

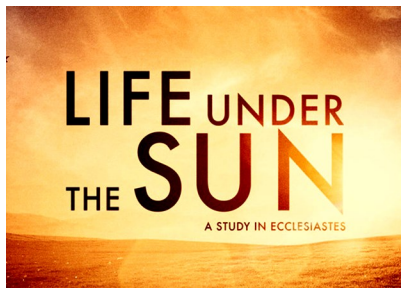
By Don Hooton

Study Schedule

Lesson Date Lesson Title

1. 1/17 **Introduction and “All is Vanity”** [1:1-11]
2. 1/24 **The Preacher’s Experiences in Vanity** [1:12-2:26]
 - *Vanity of striving in wisdom* [1:12-18]
 - *Vanity of striving in pleasure* [2:1-3]
 - *Vanity of striving in accomplishments* [2:4-16]
 - *Vanity of striving in hard labor* [2:17-23]
 - *First Conclusion: Learn to see the good God has reserved* [2:24-26]
3. 1/31 **The Preacher’s Observations about Vanity** [3:1-6:12]
 - *Even in vanity, everything has its own season* [3:1-8]
 - *Even in vanity, God makes everything right in His time* [3:9-21]
4. 2/14 **The Preacher’s Observations about Vanity** [3:1-6:12]
 - *Even in vanity, you can enjoy your lot* [3:22]
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5. 2/21 **The Preacher’s Observations about Vanity** [3:1-6:12]
 - *A Fool’s worship is empty* [5:1-7]
 - *Wealth is empty* [5:8-20]
6. 2/28 **The Preacher’s Observations about Vanity** [3:1-6:12]
 - *Life is empty* [6:1-12]
7. 3/7 **Learning to Make Good in an Empty World** [7:1-9:18]
 - *The contrasts of wisdom with folly* [7:1-10]
 - *The wisdom of God helps us see life clearly* [7:11-18]
 - *The strength wisdom brings* [7:19-8:1]
8. 3/14 **Learning to Make Good in an Empty World** [7:1-9:18]
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 - *How incomprehensible are the ways of God* [8:11-17]
9. 3/21 **Learning to Make Good in an Empty World** [7:1-9:18]
 - *And realize that there is a common destiny for all* [9:1-6]
 - *Second Conclusion: Make life good* [9:7-12]
 - *And make wisdom part of your life* [9:13-18]
10. 3/28 **Special Wisdom for Life’s Surprises** [10:1-12:8]
 - *Wisdom looks like this . . .* [10:1-15]
 - *Wisdom for the King’s House* [10:16-20]
11. 4/4 **Special Wisdom for Life’s Surprises** [10:1-12:8]
 - *Wisdom for the Businessman* [11:1-6]
12. 4/11 **Special Wisdom for Life’s Surprises** [10:1-12:8]
 - *Wisdom for the Young* [11:7-12:8]
13. 4/18 **So Hear the Conclusion of the Matter** [12:9-14]

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Lesson 1

Introduction and “All is Vanity” [1:1-11]

Memory Verse: “I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.” [1:14].

The book of Ecclesiastes is full of meaning—and full of enigmas. Many have struggled to find in the book a unifying cord, other than the utter vanity of life. But the book is not about the utter vanity of life, in any absolute sense. Rather, the book looks at life apart from God with a wise conclusion to what life needs to be. Even when God is brought in, He is seen in relation to life, not in relation to eternity. This does not change until the very end of the book, where the change is sudden and dramatic.

Some see the book as one sermon built upon one theme. Verse 1 introduces us to the book and tells us that the book was written by one **Qoheleth**, ((Eccl 1:1-2, 12; Eccl 7:27; Eccl 12:8-10) translated “Preacher,” who was the son of David and king in Jerusalem. Although the author does not specifically name himself, he does call himself “the son of David, king in Jerusalem” (1:1, 12). While not conclusive by itself, this certainly seems to be a clue that recognizes that the most qualified Davidic descendant to write this book is Solomon. “The Preacher’s (1:1,2,12; 7:27; 12:8,9,10) unrivaled wisdom (1:16, cf. 1 Kin 3:12), exploration of pleasure (2:1-3), impressive accomplishments (2:4-6, cf. 1 Kin 7:1-12), and unparalleled wealth (2:7-10, cf. 2 Chr 9:13-28) were fulfilled only by King Solomon. It can be safely assumed, therefore, that Solomon is the author.

The name “Ecclesiastes” stems from the title given in the Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Old Testament. The Greek term *ekklēsiastes* means “preacher” and is derived from the word *ekklēsia* meaning “assembly, church.” The Hebrew, *Qoheleth*, is a rarely found—just 7 times in Ecclesiastes (1:1, 2, 12; 7:27; 12:8, 9, 10). It comes from the word meaning “to convoke an assembly, to assemble.” Thus, it means “one who addresses an assembly, a preacher.”

Also, Solomon’s exclusive use of the general word for God, *Elohim* (“God”, 41x’s), rather than His personal name, *Yahweh* (“Lord”) suggest that the audience who would need and respond to the message would be both Jew and non-Jew. The story the

Preacher unravels is a human story—not a believer’s story—about his relationship with the Creator. Solomon is appealing to all men everywhere. Solomon probably wrote Ecclesiastes late in his life (approximately 931 B.C.). If this is correct, the great glory that Solomon ushered in early in his reign was already beginning to fade; and the division of Israel into two kingdoms would soon take place. Ecclesiastes may express his regret for his folly and wasted time due to carnality and idolatry (1 Kings 11). Jewish tradition asserts that Solomon wrote Song of Solomon in his youthful years, Proverbs in his middle years, and Ecclesiastes in his last years. Although Jewish tradition is by no means inspired, the timeline of Solomon’s history makes complete sense with the writing order so proposed.

He states his theme in 1:2-3 and first introduces a “truth” statement that will then be tested throughout the book. “*Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.*” He next asks a question based upon that truth statement. “*What profit has a man from all his labor in which he toils under the sun?*” The remainder of the book builds on this truth statement and question until we reach the challenging conclusion in Chapter 12.

Another way to look at the structure is that it is circular in nature. While it does have structure, it seems more to freely move between topics though clearly moving to its specific conclusion.

