderly way with one goal in mind. The discussions of each chapter demonstrate that Solomon never strayed from the major theme of the book and related every verse to the overall whole.

To emphasize the overall unity of the Book, this commentary contains the writer's translation of the Book. The translation seeks to be as literal as possible and to transfer the original words of Solomon as closely as is possible in modern English. The writer's purpose is to allow Solomon's words to speak for themselves and to prevent this translator from inserting his own ideas into the text. To this writer, faithfulness to the words God actually inspired is more important than smoothness of diction according to modern English standards. Smoothing out the words into well-turned English phrases often dulls the sharp edges of a message that is intended to cut through the hard shell that is encrusted over human hearts. When a translator adjusts the original wording of a difficult passage in an attempt to make the passage easy to read, he often misses the original writer's point completely. Sometimes it is possible for the reader to understand a difficult passage better than the translator if only the translator will accurately communicate to him what the original actually says. It is best for a translator to allow the Holy Spirit to speak through the original words He inspired. On that premise, this translator seeks to allow Solomon to speak to the reader for himself without the translator's serving as an interpreter. If any words must be added to make sense in English, those words are indicated by enclosing them in brackets. The reader can omit those words to see if he feels the translator has changed Solomon's meaning in any way.

The translations are arranged in outline form in order to show, not only the overall unity of the message, but also the well-organized relationship of each individual statement to the overall theme. The outlines show that each phrase has its own significance and is worthy of close examination but that each reveals its true meaning only as it is related to the overall theme it is illustrating. By outlining the thoughts in groups as they relate to each other, the outline itself becomes an exposition of the Book that illuminates Solomon's message. If any sub-topics are added to show how the ideas relate to each other in groups, those sub-topics are indicated by enclosing them in brackets. The reader can omit those sub-topics to see if they make any difference in the meaning of the text.

The comments that follow each section of the outline seek to further clarify the meaning and significance of that section. Read them with discernment to determine if they illuminate Solomon's intentions or miss his point. Hopefully those comments will do more than help readers understand Solomon's message. Their purpose is to help the reader apply Solomon's message to his own life. The goal of this commentary is to help you the reader avoid vanities in your life and instead fill your life with hope and joy by surrendering each aspect of your life to God. It is written with a prayer that when you have completed studying Solomon's words all the way through you will be left with absolute assurance that Solomon's final conclusion is eternally right, which is that the one who trusts and obeys God has everything.

2. INTRODUCTION OF THE BOOK

Every Human Effort is Vanity

Ecclesiastes 1:3-11

A. What advantage [comes] to the man through all the toil at which he toils under the sun (1:3-11)?

1. A generation goes and a generation comes, and the earth stays the same through the ages (1:3-8)?

2. The sun rises, and the sun sets, then hastens to the place where it rises (1:5).

3. The wind goes to the south and turns to the north, going around and around (1:6)

4. All floods flow to the sea, but the sea [is] never full; to the place where the floods flow there they continue to flow (1:7)

5. All things are [so] boring a man [has] nothing to talk about (1:8a).

6. An eye never gets enough seeing; an ear never gets its fill of hearing (1:8b).

B. What has been is what will be, and what was done is what will be done (1:9-10)

a. And nothing new [is] under the sun (1:9)

b. Is there a word of which someone says, "See this is new"? It has been already in the ages that were before us (1:10).

C. [People never remember what happened before them] (1:11)

1. No memory [remains] of former tunes (1:11a).

2. And of that which is yet to be no memory will be among those who will come later (1:11b).

After presenting the theme that flows through his entire Book, Solomon gave a general explanation of why he contended that everything a person does is as flimsy and as vaporous as the wind. He presented three reasons for making that statement:

Ecclesiastes 1:3-8. Man's failure to impact the world. Solomon's first reason was the failure of people's attempts to make any real impact on the way the world operates. He said all the efforts of men have not changed one aspect of the way the sun rises and sets, the way the wind blows, or the way rivers flow. The way the world operates is so repetitious that people are left with nothing to talk about. Yet the eye keeps on wanting to see, and the ear keeps on wanting to hear. They are searching for something new, but it never comes. No matter how much effort people place in their attempts to make the world a better place, it remains forever the same.

Grandchildren and great grandchildren see the same sun rise and set each day. A thousand years later, gentle winds and violent storms blow without any change from all the works of men in all those years.. Generation after generation builds bridges and rides boats on the same rivers, but the rivers never cease to flow or change their channels. They may alter their courses a bit, but they still flow through the same areas and empty into the same seas. People forget who their ancestors were, but their eyes see and their ears hear in just the same way as those of their long-forgotten forebears. In essence, people have no power to change the world in a meaningful way.

Solomon had spent his life running a government, developing a land, and constructing buildings and cities, but none of those works had succeeded in making any basic changes in the way the world runs. It made him realize that if all his efforts had failed to make any real difference in the world, no one else could either. Therefore, all of the works of men are empty efforts, going nowhere.

Eccl 1:9-10. Life is only endless repetitions. Solomon's second reason was that life consists of unending repetitions but never produce any experiences that are truly new (Ecclesiastes 1:9-10). Solomon had lived enough years to see several generations born, grow up, and have children of their own. He observed that each generation went through the same stages of life. In spite of relatively minor variations, children learned the same lessons, followed the same processes to find their life's work, went through the same labors to provide a home for themselves, experienced the same disappointments and joys in finding a mate, and discovered the same triumphs and joy in giving

birth to children and rearing them. Then the grandchildren repeated the whole process over again. Nothing really new or different ever happened.

Solomon was keenly aware that all the great achievements of his life were actions that others had performed before him, and he also knew that someone else was going to have to do it all over again when he was gone. Even his monumental buildings were going to grow old and decay. He could not have known that the day was going to come when his great temple was going to be torn down so completely that not one stone was going to stand on another, but he surely knew that it was going to have to be repaired, remodeled, and rebuilt as it experienced the ravages of time and wear. All that he had done and built only prepared for someone

else to have to repeat what he had already

done. Even his great record of running a government, making friends, fighting enemies, and dispensing justice had all been done before and would have to be done over again. Life seemed utterly futile, because it was a constant repetition of what had gone before. It never produced anything really new.

Ecclesiastes 1:11. No one remembers what went before. Solomon's third reason was that all that a man accomplishes is soon forgotten. He knew the generation that was living at that time only vaguely knew about their parents' youths and knew even less about their earlier ancestors. He also knew that the next generation was going to have the same lack of interest in his generation's agonies and victories. He had learned little from experiences of the past, and his descendants were going to learn little from his experiences. Because people learn so little from the past, the same mistakes were going to have to be made over and over again, resulting in the same consequences, the same defeats, and the same rewards. It all seemed so futile to him that he had worked so hard so long to do what he had done only to realize it was not going to last. It was not even going to be remembered.

The three reasons Solomon cited summarized the thoughts he shared throughout the rest of the Book. They are an introduction to and a summary of his whole message. They are a message that every person who is alive today needs to hear and heed. All our effort makes so little difference, we should feel compelled to seek for something that is more than what we are able to do. That something more can only come from God.

3. INVESTIGATION AND INFORMATION ABOUT ALL THAT IS DONE UNDER THE SUN IS VANITY ECCLESIASTES 1:12-18

Ecclesiastes 1:12-18

A. I the Proclaimer am king over Israel in Jerusalem, and I have applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under the heavens (1:12-13)

1. God has given this unhappy occupation to the sons of men to work on (1:13b)

2. I have seen all the doings that are done under the sun, and behold all is vanity and grabbing at the wind (1:14-15)

a. What is crooked cannot become straight (1:15a)

b. And what is lacking cannot be counted (1:15b)

B. I spoke to myself, saying, "I have accomplished great things, and I have increased information above all who were before me over Jerusalem, and my mind has observed information and knowledge" (1:16-18).

1. I set my mind to knowing information and to knowing madness and folly (1:17a).

2. I know that this also is grabbing at the wind (1:17b-18),

a. For in much information is much frustration (1:18a),

b. And he who increases knowledge increases sorrow (1:18b)

The first human accomplishment that Solomon mentioned as futile and empty was conducting investigations to gain information about all that people were doing around the world. He said he sought to use wise or intelligent means of gaining practical information about life everywhere under the heavens. Scholars have said that in this section Solomon was discussing wisdom. No doubt, they reached that conclusion because they are in the business of learning and sharing wisdom. Wisdom is their primary interest, so they expect that Solomon had the same primary interest. Solomon was greatly interested in wisdom, but in this section of his book he emphasized something else. He plainly wrote that he was concerned with exploring the works with which men were occupied throughout the world. He said he wanted to use wisdom as he made his investigations and do them well, but his interest was in defining or explaining wisdom. He was interested in making practical surveys and reliable investigations into how people lived and worked in all parts of the world. From that information, he hoped to gain insights, solutions, and benefits that he could apply to his nation.

Solomon discussed his conclusions from his investigations in two sections. In each section, he emphasized the thoroughness and reliability of his investigations, and in each section he gave his reasons for concluding that all he had learned from them was "vanity,

grabbing at the wind.”

Ecclesiastes 1:12-15. His surveys had revealed no answers to the world’s problems. Solomon began his discussion of this topic by citing his credentials for making his investigations. He claimed to have expertise in the subject because he was king in Jerusalem and because he applied his mind diligently to the task.

When Solomon asserted that he was king in Jerusalem, he used the perfect state of the verb “to be.” Some interpreters have latched on to the writer’s use of the perfect state to say that he spoke of Solomon’s kingship as a thing of the past and, therefore, the writer had to be someone who wrote after Solomon’s death. That argument holds no weight, because Hebrew verb forms do not contain

time significance. The perfect state indicates completed action, but that action can be in the past, present, or future. Solomon used the perfect state to assert that he was the established king in Jerusalem and therefore was fully able to conduct a thorough investigation.

Solomon also emphasized that he had applied his mind to the surveys, which resulted in his using the best methods and the most dependable means available both in gathering the information and also in analyzing the data he gained. His investigations were not sloppily or hastily done. He had concentrated his mind on making the most thorough and accurate investigations possible.

Then Solomon hastened on to present the disappointing conclusion he had reached from his surveys. He said he had learned that everywhere conditions were the same as at home. People were occupied with unhappy busy-work that God had given people to do but that was accomplishing nothing truly meaningful or lasting.

Solomon insisted that his conclusion was not based on insufficient data. In his investigations he had seen “**all the doings that are done under the sun.**” He could not have meant he or his agents had seen every person and every act everywhere. He meant he had received information about every type of lifestyle and every kind of work that people could possibly be involved in. He had not limited his investigations to one type of people, one social class, or one kind of occupation. He had made a thorough survey of all levels of society and all nations around him. In doing so, he was not seeking for philosophical theories or intellectual rationalizations. He was looking for practical information about what was being done and about what could be done in the world. Yet, all he had learned was vanity and emptiness. People everywhere were busy traveling on a dead end road.

Solomon gave two reasons for his conclusion.

- (1) Wherever his surveys uncovered deeds or conditions that were crooked, they could not be straightened.
- (2) Wherever his surveys discovered that people’s basic needs were lacking, the needs not only could not be met, they could not even be counted or catalogued. In other words, the problems were too big to be fixed and the needs were too great to be analyzed. People were just busy struggling away at life, without ever being able to overcome their problems or meet their basic needs. Investigating needs and gaining information were vain and empty enterprises, because they provided no insight into how to improve people’s lives in the world.

Ecclesiastes 1:16-18. The findings of his surveys were confusing and irritating. Solomon continued his discussion of this topic by giving assurance that he had given careful attention to the information he had gathered. He had gathered more information than anyone before him in Jerusalem, and he had given greater study to it than anyone else ever had.

That claim was a strong statement. Only one Israelite king had ruled in Jerusalem before him, and that person was his father David. However, Canaanite kings had ruled in Jerusalem for perhaps a thousand years before David conquered the city and made it his capital. No doubt Solomon meant to include all of those rulers in his claim, but he still said he had seen more of the world and investigated more of its works than anyone before him. Furthermore, after the information had been gathered, he had given it careful scrutiny and had studied it with great care. As he did so, he took note, not only to the information that was positive and helpful, but also to the information that was full of craziness and folly. He did not neglect any source of information that might possibly help him, his nation, and his people (Eccl 1:16-17a).

However, when all of the study was completed, he reached one unshakable conclusion. All that information was useless to make any changes that would produce meaningful results. Gaining helpful suggestions from the mass of information was as elusive as grabbing at the wind (Eccl 1:17b).

Solomon gave two reasons for his conclusion:

- (1) All that mass of information only provided frustration. It was not innovative. It was not consistent. It was not conclusive. No clear patterns developed, and no strong examples stood out to provide sure guidance. It only brought confusion and disappointment (Eccl 1:18a).
- (2) The vastness of the information provided no hope or joy. It only produced sadness and sorrow.

Every place he had investigated was full of misery. Every course of action he had surveyed produced more failure than success. Every national, social, or ethnic group he had consulted was infected with abuse, dishonesty, selfishness, and hurt. Every situation he had reviewed was as full of trouble and hopelessness as every other. No one had any usable answers. The more he had learned, the more he had become discouraged. He was more sorrowful after all the study he had done than before (Eccl 1:18b).

Solomon's experience with information gathering has great application to today. Each new generation travels, observes, and learns about the world more than every previous generation. Broader acquaintance with other peoples and other cultures has brought new awareness of the great variety of people and life in the world, but it has not made people wiser or happier than those who went before.

In addition, in recent years, the means of communication have grown exponentially in every direction. Ordinary people now have the ability available to them to send messages instantly to every part of the world and to receive answers back in a matter of moments. Leaders make surveys of every kind on every conceivable subject, commercial, political, and religious. Those surveys are so pervasive that they have become a part of people's daily routine. Companies use information from those surveys to make the most attractive products that have ever existed. Politicians use the information to shape their campaigns and their policies. Religious leaders use the information to

help them minister more effectively. And charlatans use the information to attract more followers. However, the surveys and the actions they inspire never seem to solve people's intractable problems or even make people's lives more wholesome or even more contented. People today live in the Information Age, but the misery goes on as it has for thousands of years. Thoughtful people, like Solomon are sad, because it is all to no avail.

More information about the world just arouses more frustration and sorrow. It is massive, but it is **vanity, grabbing at the wind.**"

4. PLEASURE IS VANITY

ECCLESIASTES 2:1-11

A. [The pleasures I enjoyed] (2:1-10)

- 1. I said to myself, "Come now, I will try entertainment. Look at good [times]" (2:1-2),**
 - a. But behold this also was vanity (2:1b).**
 - b. Of laughter I said, "It is craziness!" (2:2a),**
 - c. And of pleasure, "What does it accomplish?" (2:2b)**
- 2. I searched in my mind how to pull it out with wine (2:3),**
 - a. Controlling my body and my mind with intelligence and to keep a hold on folly (2:3b)**
 - b. Until I might see what [is] good for the sons of men to do under heaven [during] the number of the days of their lives (2:3c).**
- 3. I enlarged my works (2:4-6)**
 - a. I built for myself houses (2:4b).**
 - b. I planted for myself vineyards (4:4c).**
 - c. I made for myself gardens and parks, and I planted in them trees and all fruit trees (2:5).**
 - d. I made for myself pools of water to irrigate [my] orchard and the sprouting of trees (2:6).**
 - e. I bought male slaves and female slaves and sons of the house (2:7).**
 - f. Also for me were livestock: cattle and flocks in abundance (2:7b).**
 - g. More were for me than all who had been before me in Jerusalem (2:7c).**
- 4. Also I gathered for myself silver and gold and treasure of kings and the provinces (2:8a).**
- 5. I got for myself men singers and women singers and delights of the sons of men (breast and breasts) (2:8b).**
- 6. I became great and exceeded all who were before me in Jerusalem, yet my good sense remained in me (2:9-10)**
 - a. So all that my eyes desired, I did not withhold from them (2:10a)**
 - b. [Or] my heart from any pleasure (2:10b-10d)**

1. Because my heart rejoiced in all my labor (2:10c)

2. And this was my reward for all my labor (2:10d)

B. Then I turned to all the works that my hands had done and to the toil at which I had toiled to do it (2:11),

1. And behold I was vanity, grabbing at the wind (2:11b),

2. And no profit [in it anywhere] under the sun (2:11c).

After becoming disillusioned with the value of investigating life and work all over the world, Solomon decided to try an opposite approach. He chose to concentrate on pleasing himself instead of learning from others. True to Solomon's approach to life, he went all out with his new strategy. He conducted a drive to experience pleasure, in other words, to try out everything he thought could make him happy. Surely that way life would be satisfying and productive. He specifically mentioned five areas he investigated in his search for pleasure and then said he tried out everything else his heart took an interest in.

Ecclesiastes 2:1-2. Entertainment.

The first source of pleasure Solomon explored was entertainment. People called entertainment "having a good time," so surely he could find meaning and value in it. He began to seek pleasure in humor, laughter, comedians, jokers, and clowns, which were customary events and personnel in great kingly courts of that day. For a brief time, Solomon must have received a big sense of merriment from all the jolly stunts that were performed for him. However, when he wrote Ecclesiastes, he was extremely clear that the merriment did not please him for long.

Solomon had seen too much in his father that revealed actions that produced real and lasting value. Soon he must have missed the serious, business-like activities he had observed in his father. It did not take him long to become ashamed of the silliness of which he had become a part. When the laughter was over and reality set in, he told himself the way he had been acting was crazy. He realized it was accomplishing nothing. So he quickly recognized that shallow laughter and entertainment were deceptive and temporary. It was all vanity.

Ecclesiastes 2:3. Wine.

Just because entertainment did not satisfy him, Solomon did not give up his search for value in pleasure. He decided to turn to another highly-vaunted means of experiencing excitement and exhilaration, so wine was the second area he investigated. People were always saying how good wine made them feel and how it helped them forget their worries and have a good time. So he experimented with wine to pull him up from discouragement and help him be positive and cheerful.

Solomon was specific in saying he was aware that wine could also make people lose control of their good senses and cause them to act foolishly. He determined he would not let that happen. He determined to keep control of his body by being intelligent in his use of it. For the same reason, he was determined "to keep a hold on folly," that is to keep folly under control so it would not take control of him. That way he felt he could learn how to use wine for the good it could do. By that means, he would be able to learn how people everywhere under heaven could receive good results from wine throughout the days of their lives.

Solomon did not take time to reveal at that point the conclusions he reached about wine as a source of pleasure, but he quickly dropped the subject and turned to another avenue for gaining pleasure. At the end of his discussion on pleasure, he surely included wine in his declaration that the whole pursuit of pleasure was "**vanity, grabbing at the wind**" (Eccl 2:11).

Solomon may not have wanted to elaborate on what stupid actions wine may have caused him to do. At any rate, he soon learned what everyone who depends on wine for pleasure learns in the end. The values of wine as a means of obtaining fun and pleasure are illusory, deceptive, and temporary. Soon, wine is a mocker, and in the end it produces pain, loss, waste, uselessness, and addiction. It does not give pleasure. It robs a person of pleasure and real contentment.

Ecclesiastes 2:4-10. Possessions.

After being disillusioned with the benefits of wine, Solomon turned to still another venue as a source for pleasure. The third area he examined was collecting great possessions. The world was so full of attractive and interesting objects that he felt owning as many of them as possible would surely give him contentment.

Solomon began his drive to gather great possessions by building about him pleasant and beautiful surroundings. He included houses, vineyards, gardens, parks, orchards, ponds for irrigation of his trees and shrubs, and slaves to protect, clean, and repair all of his possessions and also to tend to his every need. Soon his appetite for ownership reached out even farther than his immediate surroundings and included livestock of cattle, sheep, and goats. He began to include possessions that were not so much for him to

see as just for him to know that he owned them. His drive for possessions became insatiable. He said he pursued his quest so aggressively that he came to possess more than all who were before him in Jerusalem.

Solomon waited until the end of his discussion of the value of pleasure to give his appraisal of the value of great possessions. He stated his conclusion in Ecclesiastes 2:11, but first he hastened on to mention other avenues he explored in his search for pleasure.

Ecclesiastes 2:8A. Wealth. When Solomon had gained more possessions than he could take care of, he still did not have contentment; so he turned in a fourth direction and began to seek for pleasure in great wealth. He could not find anything else to buy, so he decided to just store up money and wealth in case he ever needed anything else. He gathered silver and gold and all other treasures that kings delighted to collect. Then he added even more and increased his wealth by owning or controlling whole provinces in his nation. His land holdings probably became more valuable than all the wealth he stored in his treasury.

All that wealth did not hold Solomon's attention for long. It certainly did not provide much pleasure. He couldn't even see it because it was all locked up to protect it, so he hastened on to explore still another source of pleasure.

Ecclesiastes 2:8B. Music and dancing.

Solomon's fifth project was gathering musicians and dancers. He hired or commanded the performance of the best male and female singers in the land and listened to their latest productions. However, just singing was not enough. Soon he added the best dancers in the land to perform as the singers sang.

Translators and interpreters have had a hard time with the last words of verse 8. They have translated them in a variety of ways, and some interpreters simply say their meaning is uncertain. The words are not vague or even rare. To their genuine credit, the good gentlemen probably are embarrassed to express the words as they are written. "Delights of the sons of men (breast and breasts)" is not at all puzzling to men of lesser integrity. Solomon included topless dancing among the activities he explored in his search for contentment in pleasure.

Ecclesiastes 2:9-10. Anything else my heart desired.

Solomon gave assurance that, if he omitted any pleasurable object or action from his list, it was not because he did not try it. He clearly said he tried out everything he took an interest in. If he felt an urge or inclination to experiment with any new activity or adventure, he sought it out and experienced it. It is interesting that before making that assertion, he paused to say that, even though he was more powerful and achieved greater accomplishments than anyone before him in Jerusalem, he did not let his many experiences take away his good judgment. He said, ". . . **yet my good sense remained in me.**" By that statement, Solomon revealed that he was aware that many men had lost their fortunes, self-control, self-respect, reputations, and good character in their pursuit of pleasure and "having a good time." He was careful not to let that happen to him. He did not become so excessive that he lost his dignity or his commitment to duty. No doubt, he meant that at least in his judgment he kept his search for pleasure under control and did not let it control him. In other words, he considered that he enjoyed all his pleasures in moderation.

Solomon's viewpoint was that first and foremost he found pleasure in his work and performed it faithfully. He called his responsibilities "labor," but he insisted he enjoyed them. He did not do physical labor, but he declared that the work he did was difficult, tedious, and tiring. His labor was ruling a nation, administering a government, conducting foreign diplomacy, controlling crime, dispensing justice, and protecting millions of subjects. It was indeed hard labor, but he enjoyed it. He liked what he was doing. He considered that the pleasures he sought after were his reward for doing a good job in his labors as king of Israel. However cautious he may have been in keeping his search for pleasure within reasonable bounds, he still asserted he did not deny himself any of them.

Ecclesiastes 2:11. All of it was vanity.

Solomon spent a lot of words elaborating on all the avenues he explored in his search for pleasure. However, when he had finished his search, it did not take him many words to express his conclusion. He said all of it was "**vanity, grabbing at the wind.**" Finding true satisfaction in all those sources of pleasure was as impossible as trying to catch the wind. His expression was highly descriptive. He meant a person can know the wind is real. He can feel it. He can see its effects. But just let him try to catch hold of it, put it in a box, or store it up for later. He can't do it. Solomon learned that finding satisfaction in personal pleasure is just as impossible as capturing a handful of air. Solomon did not elaborate on why all his possessions and pleasurable activities disappointed him. He just declared he did not get any real satisfaction or lasting benefit from any of them. He did not need to try to give a long explanation. He just shared his testimony that they did not turn out to be what he expected. They did not give him what he was seeking. His search was long and involved, but it was a disappointment.

Every other person who has ever given over his life to the pursuit of pleasure has experienced the same end result. It takes some people a long time to admit the truth, and some destroy themselves before they face reality. But the last page of every story is

always the same. Living for fun and pleasure is not what it claims to be. It does not produce anything of value, and it does not even produce contentment. It is all a sham. It gives excitement for a few moments, but then it is gone forever. You can't get it back, because it will never have the same effect again.

Multitudes are still being deceived by the false promises of entertainment and "good times." They badly need to hear and heed the words of Solomon

before they hurt themselves further. Today Solomon's warning needs to be published far and wide, and believers in the Word should devote themselves to being the publishers. Solomon's warnings have the power to deliver men from the mad disappointing chase after pleasure. Perhaps nothing can help people more with their need to discover that pleasure is a deceiver than Solomon's inspired words that pleasure is "**Vanity, grabbing at the wind.**" Solomon's words should not be kept shut up in a bound book. It is time for God's people to proclaim them to the world.

5. GREAT KNOWLEDGE IS VANITY

ECCLESIASTES 2:12-17

Ecclesiastes 2:12-17

(8) Then I turned to look into knowledge and craziness and folly (2:12-14a),

Because what the man who comes after the king [does is] what he has done already (2:12b).

And I saw that knowledge has an advantage over folly like light [has] an advantage over darkness (2:13-14b).

The informed man's eyes [are] in his head (2:14a),

But the fool walks in darkness (2:14b).

(9) And yet I know that one happening comes to both of them (2:14c-17).

So I said to myself, "What happens to a fool will overtake me also (2:15)

Why then have I so thoroughly informed myself (2:15b)

When this also is vanity (2:15c)?

Memory of an informed man [does not last] for an age; just like the fool (2:16).

By which [we know] that in the coming days all will be forgotten (2:16b)

And how does the informed man die? With the fool (2:16c).

(10) So I hated life (2:17).

Because to me the work that is worked under the sun is evil (2:17b).

Because all of it is vanity, grabbing at the wind (2:17c).

The third topic Solomon discussed that he found to be futile and empty was great knowledge. The Hebrew word that is translated "knowledge" above is an extremely versatile word. It refers to using the mind in a positive way to deal with life. It means having understanding or insight that enables a person to deal successfully with his or her challenges. It is correctly translated into English as "wisdom." However, the word has several shades of meaning that describe different approaches to gaining understanding.

(7) Sometimes the word refers to understanding that comes from observing others or from practice. In that case it refers to a skill that is important in handling a certain trade or circumstance, and it can be translated "know-how."

(8) At other times the word refers to understanding that comes from reason or rational analysis of a problem or challenge. In that case it means philosophy or logic and can be translated "learning."

(9) Sometimes the word refers to understanding that comes from experimentation or testing to find what works. In that sense it refers to the scientific method, though that method was not defined and refined until recent centuries. In such cases, it can be translated "discovery."

3. Most often, the word refers to understanding how to deal with people in a way that solves problems, eases tensions, and produces harmony. In that case, it means diplomacy or counseling and can be translated "advice."

All of the uses of the word mean "wisdom," and it is usually translated that way in English. The task of the reader becomes discerning which shade of meaning the writer had in mind when he used the word.

The word was used in Ecclesiastes 1:16,17,18 to describe what Solomon sought with his wide-ranging investigations. He was looking for skill to solve problems and improve life on the earth. Unfortunately, he learned that no one possessed those skills. In this passage, Solomon seems to use the word to refer to understanding that is gained by reason and logic. He spoke of a person who had eyes in his head (v. 14a), which seems to mean he had enough information to see what was taking place and to know what to do about it. The knowledge he had gained enabled him to see what to do. He also referred to his putting effort into knowing how to act effectively instead of foolishly (v. 15b), which is best understood to refer to information that enabled him to solve a problem. Therefore, the word is translated “knowledge” in verse 13 above to indicate knowing how to handle situations when they arise. It means being armed with adequate information.

Solomon discussed knowledge gained by reason from two points of view:

Ecclesiastes 2:12-14B. Knowledge is better than foolishness.

Solomon first spoke of the positive side of knowledge that comes from reason. He said that, in order to discover the value of thoughtful knowledge, he looked into what knowledge produced and compared it with what foolishness produced. He sought to discover the difference in the results of a serious, thoughtful approach to life and the results of a playful, fun-loving approach to life.

Solomon said he wanted that information because “the man who comes after the king” does what “he has done already.” The man who comes after the king is the next king in line. The new king has to continue the duties and activities that the king before him performed, so it is wise for him to learn from what the previous king did. Solomon himself must have been “the man who came after the king,” because he was king and he came after his father King David. He wanted to know how the previous king had acted so he could learn from his example. If the previous king acted seriously and thoughtfully, he could judge by the results of that king’s actions whether he should do the same. If the previous king acted playfully and thoughtlessly, he could see the results and guide his actions accordingly.

Solomon said his observations enabled him to see that gaining information and acting in light of that knowledge was better than acting carelessly or recklessly. He certainly would have reached that conclusion by studying his father’s example. He judged that acting with adequate knowledge was as much better than acting on feeling or emotion as light is better than darkness. The man who has gathered sufficient information is like a man who has eyes and is able to see where he is going. The knowledge he has gained enables him to see into the situation and offer a viable solution. On the other hand, the man who acts spontaneously is blind and walking in darkness. He hasn’t studied enough to know what to do and gropes blindly for an answer. Solomon’s conclusion was that knowing what a person is doing is far superior to playing through life like it is only a game.

Ecclesiastes 2:14C-16. The end of the knowledgeable man and the foolish man is the same.

Solomon then turned to the negative side of knowledge that comes from reason. He said that in the end the knowledgeable person is no better off than the person who plays through life, because what happens to one also happens to the other. On that basis, he said knowledge was no better than foolishness for two reasons.

First, knowledge is no better than foolishness because the end of both is the same (v 15). He meant one will die as surely as the other. Specifically, he said what was going to happen to the fool was going to overtake him also. Obviously he considered himself to be the knowledgeable man, and it depressed him that he was going to come to the same end as the fool. He was going to die just like the foolish man was going to die. Since his death was just as sure as the foolish man’s death, he wondered why he had put so much energy into getting informed. In the end all that study, reasoning, and philosophizing was vanity. It accomplished nothing.

Second, knowledge is no better than foolishness because the informed man will not be remembered any more than the foolish man (v. 16). Solomon was aware that the informed man was not going to be remembered for an age, just like the foolish man was not going to be remembered for an age. Soon everything about both of them was going to be forgotten. He asked, “How is the informed man treated when he dies?” He answered, “Just like the fool.” His implication was, “Both are buried, and both are forgotten.”

