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# Ecclesiastes

## FOR BEGINNERS

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MIKE MAZZALONGO

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## THE "FOR BEGINNERS" SERIES

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Study Guide: "Living on the Ragged Edge" by C. Swindoll

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

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1. INTRODUCTION	5
2. THE PURSUIT OF PLEASURE	17
3. THE PURSUIT OF MEANING THROUGH WORK	27
4. A TIME FOR EVERYTHING - PART 1	35
5. A TIME FOR EVERYTHING - PART 2	45
6. A VIEW FROM THE TOP	55
7. ONE PLUS ONE EQUALS SURVIVAL: SOLUTIONS TO LONELINESS	63
8. WORSHIP ATTITUDE	71
9. WISDOM PROVERBS	81
10. QUALITIES OF A WISE LEADER	93
11. COMMENTS ON THE RAT RACE	105
12. POSITIVE THINKING	117



# CHAPTER 1

# INTRODUCTION

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The book of Ecclesiastes is really a journal. It is the personal journal (or diary) of one man's journey through life. In this journal the writer observes several important things about his own life:

1. He notes his own loss of enthusiasm for life in general. He is very pessimistic, even depressed.
2. He records his feelings and observations as he purposefully searches for joy and satisfaction in life apart from God.
3. He sets forth his conclusions based on his lifetime experiences.

This is the true story of a man who cut the cord; who did it all; who went to the horizon of every experience he desired or imagined and, who left us notes about what he felt and learned. It is a great book because it teaches not from a theoretical perspective but from a full life experience.

# Background

## Author

The book doesn't name the author but refers to him as the "preacher" and because of this the book is called "Ecclesiastes" which means, "One who calls the assembly" by the authors of the Septuagint (Greek translations of Old Testament). The writer also identifies himself as:

- A king in Jerusalem – 1:1
- Wisest person who had ever ruled over Jerusalem – 1:16
- Builder of great projects – 2:4-6
- Man of much wealth – 2:8
- Possessor of a large harem – 2:8

These references, among others, can only be attributed to Solomon because only he, among the Jewish kings, fits this description.

## Date Written

925 BC (30 centuries ago and it is still relevant As well as a good argument for the uniqueness of the Bible as an inspired book.)

## Theme – Chapter 1:2 (Vanity)

We see vanity as pride, however the term actually means "breath." The writer of Ecclesiastes uses this word metaphorically to mean purposelessness or meaninglessness.

The point is that whatever man does apart from God (without regard to Him in asking, thanking, serving etc.) amounts to nothing in the end ... like a breath. The reason he gives for this conclusion is that life (without God) is simply a repetitious cycle of events - it does not give nor does it possess lasting value or satisfaction.

And I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven. It is a grievous task which God has given to the sons of men to be afflicted with. I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind.

- Ecclesiastes 1:13-14

The conclusion is that for a man without God, life, when examined, will be found to be empty and meaningless. Many since Solomon have come to the same conclusion and have tried to inject, with their own philosophies, some sort of meaning to life that does not factor in the presence of God. For example:

- Materialism (life is about gathering and using resources)
- Existentialism (life is what you make it)
- Positivism (life is whatever works best for you)
- Postmodernism (life is the sum total of our history)

## Outline

Think of Ecclesiastes as a journal or a diary written by a man who is consciously examining his own life's journey while he is experiencing it. He is on the outside looking in at himself.

## **Introducing the journey – 1:1-11**

The journey of life is seen as wearisome, an endless repetition of events that are meaningless when examined. The author comes to this conclusion before he begins and then explains how he got there.

## **Pursuing and exploring – 1:12 - 6:9**

Here Solomon describes his attempts at finding ultimate value and enduring happiness apart from a consistent walk with God. He records the areas he explores as well as his findings:

- **1:12-18** – The pursuit of knowledge and wisdom ends in much grief and increasing pain.
- **2:1-11** – The many paths of pursuing pleasure and acquiring possessions are futile and unprofitable.
- **2:12-17** – To live wisely or foolishly are equally empty since both end in death.
- **2:18-3:22** – The work ethic is examined and found to be full of grief and emptiness in the end because you cannot keep what you earn.
- **4:1-6:9** – Even the accumulation of power and wealth through oppression are not satisfying and lead to frustration and dissatisfaction.

## **Reflection and Summary – 6:10 - 12:14**

Solomon draws a general conclusion from his observations of a life lived under the sun. The expression (under the sun) means here on earth without God.



1. Lasting purpose and fulfillment can be found only in a trusting relationship with God - nothing less will do (6:10-11:6).
2. The young should remember and serve God while they are young before age and death overtake them (11:7-12:8).
3. The bottom line principle for a meaningful life is to fear God and keep His commands (12:9-14).

## Introduction - 1:1-18

Solomon's father, David, had fought many wars in order to secure Israel's borders and bring peace upon the land. He also left a great estate which made Solomon wealthy as he began his reign.

This wealth increased as tax money, normally used to provide for wars and armies, was left for Solomon to invest into other pursuits. Great riches plus relative peace provided Solomon with the luxury of experimenting with various pursuits in order to find true happiness; happiness and satisfaction without regard to God.

Chapter 1:1-11 establishes at the outset his conclusions concerning this search.

<sup>1</sup> The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

<sup>2</sup> "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity."

<sup>3</sup> What advantage does man have in all his work Which he does under the sun?

After identifying himself, Solomon goes on to state the basic premise of the book. That in life, when all is said and done, there will be nothing left that will give us a sense of accomplishment and gratification. When all of his effort is over here on earth, there will be nothing "left over" that will satisfy man. His point is that life on a purely human level (no matter how greatly lived) will be, in the end, worthless.

In the next verses, he presents various examples to support this premise. Four examples of futility:

## 1. The passing of the generations

<sup>4</sup> A generation goes and a generation comes,  
But the earth remains forever.

People are born merely to die and nothing changes this. Why be, if all that is going to happen to you is that you will cease to be?

## 2. The cycles of nature

<sup>5</sup> Also, the sun rises and the sun sets;  
And hastening to its place it rises there again.

<sup>6</sup> Blowing toward the south,  
Then turning toward the north,  
The wind continues swirling along;  
And on its circular courses the wind returns.

<sup>7</sup> All the rivers flow into the sea,  
Yet the sea is not full.  
To the place where the rivers flow,  
There they flow again.

<sup>8a</sup> All things are wearisome;  
Man is not able to tell it.

The ceaseless system of nature also demonstrates that activity, in and of itself, produces nothing of ultimate value. For example:

- The sun rises only to set.
- The wind blows but goes nowhere.
- The rivers fill the seas only to evaporate into rain and repeat the cycle.
- This cycle of nature goes on and on to the point of weariness.

### 3. The curiosity of man

<sup>8b</sup> The eye is not satisfied with seeing,  
Nor is the ear filled with hearing.

When man's curiosity is aroused he seeks answers, but the more he knows the more questions he raises. As far as knowledge is concerned, there is no end or satisfaction to it.

### 4. The absence of something new

<sup>9</sup> That which has been is that which will be,  
And that which has been done is that which will be done.

So there is nothing new under the sun.

<sup>10</sup> Is there anything of which one might say,  
"See this, it is new"?

Already it has existed for ages  
Which were before us.

<sup>11</sup> There is no remembrance of earlier things;  
And also of the later things which will occur,

There will be for them no remembrance  
Among those who will come later still.

Solomon has observed that there is nothing really new, only that people forget what has gone by or are not aware of it. Even the great "discoveries" are merely insights to what already is there (e.g. gravity).

New inventions are better ways of doing things we have already done. Solomon uses these four examples to drive home the point that: "life under the sun" when examined is really meaningless. This conclusion could be very discouraging, and many have reached it and stopped there without searching further. As I mentioned before: They have merely created philosophies of life to help them live with this conclusion.

Solomon, however, pursued his investigation to a much more satisfying, workable and logical conclusion. He deduced the following:

1. There is nothing under the sun that has meaning and satisfaction, and lasting value cannot be found in what is visible.
2. If nothing satisfying or of lasting value can be found in what is visible, then these things must be sought after in the realm of the invisible.

Solomon's conclusions are based on the idea that for every universal, innate need of man there is an available and corresponding satisfaction. For example:

- Hunger – Food
- Sex – Sex partner

He proposes that the search for meaning, for satisfaction, for lasting value, for life beyond death is a universal human experience and can be satisfied - but not by anything material, human or earthly, only by something spiritual, Godly and heavenly.

**Excerpt from the book "Living on the Ragged Edge" by C. Swindoll:<sup>1</sup>**

*Some years ago, C.S. Lewis penned words that are directly relevant to the conclusion of Solomon. Note carefully what he said:*

*Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire for which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it to suggest the real thing.*

*Interestingly enough, it was the desire to satisfy his longing for joy that eventually drove C.S. Lewis to Jesus Christ. He writes about this experience in his book, "Surprised By Joy."*

In verses 12 to 18 Solomon explains how he has reached the conclusions that he has just stated.

<sup>12</sup> I, the Preacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. <sup>13a</sup> And I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven.

At first in verses 12-13a, Solomon had been blessed with great wisdom (1 Kings 4:29-34). Not just the wisdom of common sense but a capacity for study, memory, discernment and an application beyond what was known to man. He writes that he decided to apply his great mind to the task of investigation by experiencing all the different "lifestyles" or approaches to life that were common to men, and note the results.

13b - It is a grievous task which God has given to the sons of men to be afflicted with.

This would seem like an interesting life experiment to be involved in but Solomon soon discovers that "it is an unhappy business." He had, what he thought was a life adventure, and discovered that it just was not so.

In the next few verses he describes what this exercise has taught him:

14 I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind.

That all the lifestyles, their settings and what they produce are meaningless.

15 What is crooked cannot be straightened and what is lacking cannot be counted.

Nothing can be changed; there are so many things wrong with the world that they cannot be numbered.

<sup>16</sup> I said to myself, "Behold, I have magnified and increased wisdom more than all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has observed a wealth of wisdom and knowledge." <sup>17</sup> And I set my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly; I realized that this also is striving after wind.

Even the pursuit of wisdom and knowledge by immersing oneself in each lifestyle turns out to be meaningless and "chasing after wind."

<sup>18</sup> Because in much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge results in increasing pain.

The constant desire to increase in human knowledge brings grief and pain because you cannot learn what you need to know in order to produce peace, joy, security and meaningfulness of the whole by simply increasing your fund of knowledge and wisdom of the parts. This constant increase only brings more difficult and complex questions that produce frustration, anxiety and discouragement. The whole cannot be known without God, and to try to know it through knowledge alone is futile.

Ecclesiastes is a valuable book for many reasons, but one reason in particular is because it documents a very wise man's search for meaning and value "under the sun" and his eventual understanding that some things you cannot know, and will never be discovered here on earth.

The next section of his journal begins a description of four different "lifestyles" that he immersed himself in and what he concluded from each.

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis Mere Christianity (New York, MacMillan Publishing Company. Inc. 1952), Page 120





# CHAPTER 2

# THE PURSUIT OF PLEASURE

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In the journal detailing his life experience, Solomon records the conclusions of a lifetime search for happiness and satisfaction apart from God. His journal is divided into three main sections:

1. Introduction – 1:1-18
2. Exploration – 2:1-6:9
3. Summary – 6:10-12:14

We have noted that in the introduction he declares that the examined life will be found to be meaningless if lived without faith and obedience to God. This is largely the content of the introductory part of Ecclesiastes. If not examined one can go through life oblivious to these truths. The exploratory section describes the various things that Solomon did in his search that eventually led him to that conclusion.

In chapters 2-6 he describes four key pursuits that he examined:

1. The pursuit of pleasure.
2. The pursuit of wisdom and folly.
3. The pursuit of meaningful work.
4. The pursuit of power and wealth.

In this chapter we will examine the first of these which is the pursuit of pleasure.

I said to myself, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure. So enjoy yourself." And behold, it too was futility."

- Ecclesiastes 2:1

Solomon began his search where most of us would: in the exploration of sensory pleasures. What he could do to feel good! Remember, he had the imagination, time, money and influence to try whatever he liked. Nothing was out of his reach.

**2:1a:** Solomon reviews his "self-talk" at the beginning of his journey where he rubs his hands together at the sheer anticipation of the delights he was about to help himself to.

**2:1b:** As in the previous section, he gives us the conclusion before describing his experience. The conclusion is that sensuality is futile, empty and has no lasting satisfaction.

He goes on to describe several areas where he gave full vent to his desires:

## 1. Laughter

<sup>2</sup> *I said of laughter, "It is madness," and of pleasure, "What does it accomplish?"*

He experienced fun and games through a steady stream of entertainers and materials that were meant to amuse. Comedians, clowns and plays that would keep one laughing. Solomon does not depreciate the importance of a healthy sense of humor, but rather that amusement (you are insane for a moment; you escape using laughter) in whatever measure, does not bring lasting satisfaction.

## 2. Consumption of Wine

<sup>3</sup> I explored with my mind how to stimulate my body with wine while my mind was guiding me wisely, and how to take hold of folly, until I could see what good there is for the sons of men to do under heaven the few years of their lives.

Solomon did not become a drunk ("my mind guiding me wisely") but he did become a connoisseur of fine wine developing his appreciation for this substance to its maximum pleasure without becoming addicted (which few accomplish). However, even this did not provide him with the satisfaction he desired.

## 3. Building Projects

<sup>4</sup> I enlarged my works: I built houses for myself, I planted vineyards for myself; <sup>5</sup> I made gardens and

parks for myself and I planted in them all kinds of fruit trees; <sup>6</sup> I made ponds of water for myself from which to irrigate a forest of growing trees.

He also completed ambitious public works projects (how satisfying it is to build something). Houses, plants, parks, pools (fountains), were designed and built during his reign.

#### 4. Sensuality

<sup>7</sup> I bought male and female slaves and I had homeborn slaves. Also I possessed flocks and herds larger than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. <sup>8</sup> Also, I collected for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I provided for myself male and female singers and the pleasures of men—many concubines.

He lists the people and things that he collected. 1 Kings 11:3 says that he had 700 wives and princesses as well as 300 concubines. He had inexhaustible erotic, sensual experiences at his disposal. He had entertainment, service and sexual variety beyond measure.