Here is one outline (Duane Guarett, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 256). These are the themes:

1. Introduction (1:1-2)
2. On time and the World (1:3-11)
3. On Wisdom (1:12-18)
4. On Wealth (2:1-11)
5. On Wisdom (2:12-17)
6. On Wealth (2:18-26)
7. On Time and the World (3:1-15b)
8. On Politics (3:15c-17)
9. On Death (3:18-22)
10. On Politics (4:1-3)
11. On Wealth (4:4-8)
12. On Friendship (4:9-12)

13. On Politics (4:13-16)
14. On Religion (5:1-7)
15. On Politics (5:8-9)
16. On Wealth (5:10-6:6)
17. Transition (6:7-9)
18. On Wisdom and Death (6:10-7:4)
19. Transition (7:5-6)
20. On Wisdom and Politics (7:7-9)
21. Transition (7:10)
22. On Wisdom and Wealth (7:11-14)
23. On Wisdom and Religion (7:15-29)
24. Transition (8:1)
25. On Politics (8:2-6)
26. Transition (8:7-8)
27. On Theodicy (8:9-9:1)
28. Transition (9:2)
29. On Death and Contentment (9:3-10)
30. Transition (9:11-12)
31. On Politics (9:13-10:17)
32. Transition (10:18-20)
33. On Wealth (11:1-6)
34. On Death and Contentment (11:7-12:7)
35. Conclusion (12:8-14)

While Solomon was working toward a conclusive point, he did so in a cyclical manner. Even though he wrote in such a manner, much of our study will follow a linear approach.

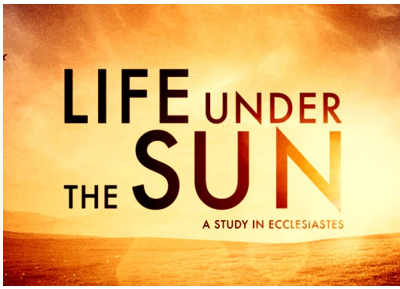
One main theme, however, is **vanity**, mentioned 38 times in this book alone in comparison to just 35 times in all of the rest of the Old Testament. The preacher use of "God" appears 41 times but LORD" (Israel's covenant name) is never mentioned. "*All is vanity*" appears 6 times (1:2, 14; 2:11, 17; 3:19; 12:8) and "vanity of vanities" appears 3 times (1:2[2]; 12:8). In that connection, three times he asked the question, "What profit" (or advantage) "is there?" (1:3; 3:9; 5:15) In 2:11 the answer is none because all we should do is "Eat and drink" (2:24; 3:13, 22; 5:18-19; 8:15; 9:7-9; 11:9). In other words, what people seem more interested in "under the sun" ends up being meaningless. Nothing in life, without God, has inherent value but only a contingent value ... contingent upon that pursuit's relationship to God. That dark picture intends to impact the readers and pry their hands off of this earthly life in order to find ultimate meaning solely in relationship with

God. Some people even describe Ecclesiastes as the "negative" preparation for the gospel—divine revelation about the hopelessness of this life to prepare one to accept the hope of the next life, Jesus.

QUESTIONS:

1. What two questions are asked in this chapter?
2. How would you summarize what you already know about this book?
3. From what you see in the following verses, how would you summarize the kind of teaching that the book of Ecclesiastes appears to give about happiness or joy—2:26; 3:12; 5:19; 7:14, and 11:9.
4. Find the most prominent activity that reoccurs in the following verses — 2:24; 3:13; 4:9; 5:19; 8:15, and 10:15. What clues could this offer about the central message of Ecclesiastes?
5. Look at the word that is repeated in 1:2. Then scan the rest of the book to see how often it reoccurs. What do you know about the meaning of this word as it is used here in Ecclesiastes?
6. What do you learn in 11:9 and 12:1 about the intended audience for this book?

KEY WORD(S) & PHRASE(S): Vanity (38x's), under the sun (29x's), wisdom/wise (52x's), man (47x's), labor (36x's), and evil (22x's).



Lesson 2

The Preacher's Experience in Vanity

[1:12-2:26].

Memory Verse: *"I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind."* [1:14].

NOTHING MAKES SENSE (1:12-18)

Solomon now tells us that searching for the answer to the problem that vexed him. As Israel's King Solomon had everything necessary for "experimenting" with what everyone tries to make life worth living. He experimented with physical pleasures (2:1-3), accomplishing great and costly works (2:4-6), and accumulating great possessions (2:7-10) only to discover that all of it was only "vanity and grasping for the wind" (v. 14, NKJV).

Even before he began the search, Solomon took time to try to think the matter through. Since he was the wisest of all men, surely his God-given wisdom and a mind wholly devoted to the matter to get to the root of it ("seek") and to explore it from all sides ("search").

Here are some of his tentative conclusions:

Life is tough, but it is the gift of God (v. 13). Since the fall of man, "the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs" (Rom 8:22, NKJV); this is one reason why life is so difficult.

Life doesn't get easier if you try to run away from it (v. 14). All the works that are done "under the sun" never truly satisfy the heart. They are but "vanity and grasping for the wind" (v. 14, NKJV).

Not everything can be changed (v. 15). He makes a similar statement in 7:13. If we spend all our time and energy trying to straighten out everything that is twisted, we will have nothing left with which to live our lives! In short, Solomon is saying, "The past can't always be changed, and it is foolish to fret over what you might have done."

We must remind ourselves, however, that God has the power to straighten out what is twisted and supply what is lacking. He will not change the past, but

He can change the way that the past affects us. Faith makes the difference.

Still, wisdom and experience will not solve every problem (vv. 16-18). Those who go through life living on explanations will always be unhappy for at least two reasons.

First, there are no explanations for some things that happen, and God is not obligated to explain them anyway.

Second, God has ordained that His people live by promises and not by explanations, by faith and not by sight. "Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed" (John 20:29).