Ecclesiastes 2:17. I hate the way life treats knowledge,

turning it into vanity. Solomon’s said his conclusion about the value of studying to gain great knowledge made him hate life. He did not mean he hated being alive. He meant he hated the way life worked. He expressed it as, “the work that is worked under the sun.” To him the way life worked wasn’t fair. He used a strong word about it. He said it was “evil”. He resented it that a man could spend his life studying, reasoning, and learning and end up just like a man who never has a serious thought in his whole life. To Solomon, it was just wrong.

As unfair as life is, Solomon was right about the end result as great learning. The professor dies and is forgotten just as surely as the playboy who turned life into a foolish game. All of the knowledge the thoughtful man gathered turns to dust along with his body. He cannot pass it on in a package. It is just lost and gone. The reason is that gaining great knowledge is a human effort and just as

temporary as every other work of man. That very reality is what drives people to seek for something more in life than what people can do. Solomon did not say it until the end of his book, but what drives away the gloom of the unfairness of life is that a way exists to change the end result of people's lives. A way does exist to turn despair into hope and death into life. Solomon gives that way at the end of the book: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the all-in-all for a man (Eccl. 12:13b).

HARD WORK IS VANITY ECCLESIASTES 2:18-4:16

Introduction: I hate all the labor on which I have labored under the sun (2:18).

A fourth topic that Solomon had found to be vanity was hard work. Solomon certainly had worked hard during all of his reign. He would not have been able to achieve all of the spectacular accomplishments that his reign produced without working long hours with great energy, yet all of that hard work and all it had accomplished left him empty when he was writing this book in his old age..

He said he had come to hate all the labor that had been required to produce his construction projects, his wise decisions, his great wealth, and his lavish entertainments. Those achievements had not come easily. They had consumed his whole life, but now they left him unsatisfied, discontent, even lonely in the midst of a nation of people. He was aware he could have spent his time and his labors in more meaningful ways. So he hated a

lifetime of labors that he had thrown away on works that did not satisfy.

Solomon shows that he felt especially strongly about this vanity in his life. He had spent 35 verses on the first three topics that he found to be vanity. He spent 46 verses on this one topic. The reason he felt so strongly about this topic was that it had been the major emphasis of his life. Now it was the major disappointment of his life. Since he felt so strongly about it, he wanted to explain it fully. He was eager for people to understand the folly of spending life on hard work and neglecting other emphases that are more important.

Solomon gave four reasons for concluding that his hard work had not produced anything that was truly meaningful to him at the end of his life. He developed those reasons one by one.

(4) Because I must leave it to the man who will come after me (2:18-21).

And who knows whether he will be a wise one or a fool (2:19)?

Yet he will control over all my labor on which I labored and in which I was wise under the sun (2:19b).

This also is vanity (2:19c).

So I turned to cause my heart to despair over all the labor on which I have labored under the sun (2:20-21).

Because so often a man must give that on which he labored with wisdom and with knowledge and with skill as an inheritance to a man who did not labor for it (2:21a).

This also is vanity and a great evil (2:21b).

And what comes to the man from all his labor and from the struggles of his mind over which he troubled under the sun (2:22-23)?

Because all his days [were] pain and his occupation frustration (2:23a).

Even at night his mind did not rest (2:23b).

This also is vanity (2:23c).

The first reason Solomon gave for concluding that his hard work was vanity was that he had to die and leave everything to someone else. We may want to ask why Solomon did not find that prospect to be pleasant and satisfying. He could have rejoiced that his work was going to make it possible for someone else to have an easier life. He did not feel that way, and he took time to explain clearly why. He explained it in three ways.

Verse 2:19. I do not know if the one who will inherit my possessions will be wise or foolish. The first explanation Solomon gave for

feeling it was vanity to turn the results of his hard work over to someone else was that he did not know if his heir was going to be a wise person or a fool. He felt that if he could be sure he was going to leave all his possessions to someone who was going to make wise use of them, he would feel good about what he had done. However, if he left all the results of his labors to a foolish man, that person would abuse, squander, neglect, and eventually destroy all he had accomplished. It was frightening, even maddening for him to know he was going to give control over all his life's work to someone without knowing what that person would do with it.

That statement was tragically sad. Solomon knew well who his heir was going to be. His oldest son was going to succeed him on the throne, and that son was going to gain control over Solomon's estate, government, and nation. Why did he feel so insecure about leaving his work and treasures to his son? The reason is he had spent so much energy on building his estate and on gathering his possessions that he had not taken any time to help his son build his life. Actually, he did not even know his son; and, therefore, he had no idea what his son was going to do with the nation and with his wealth when he was gone.

Do not think that statement is too harsh a judgment on Solomon. Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines. We do not know how many sons he had, but they must have been many. He could not possibly have had time for so many sons in the midst of his many other responsibilities and activities. The record of Solomon's life indicates that he did not even take time for one of his many sons.

In the record of Solomon's reign that is recorded in both 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles, strong mention is made of his aggressive dealings with his opponents, with his business dealings with the king of Tyre, and with his diplomacy with the queen of Sheba. We read about his impressive public ceremonies and his great efforts to please his wives by constructing temples for them. But we do not read one word about his relationship with his sons or about his training them for leadership. They were just ornaments with which he decorated his life. Now in his old age, he suddenly was aware he had neglected the greatest treasure he had, and it was too late to do anything about it.

The fact is that, right after Solomon's death, Solomon's son Rehoboam started out by being a foolish king. He received a reasonable request from the men of his nation for lower taxes and less drafted labor, because the people were exhausted from the heavy burdens Solomon had put on them. Rehoboam received good counsel from elder statesmen in the land, who urged him to comply with the request of his people. Instead he listened to inexperienced young men who had grown up with him, and in compliance with their advice he responded to the people with force and threat. He told them he was not going to expect less of them. Instead he was going to demand more. As a result, the northern ten tribes of the nation rebelled and never again were reconciled with Solomon's tribe of Judah until they were carried into captivity by Assyria (1 Kings 12:1-20; 2 Chron. 10:19).

Solomon must have been expecting just such consequences when he was writing Ecclesiastes, because he knew he had not prepared Rehoboam for the responsibilities he was going to assume. Solomon said he wasn't sure whether his heir was going to be wise or foolish, but he must have thought it was most likely that his son would act foolishly. If he was expecting such developments, it is easy to understand why he thought leaving all the results of his work to his heir and son was nothing but vanity.

To Rehoboam's credit, he learned from his tragic initial mistake and listened to good advice from Jehovah's prophet about how to respond to the rebellion, and that time listening to the right advice saved him from a debilitating and hopeless war (1 Kings 12:21-24; 2 Chronicles 10:1-19). Afterward, Rehoboam's record was a mixture of wise fiscal policies (2 Chron. 11:1-17) and disastrous spiritual policies (1 Kings 14:21-28). The most instructive information that the Scriptures give concerning Rehobom's reign is what they say about his relationships with his sons. 1 Chronicles 11:22 (HCSB) says,

(11) Rehoboam appointed Abijah son of Maacah as chief leader among his brothers, intending to make him king. Rehoboam also showed discernment by dispensing some of his sons to all the regions of Judah and Benjamin and to all the fortified cities. He gave them plenty of possessions and sought many wives for them."

Could it be that Rehoboam gave so much attention to his sons just because he had not received that kind of provision and training from his father Solomon?

So Solomon's dismay over the prospect of what the man who came after him was going to do with all his possessions and accomplishments was well founded. He knew it as the time of his departure drew near and as he sat down to write the Book of Ecclesiastes. He obviously wanted to warn other men against making the mistake he had made. He knew well that other men had the same drive to succeed that he had had, and he wanted to warn them about the danger of carrying that drive too far. He was willing to open his heart and share his inner agony in the hope that some younger men would learn from his mistake and not put all their emphasis on their work and their worldly success. He wanted them to be inspired to take time for their sons and to prepare their sons for the responsibilities they were going to assume when their fathers were gone.

Ecclesiastes 2:20-21. I must leave my possessions to one who did not work for them.

Solomon's second explanation of why he felt it was vanity to leave his life's work and accomplishments to someone else was that they was going to be possessed and controlled by someone who had not worked to build them.

Solomon was keenly aware that he was going to leave everything he had worked so hard to build to someone who had done nothing to earn it. He had done all the hard work to gather great possessions and to construct great structures, but he had not involved his sons and heirs in the work, not even his oldest son. At his death his son was going to receive everything without working for it. He said he knew that all too often those who receive such favors without working for them soon destroy or lose what they have received. He knew that gains easily obtained without work to achieve them are seldom appreciated. When people receive wealth and favors without paying a price for them, more often than not they squander and waste them. What comes too easily, goes quickly away. He obviously was afraid that tragedy was going to come to his son, because he had not prepared his son to know how to protect and handle the favors he was going to receive. It made all his work vanity and emptiness.

Solomon saw that the same result could come to any man's hard work. He took time to express his misgivings in hope that other men would learn from his mistake and build more than physical and financial achievements. He hoped other men would learn to teach their sons the value of possessions by showing them how to work to achieve them. Then they also would know how to preserve them.

Ecclesiastes 2:22-23. All I received from my possessions was work, suffering, and worry.

Solomon gave a third explanation of why he felt it was vanity to leave his great possessions to someone else. It was because all he had gotten out of his great wealth and possessions was labor, pain, and worry. He had spent his days in frustration and his nights in worry. He had not taken time for rest, recuperation, or refueling. All his life had been one long drive after ambition, achievement, and rushing from one responsibility to another. In the midst of it, he had never taken time to enjoy any of it. Now he realized he had not received any real benefit. Someone else was going to enjoy the results of his labor, but he never had. All of it was just vanity and wasted effort. Solomon's groans were a tragic way for a man to end a momentous life, but those groans still need to be heard around the world. God inspired Solomon to write those moanings into the Scripture for the benefit of all future generations. Men everywhere need to hear and learn that, if a man spends his whole life on work and achievement, he will end up with disappointment and sorrow. Life consists of more than wealth, fame, and worldly accomplishment. If a man fails to put God ahead of his work and career, though he gains the whole world, he ends his life with disappointment and vanity.

(10) Nothing [is] good for a man except that he must eat and he drinks and he sees good to himself in his labor (2:24).

I saw this also [is] from the hand of God (2:24b).

Because who eats, and who enjoys apart from Me (2:25-26)?

For to a man who [is] good before His face, He gives wisdom, knowledge, and joy (2:26a).

To the sinner He gives the trouble of gathering and collecting in order to give [it] to [one who is] good before God's face (2:26b).

So this also is vanity, grabbing at the wind (2:26c).

For every everything [there is] a time and a season (3:1-9),

For every activity under the heavens (3:1-8)

A time to give birth and a time to die (3:2a);

A time to plant and a time to twist up what was planted (3:2b);

A time to kill and a time to heal (3:3a);

A time to tear down and a time to build up (3:3b);

A time to weep and a time to laugh (3:4a);

A time to mourn and a time to dance (3:4b);

A time to throw stones and a time to gather stones (3:5a);

A time to embrace and a time to avoid embracing (3:5b);

A time to acquire and a time to destroy (3:6a);

(10)A time to keep and a time to throw away (3:6b);

(11)A time to tear and a time to sew (3:7a);

(12)A time to be silent and a time to speak (3:7b);

(13)A time to love and a time to hate (3:8a);

(14)A time for war and a time for peace (3:8b).

What benefit [comes] to a doer from all his labor (3:9)?

3. I see that God has given this occupation to the sons of men to be occupied with it (3:10-13).

a. He has made everything beautiful in its time (3:11a);

(1) And he has put the ages in their minds (3:11b),

(2) Yet so that man may not discover what God is doing from the beginning to the end (3:11c).

b. I know that nothing [is] good for them except to rejoice and to do good throughout his life (3:12-15),

(1) And also that the man eats and he drinks and he sees good in all his labor.

(2) It is the gift of God (3:13).

4. I know that all that God does lasts for an age (3:14).

(1) There is nothing to add and nothing to take away (3:14b).

(2) God has done it so that they will fear before His face (3:14c).

5. That which is [has been] already (3:15);

(1) That which [is] to be has been already (3:15b),

(2) And God seeks that which has been chased away (3:15c).

A second reason Solomon gave for saying hard work is vanity was that no matter how hard a person works God determines the outcome of his efforts. He realized that God is at work in the world and that what He wishes is what gets accomplished in the end. God involves Himself in every person's life, whether that person acknowledges it or not. What a person accomplishes is what God decides, not how much work the person puts into it. He explained that conclusion in five ways.

Ecclesiastes 2:24-26. God blesses the simple life.

Solomon began his explanation of how God determines the outcome of a person's life by saying that the only achievement in life that is truly good is for a man to have enough to eat and drink and to enjoy his life and work. Anything more is just a burden to worry over and a fear to endure because he might lose it. Having enough to not be in want but not enough to fill a life with burden and worry is the only really satisfying way to live.

All English versions translate verse 24 with words almost identical to HCSB, which says, "There is nothing better for man than to eat, drink, and to enjoy his work." Perhaps that translation is correct, but the usual way to express the comparative degree in Hebrew is "There is nothing good from" Solomon wrote, "There is nothing good except that" Maybe we should take his words exactly literally and understand he was not describing one way of living that is better than another, but the only way that brings satisfaction in life. In that case, the statement means it is all right to have more, but the extra adds nothing to a person's life. After his basic needs are met, the overage is just a responsibility to take care of and a burden to add to a person's worries. What makes a person content and free of worries is to have just enough and to enjoy it.

Solomon said living that simple life comes from the hand of God. It is the kind of life God planned for a man, and it is God's hand that enables him to live in that manner. When a man lives otherwise, he really does not gain anything. When his wealth and his possessions become his major emphasis, God considers him to be a sinner, and in one way or another God takes away from him the gains he achieved from selfish ambition, human drive, and personal effort. Then God gives what he achieved to another person who pleases Him. In other words, God blesses the life of a man who honors Him and subtracts from the life of the man who honors things more than he honors God. Therefore, the outcome of a person's hard work is determined by what God decides, not by how hard that person works. Solomon was not saying it is vanity for God to favor the man who trusts and obeys Him. It is right and just that He does so. Solomon was saying it is vanity for a man to neglect God, since God will determine the outcome of his life not how hard he works.

In life, it is really true that the only one who finds satisfaction and joy is the one who pleases God and with whom God is pleased. So God determines the satisfaction a person receives out of life, not the person himself. Contentment comes from trusting God, not from working for ourselves.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-9. God confines life to set rhythms.

Solomon continued his explanation of how God determines the outcome of a person's life by pointing out that life consists of an established rhythm that God established and that no one can avoid. Life includes many contrasting occasions that come to everyone. Those occasions ebb and flow in people's lives and are beyond their control. They determine what a person does and what his deeds will produce more than his own labor. Solomon described a long list of those occasions, and every thoughtful person

recognizes that all of them have come or will come into his life at an appropriate time. Birth and death come to every life, but they are totally beyond a person's control. Planting and harvesting come when the seasons are right, and ignoring those seasons only results in crop failure. The time comes when a faithful pet is old and sick and suffering beyond hope of a cure and it is best to end the pet's life to save it from further suffering. At other times, a person will spend large sums of money and stay awake all night to care for a beloved pet and save its life because it is healthy enough to heal. The wise man recognizes the difference and acts accordingly. The same is true of every other life event Solomon mentioned. Therefore, the rhythm of life that God has established determines more of what people do and what they accomplish than how hard they work.

Awareness of the set rhythm of life made Solomon wonder why workmen put so much energy into activities whose outcome they do not and cannot control. He meant it is best to trust and obey God, because He is the One who determines the events that come and go in our lives and the outcome of those events. He also is the One who enables us to be content with the life He gives.

Ecclesiastes 3:10-13. Contentment comes from following God's plan for people's lives.

Solomon further discussed how God is control of the outcome of a person's life by saying the simple life is the occupation God planned for men. By "occupation" he meant, not a person's life's work, but the life with which God planned for them to be occupied, the life they were to be busy living. God planned for people to be able to live and thrive on rather meager requirements, and having those minimal needs is enough to enable them to have a strong and healthy life. Those basic requirements are all that is needed to be able to live a meaningful life. Solomon was aware of that truth because he had seen men who had few of the earth's possessions who were loved and happy throughout life, while he had seen others who had more of the world's wealth and bounties than they could count and were miserable every day they lived. Therefore, the good way to live was to have enough and to be happy with it.

Solomon went on to describe what can enable a person to be content with that simple life.

First, he said God has made everything beautiful in its own time (Ecclesiastes 3:11). Everything God has made is good and has a good purpose. Man's best occupation is to find the beauty and good that God has placed around him, instead of trying to make his own beauty and good. If people will just take time to appreciate all the good God has placed around them, they will be content to just enjoy it and will need nothing more. Also God has put the ages in men's hearts, which means God has given people a yearning to live on through the ages. God's purpose in doing so is to help people live for more than today and for more than the achievements of their hands. Yet Solomon said God intentionally hides from people how He is working to fulfill that yearning, so they will trust Him. People find contentment when they take the long view and look forward to continuing through the ages by trusting God. They find contentment by expecting God to continue to do good for them through all the ages and by trusting Him to take care of them through it all, whatever comes.

Second, Solomon said God plans for people to be occupied with doing good for others, rather than from being absorbed with themselves (vs. 12-13). Doing good for others means helping the needy, encouraging the sad, ministering to the sick, and witnessing to the sinful. Doing good for God, for the world, and for others is more important than working and striving for ourselves. Therefore, living the good life means being satisfied with enough to eat and drink and being able to see the good in the work we do each day. Living that kind of life is the gift of God. Our efforts will never achieve it. God will give it to those who trust in Him.

Solomon did not mean that a person should stop working and just wait on God to do what He wishes. He made that obvious when he spoke of a man who "sees good in all his labor." He meant that a man who lives the simple life sees that whatever God has given him to do is good and worthwhile. He is not to expect to be free of labor; but he is to know that his labor, no matter how humble, fits into God's purpose. Therefore, it gives him contentment. God designed people to live that way, and He assigned people the responsibility of living that way to make their living worthwhile. Fortunate are those who find it. They make a greater impact for good on the world than the man who builds an empire to his own glory.

Ecclesiastes 3:14. Only what God does lasts.

Solomon gave another insight into how God determines the outcomes of a person's life by stressing that what God does lasts for an age, while human effort is only temporary. Furthermore, God's works are finished and perfect. Nothing can be added to them, and nothing can be subtracted from them. So it is much better to trust in what God does than to try to achieve accomplishments for ourselves. God made the imperfection of human efforts to contrast with His perfect works for that very purpose. They are to teach people to fear Him, that is, to trust their lives and the outcome of their lives to Him. When they do, He makes their days enjoyable and their future bright.

Ecclesiastes 3:15. Life is just a series of grand repetitions.

Solomon closed his discussion of how God determines the final outcome of a person's life by acknowledging that no matter how great a person's accomplishments are, they are not unique. Someone has done them before, and someone will repeat them again in the future. A great inventor may invent something new, but he is only one in a great line of inventors who have kept life moving

forward and who will keep life moving forward as long as people exist. A great builder may construct the tallest or the biggest building in history, but great builders have built structures before him that rival his works in many ways, and someone will surely arise tomorrow to surpass what he has done today. A great conqueror may subdue many nations, but he is far from the first conqueror to raise an empire only to lose it all in tragedy. Neither will he be the last. A great writer may inscribe beautiful and powerful words, but so many others have done the same before him and will do the same again in the future that his books soon will be lost and forgotten in the unending array of thoughts that come from the minds of men. Life is one grand repetition after another, and if men lose track of one accomplishment God seeks to bring it back through someone else. Therefore, no man's work is that impressive. It is far better to trust in the works of God and find pleasure in doing His will. A person should live for what God does for him and through him, not for what he can do by himself.

C. And also I saw that under the sun in the place of justice there is wickedness and in the place of righteousness there is wickedness (Ecclesiastes 3:16-4:3).

1. I said in my heart (3:17):

a. God will judge the righteous and the wicked (3:17a),

b. Because there is a time for every activity and every work (3:17b).

2. I said in my heart, [it is] on purpose for the sons of men (3:18-22)

(1) For God to purify them (3:18b)

(2) And to show them that they are animals, them, yes them (3:18c-21).

(a) Because what happens to the sons of men and what happens to animals [are] one happening (3:19-21).

(a) As this one dies, so that one dies (3:19b).

(b) One breath is in them all (3:19c).

[1] The man has no advantage over the animals (3:19d),

[2] So all effort is vanity (3:19e).

(d) All go to one place (3:20-21).

[1] All are from the dirt,

[2] And all are returning to the dirt (3:20b).

(e) Who knows [if] the spirit of man ascends upward and [if] the spirit of the animal descends downward to the earth (3:21)?

(b) So I saw nothing [is] better than that man should enjoy his work (3:22),

(a) Because that is his portion (3:22b),

(b) For who will bring him to see into what will be after him (3:22c)?

3. Then I saw again all the oppressions that are being done under the sun and—behold!--all the tears of the oppressed (4:1-3)

a. And no one was comforting them (4:1b-1d),

(1) And power was on the side of their oppressors (4:1c),

(2) And no one was comforting them (4:1d).

b. And I praised the dead who already have died more than the living who are still alive (4:2-3);

(1) And better than both is the one who has not yet lived (4:3a),

(2) Who has not seen the evil doing that goes on under the sun (4:3b).

The third reason Solomon gave for saying a person's hard work is vanity was the world is so full of injustice and oppression. He saw that the authority figures who were set up to dispense justice were unrighteous and unjust themselves. Therefore, no matter how hard a person worked, the results could all be taken away by greedy and unjust people in authority. If unjust men did not take away a person's possessions, living in the midst of injustice and oppression made enjoying one's possessions impossible. Paul developed his discussion of how oppression and wickedness made hard work to be vanity in three points.

Verses 3:17. God will judge the righteous and the wicked. Solomon acknowledged that God

will judge the righteous and the wicked. He reasoned that God has ordered the world in such a way that a time exists for every activity and every work; therefore, He must have set aside a time to judge the righteous and the wicked. But even when Solomon recognized that encouraging truth, it did not take away from him the strain of living in a vicious world.

Verses 3:18-22. God allows wickedness to prosper to humble men so they will repent. Then Solomon reasoned that, if God will judge the righteous and the wicked but is delaying in doing so, He must have a reason for allowing injustice to continue. He cited two reasons. The first reason was so people will turn to God to be purified (v.

18b). When a person is treated unjustly, he recognizes that the unjust world cannot purify him from his sins. The unjust world has no purity to give. A sinner has only one place where he can turn to receive cleansing, and that place is God. By suffering from injustice, people learn to turn to God for what they cannot receive from the unjust world. So they turn to God to be purified of their own sinfulness.

The second reason Solomon cited for God's leaving injustice in the world was to humble people and help them recognize they were created beings just like the animals (vs. 18c-22c). Men and animals are made from the same physical, earthy materials. Both breathe the same air. Both get old or sick and die. Both return to the same dirt from which they were made. Furthermore, no one has a way to know through our own efforts or ingenuity if people have a different destiny after death from animals. People's bodies are unconscious after death and cannot speak, and no one has ever returned to tell what happened to them. People have the same physical lives as animals, perhaps on different mental levels, but they still have physical lives in physical bodies that share the same general characteristics that animals have: seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, and feeling.

Solomon's emphasis was good. People need to be aware of their likeness to animals and to be humbled by it, because it will drive them to turn to God for uplift and deliverance. People need to be humbled so they can recognize they are created beings like the animals and dependent on God for their lives and their destinies. If people never had to deal with their creaturely natures, they probably would be content to think they have all they need and be content to live our lives without trusting God. So Solomon's emphasis that people and animals share a common physical life is true and a revelation given by God.

Nevertheless, Solomon's words are puzzling, even troubling. Did he really believe people have no way of knowing what comes after death? Did he really believe that a man's life ends at the grave and is no more? Definitely not, because he had said in verse 11 of this same chapter that God has put the ages in people's minds. If he believed God has given people the ability to conceive of an extended life beyond the grave and to desire to have it, such a life had to be possible. He knew it was not possible for people to extend their lives after death by their own works, so it had to be available from God.

In addition, in Ecclesiastes 3:17 of this very same passage Solomon said that God will judge the righteous and the wicked, which means that a person's destiny after death is determined by God. Perhaps Solomon's ideas about how that judging

will take place were vague. For that matter, believers' ideas about the judgment and about rewards or punishments after death are still somewhat vague and undefined, even after God has revealed much more information about life after death than Solomon had. But Solomon's belief in the judgment must have meant that he expected God to justly decide what happens to people after death. He knew God is just and good, and he was content to leave his eternal destiny to God.

Even more significant is Solomon's statement near the end of His book, "and the dust returns to the earth as it once was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it" (Eccl. 12:7HCSB). That statement was his firm conclusion after he had exhausted explaining all his disappointments and frustrations. Those words show that he definitely knew that people have a spirit that is more than dirt. It comes from God, not out of the ground; and after death it lives on to return to God. However, Solomon didn't gain that assurance from human reason or science. He received it by revelation from God. There is a way for a person to know that life

continues after death. Solomon knew it, and believers know it today because God reveals it. In the Scriptures, God has revealed more about life after death than most people will admit. Revelation is still the only way people can know for sure that human life continues on after death. We can rejoice with Solomon that we know a God who reveals to us what our human insight can never penetrate.

From historical records and from archaeological discoveries, it is well known that peoples of all nations in Solomon's day expected to live on after death and that they spent much of their time and wealth preparing for that after life. The Egyptians were so preoccupied with living on after death that they spent their whole lives preparing mausoleums and saving for the cost of mummifying their bodies, because they believed that preservation of their bodies was important to help them have a full life after death. Some of the pharaohs impoverished their whole nation making preparations for their lives to continue in luxury after death. It is incredible that God's people, living in the midst of nations that had such firm beliefs about life after death, should have no expectation of life after death. It may very well be that true believers in Solomon's day and before said little about life after death because they rejoiced that Jehovah God makes life on earth good and meaningful, whereas false gods do not. It may also be because they knew that the best preparation for

life after death is to trust God and to live in obedience to Him in this life.

Therefore, when Solomon asked who knows if the spirit of a man goes upward to God at death and if the spirit of an animal goes downward to the earth, he meant human insight and knowledge cannot answer that question. People cannot see beyond the grave and have no way of learning what happens afterward. No one can prove by human science or reason that people's spirits are made of an intangible reality that lives on after death or that animals' spirits are only mechanisms of their physical bodies that return to the dirt. What people do know is that they live and die like animals and are buried in the same ground. By human wisdom it is well known that people share a common life and death with animals. Therefore, from the point of view of what people can discover on their own, the best people can do with their lives is trust God and enjoy the work He gives them to do--and leave to God what will happen to them when they die. Then God reveals to those who are open to Him that human beings do have an additional kind of life that animals do not have. They have a spirit life that never ends. After death, that spirit continues to exist and either lives with God in peace and joy or survives in suffering and misery forever.

Ecclesiastes 4:1-3. Injustice and oppression is so strong that the results of a person's hard work can be taken away quickly, making all his efforts vanity.

Then Solomon looked again at the injustices and oppressions in the world. He realized that worldly power was in the hands of the unrighteous and the unjust, and the oppressed people of the world had no way to change that reality. People had no one to defend them or even to comfort them in their distresses. All the power was in the hands of the oppressors, and the poor and the weak had no one to deliver them. In spite of all the effort people have invested in trying to stamp out injustice in the world, it still is rampant everywhere. A person still can work hard for years and then have all he gained taken away from him by powerful and unjust people.

One must wonder if Solomon was aware that he had been one of those oppressors. He had taxed the people more than they could bear. He had drafted men into virtual slavery to construct his great monuments. He had lived in unreasonable luxury while others were hungry around him. After his death when people were no longer afraid of him, they begged his son for relief, but they did not receive it from him any more than they had received it from Solomon. However, humans seldom see our own failures unless God reveals them to them. Solomon was just beginning to be aware of his many failures, and he was confessing them. However, at the moment, whether he realized his participation in oppression or not, he was aware that injustice abounded all around him and he mourned over what he saw all over the world.

Solomon concluded that from the human point of view, people's hard work was futile because it could so easily be taken away by unscrupulous men. In despair, he proclaimed that people are better off dead, because death removes them from the clutches of the oppressors. He even went further and declared that it is even better if a person is never born and never has to suffer under the oppressions of this world.

We still live in that kind of a world. Hunger, disease, pain, suffering, tears, and loneliness exist in the world as much as ever. Constantly evil men deceive and overpower innocent and helpless people and take away from them all they own.

Persecution of good men abounds, and every day people around the world suffer and die because of their faith in the true God. Many of them would welcome death over the imprisonment, torture, and privation they suffer every day. Multitudes of others are not imprisoned in walls but live in limitations set by unjust laws and hostile cultures that deprive them of a free and full life. For them death comes as a relief. Solomon's words are not an exaggeration. They are not the unreal complaints of a deeply depressed man. They recognize reality. Living in that kind of a world does make us know that death is a deliverance if we know God. It made Solomon know with absolute clarity that oppression and wickedness in the world denied a person the ability to know he would ever enjoy the benefits of his hard work. Therefore, it was vanity.

In all the ways Solomon had reviewed, he learned that the injustices of this world teach us that hard work on earth is vanity. Wise men recognize that same condition exists today. Their wisdom recognizes that comfort and peace come from something more than hard work, and that something more is God.

D. Then I saw that all labor and all skill in work is because of this--man's jealousy of his associate. This also is futile, grabbing at the wind (4:4-16).

- 1. The fool folds his arms and consumes his own flesh (4:5),**
 - a. [Thinking] a handful of rest is better than two handfuls of labor (4:6a),**
 - b. But grabbing at the wind (4:6b).**
- 2. But I turned and I saw [another] vanity under the sun (4:7-8)**
 - a. Which is one without another, not even a son or a brother to him (4:8a).**

- (1) With no end to all his labor (4:8b),
- (2) Yet his eye is not content with riches (4:8c-8e)

- (a) So for whom am I laboring and depriving myself of pleasure (4:8d)?
- (b) This also is vanity, and it is a miserable occupation (4:8e).

b. Two are better than one, because they have a good wage for their labor (4:9-12).