The footnote in 1 King 11:3b tells us that it was Solomon's abundance of foreign wives who, because of their idolatry not their sexuality, turned Solomon's heart away from God. Solomon was unfaithful, not because he had many wives, but because his wives and concubines were pagan.

Even with all this sensual delight he ultimately declares that these left him bored and frustrated.

## 5. The Good Life

<sup>9</sup> Then I became great and increased more than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. My wisdom also stood by me. <sup>10</sup> All that my eyes desired I did not refuse them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart was pleased because of all my labor and this was my reward for all my labor.

Solomon gives an image of himself as seen by others as one living the good life, wealthy and denying himself nothing. There were rewards for this life of pleasure:

- **Laughter** – the joy and release that comes with it.
- **Consumption of wine** – the taste and feeling it gives.
- **Building** – the sense of pride of achievement.
- **Sensual gratification** – the pleasure the body feels when stimulated by music, sex and personal service.
- **Prosperity** – satisfaction and assurance that comes with success.

These pleasures are inherently human and neither moral nor immoral. Feeling a feeling related to humor or work or sex is neutral. In verses 9-10 Solomon says that he experienced all of these feelings in their proper contexts and in great abundance (no sin there).

<sup>11</sup> Thus I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold

all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun.

In verse eleven he gives his verdict on what experiencing these great pleasures has taught him (not that pleasure is Bad!).

His conclusion is that although the "feelings" were real and the pleasure enjoyable and authentic, they did not linger and thus did not accumulate in order to produce something greater and lasting.

For example, how satisfying today is yesterday's supper, movie or sexual experience?

We have a memory of this happening and even a memory of the pleasure, but the pleasure itself is gone. Sensual pleasures cannot be accumulated or stored → they are fleeting and transitory.

We need to understand the difference between legitimate and illicit pleasure. Legitimate pleasure is momentary and leaves you only wanting more. Illicit pleasure is also momentary, but it leaves you feeling guilty and ashamed.

Solomon concludes that the pursuit of pleasure (even legitimate pleasure) is vanity because there is no gain in the pursuit of satisfaction. He declares that he was left as dissatisfied at the end of his search as he was at the beginning.

## **Summary**

The seeking after sensual pleasure is the common man's treadmill. It is this factor that keeps most people working too hard, living too fast, and dying too young. Our society is geared to providing ourselves whatever feels good as a

substitute for that which is good. We live and die in the rat race to obtain what will satisfy us, and try to achieve this by pursuing things that only make us feel good but cannot fulfill our basic needs:

- Security
- Home
- Status/Power
- Car
- Education
- Entertainment
- Clothes
- Sex
- Independence

Sometimes we delude ourselves into thinking that this striving for pleasure is really spiritual because we run the race with other Christians.

- We trade with each other.
- We display our status, clothes and wealth in front of each other.

The race we ought to be in is the race for the crown of life! This race strives for that which is good, not that which will make us feel good. Therein lies the difference between spiritually and sensuality. Solomon learned that sensuality was a dead-end for several reasons:

1. Pursuit of pleasure promises much but delivers little. Whatever promise that sensual pleasures make, they are either not as good as they promise or only

last for a short time. If they are illicit they also bring shame and guilt.

2. Pursuit of pleasure promises to improve our lives but in reality our lives are rarely changed or improved by merely sensual pleasures (no matter how much I enjoy a concert, my life is rarely changed by it). Again, if it is illicit, it makes my life worse.
3. Pursuit of pleasure promises to satisfy our needs but in the end our needs continue to place a demand on us or we often become disillusioned, feeling that our needs will never be met. If our pleasures are sinful, our needs become insatiable cravings.

I am not saying that pleasure is wrong. I am saying that legitimate pleasure is not the avenue to pursue in order to find meaning, fulfillment and satisfaction in life. Illicit pleasure is dangerous in that it destroys our ability to enjoy normal human pleasures and casts us headlong into self-destruction. God created us with the ability to enjoy pleasures of every kind, but the search for pleasure does not lead us to wholeness, peace and deep satisfaction of the soul.

We need the type of satisfaction that remains with us and is accumulated throughout a lifetime. Things that:

- Deliver what they promise
- Make us better people
- Satisfy our most basic needs

Solomon refers to them at the end of his journal (faith and sincere obedience to God). These things deliver great gifts and are a constant daily source of joy that affect every part of our being. Two others are like the first:



- Knowledge of Christ (a relationship with Him)
- Submission to the Holy Spirit.

The search for pleasure ends in disappointment, disillusionment and dissatisfaction if pursued as an avenue for satisfaction, enlightenment or joy. If this is so, one might ask, "What then is pleasure for?" Pleasure is for rejoicing and thanksgiving, rather than for hoarding or abuse. Only faith and obedience to God, a relationship with Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit can truly satisfy the deep yearnings of man. Again, someone may ask, "Why is this so?" Sensual pleasure only goes "skin-deep" and has been created for the flesh.

The yearning for peace and joy comes from man's soul and thus spiritual things are needed to satisfy these. It is a question of context. Long-term satisfaction can only be produced by long term things like faith, hope and loving service in Christ's name. Sensual pleasures, even in the most positive of settings, have been designed by God to please the flesh momentarily. Spiritual pleasure, on the other hand, was designed by God to last an eternity.



# CHAPTER 3

# THE PURSUIT OF MEANING THROUGH WORK

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We are reviewing the part of Solomon's journal where he describes his experiences and conclusions concerning the different lifestyles that he has examined.

The pursuit of pleasure has taught him that although enjoyable, pleasurable experiences cannot be accumulated in order to produce joy or satisfaction. They are fleeting and have no lasting or transformative value.

Next, he goes on to survey life lived wisely or foolishly (carefree, no thought for tomorrow) in order to see which is better. After this, he considers the idea of work and makes

notations of his findings along the way. Let us first begin with Solomon's thoughts on a life of wisdom and folly.

<sup>12</sup> So I turned to consider wisdom, madness and folly; for what will the man do who will come after the king except what has already been done? <sup>13</sup> And I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness. <sup>14</sup> The wise man's eyes are in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I know that one fate befalls them both. <sup>15</sup> Then I said to myself, "As is the fate of the fool, it will also befall me. Why then have I been extremely wise?" So I said to myself, "This too is vanity." <sup>16</sup> For there is no lasting remembrance of the wise man as with the fool, inasmuch as in the coming days all will be forgotten. And how the wise man and the fool alike die! <sup>17</sup> So I hated life, for the work which had been done under the sun was grievous to me; because everything is futility and striving after wind.

- Ecclesiastes 2:12-17

**Verses 12-14a:** Solomon remarks that he alone chooses which lifestyle he will live by (wise or foolish), no one dictates it to him. He leads as king and others merely follow. At first glance it seems that to live wisely is better. The wise man thinks, avoids the pitfalls of life and thus demonstrates the superiority of this lifestyle. The fool, on the other hand, is always in trouble, always dealing with self-inflicted problems because of his carelessness, foolishness, greed or pride.

**Verses 14b-15:** Once he goes beyond this thought however, he realizes that death will be the end of both the fool and the wise man. There is, therefore, no real advantage to living wisely because living this way cannot overcome the final destiny of all men, death. Solomon reasons that wisdom and its practice or lack of practice is also vanity because it cannot protect you against death.

**Verse 16-17:** To make matters worse, not only do both the wise and foolish die, they are both forgotten. Given enough time, both are swallowed up in history and their lives and memory are extinguished. This realization drives the author to despair.

## The pursuit of meaning through work – 2:18 - 3:22

Solomon considers not only work in this section but the result of work and the context in which a man's life is played out - time. Both chapters 2 and 3 conclude with some insights about what he has learned thus far.

### 1. The fruit of one's labor

<sup>18</sup> Thus I hated all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun, for I must leave it to the man who will come after me. <sup>19</sup> And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the fruit of my labor for which I have labored by acting wisely under the sun. This too is vanity. <sup>20</sup> Therefore I completely despaired of all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun. <sup>21</sup> When there is a man who has labored with wisdom, knowledge and skill, then he gives his legacy to one who has not labored with them. This too is vanity and a great evil. <sup>22</sup> For what does a man get in all his labor and in his striving with which he labors under the sun? <sup>23</sup> Because all his days his task is painful and grievous; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is vanity. <sup>24</sup> There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good. This also I have seen that it is from the hand of God. <sup>25</sup> For who can eat and who can have enjoyment without Him?

**2:18:** The realization that the wise and fool both die turns his attention to the work that both do. If they both die, then the fruit of their labor will be left behind (no matter how well they do it).

**2:19:** Who knows if a wise man's labor will not be left in the hands of a fool after he is gone. What, therefore, is the purpose of wise, meaningful and productive work?

**2:20-21:** Another despairing thought is the situation where a man works hard in order to accumulate wealth only for it to be left to one who did not earn the profit. Many have left their hard earned fortunes in the hands of children who never work and whose only activity is to spend what their fathers have accumulated.

**2:22-23:** Even while he is alive and active in work (which is in itself hard), he worries at night about the work itself (stress) and the concerns that he has already mentioned. Solomon knew firsthand about his own heir's propensity for foolishness and waste.

Rehoboam, Solomon's son, foolishly plunged Israel into civil war in the very first year of his reign, and had to strip the temple of its gold in order to pay off the Egyptian army to protect him from the threat of foreign invasion brought about by the turmoil that he had caused. At this point Solomon draws the first of a series of insights that he has gleaned from his observation of "work" and "time."

**Verses 24-25:** The ability to experience joy (glad satisfaction) is not related to what we do no matter how hard we work or how great our achievements. The experiences of joy, peace, and satisfaction are gifts we receive from God. Whatever satisfaction we feel from what we do is partial or fleeting. The peace, satisfaction and joy we feel as gifts from God, however, are there because we have a relationship with Him. We experience this relationship and joy in several ways:

- Salvation - the joy, relief and gratitude felt in knowing that we are forgiven for our sins.
- Hope - the confidence we have in facing trials, persecution and death as believers.
- Insight - The pure joy of having our eyes opened to the truth about life revealed through God's word.
- Love - The peace and joy that come from acting out of love - serving, bearing each other's burdens, forgiving, sharing and other actions motivated by the Spirit and not the flesh.

The "experience" of our relationship with God through Christ in whatever form it takes is the thing that produces the joy, satisfaction, peace and confidence that all of us so desperately want, and so many mistakenly seek through the pursuit of sensual pleasure or career success.

The satisfaction we search for is only possible in an "experienced" relationship with Christ, which results in an awareness of love, joy, peace and other blessings in our lives. This experience is a free gift from God to us through Christ. The mistake is thinking that we work at a variety of things and then draw on these outward things in order to create an inward experience from the outside in. We delude ourselves into thinking that if we do what we do faster, better, more efficiently and profitably - this will create the feeling of satisfaction, peace and joy.

In other words, if we improve the outside it will necessarily improve the inside. This idea is partly true because when you improve the outside, the improvement that does take place on the inside (joy, peace, etc.) is only temporary because new problems and failure to remember old lessons will require constant monitoring, tinkering and improving. For example, the reason marketers release a new and improved "Tide" detergent every few years or so is not because this

soap product does not work. They come up with a new package and promise because consumers get tired of the old Tide and want something new. Marketing consultants exist because of this weakness in people (the temporariness of satisfaction).

I believe Solomon is saying that for satisfaction, joy and peace to be lasting, it has to be developed from the inside out. It is the experience of Christ, freely given and experienced inwardly that radiates outwardly and thus enables us to enjoy the externals (the beauty of creation, the laughter of a child, the sound of music, even the old-formula Tide).

For example, the joy in my heart because of Christ makes me hear and enjoy the wind blowing in the trees while praising God who sends the wind and created the trees. Otherwise it would simply be noise, molecules, sound waves, "endless repetition without meaning" as Solomon says. My inside joy and peace color everything I see, touch and experience with either appreciation or hope. I appreciate the good, hope for future good and pray for the bad. The externals (whether work or anything else) are suffused with joy and satisfaction from the inside. I work on the inside to make lasting improvements on the outside.

<sup>26</sup> For to a person who is good in His sight He has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, while to the sinner He has given the task of gathering and collecting so that he may give to one who is good in God's sight. This too is vanity and striving after wind.

The second insight that Solomon shares at this point is: Those who are right with God derive benefit from all that they do, not only from what they succeed at. This does not mean that only Christians succeed, however, it does mean that judging by the standard of personal satisfaction, peace and



joy experienced, and not only productivity or profit -- the Christian enjoys and profits from what he does regardless of his margin of worldly success. In other words, the Christian is able to draw a greater satisfaction and joy from what he has than what the sinner is able to experience no matter what he possesses.

The sinner ultimately loses his soul and nothing he has amassed will buy it back for him. There is even no guarantee that all of his profit from hard work and worry will be there for him to enjoy while here on this earth. God has the power to turn the sinner's profit over to the believer (even if he has not earned it) if He so chooses.

Many people stress out because their role or career becomes the essence of who they are and they judge themselves according to what they do to earn a living. As Christians, however, our work is only an extension of who we are but not the source of our joy, peace or ultimate satisfaction.

Medical researchers are trying to find out why women in this generation are having more heart attacks and male oriented health problems. One answer may be that women are now evaluating their worth based on what they do, as men have traditionally done, and are reaping the negative emotional and physical consequences as a result. In addition to this, their lives are further complicated by childbearing needs while pursuing a career, and the conflict of changing traditional roles in the family home.

Men and women need to realize that roles and careers are not the essence of who they are. The essence of being is rooted in one's relationship with God and flows outward from this to color whatever one does.

## Summary

Here are the points that Solomon makes concerning his observations about work:

**1. The same joy and satisfaction that all people need to be genuinely happy and at peace are available in the same quality and quantity for everyone - no matter what they do.** They are not reserved for the rich and successful or the highly trained, but within reach for all, whether they work at The White House as President or Wal-Mart as a cashier.

**2. This joy and satisfaction is not a product of career, success or ability.** The "feeling" of satisfaction that most seek after through successful or challenging work can only be found in a relationship with God. In our time, that relationship is expressed in a relationship with Jesus Christ through obedient faith.