If anybody was equipped to solve the difficult problems of life and tell us what life was all about, Solomon was that person. He was the wisest of men, and people came from all over to hear his wisdom (1 Kings 4:29-34). His wealth was beyond calculation so that he had the resources available to do just about anything he wanted to do. But these advantages didn't enable Solomon to find all the answers he was seeking. The more we seek knowledge and wisdom, the more ignorant we know we are. This only adds to the burden. "All our knowledge brings us nearer to our ignorance," wrote T. S. Eliot in "Choruses From The Rock." An old proverb says, "A wise man is never happy."

For some people, life may be monotonous and meaningless, but it doesn't have to be. For the Christian believer, life is an open door, not a closed circle; there are daily experiences of new blessings from the Lord. True, we can't explain every-thing; but life is not built on explanations: it's built on promises — and we have plenty of promises in God's Word!

SO ARE YOU DISGUSTED WITH LIFE? (2:1ff).

"There is but one step from the sublime to the ridiculous." Napoleon is supposed to have made that statement after his humiliating retreat from Moscow in the winter of 1812. The combination of stubborn Russian resistance and a severe Russian winter was too much for the French army, and its expected sublime victory was turned into shameful defeat. As part of his quest for "the good life," King Solomon examined everything from the sublime to the ridiculous. In this chapter, Solomon recorded three stages in his experiments as he searched for a satisfying meaning to life.

He Tested Life (2:1-11). Solomon had the means and the authority to do just about anything his heart desired. He decided to test his own heart to see how he would respond to two very common experiences of life: enjoyment (1-3) and employment (4-11).

Enjoyment (2:1-3). The Hebrew people rightly believed that God made man to enjoy the blessings of His creation (Ps 104, 1Tim 6:17). At the conclusion of his book, Solomon admonished us to enjoy God's blessings during the years of youth, before old age arrived and the body began to fall apart (12:1 ff). Eight times in Ecclesiastes, Solomon used the Hebrew word meaning "pleasure," so it is obvious that he did not think God was a kill joy about life. However, today's world is pleasure-mad. While there is nothing wrong with innocent fun, the person who builds his or her life only on seeking pleasure is bound to be disappointed in the end.

For one thing, pleasure-seeking usually becomes a selfish endeavor; and selfishness destroys true joy. People who live for pleasure often exploit others to get what they want, and they end up with broken relationships as well as empty hearts. People are more important than things and thrills. And pleasure appeals to only part of the person and ignores the total being. This is the difference between entertainment and true enjoyment, for when the whole person is involved, there will be both enjoyment and enrichment.

Employment (2:4-11). Next, Solomon got involved in all kinds of projects, hoping to discover some-

thing that would make life worth living. He started with great works (4-6), including houses (1 Kings 7), cities (2 Chron 8:4-6), gardens, vineyards, orchards and forests (1 Kings 4:33), and the water systems needed to service them. Of course, Solomon also supervised the construction of the temple (1 Kings 5 ff), one of the greatest buildings of the ancient world.

He not only had works, but he also had workers (7 a). He had two kinds of slaves: those he purchased and those born in his household. Of course, Solomon accumulated wealth (7 b-8 a), in flocks and herds (1 Kings 8:63) as well as gold and silver (1 Kings 4:21 and 10:1 ff). He was the wealthiest and wisest man in the whole world, yet he was unhappy because activity alone does not bring lasting pleasure.

Solomon tested life, and his heart said, "Vanity!"

Solomon Hated Life (2:12-23). "I turned myself to behold" simply means, "I considered things from another viewpoint." What he did was to look at his wisdom (12-17) and his wealth (18-23) in light of the certainty of death. What good is it to be wise and wealthy if you are going to die and leave everything behind?

He considered his wisdom (2:12-17). Since both the wise man and the fool will die, what is the value of wisdom? For one thing, we can leave our wisdom for the guidance of the next generation, but how can we be sure they will value it or follow it? "What can the man do that cometh after the king?" suggests that it is folly for successive generations to make the same "experiments" (and mistakes) when they can learn from their forefathers, but they do it just the same!

"So I hated life!" concluded Solomon, but he was not contemplating suicide; for death was one thing he wanted to avoid. "I hate life and yet I am afraid to die!" said the French humanist Voltaire; Solomon would agree with him. Life seemed irrational and futile to Solomon, and yet it was still better than death. We might paraphrase his statement, "Therefore, I was disgusted with life!"

He considered his wealth (2:18-23). Not only did

Solomon hate life, but he hated the wealth that was the result of his toil. Of course, Solomon was born wealthy, and great wealth came to him because he was the king. He gave three reasons why he was disgusted with wealth.

First, **you can't keep it** (v. 18). The day would come when Solomon would die and leave everything to his successor. This reminds us of our Lord's warning in the parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12:13-21) and Paul's words in 1 Tim 6:7-10. A Jewish proverb says, "There are no pockets in shrouds."

Second, **we can't protect it** (vv. 19-20). It's bad enough that we must leave our wealth behind, but even worse that we might leave it to somebody who will waste it! Suppose he or she is a fool and tears down everything we have built up? Solomon didn't know it at the time, but his son Rehoboam would do that very thing (1 Kings 11:41-12:24).

Third, **we can't enjoy it as we should** (vv. 21-23). If all we do is think about our wealth and worry about what will happen to it, we will make our lives miserable. We do all the work and then leave the wealth to somebody who didn't even work for it (v. 21). It all seems so futile.

At this point, Solomon appears to be very pessimistic, but he doesn't remain that way very long.

He Accepted Life (2:24-26)

This is the first of six "conclusions" in Ecclesiastes, each of which emphasizes the importance of accepting life as God's gift and enjoying it in God's will (3:12-15,22; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-10; 11:9-10). Solomon is not advocating "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die!" That is the philosophy of fatalism not faith. Rather, he is saying, "Thank God for what you do have, and enjoy it to the glory of God." Paul gave his approval to this attitude when he exhorted us to trust "in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy" (1 Tim 6:17, NKJV). Solomon made it clear that not only were the blessings from God, but even the enjoyment of the blessings was God's gift to us (v. 24). He considered it "evil" if a person had all the blessings of life from God but could not enjoy them (6:1-5). It is easy to see why the Jewish people read Ecclesiastes at the Feast of Tabernacles, for Tabernacles is their great time of

thanksgiving and rejoicing for God's abundant provision of their needs.