(1) Because if they should fall, one will pick up his partner; but woe to the one who falls when there is no other to pick him up (4:10).

(2) Also if two lie down together, they are warm; but for one, how will he get warm (4:11)?

(3) And whereas one may overpower just one, two might withstand him (4:12a).

c. A tripled cord is not easily broken (4:12b).

3. A poor but wise youth is better than an old but foolish king who still does not know how to take advice (4:13-16).

a. Even if he came from being bound to become king, and even if he was born poor in his kingdom (4:14-16a)

b. I saw all the living who move about under the sun [were] with the youth, the successor, when he began to stand in his place (4:15).

(1) There was no end to all the people, to all who were before them (4:16a).

(2) However, those coming afterward are not pleased with him (4:16b).

c. Thus this also is vanity and grabbing at the wind (4:16c).

Solomon gave a fourth reason for saying hard work is vanity. It was that people only work hard so they can gain more than someone else. People don't sacrifice to work and achieve because they really need all the abundance they work for. They do it to get ahead of others or even to gain power over others. Sweating and laboring to outdo someone else is a miserable way to live. The person who lives to get ahead of someone else does not enjoy either his labor or the results of his labor. He only worries that someone will surpass him, and someone always does. He is wasting his time as much as a man who tries to catch the wind and hold it. His work to get ahead of others turns out to be vanity. He developed that idea in three sections.

Ecclesiastes 4:4-6. Idleness is vanity.

Solomon did not mean that being idle was a desirable way to live. He specifically took time to say idleness is vanity. He described a lazy person as a person who folds his arms and consumes his own flesh. While he is sitting still and doing nothing, his own body is consuming itself to have something to sustain it. The lazy man has the attitude that one hour spent resting is better than two hours of hard work. Solomon said the one who takes that attitude is a fool. He is wasting his life on nothing at all. His life is as empty as that of a man who tries to catch the wind.

Ecclesiastes 4:7-12. Working selfishly is also vanity.

Then Solomon turned his eyes in the opposite direction and saw an equal vanity, which was a man's working feverishly to get ahead of others only to discover he lost far more than he gained. A man who works hard to get ahead of others may gain materially, and he may gather more than all of his acquaintances; but he ends up losing something much more valuable. He loses his friends and soon stands alone and lonely. He has no one with whom to share his possessions and accomplishments, and he finds he cannot enjoy them alone. All his wealth and property cannot embrace him or encourage him or love him, or have friendship with him. His drive to outdo all of his friends drove them all away, and he is left with nothing but unfeeling and unmoving objects that cannot reach out to him in any way.

Solomon said one man without another is a super-vanity. He specifically referred to a man who did not even have the friendship of a brother or a son. He must have been talking about himself. He certainly had never had any meaningful relationship with any of his brothers. The conflicts and intrigues in his father David's family were mammoth. His only full brother died soon after birth as a punishment to David for stealing another man's wife (2 Sam. 12:12:1-23). One half-brother Amnon raped his half-sister Tamar (2 Sam. 13:1-20). Later Tamar's full brother Absalom murdered Amnon (2 Sam. 13:21-39). Still later Absalom led a massive rebellion against his father David because David had not taken action to punish Amnon. In the process Absalom was killed while hanging helpless in a tree (2 Sam. 15:1-18:33). Another brother Adonijah led a revolt against David that was thwarted only by David's rising from his death bed to arrange for Solomon to be anointed as king before Adonijah could complete his sedition (1 Kings 1:1-53). The only mention of Solomon's having any contact with one of his half-brothers was when he showed mercy to Adonijah after he was

anointed as king but sent Adonijah home so he would have no further contact with him (1 Kings 1:41-53) and then later commanded Adonijah's execution when Adonijah showed he still had designs on the throne (1 Kings 2:13-25). Solomon was isolated from his brothers in his youth and throughout his reign.

The same aloofness existed between Solomon and his sons. Solomon's failure to be involved in his sons' lives has already been noted. Surely he was the man to whom he was referring when he spoke of a man without a friend, not even a brother or a son. What had it done to him to be without a friend? He had devoted his life to working and gaining riches, but they give him no comfort. He had deprived himself of rest and pleasure in his drive to gain and outdo everyone else, and now he knew it all was vanity. It was a miserable way to be occupied with life.

Then Solomon cited instances that showed the advantage of working with others instead of alone or in competition with others. He said two men working together have the advantage of earning two wages. Thus, they can share and help each other in times of need. They don't need to outdo each other, because they share and help each other. Also, when a man has a partner with whom to share his work, he has the advantage in the daytime that, if one falls, the other will help him up. On the other hand, a man who works alone has no one to help when he falls down. At nighttime having a partner is an equal advantage because, when they lie down to sleep, they can keep each other warm, whereas a man who works by himself has to shiver in the cold alone. And if a person works alone, a robber or a rival might attack and wound him or even kill him; but if he has a comrade, the two can defend each other and drive off the attacker. Solomon had never had any of those kinds of friendships, because he had always worked hard to gain for himself and to outdo everyone else. Now he knew how much he had sacrificed and lost. He needed a friend, because he was facing old age and death, and he had no one to help him through it.

No doubt Solomon uttered his closing words about the value of a friend with a pitiful moan. He said, "a tripled cord is not easily broken." Did he mean, he was about to break, because he had no comrade to help him? As he faced weakness and death, none of his accomplishments could help him. He was just one strand facing his disappointments alone.

Ecclesiastes 4:13-16. A sad personal example.

Then Solomon gave an illustration of the vanity that comes from working alone or working only to benefit one's self. He said a young man who is poor but wise makes a better king than an old, experienced king who does not know how to listen to advice. The wise young man is preferred even if he comes from being bound and even if he was born in poverty.

Almost all English versions translate Ecclesiastes 4:14 to say "came out of prison," and sometimes the word can mean imprisonment. However, the word actually has a much broader meaning and refers to any kind of binding or limitation. Solomon used the passive participle of the verb, which means "being bound." It means the young man was restrained in some way but still preferred as king. People considered him to be preferable as king than the old worn out king.

Solomon's statement described such a specific situation, it makes one wonder if he was talking about someone in particular. He continued with an even more specific reference that raises that question even more.

Solomon continued by saying he saw a great multitude of people standing before a new young king at the side of the old king. The crowd was welcoming the beginning of the young king's reign as he was being installed into office in the presence of the old king. There seemed to be no end to the people who gathered to acclaim the new king and to install him into office. The occasion must have been exciting and exhilarating. It filled the new king and the people with hope. It was a time of unity and joy. However, Solomon went on to describe people who lived under that king's rule years later and possibly were born after he became king. They did not see him in the same light. They did not rejoice over his rule. He had failed them in many ways, and they took no pleasure in him. It was a sad sight to see a king make such an impressive beginning only to come to such a disappointing end. It turned his whole reign into vanity.

Comparing Solomon's words with what we know of his own experience gives strong assurance that Solomon's illustration was about himself. Solomon said he saw the crowd that gathered to welcome the young king, indicating he was present for the occasion. Then he spoke like he was describing a personal experience when he said that the people coming later in the king's rule were not pleased with him. Those words along with the description that preceded them sound so specific and so personal, they strongly indicate Solomon was talking about himself and his own reign.

Everything he described fits his own experiences, which can be summarized as follows:

After Solomon had ruled for many years, he observed among his drafted workers an industrious young man named Jeroboam who got work done quickly and well. He promoted Jeroboam to be his chief boss over all of his drafted laborers (1 Kings 11:28). God chose to use that young man to punish Solomon for his sins and unfaithfulness. He sent the prophet Ahijah the Shilonite to tell Jeroboam God was displeased that Solomon had encouraged and ignored the worship of false gods in Jerusalem and, therefore, was going to take ten of the tribes of Israel away from Solomon and make Jeroboam ruler over those tribes. He even told Jeroboam

the rule of his house would be permanent if he would be faithful to God (1 Kings 11:29-39). With those words to encourage him, Jeroboam sought to lead a rebellion against Solomon (1 Kings 11: 26-27). Though Solomon must have heard of Ahijah's prophecy, he did not repent. Instead, he crushed Jeroboam's attempt at rebellion and sought to kill Jeroboam. Jeroboam fled to Egypt and found asylum there until Solomon died. After Solomon's death, when his son Rehoboam refused the people's request to lighten their taxes and forced labor, Israel's ten northern tribes called for Jeroboam and made him their king. Since the northern tribes called for Jeroboam to return from Egypt so quickly, they obviously had wanted him to be their king from the time he had attempted a rebellion (1 Kings 11:26-12:19).

When Solomon was writing the Book of Ecclesiastes, he surely knew of the desire that many had for Jeroboam to be king, and he felt the sting of people preferring as their king a young man who came out of poverty and who was bound by being forced to live in exile. It especially stung him because he realized he had been too old and too proud to take advice from Ahijah's prophecy and change his ways. Solomon's words in these verses sound all too similar to his experience with Jeroboam to be hypothetical. He realized he had made a terrible mistake, and it was too late to change.

Faced with those sad conditions, Solomon's mind turned back to the days when he was anointed king at David's command in order to head off Adonijah's rebellion. David sent Zadok the high priest, Nathan the prophet, his private body guards, and their commander Benaiah to anoint Solomon to be king at the Gihon Spring before all the people. From there a great procession followed as Solomon was escorted to the palace and into the king's presence, where he was seated on the king's throne (1 Kings 1:1-40). The Scriptural account of Solomon's anointing ends with,

39 Then they blew the ram's horn, and all the people proclaimed, "Long live King Solomon!" 40 All the people followed him, playing flutes and rejoicing with such a great joy that the earth split open from the sound" (HCSB).

Solomon's description in Ecclesiastes 4:15-16a sounds too much like Solomon's experience when he was anointed as king to allow us to surmise that he was referring to anyone other than himself.

When Solomon was writing the Book of Ecclesiastes, it was nearly forty years after he had been anointed. People had become disappointed with his rule, and they were eager for him to be replaced. A rival to the throne had escaped his grasp and was waiting for an opportunity to be enthroned. It was a sad situation for a king who had exhausted himself seeking to build his nation. It was the end result of a life devoted primarily to human labor and achievement. It was the sad end of a reign that preferred human effort and glory over obedience to God. All Solomon could conclude from it was, "Thus this also is vanity and grabbing at the wind."

The point of this whole section is that hard work is an empty enterprise if it is done in human strength and for human glory. No matter how much a person's work may accomplish, it ends up being empty human vanity. A person needs to find something more satisfying and more lasting on which to build his life than hard work, because hard work for its own sake is just another vanity.

HASTY SPEECH IS VANITY ECCLESIASTES 5:1-5

VII. Watch your feet when you go to the house of God (Ecclesiastes 5:1a)

(12) And drawing near to listen is better than the fool's offering of a slaughter-offering, for they do not know that they are doing evil (5:1b-3).

Do not be quick with your mouth (5:2a);

And do not let your heart rush to bring forth a word at God's face (5:2b-3),

For God is in heaven and you are on the earth; therefore, let your words be few (5:2c).

For the dream comes with much activity, and a fool's speech with many words (5:3).

(13) When you vow a vow to God, do not be late in completing it (5:4-7)

For [He finds] no pleasure in the fools (5:4c)

Complete what you vow (5:4d).

It is better that you not vow than that you vow and not complete it (5:5).

Do not allow your mouth to cause your body to sin, and do not say to the Angel's face that it [was] a mistake (5:6a).

Why should God be angry with your speech and destroy the work of your hands (5:6b).

**Because where dreams abound, both vanities and words increase (5:7a).
Instead fear God (5:7b).**

A fifth topic that Solomon found to be vanity and futile was glib talking, especially in God's presence (v. 1a). God holds a person responsible for his words as well as his deeds. Solomon warned that irresponsible speech is a sin and an offense to God.

Solomon cautioned his readers to watch their feet when they walked into God's house. The word "watch" refers to the attention of a watchman guarding a gate or manning a watchtower of a walled city or sitting in a tower to protect a farm from intruding animals, enemies, or thieves. Solomon admonished people to stand watch over their feet in the same way when they entered the temple. However, the remainder of this passage clearly shows that those words of caution were not directed toward how people should move about when they went to the temple but to how they should speak. He stressed that sincere speech, not glib speech, was appropriate in the house of God.

Ecclesiastes 5:1b-3. Listening is better than rituals done for their own sake. Solomon said the proper approach to worship was to enter to listen and to learn, rather than to speak and express opinions. God is much more pleased with a person who listens and learns than with a person who speaks with a shallow understanding of what he is talking about. The person who talks more than he listens is a fool. He thinks his many words will impress God, when actually God considers his loose words to be evil. Unfortunately, he is talking so much he does not take time to realize he is doing evil.

Solomon's emphasis at this point is of massive significance. He stressed that using the temple as a place for teaching and learning was more important than using it as a place for ritual. Most people today do not think of Israel's temple in that light, and perhaps when Israel's temple stood most Israelites did not think of it in that light. Solomon definitely did, and if Israel had so honored it maybe it would not have had to be torn down.

Solomon specifically said listening to learn is better than a fool's slaughter-offering. A fool's slaughter-offering was an offering offered in perfect form but without giving attention to its meaning (Ecclesiastes 5:1b). It was an offering offered as a ceremony, not as a sincere expression of the heart. It was an offering made to have something to talk about instead of something to please God.

A slaughter-offering was one of the five types of offerings an Israelite could offer at the temple. The name of that offering is translated in different ways by different translators. The two most frequent translations are "sacrifice" and "fellowship offering." The most literal translation of the meaning of the Hebrew name is "slaughter-offering." That name related the offering to occasions in ancient times when a family slaughtered an animal that had been fattened to provide food for the winter. It was common for neighbors and friends to gather to assist the family with the work. They would slaughter the animal, prepare the meat for preservation during the winter, cook a meal from the fresh meat, and sit down to enjoy it together. The slaughter-offering that God authorized for use at the temple had a similar significance. It symbolized cooperation and fellowship among God's people. It showed that God's people were a large group of friendly neighbors and that they were expected to love one another and work together (Lev. 3:1-17; 7:11-38). The ritual of the slaughter-offering was that, after the blood of the offering was spilled around the altar, the meat of the animal was shared among God and His people. Part of the meat was roasted on the altar as God's part of a fellowship meal. Another part of the meat was given to the priests to provide their part of the meal. The remainder of the meat was cooked by the offerer in the court yard of the temple and was eaten by him, his family, and his guests to provide the worshiper's part of the fellowship meal. The slaughter-offering had a beautiful and significant meaning for Jehovah worshipers because it symbolized love and fellowship shared by God, His ministers, and His worshipers.

Solomon said it was better to go to the temple without a slaughter-offering if the person went to listen and to learn than it was for him to go to the temple and offer an offering with an insincere heart. The person who offered a fire-offering in the temple without discerning its meaning was foolish and wasting his time. Jehovah has always taught that the essence of worship is sincere, heartfelt submission to God and that rituals are significant only if they are observed to symbolize the genuine feelings and commitments of the worshipers' hearts. Solomon had offered thousands of offerings when he dedicated the temple (2 Chron. 5-5), but as he drew near to the end of his life he knew that the abundance of the offerings was not nearly as important as what was in the heart of the worshiper.

Solomon stressed again that in the house of God a person should limit his words to what he really means, and he added that a person should control his heart and not let it stimulate his mouth to bring forth hasty words when he was standing before God's face in His house (Eccl 5:2a-2b). By the "heart," the Israelites meant a person's whole inner self. It included a person's thoughts as well as his feelings. When Solomon urged worshipers to control their hearts, he meant they should not let their emotions or their knowledge of the rituals cause them to speak hastily. They were in God's house to learn, not to release their emotions or to show off their knowledge. Therefore, they should control their outward actions and their inner feelings. He gave two reasons for that advice.

Solomon's first reason was that God was in heaven, while His worshipers were on the earth (Eccl 5:2c). He meant God was in a

position of authority over all things, while a worshiper is weak and limited on the earth. A worshiper should be careful not to try to deceive God with a lot of words because God recognizes hypocrisy for what it is and rejects both the offering and the meaningless words of an insincere worshiper. When a worshiper displeased God, he offended the God who was seated in the heavens and Ruler of the heavens and the earth.

Solomon's second reason was that dreams produce a lot of activity and a fool's speech produces a lot of words (v. 3). Various opinions have been offered concerning what Solomon meant by "dreams." Night dreams during sleep would be an intrusion into this passage, because the subject is worship in the temple, not sleep in bed. Dreams in the sense of visions from God are equally unconnected with the subject of the passage. The most meaningful explanation is that Solomon was talking about people whose big talk was just dreaming. It was all imaginary. It was bragging unconnected with the reality of their lives. Solomon said such dreaming produces much activity, but the activity he was referring to was agitation and motion, not meaningful productive work.

That meaning for "dreams" is congenial with the second clause of the sentence, which says that a fool's speech produces a lot of words. A fool's speech is the pointless talk of a man whose life does not back up his talk. A foolish person whose speech is unconnected with his real life has to talk a lot to excuse himself or exalt himself, but his many words have no substance or reality. They only amount to a lot of noise. The better way is for a person to speak little and let his life testify to what he is.

Ecclesiastes 4-7. An unkept vow is a sin.

Solomon then turned to another area in which sincere speech was important when worshipers went into the house of God. That aspect was the making of vows. A vow was a promise to make a donation of goods or money or service to the support of the temple and of those who served there. Solomon stressed that vows were serious business. A person should not make a vow unless he definitely was going to keep it.

In Israel the practice was that, when a person made a vow to God, he went to the temple to present a formal promise of what he was going to do for God or give to God at some future time. Then when the time came for him to fulfill or complete his vow, he returned to the temple to carry out what he had promised. When he returned, along with his gift he brought a special type of fire-offering called an "homage-offering" to accompany the fulfillment of his vow (Lev. 16; 22:17-33; 27:1-29). Most English versions translate the name of that offering as "meat offering" or "meal offering" or "grain offering" (Lev. 2:1-16). A literal translation of the Hebrew name for the offering is "homage-offering," indicating that the person's gift was a means of expressing homage to God. By it he recognized that God was the owner of all he possessed and that God had entrusted a portion of his vast holdings to him to use. The homage-offering symbolized the reason he made and fulfilled his vow and the spirit in which he brought it. Solomon emphasized that a person who went through the ritual of making such a vow should take care to fulfill it as he promised, because God is not pleased with beautiful words that are not backed with the action. He considers generous promises that are not kept to be foolishness, the actions of a fool.

Because God honors sincere words, Solomon stressed that it is better not to make a vow than to make a vow and fail to fulfill it (v. 5). He pointed to the seriousness of that failure in two ways.

- (1) If a person made a vow and did not fulfill it, the words that came from his mouth made his whole body sin, because his whole body has participated in the failure.
- (2) When it was time for him to fulfill the vow if he went to the temple without taking with him what he had promised, he would have to confess to The Angel that making the promise was a mistake.

In Hebrew, the primary meaning for the word for "angel" is "messenger." Angels often served as messengers for God to reveal His truths or His will to people. Throughout the Old Testament, one special Messenger or Angel was distinct from all other angels and was used by God to deliver God's most important messages. That Angel was sometimes called "The Angel of Jehovah" or "The Angel of God." Whenever He appeared, He always was recognized as God, and yet as distinct from God. The only Person who can fit that description is the One who later became a man to bring God's most complete message to people, who is Jesus.

Solomon understood that that special Messenger from God was present in the temple to witness the worship of God's people and to observe the fulfillment of vows by His worshipers. If the worshiper came without the gift or service he had promised, he would have to confess his failure in the presence of The Angel, who was both God's Messenger and God Himself. The Hebrews may not have understood all the significance of such a Person, as we also do not fully understand how Jesus can be God and yet the Son of God, even after the many additional revelations we have received. Nonetheless, they honored the God who had manifold powers and who could communicate in

many ways. They knew God had a special Messenger who had appeared numerous times with special revelations about God. Solomon shows that He knew that that Messenger was present when God's people gathered to worship Him. His words about the Messenger or Angel mean that it would be a huge embarrassment for a person to have to confess to that Angel that he made a

mistake when he promised what he either could not or would not do.

Many other explanations have been given for this special Angel, but all of them seek to explain the meaning based on the assumption that Solomon was talking about “an angel.” However, Solomon used the definite article when speaking of The Angel, and the actual words he used should not be considered to be insignificant. Only one unique one-of-a-kind Angel is mentioned in the Bible, and He alone is called “The Angel.” Commentators who give other explanations of Solomon’s words always are uncertain about their views, and their interpretations are tenuous and limp. Only accepting that Solomon was talking about The Angel of Jehovah makes his words meaningful and powerful. Solomon went on to further emphasize the seriousness of failing to keep a vow by saying that not keeping a vow made God angry. God expressed his displeasure by taking away objects or wealth that had come from the work of the man’s hands (v. 6b). That punishment is appropriate, because the man took away what he had promised to God, so God was right in showing him the seriousness of his failure by taking away items that were valuable to him.

Then Solomon added still another way that failing to keep vows was evil and dangerous. He said that when a person’s promises were just dreams and not reality, he had to justify himself with many vain actions and untrue words (Ecclesiastes 5:7a). His making false promises produced more false actions and words. The more he talked, the more vain and futile his words became. His sin grew and multiplied, as sin always does.

Solomon closed his serious warnings with a brief, pungent suggestion. Instead of all of that false talking, a person should simply fear God in his heart (v. 7b). By fear, Solomon meant having an awesome respect for the overpowering almighty God. If a worshiper came to God’s house with that attitude in his heart, empty words would be unnecessary.

GREAT WEALTH IS VANITY

ECCLESIASTES 5:8-6:9

A sixth topic that Solomon said was vanity and empty was great wealth. He possessed wealth far beyond any Israelite king before him or after him. He was in the best position of any person in Israel throughout its whole history to discuss the subject of wealth, and he had found that possessing great wealth had left him unsatisfied.

Solomon cited five examples of how great wealth does not satisfy.

(6) If you see oppression of the poor and snatching away of justice and right in the province, do not be amazed over its happening (5:8-9),

Because one official is watched over by a higher one, and higher ones are above them (5:8b).

And profit from land [is divided] among them all (5:9a).

A king [collects] from [every] cultivated field (5:9b).

The first example was that wealth is drained away by oppressive taxation at every level of government. Solomon said, if his readers saw government officials oppressing the poor and denying justice to them, they should not be surprised. Such actions were all too common in his day, as they are all over the world today. Because of the fallen nature of mankind, people tend to use any power they have to take advantage of others. Government authorities have the greatest temptation of all to oppress others, because they have the greatest human power of all.

Solomon said officials in his day watched over each other. By “is watched over” he meant providing protection. Lower officials were protected by higher officials, to keep their dishonest schemes from being exposed. If a person sought protection from one official by going to a higher authority, he found that the higher official was involved in the same kind of oppressive actions and, therefore, unwilling to defend him. Even the higher officials above them were equally dishonest, so that the poor person was left without recourse.

However, the wealthy person fared no better. He was oppressed with heavy taxes because of his wealth. The profit that came from his land was collected by officials at every level of the government, and the king got his portion of the profit from every cultivated field in the whole land. The more profit a person made, the more of it he had to pay to officials through taxation.

Solomon’s point was that accumulating great wealth was vanity, a futile enterprise, because rulers require great portions of it to support both legitimate services and illegitimate oppressions.

(14) One who loves money is not satisfied with money, nor one who loves abundance with wealth.

This also is vanity (5:10-12).

When goods increase, the ones eating them increase, (5:11a).

So what advantage do their owners have (5:11b),

Except to see [them] with his eyes (5:11c)?

Sleep of the working one [is] sweet (4:12),

Whether he eats a little or a lot (5:12b),

But the overabundance of the rich one does not allow him to sleep (5:12c).

Solomon's second example of why great wealth is vanity was that the more goods a man has the more workers he must hire and feed to take care of his many possessions and responsibilities. In Hebrew the word translated "goods" is singular. It means the sum total of all of a man's good and valuable possessions and holdings. When a man has an abundance of possessions and investments, a great portion of his wealth is consumed by paying his workers so they can eat, and little is left for him to use for himself. He has wealth on paper, but that wealth gives him little to use for himself.

After a while the wealthy owner may wonder what advantage he has over his workmen. They can go to bed at night and sleep soundly, because they did their work and do not have to carry home with them the problems of the day. The business and its problems do not belong to him because he is not the owner, so he goes home, forgets them, and sleeps soundly. However, the owner carries those responsibilities on his shoulders all the time, because he owns them and is responsible for them day and night. He thinks and worries so much about them he cannot sleep at night. His great wealth causes him burdens, not satisfaction. Owning so many enterprises turns out to be a vanity, an accomplishment that produces no satisfaction.

(11) I saw a sickening calamity under the sun (5:13-20).

Riches were being kept by their owner to his detriment (5:13b-14),

And those riches were lost in a bad investment (5:14a).

And he fathered a son (5:14b),

And he did not have anything in his hand (5:14c).

Just as he came out from his mother's womb, naked again [he] went (5:15-17).

Just like he came, he also did not take away anything for his trouble that he might carry in his hand.

Again that was a sickening evil (5:15b-16a)

Wholly parallel to [how] he came, thus he went,

So what advantage [came] to him that he kept on laboring for the wind (5:16b)?

Also all his days

He ate in darkness (5:17a),

And he was exasperated to abound in both sickness and anger (5:17b).

Behold, that which I myself have observed to be good and beautiful is (5:18-20):

To eat and to drink and to see pleasure in all the labor with which one labors under the sun during the few days of his life that God has given him because that is his portion (5:18b).

Also every man to whom God has given wealth and possessions and caused him to have power to eat them and to carry his portion and to rejoice in his labor (5:19-20),

That is the gift of God (5:19b).

For he does not reminisce a lot on the days of his life because God causes him to respond with joy in his heart (5:20).

Solomon's third example of why great wealth is vanity was that it can be lost so easily. If a person depends on what he owns to give him worth, he is basing his value on a shaky foundation. Wealth is a fragile foundation, because it can so quickly vanish away.

Ecclesiastes 5:13b-17. A sickening example.

Solomon said it made him sick when he saw what one man went through because of an unwise investment. The man had been denying himself pleasures he would like to have had so he could save money for some need he might have in the future, but he lost

all he had saved plus all he owned because of a mistake in judgment (v. 13). Then he fathered a son, and he did not have anything that he needed to provide for his son (v. 14).

Later the man died, and he was as penniless as the day he was born (vs. 15-16). Solomon felt strongly that dying in complete poverty was a tragedy, and he showed it by restating in different words that the man did not retain anything he could carry in his hand for all his troubles in life. He did not mean it was a tragedy that the man could not carry away his possessions after he died. He meant it was a tragedy that the man died without owning anything he could carry or touch with his hand. Solomon said that to him that was a sickening tragedy. Then he repeated again in still different words that the man's condition when he went away was exactly parallel to his condition when he came into the world. Solomon asked in dismay what advantage had the man gained from all his labors. It was as if he had been laboring for the wind.

All English versions either translate verses 15-16 as the condition in which Solomon expected the man to die or as the statement of a general principle that applies to every person who is born and dies. Neither of those views is appropriate. Solomon gave no indication that in verse 15 he was changing his account of what he had seen to what he expected. In fact, he continued to stress that the man's predicament was sickening. If the man was still alive, Solomon could not have been that sure that he was not going to recover from his loss and was going to die penniless. Hebrew verb forms do not have time significance, so it is just as accurate to translate the verbs in verses 15 and 16 in past tense as in future tense. The context indicates Solomon was continuing his account of what he had seen, and it calls for the past tense.

Also Solomon gave no indication in verse 15 that he was beginning to talk about a general principal that applied to all men. In fact, he continued to speak about a sickening evil. It is hard to see why he would have been sickened by the thought that every man leaves this life without being able to take anything with him into the next. It is easy to see why he would have been sickened that a man would die without being able to show one accomplishment he had made in life. Seeing that tragedy happen strongly supported his contention that great wealth is vanity, because it can so easily be lost. Translating verses 15-16 as a general principal that applies to all men makes them irrelevant to Solomon's subject and weak in their impact. Translating them as an account of how the man died allows them to be a powerful illustration of Solomon's very valid and relevant point.

Solomon further elaborated on the man's predicament by saying that he lived all his days in darkness or in depression and gloom (v. 17). In addition the pain of his great losses, his poverty caused him to be exposed to sicknesses, and he was afflicted with them throughout the rest of his life. Sickness on top of his poverty kept him angry at life and angry at himself for the failure he had brought on himself by his unwise investment. He not only died in sadness. He lived in sadness until his death because of his great loss.

Ecclesiastes 5:18-20. Regardless of your portion in life, find the good that is in it and enjoy it.

Faced with the knowledge that any man might face the same kind of losses, Solomon said the best advice he could give to a man was to be content with the life God gives him and to do good with it. He said, if a person will take that approach to life, he will find it to be satisfying and beautiful.

Solomon applied that principal to a man who has only enough to eat and to drink to sustain his life (v. 18). He challenged that person to enjoy the portion God had given him in life and do something good with it. When Solomon spoke of the man's portion, he was comparing it with the division of the land of Israel among the tribes and the families of the nation in the days of Joshua. God assigned each family a portion of the land, which they were to continue to own and use through all later generations. Solomon saw every person's condition in life to be just that kind of gift from God. He was asserting that each person's position in life is the portion God assigned to him. God had a reason for assigning him that portion, and he should be grateful for it and enjoy doing what God intended for him to do with it. The person who takes that approach to his position in life does not spend time talking about what used to be or what might have been. Instead he gives attention to the joys of the present day. That person has learned the secret of being happy and contented with the portion God assigned to him, and being blessed with that attitude is far superior to possessing great wealth.

However, Solomon applied the same principal to a man who has great wealth (vs. 19-20). He said that when a man of great wealth can eat sensibly from what he owns, carry well the responsibilities God gave him, and enjoy the work that is involved, that also is a gift from God. That man also does not spend much time remembering or thinking about what used to be. Also he does not worry about what might be. He is too busy responding to the challenges he is facing each day. In approaching the problems he faces each day as challenges God has given to him, he finds joy in grappling with them. As he faces his challenges with joy, he too finds contentment.