**3. The relationship blesses the work.** Once a person has a relationship with God, what they do, how they do it or where they do it will not alter their basic joy, peace or satisfaction. When people understand this in the context of working life – they can simply choose what suits their talents and circumstances, and do it knowing that their work is a blessing and an opportunity for satisfaction but not the source of it.

# CHAPTER 4

# A TIME FOR

# EVERYTHING

## PART 1

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Solomon documents his search for meaning by experimenting with different lifestyles and ways of thinking about life. Thus far he has examined and commented on life from the following perspectives:

1. The pursuit of sensual pleasure: Enjoyable but not profitable.
2. The life lived wisely or foolishly: Both end in death and thus no better than the other.
3. The pursuit of meaning through one's activity (work) here on earth. An experiment that yields several insights: a) Inward joy and satisfaction is a gift from God and cannot be produced simply by succeeding

at work. b) When we are right with God we derive profit not only from our own work but from everyone else's work as well. This is possible when we make an effort to appreciate another's work instead of envying it or trying to profit from it selfishly.

Solomon now explores the context in which a person's life and work is carried out - the framework of time. Before we study the text regarding time, however, we need to examine the subject of time itself.

### **What is time?**

Definition: A measurable period during which events occur.

### **Why is time so important?**

Time is not important in itself but it measures events that are irretrievable once they pass (i.e. "Cannot stop time").

### **When did time begin and when will it end?**

Concrete events and changes began with creation and thus, so did time. "In the beginning (of time)..." (Genesis 1:1). Time will end when what time measures and the instruments by which time is determined (the planets, stars) will cease to be. This will occur when Jesus returns (II Peter 3:10-11).

Solomon examines the context in which a person's life is lived out and the events that take place throughout the time that a one spends here on earth. He concludes that the events (times) in one's life are cyclical in nature and when examined, are in themselves pointless.

The reference to time and its cyclical nature are established in the first verse of chapter three.

There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven.  
- Ecclesiastes 3:1

In the following verses he will refer to 14 pairs of opposite events which occur at "appointed" times. The fact that they are mentioned in multiples of seven and that they begin with birth and death is significant. Opposites suggest the entire range of important life experiences along with everything that happens in-between these events (this is a poetic device called Merism).

Even though Solomon does not mention every conceivable event in life, the things he does mention and the way he arranges them are meant to convey the total of life and its experiences in time. Each "time" has its significance and tracks important events, but the sum total of these do not constitute the essential meaning of one's life.

## 1. Life and Death

2a A time to give birth and a time to die;

The beginning and the end of life - the experiences that reduce every life to a common denominator.

## 2. Renewal and Change

2b A time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted.

This refers not only to the growing seasons of the farmer and the cycle of preparing, planting and harvest, but also to those seasons in our lifetimes when we are in stages of growth, development, learning, re-thinking old ideas and the consideration of new ones.

### 3. Destruction and Restoration

<sup>3a</sup> A time to kill and a time to heal;

In that day and time an individual could avenge the killing of a family member (Avenger of Blood - Numbers 35:6-34). Solomon says that there was a time for this type of justice, and at other times, restoration and healing were the order of the day (e.g. Mephibosheth - Jonathan's son, crippled in both feet, and potential heir and challenger to David's throne). King David, because of an oath to his friend Jonathan, spared Mephibosheth and provided him with support all of his life.

### 4. Demolish and Rebuild

<sup>3b</sup> A time to tear down and a time to build up.

The cycle of rebuilding, remodeling and modernizing not only buildings but lives as well.

### 5. Sorrow and Joy

<sup>4a</sup> A time to weep and a time to laugh;

Life is a continuous cycle of events that create one or the other. Many times we make ourselves miserable because we try to avoid sorrow or see it as an aberration in life and thus learn nothing from it. Solomon, however, says that it is a natural part of life and has its own time and value.

## 6. Mourn and Dance

<sup>4b</sup> A time to mourn and a time to dance.

Again, the cycle of the various passages life takes us through - birth, death, marriage, divorce, success, failure etc.

## 7. Select and Reject

<sup>5a</sup> A time to throw stones and a time to gather stones;

This could refer to the process of gathering building materials that are suitable. The idea is that there are moments when we choose our careers, friends, homes etc. and times to reject what is before us. We do not have to go through every open door or take advantage of every seeming opportunity. There is a time to consolidate and stay put as well as a time to start anew.

## 8. Embrace and Confront

<sup>5b</sup> A time to embrace and a time to shun embracing.

Some moments call for warm relationships and loving interaction while other times bring us into confrontation, rebuke and conflict.

## 9. Search and Abandon

<sup>6a</sup> A time to search and a time to give up as lost;

There needs to be a willingness to acknowledge when there is no longer the possibility of success in a mission, project or search. There is a time to work hard and push ahead, and then a time to say, "This is not going to work; or this is not worth the risk; or there is no longer any chance of success."

## 10. Keep and Discard

<sup>6b</sup> A time to keep and a time to throw away.

This does not only refer to the "garage sale" mentality but also to our own ideas and circumstances. Paul says that he "...put away childish things" (1Corinthians 13:11-13) referring to the sorting out of what is valuable or useless in our lives. There are times when we need to adjust to new ideas, situations and goals in life, and this usually requires the letting go of attitudes and beliefs that are either no longer true or no longer profitable for our emotional and spiritual development.

## 11. Grief and Resolution

<sup>7a</sup> A time to tear apart and a time to sew together;

The tearing apart could refer to the custom "rending" one's clothing done to signify grief and mourning over the loss of loved ones, dignity, health etc. Sewing the torn clothing was



a sign that the period of grieving was over. In life, it is normal that we eventually experience both stages. Not to do so restricts our emotional development.

## 12. Silence and Speaking Out

<sup>7b</sup> A time to be silent and a time to speak.

There are legitimate times to voice our concerns and stand up for what is right; at other times it may be best and loving to remain quiet.

## 13. Love and Hate

<sup>8a</sup> A time to love and a time to hate;

In life we experience both times of friendship, love, warmth as well as periods of injustice, oppression and prejudice.

## 14. War and Peace

<sup>8b</sup> A time for war and a time for peace.

Again, this world continues in a cycle of conflicts and wars followed by periods of peace. These were present in Solomon's day and will continue until the end of time. The only difference from one time to the next is the intensity and duration of either period.

## The Main Question

<sup>9</sup> What profit is there to the worker from that in which he toils?

Solomon reviews the whole of man's experience in the context of time and seeks to find out what all of these experiences mean or lead to. The answer (implied) is that there is no profit or point. The sum total of man's experiences measured in the time of his life amount to nothing more than a cycle of events common to all people (e.g. Everybody lives and dies; loves and hates etc.).

## The Main Conclusion

<sup>10</sup> I have seen the task which God has given the sons of men with which to occupy themselves. <sup>11</sup> He has made everything appropriate in its time. He has also set eternity in their heart, yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end.

If there is no profit to the sum of man's experiences in time then what is the point of it all? The point that Solomon discovers is that meaning can only be found beyond man's experience or point of view. Human experience in time is fully understood only within a divine context, not a human one. In other words, time only makes sense when considered within an eternal framework. Solomon, looking at time within eternity, draws three main conclusions:

## **1. God has made everything appropriate (beautiful - Hebrew) in its time.**

There is order in the seasons as well as in our lives. From the eternal perspective every event and experience in time works for God's purpose and is appropriate because of that reason. Only when we see these events from a limited time perspective do they become chaotic or meaningless. Seen from an eternal viewpoint, however, time (and what takes place in time) finally takes on meaning.

## **2. God has put eternity into our hearts.**

We cannot accept our own finiteness because we have been created in the image of an eternal being. This vision of eternity is what fuels our curiosity about tomorrow or what the distant stars are like. However, none of our discoveries about tomorrow or the universe can ever give meaning to the whole without reference to God.

All the parts of life, when put together, do not equal something meaningful. To have meaning you have to add the part or Person who is outside of time. Our yearning for eternity and eternal life can only be satisfied by discovering the person, the work and the salvation found in Jesus Christ. This is why Jesus says that He is yesterday, today and tomorrow: We only understand eternity and its meaning when we accept Christ, who is both the author of time and beyond time (Col. 1:15-17).

## **3. We cannot discover God's total work.**

Even though we have a sense of eternity built into our nature, and God reveals His ultimate plan for us (salvation through Christ), we are still and will always be, less than He is. This means that we will never know Him completely and never know all that He has done. This should immediately

humble us without reservation forever. This humility, however, will enable us to grasp the full meaning of our own life found and experienced in Jesus Christ (Matthew 8:8-13).

# CHAPTER 5

# A TIME FOR

# EVERYTHING

## PART 2

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In his journal, Solomon has described the various ways he has sought for satisfaction and joy apart from God.

- He has pursued wisdom and found that increased wisdom only brings increased pain and grief.
- He has pursued pleasure and found it to be empty.
- He has examined the prudent and foolish life and seen that both end in death.
- He has sought meaning in work and discovered that work is hard, not always profitable and its accomplishments cannot be brought beyond the grave.
- He has even examined life "events" and found no meaning in them other than the fact that they are cyclical in nature and pointless in the end.

Solomon's general conclusion thus far is that life, lived apart from God, is pointless. In his journal Solomon offers conclusions not only at the end of his journey but along the way as well. For example, in a flash of insight he informs us that God has actually designed life to be this way. Charles Swindoll, in his book about Ecclesiastes entitled, "On the Ragged Edge" says,

*"God has created us with a God shaped vacuum that only He can fill. And until He does, life is little more than hell on earth."*

In the balance of chapter three Solomon offers some final thoughts on the search for meaning in the events of one's life lived on earth. He shares both positive and negative insights.

## **A Vertical View – 3:11-15**

If man is able to look beyond the events or "time" of this life on earth and develop a vertical viewpoint (one that sees life from an eternal perspective) he will discover certain things. Solomon lists these in the next few verses.

### **1. God is able to make sense from chaos**

<sup>11</sup> He has made everything appropriate in its time. He has also set eternity in their heart, yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end.

The presence of God gives appropriate meaning and purpose for everything that He has made:

- Ps. 19:1 – The stars exist to declare His glory.

- Ps. 150:6 – The voices and noises of all life are there to praise him.
- Ps. 8:28 – All events, whether good or bad, serve His purpose. For those who believe, the advantage is that all events ultimately work for good. For disbelievers everything taken together is meaningless.

In creating us, God has made beings that live in the context of time, but in fashioning us in His likeness He has enabled us to transcend the dimension of time and look into eternity. This is something that plants, minerals and animals cannot do.

Q. How does one who is temporal become eternal, and he who has a beginning have no end?

A. In the same way that all spiritual matters are seen and accomplished. By faith I accept that God will do this for me just as He produced a son from the dead womb of ninety year old Sarah, and resurrected a very dead Lazarus after four days in the tomb. By faith I believe that in the twinkling of an eye I will be raised from the dead to live forever (1Corinthians 15:52).

## 2. God enables us to enjoy life

<sup>12</sup> I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and to do good in one's lifetime; <sup>13</sup> moreover, that every man who eats and drinks sees good in all his labor—it is the gift of God.

The presence of God motivates us to do what is right and find purpose in our existence, thus bringing us joy. That men do good, that they find meaning in their lives, that they enjoy

the blessings of earth are gifts from God because altruism, work and abundance without God cannot sustain happiness. It is God's presence in the midst of these that generates lasting satisfaction. Being rich does lead to a certain type of happiness but only for a short while.

### 3. God provokes us to worship Him

<sup>14</sup> I know that everything God does will remain forever; there is nothing to add to it and there is nothing to take from it, for God has so worked that men should fear Him. <sup>15</sup> That which is has been already and that which will be has already been, for God seeks what has passed by.

Man can violate the environment, try to manage or save it, but he cannot improve it. God has so made creation that exploration of it always leads to greater respect and praise for Him. We keep learning that which has been learned before but the whole continues to elude us because God is always and will always be greater than His creation. God continues to demonstrate this to the believer to his joy and praise.

## A Horizontal View - vs. 16-22

Solomon now leaves the vertical view of life and returns to a more horizontal view of things as seen by one who only considers life from an earthly perspective. A strictly horizontal view breeds:



## Cynicism

<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, I have seen under the sun that in the place of justice there is wickedness and in the place of righteousness there is wickedness.

When looking at life from a horizontal perspective, Solomon's first observation is one of cynicism. Cynicism is a sense of disillusionment or a feeling that no good exists. In most cases cynicism occurs when there is injustice or oppression that goes unpunished for too long, and for this reason often leads to despair.

Solomon mentions the cause for his cynicism in several places in his journal:

<sup>1</sup> Then I looked again at all the acts of oppression which were being done under the sun. And behold I saw the tears of the oppressed and that they had no one to comfort them; and on the side of their oppressors was power, but they had no one to comfort them. <sup>2</sup> So I congratulated the dead who are already dead more than the living who are still living. <sup>3</sup> But better off than both of them is the one who has never existed, who has never seen the evil activity that is done under the sun.  
- Ecclesiastes 4:1-3

If you see oppression of the poor and denial of justice and righteousness in the province, do not be shocked at the sight; for one official watches over another official, and there are higher officials over them.  
- Ecclesiastes 5:8

All this I have seen and applied my mind to every deed that has been done under the sun wherein a man has

exercised authority over another man to his hurt.  
- Ecclesiastes 8:9

He sees that in life there is not always a happy ending. There is injustice at every level of society and no satisfaction or comfort for those at the top or bottom of the system. It seems that the best option is to never have been born than to live under unjust oppression all of one's life. From this perspective, therefore, the horizontal view of life (without God's help or ultimate justice and reward) easily and inevitably leads to cynicism.

## **Solutions to Cynicism – vs. 17-21**

Solomon compares cynicism to the vertical view of life. He also offers some ways to deal with the despairing cynicism caused by the strictly horizontal view of life. When this horizontal view becomes discouraging, remember the following:

### **1. Injustice is temporary**

<sup>17</sup> I said to myself, "God will judge both the righteous man and the wicked man," for a time for every matter and for every deed is there.