"For who can eat and who can have enjoyment without Him?" The farmer who prayed at the table, "Thanks for food and for good digestion" knew what Solomon was writing about.

The important thing is that we seek to please the Lord (v. 26) and trust Him to meet every need. God wants to give us wisdom, knowledge, and joy; these three gifts enable us to appreciate God's blessings and take pleasure in them. It is not enough to possess "things"; we must also possess the kind of character that enables us to use "things" wisely and enjoy them properly.

Not so with the sinner. (The Hebrew word means "to fall short, to miss the mark.") The sinner may heap up all kinds of riches, but he can never truly enjoy them because he has left God out of his life. In fact, his riches may finally end up going to the righteous. This is not always the case, but God does make it happen that "the wealth of the sinner is laid up for the just" (Prov 13:22). At their exodus from Egypt, the Israelites spoiled their Egyptian masters (Ex 3:22; 12:36), and throughout Jewish history their armies took great spoil in their many conquests. In fact, much of the wealth that went into the temple came from David's military exploits. It is "vanity and vexation of spirit" ("meaningless, a chasing after wind," NIV) for the sinner to heap up riches and yet ignore God. Apart from God, there can be no true enjoyment of blessings or enrichment of life. It is good to have the things that money can buy, provided you don't lose the things that money can't buy.

This completes the first section of Ecclesiastes — The Problem Declared. Solomon has presented four arguments that seem to prove that life is really not worth living: the monotony of life (1:4-11), the vanity of wisdom (1:12-18), the futility of wealth (2:1-11), and the certainty of death (2:12-23). His argument appears to be true if you look at life "under the sun," that is, only from the human point of view.

But when you bring God into the picture, everything changes! (Note that God is not mentioned from

1:14 to 2:23.) Life and death, wisdom and wealth, are all in His hands; He wants us to enjoy His blessings and please His heart. If we rejoice in the gifts, but forget the Giver, then we are ungrateful idolaters.

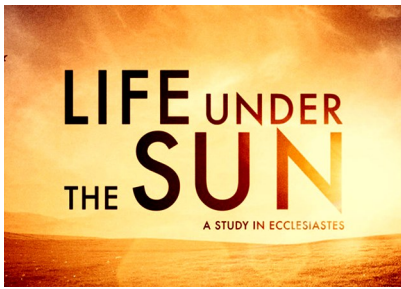
In the next eight chapters, Solomon will consider each of these four arguments and refute them. At the end of each argument he will say, "Enjoy life and be thankful to God!" (See the outline.) In his discussions, he will face honestly the trials and injustices of life, the things that make us cry out, "Why, Lord?" But Solomon is not a shallow optimist wearing rose-tinted glasses, nor is he a skeptical pessimist wearing blinders. Rather, he takes a balanced view of life and death and helps us look at both from God's eternal perspective.

"Life isn't like a book," says Chuck Colson. "Life isn't logical, or sensible, or orderly. Life is a mess most of the time. And theology must be lived in the midst of that mess."

Solomon will provide us with that theology.

It's up to us to live it — and be satisfied!

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Lessons 3-6

The Preacher's Observations about Vanity

[3:1-6:12].

Memory Verse: *"I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind."* [1:14].

Solomon presents arguments to prove that life was nothing but grasping and chasing after the wind. But he was too wise a man to let his own arguments go unchallenged, so in Eccl 3-10, he reexamined each of them carefully.

His first argument was the monotony of life (1:4-11), and he examined it in Eccl 3:1-5:9. He discovered four factors that must be considered before you can say that life is monotonous and meaningless.

First, **he saw something above man, a God who was in control of time and who balanced life's experiences** (3:1-8). Then **he saw something within man that linked him to God — eternity in his heart** (3:9-14). Third, **Solomon saw something ahead of man — the certainty of death** (3:15-22). Finally, **he saw something around man — the problems and burdens of life** (4:1-5:9).

God Orders Time (3:1-8).

In fourteen statements, Solomon affirmed that God is at work in our individual lives, seeking to accomplish His will. The inference is plain: if we cooperate with God's timing, life will not be meaningless. Everything will be "beautiful in His time" (v. 11), even the most difficult experiences of life. Most of these statements are easy to understand, so we will examine only those that may need special explanation.

- Birth and death (v. 2).
- Planting and plucking (v. 2).
- Killing and healing (v. 3).
- Casting away stones and gathering stones (v. 5).
- Embracing and refraining from embracing (v. 5).
- Getting and losing (v. 6).
- Tearing and mending (v. 7).
- Loving and hating (v. 8).

Eternity Is in Your Heart (3:9-14).

The Preacher adjusted his sights and no longer looked at life only "under the sun." He brought God into the picture and this gave him a new perspective. In verse 9, he repeated the opening question of 1:3, "Is all this labor really worth it?" In the light of "new evidence," Solomon gave three answers to the question.

First, **man's life is a gift from God** (v. 10). Second, **man's life is linked to eternity** (v. 11). Third, **man's life can be enjoyable now** (vv. 12-14). Life appears to be transitory, but whatever God does is forever, so when we live for Him and let Him have His way, life is meaningful and manageable. However, we must note that Solomon is not saying, "Don't worry — be happy!" He is promoting faith in God, not "faith in faith" or "pie in the sky by and by." Faith is only as good as the object of faith, and the greatest object of faith is the Lord.

The Certainty of Death (3:15-22)

Life, death, time, and eternity: these are the "ingredients" that make up our brief experience in this world, and they must not be ignored.

Solomon mentioned the certainty of death in 2:12-23 and repeats it several times before he ends his book (4:8; 5:15-16; 6:6; 8:8; 9:2-3,12; 12:7-8). Solomon added a new thought here: "and God will call the past to account" (v. 15, NIV). Scholars have a difficult time agreeing on the translation of this phrase. It literally says "God seeks what hurries along." Solomon seems to say that time goes by swiftly and gets away from us; but God keeps track of it and will, at the end of time, call into account what we have done with time (12:14).

Sometimes Life is not fair (4:1ff)

In chapter 4, Solomon recorded his observations from visiting four different places and watching several people go through a variety of experiences.

