

## **Ecclesiastes - Reality & Wisdom in the Midst of the Unrealistic & Foolish**

**12.30.18**

Acts 17:22-31

**So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.**

**For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.**

**The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for "'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, "'For we are indeed his offspring.'**

**Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but**

**now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."**

### **An Introduction to Ecclesiastes**

Life, death, love, hate, family, work, wealth, time and terror. The mysteries of fallen human existence are self-admitted and well documented, and because of our appetite for social media who we are and what we are capable of (both good and bad) are just simply, as they say "out there." For most Americans we are living life pretty close to how we want to live it. And for most of us, we are asking just about every question under the sun, while pretty much having access to everything under it as well. But once we have exhausted our vain dabbling into secular existence, when we have finished filtering all of life and people through our lens of negativity and pessimism, and when we are finally worn out and sick to death of wallowing in our self-loathing and self-pitied pride - Ecclesiastes will tell us there is something different and there is something more! We ask, "What is it?" **Ecclesiastes will tell us - there is God.** Because there is God there will be justice and peace one day. At the end of the day we humans do not know all the answers nor do we even ask all the right questions. But please believe me it does not mean there are no answers even to the wrong questions. That is why Ecclesiastes calls us to look for reality and wisdom in the midst of the unrealistic and foolish - because God is the answer.

## **The Historical Context to Ecclesiastes**

### **One: The Name**

The Hebrew name was the phrase from chapter 1, verse 1, "the Words of Qoheleth (the preacher), the son of David, king in Jerusalem."

The book was called "**Ecclesiastes**," which is a Latinized form from the Septuagint. This is the Greek term for "one who assembles," and from the root "to call out."

- Literal Meaning - a teacher or preacher who assembles an audience.
- Metaphorical Meaning - a gatherer of truth.
- Post-Modern Meaning - one who gathers different opinions and decides which more accurately fits personal narrative.

### **Two: The Veracity**

Ecclesiastes is a distinct example of unorthodox wisdom literature. It is an extended treatment of a subject and, like Job, often challenges orthodox wisdom and traditional teachings. It is part of the third division of the Hebrew canon called "The Writings." It is also part of a special grouping of five small books called the "Megilloth" or "five scrolls." Each of the five were read at an annual Jewish feast day. Ecclesiastes was read at the Feast of Tabernacles.

Because of the skeptical tone and somewhat pessimistic nature of this book it was rejected by the conservative rabbinical school of Shammai but advocated by the liberal rabbinical school of Hillel. This discussion continued even until the time of Jamnia after the fall of Jerusalem (a.d. 70-90). These ongoing concerns and discussions furthered the acceptance and canonization process of Ecclesiastes and several other books of the OT as well. Some of the reasons and concerns that caused hesitancy for these books were...

- Ecclesiastes - bitter, negative, non-traditional spirit
- Song of Songs - open affirmation of physical or sexual love
- Esther - no mention of God or Jewish Temple
- Ezekiel - his Temple was different from Moses'
- Daniel - concerns over the apocalyptic prophecies of chapters 7-12

Ultimately (as we know), Ecclesiastes and the other books mentioned were all accepted and were all canonized. Ecclesiastes was finally accepted because of its strong connections to the attributes of Solomon, and, for all of its no-traditional wisdom has a very traditional conclusion that makes real and relatable connections to human experience. The book also reveals the confusion and the grind of the real-life faith struggles for the Jewish community. Having said that, it is very interesting to see all skepticism and pessimism from Ecclesiastes truly reflected in similar struggles for the post-modern age (of which we live).

### **Three: The Literary Style**

Ecclesiastes is not only a collection of wisdom material; it is also a narrative. It is more like a life's journal than a structured literary work. It is similar to rabbinical teaching style called "pearls on a string." Pearls of wisdom that help one process life, realizations, actualities, inevitabilities, and finally the grand acknowledgement of the existence and sovereignty of God.

To be understood in context, Ecclesiastes (like the book and story of Job) must be interpreted as a whole - not as a cut and paste Twitter quote. Obvious is the author's sarcastic (almost bitter) look at the irony of life without God. A key phrase used for this is "**under the sun,**" (**used 31 times**). This repetitive theme sustains the focus on the human tensions of both the illusions and delusions of the human existence (until the chapter 12 epilogue of course). Clearly the writer insists the reader take a sober and honest look at the irony of life without God.

The book of Ecclesiastes is also characterized by polar opposites (contrasting parallels). For example:

- **wisdom vs. folly (foolishness)**
- **good vs. evil**
- **light vs. dark**
- **love vs. hate**
- **life vs. death**

- **this world (temporal) vs. the world to come (eternal)**

Finally, Ecclesiastes is written in the style of Old Testament Wisdom Literature (monotheistic, judgment day, future hope, goodness and fairness of God, revelation [Scripture] is true and secure.