No matter how bad it is, God will execute justice one day. Everyone will be judged and no one will escape the judgment. Justice is only delayed not cancelled, therefore, we need to commit our hurts and offenses to God who will make a righteous and final judgment on behalf of the aggrieved.

## 2. Injustice condemns man

<sup>18</sup> I said to myself concerning the sons of men, "God has surely tested them in order for them to see that they are but beasts." <sup>19</sup> For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same. As one dies so dies the other; indeed, they all have the same breath and there is no advantage for man over beast, for all is vanity. <sup>20</sup> All go to the same place. All came from the dust and all return to the dust. <sup>21</sup> Who knows that the breath of man ascends upward and the breath of the beast descends downward to the earth?

The justice of God will judge those who have acted like beasts in devouring others through injustice. Here, Solomon inserts a parenthetical statement concerning a comparison between men and animals. Since both humans and animals die and return to dust, the horizontal thinker may believe that this justifies him acting like a beast while alive (the ultimate danger of the theory of evolution is that it considers all men and animals to be nothing more than beasts).

However, Solomon asks the question in vs. 21 - How do you know that true difference between man and beast will only be seen after the grave as one remains dust (animal) but the other (man) ascends to God for judgment, and then it will be too late?!

You may act like an animal and die like an animal, but doing so does not mean that you will not be judged like a man! A life of injustice will condemn a man as acting like a beast. However, unlike a beast who remains dust, a man's soul will go and face God for having acted like a beast rather than like a man who is made in God's image.

## Hope Beyond Cynicism

<sup>22</sup> I have seen that nothing is better than that man should be happy in his activities, for that is his lot. For who will bring him to see what will occur after him?

Solomon's conclusion in the final verse is to face injustice (we all suffer from it personally or corporately to a greater or lesser degree) and accept one's lot in life with optimism.

He does not advise his readers to:

- Try to understand the why of their circumstances.
- Retaliate with bitterness or cynicism.
- Retreat in resentful silence.

He says that we may not be able to alter our lot in life but we can change our response to it. All of us experience injustices that tempt us to become cynical and depressed. When this happens, here are three questions to ask ourselves in order to change that hopeless cynicism into hopeful realism:

**1. What exactly is your unjust disadvantage?** Sometimes we exaggerate petty irritations and allow our feelings to grow out of proportion in comparison to the actual situation. It is helpful at these times to articulate what, exactly, has been done to us that has caused our anger and hurt. Matching the seriousness of the situation and the intensity of our reaction is usually the first step in finding a reasonable resolution.

**2. When do you plan to replace passive self-pity with active courage?** Resolution begins with prayer and is followed with action on those things that are doable, no matter how small (small steps before big steps). The key is

to begin. Take the first step even if you are not sure what the second step is going to be. Let the Lord work in your life!

**3. How can God use you?** The Lord uses everything in your life for His purpose. Seek for ways that God can use your disadvantage to His advantage. Let Him use your pain, your failure and your struggle for someone else's victory.

Many times the element that makes the circumstances constructive or destructive is your attitude. We cannot always change circumstances, but we can change our attitude about our circumstances. It is not circumstances that glorify God or inspires others; it is attitude, because faith shines forth not in events but in the way people respond to events. Changing our attitude can change us from being cynical to hopeful.



# CHAPTER 6

# A VIEW

# FROM THE TOP

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In our last several chapters we have explored the various lifestyles that Solomon pursued in his quest for satisfaction and joy. These were pleasure, wisdom, folly, different views of work and the seasons of a person's life.

One final area that Solomon commented on was the pursuit and exercise of power and wealth. He begins the exploration of this area in chapter 4:1-8 by stating the idea that, "What you see is not necessarily what you get." Charles Swindoll summarizes this passage in his book, "Living on the Ragged Edge," by saying:

***The Lonely Whine of the Top Dog.***

*We have been inundated with books, seminars, courses, and speeches on the subject of top-level management and success-oriented leadership. The hype has never been greater nor the lure more effective. Indeed, we have largely been convinced that the achievement of an impressive position brings lasting satisfaction and a*

*liberating sense of pleasure. But for the executive, the proverbial pot of gold at the end of the rainbow is not what it appears to be. More often than not, managers have head-on collisions with intense pressure, political rivalry, economic anxiety, and inescapable loneliness. Centuries ago, King Solomon addressed the emptiness of those who make it to the top of their profession. His words live on today. They can make a difference in our lives if we will hear them well and heed their cry.*

Solomon lived in the real world of politics, power and wealth. He observed military and political rivalries as well as the pursuit of great wealth and power by those around him.

Solomon's own rise to power was full of intrigue as his brothers jockeyed for position while David, Solomon's father, grew old and feeble. It was only after his mother, Bathsheba, and Nathan, the prophet, planned to save Solomon's life by having him installed as king before the other brothers were anointed and could mount a power base (1 Kings 1:1ff).

Solomon got rid of his enemies and increased his wealth and influence through government control and heavy taxation. He was no stranger to the fierce competition that takes place at the top, and in his journal he gives us an idea of what the view is like from there.

From his perch, he sees three things:

## **1. Oppression – 4:1-3**

<sup>1</sup> Then I looked again at all the acts of oppression which were being done under the sun. And behold I saw the tears of the oppressed and that they had no one to comfort them; and on the side of their oppressors was power, but they had no one to comfort them.



He does not describe this in detail but makes a general reference to the oppression taking place in his day.

- The word oppression means to "press against."
- To treat with unjust harshness, tyranny.
- To cause mental and physical hardship.

Oppression is often seen in rulers thirsty for power and landowners greedy for wealth. Solomon makes an interesting observation concerning the oppressors and the oppressed:

- Those who are oppressed suffer and have no one to rescue or comfort them. The injustice they suffer is unbearable because they are powerless.
- Those who are doing the oppressing have power (power to change things if they wanted to) but, like the oppressed, have no one to comfort them either.

The idea is that both die and neither can escape or be comforted through this injustice.

<sup>2</sup> So I congratulated the dead who are already dead more than the living who are still living.

If this be true (there is no comfort), then one is better off dead because at least in death neither the pain of oppression nor the fear of death exists.

<sup>3</sup> But better off than both of them is the one who has never existed, who has never seen the evil activity that is done under the sun.

As an afterthought Solomon expresses the idea that since the world is filled with this kind of evil it is better to not even be born, this way one never sees the evil that exists. Many have used this same argument to defend their decision not to have children, believing that this present world is the worst of places and our times the most dangerous. This is an example of horizontal thinking (without reference to God) that has remained with us for over 2700 years!

Another thing Solomon sees from the top:

## 2. Envy - vs. 4-6

You would think that success, power and climbing the ladder would produce contentment, but much of the time it only creates envy.

<sup>4</sup> I have seen that every labor and every skill which is done is the result of rivalry between a man and his neighbor. This too is vanity and striving after wind.

Solomon explains that much of the time success kindles envy in others, and rivalries occur when those who strive for power and wealth do so in order to overtake others or not to be surpassed themselves. In other words, the primary motive for the striving that some do for success is not so they can right injustices or have influence to balance the inequalities of the more unfortunate, it is to feed egos, to protect fragile self-images and to insulate self from the suffering of others. This striving and pushing for the top is vain and often provokes others to jealousy. The end result is profitless for everyone at the top and at the bottom as well.

<sup>5</sup> The fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh.

Solomon now contrasts the person with selfish ambition to the one who does not strive for anything. The lazy man (folding of hands is a reference to sleep) wastes his life (consumes his own flesh). The lazy man wastes his life away by not caring about anything.

<sup>6</sup> One hand full of rest is better than two fists full of labor and striving after wind.

The balanced person is the one who is content (one handful) with what he has. If a man is satisfied with what he has, he will have quietness (peace, satisfaction, freedom from envy of another's position and success). What good is having a lot or being at the top if you are not at peace with yourself?

Speaking of contentment, here are a few simple rules about being satisfied with what you have and how to achieve this state.

### **Keep your eyes on your own stuff!**

- Exodus 20:17 - "Thou shall not covet..."
- Keep your attention focused on your life, family, work and possessions.
- This does not mean you cannot admire or like what others have, but keep your focus on what you have, not what you do not have or what others have.

## Give thanks for what you have.

- Before you ask for anything, make a careful inventory of what you already have big and small (e.g. You've never had cancer or a heart attack, the fact that your nose works and you can walk, you have indoor plumbing, access to schools and hospitals etc.).
- You will be amazed at how well off you are. The giving of thanks is a healthy spiritual exercise that is an enjoyable experience and one that pleases God.

## Ask for what you need instead of complaining about what you do not have.

- Discouragement, envy, rivalry etc. take place when we feel we are not getting our fair share of the blessings.
- We ask, "Why him and not me?"

<sup>1</sup> What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? <sup>2</sup> You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. <sup>3</sup> You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.

- James 4:1-3

Do not ask while comparing yourself to others (i.e. I want what he has - this is asking God to satisfy your lust). Ask for the things you need. The secret to the abundant and successful life is finding out what you really need, not simply

what you desire. When you truly discover this, God will grant it to your joy and satisfaction. For example, many times we ask for more money when what we need is more self-control. We ask for an end to suffering when what we need is to find a closer relationship to God through suffering.

One final thing Solomon sees from the top:

### 3. Disillusionment – vs. 7-8

<sup>7</sup> Then I looked again at vanity under the sun. <sup>8</sup> There was a certain man without a dependent, having neither a son nor a brother, yet there was no end to all his labor. Indeed, his eyes were not satisfied with riches and he never asked, "And for whom am I laboring and depriving myself of pleasure?" This too is vanity and it is a grievous task.

Here, Solomon shares a reflective moment that such a "top dog" might have - questioning the reason why he fights so hard to get to and stay on top when there is no real purpose for it since when he dies no one will benefit from his hard work. The sad thing about this is that most people in this position rarely have this insight and when they do there is no recourse but to keep "playing the game." (e.g. When compulsive gamblers play, even when they know that the game is rigged, because what they love is the thrill of gambling and not the winning).

## Summary

Solomon's view from the top is rather bleak:

1. "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely" - someone said, and Solomon sees oppression as something that is simply part of the game at the top.
2. Success is often bred by envy, and creates jealousy and rivalry. The best success, however, is contentment.
3. Life at the top is often lonely and full of disillusionment. It is never what it was promised to be, but if it is all you know, you will die trying to protect your top spot.

We live in a fast-paced society with a competitive spirit. Competition is not wrong when it is used as a tool to produce excellence. Power is not wrong when it is used to bless the powerless. Wealth is not wrong when it is seen as a stewardship from God for His service. It is natural for us as human beings to aim and strive for certain goals in life. Here, therefore, are some goals to aim for in order to avoid loneliness and disillusionment if you make it to the top:

1. Aim for contentment each day, not increased production.
2. Strive to be useful wherever you are, not to be #1.
3. Work at being faithful (to God, spouse, friends, work etc.) not faultless or perfect.

Do these and whether you are at the top or bottom, you will be fine.

# CHAPTER 7

# ONE PLUS ONE

# EQUALS SURVIVAL

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In his journal, Solomon has described the different lifestyles that he pursued in the search for happiness and contentment apart from a relationship with God.

In his experiment with wealth and power he concludes that life at the "top" is filled with grief (oppression, envy, disillusionment). In the section we will study now he will summarize the most common feeling experienced by those at the top of any enterprise: loneliness. He discovers that the ironic thing about loneliness is that no amount of success can insulate one from this feeling.

In these few verses he describes the antidote for loneliness and how this antidote, just like the loneliness itself, is

available for everyone whether they are at the top or at the bottom.

The word loneliness refers to both a perception and an emotion. The perception of loneliness is that of being on one's own; without connections to other individuals through friendship, family, shared history, ideals or common objectives.

One of the most difficult problems experienced by newly arrived immigrants, for example, is loneliness since they are cut off from both friends and family as well as country, politics, history and ideals that their former dwellings provided. The further you move and the more often you change, the greater the perception of separateness or loneliness. Loneliness not only has a face and image but also has a heart or feeling. Loneliness is felt in a variety of ways (e.g. fear, anger, anxiety, heaviness, sorrow, discouragement). The emotion of loneliness is usually dictated by the cause of the separation. For example, loneliness caused by culture shock usually feels like anxiety, discouragement and a sense of unreality. Loneliness caused by forced separation like death, divorce or a dispute feels like anger, fear and sorrow.

Loneliness is a normal part of life. It is like a small island that we sometimes inhabit as the seasons of our lives change, and since our lives do inevitably change we need to recognize that we will often visit the island of loneliness for periods of time. The danger is making a permanent home for ourselves there. We know we have been on the island of loneliness too long when we hear ourselves say things like:

### **1. "Why don't people love me and help me?"**

This question suggests that we are shifting the responsibility for our loneliness onto everyone else's shoulders but ourselves. We begin to deal with our loneliness by blaming others for it.



## **2. "If only other people realized how difficult things are for me."**

This statement is a cover for attention getting strategies. Most of the time we want people to listen to our problems without trying to find any solutions. In this type of situation we deal with loneliness through self-pity.

## **3. "Nobody cares. I am all alone in this."**

This is not a question, it is an attitude. It is a type of pride that assumes one's own problems are greater and more complex than anyone else's. Here we struggle with loneliness by wearing it as a badge. We develop a type of martyr complex.

We cannot leave the island of loneliness:

- By blaming others for putting us there.
- By sitting under a palm tree and feeling sorry for ourselves.
- By stoic self-resignation.

We eventually leave the island by calling out for help:

- Send up a smoke signal.
- Drop a note in a bottle.
- Paddle out to the next island and seek out the one who is there.

## Solutions to Loneliness (4:9-12)

Solomon recognized that loneliness afflicted everyone - even the people at the top (suggesting that he too may have been lonely) and that the solution to loneliness and feelings of alienation was the simple acknowledgment that we need companionship. This was ironic coming from Solomon since he had 1000 wives and concubines!

We cannot enjoy life to the fullest as loners. People have been created to function at their very best in the company of other people. Adam knew God and fellowshiped with Him and the creation alone, but until there was another human being created to be like him and with him - he was lonely. Have you ever noticed that in the scenes depicting heaven, we are never pictured enjoying eternity in solitary union with God but in the fellowship of the saints and angels?

In Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 Solomon reiterates this truth and gives three reasons why friends are necessary and companionship is the antidote to loneliness.

<sup>9</sup> Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor.

Solomon, as is his usual style, states the conclusion first. It is better to go through life with someone else than to go at it alone. He is not only referring to marriage here, but every morally responsible relationship available to man. Life is tough and we need help to get through it.

Even the Lone Ranger was not alone, he had Tonto! Robinson Crusoe would not have kept his sanity without his man, Friday. The worst punishment in prison is solitary confinement.

The next verses contain three reasons why companionship (and not money, sex, power or prestige) is the answer to loneliness.

## **1. One can encourage when the other is weak.**

<sup>10</sup> For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up.

We would not need friends if we never made mistakes, never sinned or were never sick. Friends are our guard against being totally overwhelmed by illness, trouble and the negative circumstances in our lives. Nothing is more enjoyable than helping a friend, and nothing is more humbling and spiritually maturing than allowing ourselves to be ministered to by our friends.

## **2. The sum is greater than the parts.**

<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm alone?

There are things I cannot do by myself or for myself, but can accomplish with the help of my friends. It can be business or the development of certain elements in my personality. We need friends to make us whole in various areas of our lives. We need friends to help us raise our children, celebrate our victories and mourn our losses. Friends divide the workload and multiply the joy.

### 3. We need protection.

<sup>12a</sup> And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him.

We need protection from physical as well as spiritual danger in this world. I need my friend to defend me when others are gossiping against me. My car has problems, and my friends who know about cars protect me from being cheated at some dishonest garage. Solomon concludes by extending his thought in verse 12b.

A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart.

If two friends are good, three are even better. The point is that the way to leave the island of loneliness is to build a bridge of escape one friend at a time.

### Summary

Solomon teaches us that loneliness can strike at the top or at the bottom, but the antidote is to cultivate companionship wherever we are on the ladder of success because:

- Companions help calm the storms of life.
- Companions reassure us when we are vulnerable or exposed.
- Companions take our part when others try to take us apart.

I believe that more than anything else in my Christian life, the Christian friends that my wife and I have made have been

the cure for much of the loneliness that we have experienced because of our conversion, our work in the ministry and the many moves that we have made in service to our calling.

We cannot make it through days of disillusionment and times of trouble without friends. When it comes to loneliness, many times one person plus one friend often equals survival.



# CHAPTER 8

# WORSHIP ATTITUDE

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So far Solomon has been giving us the bleak results of a life dedicated to finding meaning and satisfaction without God. In chapter five there is an abrupt change as he makes some comments about worshipping God properly and goes on to talk about materialism, the arch-enemy of spirituality. He will conclude in chapter six with a portrait of his own life and some advice that he gives based on his experiences so far.

Without any explanation, Solomon leaves off the description of his lifestyle and begins to warn his readers about the proper attitude they should have at worship.

## Pay attention to what you are doing

<sup>5:1</sup> Guard your steps as you go to the house of God and draw near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools; for they do not know they are doing evil.

When preparing for worship, realize that you are going to worship almighty God the creator and judge of the world. Lack of preparation or attention is disrespectful and dangerous. God speaks to us through the sermon, the prayers, the songs and the teaching so we should be aware and listening for Him as He speaks to us.

## Guard your mind

<sup>2</sup> Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought to bring up a matter in the presence of God. For God is in heaven and you are on the earth; therefore let your words be few. <sup>3</sup> For the dream comes through much effort and the voice of a fool through many words.

<sup>7</sup> For in many dreams and in many words there is emptiness. Rather, fear God.

When you pray, do not be too quick to ask or blame God for things. He is really listening! Give as much respect in your prayers as you would if you had an interview with a prospective employer or high official.

Let your yes be yes and no be no with God. He is not impressed with repeated words or the number of prayers. It is honesty, devotion and faith that He wants in prayer, not eloquence or volume. Also, when you are in worship, fear God and do not drift or daydream. Stay focused. It is easy for



the mind to wander, become distracted, or make rash promises and statements in prayer. Solomon says that when you worship you should be calm, focused on God and offer simple, honest prayers to Him.

## Keep your promises

If you offer God your life, do not take it back. If you promise to give up something, do not start it again. If you tell Him you are going to do something, make sure that you do it - Why?

## God remembers

<sup>4</sup> When you make a vow to God, do not be late in paying it; for He takes no delight in fools. Pay what you vow! <sup>5</sup> It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. <sup>6</sup> Do not let your speech cause you to sin and do not say in the presence of the messenger of God that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry on account of your voice and destroy the work of your hands?

Asking God's blessing on what you propose to do and then not do it, or repenting of a sin and then going back to it leads to judgment because God remembers all of our prayers and promises, and will hold us accountable. Solomon says that if you are not sure, you are better off not saying or vowing anything. Jesus says that we should not make vows because we are too weak to keep them perfectly. Better we answer with a simple yes or no than make elaborate promises.

James 4:15 says that our commitments to the Lord should be based on our dependence on Him to help us carry them through "...if the Lord is willing...".

# Folly of Riches – vs. 5:8-20

After his comments about worship, Solomon goes on to discuss what he has learned about the pursuit of wealth and power. In verses 8-17 he lists 5 principles concerning the pursuit of wealth:

## 1. Absolute power corrupts

<sup>8</sup> If you see oppression of the poor and denial of justice and righteousness in the province, do not be shocked at the sight; for one official watches over another official, and there are higher officials over them. <sup>9</sup> After all, a king who cultivates the field is an advantage to the land.

In other words, as the rich get richer and more powerful their tendency is to neglect, not help the poor. God desires that a powerful leader should "cultivate" his people, meaning he should help them to grow and develop a good life.

## 2. Greater wealth does not equal greater satisfaction

<sup>10</sup> He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves abundance with its income. This too is vanity.

If anyone could have felt satisfaction from wealth, it was Solomon. He was the richest and wisest man in the world at the time. He concludes that the amassing of wealth does not increase satisfaction. On the contrary, greater riches only produce the desire to have even more money.

### 3. More money = more worries

<sup>11</sup> When good things increase, those who consume them increase. So what is the advantage to their owners except to look on? <sup>12</sup> The sleep of the working man is pleasant, whether he eats little or much; but the full stomach of the rich man does not allow him to sleep.

The more you have, the more you have to take care of, protect, count, service and replace. You lose sleep because of the fear of losing what you have or because of the work required to maintain what you have.

To all appearances the life of the wealthy seems relaxed and carefree, but the truth is that on the inside wealthy people are plagued with frustration, anxiety, discontentment and loneliness - and they worry about losing their stuff!

### 4. You cannot take it with you

<sup>13</sup> There is a grievous evil which I have seen under the sun: riches being hoarded by their owner to his hurt. <sup>14</sup> When those riches were lost through a bad investment and he had fathered a son, then there was nothing to support him. <sup>15</sup> As he had come naked from his mother's womb, so will he return as he came. He will take nothing from the fruit of his labor that he can carry in his hand.

There is a popular saying derived from this passage, "You cannot take it with you." No matter how hard you work and how much you hoard, there is no guarantee that you will keep what you have acquired, and you will definitely have to let it go when you die.

## 5. Those who live high, die hard

<sup>16</sup> This also is a grievous evil—exactly as a man is born, thus will he die. So what is the advantage to him who toils for the wind? <sup>17</sup> Throughout his life he also eats in darkness with great vexation, sickness and anger.

If wealth is what you pursue, then your life will be filled with discontentment (fail or succeed), and your death will be hard. It will be hard because money is no comfort to those who are dying.

In the final verses (18-20) Solomon goes on to contrast three gifts that we receive if we have the right attitude about wealth.

### A - God gives true enjoyment

<sup>18</sup> Here is what I have seen to be good and fitting: to eat, to drink and enjoy oneself in all one's labor in which he toils under the sun during the few years of his life which God has given him; for this is his reward.

The ability to enjoy what you have is a gift that God gives those who have the right attitude about wealth.

### B - God enables fulfillment in your work

<sup>19</sup> Here is what I have seen to be good and fitting: to eat, to drink and enjoy oneself in all one's labor in which he toils under the sun during the few years of his life which God has given him; for this is his reward.

A right attitude about your work and career will enable you to find satisfaction in what you actually do, not just what you would like to do. (Grass is greener on the other side syndrome)

### **C - God provides general contentment**

<sup>20</sup> For he will not often consider the years of his life, because God keeps him occupied with the gladness of his heart.

Satisfaction and inner peace will find those who focus on the Lord instead of focusing on what they do not have or acquiring more of what they do have.

The blessings of enjoyment, fulfillment and contentment are the worthwhile things of life that money cannot buy - all freely given by God.

## **Self-Portrait – 6:1-12**

In chapter six Solomon becomes introspective and gives us a portrait of himself as the king who pursued all of these things. In verses 1-9 he says that he is depressed for several reasons:

<sup>1</sup> There is an evil which I have seen under the sun and it is prevalent among men — <sup>2</sup> a man to whom God has given riches and wealth and honor so that his soul lacks nothing of all that he desires; yet God has not empowered him to eat from them, for a foreigner enjoys them. This is vanity and a severe affliction. <sup>3</sup> If a man fathers a hundred children and lives many years, however many they be, but his soul is not satisfied with good things and he does not even have a proper burial,

then I say, "Better the miscarriage than he, <sup>4</sup> for it comes in futility and goes into obscurity; and its name is covered in obscurity. <sup>5</sup> It never sees the sun and it never knows anything; it is better off than he. <sup>6</sup> Even if the other man lives a thousand years twice and does not enjoy good things—do not all go to one place?"

<sup>7</sup> All a man's labor is for his mouth and yet the appetite is not satisfied. <sup>8</sup> For what advantage does the wise man have over the fool? What advantage does the poor man have, knowing how to walk before the living? <sup>9</sup> What the eyes see is better than what the soul desires. This too is futility and a striving after wind.

**6:1-2** -He is not able to fully enjoy all that God has given him. The "foreigner" mentioned here can be an enemy, a disease or a depressed spirit, but something is in the way of his contentment. We know that his lack of full devotion to the Lord is what has blocked his enjoyment and peace. He has everything, but he cannot enjoy it.

**6:3-5** - He has lost children and even replacing them with many others cannot create the joy he is missing.

**6:6** - Long life or short life are the same, they both end in death.

**7-9** - He is weary of not being satisfied with what he has, and wearier still of continually wanting more. Better he should be content with what he has, but he is not.

In the final verses he makes some realistic observations concerning his own life and condition.

## 1. God is sovereign

<sup>10a</sup> Whatever exists has already been named,

Naming something denotes sovereignty (God named Adam, Adam named the animals etc.) Everything has been "named" so Solomon concedes that no matter how great he is, there is always someone greater.

## 2. Man is not sovereign

<sup>10b</sup> and it is known what man is;

This suggests that man will never be sovereign, will always be in a position of inferiority before God so there is no room for pride here.

## 3. Disputing with God is a waste of time

<sup>10c</sup> for he cannot dispute with him who is stronger than he is. <sup>11</sup> For there are many words which increase futility. What then is the advantage to a man?

God's ways are not our ways. We do not have to understand. Our job is to believe and obey - His way is always the best for us in the end. Solomon finishes in verse 12 by saying that no one knows what life will bring, how it will end or what will come after. What is not said is that God knows and cares, and faith is what He wants, not debate.

## Summary

Chapter 6 of Ecclesiastes completes the first major part of this book. In these chapters Solomon has examined life from every angle and experimented with every human desire in order to find satisfaction, happiness and true contentment, but to no avail. He has only discovered disillusionment, discontentment and depression. This dead-end forces him to begin looking in another direction for the peace and joy he desires.

Solomon goes from looking strictly in a horizontal direction (on earth, with earthly things) to a vertical or upward direction towards God for answers. In chapter 7 we will see him begin to look beyond the physical to the spiritual for answers, and note some of the things he discovers.



# CHAPTER 9

# WISDOM PROVERBS

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In the first six chapters of Ecclesiastes we see the fruit of Solomon's rebellion. He disobeyed God in marrying foreign wives and they led him away from the Lord. To compensate for this loss, Solomon tried to find satisfaction in a variety of worldly ways. By chapter six he has exhausted his search and acknowledges that his results are empty.

In chapter seven we see Solomon turning again to God as he begins to write about true wisdom. He does this in the form of proverbs and uses a literary device known as parallelism.

## Parallelism

Parallelism is a literary device used to accentuate or highlight an idea or a word using repetition, contrast and comparison. Writers would, for example, repeat the same thought in successive verses using different words in order to emphasize that idea, or give an opposite idea in a successive verse to achieve emphasis or contrast.

Parallelism was used to contrast or emphasize ideas rather than words. Here are some general examples of this device being used:

**Contrasting Parallelism** – Proverbs 13:1  
(Shows difference)

A wise son accepts his father's discipline,  
But a scoffer does not listen to rebuke.

**Completion Parallelism** – Proverbs 14:13  
(Stacks information to complete)

Even in laughter the heart may be in pain,  
And the end of joy may be grief.

**Comparative Parallelism** – Proverbs 25:24  
(Compares)

It is better to live in a corner of the roof  
Than in a house shared with a contentious woman.

In each of these passages parallelism is used to emphasize the points he is trying to make.

In the discussion of true wisdom (Ch.7:1-15) Solomon uses seven comparative, one contrastive (vs. 4) and one complete (vs. 7) parallelism devices.

## 1. The value of a good name

<sup>1a</sup> A good name is better than a good ointment,

This is a comparative proverb comparing a good name to good ointment. Good ointment gives off a lovely fragrance, blesses all who enjoy the aroma, has value just by being there, is a great gift to someone else and so is a good name. Once you spoil or dilute it, it is almost impossible to regain its former value or potency.

## 2. Death is better than birth

<sup>1b</sup> And the day of one's death is better than the day of one's birth.

This is also a comparative proverb. Once the end has come we can understand the whole story in context. For believers, the end signals the beginning of a new and more enjoyable spiritual life. At death we have come to the end of suffering and trouble, there is no more to come for the Christian, it is truly a time of rest.