- **In the Courtroom (4:1-3).** Israel's judicial system (Ex 18:13-27; Deut 17:1; 19), based on divine Law; was adequate but could be corrupted (5:8). Moses warned officials to be honest and fair (Lev 19:15; Deut 1:17), and prophets lashed out against social injustice (Isa 56:1; 59:1 ff; Amos 1-2).
- **In the Marketplace (4:4-8).** Disgusted with what he saw in the "halls of justice," the king went down to the marketplace to watch the various laborers at work. Solomon considered four different kinds of men.
 - The industrious man (v. 4).
 - The idle man (vv. 5-6).
 - The integrated man (v. 6).
 - The independent man (vv. 7-8).

Solomon's conclusion was, "This, too, is meaningless — a miserable business!" (v. 8, NIV) God wants us to labor, but to labor in the right spirit and for the right reasons. Blessed are the balanced!

- **On the Highway (4:9-12).** Solomon's experience with the independent man caused him to consider the importance of friendship and the value of people doing things together. He may have recalled the Jewish proverb, "A friendless man is like a left hand bereft of the right." Perhaps he watched some pilgrims on the highway and drew the conclusion, "Two are better than one."

Two are certainly better than one when it comes to working (v. 9), to walking (v. 10), to warmth (v. 11) and when it comes to their watch and care, especially at night (v. 12). Solomon started with the number one (v. 8), then moved to two (v. 9), and then closed with three (v. 12). This is typical of Hebrew literature (Prov 6:16; Amos 1:3,6,9, etc.).

- **In the Palace (Eccl 4:13-16).** This is Solomon's fourth "better" statement (4:3,6,9), introducing a story that teaches two truths: the instability of political power and the fickleness of popularity. Once again, Solomon drew the same conclusion: it is all "vanity and vexation of spirit" (see vv. 4 and 8).

No matter where Solomon went, no matter what

aspect of life he studied, he learned an important lesson from the Lord. When he looked up, he saw that God was in control of life and balanced its varied experiences (3:1-8). When he looked within, he saw that man was made for eternity and that God would make all things beautiful in their time (3:9-14). When he looked ahead, he saw the last enemy, death. Then as he looked around (4), he understood that life is complex, difficult, and not easy to explain. One thing is sure: No matter where you look, you see trials and problems and people who could use some encouragement. However, Solomon was not cynical about life—just viciously honest.

In chapter 5, Solomon talks about but goes beyond the subject of mere money and deals with the values of life, the things that really count.

Don't Rob the Lord (Eccl 5:1-7).

Don't Rob Others (Eccl 5:8-9)

Don't Rob Yourself (Eccl 5:10-20).

Solomon had already discussed "the futility of wealth" in 2:1-11, and some of those ideas are repeated here. What he did in this section was demolish several of the myths that people hold about wealth. Because they hold to these illusions, they rob themselves of the blessings God has for them.

Wealth brings satisfaction (v. 10).

Money solves most every problem (v. 11). There is no escaping the fact that we need a certain amount of money in order to live in this world, but money of itself is not the magic "cure-all" for every problem. Still, John Wesley said, "Make all you can, save all you can, give all you can."

Wealth brings peace of mind (v. 12). The Living Bible expresses verse 12 perfectly: "The man who works hard sleeps well whether he eats little or much, but the rich must worry and suffer insomnia."

Wealth provides security (vv. 13-17). There are three ways to get wealth: we can work for it, we can steal it, or we can receive it as a gift (see Eph 4:28). Solomon saw the blessings of life as God's gift to those who work and who accept that work as the favor of God. "To enjoy your work and to accept your lot in life — that is indeed a gift from God" (v. 19, TLB). Solomon added another important thought: the ability to enjoy life's blessings is also a

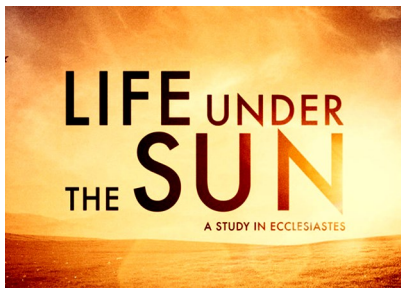
gift from God.

Riches Without Enjoyment (Eccl 6:1-6). What a seeming tragedy it is to have all the resources for a satisfying life and yet not be able to enjoy them for one reason or another. What is Solomon saying to us? "Enjoy the blessings of God now and thank Him for all of them." Don't plan to live — start living now. Be satisfied with what He gives you and use it all for His glory.

Labor Without Satisfaction (Eccl 6:7-9). Solomon had spoken about the rich man; now he discusses the situation of the poor man. Rich and poor alike labor to stay alive. We must either produce food or earn money to buy it. The rich man can let his money work for him, but the poor man has to use his muscles if he and his family are going to eat. But even after all this labor, the appetite of neither one is fully satisfied.

Questions Without Answers (Eccl 6:10-12). Thus far, Solomon has said that life is a dead-end street for two kinds of people: those who have riches but no enjoyment and those who labor but have no satisfaction. But he has tried to point out that true happiness is not the automatic result of making a good living; it is the blessed by-product of making a good life. If you devote your life only to the pursuit of happiness, you will be miserable; however, if you devote your life to doing God's will, you will find happiness as well.

But, the Preacher was not finished. He knew that life was also a dead-end street for a third kind of person — the person who required answers to all of life's questions. Solomon was not condemning honest inquiry, because Ecclesiastes is the record of his own investigation into the meaning of life. Rather, Solomon was saying, "There are some questions about life that nobody can answer. But our ignorance must not be used as an excuse for skepticism or unbelief. Instead, our ignorance should encourage us to have faith in God. After all, we don't live on explanations; we live on promises."



Lessons 7-9

Learning to Make Good in an Empty World

[7:1-9:18].

Memory Verse: "I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind." [1:14].

The Contrasts of Wisdom with Folly [7:1-14].

A good name is better than precious ointment [1].

Just as the bizarre beginning in verse 1 is not saying dying is better than living—but rather that death seals the life and the 'name' (i.e. reputation) we have will make better for us. "Every man has three names," says an ancient adage; "one his father and mother gave him, one others call him, and one he acquires himself.