4. There is another evil that I have seen under the sun, and it is frequent among men (Ecclesiastes 6:1-6).

1. It is a man to whom God gives wealth and possessions and honor and nothing is lacking to his life of all that he might desire, but God does not enable him to enjoy them, so that an outsider gets to

enjoy them (6:2).

This is futility (6:2b).

And it is a severe affliction (6:2c).

If a man fathers a hundred children and lives so that the days of his years are many and he himself is not satisfied out of the good things and also a burial, I say a stillborn child is better off than he is (6:3-5).

For in futility it comes and in darkness it goes, and its name is covered with darkness (6:4).

Although it has not seen the sun and it has not known anything, it has rest more than he (6:5).

And if he lives a thousand years twice and does not see any good thing, do not all go to one place (6:6)?

Solomon gave a fourth example of why great wealth is futile. It was that many times a wealthy person is afflicted so that he cannot use or enjoy his great wealth. He said he had frequently seen people who had wealth and possessions enough to buy anything they could desire, but they were hindered from enjoying it. He probably was thinking about a man with a permanent illness or injury that kept him from using any of the expensive items he owned. That man had to let someone else spend his money for him. He was the owner of a fortune, but someone else got the joy of spending it. He lived in futility because he had great possessions, but he could not enjoy using any of it.

If a man in that condition fathered a hundred children and lived many years, his life would be as dark as that of a stillborn child. The child would come into the world lifeless and in darkness. He would leave the world the same way and would never know anything, but that child still would be better off than the man who had great possessions but no way to use them or enjoy them. That man would know what he was missing, but the stillborn child knew nothing at all and was not made miserable by knowing about what he could not enjoy. Both the man and the child were headed to the grave, but at least the child did not know about what he was missing.

He stressed the same thought again by saying that, if a man lives 2,000 years and is not able to use what he owns, what use is his wealth?: He is headed toward death, just like everybody else. His wealth has gained him nothing.

6. All of a man's labor [is] for his mouth, and yet his soul is not satisfied (6:7-9).

a. So what advantage does the wise one have over the fool (6:8),

(1) And what advantage does the poor man have who knows how to walk in front of the living ones (6:8b)?

(2) Eye sight is better than a wandering soul (6:9a)

b. This also is vanity, grabbing at the wind (6:9b).

Solomon gave one final example of why great wealth is vanity. That example is that everybody is working for their mouths, that is, for the things that please their senses; but the things that please the senses do not satisfy a person's soul or inner being. Though he expressed that fifth example in only a few words, the problem to which those words point is the most widespread and the most critical of all of his examples that illustrate the inadequacy of material possessions.

Commentators have had a hard time with these verses. The reason for their difficulty grows out of uncertainty concerning the meaning of the Hebrew word נֶפֶשׁ, nephesh, which is translated above as "soul." The difficulty translators face in translating that word into English is shown in that the King James Version translates it in 35 different ways. It translates the word as "soul" 428 times, but in this passage it uses the translation "appetite" in verse 7 and "desire" in verse 9. All major English versions follow the example set by KJV or use translations that are so free it is difficult to see how they connect with the Hebrew text. To understand this passage it is essential to form a conclusion about the correct meaning of the word nephesh.. To arrive at a conclusion about its meaning, it is necessary to survey its usage in the Old Testament. Please take time to consider the brief survey of that usage that follows:

D. In the Genesis records of creation and of the flood, a fish, a bird, or an animal is called a living "nephesh" (Gen. 1:20,21,24; 2:19; 9:10,12,15,16). In those verses, KJV translates the word as "creature." In those verses, the word refers to a being that has independent life, which fish, birds, and animals have but nothing in the newly created universe had prior to the creation of living beings on the fifth and sixth creative days. In those verses, the word nephesh refers to the being itself, not the entity or characteristic that made it a nephesh.

E. The Genesis record of man's creation says, "Then Jehovah God formed the man of dirt from the earth, and he breathed into his nostrils the breath of lives; and the man became a living nephesh. (Gen. 2:7). In that verse, KJV translates the word as "soul." In that

verse, the word means that man also is a being that has independent life. At the same time, the verse indicates that something was different about the man from animals, because God did not make man a nephesh by creation only but also by breathing His own breath into him. In addition, the verse uses the plural “lives,” indicating that man was given more than one kind of life.

1 Numerous verses in Genesis use the word with reference to people by speaking of a person’s having a nephesh, rather than being a nephesh (Gen. 12:13; 19:20; 27:4,19,25,31; 34:3,8; 42:21). One verse emphasizes that point by saying Rachel’s nephesh departed from her when she died (Gen. 35:18). In those verses, KJV translates the word as “soul.” Those verses mean that a nephesh is an invisible but real entity that a person has inside, which is alive and which gives him or her life. At the same time, other verses in Genesis continue to speak of a person’s being a nephesh. (Gen. 12:5; 17:14; 46:18,22,25,26,27). In those verses also, KJV translates the word as “soul.” Comparing those two ways that the word is used reveals that, when a person has a nephesh, it is such an important part of him that it identifies what he is. Having a nephesh makes him be a nephesh. The English word “soul” is used in the same two ways. It is common to speak of a person’s having a soul, but it is also common to call a person a “soul.” The usage shows that the English word “soul” is virtually equivalent to the Hebrew word “nephesh.”

2 In later Old Testament verses, the words “heart” and “nephesh” are frequently used together when speaking of a person’s seeking, loving, serving, obeying, turning to, or entering into covenant with God (Gen. 4:29;6:5; 10:12; 11:13,18; 13:3; 26:16; 30:2,6,10, plus 18 verses in Joshua., Kings, Chronicles, Isaiah, and Jeremiah). A well-known example is Deuteronomy 6:5, “And you shall love Jehovah your God with all your heart and with all your “nephesh,” and with all your might..” In all of those verses, KJV translates the word as “soul.” Repeated use of the words “heart” and “nephesh” together, shows that they are two separate entities but that they function in unison. To the Hebrews, “heart” meant the organs of a person’s body that were involved in emotion and in thought. Nephesh meant to them an intangible entity in the person’s makeup that also was involved in emotion and thought. The two were distinct from each other, but when it came to relating to God the two worked together. The invisible entity that gave the person life was as real and as necessary as a person’s physical organs.

In Genesis 6:5, the addition of the words “and with all your might” indicates that both “heart” and “nephesh” were distinct from a person’s outer body, that is, from his skin, muscles, and bones. “Body” or “might” means a person’s outer physical structure. “Heart” means the inner organs that enable a person’s physical structure to have physical life and to function independently. “Soul” means the entity that enables a being to have self-awareness and relationships with other living beings. A person needs to involve all three in loving, worshiping, and serving God.

(5) In Leviticus, as God revealed his commandments for Israel’s rituals, He spoke repeatedly of sins that a nephesh might commit (Lev. 4:2; 5:1,2,4,15,17; 6:2; 7:18,20,21,25,27; 17:10,12,15; 18:29; 19:8; 20:6 (twice); Lev 20:22:3,6; 23:29,30). In other verses, He spoke of “your nephesh” when he talked about a person’s sinning, repenting of sin, or being covered from sins (Lev. 16:29,31; 17:11 (twice); Lev 20:25; 23:27,32; 26:15,43). In all of those verses, KJV always translates the word as “soul.” Those verses show that in people, whether the nephesh was considered to be an entity within a person or the person himself, a nephesh was involved in a person’s sin and in his receiving covering from his sins. Thus, they show that in people, nephesh had the ability to relate to God, to sin against God, and to be restored to God. Animals do not have that ability, so a human nephesh is an

entity animals do not have. Animals have a nephesh, but human have a nephesh that gives them moral capability and responsibility.

The above uses of the word nephesh lead to the following conclusions: (1) Nephesh is the part of a being’s makeup that enables it to do more than simply react to environment, as physical organs do. Nephesh gives a being a conscious, independent existence. (2) Both animals and humans have nephesh, though a human’s nephesh has much more advanced capabilities than an animal’s nephesh. (3) Human’s also have another nephesh that animals do not have, which enables them to have moral responsibility and relationship with God. In English, that nephesh is rightly called the person’s “soul.”

(4) “Appetite” is a function of a being’s inner organs, not of the invisible entity that gives it life. Therefore, the word “appetite” is not a valid translation for the word nephesh.

Understanding the word “nephesh” in Ecclesiastes 6:7 and 9 to mean “soul” gives meaning to Solomon’s statement, whereas understanding it to mean “appetite” or “desire” does not. Explaining how giving all of one’s attention to feeding the mouth will never satisfy the appetite is a puzzle. Feeding the mouth is what satisfies the appetite. However, saying that giving all of one’s attention to feeding the mouth will never satisfy the soul is a fundamentally important statement about human existence.

Solomon’s statement was giving his final punch to his argument that great wealth is futile. He said that feeding the body does nothing for the soul. A person’s body is made from dirt. His soul is not. If a person gives all of his attention to satisfying his senses or feeding his body, he neglects the most important part of him, which can never find satisfaction in physical possessions or provisions. What a person eats, smells, sees, touches, or tastes can never give satisfaction to his soul, because those provisions are physical and his soul is not. His life becomes a never ending race in the dark, because he does not even know what he is seeking. The only way to satisfy the soul of a man is to bring it into a relationship with God. Therefore, great wealth without faith in God is vanity. It

leaves a person empty and his life futile and vain.

Solomon asked, therefore, how is a man who is wise enough to accumulate a great fortune any better off than a fool who is always making mistakes and failing? Both are in a blind search for some object that will bring them contentment and neither of them is finding it, so the wise man is as bad off as the fool.

Solomon applied that same principle to a poor man. He asked how a poor man who knows how to relate well to other people and is able to gain their approval is any better off than a fool? The poor but congenial man who is interested only in satisfying his mouth and his senses is in the same situation as the rich man who takes no note of God. He also is no better off than a fool. His seeking and striving also never ends, and contentment never comes. So the poor man who acts correctly is no better off than the man who acts foolishly.

Solomon was describing a reality about human existence that he had learned to recognize by careful observation of the human condition. What he observed has continued to be true to the human experience through all the years from Solomon's day until today. People who seek for satisfaction in money, possessions, and physical satisfactions are never content. They always are looking for something to fill an emptiness they cannot define. They either feel oppressed or depressed, or else they never release themselves from the drive to gain something they cannot define or find. Whether rich or poor, wise or foolish, they are all alike in their inability to be content.

Solomon closed his discussion of this vital insight with an enigmatic statement. He said, "Sight of eyes is better than a wandering soul." By "wandering soul" he evidently meant the unsatisfied soul to which he had been referring. He thought of a man who could not find contentment as having a soul that wanders about endlessly in search of something to fill the emptiness in his life. By "sight of eyes" he evidently meant seeing or finding that for which the person is searching. His statement seems to mean that a person with a discontented or wandering soul knows his life would be much better if he could find what he is seeking. Therefore, he keeps on searching. Solomon did not go on to describe what would end that person's frustrating search and give him satisfaction. Instead he declared that the soul that is still wandering and has not seen what he longs for is living in vanity. He is grabbing at the wind.

Those who know God want to add to Solomon's words and inform the wandering soul that the way to see relief and find contentment is to trust and obey God. However, Solomon was not ready for that declaration. He was going to declare that truth at the end of his book (Eccl. 12:13-14), but first he wanted to help his readers understand why they needed to trust and obey God. To do so, he was exhausting his list of all the enticements that do not satisfy. Only then was he going to be ready to reveal where a person can find satisfaction. At this point, he was emphasizing that seeking for satisfaction in wealth is just one more empty vanity that will never satisfy.

Solomon's purpose in this whole section of his book was to emphasize that wealth and possessions will never give a person contentment. Seeking satisfaction from wealth and possessions is just another vanity, grabbing at the wind.

SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS IS VANITY ECCLESIASTES 6:10-7:29

Introduction (Ecclesiastes 6:10-12):

(7) Whatever it is that comes, its name already has been called, and what a man [will be] is known (6:10-11),

So he is not able to judge like the One who [is] stronger than he (6:10c).

Wherever words increase, vanity increases. What benefit is that to the man (6:11),

(8) Because who knows what is good for the man during his life (6:12),

[During] the number of the days of his life of vanity, while he passes through like a shadow (6:12a)?

Because who will tell the man what will come after him under the sun (6:12b)?

Many commentators have sought to connect these verses with the previous section, but they fit much more logically with the section that follows. They are an introduction to the section that follows, which discusses another topic that is vanity. That topic is righteousness that is obtained by one's own effort. Solomon introduced that subject by stressing man's inadequacy. Human inadequacy makes people unable to know what righteousness is, much less how to practice it. Solomon pointed to two ways in

which people are inadequate.

Verses 10-11. No one is able to see the future, as God does. The first inadequacy of people that Solomon pointed out was their inability to see into the future. Though all major English versions translate this verse to say that what exists in the present was known before it happened, that statement contains little meaningful information. Because someone in the past knew an event was going to happen before it occurred does not provide any help to a person in the present. The sentence is capable of being translated in a much more meaningful way. Because Hebrew verbs do not contain time significance, it is just as accurate to translate the statement in future tense, by which it declares that what is coming in the future is known already. That statement is much more impressive and significant. The One who can see what is coming in the future is God, so Solomon was pointing out that God knows what a person will do before he does it. Because God knows the future, He is much stronger and wiser than people are.

The importance of that statement is that, since man cannot see the future, he not able to judge right or wrong like the One who is stronger than he is who is God. Because people cannot see into the end result of their actions, they cannot judge what is right wrong. Since they cannot determine what is right and wrong, they certainly cannot live righteous lives, without God to show them the way.

Solomon followed his statement about human inadequacy by saying a lot of words only produce vanity. He meant, when a person is incapable, much talk will not take his inability away. Many times, when a person realizes he is inadequate or uninformed, he tries to cover up his lack by talking a great deal. He intends for his long speech to sound intellectual and informed. Instead, it produces vanity, because people quickly recognize his predicament. So what benefit does he gain from all his empty words? What good is it for people to talk a lot about right and wrong when they really do not know what they are talking about?

Verse 12. No one knows what is right for him to do during his lifetime. The second inadequacy of people that Solomon mentioned was their inability to know what is right for them to do during their lifetimes. A person's life is just a number of days filled with vanity, so how can he know what is right for him to do? He is just passing through his life like a shadow. His life is as unstable and insecure as a shadow, so he certainly cannot know with certainty what is the right action for him to take in any given situation. The only way a person might be able to judge what is right for him to do while he is still living is if he could know what the outcome of his actions will be after he is gone. No man has that knowledge, so he is left uncertain about what is right for him to do. Therefore, knowing how to do right and how to achieve righteousness is beyond his grasp.

Solomon's reason for pointing out these two inadequacies in people was to form a foundation for discussing another topic that was vanity. That topic was achieving righteousness through one's own effort. The seventh area he discussed was self-righteousness, not in the sense of pride but in the sense of making one's own self-righteousness. He declared that self-righteousness was another vanity because it could not be achieved.

A. PROVERBS ABOUT SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS (Ecclesiastes 7:1-29)

To prove his point, Solomon quoted a list of proverbs about becoming righteous. He was intimately acquainted with the method wise men used in that day to communicate and teach about righteousness. Their method was to speak or write short sayings about righteousness, which we call "proverbs." 1 Kings 4:32 says Solomon wrote 3,000 proverbs and 1,005 songs. He included many of his proverbs in the Book of Proverbs. The best of his songs, The Song of Solomon, is also included in the Bible. Out of his vast knowledge about the proverbs of the wise men, he selected seventeen for inclusion in this section of the Book of Ecclesiastes. His purpose was to show that wise sayings or even following the advice contained in wise sayings does not make a person righteous. That effort also is a vain enterprise.

Solomon would never have said that studying and the proverbs of the wise men or practicing what the proverbs taught was evil or worthless. He considered them to be so valuable that he spent years writing and gathering them, but his extensive study of them had shown him that they do not enable a person to become truly righteous. They are inadequate because they describe aspects of righteousness but do not provide the power to follow all their good advice.

The proverbs Solomon listed in this chapter should not be understood as statements that develop Solomon's theme for his book. They only contribute to his theme by being examples of wise advice about how to be righteous that is good but inadequate. They help a person understand how to be better, but they do not produce righteousness.

Those who understand the proverbs in this chapter to be a means Solomon used to develop the theme for his book end up concluding that the Book of Ecclesiastes has no central message. They see the book as a disjointed collection of unrelated insights into many topics. That conclusion is severely erroneous. The theme of the Book of Ecclesiastes is that all human insight and activity is vanity. The book sticks to that theme throughout. This section of the book continues that theme by emphasizing that studying and following good advice turns out to be just one more of those vanities.

Each of the proverbs Solomon listed will be briefly discussed below, not because they prove Solomon's theme, but because they are

examples of the type of goodness that in the end proves to be just one more vanity. The type of righteousness he talked about was self-righteousness, achieved by one's own effort. Self-attained righteousness is vanity because it is not true righteousness.

The proverbs Solomon listed in this section of his book have the potential of being enlarged and elaborated on at great length. Proverbs are seed thoughts from which a whole crop of helpful insights can grow, and it is hardly possible to exhaust the treasure trove of advice contained in the seventeen proverbs Solomon quoted. Therefore, the following comments on those seventeen proverbs are not intended to exhaust the meaning of those proverbs but to identify the basic truth each contains. After taking note of the truth contained in each of the proverbs, it is easy to agree with Solomon's point that, as good and useful as s are, they do not empower a person to live a truly good life.

Solomon expressed in his own way a truth that is strongly emphasized in the New Testament, which is that everyone is a sinner and no one can become righteous by his own efforts. Everyone is a sinner and cannot change what he is by his own effort. Righteousness does not come from human knowledge or human effort. Righteousness is a gift that God bestows on those who trust in Him.

Solomon saved his statement about what can enable a person to be righteous until the end of his book, but it helps to understand the reason Solomon stressed the inadequacy of self-righteousness by looking forward to the concluding words of his book. His eternal and infallible conclusion about

what will enable a person to be righteous is recorded in Ecclesiastes 12:13, ". . . fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the all-in-all for mankind." At this point, Solomon is leading up to that conclusion by emphasizing that human effort to achieve righteousness is just another vanity. He is building a tension that will cause the reader to begin to cry out to know what is valid and trustworthy. When he becomes convinced that everything he can do for himself will end up inadequate, in desperation he will cry out for someone to tell him what can make him truly righteous.

With that perspective in mind, a discussion of each of the proverbs about righteousness that Solomon quoted is given below.

1. A good name is better than ointment, and the day of death than the day of one's birth (Ecclesiastes 7:1).

This proverb contains two comparisons that point to two values that are better than two others, but it does not talk about what is best. It illustrates one of the weaknesses of proverbs about righteousness. They point to better ways, but they do not define the best way.

The first comparison in this proverb is that a good name is preferable to a soothing ointment. A good name means having a reputation for being honest, good, kind, courteous, productive, or generous. Earning a good name requires hard work, sacrifice, and pain; and many people find the effort too high a price to pay. The same people would be pleased, even excited, to receive a soothing skin cream after being sunburned or after being scraped by a rough object, or they would be pleased to use a perfumed cream after a warm bath. However, the cream brings satisfaction only temporarily and soon washes away. A good reputation does not fade away. Instead, it spreads widely. It attracts business for a store, friends for an individual, admiration for a student, and a strong defense for one who is falsely accused. A pleasing ointment is good, but a good name brings advantages many times greater. This proverb advises people to put their emphasis on the better of two beneficial choices. The better of the two is a good reputation.

The second comparison in this parable is more difficult to understand. Solomon said the day a person dies is better than the day he is born. That statement is backwards from the way people think. People rejoice, celebrate, and send announcements far and wide when a new baby is born. Their feelings are exactly the opposite when a family member or friend dies. They cry over the loss. They feel depressed and lonely. They worry about what is going to happen to them without the person who is gone. People much prefer hearing about a birth than about a death. But Solomon points to another side to both situations. A baby is born into a troubled world. Growing up, studying in school, training for work, paying bills, and experiencing illnesses, misunderstandings, betrayals, and disappointments all lie ahead for every new-born baby. No baby ever born has ever been able to escape those problems completely. Solomon was right that it is appropriate to cry for a baby when it is born because of the suffering, stress, and sorrow that baby inevitably is going to experience in its life. By contrast, the person who dies is free of all his struggles. He leaves his worries and debts to others. His days of suffering on earth are ended. His loved ones and his friends should rejoice for him and be glad.

To be sure, from the viewpoint of eternity, if the person who dies rejected God as His Savior throughout his life, he faces even worse suffering in hell than it is possible to suffer in this life. However, if he trusted Jesus as his Savior, he will never suffer again and will live forever in peace and prosperity. So death for a believer is a time to rejoice. Death for a believer ends suffering and begins a life of righteousness, peace, and plenty forever. A funeral for a believing friend is a time to laugh and be glad.

The proverb Solomon quoted faced birth and death only from the viewpoint of the person's earthly condition. From that perspective, a baby's birth is the beginning of a lifetime of troubles, but a person's death ends all of his earthly troubles.

From that point of view a baby's birth should be a time to cry, and a person's death should be a time to laugh.

From an earthly perspective, both preferences recommended by this are correct; but the proverb does not deal with the basic meaning of righteousness, and it does not tell how to achieve it. From a believer's point of view, if a person is righteous through faith in God, the proverbs provide tremendously helpful advice about how to live out the righteousness he received as a gift from God. However, if a person has not found righteousness through faith, all the proverbs ever written will never make him righteous. Self-righteousness is a failure. It is vanity.

**(15) Going to a house of mourning is better than going to a house of feasting (Ecclesiastes 7:2),
Because that is the end of all men (7:2b),
And the living one should keep it in his heart (7:2c).**

This proverb is another statement about the better of two choices. Like the previous proverb, it has the weakness of not dealing with ultimate righteousness or with the way to obtain it. It only deals the better of two limited choices.

The two choices are accepting an invitation to go to a banquet at someone's house or going to a house where someone has died. Given a choice, who would not prefer to go to a house party than to a house where a family is mourning the death of a loved one? As strange as it sounds, however, this proverb says that going to the house of mourning is the better choice. When a person goes a house where people are suffering so he can comfort them, he provides help and encouragement to people in genuine need and he gains appreciation from them and from others. His concern for others also makes people want to help him when his time of need comes. Ministry to others builds character for the one ministering and gives comfort to the persons who are ministered to. Satisfaction that comes from giving encouragement to a person facing sadness or rescue to a person facing danger gives more deep-down satisfaction to the one doing the ministering than a time of fun ever will.

The proverb concentrates on an even more important benefit that comes from going to a house where someone has died. That benefit is that it reminds the one ministering that he too will end in the same way. Everyone needs to keep in mind that he too is going to die, so he will prepare for his death by trusting God and obeying His commands. Going to a house of death reminds the one who goes there that he needs to get ready for his coming death, whereas partying makes a person forget that his death is coming and that he needs to prepare for it. If a person spends too much of his time in partying, he will come to the day of his death unprepared, and he will face a tragic eternity. Therefore, going to a house where someone has died brings more benefit than going to a banquet.

3. Sorrow is better than laughter, because through a sad face a heart becomes glad (Ecclesiastes 7:3).

This third proverb is another that deals with the better of two alternatives. It does not deal with what is best or with what constitutes true righteousness. It does, however, point out another surprising contrast. It says that sorrow is better than laughter because sadness produces a glad heart.

The way that sadness produces gladness is that people are discontent with sadness and want to make changes that will remove the sadness. Sorrow is actually productive because it motivates a person to make improvement. When a person works at making improvement, he soon makes the needed changes, and then everyone involved is glad.

Sadness over sickness makes a person seek a doctor, a nurse, a hospital, or a medicine. More often than not he gets well or better, and then he and his loved ones are glad. Sadness over lost income makes a man seek a new job or a way to start a new business. He works at it, succeeds, and then his friends rejoice with him. Sadness over a lost pet makes a person want another pet. He finds one that meets his interests, and then he is glad. A biting sermon may upset a person or even offend him, but often it can pierce through the hardness of someone's heart and bring him to God for salvation. The result will be gladness for everyone who hears of the change in his heart and life. Conviction of sin first produces sorrow, but then it produces repentance, forgiveness, correction, righteousness, and genuine inner joy. His friends and family rejoice. Even the angels in heaven rejoice with him.

Laughter produces the opposite effect. It makes a person feel so good he wants conditions to remain as they are so he can laugh again. Who wants to change something that makes him feel good? So laughter causes a person to seek after laughing again, and he spends little time in making his life or the lives of people about him better. Comedy draws people to television when they should be in church. A church party may draw people to a church's fellowship hall, but it seldom leads a person to salvation. Jokes in the pulpit draw people to the pews, but they do not draw people to repentance. Too much time spent in laughter makes a person unproductive.

Solomon was right. When it comes to producing beneficial results, sorrow is better than laughter.

(12) The heart of the wise ones is in a house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of merriment (Ecclesiastes 7:4).

The fourth proverb Solomon quoted deals with contrasting places where the hearts of two different types of people seek to be. Like the previous proverbs, it does not define genuine righteousness or tell a person how to get it.

To the Hebrews, the heart meant the organs that are involved in a person's emotions and reasoning. A person's feelings and thoughts determined where he wants to go and what he wants to do. A wise person's heart will make him feel concern for those who are in sorrow. It will influence him to think about those who are unfortunate and about those who are lost in sin. Then he will go to them to minister and to witness, and many of them will be drawn to God. The wise person's heart not only will lead him to actions that will bring uplift to the hurting but also will bring a sense of worth to the person himself. It will result in good will to him from others and a feeling of self-worth to himself.

On the other hand, a foolish person's heart makes him be drawn to places of merriment, entertainment, fun, and partying. The tone of the party may be coarse, crude, scatological, or even obscene, or it could be gossipy, scornful, disdainful, or sarcastic. Still again it might be a friendly fellowship with refreshments and talk about funny experiences or pleasurable moments. In any case, it is all for pleasure, a way to spend time with jokes and fun and no thought of benefit or learning or improvement or service. The person with a heart that leads him to spend too much time in merriment is foolish, because he puts his major emphasis on activities that produce no good. When the moments of fun are gone, he is no better than he was before. He spent empty hours that left no good benefit behind. Merriment is fleeting and temporary. When the laughter is over, nothing remains. The person who lives for merriment has to hasten to party again, because the entertainment has left nothing behind to sustain him.

The person with a heart that reaches out for cheap entertainment, coarse activities, degrading shows, and belly laughs is especially foolish. He spends his time not only in activities that produce no benefit but that actually do harm to his life. His life stands still or falls backward into uselessness.

In the modern day, the wisdom or foolishness of a person's heart is most easily measured by the television channels he chooses as his favorites. Are they Comedy Central, sports channels, stand-up entertainment, or maybe even pornography? Or are his favorite channels those that present genuine learning opportunities, beneficial advice, dependable news, or better still the gospel truth? The foolish heart chooses the easy way. The wise heart chooses the productive way.

5. To hear rebuke from a wise one is better than for a man to hear a song from fools (Ecclesiastes 7:5-6).

For the laughter of fools is like the crackling of thorns under a pot (7:6a).

This also is futility (7:6b).

This proverb also is about two choices, one that is wise and the other that is foolish, but it still does not deal with the source of righteousness or the power to achieve it.

The choice this proverb deals with is taking heed to the rebuke of a wise friend or listening to the silly songs of the foolish. Solomon said the wise choice is willingness to listen to a loving rebuke or even to seek it out.

Inside every person is a desire to be right, even to be the best. A person feels disappointed and defeated when he makes a mistake, especially when his mistake is exposed to someone else. To avoid such embarrassment, people love to go where there is singing and laughing and no one cares what they do. Sadly when they go there, they have no incentive to improve and no inclination to do better. The lighthearted laughter hides their weaknesses, but it leaves them unimproved.

From that point of view, the empty laughter of foolish men who only seek to celebrate and dance sounds like the crackling of the branches of thorn bush burning under a pot. They make a lot of noise and sound good, but they do not make enough heat to warm the pot or cook its contents. Foolish laughter produces nothing good.

People who want to do what is right and to strengthen their lives prefer to spend time with those who tell them honestly about their mistakes and offer a suggestion of how to correct them. An enemy notices a person's mistakes and gossips about them. A friend notices a person's mistakes and helps him correct them. A person will be embarrassed when someone shows him what he was doing wrong, but in the long run his embarrassment will be much less if he acknowledges the mistake and corrects it. Then he will not have to be embarrassed again from repeating the mistake. Soon he will hear compliments instead of rebukes.

Listening to a person who tactfully shows a person how to correct an error is a far better and more profitable experience than the

senseless chatter of a happy but meaningless song.

7. Surely oppression makes the wise one foolish, and a bribe corrupts the heart (Ecclesiastes 7:7).

This proverb deals with two actions that are both foolish and wrong, but it does not deal with the right actions or how to practice them. The two actions it says are foolish are oppressing others and taking or giving a bribe.

A man is considered to be wise when his deeds are successful and produce results. However, because a person is wise in making investments or earning money does not guarantee he will be wise in all his dealings. Often his success in business

opens up opportunities for him to have influence and power over others. His authority may lead him to oppress or take advantage of others. If his oppression of others continues, it will lead eventually to his downfall.

Many a person is wise in his relationships with others until he becomes a supervisor. Then he becomes inconsiderate, makes unreasonable demands, denies adequate pay, never gives a compliment, and reprimands workers in the presence of others. The result of that kind of management is that workers feel unappreciated, have little motive to do their best, and begin to neglect their work. The supervisor will likely become angry and give harsh reprimands until the workers begin to seek employment elsewhere. When one resigns to take another position, the supervisor may be heard to say, "He used to be such a good worker, I don't know what happened to him." The supervisor is foolish because he is not aware that he was the cause of the worker's discontent and departure. Sadly his wisdom turned into foolish actions and caused him great loss.