## 3. Funerals are better than weddings

<sup>2a</sup> It is better to go to a house of mourning

<sup>2b</sup> Than to go to a house of feasting,

Verse 2a is comparative and 2b is completing. You learn many more important things at a funeral than at a wedding. Funerals remind us of our short lives, they draw us close to families, they teach us about the frailties of life whereas weddings are for rejoicing - more pleasant but not more instructive. Funerals force us to face God regarding our sins and need for mercy, weddings rarely do this.

#### 4. Sorrow is better than laughter

<sup>3</sup> Sorrow is better than laughter,  
For when a face is sad a heart may be happy.  
<sup>4</sup> The mind of the wise is in the house of mourning,  
While the mind of fools is in the house of pleasure.

These are contrasting. Sober mindedness brought on by the trials of life is more profitable than the laughter and merrymaking we experience during the good times. In life we experience both sorrow and laughter, but it is in sorrow that we draw closer to God and usually learn the most valuable lessons in life. Solomon is not telling us to be overly serious, he is encouraging us to benefit from those times when we experience sorrow.

#### 5. Better receive rebuke than listen to foolishness

<sup>5</sup> It is better to listen to the rebuke of a wise man  
Than for one to listen to the song of fools.  
<sup>6</sup> For as the crackling of thorn bushes under a pot,  
So is the laughter of the fool; And this too is futility.  
<sup>7</sup> For oppression makes a wise man mad,  
And a bribe corrupts the heart.

This is completive parallelism.

Verse 5 states the premise - better to be rebuked (which is unpleasant) by a wise person than listen to entertainment that has no value for growth or development (only feels good).

Verse 6 completes the picture by adding a comparative verse showing what fools and their jokes are really like. Burning thorns that make jokes as they are being destroyed, this is how useless they are.

Verse 7 is a final completive verse to round out the idea. Yes, it is better to listen to the rebuke or advice of a wise man, but even in this you need to be careful. In difficult times you can easily be manipulated by seemingly wise advice. As an example of this he shows how under extreme circumstances one could corrupt all wisdom by accepting a bribe. Be very careful, even those who think they are wise could fall into temptation

## **6. To end is better than to begin**

<sup>8a</sup> The end of a matter is better than its beginning;

This part of the verse is comparative. It is easy to start, harder to finish. The excitement of starting gives way to the joy of completing. Both are good but to finish something is always sweeter.

## **7. A patient spirit is better than a proud spirit**

<sup>8b</sup> Patience of spirit is better than haughtiness of spirit.

<sup>9</sup> Do not be eager in your heart to be angry,

For anger resides in the bosom of fools.

<sup>10</sup> Do not say, "Why is it that the former days were better than these?"

For it is not from wisdom that you ask about this.

This is comparative and completive. God desires to develop our character as we go from birth through to death. In this regard, Solomon says that this includes replacing our pride with the quality of patience. Pride pushes patience aside. Patience leads to the development of a godly character.

Solomon adds that a proud spirit can lead to the harboring of anger and resentment (which are the characteristics of a fool). In addition to this, pride and bitterness can lead to wasteful and foolish longings for "yesterday." Wisdom, on the other hand, lives in the present, learns from the past and looks forward to the future. As a result, the wise can flourish despite difficulties and obstacles while the foolish are doomed to live in the past and repeat the same mistakes.

In the last four verses of this section, Solomon explains the advantages of wisdom. He has already said that the foolish and wise end up in the same way, but he now concedes that the wise person has two advantages nevertheless.

### **A. Wisdom guards against pitfalls**

<sup>11</sup> Wisdom along with an inheritance is good  
And an advantage to those who see the sun.

<sup>12</sup> For wisdom is protection just as money is protection,  
But the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom  
preserves the lives of its possessors.

Yes, both fool and wise die, but the wise person makes less mistakes along the way and learns how to preserve his life.

Wisdom does not extend life but it can enable one to have a better quality of life.

## B. Wisdom gives a divine perspective

<sup>13</sup> Consider the work of God,  
For who is able to straighten what He has bent?  
<sup>14</sup> In the day of prosperity be happy,  
But in the day of adversity consider—  
God has made the one as well as the other  
So that man will not discover anything that will be after  
him.

Wisdom helps one to "consider the work of God". What does this mean and how do we do this? We cannot change what God does nor can we know what He will not reveal. However, in knowing our limitations we can seek Him in humility, and this is the first step in finding eternal life. This section on wisdom teaches us two important lessons:

1. Seek God when making decisions in life - seek His wisdom not our own.
2. Ask God to reveal to us what we do not understand.

If we have true wisdom, we will be doing this on a regular basis. Doing this is what "life" is all about - this is the answer to the questions, "What is life about? And what should I do?"

## Wisdom at work – vs. 15-29

Now that Solomon has given us a few proverbs about the value of wisdom, he will go on to explain some of the ways that wisdom can benefit a person in his/her life. In verses 15 to 29 he gives three things that wisdom provides the person who avails himself of it.

## A. Wisdom provides balance

<sup>15</sup> I have seen everything during my lifetime of futility; there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his wickedness. <sup>16</sup> Do not be excessively righteous and do not be overly wise. Why should you ruin yourself? <sup>17</sup> Do not be excessively wicked and do not be a fool. Why should you die before your time? <sup>18</sup> It is good that you grasp one thing and also not let go of the other; for the one who fears God comes forth with both of them.

In these seemingly contradictory verses Solomon is telling his readers that in a world where there are extremes, the middle road is the one that is indicated by wisdom. That the good perish young and the wicked live long is a testimony to this contradictory world. Wisdom allows us:

- Not to be so pious that we cannot face reality (i.e. too heavenly bound to be any earthy good).
- Not so wicked that your life is in danger. All men are sinners but some revel in it and give themselves to it (i.e. hell-raisers).

By avoiding the extremes a wise man can live a good life here and have the one to come as well.

## B. Wisdom provides strength

<sup>19</sup> Wisdom strengthens a wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city. <sup>20</sup> Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who continually does good and who never sins. <sup>21</sup> Also, do not take seriously all words which are



spoken, so that you will not hear your servant cursing you. <sup>22</sup> For you also have realized that you likewise have many times cursed others.

Solomon begins by saying that wisdom is worth the strength of ten rulers of cities - in other words, there is great strength in wisdom. Especially in three areas.

**1. Strength to handle sin.** No man is perfect, and everyone sins and causes trouble. Wisdom helps us deal with the fallout from the sin in our lives.

**2. Strength to avoid entrapment.** It is easy to be taken in by flattery and cunning deceit. Wisdom helps us have a fair estimate of ourselves so we are not easily taken in by these things.

**3. Strength to deal with criticism.** Sometimes we are justly or unjustly criticized. Wisdom builds a strong character that does not cave in to problems, flattery or criticism.

## **C. Wisdom provides insight – vs. 23-29**

True satisfaction comes from a relationship with God, and the reason that this produces satisfaction is because it is only in this relationship that we gain:

- Salvation - peace for our souls
- Insight - understanding
- Peace + understanding = satisfaction.

Solomon shares some of the insights that his God-given wisdom has provided for him.

## 1. Understanding only comes from God

<sup>23</sup> I tested all this with wisdom, and I said, "I will be wise," but it was far from me. <sup>24</sup>What has been is remote and exceedingly mysterious. Who can discover it?

He does not express it here, but he realizes that man cannot produce wisdom and cannot reveal what God has hidden. Understanding is a joyful discovery that God gives as a gift to all those who seek it by faith.

## 2. Sexual adventure is not satisfying

<sup>25</sup> I directed my mind to know, to investigate and to seek wisdom and an explanation, and to know the evil of folly and the foolishness of madness. <sup>26</sup> And I discovered more bitter than death the woman whose heart is snares and nets, whose hands are chains. One who is pleasing to God will escape from her, but the sinner will be captured by her. <sup>27</sup> "Behold, I have discovered this," says the Preacher, "adding one thing to another to find an explanation, <sup>28</sup> which I am still seeking but have not found. I have found one man among a thousand, but I have not found a woman among all these.

In all of his sexual experimentation he found only suffering and guilt. In his life there were few men (1 in a 1000) who could give a wise or satisfying answer. However, his 1,000 wives could not give him satisfaction. Of course this is because he violated the way in which God designed sexual and intimate satisfaction to be found, where only one man is united to only one woman for life.

### 3. The problem is within not without

<sup>29</sup> Behold, I have found only this, that God made men upright, but they have sought out many devices.

Solomon's wisdom finally led him to understand that man's problems and the evil in the world do not come from God; they come from within man's sinful heart. Wisdom helps us to know where to lay the blame for the problems in our lives. Solomon explains how his wisdom is finally working to lead him back to God by teaching him what true wisdom is and how it is to be properly applied to life.



# CHAPTER 10

# QUALITIES OF A

# WISE LEADER

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Starting in chapter seven of his journal we see that Solomon is no longer exploring the various pursuits of worldly living which have left him unfulfilled and depressed. He has written several proverbs describing the true wisdom that comes from above and how life is enriched when one realizes that this is the wisdom that produces strength, balance and insight.

In chapters eight and nine Solomon will continue this line of thinking by discussing the qualities of good leaders, mysteries that cannot be solved and the importance of developing a proper philosophy of life. In his comments on the subject of leadership he notes that rising to this position in any enterprise is usually the result of hard work and talent, however, not all who achieve this role are qualified for their jobs. For example:

**Some are promoted beyond their capabilities.**

Some people rise one step above their competency level and, consequently, are not able to function effectively at this stage. It is hard to work for people like this because they are

uninspiring and cause resentment among their followers since everyone is aware of and affected by their incompetence.

**Some are egotistical and intolerant of lesser talented people.**

These "hard driving" types think everyone else should be like them or no one else can be like them. They push too hard and usually do not appreciate the people who work for them.

There are many other types but these two are examples of leaders who have the position but not the character that the position of leadership requires. Solomon, who was a leader, provides five key characteristics that leaders should have in order to be qualified as godly leaders:

## **1. A Clear Mind**

1<sup>a</sup> Who is like the wise man and who knows the interpretation of a matter?

The word "interpretation" means solution. Solomon says that a good leader is able to see through a problem to an eventual solution. A good leader's mind is not cluttered with unresolved issues and changing values. He or she can see clearly to the bottom line because a good leader has a set of core values and standard references to help him make consistent decisions whatever the situation. A leader's clear mind helps him lead without confusion or hesitation.

## **2. A Cheerful Disposition**

1<sup>b</sup> A man's wisdom illumines him and causes his stern face to beam.

A cheerful heart is reflected in a person's face. He has a positive and happy look. There is nothing more difficult than serving under a person who has no sense of humor about himself or funny situations. A great leader deals seriously with the issues of leadership but does not take himself too seriously.

### 3. A Discreet Mouth

<sup>2</sup> I say, "Keep the command of the king because of the oath before God. <sup>3</sup> Do not be in a hurry to leave him. Do not join in an evil matter, for he will do whatever he pleases." <sup>4</sup> Since the word of the king is authoritative, who will say to him, "What are you doing?"

Solomon is speaking primarily to subordinates here, saying that they should be loyal to their leaders and obey them because they can make life difficult for followers. In an indirect way, however, he is also telling leaders that they can best inspire loyalty and obedience in their subordinates if they have a discreet mouth themselves.

Leaders who exercise their authority with tact, sensitivity and compassion usually receive the benefit of supportive followers.

### 4. Keen Judgment

<sup>5</sup> He who keeps a royal command experiences no trouble, for a wise heart knows the proper time and procedure. <sup>6</sup> For there is a proper time and procedure for every delight, though a man's trouble is heavy upon him. <sup>7</sup> If no one knows what will happen, who can tell him when it will happen?

Good leaders show that they have the type of skills and attitudes that enable them to make good judgment calls when necessary. Solomon describes some of the features that enable one to have keen judgment.

In verse 5a he describes a leader who knows his place, is sure of his leadership and knows that the call is his to make. The royal command means one is put in a position of leadership by God in order to make decisions.

In verses 5b to 6 we see that this leader knows the right time and procedure in which things need to be decided and carried out. He remains calm in making these decisions, even when called upon to do so under pressure.

In verse 7 Solomon says that this person is tuned in to the attitude and needs of his followers. Even though others do not know what is going to happen, good leaders can discern the right timing for their decisions concerning the future. Leaders maintain loyalty and credibility by making good decisions based on keen judgment.

## 5. A Humble Spirit

<sup>8</sup> No man has authority to restrain the wind with the wind, or authority over the day of death; and there is no discharge in the time of war, and evil will not deliver those who practice it. <sup>9</sup> All this I have seen and applied my mind to every deed that has been done under the sun wherein a man has exercised authority over another man to his hurt.

Despite having great skill or given many advantages in life, it is important for leaders to recognize their limitations, and acknowledge their mistakes. Truly wise leaders are humble individuals who can take direction from the Lord above and



advice from those below. This guarantees a leader's position with God and the loyalty, love and respect of his followers. Solomon ends this section with two warnings against arrogant and proud leaders:

First, God will judge leaders who take unfair advantage of those in their charge. Secondly, leaders who do take advantage of their followers hurt themselves more than they hurt those under them (because they, and not their followers, will incur the judgement of God).

## **Mysteries – 8:10-17**

After reviewing some of the qualities of good and godly leaders, Solomon describes what he calls "mysteries" that defy even his great wisdom. Of course, when Solomon discusses things he cannot understand, he is referring to events and situations that he cannot understand without God's help or God's revelation. For example:

- Some things we do not understand because we have not yet discovered them in the Bible (spiritual immaturity).
- Some we do not understand because God has not revealed them to us yet (e.g. the coming of the Lord).
- Some we do not understand because they will always be beyond us (e.g. God's total wisdom).

In chapter 8:10-17 Solomon describes three mysteries that are simply beyond his knowledge and can only be understood with the help of God's revelation:

## 1. The Triumph of the Unjust

<sup>10</sup> So then, I have seen the wicked buried, those who used to go in and out from the holy place, and they are soon forgotten in the city where they did thus. This too is futility. <sup>11</sup> Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed quickly, therefore the hearts of the sons of men among them are given fully to do evil. <sup>12</sup> Although a sinner does evil a hundred times and may lengthen his life, still I know that it will be well for those who fear God, who fear Him openly. <sup>13</sup> But it will not be well for the evil man and he will not lengthen his days like a shadow, because he does not fear God.