- *Sorrow is better than laughter* (2-4). Solomon was certainly not a morose man with a gloomy lifestyle but he knew sorrow can do more good for the heart than laughter, even though he knows laughter can be medicine [Prov 15:13,15; 17:22]! There is "a time to laugh" (Eccl 3:4).
- *Rebuke is better than praise* (7:5-6). King Solomon compared the praise of fools to the burning thorns in a campfire: you hear a lot of noise, but you don't get much lasting good.
- *The "long haul" is better than the shortcut* (7:7-9). Beware of "easy" routes; they often become expensive detours that are difficult and painful. Bribery appears to be a quick way to get things done (v. 7), but it only turns a wise man into a fool and encourages the corruption already in the human heart. Far better that we wait patiently and humbly for God to work out His will than that we get angry and demand our own way (v. 8).
- *Today is better than yesterday* (7:10). When life is difficult and we are impatient for change, it is easy to long for "the good old days" when things were better. "Carpe diem!" wrote the Roman poet Horace. "Seize the day!" This does not mean we shouldn't learn from the past or prepare for the future, because both are important.

Wisdom Helps Us See Life Clearly (Eccl 7:11-18)

One of the marks of maturity is the ability to look at life in perspective and not get out of balance. When you have God's wisdom, you will be able to accept

and deal with the changing experiences of life like...

- *Wealth* (7:11-12). Money can lose its value or be stolen, but true wisdom keeps its value and cannot be lost, unless we become fools and abandon it deliberately. The person who has wealth but lacks wisdom will only waste his fortune, but the person who has wisdom will know how to get and use wealth.
- *Providence* (7:13). The country preacher says, "Learn to cooperate with the inevitable!". The Living Bible says, "See the way God does things and fall into line. Don't fight the facts of nature." We don't fully understand all the works of God (11:5), but we do know that "He hath made everything beautiful in its time" (3:11).
- *Adversity and prosperity* (7:14). Wisdom gives us perspective so that we aren't discouraged when times are difficult or arrogant when things are going well. It takes a good deal of spirituality to be able to accept prosperity as well as adversity, for often prosperity does greater damage (Phil 4:10-13).
- *Righteousness and sin* (7:15-18). If there is one problem in life that demands a mature perspective, it is "Why do the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper?" Didn't God tell the people that the obedient would live long (Ex 20:12; Deut 4:40) and the disobedient would perish? (Deut 4:25-26; Ps 55:23). God did promise to bless Israel if they obeyed His law, but those same promises were not made to believers today under the new covenant. Second, the wicked appear to prosper only if you take the short view of things. Verses 16-18 oft are misunderstood to say that Solomon taught "moderation" in everyday life: 'don't be too righteous, but don't be too great a sinner' but this is not what Solomon wrote (*from The Bible Exposition Commentary: Old Testament* © 2001-2004 by Warren W. Wiersbe. All rights reserved.)

In the Hebrew, the verbs carry the idea of reflexive action. Solomon said to the people, "Don't claim to be righteous and don't claim to be wise." In other words, don't be self-righteous with the pride that comes when we think we have "arrived" and know it all. He condemned self-righteousness of the hypocrite and the false wisdom of the proud.

Wisdom Helps Us Face Life Stronger (Eccl 7:19-29)

"Wisdom makes one wise man more powerful than ten rulers in a city" (v. 19, NIV). The wise person fears the Lord and therefore does not fear anyone or anything else (Ps 112). He walks with the Lord and has the adequacy necessary to face the challenges of life, even war (see 9:13-18).

- It helps us cope *with sin*, (19-20) because nobody on earth is sinless (v. 20, and note 1 Kings 8:46). We are all guilty of both sins of omission ("doeth good") and sins of commission ("sinneth not").
- We can cope with *what people say about us* (vv. 21-22). The wise person pays no attention to the gossip of the day because he has more important matters which to attend.
- Wisdom also *helps with our inability to grasp the meaning of all that God is doing* in this world (vv. 23-25, and see 3:11 and 8:17).
- It helps us deal with the *sinfulness of humanity* in general (vv. 26-29). Solomon concluded that the whole human race was bound by sin and one man in a thousand was wise — and not one woman! Yes, there are many snares and temptations in this evil world, but the person with godly wisdom will have the power to overcome.

In light of all these hardships, Solomon queries, "Does God know about it and yet not care?" Some people ponder this question and end up becoming either agnostics or atheists, but in so doing, they create a whole new problem: "Where does all the good come from in the world?" We must not forget that one major source of evil in this world is fallen man and his "many devices," both good and evil, that have helped to create problems of one kind or another (7:29, NASB). God certainly can't be blamed for that! The Preacher explored the problem of evil in the world by examining three key areas of life.

Authority (Eccl 8:1-9). Millions of good people have been oppressed by bad rulers. Some leaders ruled as benevolent dictators, but for the most part rulers in the ancient East were tyrannical despots. Suppose the king commanded the servant to do something evil? What should the servant do? Here is

where wisdom comes to his aid. His wisdom told him that there were four possible approaches he could take to this problem.

- *Disobey*. But Solomon's admonition was, "Keep the king's commandment" (v. 2). Why? He must be true to his oath to the king and to God, who is the source of all authority (Rom 13). To disobey orders would mean breaking promise. And the officer should obey so that he might avoid punishment (v. 5 a). We all have enough misery, so why add to it (v. 7)? One thing is sure: a day is coming when wickedness will be judged (v. 8 b), and even kings will not escape.
- *Desert* (v. 3 a). Even this action may lead to punishment if the king might be offended. But more than one person has quit a job or resigned from office in order to maintain his or her integrity.
- *Defy* (v. 3 b). Is there ever a place for "civil disobedience" in the life of the believer? Do law-abiding citizens have the right to resist authority when they feel the law is not just? Thomas Jefferson wrote, "Resistance to tyrants is obedience to God." Was he right? When it comes to matters of conscience and the law, Christians should agree with Peter: "We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). Martyrs down through the ages testify to the courage of conscience and the importance of standing up for truth. This doesn't mean we can resist the law on every minor matter that disturbs us, but it does mean we have the obligation to obey our conscience. How we express our disagreement with the authorities demands wisdom and grace; this is where the fourth possibility comes in.
- *Discern* (vv. 5 b-6). The wise servant understands that "time and judgment [procedure, NASB]" must be considered in everything we do, because it takes discernment to know the right procedure for the right time. The impulsive person who overreacts and storms out of the room (v. 3) is probably only making the problem worse. Wisdom helps us understand people and situations and to figure out the right thing to do at the right time. "The wise heart will know the proper time and procedure" (v. 5 b, NIV).