#### **Four: Authorship**

Simple, the book is anonymous. However, there are credible Jewish traditions that say Ecclesiastes was one of three books written by Solomon. Song of Songs when he was young, Proverbs when he was middle aged, and Ecclesiastes when he was old cynical and bitter. It's obvious that Solomon is obviously the literary subject of chapters 1-2 because of references to wisdom, wealth and position. But there are also serious hints within the text that he is not the true author. One being that his name is never mentioned, the second, found in chapter 8, where advice is given on how to act and not to act in the King's presence.

#### **Five: The Date**

Most bible scholars and historians will offer a suggested writing date for Ecclesiastes and then change it. The most common suggestions date the writing at anywhere from 500 to 300 B.C. However, there are two issues related to its writing date: when the book was composed, and when it was put in its final canonical form. The historical setting must be after Solomon's day, because he is used as a literary object lesson in chapters 1-2. The final form of the book points to a later date, because the stylistic form of the Hebrew is post-exilic but before 400-300 b.c., but the use of

Aramaic words and expressions would seem to push it back to an early one.

Back and forth the debate goes. There are literary parallels in Phoenician wisdom literature of about 600-400 b.c., and then there are allusions to Ecclesiastes that appear in the writing of Ben Sirach, Ecclesiasticus, which was written about 180 b.c.

Important to note that there have been several small parts of Ecclesiastes found in the Dead Sea Scrolls. These have been dated as late as the second century b.c.

### **Six: The Theology**

The very fact of this book's presence in the Canon seems to imply that God does not reject the sincere, doubtful seeker - the person with more questions than answers. The asking of ultimate questions is not discouraged.

Ecclesiastes assumes the existence of God and is written within the stream of the Old Testament faith. Evil is a result of mankind's fall, not God (Ecclesiastes 7:29; 9:3). This is not the world God intended it to be!

God's ways cannot be known. Mankind can struggle for meaning in life, but it cannot be found without God! It doubts the easy orthodox views on the afterlife and doubts mankind's ability to know God, but still God is gracious and present. The world, as it is, is unfair and cruel; there must be

something more, if God's promises are true! Be content with life—it is from God. Enjoy it when and where you can (2:24-26; 3:12, 13, 22; 5:18; 8:15; 9:7-9). Simplistic answers that do not fit life experiences are "no" answers. We must face the reality of the meaninglessness of life if indeed there is no God.

### **Seven: The Main Message**

The main message of Ecclesiastes is to show the futility of human existence apart from God. It is a natural apologetics to convert self-sufficient materialists or secularized intellectuals. Many rebellious converts have confessed that in the days of their infidelity and excess, Ecclesiastes exercised a mysterious pull on them, in expressing the emptiness of life and redirecting toward God. Here is an example of this reality...

"If the vanity of all reality is truly the preacher's own conclusion, it is only because he initially limits his observations to a reality without the God of the Old Testament; then when he finally introduces God as source, solution, and sovereign do the pessimistic views and sarcastic expressions of life disappear and are replaced by a more orthodox attitude articulated in the final epilogue of chapter 12, verses 13-14."

A good portion of Ecclesiastes has the feel and vibe of being agnostic towards God and the afterlife in the sense that it commits so much time processing the questions of current and temporal reality. That ultimately is the beauty and wisdom of the Ecclesiastical set-up! The author wisely



waits patiently to the end to ask and answer the questions of the ultimate and eternal reality.

For Jews, it showed the error of simplistic overstatements made by traditional theologians (the two ways). For godless pagans, it shows the bankruptcy of earthly life without God. Most often easy answers to life's questions are usually wrong.

There is a beautiful mystery even for faith! There is mystery in life, in nature, in humanity, and in God. The key is found in actual faith, not just the knowledge of faith; in family, not possessions; and in God, not human wisdom or actions. The simple pleasures of life: family, work, friends, food provide happiness in this life. The next life is veiled, but God is there! **A revelation of life does not reveal all - but God's revelation of life in Christ will.**

We are going to find reality and wisdom in the midst of the unrealistic and foolish. Here is our focus for that mission the next few weeks.

- **The Illusion of Happiness and the Delusion of Satisfaction**
- **The Real Struggle to Faith and Obedience**
- **Contentment in the Pleasures and Pressures of Home and Family**
- **The Search for One's Meaning and One's Life Work**

## 1.6.19

### **Ecclesiastes - Reality & Wisdom in the Midst of the Unrealistic & Foolish**

1 Kings 3:3-14

**Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of David his father, only he sacrificed and made offerings at the high places. And the king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there, for that was the great high place. Solomon used to offer a thousand burnt offerings on that altar. At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night, and God said, "Ask what I shall give you." And Solomon said, "You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant David my father, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you. And you have kept for him this great and steadfast love and have given him a son to sit on his throne this day. And now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of David my father, although I am but a little child. I do not know how to go out or come in. And your servant is in the midst of your people whom you have chosen, a great people, too many to be numbered or counted for multitude. Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to govern this your great people?"**

**It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. And God said to him, "Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches or the life of your enemies, but have asked for**

**yourself understanding to discern what is right, behold, I now do according to your word. Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you. I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor, so that no other king shall compare with you, all your days. And if you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your days."**