Solomon begins by referring to religious hypocrites who attend worship but who are evil people. Many times when these people die they receive elaborate funerals and are preached into heaven. In addition to this, those who build comfortable lives for themselves at the expense of others are never judged and punished for their unjust exploitation. Solomon complains that without swift justice (from God) others are encouraged to do the same. He does not, therefore, understand God's tolerance of this kind of evil and hypocrisy.

## 2. The Existence of Unfair Consequences

<sup>14</sup> There is futility which is done on the earth, that is, there are righteous men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked. On the other hand, there are evil men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I say that this too is futility.

Why do bad things happen to good people, and good things happen to bad people? For example, a young mother is struck and killed by a drunk driver who walks away from the accident without a scratch. Solomon looked at similar tragedies of his day and questioned why a good and loving God allowed unfair things to happen. Sometimes we ask ourselves the very same question. Imagine, even Solomon had no answer!

### 3. The Delight of Untimely Pleasure

<sup>15</sup> So I commended pleasure, for there is nothing good for a man under the sun except to eat and to drink and to be merry, and this will stand by him in his toils throughout the days of his life which God has given him under the sun.

Despite the difficulties of life, however, there are good moments that come which are unexpected and unearned. Solomon's response to the first two mysteries is to encourage his readers to take advantage of the third one (unexpected blessings) when they come. This is not the answer to all of life's problems but a way of helping us avoid becoming skeptical, pessimistic or angry. Things that could eventually lead us to a loss of faith.

<sup>16</sup> When I gave my heart to know wisdom and to see the task which has been done on the earth (even though one should never sleep day or night), <sup>17</sup> and I saw every work of God, I concluded that man cannot discover the work which has been done under the sun. Even though man should seek laboriously, he will not discover; and though the wise man should say, "I know," he cannot discover.

In the final two verses of chapter eight, Solomon concludes that there are limits to what a person can understand (without God's help), even for a wise man.

## **Developing a Good Life Philosophy**

### **- 9:1-10**

Now that Solomon is journeying back to God, demonstrated in his discussion about true wisdom, good leadership and the limits of his own wisdom, he begins to construct a view of life that he should have had from the beginning. He has tried many avenues that have led nowhere, and now that he is turning to God once again, he begins to see the way that a truly wise man should go. It is the same with us today, many try a variety of lifestyles or life-philosophies before finding the "narrow way".

In chapter nine Solomon makes a break from his past and begins to describe a new philosophy of life based on faith. We see this change in the first verse where he acknowledges that he has taken to heart and reviewed the various ways a man could choose to live his life, but now has found God's way. In the following verses he goes on to describe a life philosophy that is based on having faith in, and obedience to God. This life plan, he says, has four key truths and four key applications to guarantee a godly and rewarding life:

### **Truth #1 – God is sovereign**

<sup>1b</sup> Man does not know whether it will be love or hatred; anything awaits him.

Whether good or bad happens in your life, God is in control of all. Men cannot know what will happen, but God does

(implied idea). When faith in God is the foundation that your life is built upon, you can deal with whatever comes knowing that He is in control, not you and certainly not the adversities that may confront you.

## **Truth #2 – Death is certain**

<sup>2</sup> It is the same for all. There is one fate for the righteous and for the wicked; for the good, for the clean and for the unclean; for the man who offers a sacrifice and for the one who does not sacrifice. As the good man is, so is the sinner; as the swearer is, so is the one who is afraid to swear. <sup>3a</sup> This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that there is one fate for all men.

Knowing and believing that death is certain, enables one to keep a proper perspective on life and time. This knowledge also forces a person to establish priorities, be more careful in what he does, and seek after God with greater fervor.

## **Truth #3 – The heart is evil**

<sup>3b</sup> Furthermore, the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil and insanity is in their hearts throughout their lives. Afterwards they go to the dead.

There is no spiritual progress in one's life until there is an acknowledgement of both sinfulness and the need for redemption. This is the first step in every "recovery" type program. A person cannot enjoy peace and joy without forgiveness and grace, and this only comes with the awareness and confession of sin.

## Truth #4 – Where there is life, there is hope

<sup>4</sup> For whoever is joined with all the living, there is hope; surely a live dog is better than a dead lion. <sup>5</sup> For the living know they will die; but the dead do not know anything, nor have they any longer a reward, for their memory is forgotten. <sup>6</sup> Indeed their love, their hate and their zeal have already perished, and they will no longer have a share in all that is done under the sun.

In Solomon's day dogs were not pets; they were mongrels and wild. Lions, however, were prized as royal animals. Solomon is saying that it is better to live in poverty and dishonor than have great honor and praise but be dead, because the living have hope for tomorrow, but the dead are gone. His point is that while you are alive, make the most of the present, you have no guarantee of the future.

Solomon's faith in a sovereign Lord, his acknowledgement of sin and death, and the wisdom of taking advantage of each day set the course for his new philosophy and approach to life. He now ends the section with some practical applications that these things will produce in the life of one who embraces them.

## Application #1 – Contentment

<sup>7</sup> Go then, eat your bread in happiness and drink your wine with a cheerful heart; for God has already approved your works.

If God is sovereign and if, as a sinner, you are reconciled to Him, then enjoy what He gives you whatever it is. Christians often feel guilty for enjoying their blessings but should not

feel this way since prosperity is only a sin when we gain it in evil ways, fail to give thanks for it or refuse to share it with others in need.

## **Application #2 – Purity / Spirituality**

<sup>8</sup> Let your clothes be white all the time, and let not oil be lacking on your head.

White clothing was a sign of purity, and oil represented the work of the Spirit in life. Solomon is saying that if your life is based on this philosophy then your life will be purified of its evil and the Spirit of God will lead you (through the Word, Spirit, church etc.).

## **Application #3 – Faithfulness**

<sup>9</sup> Enjoy life with the woman whom you love all the days of your fleeting life which He has given to you under the sun; for this is your reward in life and in your toil in which you have labored under the sun.

The man with a thousand wives concedes that an intimate relationship with one woman is the way to satisfaction and joy. The world offers all kinds of methods to find sexual and intimate satisfaction, but God has shown us that a faithful relationship with one marriage partner is the only way that this can be achieved fully.

## Application #4 – Zeal

<sup>10</sup> Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might; for there is no activity or planning or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol where you are going.

Now that the searching for life's true meaning is over, Solomon says that a person can exult in their work, family and passion. Life is short so we must not wait until tomorrow to enjoy and make the most of today's blessings.

In the end, Solomon says that until we have settled in our minds some of the basics of what life is really about, we cannot truly begin to live and enjoy the life that God has blessed us with. I believe that this is the reason why people who neglect studying God's word and pursuing church life miss out on so much of what God has intended for us to enjoy.



# CHAPTER 11

# COMMENTS ON

# THE RAT RACE

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Solomon has been sharing the fruit of his hard won wisdom. After living apart from God he returns and notes some of the things he has learned concerning wisdom itself, the qualities of good leadership and several basic principles upon which one's life must be based in order to succeed.

In the passages we will cover in this chapter, the writer will provide more advice on how to live and how to deal with certain people in our lives. Once Solomon stops using his wisdom for strictly worldly pursuits he focuses it on the simple "art of living" and how one can succeed during the brief time they have here under the sun.

We think that the idea of the "rat race" is a 21<sup>st</sup> century phenomenon where one is under pressure to perform, to pursue too many goals while neglecting family, working harder and longer but gaining less and less satisfaction. Our culture thinks it invented the rat race mentality, however

Solomon's comments in chapter 9:11-18 demonstrate that even people who lived almost 3,000 years ago suffered from the same kinds of problems.

Solomon begins by commenting on the nature of the rat race as he observed it in his day.

### **The race is foolish**

<sup>11</sup> I again saw under the sun that the race is not to the swift and the battle is not to the warriors, and neither is bread to the wise nor wealth to the discerning nor favor to men of ability; for time and chance overtake them all.

Even though some wake up earlier, run faster and try harder - there is no guarantee that these efforts will produce success. Blessings come to good and bad alike, and success is often achieved by those who are undeserving. Solomon says that to work harder and sacrifice everything in order to get ahead does not always guarantee success.

God's sovereign (time and chance) hand can level the playing field at any time.

### **Trusting in our ability is foolish**

<sup>12</sup> Moreover, man does not know his time: like fish caught in a treacherous net and birds trapped in a snare, so the sons of men are ensnared at an evil time when it suddenly falls on them. <sup>13</sup> Also this I came to see as wisdom under the sun, and it impressed me.

The entire rat race mentality is based on the false notion that "only the strong survive." If you are clever, knowledgeable, educated and have influence, you will get ahead and this will

make you happy and satisfied. Solomon notes that trouble and death know no difference between the wise and the simple because everybody experiences trouble and everyone dies. Being first in line does not guarantee happiness nor does it protect you from sickness and death. Usually the rush to be first is what causes most of the problems.

### **Those who remain in the race remain fools**

<sup>14</sup> There was a small city with few men in it and a great king came to it, surrounded it and constructed large siege works against it. <sup>15</sup> But there was found in it a poor wise man and he delivered the city by his wisdom. Yet no one remembered that poor man.

Here, Solomon tells the story of a wise king who saved his city from attack only to be rejected and forgotten for his efforts. This story illustrates the foolish attitude of those caught in the rat race. They have a near death experience and are miraculously saved (no army, just the wisdom of one man) yet the experience does not change them in any way. They go right back to their pursuits, even forgetting to honor the one who saved them.

The rat race makes people self-centered and insensitive to spiritual things.

Based on these verses and others in the passage, Solomon develops some core ideas about life in the fast lane that helps those in it reconsider their lifestyle.

## **1. Human ability cannot guarantee genuine success**

We go back to verse 11 to see that despite all human effort, final success is given to us by God. It is hard for us to accept that He permits even evil and selfish people to succeed wildly at times but we must remember that their success is short lived and limited by this world. True success in life is measured by the degree of peace, joy and love we experience and share, and no amount of talent or hard work guarantees these things - they are gifts from God.

## **2. Strength is more impressive yet less effective than wisdom**

<sup>15</sup> But there was found in it a poor wise man and he delivered the city by his wisdom. Yet no one remembered that poor man. <sup>16</sup> So I said, "Wisdom is better than strength."

We love to have and exercise power, but wisdom is always a more useful and profitable asset. The rat race mentality, however, moves us to acquire power not wisdom. Wisdom is not cultivated by "doing" but by "listening." When we finally shift gears in order to pursue wisdom, we take the first step in getting out of the rat race.

## **3. Wise counsel is not usually popular, rarely obeyed and seldom remembered**

<sup>16b</sup> But the wisdom of the poor man is despised and his words are not heeded.

It is a pessimistic observation but a true one. Historians say that the value of the study of history is to not repeat past mistakes. It is part of the human sinful nature to continually forget the lessons of the past.

The implicit advice is to continually review and reaffirm the counsel and instructions we have received in order to succeed.

#### **4. Human rulers will always out shout wise counselors, and fools like it this way**

<sup>17</sup> The words of the wise heard in quietness are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools.

The rat race is noisy, and most like it this way so they do not have to be distracted by another message or another way. In our society the rat race has one more meeting, one more thing to buy and one more holiday to get ready for. This kind of "noise" drowns out the quiet voice of the Spirit or the voice of our conscience and heart's true desire.

#### **5. Wisdom is better than war**

<sup>18</sup> Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.

If everyone listened to wisdom there would be no wars, but one fool can easily destroy what ten wise persons can build. In our lives the same is true, one foolish act or person, or the one time we compromise wisdom can lead to the destruction of much good – so we must be careful.

## Wisdom and Folly – 10:1-11

Now that he has commented on the foolishness of the rat race itself and the advantage of opting out for a wiser course of living, Solomon continues to build his case for wisdom.

### 1. He contrasts wisdom and folly - vs. 1-10

The contrasting of these two traits can be broken down into three main sets of comparisons:

#### The advantages and disadvantages of wisdom

<sup>1</sup> Dead flies make a perfumer's oil stink, so a little foolishness is weightier than wisdom and honor. <sup>2</sup> A wise man's heart directs him toward the right, but the foolish man's heart directs him toward the left. <sup>3</sup> Even when the fool walks along the road, his sense is lacking and he demonstrates to everyone that he is a fool.

**vs. 1** - Be careful because just a little foolishness can ruin a lifetime of wisdom (25 years of marriage ruined by a one-night-stand).

**vs. 2** - Right personifies honor and strength; the left is foolishness and ruin. A constant practice of foolishness or wisdom will bring a constant result of success or ruin.

**vs. 3** - Eventually fools have the reputation of being foolish and wise men have the reputation of being wise.

#### Humility and patience versus popularity and partiality

<sup>4</sup> If the ruler's temper rises against you, do not abandon your position, because composure allays great

offenses. <sup>5</sup> There is an evil I have seen under the sun, like an error which goes forth from the ruler— <sup>6</sup> folly is set in many exalted places while rich men sit in humble places. <sup>7</sup> I have seen slaves riding on horses and princes walking like slaves on the land.

**vs. 4** - In another place Solomon says, "A soft answer turns away wrath," (Proverbs 15:1). Solomon shows that wisdom is better at handling difficult superiors than foolishness, which would return heat for heat, unreasonableness for unreasonableness.

**vs. 5-7** - The down side is that many times unqualified people rise to the top and the wise are left at lower positions. Wisdom helps one to understand why this is so and makes the best of it. The fool would despair or covet and lose his soul.

### **Inevitable risk versus inexcusable stupidity**

<sup>8</sup> He who digs a pit may fall into it, and a serpent may bite him who breaks through a wall. <sup>9</sup> He who quarries stones may be hurt by them, and he who splits logs may be endangered by them. <sup>10</sup> If the axe is dull and he does not sharpen its edge, then he must exert more strength.