Inequity (Eccl 8:10-14). Solomon summarized his concern in verse 14: "righteous men who get what the wicked deserve, and wicked men who get what the righteous deserve" (NIV). In spite of good laws

and fine people who seek to enforce them, there is more injustice in this world than we care to admit. How should the wise person respond to the inequities and injustices in this world? Certainly we should do all we can to encourage the passing of good laws and the enforcement of them by capable people, but even this will not completely solve the problem. It is one of life's "vanities" we must accept it without becoming pessimistic or cynical.

Mystery (Eccl 8:15-17). The person who has to know everything, or who thinks he knows everything, is destined for disappointment in this world. Through many difficult days and sleepless nights, the Preacher applied himself diligently to the mysteries of life. He came to the conclusion that "man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun" (v. 17; see 3:11; 7:14,24,27-28).

Our Common Destiny (Eccl 9:1-18). This is not the first time the subject of death has come into Solomon's discourse, nor will it be the last. (See 1:4; 2:14-17; 3:18-20; 4:8; 5:15-16; 6:6; 8:8; 12:1-7.) After all, the only way to be prepared to live is to be prepared to die. Death is a fact of life, and Solomon examined many facets of life so that he might understand God's pattern for satisfied living. In this chapter, Solomon drew two conclusions: death is unavoidable (1-10) and life is unpredictable (11-18). That being the case, the best thing we can do is trust God, live by faith, and enjoy what-ever blessings God gives us.

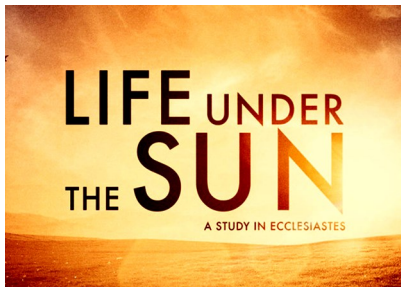
Death Is Unavoidable (9:1-10). Death is not an accident, it's an appointment (Heb 9:27), a destiny that nobody but God can cancel or change. Life and death are "in the hand of God" (v. 1), and only He knows our future, whether it will bring blessing ("love") or sorrow ("hatred"). How people deal with the reality of death reveals itself in the way they deal with the realities of life. Solomon pointed out three possible responses that people make to the ever-present fear of death.

- **Escape** (v. 3). The fact of death and the fear of death will either bring out the best in people or the worst in people; and too often it is the worst.
- **Endurance** (vv. 4-6). When confronted by the stern fact of death, not everybody dives into an escape hatch and shouts, "Let's eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die!" Many people just grit their teeth, square their shoulders, and endure. They hold on to that ancient motto,

"Where there's life, there's hope!" (v. 4)

- **Enjoyment** (vv. 7-10). This has been one of Solomon's recurring themes (2:24; 3:12-15,22; 5:18-20; 8:15), and he will bring it up again (11:9-10). His admonition "Go thy way!" means: "Don't sit around and brood! Get up and live!"

Life Is Unpredictable (9:11-18). Anticipating the response Solomon turned from death and began to discuss life. "If death is unavoidable," somebody would argue, "then the smartest thing we can do is major on our strengths and concentrate on life. When death comes, at least we'll have the satisfaction of knowing we worked hard and achieved some success." "Don't be too sure of that!" was Solomon's reply. "You can't guarantee what will happen in life, because life is unpredictable." To begin with, our abilities are no guarantee of success (vv. 11-12). Our opportunities are no guarantee of success (vv. 13-18). And since death is unavoidable and life is unpredictable, the only course we can safely take is to yield ourselves into the hands of God and walk by faith in His Word, We don't live by explanations; we live by promises.



Lessons 10-12

Special Wisdom for Life's Surprises

[10:1-12:7].

Memory Verse: *"I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind."* [1:14].

As the preacher begins his conclusions, he begins to notice some foolish things that life affords that bring emptiness to life. These are some of his observations.

Wisdom does not look like this . . . [10:1-15]

Ruined reputations (1). Like dead flies putrefy the perfumer's ointment, so folly is to one respected for wisdom and honor. Just a little folly can ruin an otherwise good man.

Misguided choices (2). The wise man's heart is at his right hand, the hand regarded as the normal or most common used one. The fool's heart is at his left hand, which means it is in the wrong place.

Stupid (3). A fool will walk along the way without wisdom and in his life demonstrate that foolishness. Yet, not only does his life manifest it – his speech does as well.

Rash (4). A fool will lose his head in times of crises but a wise man, especially in the presence of an important figure will keep his wits, keep his post and conciliate a restored relationship.

Governmental Waste (5-20). It is interesting that the Preacher calls this "An evil". He has seen these errors where the folly of ill prepared people fill roles while the true princes are humbled to lower positions.

Even among the work force, there was evidence of more of this folly to the preacher.

Those who labor with foolishness hurt and hinder themselves. Things happen to people certainly. But the wisdom of the wise will know how to expedite and to protect his labors.

Further, The foolish seldom know how to restrain themselves (11-15). They do not know how to hold

their tongues and they do not know how to direct their labor

Wisdom for the King's House [10:16-20].

The Preacher also notices how folly and wisdom affect the condition of the country (16-19).

He says, "Woe to the land whose leaders...

- are childish and feast in the morning
- are lazy, resulting in broken down buildings

The he says, "Blessed is the land whose leaders...

- Feast at the proper time
- successfully rule, providing for true happiness and meeting every need

But then he warns every citizen.. "Be careful what you say" (20)

- Do not curse the king
- Do not curse the rich
- For what you say will likely reach their ears

The wise man notices freedom of speech is best restricted by the wise.