Oppressive actions or unfair criticisms of an employee, a student, or a neighbor are counterproductive and foolish. Oppressive laws or oppressive actions of a government official toward a citizen break down law and order and lead nations into decline and fall. Oppressive demands or criticisms of a spouse or a child turn a happy home into a prison and lead to violence or divorce. A wise person will renounce oppression and replace it with encouragement.

Another way a wise man can be drawn into foolish actions is through yielding to the temptation of bribery. Whether a person seeks to gain by giving a bribe or by taking a bribe, he is foolish. It certainly will be discovered. Those who were cheated because of the bribe will resent him. The one who gained by the bribe will depend on the bribe for protection and will not be motivated to do a good job. Relationships will deteriorate, and both the person who took the bribe and the person who gave the bribe will have harmed everyone. The person who thinks he can gain by a dishonest deal is involved in true foolishness.

F. The end of a word is better than its beginning; the patient one in spirit is better than the haughty one in spirit (Ecclesiastes 7:8).

This proverb discusses two actions that are superior to two contrasting actions. They provide good advice, but they do not provide a way to become truly righteous.

The first contrast is between a promise made and a promise kept. When a promise is made, it sounds good and gives great hope; but if it is not kept, it leads to disappointment and distrust. The one who makes unfulfilled promises is not trusted any more, and the one who depended on promises that are not kept feels deserted and mistreated. Therefore, a word spoken gives hope, but a word fulfilled gives confidence and trust. Not what a person promises but how he fulfills his promises reveals his character.

The Hebrews used the word "word" in a variety of ways. They often used it to refer to a person's actions or work. So this proverb can be accurately translated, "The end of a deed is better than its beginning." When translated in that manner, it teaches the same truth. How a person finishes a job tells much more about the kind of workman he is than how he begins a job. A person can begin with care and skill but finish with carelessness and sloppiness, or he can begin with caution and end with accuracy. Whether the task is cooking a meal, cleaning a room, building a fence, constructing a house, keeping a set of books, driving a truck, or pastoring a church, the test of a person's work is not how enthusiastically he begins but how accurately he finishes a job. Dependability and consistency are the marks of a good worker.

The second half of this proverb relates to attitudes a person can have toward his work. Some work with patience and humility. Others work with pride, selfishness, and disdain for others. The former makes a good worker. The latter makes for an isolated and resented worker. Patient and considerate workers build a team that accomplishes far more than the sum of the workers individually. Everyone is benefited. Haughty and selfish workers build resentment and competition. Workers begin to undermine each other, and the result is decreased productivity and increased dissatisfaction. Everyone is harmed. That principle applies in a school, a home, a business, a ball team, or a governmental bureau. In every kind of relationship, a person benefits himself when he is considerate of others, but he hurts himself when he is disdainful of others.

3 Do not be quick to be angry in your spirit, for anger rests in the chest of fools (Eccl 7:9).

This proverb is the first among those Solomon listed that is a direct warning against a particular sin, but it makes no mention of a positive righteous quality that might replace it.

The proverb does contain wise counsel, because it warns that anger is a foolish activity. It gives two kernels of advice about anger. Do not get angry quickly, and do not hold on to anger. Slow to anger and quick to forgive are twin attitudes that avoid magnifying a problem and contribute to a solution.

How well a person handles anger is a good test of his character. Nowhere does God instruct people to never be angry. At times anger is appropriate, and in some circumstances it would be heartless not to be angry. A person is right to be angry when he sees a child abused or when he learns that an elderly neighbor has been tricked out of a large sum of money or when he reads that a young woman was raped and robbed or when he is told that a politician used his position to enrich himself illegally. God Himself becomes angry, even wrathful, over such actions; and it is entirely right for God's children to be angered by that which angers God.

While anger is a legitimate function on some occasions, runaway anger is extremely dangerous. It can cause a person to make rash decisions and heartless actions. It can arouse lasting resentments. It can result in unnecessary injury. Therefore, anger, like every other powerful tool, must be kept under careful control. God does not release His anger until He has exhausted His mercy. When a person is following God's example, he will not allow himself to become angry only as a last resort.

Anger should not be released until the person is sure he has the correct information about the situation that disturbed him. Anger should be expressed only for serious offenses and not for trivial accidents. Scars from unjust anger do not heal easily, so before releasing the fires of anger, a person should be sure the object of his anger truly deserves it. He should never be quick to be angry.

If a person releases flashes of anger at the slightest offense, people will tend to avoid him. Soon he will have few friends. If he explodes in tirades of anger in response to only an imagined offense, he may stir up a fight for no good reason. Injuries may occur, and he may end up with long term regrets over a momentary incident. The wise person deals with an offense calmly and seeks an amicable solution. The person who harbors anger just beneath his skin, ready for it to flash at any moment finds no solutions to problems and soon has no admirers. He is a master of foolishness.

Holding onto anger and allowing it to fester within is equally foolish. Solomon spoke of anger resting in a person's chest. He meant allowing anger to lie down and be at home within a person. Allowing anger to rest in a person's chest means harboring it in his heart. When a person retains anger within, it grows and becomes magnified. It grows and becomes stronger. It gathers to itself other reasons to be angry and eventually turns into lifelong bitterness that poisons the person's whole system. Whatever aroused a person's anger, he should never give it a bed to lie down on inside his heart.

Wisdom gets rid of anger quickly, even when the anger was justified. The way to get rid of anger is, not to forget about the problem that aroused the anger, but to seek reconciliation and forgiveness. Forgiveness stops brooding over one's injury. Reconciliation turns bitterness into sweetness and enemies into friends.

1 Do not say, "Why is it that the former days were better than these," for it is not out of wisdom that you ask that (Ecclesiastes 7:10).

This proverb contains good and practical advice, but it has little to do with righteousness. It is a warning against reminiscing over the past and longing for it to return. Such expectations are not wise, because it is impossible to bring back the past. In addition, those reminiscences are based on an unrealistic view of both the past and the present.

In every generation, longing for the "good old days" becomes an obsession with some people. The longing is almost always based on a false nostalgia, by which the person dwells on pleasant memories and overlooks other serious problems of those former days. This proverb says that people who ask why the former days were better do not ask such questions out of wisdom. They are not basing their question on accurate information, but on idealized memories. If they could go back to the former days, they likely would be greatly surprised by the reality of what they would find, and they would be bitterly disappointed.

Longing for an idealized past is usually based on a refusal to face reality in the present. The person probably not only has a distorted view of the past but also a distorted view of the present. The problem he faces almost always overshadows any good events that also are occurring in his life at the same time. Instead of bravely facing his problems, he tries to escape them by fantasizing on some wishful utopia. A realistic view of a person's life acknowledges the problems that are present but also rejoices over the good events that are present. That approach enables a person to tackle the problems in a reasonable manner, and it makes good results possible.

For sure, no one can escape into the past, and longing to do so is vanity. Dealing with the present offers a person an opportunity to improve his situation. Facing one's problems head-on instead of longing to run away from them is both practical and wise.

4. Wisdom is as good as an inheritance and a preference to those who see the sun (Ecclesiastes 7:11-12).

This proverb compares two values and says that each is of equal value in its own realm, but one is to be preferred to the other when it is considered that one deals with intangible values and the other deals with tangible values. It shows that values in both realms are good and needed, but intangible values are preferable. That insight is extremely important, but it still does not deal with how to have either value. The proverb is good but limited, like most of the other proverbs of Israel's wise men. It does not tell a person how to have either one. As good as the advice is, it refers to righteousness obtained by a person's own effort. That kind of righteousness is inadequate and leads to vanity.

The two values are wisdom, which is an intangible value, and an inheritance, which is a tangible value. Each is two values that the mentions is good in its own realm, because people live in two realms. People need what is good in the physical realm, and they need just as much what is good in the intangible realm. After acknowledging that reality, the takes another step and declares that actually the intangible value is the better of the two. It emphasizes that point by stating that the intangible value is the more important value for everyone who sees the sun, which means everyone in the whole world. The proverb is striking because it says that the intangible value is the preference of those who live in the tangible world under the sun. Those who live in bodies in the physical world are not satisfied by physical wealth and possessions only. They find contentment only when they also give attention to the values that cannot be touched or seen.

The intangible value to which the proverb refers is wisdom. It declares that wisdom is more valuable than an inheritance of money or land. The person who receives an inheritance without the wisdom to know how to handle it soon loses the inheritance and has neither wisdom nor the inheritance. The person who has wisdom to know how to manage his inheritance is able to keep it and even grow it into more. He has both wisdom and his inheritance. In fact, a wise person usually can earn his own money and possessions and is able to prosper without an inheritance. He even may have some to pass on to the next generation as an inheritance.

One may question whether this proverb about wisdom belongs in a list of s about righteousness. Doing so was perfectly logical to Solomon, because Israel's wise men considered wisdom and righteousness to be inseparable. Wise men in the pagan nations sought after power through magic, contact with spirits, interpretation of dreams, and pronouncement of curses and blessings. Israel's wise men rejected that concept of wisdom and sought after clean, honest, right living. They taught many practices that helped people improve their way of living. Therefore, when Solomon quoted this about wisdom, he strongly implied that he was applying it to right living. He was teaching that righteousness is as valuable as an inheritance. Rather, it was better than an inheritance.

By quoting the proverb, Solomon showed that, when he said that seeking righteousness through one's own efforts was vanity, he did not mean that striving to be righteous was undesirable or invaluable. He meant that, in spite its genuine value, one's own effort fails to enable a person to be truly good or to live a fully meaningful life. Nonetheless, the proverb says that being wise enough to live a good life is more valuable than receiving a large inheritance. An inheritance does not give a person the answer to all his questions or the solution to all his problems, but it certainly is welcome and helpful. Righteous actions through one's own effort should be welcomed and honored in the same way. They are valuable and helpful, but a person should not expect that kind of righteousness to be the final answer to all of his questions either. He should recognize that it does have practical value for everyone who sees the sun rise and set each day, which means, everyone who is alive, but it takes something more to have true righteousness.

E. For [being] in the shade of wisdom [is] like [being] in the shade of money (Ecclesiastes 7:12),

- 1. But the advantage of knowledge is that (7:12b)**
 - 2. Wisdom preserves the life of its owner (7:12c).**
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This proverb compares the value of wisdom and money, by saying that both provide shade for the person who has them but wisdom does even more and preserves the life of the one who has it. The advice is valuable, but it does not tell a person how to gain either wisdom or money.

The word translated "shade" means "shadow." Some versions translate it in this verse as "shelter." Others translate it as "protection." KJV translates it as "defense." None of those translations stick to the literal Hebrew words, which are "in the shade of wisdom" and "in the shade of money." The proverb teaches that the two positions are similar, because both provide shelter from uncomfortable situations.

The proverb compares having money and wisdom to being in the shadow of a cloud that shelters an area from the blistering sun.

Money is similar to being in the shadow of a cloud because it provides shelter from want, need, hunger, and privation. Everyone needs that shelter. In a similar way, wisdom provides shelter from uncomfortable situations in life. It shelters people from temptation, dangerous conditions, even hostile attacks. It shelters people from those dangers by showing them how to avoid them or how to deal with them calmly and effectively when they arise. That kind of shelter is also badly needed.

The truth in this proverb is especially applicable to wisdom that teaches people the importance of living righteous lives. Doing right preserves a person from resentment, retaliation, natural consequences, and God's anger. Being in the shade of right living provides the most vital protection of all.

The proverb presses the comparison further by saying that the wisdom of being righteous provides more than just protection from uncomfortable situations. It also preserves the life of the one who has it. The dangers that come from foolishness and sin shorten a person's life and sometimes end it suddenly. Wisdom and righteousness, on the other hand, help a person avoid a life-threatening situation and shows a person how to escape from danger when it arises. As a result, the wise person will tend to live longer than the foolish sinner who acts on impulse instead of understanding.

d. Consider the work of God, for who is able to make straight what He has made crooked (Ecclesiastes 7:13-14)?

(1) In a day of prosperity, be in prosperity (7:14a),

(2) And in a day of adversity, consider that God has made this one parallel to that one so that man will not discover anything [that comes] after him (7:14b).

This proverb asks people to consider how God works, not so they can understand Him, but so they can recognize that they are not able to understand what He is doing. Not understanding God's works should lead a person to humility toward himself and faith toward God. It comes closer to explaining true righteousness than any proverb Solomon quoted up-to this point.

The proverb says that God placed both prosperity and adversity in the world and made them exist side by side for a purpose. His purpose was to keep people from understanding what lies ahead for them. Not being able to understand makes people know they cannot change what God does. When they come to that recognition, they are willing to adjust to what God does without having to understand. As a result, they are able to trust Him to work for their good, and they have far less frustration and worry.

The advises people to enjoy the day when all is going well. On the other hand it advises them to believe that God knows what He is doing and leave the outcome to him when everything is going badly.

If God makes the road before a person crooked, he are not able to make it straight. He should learn to navigate the crooked road and know that it has a good purpose. Such advice recognizes that humans are not completely in charge of their own lives. They face many circumstances they do not

understand and cannot control. Therefore, a person's task is to do the best he can with the circumstances God places before him. In the end, he will find that even the crooked road God prepared for him had a good purpose. By accepting the crooks in the road and making the best of them, he learns his weakness and comes to trust in God's strength.

On the other hand, if a person lives in a day of prosperity, he should use the opportunity it gives him to do something profitable and good. Prosperity was not given to him to make him lazy or idle, but to provide for him an opportunity to do good and to help others. He should recognize that his prosperity may not last always, so he should use it to full advantage and make something useful out of it while he has it.

Through varied circumstances that people cannot control, God hides what He is intending to accomplish so that people will trust in Him. A person's responsibility is to live each day in whatever circumstance God sends and find a way to use it for good. If a person trusts God and obeys His commands, God will take care of what comes after him. What God does will be good, and it will be much better than anything a person can do for himself.

40 I have seen everything in my days of breathing (Eccl 7:15).

There was a righteous one perishing in his righteousness (7:15b).

And there was a wicked one prolonging [his days] in his wickedness (7:15c).

This proverb contains an astute observation of the reality of life in a sinful world. Often good people suffer and evil people prosper. It seems to present those situations as realities a person needs to adjust to without blaming themselves for it. Yet it does not explain

why such injustices happen, and it proposes nothing to correct it. The only conclusion a person should draw from those realities is that he should trust in God because he cannot find justice in the world of men. In so doing, he comes close to describing what real righteousness is, but he does not state it clearly. If a person has righteousness through faith, it is a helpful observation, but it does not tell him how to gain that true righteousness.

The originator of this proverb spoke of “in my days of breathing.” The word “breath” or “breathing” was used by Solomon throughout Ecclesiastes to refer to something that vanishes away as quickly as a person’s breath or that is as unstable as the wind. Therefore, throughout Ecclesiastes it is regularly translated as “vanity. Because Solomon spoke so much about vanity in the Book of Ecclesiastes, all major English versions translate the word in this verse in its symbolic meaning that is so often used elsewhere in the book. Thus, they render the word in this verse as “vanity,” “vain,” “futile,” “meaningless,” or “pointless,” referring to the writer’s life. However, Solomon most likely was quoting this parable, not originating it. It is likely that whoever originated it was not using the word in the same way that Solomon did in this book. He probably intended for it to have its more literal meaning, which is “breath” or “breathing.” Therefore, “in my days of breathing” means “during my lifetime.”

The writer said that in his lifetime he had seen just about every situation that can occur. Some of the situations he had seen seemed to have no explanation. Two situations he had seen were especially puzzling to him. He had seen a righteous person dying with no apparent reason for him to be punished with death. He had also seen a wicked person living a long and comfortable life when it seemed he should have been punished for his many sins. Seeing those circumstances, one person could say there is no justice in this world, and the way a person lives makes no difference. Another person could say there is a higher justice in life that people are not able to understand or explain. Therefore, it is best not to try to understand but just to live the best life possible and leave the outcome to God. Trusting God provides more strength in life than trying to understand the unexplainable.

This proverb recognizes that this world is full of injustices. It does not try to explain why injustice exists, and it does not propose a solution for it. It simply recognizes that injustice is a reality of life. A person is in a much better position to cope with life’s uncertainties if he can recognize that injustice will come to him for which he is not to blame but which he cannot avoid. When a person recognizes that reality, he is in a much better position to make the best of whatever situation comes to him. He will not blame himself or try to fix blame on anyone else. He will not persecute himself or seek vengeance or retaliation on someone else. Instead, he will recognize he will be judged, not for what was done to him, but for what he does in return. He will do his best to do right, regardless of what others have done. He will recognize that he is responsible for his own actions and for being as just and honest as he can be in the midst of the injustices around him.

Life is puzzling, and many of its mysteries are beyond human understanding. Sometimes it is best not to try to understand what is beyond human explanation. In such a case, a person should do what he knows is right and leave the outcome to God. Human wisdom does not provide us a satisfactory answer, but trusting God does.

14. You must not be super-righteous (Ecclesiastes 7:16),

a. And you must not cause yourself to be overly wise (7:16b).

b. Why should you destroy yourself (7:16c)?

This proverb seems to give strange advice, especially when compared with the next proverb, which counsels not to be overly evil; but when applied to self-righteousness it makes good sense. It advises a person not to take pride in either his goodness or his sin. As good as that advice is, it provides no guidance as how to do either.

Together the two proverbs are understood by many to encourage people not to go to extremes in any direction. They say the proverb advises people to be just moderately good and just a little evil. They say it suggests that the best course to take in life is to be moderate in all things.

That kind of thinking is appealing to many people, and it is often suggested as the wisest way to go through life. People who accept that philosophy want to be comfortable in every crowd, just as long as they don’t go overboard. They want to please everybody by not being radical on any subject. Examples of their way of living are: drink moderately; use only the milder drugs just to be congenial; curse only when needed to make a strong point; gamble to a specific limit and quit; cheat as long as it doesn’t do serious harm; commit adultery only with a consenting adult; and lie only to help someone out of trouble. That relaxed way of life seems to many to be a sensible middle way that enables a person to have fun and not do any real harm. Unfortunately that kind of advice seems starkly out of place in a Bible that makes such serious demands as: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matt. 5:46, HCSB); “No one can be a slave to two masters, since either he will hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other” (Matt. 5:24a, HCSB); “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:6, HCSB); or “For whoever keeps the entire law, yet fails in one point, is guilty of breaking it all” (James 2:10 HCSB). Some other teaching must lie in this besides moderation in all things.

The proper understanding of this is to see it as a warning against having a “show-off” righteousness. It is the same plea that Jesus gave when he challenged his disciples to avoid the kind of righteousness practiced by the Pharisees (Matt 5:10; 16:5-12). The Pharisees made a great display of their righteousness, making long prayers on the city streets (Matt. 6:5-8; 23:14), darkening their eyes and drawing lines on their faces when they fasted (Matt. 6:16-18), loudly throwing bags of coins in the collection barrel (Luke 21:1), bragging about their goodness even in their prayers (Luke 18:10-19), wearing elaborate garments and seeking prominent seats in meetings to demonstrate their religious importance (Matt. 23:5-7), loving lofty titles (Matt. 23:5-7), making a show of tithing even the spices from their vegetable gardens (Matt. 23:23-24i), and building monuments to prophets without obeying what the prophets taught (Matt. 23:29-32). Jesus strongly condemned the Pharisees for those religious excesses because they were empty of true spirituality. The Solomon quoted in this verse warned against that kind of super righteousness or overly flamboyant wisdom. It is a warning against being a “holier than thou” person. That kind of righteousness is only pretense. It is all noise and no substance. It is only a performance and a show. True righteousness is not pompous and proud. It is humble and modest.

The proverb says, “Why should you destroy yourself?” That question contains the same warning as the proverb that says, “Pride goes before destruction, and an arrogant spirit before a fall” (Prov. 16:18, HCSB). Pretended spirituality and religious pride are dangerous deceptions. They rob the person of true spirituality and drive him to oppress others in order to maintain his pompous position. They cause people to lose faith in him and turn against him. Eventually God is moved to humble him and punish him. Such a person destroys himself by his excessive religiosity. This is a warning against self-made righteousness. It comes close to the emphasis Solomon was making in this section of his book, that self-righteousness is not true righteousness and is vanity.

15. You must not be excessively wicked (Ecclesiastes 7:17),

a. And you must not be a fool (7:17b).

b. Why should you die before your time (7:17c)?

This proverb forms a striking contrast to the previous proverb. It counsels against taking pride in one’s sinfulness, but like other proverbs Solomon quoted it provides no advice about how to avoid that obnoxious attitude.

While some people love to show off their religiosity, others love to show off their meanness. They brag about how they harassed a neighbor they did not like until he sold his house and moved away. They laugh about cursing in front of the preacher. They tell about how many people they beat up for displeasing them. They are boastful of how much liquor they can drink without seeming to be drunk. Sometimes such people turn into a pussy cat when someone dares to challenge them, but they try to maintain the aura of meanness to show how strong they are and how no one should mess with them.

This proverb says that such actions are foolishness. They drive away friendships. They make people lose respect for the proud “toughy.” Instead of causing people to admire their strength, they make people afraid of them. They become isolated and lonely, which only makes them put on a front of even greater toughness to hide their feelings of isolation. Trying to show off one’s meanness is a foolish and unproductive way to live.

The proverb says, “Why should you die before your time?” The person who tries to show off his meanness sooner or later irritates someone who is truly mean and who will fight back at him. He will become injured, which will weaken him and lead to an early death; or it might cause him to be killed instantly. If being a “show-off” in righteousness leads to destruction, being a “show-off” in meanness is the pathway to death. What a foolish way to throw a life away!

16. It is good that you take hold of this one (Ecclesiastes 7:18);

a. And from that one you should not hold back your hand (7:18b),

b. For the one fearing God will go forth with both (7:18c).

This proverb obviously goes together with the previous two. All three are intended to explain and complement each other; however, this proverb does not explain how to maintain the balance it recommends. It contains good counsel, but it is incapable of producing true righteousness. It tells how a person should act but does not tell how a person can get the strength to act that way. It tells how to act righteously but not how to be righteous.

Taken together, the three s in verses 16-18 say, “Don’t be a “show off” about how good you are or how mean you are, but hold goodness in one hand and toughness in the other hand and balance them in your life. Does that bit of advice mean it is all right to be only mildly good and that it is acceptable to be a little bit worldly? Surely not! The Bible is too emphatic that believers should be totally committed to God and to His way of life. Jesus challenged His followers to take the narrow road, not to walk in the middle of the road. So what does the proverb mean when it says the man who fears God will take hold of righteousness with one hand and toughness with the other hand?

One who fears God has no difficulty understanding that he should take hold of righteousness. Fearing God makes people strive to be like God in order to please Him, and God is altogether righteous. The one who fears God does not have to make a display of his righteousness.

Righteousness does not have to be a banner for him to carry in his arms or a pin to wear on his chest. However, genuine righteousness will be the goal of his living. True righteousness is humble and shows itself in quiet deeds of kindness and quiet words of purity. The truly righteous person does not have to scold every person he sees doing something wrong or hears speaking a hurtful word. A better way is for him just to be kind and to speak in respectful ways himself. The man who has been flaunting his profanity will recognize the difference quickly. In the presence of such a person, he will usually start to temper his speech or actions. Such men have been seen to bend their shoulders and confess they are not living like they should. Sometimes they have even left promising to make some changes in their lives. A little bit of genuine goodness is all it takes to make a tremendous impact on others. That kind of humble goodness is a value that a person who loves God should hold tightly in his hand.

It is not as easy to understand why the proverb says a person who fears God should take hold of toughness with the other hand. Probably the meaning is that the person who fears God needs a measure of toughness to be able to bear the mistreatment and ridicule he inevitably will have to face as he goes through life. The person who lives a righteous life eventually is going to be scorned, maybe even persecuted. He does not need to fight back in the same way that others are treating him.

A better way is for him to be tough enough to take the mistreatment without anger or fear and to return to his critic a deed of kindness or a word of compliment. The offender usually will be so taken aback that he will not know how to respond. After a while, he may even mumble a poorly worded apology. When he does, receive it graciously. He is not accustomed to apologizing, and he does not know how to do it well; but he is trying. So encourage him with good words. That kind of response shows more toughness than angry reprimands or lecturing words ever could. That kind of toughness is a gift from God that a man who fears God should hold tightly in his hand.

17. Wisdom gives strength to the wise one, more than ten rulers who are in the city (Ecclesiastes 7:19).

This proverb declares that a person's inner wisdom gives him more strength to overcome an enemy attack than instructions from ten commanders. It contains good advice about the advisability of using one's own inner wisdom, but it does not tell how to gain that inner wisdom. It is another proverb that gives good counsel but no information about how to obtain the power to follow that counsel.

The proverb does not mean that a good commander or leader is bad or unnecessary. It simply states that one's own wisdom is an even better defense. A good leader is a strong weapon against an enemy attack. His skill in preparing defenses, his way of deploying his troops, and his knowledge of when to wait and when to strike all contribute more to victory than how many catapults or canons he has or how many foot soldiers or cavalymen or archers are under his command. Many a general has lost a city because of a poor battle plan. Many a general has conquered an army much larger than his own because of a wise plan of attack. So a good leader is a vital necessity when an army goes forth to war. If one good leader is a powerful force, ten good leaders working together provide an almost impregnable wall of defense. Even so, a soldier's own good sense provides him with greater strength than all ten commanders of his army.

That same principle holds true in fighting the battle for righteousness in everyday life. A person's own wisdom provides more strength for living righteousness in an evil world than ten teachers. When a wise person is attacked or criticized in a cruel way, he does not have time to consult his teacher or pastor about how to respond. He must call on his own good sense to know what to do. His own wise response will provide a powerful defense, whereas waiting for instructions from his teacher would cause him to wait so long he already would be defeated before the instructions could arrive. When a person who fears God and uses his own wisdom to reply to attacks with goodness or kindness, he uses a weapon his critics do not know how to counter. He wins a victory without a fight.

This proverb provides the same advice that Jesus gave when he taught his followers to return good for evil. This proverb is based on the understanding that wisdom and righteousness are intimately related. A wise person is a person who has learned how to be righteous, and his righteousness is a better defense than ten teachers.

B. SURELY A RIGHTEOUS MAN WHO DOES GOOD AND NEVER SINS DOES NOT EXIST ON THE EARTH (Ecclesiastes 7:20).

After quoting seventeen insightful proverbs about righteousness, Solomon burst forth with a conclusion that had been building in him

to the point of explosion. He declared: No one can follow all of that advice! No one can keep so many good suggestions. No one on earth is good enough to do it. It is impossible! If good advice is all that wisdom provides, it is vanity because it tells how a person should live, but it does not tell how to do it. Working to follow all that advice is self-righteousness, and self-righteousness does not exist!

Solomon was exactly right in that declaration. A righteous person by his own effort is non-existent. Good advice about how to act righteously is good only if a person first is righteous. When a person becomes righteous, only then can he benefit from the advice of the proverbs, because only then does he have the power to begin to practice righteousness. The proverbs of Israel's wise men lead to the same conclusion that Israel's prophets, priests, elders, and kings also all declared. It is also the basis of the gospel. No person is completely good. All people are sinners. All people are lost and condemned. The only hope for humans lies not in human understanding or human efforts, but in God.

For that very reason, God revealed the covenant to Israel, first to Abraham and then to the whole nation at Sinai. The covenant had two requirements, as expressed in Exodus 19:5-6: "hearken to My voice" (faith) and "keep My covenant" (obedience). The Israelites promised to keep the covenant, but they could not do it. They immediately fell back into their former ways and sought to worship through an idol in the form of a Golden Calf. Man's inability to be righteous and to overcome sin was dramatically revealed to the Israelites after they committed that grave sin. Moses tried all kinds of means to restore Israel to God, and all his efforts failed. Then He asked for God's way, and God told him the way was grace: "Jehovah, Jehovah is a merciful and gracious

God, slow to anger and abundant in grace and truth, keeping grace for thousands [of generations], forgiving iniquity and rebellion and sin; but He absolutely will not excuse [the sinner], visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the sons and upon the grandsons, upon the third and the fourth [generations]" (Ex. 34:6-7).

The proverbs of Israel's wise men did not have to end in a cry of despair. The proverbs were a fence that guided them to the glorious grace and salvation God had revealed to Moses on Sinai. The knowledge of God's grace was Israel's greatest treasure, and their purpose was to share that treasure with all mankind. So the end result of the s was a cry of triumph and joy. However, before anyone could arrive at that point of victory, he first had to arrive at the conclusion Solomon explained in this verse. Human wisdom about righteousness is a failure. Self-righteousness does not exist. The teachings of wise men are full of true and good advice, but they are powerless to make people good. As a means of obtaining goodness and righteousness, they are vanity, like everything else people do. Recognizing that truth is a necessity because a person must recognize his sinfulness before he can accept the covenant of grace.

Solomon cited four observations to support his declaration that a righteous person does not exist on the earth.

1. Also you must not take to heart everything that others say (Ecclesiastes 7:21-22)

a. So that you will not hear your slave cursing you (7:21b),

b. For also many times your heart knows that you also have cursed others (7:22).

Solomon's first observation was that, if a person will listen, he will hear others cursing him for wrongs he has done and then he will be aware he has done the same to others.

Solomon's point was not that people were cursing others unjustly but they were cursing others for what they had done that was wrong, and they in turn were cursing others for the same reason. Solomon expressed that reality by advising others not to listen to what people were saying about them. If they did, they would surely hear them saying how evil he was. A master would even hear his own slaves cursing him for wrongs he did to them. When someone hears another person's complaint against him, if he is wise he will recognize when the criticism is justified. He did wrong to that other person, and he should rectify it. As unpleasant as that truth might be, it will help him recognize the truth that he is a sinner. It will help him to be patient toward the sin of others, but even more importantly it will help him face up to his own failures. It is never easy for a person to hear about his faults, but doing so will help him recognize that all his wise sayings and good advice did not make him good. Being stung by that reality enables a person to quit trying to make himself good and trust God instead.

The point Solomon was making was that all people, from slaves to masters, were justly resented for wrongs they had committed against others. That reality was proof that a totally righteous person did not exist in the world. That reality is as true today as it was in Solomon's day. It takes more than wise sayings and much more than a human effort to deal with a person's sins. Only God can provide him a way out of his sinfulness.