**vs. 8-10a** - In these short proverbs Solomon is showing that there are consequences to actions (i.e. if you dig a pit, you risk falling into it). His point is that the fool does not measure the risk well and usually ends up getting hurt, whereas the wise person will take a risk but it will be calculated. With these contrasts Solomon is trying to demonstrate the advantages of pursuing and implementing wisdom in one's every day life by contrasting wise actions to folly and its results.

In verses 10b-11 he rounds out his thoughts by saying that wisdom is superior because it gives superior results in the long run.

<sup>10b</sup> Wisdom has the advantage of giving success. <sup>11</sup> If the serpent bites before being charmed, there is no profit for the charmer.

Fools succeed for a while but eventually the wise will win out. His final example is the one where the careless snake charmer is eventually bitten by his own snake - foolishness will bite you in the end.

## **A Fool's Portrait - vs. 12-20**

He has talked objectively about wisdom and folly but now will become more personal as he describes the fool himself. What does a fool look like? Solomon describes him in detail at the end of this chapter.

### **The Character of a Fool**

In other places Solomon has previously described the character of a fool.

#### **1 - His language is one of disbelief**

The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God'.  
- Psalms 14:1

Because of this he can live comfortably in a world without God.



## 2 - He loves sin

- He lies easily. – Proverbs 14:8
- He has no conscience. – Proverbs 14:9
- He easily offends God. – Proverbs 19:3

When the Bible talks about a fool, it does not simply refer to a joker or a simpleminded person, but rather a Godless sinner who enjoys sin and disbelief.

## Actions of a Fool

Now that we have seen some of Solomon's other comments about the character of a fool, let us review what he says about the action of fools.

### 1 - They make foolish talk

14a No man knows what will happen, and who can tell him what will come after him?

The wise create goodness and wisdom with their words but fools simply create problems. The more they talk the more trouble they cause.

### 2 - They have unsure future

14b No man knows what will happen, and who can tell him what will come after him?

Their foolish actions will get them into jail, hospital, unemployed, unmarried, etc. A fool's future is uncertain and painful.

### 3 - They are their own worst enemies

<sup>15</sup> The toil of a fool so wearies him that he does not even know how to go to a city.

The image is of a person who works hard for nothing or stupid results. For example, thieves who risk their lives with elaborate schemes only to gain a small amount. Cities were highly visible and to not know how to get there was the ultimate put down that you did not know right from left. "Clueless"

### 4 - They make poor leaders

<sup>16</sup> Woe to you, O land, whose king is a lad and whose princes feast in the morning. <sup>17</sup>Blessed are you, O land, whose king is of nobility and whose princes eat at the appropriate time—for strength and not for drunkenness.

Some fools get to be leaders, but heaven help the families, churches, corporations, countries that get one. Do not expect leadership, only trouble from such a one.

### 5 - They Waste Time and Money

Through indolence the rafters sag, and through slackness the house leaks. <sup>19</sup> Men prepare a meal for enjoyment, and wine makes life merry, and money is the answer to everything.

They let things go, cannot make decisions, put off action until it is too late. They love to enjoy themselves and think that money is the answer to everything; that is why they are always broke. Solomon ends the passage in verse 20 with a warning that it is dangerous to allow a fool to become your enemy because a fool loves to take revenge.

## How to Deal with a Fool

Although it is not contained in this chapter, Solomon does give advice on how to deal with the fools in our lives.

### 1. Isolate them

Leave the presence of a fool, Or you will not discern words of knowledge.

- Proverbs 14:7

Do not speak in the hearing of a fool, For he will despise the wisdom of your words.

- Proverbs 23:9

If they continue, leave their presence, isolate them. No use reasoning with a fool, the best method is to allow them to face the consequences of their foolishness. Pain is the only language fools understand.

### 2. Restore them only if there is evidence of repentance and brokenness

<sup>10</sup> There were those who dwelt in darkness and in the shadow of death,

Prisoners in misery and chains,

<sup>11</sup> Because they had rebelled against the words of God  
And spurned the counsel of the Most High.

<sup>12</sup> Therefore He humbled their heart with labor;  
They stumbled and there was none to help.  
- Psalm 107:10-12

<sup>39</sup> When they are diminished and bowed down  
Through oppression, misery and sorrow,  
<sup>40</sup> He pours contempt upon princes  
And makes them wander in a pathless waste.  
- Psalm 107:39-40

These verses show that God allows fools to suffer before coming to their rescue. Fools love to lie, so it is okay to require solid fruit of their repentance before restoring them to their former place.

### **3. When restored, proclaim the change**

<sup>21</sup> Let them give thanks to the Lord for His  
lovingkindness,  
And for His wonders to the sons of men!  
<sup>22</sup> Let them also offer sacrifices of thanksgiving,  
And tell of His works with joyful singing.  
- Psalm 107:21-22

The foolish one restored is able to witness about his change to announce his restoration. Fools who are turned around can be a powerful witness for the grace of God and the power of His wisdom.

# CHAPTER 12

# POSITIVE THINKING

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Up until this point, Solomon's journal has been quite skeptical and downright depressing. He has seen all, done all and found that the cycle of events in life is empty and without true meaning. His search for happiness without God has led him to despair.

In these last chapters, however, his tone will change becoming more optimistic as he grows closer to God and further away from his old lifestyle and thinking. By the time he finishes the book, he is very positive and encourages his readers to be that way as well.

Beginning in chapter eleven Solomon tells his readers that God's plan is not that people should suffer, be afraid or become depressed. On the contrary, God's plan is for us to be optimistic, to hope for the best, to think positively because He wants to bless us and see us rejoice to the point that we as sinful and weak people possibly can under the circumstances. To this end he exhorts everyone to adopt a new mindset by re-setting their attitude to include a more

positive way of thinking about things. This new mindset has four key attitudes:

## 1. Instead of defense, think offense

<sup>1</sup> Cast your bread on the surface of the waters, for you will find it after many days.

People are usually playing it too safe, they want to hold back, take a second and third look before venturing forth. Solomon says that instead of looking for ways of always protecting yourself, try releasing yourself to your full potential. This is not a call to be reckless and foolish, but rather a reminder of what a person can accomplish if they step out in faith. When you become adventurous for God, there is always a return.

## 2. Instead of hoarding, try giving

<sup>2</sup> Divide your portion to seven, or even to eight, for you do not know what misfortune may occur on the earth.

Remember, this advice is for those who have faith in God. Trying to save, hoard and protect yourself by yourself at the expense of charity or good works will not work. At best you end up having money, but you have no peace or joy, and may lose it all anyways.

Solomon reminds us of a spiritual rule of thumb - the more you give, the more you get. Jesus reminds us that it is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35). This is because there is more satisfaction and potential for personal blessings for one who is a generous giver (of time, money,

affection, service, talent etc.) than there is for the one who hoards these things.

### 3. Instead of watching, try doing

<sup>3</sup> If the clouds are full, they pour out rain upon the earth; and whether a tree falls toward the south or toward the north, wherever the tree falls, there it lies. <sup>4</sup> He who watches the wind will not sow and he who looks at the clouds will not reap.

Solomon mentions some very normal phenomena: clouds give rain, trees grow and fall, sowing brings reaping. The implication is that there are natural cycles of things that happen, actions and reactions, and laws of creation that are observable. We can simply watch these things happen and become simple observers of life or we can be people that put these things to work for us in order to achieve our goals. Another way of expressing this idea is that it is no use worrying about the things you cannot change. It is better to concentrate on the things you can change or those things you can exploit for your good. In other words, "Jump into life, do something, don't just sit there!"

### 4. Instead of doubting, try trusting

<sup>5</sup> Just as you do not know the path of the wind and how bones are formed in the womb of the pregnant woman, so you do not know the activity of God who makes all things. <sup>6</sup> Sow your seed in the morning and do not be idle in the evening, for you do not know whether morning or evening sowing will succeed, or whether both of them alike will be good.

We cannot know all the variables and cannot guarantee the outcome, somewhere along the line we need to have faith and trust in God. Many people want to know the end before they begin. Solomon advises that we go with what we know, do our best and leave the rest to God. Also, we should continue trying and multiplying our efforts to succeed because we never know when and which one of these efforts God will bless.

Solomon begins his final exhortation by exhorting his readers to apply wisdom and effort to their endeavors, being careful not to lose faith when things slow down or the results seem uncertain.

## **Do not Procrastinate – 11:7-12:1**

When we talk about procrastination we are usually talking about people who continually put off unpleasant tasks or responsibilities to future dates. I have explained in the past that this is a form of laziness or self-centeredness, for example:

- I want to do what I want now.
- I want to delay effort / work as long as I can.

Solomon talks about another form of procrastination here. He describes people who put off enjoying their lives until some future event or time, for example:

- I will be happy when I have more money.
- I will enjoy my life when I meet the right person.
- We will start enjoying ourselves when the kids are gone.



The reasons people feel this way are many but one possible root cause is that of greed. They believe that happiness is based on having more of something or something in particular (a mate, a job, an achieved goal).

**Greed is the sin of never being satisfied with what you have now.**

Greedy people are always looking to the future or desiring more of some particular thing in order to be satisfied, and do not understand that unless you learn to be satisfied with what you already have, you will never be satisfied with what you desire. Solomon points out that our joy and satisfaction today are linked to what we have with God, not what we possess. He explains this idea in a series of statements:

## **1. God permits us to enjoy life now**

<sup>7</sup> The light is pleasant, and it is good for the eyes to see the sun. <sup>8a</sup> Indeed, if a man should live many years, let him rejoice in them all, and let him remember the days of darkness, for they will be many.

Light and sun were images used in Scripture to depict God's love and protection (Ps. 27:1) and so Solomon uses these to represent the warmth and security of God's love present every day. God's love and blessings are available each day and He has given us the permission to be happy and enjoy His love now. There is, therefore, no reason to wait for this to happen, it is already here.

## 2. Take advantage of your blessings now

<sup>9a</sup> Rejoice, young man, during your childhood, and let your heart be pleasant during the days of young manhood.

In that time, young people began to establish themselves early in life because life was short and difficult. Solomon says that the young should enjoy the blessings that come with youth (e.g. strength, vitality, enthusiasm etc.) while they have them. This attitude is wise and contributes to a healthy outlook on life. He explains why this is so in the following verses.

## 3. There are no guarantees

<sup>8b</sup> Everything that is to come will be futility. <sup>9b</sup> Yet know that God will bring you to judgment for all these things. <sup>10</sup> So, remove grief and anger from your heart and put away pain from your body, because childhood and the prime of life are fleeting.

He warns that if you do not rejoice now and put your happiness off until a future time, that time may not come. He also adds that even though you should take full advantage of your gifts and situation now, you must do so within God's will because you will be judged eventually. Solomon is not teaching, "Do what you want, for tomorrow you die," he is saying, "Be merry and rejoice in what is good now because tomorrow you will be judged on how you used what God gave you."

## 4. The essential ingredient for happiness today is to have a relationship with God today

<sup>1</sup> Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near when you will say, "I have no delight in them";

Happiness is not based on how well you live or how much you have, it is based on how well you obey and how much of God's will is being achieved in your lives. You cannot always have the home, education, mate and situation you desire in your life today. However, you can have God in your life today and it is this ingredient that generates happiness in life. God's love and will are the only things you can legitimately desire more and more of without harming yourself.

Solomon mentions two things that keep us from enjoying the blessings of each day:

- We keep our eyes on tomorrow rather than today.
- We keep our hope focused on ourselves and things instead of completely relying on God for our well being and needs each day.

## Growing Old with Grace – 12:2-8

Of course, no matter how well we live each day, the days do go by and all of us grow older. Since aging is inevitable Solomon provides Godly wisdom regarding the process that so many find difficult and depressing.

## Accept the obvious

<sup>2</sup> before the sun and the light, the moon and the stars are darkened, and clouds return after the rain; <sup>3</sup> in the day that the watchmen of the house tremble, and mighty men stoop, the grinding ones stand idle because they are few, and those who look through windows grow dim; <sup>4</sup> and the doors on the street are shut as the sound of the grinding mill is low, and one will arise at the sound of the bird, and all the daughters of song will sing softly. <sup>5</sup> Furthermore, men are afraid of a high place and of terrors on the road; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags himself along, and the caperberry is ineffective. For man goes to his eternal home while mourners go about in the street.

In these verses Solomon describes, in poetic fashion, the deterioration that comes with age, both mental and physical. These things are not pleasant but sometimes made harder to bear because people refuse to accept this or cling to images of their youth. With acceptance comes peace, and with peace comes the ability to enjoy life without the stress of trying to maintain an image of youth that is quickly passing.

## Prepare for the obvious

<sup>6</sup> Remember Him before the silver cord is broken and the golden bowl is crushed, the pitcher by the well is shattered and the wheel at the cistern is crushed; <sup>7</sup> then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it.

The signs of aging are also the signs of death. Aging should focus our minds on being prepared for this inevitable fact. It

is an act of mercy that God allows us to deteriorate slowly so we have the time to become aware of and prepared for our own passing. It does not always work this way but in normal circumstances we have time to prepare and should use it.

## Acknowledge the obvious

<sup>8</sup> "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher, "all is vanity!" <sup>9</sup> In addition to being a wise man, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge; and he pondered, searched out and arranged many proverbs. <sup>10</sup> The Preacher sought to find delightful words and to write words of truth correctly. <sup>11</sup> The words of wise men are like goads, and masters of these collections are like well-driven nails; they are given by one Shepherd. <sup>12</sup> But beyond this, my son, be warned: the writing of many books is endless, and excessive devotion to books is wearying to the body. <sup>13</sup> The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. <sup>14</sup> For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.

In verses 9-12 Solomon summarizes his personal journey and fruitless effort in the search for happiness through the use of knowledge and wisdom alone. Unlike others, however, who sought these things without regard to God, Solomon humbles himself and finally acknowledges that obedience and devotion to God are what give life its potential for joy and meaning.

This, God has made plain through His word if only man will listen, acknowledge and obey. In conclusion, Solomon declares that life is short and death is sure, but for the one that seeks God and obeys Him there are three promises.

1. There is satisfaction in each day. - If only we look for and acknowledge it.
2. There is peace regardless of age and position. - Through faith in God.
3. There is hope when life is over. - Heaven for the faithful.

Let us take to heart this wise advice.

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