## **Content**

### **The Eight Ecclesiastical Mysteries of Life**

- **All is Vanity - (Meaningless and Meaningful)**
- **A Time for Everything - (Priority and Value)**
- **Nothing New Under the Sun - (Negative and Neutralized)**
- **Dust to Dust - (Mortality and Mission)**
- **The Mysterious Ways of God - (The Predictable Ways of Man)**
- **The Work of our Hand - (Legacy of Meaning)**
- **Wisdom and Foolishness - (Beginning and End)**
- **Life Love Laughter - (Family - Faith - Finish)**

The eight profound mysteries of life? Solomon will even say there are more, but we will focus on these eight as "The Mysteries of Life." Let's start with a biblical premise:

In life, in nature, in our humanity, God reveals Himself to us in Christ. Yet there certainly remains before us many profound elements of mystery within the mind and heart of God. (Romans 1:18-22, Ephesians 1:9-10)

Ecclesiastes, will teach us WISDOM KEYS that will unlock significant of understanding to these mysteries. We will call those wisdom keys Ecclesiastical Wisdom - they are as follows:

- **The Key to Life's Mysteries are Found in God  
Not in the Wisdom or Actions of Man.**
- **The Key to Life's Mysteries are Found in Actual Faith  
Not Virtual Faith (Mere Knowledge).**
- **The Key to Life's Mysteries are Found in Family  
Not in Positions, Possessions or Wealth.**

The Ecclesiastical Keys lead us to an understanding and value of the essential God given blessings and pleasures of life: faith, family, work, friends, food etc. - meant to provide happiness in this life. These blessings and pleasures will remain in place for us through all of life (good and bad) if we choose to acknowledge and embrace them. They do not leave us or just disappear when life does not turn out as we want or expect it to - they re-manifest and re-express themselves in deeper meanings, mysterious ways and eventual outcomes. Meanings, mysteries, and eventuality are only discovered through intimate faith and trust in God.

Faith and trust continued even during times of suffering, sorrow and surrender. Many have found themselves right there - tainted and torn by the tragic and often times cruel unpredictability of life. Unable to make the choice to reconcile real life tragedy and cruelty enough to recover and redirect toward healthy living and hopeful outlooks. Many people simply just flounder and drown themselves and others around them in the hate and hostility of brokenness. Others seem to give themselves over to negative responses and a cynical outlook that feeds unhealthy pessimism and mean-spirited sarcasm - using words and body-language that crush and derail the faith of others.

There is another path that has become even more well-traveled in response to life tragedy and unmet expectations - it is the path of agnostic unbelief and cultural narcissism. That path leads to oblivion - because it only leads away from God (hope) and into itself (hopeless). It seeks for more than you and I can possibly give and for far more than God intended for this life to give. We do not live to ourselves for ourselves - we live to others for others - after that, we truly live. This is not complicated but it is profound.

Ecclesiastes will lead us to see that the next life is veiled, but that for those who have used these keys of Ecclesiastical Wisdom to unlock its mysteries - God IS there! We will finally see that a revelation of life does not reveal all - but God's revelation of LIFE IN CHRIST will reveal all that is needed and all that is to come.

We are going to find reality and wisdom in the midst of the unrealistic and foolish. Here is our focus for that mission the next few weeks. We are going to tackle the mysteries of life that Ecclesiastes so profoundly addresses.

So my invitation to is that you allow negative and defensive walls to come down, that you open your mind to the process of realistic conversation and meaningful dialogue, and finally open your heart to the contemplative and meditative process of the word of God through which the wisdom of God is revealed to you and those you love. Many of the answers about the mysteries and realities of life that you seek are found within the Ecclesiastical wisdom of Solomon - join this journey.

1.13.19

## **Ecclesiastes - Reality & Wisdom in the Midst of the Unrealistic & Foolish**

### **All is Vanity - Meaningless and Meaningful**

Ecclesiastes 1: 2-18

**Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.**

**What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?**

**A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.**

**The sun rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises.**

**The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north; around and around goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns.**

**All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they flow again.**

**All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.**

**What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun.**

**Is there a thing of which it is said, "See, this is new"? It has been already in the ages before us.**

**There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after.**

**I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.**

**What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted.**

**I said in my heart, "I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge." And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind.**

**For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.**



## Content - Context of Chapters 1 - 2

These are the words of Solomon as he comes to the end of his life. Looking back, he concludes, **"Everything is meaningless."** The word **"meaningless"** is from the Hebrew word **hébel** which can be also translated as **breath, vapor, vanity, or meaningless**. In contemplating his own life's trouble and temptation he uses the same word (**hebel**), to describe just how brief and often brutal life really is. Solomon will with pinpoint sarcasm touch all the bases - possessions and power, business and busy-ness, working in vain, family, shallow friendships and so on. Solomon's father David also used the word (**hebel**) in his songs and poems that we now know as the biblical book of Psalms. In those songs, David also sang about the completely meaningless aspects of life and its fleeting nature (Psalm 39:5-7; 39:12; 62:9).