2. I tested all this with wisdom (Eccl 7:23-29). a. I said, "I shall be wise" (Ecclesiastes 7:23-24).

(1) But it was far from me (7:23b).

(1) That which is far off and deep, deep, who finds it (7:24)?

b. So I, even I, turned my heart to know and to search out and to seek (7:25)

(1) Wisdom and accountability (7:25b)

(2) And to know the wickedness of folly and the foolishness of craziness (7:25c).

Solomon's second observation that supported his statement that a righteous person does not exist in the world is that he had sought for wisdom and righteousness sincerely and earnestly and had failed to find them. Solomon said he had tested out the truthfulness of all of the seventeen s he had quoted. He said he tested them "with wisdom." He meant he had studied their meaning carefully and had sought to apply them to his life, but wisdom and righteousness still were far from him. Righteousness was so deep that no one had ever been able to define it, and certainly none had been able to live it.

Solomon wanted to emphasize that his search had not been superficial. He used three verbs to describe the depth of his search: "to know," "to search out," and "to seek." Without doubt, Solomon implied that he had studied many more s than the seventeen he quoted as examples. Since 1 Kings 4:32 says he spoke 3,000 proverbs of his own, his study of the proverbs of Israel's wise men must have included the study of hundreds of scrolls. His study of Israel's wisdom literature was not only intensive but also exhaustive. Then he further showed that extent of his study by referring to its breadth. He said it had extended in two directions. He had studied both wisdom and folly, both intelligent living and foolish living. He needed to know both, so he could practice righteousness and avoid unrighteousness.

If Solomon was going to be a good king, he needed to know how to recognize wise actions and how to perform them, so he dug into that subject in earnest. He said that, when he studied wisdom, he included accountability in his study. The word translated "accountability" is a rare word. It refers to an accountant's records, but Solomon used it to refer to a person's being accountable for his actions. In other words, his study included practical righteousness as well as intellectual righteousness.

If Solomon was going to be a good king, he also needed to know how to recognize unwise actions and how to avoid them. So he studied foolish ways of living as well as wise ways of living. When he studied folly, his study included two kinds of foolishness. He studied evil actions that come from stupidity and also meaningless actions that come from being comical. He dug into the difference between being dull and incapable of understanding and being comical by making fun, playing tricks, telling jokes, and acting crazily. He needed to treat each form of folly differently, so he investigated both with great diligence.

Solomon was emphatic that his search for righteousness was both deep and wide, yet he had failed to find true righteousness. The reason he had not found it was not that he had not searched hard

enough. He had looked and studied as far and wide as it was possible to go, but still he had failed to understand righteousness or how to practice it. His failure to fathom the meaning of true righteousness was another observation that supported his conclusion that no one in all the world was truly righteous.

3. And I find bitterer than death the woman who is a trap, and her heart nets, her hands chains (Ecclesiastes 7:26).

1. The one who is good before God's face escapes from her (7:26b),

2. But the sinner is captured by her (7:26c).

Solomon's third observation that supported his statement that a righteous person does not exist in the world was that men are easily trapped by an evil woman. He did not define what he meant by an evil woman. It seems natural to assume he was referring to an immoral woman, but he may have had a broader definition of an evil woman in mind. Solomon had a lot of experience with women, since he had 700 wives and 300 concubines (1 Kings 11:3). He may have been referring to a scheming woman in his harem, plotting to gain more advantages than other wives, or he may have been referring to an immoral woman seeking to catch a man in her web by using the forbidden allurements of her body. He may well have been referring to either or both or to still additional ways that a woman can entrap a man.

Whatever exactly Solomon meant by an evil woman, he compared her to a trap to catch animals, her heart to a snare net to catch fish, and her hands to chains to bind prisoners. In just a few words, he gave three vivid descriptions of the power of an evil woman to damage men. He obviously felt strongly about the power of such women, because he said he found their schemes to be bitterer than death. The strength of his feelings about them shows he definitely had had his struggles with them. He left no doubt that he had been personally ensnared by such a woman or perhaps by many of them, and he was bitter about the embarrassment it had brought to him. It would be interesting to know if he recognized that marrying so many women was one of those snares. It probably is being too nosy to wish we knew more details about his struggles with evil women, but at least it is obvious that he knew much

about the danger inherent in being involved with one.

Solomon said someone who is good before God's face escapes being entrapped by an evil woman. By "good before God's face" he meant someone whom God considered to be good. That man trusts God and obeys his commands. He escapes because God protects him. Solomon did not say that being wise enables a man to escape from such a woman's trap. Men are too vulnerable to the schemes of evil women to escape through their own wisdom and strength. It takes God to protect and deliver them, but God will protect them if they trust and obey Him.

By contrast, Solomon said a sinner has no way to escape an evil woman's grasp. By a sinner he meant someone who was not good in God's sight, in other words a man who is not trusting in God. It is not a foolish man who is entrapped by her but any man who is not trusting and obeying God. Only the man whom God is watching and protecting escapes her snares.

Men's weakness to evil women was another proof that a truly righteous person does not exist on the earth.

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- 4. Behold, I found this, the Proclaimer says (Ecclesiastes 7:27-29),**
- a. I added one to one to find the total that my soul sought (7:27b-28a),**
 - b. But I did not find [it] (7:28b).**
 - (1) I found one man out of a thousand (7:28c).**
 - (2) And I did not find one woman among all these (7:28d).**
 - c. Behold, I only found this (7:29),**
 - (1) That God made man straight (7:29b),**
 - (2) But they have sought after many deviations (7:29c).**
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Solomon's fourth observation that supported his statement that a righteous person does not exist was that he had searched everywhere for a person who was clean and straight and his search had been in vain. Solomon's second observation was that he had searched to understand what righteous is and how to live it and had failed to find it for himself. This fourth observation was that he had searched for someone else who understood and lived righteous, and he had found only one man in a thousand and no women at all who had managed to be righteous. Not only did he fail to find a way to be truly righteous himself, he also had found no one else who had been able to do it either.

Solomon first said he had made a thorough search for something, but he did not specifically state what he was looking for. Only in his last sentence did he clearly state what he had been looking for. First, he insisted that his search had been methodical. He had gathered statistics and added up the results to draw his conclusion. Out of all of the data he had gathered and evaluated, he did not find what he was looking for. Then Solomon declared his conclusion, which was that God made men straight but that they had sought after many deviations. He meant that God had made people good and right, but people had found many ways to depart from God's plan for them. Humanity's problem was not that God had been wrong in the way He made them. Their problem was that they had departed from the way God made them. His conclusion revealed what he had been looking for, which was one righteous person. He did not find one.

Solomon first said he did not find what he was looking for. Then he said he found one man among a thousand and no woman at all. His statement that he found one man among a thousand must not have meant that he actually found none, because he had already said he did not find what he was looking for. His statement about finding only one man in a thousand was just a colorful way of describing the futility of his search.

Did Solomon state his conclusion as he did in order to disparage women? If so, he certainly did not rank men more than one notch in a thousand above them. His real point was that no matter how earnestly people studied the question of righteousness, none were able to achieve it.

Solomon did not say what measurement he used to determine if a person was righteous. The point was that however he measured it, everybody failed. Every person's effort to be righteous was a failure. Righteousness through one's own effort could not be attained. Self-righteousness was and is just one more vanity.

HUMAN WISDOM IS VANITY

ECCLESIASTES 8:1-9:10

Another area that Solomon found to be vanity was wisdom. That statement is a shocker, because the interests and characteristic for which Solomon is best known is his wisdom. When Solomon was anointed as king of Israel, Jehovah allowed him to ask for anything he wanted to help him succeed as king. Solomon asked for wisdom, and God was so pleased that Solomon asked for wisdom instead of long life, riches, or the death of his enemies that God gave him wisdom and also promised him riches and honor. Jehovah fulfilled those promises so profusely that Solomon soon became known all over that part of the world as a model for astuteness and sagacity. He demonstrated his penetrating insight into people and his perceptive good judgment through his insightful judicial decisions (1 Kings 3:10-28), his intelligent political appointments (1 Kings 4:1-27), his astonishing literary accomplishments (1 Kings 4:29-34), his monumental construction projects (1 Kings 5:1-7:51), his impressive religious leadership (1 Kings 8:1-9:9), his successful international relationship (1 Kings 10:1-13), and his incredible business successes (1 Kings 10:14-29). His outstanding success in all of those fields made his name a by-word for wisdom that spread over the whole world of that day. They remain to his credit until today. People still are so impressed by Solomon's unequalled understanding and achievements that they immediately declare that Solomon never would and never could have declared that wisdom is vanity.

Admiration of Solomon is so great among people even until today that they spend great energy investigating how Solomon's words in this section of his book are actually words of praise for the value and usefulness of wisdom. When they do so, they not only fail to listen to what Solomon actually said but actually turn his message exactly upside down. Solomon's true message was that all of his good judgment and wise decisions failed him and brought him to disappointment and depression at the end of his days.

The explanation for Solomon's disappointment with his great wisdom is found in his tragic mistake of putting his wisdom and judgment ahead of obedience to God. When God first gave Solomon his legendary wisdom, He told Solomon, "If you will walk in My ways, keeping My statutes and My commandments just as David your father walked, then I will lengthen your days" (1 Kings 3:14). Unfortunately walking in Jehovah's ways and keeping His statutes and commandments is exactly what Solomon did not do. His failure to obey God began when he started depending on treaties with ungodly nations instead of depending on God. In that day, when kings made treaties with each other, they each gave the other one or more women as wives. The idea was that after the gifts, the two kings would belong to the same family and, therefore, would be friendly and live in peace with each other.

However, Solomon's foreign wives, who worshiped false gods, brought with them many unforeseen and unfavorable circumstances. To please his foreign wives and the kings who gave them to him, Solomon felt compelled to build temples for the gods of his foreign wives and then to go with them to worship in those temples (1 Kings 11:1-10). God was so displeased with Solomon's offering offerings in the temples of false gods that He told Solomon He was going to tear his kingdom apart after he died and leave only one tribe to be ruled by his son (1 Kings 11:11-13). Long before Solomon's death, the deterioration of his kingdom began through the rise of both foreign and domestic enemies that Solomon had to cope with through astonishingly ruthless and violent actions (1 Kings 11:14-40). Then when he died, his kingdom split asunder (11:41-24).

A study of Solomon's successes and ultimate failure provides a proper perspective on human wisdom and prepares us to receive his mournful conclusion that human wisdom is just one more vanity. Solomon's wisdom was a generous gift from God, but it consisted of the ability to make intelligent decisions that produced astonishing success. It did not consist of the ability to always make righteous decisions and to take virtuous actions. The two are not the same. Wisdom is human discernment. Righteousness is divine instruction. A person achieves lasting success only when he puts obedience to God first and only then uses his own best judgment. God explained that reality to Solomon when He agreed to grant Solomon's request for wisdom, but Solomon forgot God's warning and began to trust his own judgment more than he trusted God's commandments. His treaties with foreign kings, his marriages to foreign women, his construction of temples for foreign gods, and his worship in temples of foreign gods all to be seemed necessary and wise actions that promoted good foreign relationships, but maintaining good relationships with God is far more important and protective than good relationships with foreign nations. God remains faithful. Ungodly foreign rulers do not. In the end, only obedience to God provides safety. One's own good judgment will inevitably fail, but God's word never fails. At the end of his life, Solomon recognized the folly of putting the gift God gave him ahead of the commandments God gave him. When he recognized his mistake, it was too late to save his reign from failure; but at least he recognized his mistake and had the courage to confess it in writing before he died.

Solomon began his confession of the vanity of human wisdom with a penetrating question.

Introduction: Who [is] like the wise one, and who knows an explanation of a word (Ecclesiastes 8:1a)?

Solomon's question was double-barreled. Both questions were equivalent to: "Who really knows what wisdom is," and both questions implied a negative answer. His questions implied that no one truly understands what wisdom is or how to practice it.

Solomon's first question ask for someone to did not ask who could point out a person who resembled the wise men. Instead, it

challenged his readers to point out just one person who had the qualities and characteristics of a truly wise person. His question anticipated the answer that no one could point out such a person because such a person did not exist.

Solomon's second question contains only four Hebrew words, and two of them are difficult to understand. The first difficult word, which is translated above as "explanation" is difficult because it occurs only once in the whole Old Testament and because it has no related words in the Hebrew language. The second difficult word, which is translated above as "word," is difficult because it is extremely common in the Hebrew language and because it is used with many variant meanings. It literally means "word," but it was used to refer to just about any object or idea the writer was talking about at the time. Therefore, the second question in this verse has been translated in various ways. KJV, NKJV, RSV, and NRSV translate it as "the interpretation of a thing," NIV and TNIV as "the explanation of things," Douay as "explain things," SGV as "the explanation of a thing," JV as "solve a problem," NEG as "the meaning of anything," and NASB and HCSB as "the interpretation of a matter." True to their freer method of translation, NLT translates it as "to analyze and interpret things" and MSG as "to interpret the meaning of life." All of those interpretations imply the inability of people to understand, but they all refer to a general failure to understand anything. The Hebrew word "word" basically refers to speech or writing. It seems logical and reasonable that in this verse it was referring to the speech and writings of the wise men. Thus the question means, "Who can give an adequate explanation of the meaning of a wise saying or proverb."

Taken together, the two questions mean, "Who can show me one person who resembles a truly wise man, and who can give a truly adequate explanation of a wise saying?" The implication is that no one could. A truly wise person did not exist, and a person who could fully explain a truly wise statement also did not exist. Therefore, explaining true wisdom was impossible.

The same realities are true today. Many wise and learned men and women exist in the world and are recognized as informed and authoritative intellectuals, but not one of them resembles Solomon's expectations of a truly wise person. No matter how much someone may learn, he can never learn everything. Every new discovery only opens his vista to see some additional truth to be explored. Furthermore, new discoveries constantly show flaws and inadequacies in what was considered to be settled fact just a few days prior. Human understanding continues to be tenuous and limited. Since no one can ever know all there is to know, a finished intellectual does not exist. The one who thinks he has the final answer shows himself to be foolish. He is made foolish by his pride. A wise person can know many things, and it is good for people to learn as much as they can about academic subjects and practical living, but the secret of a happy and successful life lies elsewhere. It is found only in trusting and obeying God. Trusting God is wisdom; trusting human wisdom is vanity.

In explaining the implications of his questions, Solomon began as he had begun his explanation of the vanity of self-righteousness. He quoted proverbs that had been written by Israel's wise men on the subject of wisdom.

A. PROVERBS ABOUT HUMAN WISDOM (Ecclesiastes 8:1-8)

In his discussion of the vanity of self-righteousness, Solomon had quoted eighteen proverbs about self-righteousness. In this section, he quoted seven proverbs about wisdom. Each proverb is a brief statement of an important principle about wise living, and each is capable of being expanded with many words and thoughts. However, they do not explain what true wisdom is or how to obtain it. Each will be examined below, not in an effort to exhaust its full meaning, but to try to extract the essence of the truth that is in it. Solomon's purpose in quoting the seven proverbs was to show that they were helpful but inadequate. They and all the other wise sayings of Israel's wise men were not able to explain how to come a truly wise person.

(9) A man's wisdom causes his face to shine, and the hardness of his face is changed (Ecclesiastes 8:1b).

This proverb is a positive statement about one of the values of wisdom. Its commendation of wisdom is true and noteworthy, but it is not a guide into how to be a wise person. Like almost all proverbs, it is good and valuable; but it is not a complete or final word about wisdom.

This proverb says that wisdom will show in a person's face. Being able to understand much about life makes a person's eyes brighter, his smile freer, his confidence more obvious, and his attention more focused. It not only adds to the attractiveness of a person's face, it also takes away unbecoming and offensive facial expressions. Harsh sternness that comes from suspicion or hostility toward others is replaced with an open smile, a glad brightness. A person who is unsure of what is wise and right tends to defend himself from some mistake he might make. His expression becomes fixed and hard. His eyes become cold. His lips reflect a frown or a sneer, and he becomes so preoccupied with his uncertainties that he cannot be responsive to those around him. Possessing understanding of what is wise and right takes away those hard expressions from his face and enables him to show an attractive interest in and concern for the needs of others. Wisdom is more than inner knowledge. It is an outer brightness that shows itself to others.

Because no one can be completely wise does not mean that wisdom has no value. Wisdom is actually a value to be treasured and

sought after. However, every person needs to keep it in perspective. Wisdom is good if it is considered for what it is worth, but it is dangerous if it is placed ahead of obeying God's commandments.

The more a person can learn about how to deal with other people wisely and righteously, the more he becomes pleasant to others in his appearance and in his actions.

(16) I [say], Watch a king's mouth because of a word of oath to God (Ecclesiastes 8:2-4).

Do not be dismayed by his face (8:3a).

Go, do not take a stand over a bad word (8:3b-4),

Because he does whatever he pleases (8:3c),

In that a king's word has authority; and who will say to him, "What are you doing?" (8:4)

This proverb deals with respect for authority. The wise person will follow its advice for his own good and for the good of order and safety in his surroundings. The proverb is wise and good advice, but it is not an answer to the question of how to have wisdom.

This proverb is given in the context of the type of governmental rulership that existed in Solomon's day, when governments were almost completely in the hands of powerful kings. Governmental authority was not divided among legislative, administrative, and judicial branches as it is in America. The king possessed all of those responsibilities within his person. A king was an awesome figure to be feared by one and all. What was the wise way to deal with such an all-powerful figure? Should a person resent his authority and resist his demands? Solomon said wisdom would lead a person to obey the king.

The proverb begins with a command to "watch a king's mouth." The command means that a person should observe carefully what comes out of a king's mouth, so that he will understand the king's commands and so that he will obey those commands faithfully. The proverb gives the reason a person should obey the king. It is because of the person's oath or commitment to God. A person should obey the king for his own sake, to fulfill his own commitment to respect properly constituted authority. Obedience to the king involved a much higher loyalty than respect for law. God instituted governmental authority when Noah and his family came off of the ark. From that time on, obeying that authority was an obligation to God. When a person promised to obey God, his promise included an obligation to obey the law of the king.

The proverb counsels a person not to be dismayed by the face of the king. It is talking about when a person is faced with the king or with one of his commands. That counsel could mean that a person should not be afraid of the king. More likely, it means a person should not be deterred from obeying the king because of his attitude toward the king. A similar use of the word "to dismay" is found in Isaiah 21:3, where a frightened person says, "I am dismayed from seeing." He meant he was so distressed he could not see. This proverb literally says, "Do not be dismayed from his face." It means a wise person should not be so distressed about the king's command that he refuses to obey it.

That understanding is supported by the next sentence, which advised a person not to stand up against the king because of something bad he had commanded. The reason for not opposing the king was that the king did as he pleased. His will was supreme, and a wise person would not oppose it. The king had power and authority, and a sensible person would not dare challenge him about what he was doing. The proper attitude toward a king was respect and obedience, not resistance.

In Solomon's day the king was the only authority that brought law and order to society and protection to individuals. Without an authority to bring order and protection into society, life becomes a jungle and daily life chaos. Therefore, in the day in which Solomon lived the wise person was obligated to respect the authority of the king and obey his commands. Even if a person did not like one of the decisions of the king, he would be exposed to much worse tyranny without the protection the king provided. He should not disobey the king because of one bad decision. Even when the king made a mistake, a wise person still would respect and obey his authority..

America has no king, and in America governmental authority is limited by national and state constitutions. Also power is divided among three governmental branches and numerous regulating agencies. It is still possible for abuse and oppression to occur, but crime and violence are much better controlled with the institutions of democracy than they would be without those authorities. In free lands like America, even more than in a dictatorship, wisdom dictates that people obey governmental authority. A citizen may dislike some government leaders and some governmental regulations, but all citizens would be much worse off if no governmental authority existed. The wise person obeys the law unless it directly conflicts with a clear command from God

Disagreement with some bad decision of an official does not free a person to disrespect his authority. He is in authority, and all of society would be in disarray if the governing authority did not exist. In America, citizens have the ability to replace a bad ruler by voting. That method is orderly and prevents violent rebellion and chaos. The process is slow but orderly. While democratic

procedures are in process, a person has the obligation to obey the law and the decisions of the authorities. That obligation applies to policemen, tax assessors, game wardens, regulatory agents and all other government officials.

Paul gave the same advice in Romans 13:1-2, "Everyone must submit to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist are instituted by God. So then, the one who resists the authority is opposing God's command, and those who oppose it will bring judgment on themselves" (HCSB). He gave the same advice again in 2 Timothy 2:1-2, "First of all, then, I urge that petitions, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all those who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity" (HCSB).

This proverb, like all divinely inspired proverbs that are in the Bible, is more than good advice. It is a command from God. However, it is not a stamp of approval on the wisdom of all intellectuals, nor is it a guarantee that all the statements of a wise man will always be right.

(13) One obeying a command will not know a bad word (Ecclesiastes 8:5a).

This proverb gives another reason for obeying commands given by those in authority. The person who obeys will not be scolded, reprimanded, or rebuked. That assurance is good counsel, but it is limited because it reveals only one good result of obedience out of many. It deals with one wise action, but not with wisdom itself.

This proverb counsels that a person who obeys the law does not have to face the disagreeable experience of being reprimanded or punished. A word of rebuke is a bad word to the one who receives it. A person can avoid that unpleasant experience by obeying the persons and the laws that have authority over him. No one likes to be corrected, especially not by an authority who has the power to punish him. To avoid that irksome event, a person should obey the law. He may not like every command that is given to him, but resisting the command will bring consequences he will like even less.

Paul elaborated on that point in the passage quoted above when he said, "For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do good and you will have its approval. For government is God's servant to you for good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, because it does not carry the sword for no reason. For government is God's servant, an avenger that brings wrath to the one who does wrong." (Ro 13:3-4HCSB).

This same principle applies to other types of authority besides government. The authority of a teacher or tutor should be respected, as well as the authority of a parent or guardian or the authority of an employer or supervisor. If a person must disagree with any of those authorities, he should do so kindly and respectfully. If he complies with any such authority, he should do so willingly and cheerfully. By exercising that kind of wisdom, he can avoid the unpleasantness of a harsh word of reprimand.

6. The heart of a wise one knows both a time and a decision (Ecclesiastes 8:5b).

Solomon probably chose this proverb to complement the previous two. It says a wise person knows when and how to speak and act. It certainly applies to dealing with a king or other governmental officer, but it also can have a broader application. Wisdom enables a person to know what to say and how to act in any situation. The proverb says that a wise person knows how to deal with questions and problems, but it does not deal with how to become a person who has that kind of wisdom.

The point of the proverb is that, when a person faces a problem or seeks assistance, he should choose the right time and method for dealing with it. The word translated "decision" actually means "judgment." It generally was used to refer to the decisions of a judge in a law court, but in this proverb it refers to a person's judgment concerning his own actions. It means that a person should give thought to how best to approach a problem, and he should act only after he has made a careful decision.

Sometimes a person might need to make an appeal to a king or might have to deal with some critical situation or crisis. In such cases, it is important that the person face the situation with care and good reason. The foolish person will be impulsive and demanding. The wise person will deal with the situation in a way that will not arouse resentment or anger but that will tend to elicit a positive response. The wise person will invest thought and prayer into deciding how to proceed. As a result he will arrive at a decision about the time and the approach he should use in dealing with the problem. By doing so, his chances of success will be much improved.

Timing also is important in dealing with a critical situation. The person needs to take action at the most advantageous time possible. If he is making an appeal to an official, he needs to make his appeal when the official is not pressured with other worries and when the official has time to consider the merits of the appeal. The wise person will wait until the time is right to ask for assistance.

Using the right approach is equally important when seeking to settle a dispute or convince a person of a certain position. The wise

person will consider the manner he will use in presenting his case. He will learn as much as possible about the person with whom he is dealing, so he will know what pleases him. By using that method, he will most likely receive approval or agreement.

Recognizing the right time and the right method in dealing with any problem is a mark of a wise person, but it is not a final word about wisdom.

8. For every desire there is a time and decision, even when a man's misery [is] great upon him (Eccl 8:6-7).

- a. Because he does not know what will come to be (8:7a).**
 - b. And who will tell him what it will come to be (8:7b)?**
-

The lesson of this proverb is similar to the previous one. It teaches that for everything a person desires there is an appropriate time and way for him to go about getting it. The weakness of the proverb is that it does not tell a person how to recognize the appropriate time or how to make the right decision about the appropriate approach to take.

The word translated "desire" refers to something that pleases a person. It can be translated "every pleasure" or "every delight" or "every longing." Any of those meanings make sense in this verse. Whatever the exact meaning of the word, the point is that there is an appropriate time to act and an appropriate decision to make for obtaining whatever a person desires. A person should not insist on receiving what he desires before the time is right.

Also he should not insist on coping with a delicate matter before he has made a careful decision about the method he should use in dealing with it. The proverb emphasizes that a person should consider the right time and method for everything he seeks to do or for every desirable thing he seeks to gain.

The proverb says that the reason a person should be wise enough to choose the right time and method is because he cannot know in advance what the outcome will be. No one can tell him ahead of time what response he will receive. Therefore, he should wait to deal with his problem until the time is right and use the method that is most favorable for him to receive the response he desires.

A foolish person will rush into a problem situation and demand an immediate solution. His impatience will arouse resentment and probably anger. He will not find a satisfactory solution. A wise person will be more patient. He will wait until the other person has time to hear his appeal or his

offer without haste or pressure. He also will seek to approach the other person in a place where he is not distracted with other worries or concerns and is able to give attention to the matter at hand. And he will use a method that most appeals to the person he is approaching.

Sometimes it is difficult to wait for the right time and place before approaching a problem or disagreement. The person seeking a solution will usually feel great pressure to settle the matter as soon as possible. It may trouble him greatly that he has to wait to try to solve the problem that is weighing on his mind and heart. In spite of whatever inner pressure he might feel, if he is wise he will control himself and wait to bring up his concern when the time and place are right. His wisdom will help him know that finding the right solution in the right way at the right time is more important than demanding to deal with the situation prematurely or haphazardly.

G. No man has control over the wind to restrain the wind (Ecclesiastes 8:8),

- 1. And there is no control over the day of death (8:8)**
 - 2. And [one does not escape] control in battle (8:8b),**
 - 3. And wickedness will not let escape ones [who are] into it (8:8c).**
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This proverb is a warning that some events are beyond the control of any person. No one can change them, so a person must accept them and deal with them as they exist. Recognizing that reality takes a lot of pressure off of a person who thinks he must be in charge of everything. However, the proverb gives no advice about how to gain the ability to adjust to situations a person cannot control.

The proverb offers the wind as an example of something no one can control. Many have tried. All have failed. Some have tried to control the wind and the rain with dances. Others have tried to bring rain or to calm hurricanes with ice crystals dropped from air planes. One has had just as much effect as the other, which is no effect. The best a person can do is to seek shelter when a tornado is approaching, to seek a source of water when a dry wind brings drought, and to flee to high ground when a wind off of the sea blows in a torrential downfall. The wise person makes advance preparation for times of drought, flood, cold, and heat, because he

knows he cannot control them. He adjusts himself to weather changes instead of trying to make the weather adjust to him.

This proverb names some other events that are beyond the control of any man. One example is that no one can control the day of his death. Today some foolish people try to control their deaths by suicide or assisted suicide. Others try to control the death of someone else by murder. They may succeed in shortening their own or another person's days on earth, but they will be shocked when they learn that the people whom they helped to die or whom they killed did not really die. Instead they live on in another place, and he also will go to a place where he will have to give account to God for trying to take into his hands matters that belong only to God. The wise person makes no effort to control the day of his death, but instead prepares for it by trusting Jesus as his Savior and living according to Jesus' commands.

Another example of a situation which no one can control is when soldiers go into battle. They can only do their best to defeat the enemy, but the best preparation and the best tactics cannot guarantee victory. Along with making preparation for victory, wise fighting units make preparation for an orderly retreat if it becomes necessary. They need to make those preparations because no one has control over what happens in battle and because no one can guarantee its outcome.

Most importantly, no one can avoid the consequences of his sins. Wickedness will not release anyone who has come under its control. In addition, God has promised that He will in no wise excuse the guilty. He will forgive the one who repents, but He will not excuse anyone who hardens his heart and refuses to obey God. The Bible says all have sinned. It also says no man can work his way out of his sins or escape their consequences. Only God can give him a way out.

These examples are only some of the events over which no one has control. Since people have no control over so many happenings in life, no one can be wise enough to have the solution to every problem or the answer to every question that might arise. Events that are beyond the control of everybody deny to everyone the ability to be truly wise.

4 SOLOMON'S REASONS FOR CONCLUDING THAT HUMAN WISDOM IS VANITY (Ecclesiastes 8:9-9:10)

Introduction: I observed all this while giving my mind to every deed that is done under the sun (8:9).

Solomon said he examined all of the advice given in the proverbs he quoted. Clearly he had examined many other similar proverbs as well. Not only did he study them, he also compared them with life that was occurring around him, to see how the advice of the wise men worked out when it was put into practice. He wanted to see how practical the wisdom of the wise men was when applied to real life.

The result was that he saw many events in the lives of people that the wisdom of the wise men could not explain. Solomon proceeded immediately to cite some of the situations he saw in people's lives for which the proverbs of the wise men provided no answer.

1. A time when the man has control over a man [and does] according to evil to him (Ecclesiastes 8:9b).

One of the situations in life for which human wisdom had no solution was oppression of one person by another. Solomon saw people being hurt by other people who had power or authority over them. The wisest of men had not found a way to escape when a powerful oppressor was determined to harm him, and no human wisdom had been able to discover a way to avoid or eradicate oppression from the earth. The wisdom of men just did not provide a way for people to deal with evil oppressors.

Nations have fought wars through the ages to defeat oppressors, and America is still fighting wars to oppose oppression; yet every time one oppressor is eliminated, two more arise. Oppressive men and oppressive nations are examples of situations where wisdom is insufficient to find a solution. The pervasiveness of oppression in the world is just one example of the vanity of human wisdom.