Wisdom for the Businessman [11:1-6]

The preacher also observes and admonishes us to compassion and benevolence (11:1-8). In (1-2), his expression "Cast your bread upon the waters, you will find it after many days" suggests that sharing will lead to receiving. And the expression, "Give servings to seven, and to eight, for you do not know what evil will come" could be compared to expressions today like "Pay it forward", etc.

He then continues with an exhortation to diligence (3-8). Many things (like rain and wind storms) are inevitable (3-4) and we cannot stop the clouds full of rain from falling, nor can we keep the trees from lying

wherever they fall. But if we spend our time just watching and not doing, we will not sow and reap.

He adds also that there are things we cannot comprehend (5-6), like the way of the wind (or spirit) or the development of the child in the womb. Amazing as they are, we should then acknowledge that we also cannot comprehend God's working. His wisdom is, therefore, "do not restrict your efforts."

Days of darkness will come (7-8). But if we are blessed to be alive when one is well, when the light is sweet and the sun is warm, we can count ourselves blessed. However, if one lives many joyful days, they should know that evil days will come.

Advice to the Youth... (11:9-12:7).

The preacher then turns his attention to those who will soon be embarking on their journey of life as well.

And to the young, the preacher says, **Rejoice!**" (9a). He tells the young to "Let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth." There is much ahead of you, *why be downcast?* "Walk in the ways of your heart, and in the sight of your eyes." Live your aspirations now.

Remember Judgment. Yet he reminds them that while we should pursue our life's aspirations, never lose sight of the certain reality of the judgment of God (9b). Perhaps caution drives the warning. Perhaps experience too. Either way, the preacher says that God will bring us to judgment and that we will answer for all we do.

And then he adds, **remove sorrow and evil** (10). There is too much life to live that God has afforded us only to ruin it in worry and vexation.

And last, the Preacher says **remember God** (12:1-2) before the difficult days come, before the years come in which you find little pleasure and while the sun, moon, and stars are not darkened and the clouds do not return after the rain.

The last picture describes the process of aging that all people must face and reflect upon (12:3-7)

So what are these dark days?

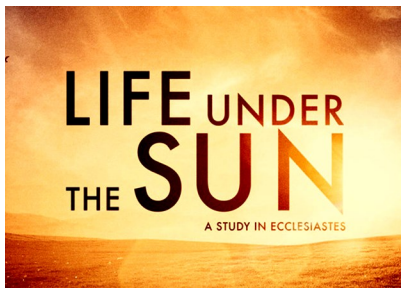
The day is coming in which:

- The keepers of the house tremble (the arms weaken).
- The strong men bow down (the legs become frail).
- The grinders cease because they are few (the teeth fall out).
- Those that look through the windows grow dim (the eyes lose their sight).
- The doors are shut in the streets (the ears become hard of hearing).
- The sound of the grinding is low (the mouth and speech become unintelligible).
- When one rises up at the sound of a bird (the elderly are easily awakened).
- And all the daughters of music are brought low (the voice no longer able to sing).
- They are afraid of height (the fear of falling).
- And of terrors in the way (the aged always feel more vulnerable than the invincibility of youth).
- When the almond tree blossoms (the wakefulness of old age setting in).
- The grasshopper is a burden (an old man, bowed like the insect, able to move only with some difficulty).
- And desire fails (fleshly desires wane).
- Man goes to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets (death).

Remember your Creator before:

- Before the silver cord (the spinal cord) is loosed.
- The golden bowl (the skull) is broken.
- The pitcher (the heart) shattered at the fountain.
- The wheel (the pelvis) broken at the well.

The figures that allude to decay of the body prepare us to face the true reality we must all face as well when finally our body returns to the dust and our spirit returns to God who gave it.



Lesson 13

So hear the Conclusion of the Matter...

[12:8-14].

Memory Verse: *"I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind."* [1:14].

So hear the Conclusion of the Matter...

Solomon closes his observations of life with his hearers and readers. In verse 8, he repeats his text that he has seen daily proved: Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.

The sacred inspired writings, if we will but make use of them, are sufficient to guide us in the way of true happiness, and we need not, in the pursuit of that, to fatigue ourselves with the search of other writings (v. 12): "And further, nothing now remains but to tell thee that that of making many books there is no end," that is, (1.) Of writing many books.

By what authority does the Preacher sum up our whole duty in this way? It is not by means of prophetic authority, for the Preacher does not claim to be a prophet. It is not by means of priestly interpretation of the Law, for the Preacher is not a priest. Although the Preacher is a king (1:1), he does not use his royal power to promulgate his message. No, the authority of the Preacher's message is the authority of common sense. He is "wise," "weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care." **His authority is the authority of reason.** Many people mistakenly try to oppose faith to facts, revelation to reason. But the Bible teaches us that both can be avenues to truth, if our hearts are pure. Both reason and revelation are "given by one Shepherd," that is, God.

Wisdom such as the Preacher displays is an inherently good thing. It is a "goad," encouraging us through "words of delight" to live well and truly before God. It is like "nails firmly fixed," providing an indispensable, unchanging support for the good life. Wisdom both initiates change, in other words, and conserves blessings.

Wisdom also is simple and eternal. The Preacher

contrasts wisdom and "making many books." Making many books refers to man's ongoing effort to understand himself and the world he lives in. Such learning is necessary. Often, as with the realm of the hard sciences, we make many new and exciting discoveries. But while knowledge of our DNA changes (thus requiring new books), knowledge of our moral nature does not. You would be a fool if you went to a doctor who studied only seventeenth-century medical textbooks. You would be an even greater fool if you ignored a moral writer like the Preacher, though he has been dead for millennia. Scientific knowledge changes; moral wisdom does not.

So, "Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man." The notion of fearing God frightens us. We like to think of God as the God of love, not fear, and because John the Apostle so calls Him that in 1John 4, He is indeed—in a certain sense. However, God is so great and majestic, so holy and awe-inspiring, that we small creatures would do well *to remember our place in the universe* and show due respect for him and for his Word. Why? "God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil." A wise person always keeps this truth in mind.

The book of Ecclesiastes begins with a statement about the world that is, "vanity of vanities" (1:2), and ends with a statement about the world to come, the "judgment."

We live between these worlds and must make choices in the former to prepare us for the latter, so choose well. If you follow the Preacher's common-sense advice, you will.