In fact, the expression "completely meaningless" is literally translated from Hebrew as **"meaninglessness of meaninglessness."** As we consider that expression I think we can logically agree this is not how God wants those who believe and trust in Him to view or understand life - simply not a great outlook on life. So to be clear - we understand that should not be the general life perspective of a hopeful or spiritually healthy follower of Christ. But, how do we avoid it - when it is also very clear that often times folks end up there? Like Solomon sarcastic, regretful, bitter, in the closing moment of one's life contemplating and processing a life in which there has overly characterized by self-focused and poor choices with a clear pattern of compulsive disobedience to God. Wise enough to know the truth

but too foolish to have lived in that truth. Solomon's lament/regret is from **that** place as he confesses doing life "under the sun" filled with the madness and mayhem from the desires, demands and expectations of one thousand wives. How's that for reality TV?

We have biblical knowledge of two separate interactions between God and Solomon. In both instances God clearly communicates to Solomon that His favor and blessing come with conditions and high expectations of continued faithfulness in worship and honorable service. These are found in the passage we read last week in 1 Kings.

- **...if you will walk in my ways**
- **...if you walk in my statutes, obey my rules, keep all my commandments and walk in them**
- **...if you walk before me as David your father walked**

Ironically, Solomon's path of disobedience began with what was seen as a brilliant military move by marrying the daughter of Pharaoh (1 Kings 3:1). Though the marriage seemed strategically savvy and shrewd from a military perspective, in reality it was a clear act of rebellion against God who commanded the Israelites not to intermarry with pagan (godless) nations. Here is the biblical report of Solomon's marital mayhem.

1 Kings 11:1-2

**King Solomon loved many foreign women, along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, from the nations concerning which the LORD had said to the people of Israel, "You shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you, for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods." Solomon clung to these in love.**

The **meaninglessness of meaninglessness** that Solomon experienced at the end of his life is the inevitable result for those who rebel against God. It is not the perspective of a Christ-follower who loves and obeys God, with genuine a passion and intent to serve Him wholeheartedly. Solomon of course loved God - but not with his whole heart. He did not love God enough to do the one thing God said would give his life meaning - **"walk in my ways - not your own."** **Solomon kept his most meaningful love for himself, which eventually made his love meaningless.** Over and over again Solomon foolishly loved himself more than he loved God. You see, even the wisest man in the world could not truly love a thousand wives more than he loved himself - but a foolish man could truly love himself more than he loved God. That kind of foolishness can only be described as self-love. In the end Solomon's meaninglessness of meaninglessness was the result of him loving himself more than he loved God - that is the vanity of all vanities, the meaninglessness of meaninglessness.

Meaninglessness always leads to hopelessness. The progression is real. In Solomon's negative and pessimistic reveal there are warnings and there are trends.

## **Meaninglessness of Meaninglessness Trending Now**

### **Depression and Suicide**

- Every 12 minutes someone will commit suicide in the America.
- Alarmingly, suicide deaths jumped from 10th in 2016, to 8th in 2018.
- Over 1.5 million suicide attempts in 2018.
- The #1 cause leading to suicide in the US in 2018: Clinical Depression and Anxiety.
- The World Health Organization reports: Following current trends by the year 2020, depression will be the second most common cause of premature death worldwide.
- The use of antidepressants worldwide has increased by 300% in the last 10 years.
- An estimated 16.2 million adults in the United States had at least one major depressive episode. This number represented 6.7% of all U.S. adults.
- The epidemic of Opioid overdose deaths claimed more than 72,000 lives in U.S. for 2018.

## **Conclusion**

We live in a cultural belief vacuum, a phenomenon of moral and ethical entitlement and expectation - where personal behavior and accountability are no longer tethered to the blessing, favor and reward of God. Influential sectors of our culture and society have cut the cord - in favor of a less intrusive, less demanding, and a lowered expectation belief system. I guess it truly is an amazing grace that is filled with God's complete unconditional love - but empty of God's very imposing and irrelevant commandments and His high and demanding moral expectations. Unfortunately Christianity has trended that way as well. The initial movement was spiritually strategic and brilliant - it made so much sense. We could create more believers by simply messaging and branding the unconditional love of God and the endlessly redemptive grace that He gives with it. God's unconditional love and His saving grace are both biblical truths - beyond comprehension and amazingly mysteries. This strategy for the last thirty years has filled massive auditoriums on sprawling campuses, gathered unprecedented resources and created golden opportunities for ministry and profession. More churches, bigger crowds, better worship, attractive amenities, higher prominence and increased profile. The Franchise - Faith, Family and Friendship. All good right? Maybe, take a closer look. With a sample size now of several generations to evaluate from, we are witnessing a disturbing and heartbreaking trend from the world's most influential culture. A culture no longer concerned with or intellectually agreeable to being identified as a Christian or faith-based nation. In fact, the opposite. We are a culture no longer tethered to the belief that loving, pleasing or obeying God is

meaningfully connected to obtaining the favor or blessing of that God. If that belief is believed (and it is) then that culture no longer sees the need to believe in God. That culture then uses that love for and on itself and not on a God that is no longer believed in. In his foolishness the wisest man who ever lived called it the vanity of all vanities - meaninglessness of meaninglessness, because he knew he had been wrong. So how do we overcome this vanity of all vanities? Start with what is most meaningful:

- **Meaninglessness to Meaningfulness**
- **Discover/Rediscover Meaningful Faith that Demands the Love of Others (God) Rather than a Narcissistic Love of Self (Man)**
- **Commit Meaningful Time to Teaching Faith Hope and Love**
- **Fully Engage Yourself and Family in a Community of Meaningful Worship and Service**
- **Adopt a Meaningful Creed of Biblical Values and Truths - Live by It**

1.20.19

## **Ecclesiastes - Reality & Wisdom in the Midst of the Unrealistic & Foolish**

**A Time for Everything - (Perspective, Priority and Value)**

**Ecclesiastes - Chapter 3**

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

**For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.**

### **Content and Context**

You don't have to be a great thinker to know that the "*times and seasons*" Solomon contemplates in *Ecclesiastes* are a common part of day in day out life, no matter where you live. And, if it were not for the inevitability of God-driven "natural laws," both science and daily life would be completely chaotic, if not just impossible. Not only are there *times and seasons* in this world, but there is also an active overarching providence in our lives - the

Holy Spirit. From before our birth to the moment of our death, God is establishing His divine purposes, even though we don't quite always understand or are necessarily happy with what He is doing.

In the following fourteen statements (verses 1-8), Solomon affirms the idea that God is at work in our individual lives, seeking to accomplish His will. All of these events are purposed and allowed by God and they all eventually become good in their time. The reasoning of Solomon is plain: if we work to mesh with God's timing, (as we learned last week) life will not be meaningless. In fact, Solomon's experience and wisdom taught him that *"everything will be beautiful in His time"* (verse 11), even the most difficult and troubling experiences of life. Most of these fourteen statements are profoundly simple, so we will spend time with only the ones that need closer look.

**Verse 2 - Birth and Death** Things like abortion, birth control, euthanasia (mercy killing), genetic engineering, gene cloning and surrogate parenthood make it look as though mankind has seized control of birth and death, but Solomon said otherwise. Birth and death are not human accidents or incidents; they are divine appointments. God is in control - and that really angers and frustrates many people. In fact, it is why many choose not to believe in God. The uncertainties of life and the possibilities of death without full explanation or permission are more than most people will allow their intellect or heart to go. But Solomon does not agree and said it is foolish to believe otherwise. Here is a wealth of biblical truth to confirm it:



Psalm 139:13

**For You formed my inward parts and You knitted me together in my mothers womb; I praise You for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.**

Ephesians 2:10

**For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.**

Isaiah 38

**We can recklessly hasten our death, but unless God wills it we cannot prevent it when our time comes.**

Psalm 139:16

**All the days ordained for me are written in Your book.**

**Verse 2 - Planting and Plucking** The Jews were an agricultural people who learned to appreciate the change and rhythm of the seasons. In fact, their religious calendar was based on the agricultural year (Leviticus 23). **Men may plow and sow, but only God can give the increase** (Psalm 65). The awkward term "Plucking" may refer either to reaping or to pulling up unproductive plants. A good farmer knows that nature works for him only if he respects and works with nature. Ironically this is also a secret to successful living: *learn God's principles and cooperate with them.*

**Verse 3 - Killing and Healing** It doesn't appear this refers to war or self-defense, but to the unseen and unknown epidemics of disease, sickness

and plague. It has always been a struggle for the mind and reason of men and women to accept that God permits some to die while others are healed. Our limited reason and understanding of a sovereign God is polarizing and leads us all to a crossroads of faith - we either choose to believe and trust God, or we will refuse to believe and trust Him. Many Christians face a crisis of faith over this very issue - when God does not do what they want God to do, when they want Him to do it. At the end of his life Solomon's wisdom and love for God overcame his foolishness and rebellion - he knew and embraced the sovereignty of God. On a side note, because God is sovereign in life and death, it does not mean that that people who believe in His sovereignty should refuse medical aid or take medicine - God can and does use both natural and supernatural miracles to accomplish His purposes (Isaiah 38).

**Verse 5 - Casting Away Stones and Gathering Stones** There is an ongoing tour guide humor in Israel that God gave stones to an angel and told him to distribute them across the world – and then he tripped and dropped them all over Palestine. Point being the region is an exceptionally rocky land, and so farmers have always had to clear their fields before they could plow and plant. In ancient Israel if you wanted to hurt an enemy, you filled up his fields with stones (2 Kings 3:19). For thousands of years the Jewish people also gathered stones for building walls, houses and waterways. Point - stones are neither good nor bad; it all depends on what you do with them. If your enemy fills your land with rocks, don't throw them back. Take each one and build something good with.