In the light of God's revealed truth, believers can say with confidence that injustices will be made right on Judgment Day when God gives punishment or reward to every person according to the way he handled his problems and challenges in life. But human wisdom did not discover the truth that Judgment Day is coming. It is known only because God has revealed it. Knowledge of the way God will bring justice to all men in the great Judgment Day is beyond discovery by the wisdom and insights of men. God has the answer, but human wisdom does not. God reveals the answer through divine inspiration when He is ready, but human wisdom can never discover it.

2 And then I saw wicked ones buried (Ecclesiastes 8:10), a And they went in and came out of the holy place (8:10b),

b And what they had done in the city was dropped. This also is futility (8:10c).

Another situation for which human wisdom has no adequate explanation or solution is when wicked men die and are given great praise at their funerals, while their evil deeds are passed over and never mentioned. It was customary in that day, as it is today, to give praise to men during their funerals, no matter how unworthily they had lived or how severely they had harmed others. It made their families feel good, and it took the edge off of the sorrow that some felt over their deaths. However, the praise often was dishonest and deceptive.

Solomon saw it happen often that a cruel and evil man was taken to the temple for his funeral service and was honored as if he were the most loyal of God's worshipers, while all the crooked deals he made in the city were never mentioned. The wise men had no counsel about how to avoid such dishonesty or what to do about it when it occurred.

Today we should not be too critical of that ancient practice, because it still happens every day at the funerals of evil men. What preacher dares to tell the truth at a funeral about the life of a drunkard, a wife abuser, an overbearing employer, or an oppressive lender? Everyone feels disdain for the person who delivers a funeral eulogy for a vicious unbeliever and "preaches him into heaven," but it happens every day. And it is vanity to think anyone can stop it from happening again the next time an evil man dies.

God will reveal the truth about each man's life on the Judgment Day, but no man is wise enough to know how to change dishonest praise in daily life today. Because wise men cannot change that unpleasant practice, wisdom is vanity.

5. Because a sentence for an evil deed is not carried out speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is full of desire to do evil (Ecclesiastes 8:11).

Another situation that troubled Solomon for which wisdom provided no solution was justice delayed. One person should have been tried and sentenced long ago, but his defenders kept finding loopholes that postponed his trial and allowed him to be free in the meantime. Another person should have been kept in prison for his crimes, but he kept finding ways to be released. Still another person should have been executed long ago for his heinous crimes, but prosecutors kept finding excuses to put off his execution and he continued to be confined but allowed to live in relative comfort. Failure to conduct a timely trial or to execute a timely sentence of some caused resentment on the part of persons who were brought to justice promptly and disrespect for the law on the part of others.

Solomon observed that human wisdom had found no way to avoid those kinds of inequities, and he concluded that failure to correct that problem proved the inadequacy and vanity of human wisdom.

The same problems exist today in enforcing the law. Suspension of penalties, probation, and parole are techniques that are used to give people an opportunity to make a new start and to correct their ways, but all too often they become excuses for a person to continue his wrongdoing. No human wisdom can tell when placing a person on probation or parole will help him correct his ways and when it will increase his incentive to do wrong. The best judgment of judges often proves to be wrong, no matter how they decide to handle a case. In spite of all the advances in law enforcement and in spite of all of the sincere efforts to improve the dispensing of justice, the problem of unfair and unequal enforcement of the law is as great a problem today as it was in Solomon's day. It remains as a testimony to the vanity of human wisdom.

F. Because a sinner keeps doing evil a hundred times and keeps prolonging his life (Ecclesiastes 8:12-13),

1. Even though I know it will be well with the ones fearing God because they fear before His face (8:12b).

2. And it will not be well with the wicked one (8:13),

a. Neither will he prolong his days like a shadow (8:13b),

b. Because he does not fear before the face of God (8:13c).

Another situation for which Solomon found no solution in human wisdom was when a person did wrong over and over again and kept getting away with his wrongdoing. He saw some people openly disobeying the law but never arrested or tried because of friendship or favoritism toward them on the part of officials. He also saw others found guilty of a crime but only warned and released. Whether the person escaped paying for his evil deeds through bribery of a judge, through pleading a technicality, or through corruption of the courts, his trial or sentencing was delayed over and over again, while he continued his illegal or unjust activities. Through those means and through many other unjust maneuvers, unscrupulous men were able to lengthen their evil lives like a

shadow lengthens as the sun drops lower in the sky in the evening.

Solomon saw that as a result of such injustices many guilty persons concluded that the law would not ever punish them but would always allow them to get away with their evil deeds. Therefore, they had no incentive to correct their ways; and they continued to do harm to others and to themselves. Solomon also saw that the proverbs of the wise men provided no guidance to let officials know when to be lenient or merciful and when to be harsh. Their best wisdom often proved to be mistaken, and their actions produced more harm than good, proving that human wisdom was vanity.

The same situations exist in enforcing the law today. Overcrowded jails cause some to be released long before they complete their sentences. Youths commit vicious deeds but because of their age are only warned and allowed to continue unrestrained. Some are found guilty but have their sentences suspended without probation, and they are left without restraint to return to their evil ways. Sometimes people are allowed to go unpunished out of good intentions, but all too often it results in disrespect for the law on the part of many. People see the guilty go unpunished, and they conclude they also will always be treated with mercy and they will never have to pay for what they do. What is intended to inspire people to do better often turns out to provide an excuse for the person to continue in wrong doing or even to increase the brazenness and fierceness with which he or she breaks the law.

Solomon said he knew the one who feared and obeyed God was going to be blessed and the one who was wicked was going to suffer for his wrongdoing. However, when he looked at the way law enforcement and justice worked, he could not see how and when justice ever was going to be accomplished. His confidence that justice was going to be done in the end was not based on human wisdom or understanding, but on faith. By human wisdom he could find no way to explain how justice eventually would be done. He just had to believe and wait. He trusted in God, because human wisdom could not give him an answer. Neither had he ever found a wise man who could show him how to avoid such injustices. The failure of human wisdom to find a solution to such unjust situations made him know that human wisdom was inadequate to deal with evil in the heart and lives of people; therefore, it was vanity.

e. There is a vanity that is done on the earth when there are righteous ones to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked (Ecclesiastes 8:14).

(1) And there are wicked ones to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous ones(8:14b).

(2) I said that this also is vanity (8:14c).

Another situation for which human wisdom could not provide Solomon with an explanation was when good men suffered and evil men lived in ease and plenty. Solomon saw one woman who served God faithfully all her adult life afflicted with crippling pain, while her neighbor drank heavily, took God's name in vain, and lied as a regular habit but never had even one painful joint or headache. A man who was faithful in giving to God and generous in sharing with those in need suffered a great financial loss and lived in poverty while his dishonest neighbor succeeded in every business venture he attempted and lived in luxury. A young couple who loved people and set a good example in every area of their lives were not able to have children, while another couple a block away had five children and introduced them to every vice known. Solomon realized that the world is full of inequities and injustices which no one had power to change. It made him know that human wisdom was helpless in such situations; and, therefore, it was vanity.

The same situations exist all over the world today. Civilization has achieved great advances in providing freedom and opportunity for all, but no one has ever been able to change the reality that many good people suffer and many evil people thrive. People write books to tell others how to accept and cope with such situations, but until today no insight has ever been offered to prevent those incongruous situations from occurring. To human wisdom those situations are still an unsolved riddle.

In His Word, God has revealed an explanation for such unjust situation. He has made known the existence of spiritual warfare between God and Satan, which explains how many good people are wounded in the midst of the battle and how many evil people are protected by unseen evil forces. He also has given a firm promise that someday the warfare will be over and that in the end God and righteousness will win and justice will be dispensed to all. But human insight has no way to discover or prove the reality of spiritual warfare, and for certain it has no way to predict its ultimate end. Human wisdom just remains puzzled, without providing any answer or explanation of why good men so often suffer while evil men often live their whole live with praise and plenty.

People who only know what human wisdom can see and explain about such situations become confused and bitter. They often become rebellious and violent, because they do not know how else to respond. Only faith in God and His ultimate triumph over evil can enable a person to live with life's injustices with calmness and confidence. A satisfactory answer to such situations cannot be found through human wisdom. Trying to find the answer through human reason and insight proves to be vanity.

41 [Because man cannot know everything that is done under the sun] (Ecclesiastes 8:15-9:1)

a. So I praise happiness (Ecclesiastes 8:15),

Because nothing good comes to a man under the sun except to eat and to drink and to be happy (Ecclesiastes 8:15b),

c. For this will accompany him in his labor [throughout] the days of his life that God gives to him under the sun (8:15c).

16. Because I set my heart to know wisdom and to see the activity that is done on the earth both in daytime and in nighttime when one does not see sleep with his eyes (8:16-17,

a. And I saw all the work of God (Ecclesiastes 8:17a),

**b. [And I saw] that man is not able to find out the doing that is done under the sun (8:17b-17d).
In that the man may labor to seek it, but he will not find it (8:17c).**

Even though the wise one may claim to know [it], he is not able to find [it] (8:17d).

c. So I put all this on my heart to clarify all this (9:1)

That the righteous and the wise and their doings [are] in God's hand (9:1b).

Whether love or hate, man does not know everything [that is] before their faces (9:1c).

Solomon cited a sixth situation for which human wisdom had no solution. That situation was that it was impossible for any person to know everything that takes place under the sun. Since no one can know everything, no one has the answer to the riddle of life.

Solomon gave advice about how to deal with that impossibility by saying that the only good way to approach life was just to enjoy life like it is. He said he praised being happy with what a person has, because nothing really good comes to a person except having enough to eat and drink and to be happy with it. He said that, if a person could learn to be content with having enough to meet his daily needs without fretting to have an excess he could not use, he would have a contentment that would stay with him through all of his labor and struggles. It will not take his struggles away, but it will enable him to be happy in spite of them.

Then Solomon explained the reason he gave that advice. He said it was because he had sought to study life all over the earth in order to make some sense out of it, and he had concluded that the search was impossible. He said he had attempted to see all the activity that is done under the sun, in the daytime and in the nighttime. What he saw was God at work but people unable to see and learn everything that took place all over the world. No matter how much he worked to try to learn everything, he could not do it. He said he had sought earnestly to know and understand life all over the world and had studied with great diligence the way the world works and the way people work in the world. He had pursued his search day and night and had pondered over it so persistently that many a night he could not sleep at all.

Solomon said some men thought they had all the answers to life's questions and claimed they could give those answers to others. But truthfully, they did not have all the answers. No matter how insightful they were or how diligently they sought for understanding, they were left with many gaps in their knowledge. When people tried to follow their advice, they found too many situations where the wise man's instructions just did not fit or did not apply.

Now after all of his searching and after all of his observance of the searches of others, Solomon was ready to share his conclusion. He concluded that it was impossible for any person to understand all about life in this world or to explain all that takes place in it. People's inability to see the whole picture proved that human wisdom was vanity. Faced with that reality, Solomon said he had it in his heart to clarify the truth that all people and everything people do in life are in God's hand. Many people think they are in control of their lives. They are not. God has ultimate control of a person's life, whether he is righteous or wicked. No one can know what is coming to his life, because no one controls his life. No one knows whether love or hate is coming to him or her, because no one can know everything. Many situations exist that the wisest of men cannot explain, and there are some questions the most insightful of men cannot answer. The search for wisdom turns out to be vanity, because no person is capable of learning enough to be able to control even his own life. Therefore, the person who thinks he can control what will happen to him is playing games with vanity.

The present day is called "The Information Age." Some claim that more discoveries have been made in the present generation than in all previous generation combined. Even if that statement is an exaggeration, the storehouse of knowledge that has been gathered in the libraries and museums of the world and the extent of the information that is contained in the minds of men and women around the world is staggering. In addition, the vast reservoir of knowledge that is known today is more easily available to everyone than ever before. A few strokes on a computer that is connected to the internet can call up information that would have taken months to uncover only a few years ago. A few swipes on an i-phone can enable a person not only to hear the latest information about a friend

on

the other side of the world but also to see him or her at the same time. Yet all that knowledge has only uncovered how much people do not know. From the vast expanse of space to the tiny minuteness of sub-particles of the atom, a vast world of knowledge remains an unsolved mystery. The great increase in knowledge and learning has only made people aware of how much remains to be learned. Today more than ever, we know that people have only scratched the surface of the great wealth of knowledge that remains to be explored. No one person and all persons together do not know enough to consider any person to be truly wise. The world contains no true gurus, and the wisest of men are limited in what they know and understand. People today are forced to conclude with Solomon that, since people can never learn everything, it is impossible for anyone to be truly wise.

Solomon was not ready to say it yet, but the only solution to man's lack of knowledge and wisdom is to trust God, because the outcome of it all is in His hand. At this point, Solomon is preparing people to receive that declaration at the end of his book by emphasizing that wisdom is another one of mankind's interest that turns out to be vanity.

17. All [happens] just the same as to all [others] (Eccl 9:2-10),

a. One event comes: (9:2b-2):

To the righteous and to the wicked (9:2c),

To the good and to the bad (9:2d),

To the clean and to the unclean (9:2e),

To the one offering a slaughter-offering and to the one not offering a slaughter-offering (9:2f),

As the good one, the same as sinner (9:2g),

The one making a vow, the same as the one fearing a vow (9:2h).

b. This is a bad thing that in all that is done under the sun one event [comes] to all (9:3).

Because the heart of the sons of man is full of evil, and craziness [is] in their heart

During their lives and in the dying ones' last [days] (9:3c).

c. For whoever is chosen [to be] among all the living, there is opportunity (9:4-6)?

For a living dog is better than the dead lion (9:4b).

For the living know that they will die, but the dead do not know anything (9:5-6).

And they have no more reward because their remembrance is forgotten (9:5b).

Their love and their hate and their envy already have perished (9:6a),

And they no longer have a part in all that is done under the sun (9:6b).

18. Go eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, because God already is pleased with your doings (9:7-10).

Always let your clothes be white, and do not let oil be lacking on your head (9:8).

Enjoy life with the wife whom you love during all of the days of your breathing that He

has given to you under the sun (9:9).

Because [during] all the days of your breathing, that is your portion in life (9:9b),

And in your labor at which you labor under the sun (9:9c).

2. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your strength (9:10),

a. Because [there is] no doing or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol (9:10b)

b. Where you are going (9:10c).

Solomon came to a seventh and final situation for which wisdom has no answer. That situation is that death comes alike to everyone. No person can avoid it, no matter who he is or where he lives. No amount of wise learning or righteous deeds can change it. Since no one knows enough to conquer death, no man can consider himself to be truly wise. Death was another situation that proved the inadequacy and vanity of human wisdom.

To stress that he meant death was going to come to everyone, he stated in six different ways that the surety of death included the righteous and the wicked. He described the righteous and the wicked as the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean, the worshiper and the non-worshiper, the good person and the sinner, and the one making commitments to God and the one not making commitments. All of those designations applied to the same two groups, and those two groups included every person in the world.

Everyone fits into one of those categories or the other. By the righteous he did not mean people who are totally good, because he had already spent considerable time insisting that no one is completely righteous. He meant people who are righteous through faith in God and through worshiping Him with offerings and vows. By the wicked he meant those who did not trust God and did not worship Him. Everyone in the world fitted into one of those categories or the other. Therefore, Solomon was stressing that the most sincere of believers and the most wicked of sinners all faced alike the reality of death. Regardless of all the differences among those who were righteous and those who were wicked, they all shared one common event. All of them were going to die.

Solomon considered it to be a bad or sad thing that the one event of death comes to all people, but he recognized that it was a reality. The reason death comes to all people is that the hearts of all people are full of evil and craziness. Even those who are righteous through faith in God still have sinful inclinations within them. The best of people are not fully good and have to face death because of their sins. Since no one is good enough to escape death, no one can be truly wise.

In the light of that reality Solomon encouraged people to realize that their only opportunity to make a mark on this world was while they were alive. When they died, it would be too late to achieve any more accomplishments on the earth. He said a living dog can accomplish much more than a dead lion, even though a lion is much bigger and stronger than a dog. No matter how strong a lion is, it cannot accomplish anything when he is dead. He pointed out that the same is true of people. When death comes, people's opportunity to accomplish anything else on earth is gone. As far as life on this earth is concerned, their bodies do not know anything, and they certainly do not have any more opportunities for praise or reward for what they accomplish. In fact, not only their ability to act is gone, but even their remembrance is forgotten.

By those statements, Solomon was not denying that life exists after death. He meant the same thing people mean today when they say we must work for God while we live, because we will be judged for what we do while we are alive in the body. After death, no more opportunity exists to change our record. While living on the earth, people have opportunities to work and do good, to love or to hate or to be envious; but when they die, their opportunity to make any other contribution to this world is ended.

Because death is sure, Solomon encouraged people to make the most of life while they have it. He encouraged people to do the things that make one's personal life enjoyable. He said, "Stay clean and neat. Enjoy sharing life with the wife God has given you. Whatever kind of work you do, do it well." He meant people should not neglect their opportunities to do those basic essentials to life, because every person's opportunity to do any of them ends when he dies.

Solomon said that when people die, they go to Sheol. Obviously, he understood Sheol as a place where people go after they die. Not a lot of explanation is given in the Old Testament about Sheol. Some say it means the grave, but Solomon's statement sounds more like he understood it to be a place where people will be conscious and active. Some say Sheol was considered by believers in Old Testament times to be a place where people have a shadowy, dreary existence. It is better to think that the knowledge people had about Sheol in Solomon's day was shadowy because God had not yet revealed a great deal about it. At least this much is revealed in Solomon's brief statement about Sheol in this verse: (1) It is a place. (2) It is a place where people go after death. (3) It is a place where both righteous and unrighteous people go. It may be assumed that righteous people and unrighteous people are in different sections of Sheol, but it is a place that includes an abode for both. Solomon's statement leaves one aspect of Sheol open to question. Did Solomon mean that people in Sheol are unconscious and unable to think or do anything? Probably not. The point he was stressing was that people only have an opportunity to influence this world while they are alive. When he said, ". . .

[there is] no doing or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol," he probably meant people cannot do any of those things to influence life on the earth when they are in Sheol. If that was what Solomon meant, he was not making any statement about what life is like in Sheol. He was making a declaration that, when people are in Sheol, their opportunities to influence life on this earth are over.

Hebrews 9:27 says the same thing, "And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment" (HCSB). In the light of other New Testament revelations, that statement clearly does not mean that after death the only thing people can experience is judgment. It means that with regard to people's relationship to this world, the only activity that remains to them is to be judged for what they did here. Solomon meant the same thing.

Solomon's emphasis was that death is coming for all men, whether they are wise or foolish. All of the wisdom and knowledge a man can collect will not change that fact one iota. Therefore, in the light of universal death, wisdom is vanity. Human wisdom is good, and it should be sought with all earnestness; but as far as being a final answer to the meaning of life, it is just another vanity.

HUMAN ACHIEVEMENT IS VANITY

ECCLESIASTES 9:11-11:8

(10) Also I turned to see that under the sun (Ecclesiastes 9:11-12)

The race [is] not to the swift (9:11a)

Nor the battle to the strong (9:11b)

Nor bread to the wise (9:11c)

Nor riches to the intelligent (9:11d)

Nor favor to the skillful (9:11e).

(11) Because time and circumstance happen to all of them (9:11b; Also because man does not know his time.

Like fish that are taken in a bad net And like birds that are caught in a trap,

Just so the sons of men are trapped by a bad time When it falls on them suddenly (9:12).

Solomon named a ninth aspect of life that is vanity. That aspect is human achievement or accomplishing a great success in some field of endeavor. No matter how great a person's success might be, he can never be sure of receiving a reward for it. Solomon had lived long enough to know that the one who achieves the greatest success is not always the one who receives the benefits from his success. The one who works the hardest is not always the one who receives the honor. The fastest runner does not always win the race. The strongest soldier does not always win the battle. The wisest person is not always the one who has the most to eat. The most intelligent person is not always the one who has the most riches. The most skillful worker is not always the one who gets the promotion.

The reason achievement and success do not guarantee reward is that many other factors beside a person's own efforts influence the outcome of his work. The timing of a person's achievements and the circumstances under which he accomplishes them often have as much to do with recognition or usefulness coming out of his efforts as the accomplishments themselves. The person who invented a much better way to make a saddle just before the automobile was invented received little benefit from his discovery because he came out with his invention at a time when saddles were going out of style. He was defeated by bad timing.

The person who opened a new clothing store just before a recession struck lost his business, and his knowledge of men's clothing was wasted because of economic circumstances over which he had not control. Sometimes a person can do his work perfectly, but the time when he does the work may be a time when no one needs what he has made or no one has the money to pay for it. Sometimes a person can put forth his best effort to grow a garden, but bad weather will destroy it before he can gather the fruit of his labors. Sometimes a person can be completely trustworthy in paying his bills, but the company for which he works closes down and he loses his job. He may be unable to pay for his house and car and lose them both through circumstances he could not avoid. Many times new and unfavorable circumstances fall on a person unexpectedly and suddenly deny him success in a venture he worked toward for a long time. He fails through happenings he could not foresee, and his dreams fade away in spite of his best efforts. Those instances are just a few examples of how time and circumstance have as much to do with the results of a person's work as his achievements and abilities. Therefore, one's achievements often turn out to be another vanity.

Solomon recognized that, because people are limited by the times in which they live and the circumstances into which they are born, they are often like fish caught in a fisherman's net or like birds caught in a fowler's trap. They are trapped by their circumstances, and no amount of effort or achievement can change the times or overcome the circumstances that limit them. Their achievements commend them, but their circumstances defeat them.

Solomon explained many of the circumstances that can turn achievement into vanity by quoting a string of proverbs that deal that reality. When he wrote of the vanity of self-righteousness and the vanity of wisdom, he used proverbs to illustrate that the best insights wise men can produce are inadequate vanities, not because they are not true but because they are not enough. In this section of his book, he used proverbs to show that the wise men repeatedly declared the vanity of human achievement. Some of the proverbs seem to indicate they were written by Solomon himself, because they are written in the first person. Others Solomon probably quoted from the writings of other wise men. They all illustrate various ways that a person's achievements can turn out to be vanity.

(17) [A proverb about achievement that is defeated by forgetfulness]

For example, I saw this wisdom under the sun, and it [was] significant to me (9:13-16).

[There was] a little city with a few men in it (9:14),

And a great king came against it and surrounded it and built against it great breastworks (9:14b).

And a poor wise man was found in it who delivered the city by his wisdom (9:15a).

And no one remembered that poor man (9:15b).

So I say wisdom is better than might (9:16),

Though the poor man's wisdom is despised (9:16b),

And his words are not heeded (9:16c).

The first example Solomon gave of how achievement is defeated by time and circumstances was an incident he described like he knew about it personally. The experience Solomon recounted was a time when a small city was attacked by a powerful king and a poor man in the city devised a plan that rescued the city from their attacker. Yet after the crisis was over, no one remembered who had developed the plan that delivered them. His name was not honored in the annals of the city or spoken of by the citizens. People just went on with the interests of their lives and forgot about the achievement of the poor man who was responsible for their deliverance. Solomon obviously deplored the lack of appreciation on the part of that city, but he also cited it as an example of a sad reality that often occurs in the world. People become absorbed by the events of their present day and forget the achievements of former days, even though their present benefits are a result of those former days.

Especially they forget the people who sacrificed to create the benefits they enjoy.

Solomon stated the conclusion he drew from the experience. He said it showed him that wisdom is better than physical power and might, because the poor man's wisdom achieved deliverance for the city when all the strength and weapons in the city could not. However, he said that the experience also showed him that the achievements of a poor man are seldom honored in the world. People receive the benefits of a poor man's service, but they soon forget the man because he is poor and not prominent in the city.

One circumstance that causes achievement to turn out to be vanity is that people so quickly forget the achievements of others, especially if that other person is poor.

(14) [Proverbs about achievement that is defeated by sinners] (9:18-10:3)

**The words of the wise heard quietly [are better] than the shouting of a ruler to fools (9:17-10:20).
Wisdom is better than weapons of war,**

But one sinner destroys much good (9:18).

**Dead flies cause spiced oil to stink [and] to become rancid. A little folly [is] weightier than wisdom
and honor (10:1).**

A wise man's heart [leans] to the right, But a fool's heart [leans] to the left (10:2).

**Even when the [fool] walks on the road, his mind has something missing; And he communicates
to all he is a fool (10:3).**

Solomon's second example of how achievement is defeated by time and circumstances is that wise actions are often undone by foolish sinners. Solomon quoted four proverbs that supported his point. The first proverb clearly states that wise words spoken calmly to people who will listen are better than orders shouted by a ruler to people who are too foolish to hear. The proverb further declares that wise advice even accomplishes much more than weapons of war. However, it stresses that it only takes one sinner's foolish actions to tear down what wise diplomacy has accomplished.

The second proverb compares the damage dead flies do to perfume with the destruction foolish actions do to wise and honorable negotiations. Dead flies rot and putrefy and make the most fragrant of ointments stinky and useless. In the same way a little foolishness has greater influence than the words of wise and honorable men. Sadly, people are attracted to foolish jabber more easily than they are to wise advice. Far too many people refuse to listen to the wise words but are attracted by invitations to sin. Therefore, the wise actions of some are undone and made to be vanity by the sinfulness of others.

The third proverb points out that people respond more readily to the attractions of sin because their hearts are bent toward the left, that is, toward wrong. Sinfulness is the natural inclination of people unless God has changed their hearts and lives and turned them to the right. Therefore, good achievements have little chance of success because of the leftward leaning of people in the world.

The fourth proverb says foolish men can be seen even in the way they walk down the road. They show by their crazy actions that they are not paying attention to what they are doing. By acting irresponsibly, they are putting themselves and others in danger. Their public display of their innate foolishness and sinfulness demonstrates clearly that good achievements are constantly defeated by the

open display of foolishness by people of the world.

All too often, the crazy actions of a foolish person undo the best efforts of a wise and honest man. Thus, the best actions of good men turn out to be wasted vanities.

7. [Proverbs about achievement that is defeated by unwise rulers] (Ecclesiastes 10:4-7)

If the anger of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your place; For soothing [words] put great sins to rest (10:4).

There is an evil that I have seen under the sun:

Such as a mistake that goes forth from the face of the ruler (10:5-7).

The fool is placed in many high positions, And the rich sit in the low position (10:6).

I have seen slaves on horses

And princes walking like slaves on the ground (10:7).

Another example Solomon gave about how achievement is defeated by time and circumstance is that foolish rulers often interfere with the wise actions of their subjects. The first proverb about rulers that Solomon quoted gives advice about how to deal with an angry ruler. The proverb advises that the person should not rise up and respond in the same angry spirit. Instead he should answer the ruler with calm words. Calm words cause great fury to calm down. They even gain mercy and forgiveness for great wrongs. The reason that a person should deal with a ruler in that manner is that so many rulers act on impulse and emotion instead of on reason and principle. Their emotional impulses must be dealt with calmly or their anger will destroy a person's good achievements.

The second proverb states the problem more directly. It probably was written by Solomon himself, because it is spoken in the first person. Solomon said that one of the great evils he had encountered was when a ruler makes a mistake. He did not accuse the ruler of deliberate fraud or malfeasance, but even an honest mistake on the part of a ruler causes damage and harm to many of his subjects or to all of them. That damage interferes with the good and wise actions of his subjects and turns their wise achievements into vanity.

The third proverb expresses the sad reality that foolish and sinful people all too often are placed in high positions, while accomplished and able men who had proved their abilities by gaining riches for themselves are relegated to insignificant positions. Power often determines a person's position, rather than ability or success. The result is inadequate rulership that brings harm to everyone.

The fourth proverb also describes Solomon's personal observations. He said he had seen men who had been slaves riding on horses, while men who had been princes were made to walk on the ground and in chains like slaves. He had seen such sights when a conqueror invaded a land and imprisoned its ruler, while he exalted unworthy men who had ingratiated themselves to them.

Rightful leaders often are rejected and unworthy men exalted to satisfy the ambitions of people who want only to empower and exalt themselves. Thus, good and worthy achievements are turned into vanity by sinful and unwise rulers.

9. [Proverbs about achievement that is defeated by unexpected accidents] (Eccl. 10:8-20)

a. One digging a pit might fall into it (10:8a),

b. And one breaking up a wall, a snake might bite him (10:8b).

c. One pulling up stones might be hurt by them (10:9),

d. One splitting logs might be endangered by them (10:9b-10);

(1) If the blade is dull and he does not sharpen the edge, then he must put forth strength (10:10a),

(2) But a preference for succeeding [is to use] wisdom (10:10b).

e. If the snake bites when [it is] not charmed, then [being] the charmer has no benefit (10:11).

A fourth example Solomon gave of how time and circumstance can defeat a person's achievements was that unexpected accidents can destroy a person's ability to exercise his abilities. The five statements that are given in this verse can be considered to be five proverbs, or they can be considered to be five parts of one proverb. Either way, they give five instances in which accidents can occur unexpectedly and interfere with or destroy a person's ability to achieve his goals.

One instance is that a person who is digging a ditch can fall into it and injure himself. The second instance is that a person who is

breaking up a wall, either to replace it with something else or to repair it, could be bitten by a snake hiding along the wall. The third instance is that a person pulling up stones, probably to clear a field, could drop one of the stones on his foot and cripple himself, or his straining could cause a hernia and turn him into an invalid.

The fourth instance is that a person splitting wood for a fireplace could be damaged either by the axe or by a flying piece of one of the logs. The damage could even be permanent. Solomon elaborated a bit on that possibility by saying that the man splitting the wood might increase the danger by failing to sharpen his ax. In that case, he would have to work harder to split the wood, which would increase the possibility of his damaging himself, either by overexertion or by having less control over the wood.

The fifth instance is that a snake charmer might try to handle his snakes without charming them and get bitten, which might result in his death. Thus, it did him no good to have the ability to charm snakes, because he neglected to use the skills he had.

Those five instances plus many other possible accidents can happen to a person and injure him to the extent that he is unable to use his skills and abilities for the rest of his life. Many people have similar experiences and spend their remaining days regretting that their skills are wasted and have become vanities.