**Verse 5 - Embracing and Refraining from Embracing** People in the Near East openly show their affections, kissing and hugging when they meet and when they part. So, you could paraphrase this, *"A time to say hello and a time to say good-bye."* This might also refer to relationships, partnerships, acquaintances, and for sure good (moral) and bad (corrupt).

**Verse 6 - Getting and Losing** "A time to search and a time to give it up for lost" is another translation. On the lighter side... for someone like me who is a little OCD, this phrase stretches biblical authority into possible garage sales and stuff the truck activity: a time to keep and a time to clean house. On the serious side it is easy to see that this carries a strong spiritual message with it as well - repentance and re-direction is the idea here.

**Verse 7 - Tearing and Mending** This probably refers to the Jewish practice of tearing one's garments during a time of grief or repentance (2 Samuel 13:31; Ezra 9:5). God expects us to grieve and express sorrow during bereavement and loss, but not like unbelievers who do not have hope.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

**But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from**

**heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words.**

There comes a time for moving forward and reaching out again. There is great value in getting out the needle and thread and beginning to sew things up again.

**Verse 8 - Loving and Hating** Are God's people allowed to hate? The fact that the next phrase mentions "war and peace" suggests that Solomon may have had the nation primarily in mind. However, there are some things that even Christians ought to hate. The bible says to love God and hate sin.

Life is something like a doctor's prescription: taken alone, the ingredients might kill you; but properly blended, they bring healing. God is sovereignly in control and has a time and a purpose for everything (Rom 8:28). This is not fatalism, nor does it rob us of freedom or responsibility. It is the wise providence of a loving Father who does all things with excellence and promises to make everything work together for good - for those who love Him.

## Conclusion

Last week I closed the teaching by asking us all the question, *"what is valuable to you?"* We had some fun with that as well as some really good answers to the question. The consensus response centered itself around the idea that love for God and for one another was most valuable. Good start. As part of his own processing of the profound mysteries of life, Solomon led his readers to ponder that very question in chapter 3, verses 1-8, when he opens with the universally recognized words, **"For everything there is a season, and there is a time for every matter under heaven."**

As we contemplate that mystery, Reason would lead us to conclude if inevitably there is a time given for everything, then every "thing" is of some importance and value. Without question then, in spite the time given to each and everything some of those things could or should be more important and valuable than others. And, if indeed some of those things were more important and valuable than others, then those important and valuable things would need and deserve more time than the others.

Solomon has already confessed in his introduction that he foolishly did not always value what was most important and as a result did not give those things the time needed and deserved. In reality, because of his compulsively poor choices and impulsively bad behavior eventually Solomon (for a season) did not value the things important to God - therefore did not have the required time or attention for anything of real value. He did not value God's ways, God's words or His expectations - and so he did not have time for everything he was given to direct, protect and love. He foolishly chased the whims, wishes, and wealth of a thousand wives on a thousand days and a thousand nights leaving him no time for

those things that were important and of value to his word with God, and his reputation with others. As he processes the *times and seasons* at the end of his life Solomon certainly regains a righteous perspective, and writes in profound wisdom from a place of deep conviction and personal regret - **everything has a value, everything has a time, everything has a season. Time and seasons make their own demands and in spite of our foolish choices and our sinful behavior this ecclesiastical mystery will in time reveal itself to us all.**

## **Ecclesiastes**

### **Nothing New Under the Sun**

**1.27.19**

**Ecclesiastes 1:1-11**

**The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.**

**Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.**

**What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?**

**A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.**

**The sun rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises.**

**The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north; around and around goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns.**

**All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they flow again.**

**All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.**

**What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun.**

**Is there a thing of which it is said, "See, this is new"? It has been already in the ages before us.**

**There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after.**

**What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun.**

**Naturalism V Supernaturalism - Concepts from C.S. Lewis' Miracles**

**Naturalists:** Those who believe that nothing exists except nature.

**Supernaturalists:** Those who believe that, besides nature, there exists something else.

**Nature:** Defined by naturalists as "everything there is." The natural is "what springs up, or comes forth, or arrives, or goes on, of its own accord: the given, what is there already: the spontaneous, the unintended, the unsolicited.

**Supernature:** That which causes nature to exist.



Under the sun is a phrase unique to Ecclesiastes, at least in the form and context in which it is used. Simply stated, the definition becomes "on the earth."

**If God is in the heavens**

**And the sun in in the heavens**

**And the earth is under the heavens**

**Then the earth is under the sun**

**And the earth is under God**

The debate with scholars and theologians is this. When it comes to Ecclesiastes, what are we to come to understand about the earth? Is it merely under the heavens (sun, God) in a physical sense, literally existing "below"? The term is fairly straightforward. Below, or underneath. Does this mean that Solomon is saying – under God's dominion? Or, does this posit what theologians and scholars would point to – that under the sun refers to the "natural world"?

When you consider "under the sun" based on the generally negative tone of Ecclesiastes, you see a negative side to the phrase.

When you consider further that "under the sun" would be synonymous with "under heaven" and heaven is the realm of God, you can easily arrive at a connotative meaning of "without God."