H. [Proverbs about human achievement that is defeated by foolish thoughts and ideas] (Ecclesiastes 10:12-17)

1. Words from a wise mouth [obtain] favor, But lips of a fool swallow him up (10:12).

**a. The first word from his mouth is foolishness,
And the last one from his mouth is evil craziness (10:13).**

b. Yet a fool multiplies words when the man does not know what will be, And what will come after him, who may tell him (10:14)?

2. Labor of a fool wears him out So that he does not know how to get to town (10:15).

**3. Woe to you, O land, when your king [is] a child and your princes feast in the morning (10:16).
Happy are you, O land, when your king is a son of a free man and your princes feast at the appointed
time for strength and not for drunkenness (10:17).**

A fifth example of how circumstances can destroy achievement is when a person's thoughts and ideas are foolish and self-defeating. The first proverb Solomon quoted to illustrate that point says that a person who speaks wise words is honored by others, but a person who speaks flippant thoughtless words gets eaten up by the words he speaks. The person who speaks silly foolish words not only loses the respect of others, he destroys his own self by his flighty and false ideas. Sadly a foolish person does not know how to speak words that make good sense. From the first word he speaks to the last, he spouts foolishness. Yet, he keeps talking about subjects he does not understand without realizing how much harm he is doing to himself. And who can slow his talking down enough to tell him he is not making any sense? The person with foolish ideas actually tends to do a lot of speaking, because he feels compelled to try to convince people he knows what he is talking about. However, his many words only cause people to have less respect for him and cause him to continue pursuing his unproductive ideas.

The second proverb says that a foolish person has to work so hard that, when he is finished, he does not have the strength or ability to go into town.

The reason he has to work so hard is that his foolish ideas about how to do the job make him have to work much longer and harder than he should.

Solomon obviously had no use for foolish gibberish. We must remember that Solomon's words in the Book of Ecclesiastes were inspired by God, so God also has no use for careless jabbering. A person who talks without studying or without basing his ideas on valid experience will have many unexpected problems and unnecessary accidents that will cause him to miss many opportunities to achieve something useful or cause his achievements to be wasted.

The third proverb speaks of the tragedy of being ruled by foolish rulers. Foolish rulers not only damage themselves but their subjects as well. Solomon described foolish rulers as feasting in the morning when they should be working for the good of their nation and their people. They act like children and spend their mornings eating and drinking instead of concentrating on the work of the day. Wise rulers are strikingly different. Their character shows they came from a line of men who have earned their right to be free. They eat their meals at regular hours not for drunkenness, but for nourishment, so they can have strength for their responsibilities. They are wise and good rulers, but those who use their rulership positions to satisfy their own desires and pleasures suffer all kinds of

accidents and set-backs that damage both themselves and their subjects

Accepting foolish ideas is another of the circumstances that destroy a person's achievements.

5 [Proverbs about human achievement being defeated by foolish actions] (10:18-20)

a Through laziness the roof caves in, and through idle hands the house leaks (10:18).

a They make bread for laughter, and wine gladdens lives,

(2) And money solves everything (10:19).

b Even in your thought do not curse the king, and in your bedrooms do not curse the rich, For the bird of the heavens will carry the statement, or the possessor of wings will make the word known (10:20).

A sixth example of circumstances that can destroy a person's ability to achieve is a carefree approach to life. The first proverb Solomon used to emphasize that point says that a lazy person's property soon decays. The roof of his house falls in and leaks. Instead of concentrating on those important needs, such a person gives attention to frivolities and having a good time. He does not eat food for nourishment, but for entertainment. He does not drink fresh juices to strengthen his body, but fermented wine for boisterous laughter. He is not interested in money so he can provide for his family but uses it to buy his way out of the troubles he brings on himself. His careless way of living destroy any opportunities he might have to achieve something meaningful and causes to vanish away any achievements he does accomplish.

The second proverb indicates that a carefree person is not only careless about his responsibilities but also about the way he talks about others.

Thoughtless words of criticism can bring resentments that destroy any opportunity a person might have to advance his station in life. The proverb especially cautions against speaking carelessly about powerful or rich people. It says a person should not allow himself even to think harsh and critical thoughts about the rich and the powerful. When someone thinks those thoughts, he will soon speak them; and when he speaks them, they will not remain private. Even if he speaks unkind words in the privacy of his bedroom, they will spread as if a bird on the windowsill heard them and carried them to the one about whom he spoke. He will receive serious repercussions from words he spoke only in careless jest.

Another circumstance that can cause a person to miss his opportunity to achieve or lose the benefit of what he has achieved is to be careless in his actions and in his speech.

3 [Proverbs about human achievement that is defeated by the uncertainties of life] (11:1-8b)

a Throw your bread on the face of the waters, because after many days you might find it (11:1).

Give a portion to seven, or even to eight, because you do not know what evil might come to be on the earth (11:2).

(b) If the clouds are full of rain,

They might empty themselves on the earth (11:3a).

(c) And if a tree falls on the earth to the south or the north, The place where the tree falls there it will lie (11:3b).

6. The one watching the wind will not plant,

And the one looking at the clouds will not harvest (11:4).

a. Just as you do not know the path of the wind, or things like bones in the full womb (11:5a) Just so you do not know the work of God, who makes everything (11:5b).

b. In the morning, plant your seed,

And at evening do not hold back your hand (11:6),

a Because you do not know if this will prosper or that (11:6b).

b Or if both alike will do well (11:6c).

7. Light is pleasant,

And to the eyes it is good to see the sunlight (11:7-8),

a. So if a man lives many years, Let him enjoy all of them (11:8),

b. But let him remember

The days of darkness because they will be many (11:8b).

Solomon's seventh example of how circumstances can effect a person's achievement in life is the uncertainties of life. He quoted three extended proverbs to illustrate that point. Taken together the proverbs emphasize that a person should carry out his responsibilities without having to know the result that will come, because life is so insecure he can never know what the outcome of his efforts will be. A person should work hard at his responsibilities even though he does not know what the result will be, because he does know that if he shirks his responsibilities the results will not be good.

The first proverb deals with the uncertainty of the results that will come from giving to those in need. A person should not hold back from helping someone in need just because he does not know what good it will do. He should not give, expecting to gain from it. He should do it because he hopes good will come of it, without having to have a guarantee in advance.

The proverb about throwing bread on the waters has puzzled interpreters through the years. Three major suggestions concerning its meaning have been offered. One is that a person should make investments in overseas trade, because he might make a profit. That suggestion is ingenious, but it is completely out of context with the subject Solomon was discussing. A second suggestion is that a person should feed the fish in the rivers and ponds, because he might be able to catch them for food when they are bigger. The idea may be true, but it seems simplistic and irrelevant. The third suggestion is that a person should give to the needy, because someone likely will return the favor to him when he is in need. This suggestion is based on the idea that many had in Solomon's day and that many have today that giving to the needy is as useless as throwing bread into a river, where it is completely wasted. Giving food to people in need often does seem to be as useless as throwing bread into the river, because the people who are helped seldom return the favor and because they often have to be helped again. If this explanation is correct, Solomon was suggesting that a person should give to the needy without knowing the results, because it might inspire others to give him help if he ever is in need. This suggestion is the most plausible explanation of the proverb, especially in the light of the next sentence in the proverb. However, Solomon's point in quoting the proverb was to point to the uncertainty of obtaining good results from help that a person gives to others.

The parallel statement in the proverb definitely relates to generous giving. It advises a person to give to seven others, even to eight. To the Israelites seven was a number that suggested completeness. Giving to seven meant giving to as many needy people as possible. Giving to eight meant giving sacrificially, beyond one's ability or beyond what is easy and comfortable for a person to give. The proverb says the reason a person should give generously is because he does not know what tragedy might happen to him. Some unforeseen circumstance might arise that would cause him to be in need. If that should happen, he would be in the best position to ask for help if he helped others when he could.

The proverb mentions some unexpected circumstances that can cause a person to be in need. One is heavy rainfall that can flood the person's house and cause him to experience a great loss. Such circumstances occur at places where they have never happened before. Clouds often contain astonishing amounts of moisture, and weather conditions can cause the clouds to drop that moisture all at once. Ten, fifteen, even twenty inches of rain have fallen unexpectedly in a few hours' time, and few locations can stand such a massive influx of water without severe flooding. A person can never know when that disaster might come to him.

Another unexpected circumstance that suddenly can cause a person to be in need is the possibility that a tree might fall on him or on his house. Trees can provide steady shelter when they are healthy and well rooted, but they can be extremely devastating when they become diseased or when a high wind blows them down. Trees are extremely heavy. When they fall, no one can control where they fall. Where they fall, they fall. If a tree falls on a person or on his property, it does great damage. He may suddenly be in need, when only a few moments before he thought he had all the resources he needed.

When a person considers the possibility of these and other sudden tragedies, he should be generous with others who have tragedies, because he can never know when a tragedy might strike him. All of those uncertainties fill life with vanities.

The second proverb deals with the uncertainty of the weather. Just as a person cannot know the outcome of giving to those in need, a farmer cannot know the outcome of his planting seed in his field. He must not wait on the weather to do his work, because he can never know what the weather will be. A farmer will never get his crop planted or his harvest brought in if he puts off planting or harvesting until he knows for sure the weather is favorable. The same is true of every other kind of work. No one can know what events life will bring, so a person should do his work because it is the right thing for him to do and not wait until he knows what the results will be.

The proverb says that the events that occur in life are the work of God. No one can understand what makes bones grow in the womb of a pregnant woman. Just as surely, no one can predict or explain God's work in every other aspect of life. A person can never

know if one effort or the other will succeed or if both will succeed. Therefore, he should do the work that needs to be done every day and leave the result to God. Unless God blesses a person's efforts, all his labor is an uncertainty and a vanity.

The third proverb deals with the uncertainty of how long good fortune may last. The proverb says a person should enjoy the blessings of sunlight as long as it is shining on his life, because he never knows how long it will continue to shine. What he does know is that days of darkness are going to come and that everyone has many dark days in his life. Not knowing when one's days of light and joy may turn to darkness turns even the blessings of life into uncertain vanities.

If a person wants something certain in life, he must not look to his life and work. The only real certainty is God. All else is vanity. .

Conclusion: Everything that comes [is] vanity (Ecclesiastes 11:8c)!

Solomon closed this section of his book in the same way that he closed every other section, with an anguished cry that this aspect of life also is vanity. He said that what will come as a result of a person's efforts is uncertain, and he can never know how long the good that comes will last. Therefore, everything that comes to a person in life as a result of all of his work and achievement is as changing and as uncertain as the wind. Therefore, human achievement, no matter what it is, is vanity. Everyone needs to seek for something more certain in life than his own achievements.

YOUTH IS VANITY ECCLESIASTES 11:9-12:8

(12) Rejoice, O youth, in your youthfulness (Ecclesiastes 11:9-10).

**Yes, let your heart make you glad in the days of your youth (11:9b-9d),
And walk in the ways of your heart and in the sights of your eyes (11:9c)**

**But understand that because of all of these God will bring you into judgment (11:9d).
Yes, remove irritation from your heart (11:10),**

**And get rid of pain from your body (11:10b)
Because youth and the dawn of life are vanity (11:10c).**

Solomon moved to a tenth topic that he said was vanity. That topic was youth and youthfulness. In verse 9, he spoke directly to young people and told them to enjoy their youth while it lasted. He encouraged them to be glad in their hearts, to practice the things their hearts desired, and to enjoy the sights their eyes liked to see. But he warned them to be cautious about how they enjoyed those days, because God was going to judge them for all the things they did during those days. He wanted them to understand that the actions of their youthful years were not going to pass away and be forgotten. The day was going to come when they were going to face judgment for how they used those years. They were not throw-away days. They were a serious part of their lives, and God was going to hold them responsible for what they did with them.

In Ecclesiastes 11:10, he challenged them a second time to enjoy their youth. He said they should not let their youth be filled with irritation in their hearts or pain in their bodies. Youth was a good time of life, and it was meant to be enjoyed and used for good. Still they should be careful to enjoy those years in the right way and not waste them. He gave them a second reason for being cautious about what they did with those years. They were not going to last forever. Youth, like everything else human and earthly, was temporary. It was another vanity that was as unsteady like the wind. They were not going to be able to hold onto their youthfulness. All too quickly, it was going to fade away into old age and death, so they needed to use it wisely while it lasted.

(18) And remember your Creator in the days of your youth (Ecclesiastes 12:1-12:7)

Before the bad days come and the years draw near when you will say, "I have no pleasure in them" (12:1b).

Before the sun and the light of the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain (12:2).

a. In the day when (12:3-5):

**The ones protecting the house will tremble (12:3b)
And the strong ones will be bent (12:3c)**

And the grinders will cease because they will be few (12:3d)

And the ones looking through the windows will be dimmed (123:3e),

And the two doors on the street will be shut (12:4)

When the sound of the grinding will be low (12:4b),

And one will rise up at the voice of a bird (12:4c),

And all the daughters of song will be brought low (12:4d).

Also when (12:5):

They will be afraid of height and terrors on the road (12:5b)

And the almond tree will blossom (12:5c),

And the grasshopper will drag itself (12:5d),

And the caper-berry will be ineffective (12:5e).

Because the man will be going toward his long-lasting house when the mourners shall walk around in the street (12:5f).

8. Before (12:6-7):

The silver cord is put away (12:6b),

And the golden bowl is crushed (12:6c),

And the pitcher is shattered at the spring (132:6d),

And the wheel is crushed at the well (12:6e),

And the dust returns to the earth like it was (12:7a),

And the spirit returns to God who gave it (12:7b).

Solomon's third word of advice to young people extends from verse 1 through verse 7 of chapter 12. It was to remember their creator in the days of their youth. He was eager that they not take his challenge to them to enjoy their youth as encouragement to live and have fun in any way they chose. They needed to spend those years wisely and not waste them on sinful activities, because youth was not going to last long. They needed to remember their Creator, live for Him, and obey Him while they were young and had the strength and vigor to do it..

Then he described for them what life was going to be like when they no longer would be young. In verse 1, he described old age as bad days in which they were going to say they no longer had pleasure in them. Solomon had seen those days in the lives of many people, and he knew he was drawing near to those days himself. He knew the time was coming to everyone who survived that weakness and sickness was going to weight so heavily on them that they no longer would enjoy their days. Today we still hear people mournfully say they are tired and want to go home to be with God and their loved ones who have preceded them. Their bodies are worn out. They want to be free of the limitations old age and disease have bought on. The hours drag by; the loneliness continues; and the pain seldom ceases, so they no longer enjoy their days and they want to be free to go home. It is not wrong for believers to feel that way, because when a believing person grows older and is weakened it is God's plan for him to go to be with Him in a much better place. God actually helps his children feel that way to prepare them for giving up their responsibilities here and for going to their reward in heaven. So to young people Solomon said, "Take advantage of your youth and your strength and do something good with it because in a shorter time than you think you will not have the strength to do it."

In Ecclesiastes 12:2-5, Solomon described why people come to a time when they no longer enjoy their days. It is because of the weakening of every part of their bodies, which prevents them from doing what they want to do. He said old age is a time when the sun, moon, and stars are darkened because a person's eyes grow weak and they cannot see clearly even when the light is bright. Also for them, even after the rain stops the earth seems to be cloudy. Their eyesight will not allow them to see clearly even when the sunlight returns after the rain is gone.

Solomon went on to describe how all other parts of their bodies were going to be weakened in old age. By "the ones protecting the house," he meant their arms, which in old age were going to tremble and shake. By "the strong ones" he meant their legs, which were going to be bowed and wobbly. By "the grinders" he meant their teeth, which were going to cease to be useful because too few of them were going to remain. By "the ones looking out of the windows" he meant their eyes, which were not going to be able to see much anymore when they looked out of the windows. By "the two doors to the street" he meant their ears, which were going to be so dim that it shut them off from the activities of the street as much as when the doors to the street are shut. Solomon elaborated on the problem of hearing loss, because that disability may be the most distressing and limiting of all the weaknesses of old age. He said their loss of hearing was going to cause the sound of the mill down the street to become dim, and at the same time it was going to cause the sound of a bird to startle them. They were going to hear the bird's chirping, but they were not going to be able to tell

what they were hearing. The piercing but unclear sound was going to make them afraid some danger was approaching. They also were not going to be able to enjoy singers any longer because the sound of the voices was going to be too muffled and unclear. The weakening of all of their senses was going to make life a chore instead of a pleasure.

Solomon then described some disagreeable conditions that they were going to experience in old age. They were going to become afraid of heights and of dangers in the road, because their weakness was going to make it easy for them to fall and difficult to get out of the way of traffic. Their hair was going to turn white like the blossoms on an almond tree. Instead of being able to hop about like a grasshopper as they used to do, they were going to be able only to drag themselves about. And their sexual ability was going to decline, so that the caper-berry, which was a much used aphrodisiac in that day, no longer was going to be able to help them function. All of those weakened conditions were going to be leading toward the day when they were going to go to their long-lasting house in the ground and people were going to go about the street mourning their death.

Then in verses 6-7, Solomon stressed that their old age was going to end in death. Probably he did so because he knew young people seldom think about death, and he wanted them to recognize that they should think about it and to be aware that they needed to prepare for that day to come. He gave six descriptions of death, the first four of which were symbolic descriptions. He compared death to a silver cord that is worn around the neck but that has been put aside and desired no more. He also compared it to a golden bowl that is treasured for its beauty and value but that has been bent out of shape and has lost its value. He compared it further to a pitcher that is used to catch water at a spring but that has been shattered and useless. Finally, he compared it to a wheel or pulley that is used to draw water from a well but that has been cracked and is unable to hold water any more. Those descriptions meant that life eventually becomes broken and useless and has to be cast away.

After those symbolic descriptions of death, Solomon described death in literal terms. He said their bodies were going to return to the dirt from which they were made and their spirits were going to return to God who gave them. Though Solomon was warning young people to prepare themselves for the loss of their youth because death was coming, he gave a remarkable description of his concept of what happens at a person's death. He knew a person's body was made of physical elements taken from the earth, and he knew that after death it gradually decays and returns to dust. That insight was not remarkable. Believers had been aware of that reality ever since the Garden of Eden, and they had seen it happen many times over again.

What is more impressive is that Solomon said a person's spirit returns to God who gave it. It had been known by Jehovah worshipers ever since God breathed life into Adam at the Creation that a person's life was much more than dirt. It was made from God's own breath. Anyone who thought seriously about God's creation of humans was able to understand that, if the spirit of a man was made in God's likeness, it could not return to the dirt. Since God breathed His likeness into man, that spirit made in His likeness would have to return to God who breathed it into him. Solomon recognized that reality and declared it. The good side of old age and death is that a person's spirit returns to God. It does not decay and pass away. It returns to God to give an account and to receive His decision on what will come afterward.

Though Solomon was warning young people that death was coming, he did not end his description of death on a note of despair but on a note of hope. Surely the reason he challenged young people to remember their Creator in the days of their youth was to encourage them to be ready for their spirit to return to God when the day of their death would come. He wanted them to be prepared because remembering, trusting, and serving God is the only action a person can take in his whole life that is not a vanity of vanities when death comes.

C. "Vanity of vanities," says the Proclaimer. "Everything is vanity" (Ecclesiastes 12:8).

Solomon closed his discussion of youth with his now familiar refrain. Youth also is vanity. He proclaimed the same message about youthfulness that he had proclaimed about every other aspect of life he had mentioned. Youth does not last. It turns to feebleness, and it ends in death. It too is a vanity of vanities.

EXCESSIVE STUDY BEYOND THE SAYINGS OF THE WISE IS VANITY

Ecclesiastes 12:9-12

A. And above and beyond that the Proclaimer was wise (12:9-12).

1. He also taught the people knowledge (12:9b),

a. And he weighed and he searched (12:9c).

b. He arranged many proverbs (12:9d).

2. The Proclaimer sought to find pleasing words, and he wrote straight true words (12:10).

After discussing the futility of youth and the inevitability of death, why would Solomon need to add any other thoughts or words? He answered that question in the first sentence of this section of his book (v. 9a). The reason is that knowing death was coming did not take away his interest in life. In fact, it made him even more determined to make the best use possible of the time that remained to him. Three times in his book he had said that the best response to the vanity of human effort is to do well whatever responsibilities a person has and to find pleasure in doing them (Eccl. 2:24; 3:13; 5:18). He had lived that way, and he obviously intended to continue to live that way. So in spite of the vanity of all human effort, he continued to be as wise as he could be and to use his wisdom to accomplish as much good as he possibly could.

In verse 9b-9d, Solomon said he not only sought wisdom for himself but also shared it in every way he could. He taught what he knew to others. To do so, he invested much energy in weighing the value of proverbs written by the wise men and in searching for the wisdom they contained. He had arranged proverbs into collections that gave people easy access to their insights and that made it easy for them to compare proverbs on similar subjects.

In verse 10, Solomon said he also wrote proverbs himself and sought the most appealing words he could find to express his insights. He wanted people to be attracted to the wise sayings he shared so people would want to learn them and to use them in their lives. However, his main interest was not in producing beautiful words but in writing straight, true words. The word translated “straight” is actually a noun that means “straightness.” His writings were “straightnesses” that contained straight, clear, accurate insights. In apposition to the noun is “words of truth.” His plain straightforward words were true words. Solomon did not write suppositions. He wrote truth that had been examined and tested. Even beyond that, he often wrote truth that had been revealed to him by God, and he recorded it under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. God used him to give people correct divinely inspired guidance into how to live lives that would be as meaningful and productive as possible.

Recognizing the limitations of human wisdom did not cause Solomon to abandon wisdom or to reject it. He sought to use it to the best advantage possible. At the close of his book, Solomon insisted that the vanity of human effort and wisdom does not mean a person should give up on living. It means he should use wisdom in the best way possible and trust the results to God.

B. The words of the wise are like prods (12:11-12).

1. Masterful collections [that] are given by one Shepherd are like fixed nails (12:11b).

2. But as for an excess beyond these, be cautious, my son (12:12).

a. [There is] no end to making many books (12:12b).

b. And much study [is] weariness to the body (12:12c).

Solomon used strong words to describe the value of the wisdom that Israel’s wise men taught. In verse 11a, he said their words were like prods or goads to guide and push people in the right direction. A goad was a sharp pointed rod used to keep sheep or cows from roaming away and to prod them into moving in the right direction. The proverbs of the wise men served the same function for people. Sometimes the proverbs were sharp. They could be painful in revealing errors or sins, but they could save people from danger just as a shepherd’s prod could save the life of a rebellious sheep.

In verse 11b, he spoke of the value of collections of proverbs. The word translated “collections” means “assemblies.” It can be used to refer to assemblies of people or to assemblings of objects or data. Some interpreters have explained the “assemblies” to which Solomon referred as gatherings of people and the masters of the assemblies as prominent wise men. Those interpretations do not fit the context of this passage, and the “assemblies” should be understood to be assemblings or collections of proverbs on a scroll or in a book.

Collections of proverbs had special value because they dealt with many aspects of wisdom and righteousness. Above all, collections of proverbs that were given by one Shepherd were of supreme value and should be given great honor and attention. The one Shepherd was God. Solomon’s statement recognized that some collections of proverbs were inspired by God. God used some of the wise men to reveal His infallible truth, just as He used liberators like Moses, kings like David, and prophets like Isaiah for the same purpose. Solomon called collections of proverbs given by God “masters of collections,” meaning they were the best and most authoritative collections. Those masterful collections deserved primary attention. They gave inerrant instructions about important aspects of a meaningful and useful life. They could be trusted and obeyed without hesitation.

The masterful collections to which Solomon was referring are now included in our Bibles. We call them the Book of Proverbs, which is actually a compilation of several collections of inspired proverbs. In the closing sentences of his book Solomon advised everyone to study the Book of Proverbs in order to learn truth that can be trusted without question.

In spite of Solomon’s unreserved commendation of inspired proverbs, in verse 12 he advised caution in studying other proverbs and other writings. Other writings were the result of human insight and experience. Because humans are fallible, their ideas did not

deserve the same unreserved trust. He warned that human insights can contain great truth but also can contain error. Therefore, the study of writings beyond those that God inspired should be approached with caution. He implied that books that come from human reason or experience can contain erroneous information that can be harmful and dangerous. Solomon did not say that people should not read others writings, but he said people should approach other writings with caution, because the insights of sincere but fallible people are always subject to error.

Solomon supported his words of caution by saying that there is no end to the making of books, and studying all those books wears a person out. He made it known that it was physically impossible to study and evaluate all the books that were being written. Therefore, for a person to be safe he should give first attention to studying the trustworthy revelations that came from God. To miss some of the discoveries of men is not tragic and it even may help a person escape some enticing but dangerous ideas. But to miss the revelations of God is the tragedy of tragedies. It provides a paved road to destruction.

Solomon's counsel is especially applicable to today because new ideas are being generated at a faster rate than ever before. In addition, those ideas are being published and advocated more widely and more attractively than ever before. Those conditions make the acceptance of new and untested ideas more likely than ever before. Learned men are highly respected today, and their discoveries and views are often accepted without question. The folly of doing so is proven by the events of the 20th century. Nazi Germany's concept that they were a super race entitled to conquer and rule the world was inspired by the evolutionary ideas of the renowned scholar and investigator Charles Darwin. The colossal and tragic world-wide aggressions of Stalin's Soviet Empire arose from the teachings of the famous intellectual Karl Marx. Today the revolts and riots of young people who have never worked are being inspired by professors in the colleges and universities who have convinced them that they are oppressed if they do not have as much net worth as people who have worked for forty or fifty years to gather what they own. All of those tragedies are evidence that human intellect and knowledge can be extremely dangerous.

Much that wise and learned people have written contains information that is wise and helpful, and the experiments of brilliant men are producing new inventions regularly that are bringing many good advances to life all around the world. Therefore, the discoveries and teachings of learned men should be seriously considered, but they should be cautiously tested. They should never be blindly accepted. Before they are accepted, they should be investigated and confirmed. Only then should they be applied to life. Completely trusting human ideas and writings without adequate confirmation is vanity.

The writings that God has inspired do not need to be read with that kind of caution. They need to be read with complete trust and obedience. Readers and students of the Word just need to be sure they understand the words accurately. Reading one's own ideas into the Bible has as much potential danger as advancing one's own ideas. But when the words of the Bible are correctly understood, they are true and trustworthy words that will never lead a person astray.

Sadly that understanding of truth is being totally reversed by many today. Highly respected people say that science is proven fact and the Bible is merely religion. Neither aspect of that statement is true. It is evident that science is not always proven fact, because scientists themselves are constantly discovering new information that corrects ideas that previously were almost universally considered to be true. For that reason, science text books have to be rewritten every few years. They become out of date because new information makes the information in them incomplete and sometimes totally false. At the same time it should be equally evident that the Bible is not just another religion. It is the one writing that contains information that has never had to be changed and brought up to date. The earliest parts of the Bible were written about 3,400 years ago, and they are as true today as they were the day they were written. During all of those years, unbelieving men have tried to prove that statements in the bible are not true, but constantly more information is being discovered that reveals that the Bible's critics are wrong and the Bible is true.

Much study of the writings of men exhausts and often misleads. Much study of God's Word refreshes and delivers.

CONCLUSION

ECCLESIASTES 12:13-14

(14) One last word [now that] all has been heard (Ecclesiastes 12:13).

**Fear God, and keep His commandments (12:13b),
For this is the all-in-all for the man (12:13c).**

(15) For God will bring every deed into judgment (12:14),

**Including every hidden one (12:14b),
Whether [it was] good or bad (12:14c).**

After surveying the whole range of human thought and actions and concluding that all of them to be vanity, Solomon comes to one brief summary statement. He states the conclusion to which all his studies led in six words, whether spoken in Hebrew or English. When Solomon had spoken those six words, he had said it all. Those words were, "Fear God and keep His commandments."

Solomon's closing words show that he had not been rambling aimlessly in all that he wrote. He was aiming at a very definite conclusion. The conclusion was that the vanity of all human effort should teach people to trust and obey God. People can never find true satisfaction in any effort of their own. No matter what they believe or practice, it never will turn out to be complete or perfect. The failure of all human thought and effort reveals that people need God. No one is adequate by himself. The only way to have real meaning in life is to fear God and obey His commandments. Everything Solomon said in his book leads to that one final word or statement, "Fear God and keep His commandments."

By fear, Solomon did not mean terror. He meant having profound respect and revere God. His words had the same meaning as the New Testament word "trust." Solomon ended the Book of Ecclesiastes with the pure gospel message. The one and only hope of humankind is faith in God that leads to obeying Him. No better statement of what it takes for a person to be saved has ever been made than the conclusion Solomon drew at the end of all of his studies.

The words translated "the all-in-all for the man" are literally "the all of the man." They have been explained in various ways, but the easiest and best explanation is that Solomon was saying that when a person trusts and obeys God he has everything he needs. It took a thousand words for Solomon to explain the vanity of human thought and effort. It took him only six words to explain the finality and completeness that comes from trusting and of obeying God. They are all it takes to make a person's life complete. When a person quits trying to solve everything for himself and turns it all over to God, he becomes whole. He has it all.

The final reason for trusting and obeying God is that God will judge all the actions of a man, including those done in the open and those done in hiding, as well as those that were good and those that were evil. Solomon obviously did not see death as the end. His final words reveal that when the spirit goes to Sheol and meets God, the person will still have to face God in judgment. He did not enter into the question of when and where that judgment will take place. He simply made it clear that at last everyone will be judged for the life he has lived and that God will be the One who will judge him. Everyone's actions will fall short and fail to measure up, but his final outcome will not be determined by his own actions but by God. For that reason the only meaningful thing a person can do in life is to trust and obey God.

Further clarification of how God's judgment will be conducted had to wait for later revelations, especially New Testament revelations. The New Testament reveals that at the judgment the sins of believers all will have been forgiven and the judgment will determine only how great their rewards will be according to God's measurement of how much good they did for Him. It also reveals that at the judgment unbelievers will have no goodness to their credit because without God their lives produced nothing good. For them the judgment will determine how great their punishment will be according to God's measurement of the extent of their sins. Without the revelations that God gave through Jesus and his apostles, Solomon had to be content with knowing that at the judgment all was going to be well for those who trusted and obeyed God but it will not be well for those who did not put their trust in Him.