But on further reflection, a better understanding would be "the natural world." It must be remembered that this is contrasted to the spiritual world, in the heavens or above the sun.

28 times the term, "under the sun" is used in the book. Listen to the examples from Ecclesiastes chapters 4-6.

Ecclesiastes 4:1

**Then I looked again at all the acts of oppression which were being done [in the natural world]. 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.**

Ecclesiastes 4:3

**But better off than both of them is the one who has never existed, who has never seen the evil activity that is done [in the natural world].**

Ecclesiastes 4:7

**Then I looked again at vanity [in the natural world]. 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.**

Ecclesiastes 4:15

**I have seen all the living [in the natural world] throng to the side of the second lad who replaces him.**

Ecclesiastes 5:13

**There is a grievous evil which I have seen [in the natural world]: riches being hoarded by their owner to his hurt.**

Ecclesiastes 5:18

**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 [in the natural world] during the few years of his life which God has given him; for this is his reward.**

Ecclesiastes 6:1

**There is an evil which I have seen [in the natural world] and it is prevalent among men—**

Ecclesiastes 6:12

**For who knows what is good for a man during his lifetime, during the few years of his futile life? He will spend them like a shadow. For who can tell a man what will be after him [in the natural world]?**

The Times They Are A-Changin' – Bob Dylan

Come gather 'round people Wherever you roam  
And admit that the waters Around you have grown  
And accept it that soon You'll be drenched to the bone.  
If your time to you Is worth savin'  
Then you better start swimmin' Or you'll sink like a stone  
For the times they are a-changin'.

Come writers and critics Who prophesize with your pen  
And keep your eyes wide The chance won't come again  
And don't speak too soon For the wheel's still in spin  
And there's no tellin' who That it's namin'.  
For the loser now Will be later to win  
For the times they are a-changin'.

Come senators, congressmen Please heed the call  
Don't stand in the doorway Don't block up the hall  
For he that gets hurt Will be he who has stalled  
There's a battle outside And it is ragin'.  
It'll soon shake your windows And rattle your walls  
For the times they are a-changin'.

Come mothers and fathers Throughout the land  
And don't criticize What you can't understand  
Your sons and your daughters Are beyond your command  
Your old road is Rapidly agin'.  
Please get out of the new one If you can't lend your hand  
For the times they are a-changin'.

The line it is drawn The curse it is cast  
The slow one now Will later be fast  
As the present now Will later be past  
The order is Rapidly fadin'.  
And the first one now Will later be last  
For the times they are a-changin'.

The times they are a-changin'- but not in the way you may think. Solomon raises some interesting points for us to think on. His tone, to me, is that of a man who cannot enjoy what he has attained. He cannot marry his massive wealth of a wide array of things (women, money, land, knowledge, wisdom) to his faith, to his hope, and so he is in despair, tied to his misery and cynicism.

Solomon's family tale is a tragic one. He was born to a father who murdered his mother's first husband out of convenience. His brother raped his sister and in anger his other brother attempted to overthrow their father. Solomon's son would nearly throw away the entire kingdom, and he would be the king that sat on the throne as the kingdom of Judah and the kingdom of Israel would split.

Solomon asked God for wisdom, not ever truly knowing what the cost of that wisdom would be. And he would journey through life gaining wisdom the way that you gain wisdom.

- Do you learn more from success or failure?

- Do you learn more from something easily attained, or from something hard fought?
- Which means more to you or has more impact on your life?

We live in a time of immense wealth – I've taught before on the subject of MORE. We also live in a time of immense safety and security. Believe it or not, now is one of the safest times in history to live, and I'm not just speaking about medicine and hospitals and the prevalence of food. This is one of the safest times in history from an existence of physical violence standpoint as well.

1. **Violent crime in the U.S. has fallen sharply over the past quarter century.** The two most commonly cited sources of crime statistics in the U.S. both show a substantial decline in the violent crime rate since it peaked in the early 1990s. One is an annual report by the FBI of serious crimes reported to police in approximately 18,000 jurisdictions around the country. The other is an annual survey of more than 90,000 households conducted by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, which asks Americans ages 12 and older whether they were victims of crime, regardless of whether they reported those crimes to the police.

Using the FBI numbers, the violent crime rate fell 49% between 1993 and 2017. Using the BJS data, the rate fell 74% during that span. (For both studies, 2017 is the most recent full year of data.) The long-

term decline in violent crime hasn't been uninterrupted, though. The FBI, for instance, reported increases in the violent crime rate between 2004 and 2006 and again between 2014 and 2016.

- 2. Property crime has declined significantly over the long term.** Like the violent crime rate, the U.S. property crime rate today is far below its peak level. FBI data show that the rate fell by 50% between 1993 and 2017, while BJS reports a decline of 69% during that span. Property crime includes offenses such as burglary, theft and motor vehicle theft, and it is generally far more common than violent crime.
- 3. Public perceptions about crime in the U.S. often don't align with the data.** Opinion surveys regularly find that Americans believe crime is up nationally, even when the data show it is down. In 18 of 22 Gallup surveys since 1993 that have asked about national crime, at least six-in-ten Americans said there was more crime in the U.S. compared with the year before, despite the generally downward trend in national violent and property crime rates during most of that period.

Pew Research Center surveys have found a similar pattern. In a survey in late 2016, 57% of registered voters said crime in the U.S. had gotten worse since 2008, even though FBI and BJS data show that violent and property crime rates declined by double-digit percentages during that span.

While perceptions of rising crime at the national level are common, fewer Americans tend to say crime is up when asked about the local level. In all 21 Gallup surveys that have included the question since 1996, no more than about half of Americans have said crime is up in their area compared with the year before.

The times they are a-changin' – but not in the way you may think.

This is quickly becoming one of the most dangerous times in history from a standpoint of faith – and we all battle as we try not to succumb to our sad realities, tied to our misery and cynicism.

Cynicism: contemptuously distrustful of human nature and motives

Why don't we trust people? Why do we so easily follow after silly conspiracy theories about why the world is the way that it is? Why do we lavish ourselves in self-loathing – I'm not pretty enough, I'm not smart enough, people don't like me, I'm not thin enough, I'm too skinny, I don't make enough money – and on and on and on and on.

Ecclesiastes 4:1

**Then I looked again at all the acts of oppression which were being done [in the natural world]. 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.**

Revelation 21:1-4

**Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."**

Ecclesiastes 4:3

**But better off than both of them is the one who has never existed, who has never seen the evil activity that is done [in the natural world].**

Colossians 2:8

**See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.**

Ecclesiastes 4:7

**Then I looked again at vanity [in the natural world]. 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.**

**2 Timothy 4:6-7**

**For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.**

**Ecclesiastes 4:15**

**I have seen all the living [in the natural world] throng to the side of the second lad who replaces him.**

**1 John 1:7**

**But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.**

**Ecclesiastes 5:13**

**There is a grievous evil which I have seen [in the natural world]: riches being hoarded by their owner to his hurt.**

Matthew 6:19-21

**"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.**

Ecclesiastes 5:18

**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 [in the natural world] during the few years of his life which God has given him; for this is his reward.**

2 Timothy 4:8

**Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.**

Ecclesiastes 6:1

**There is an evil which I have seen [in the natural world] and it is prevalent among men—**

**Matthew 5:3-12**

**"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**

**"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.**

**"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.**

**"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.**

**"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.**

**"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.**

**"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.**

**"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**

**"Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.**

Ecclesiastes 6:12

**For who knows what is good for a man during his lifetime, during the few years of his futile life? He will spend them like a shadow. For who can tell a man what will be after him [in the natural world]?**

Jeremiah 29:11-13

**For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart.**

Faith. We have faith. Hope. We have hope. Love. We have Love. There is nothing new under the sun, but there is something new within us.

### 2.3.19

#### The Elite Eight Ecclesiastical Mysteries

#### Dust to Dust - (Mortality and Mission)

#### Chapter 3, 9, 11

Ecclesiastes 3:20

**All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return.**

Ecclesiastes 9:1-6

**But all this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God. Whether it is love or hate, man does not know; both are before him. It is the same for all, since the same event happens to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice. As the good one is, so is the sinner, and he who swears is as he who shuns an oath. This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that the same event happens to all. Also, the hearts of the children of man are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead. But he who is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion. For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten. Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished, and forever they have no more share in all that is done under the sun.**

Ecclesiastes 11:1-8

**Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days. Give a portion to seven, or even to eight, for you know not what disaster may happen on earth. If the clouds are full of rain, they empty themselves on the earth, and if a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where the tree falls, there it will lie. He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards the clouds will not reap. As you do not know the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything. In the morning sow your seed, and at evening withhold not your hand, for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good. Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun. So if a person lives many years, let him rejoice in them all; but let him remember that the days of darkness will be many.**

## **Content and Context**

### **9:1 - Love or Hate**

Solomon emphasizes again the powerful doctrines of God's sovereignty and omniscience. The love/hate dichotomy in the Old Testament can be about acceptance/rejection and not just emotions. Whichever Solomon has in mind we cannot know, but that is not relevant. What matters is that God knows when we love or hate. That is not to say that He approves of hating other people. In light of New Testament revelation, the faithful are called to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.

### **9:2-3 - Good and the Evil**

The universal nature and knowledge of death is not a new insight. But Solomon laments the fact that both the righteous and the wicked die. The righteous are classified as good partly because they bring sacrifices and make vows. It is assumed here that they live in obedience to the sacrificial system as outlined in the Law of Moses. The wicked do not bring sacrifices and they are classified as "sinners" who "shun an oath." They are not interested in what the Law of God says, or to live according to His will as revealed in the Law. Even so, death is referred to as "the same event" that "happens to all." Solomon concludes that this is not only not good, but that this is, in fact, the absence of good; it is "evil." How does this fit with his view of God's sovereignty? It seems that it doesn't. But he is not afraid to ask the tough questions and even to allow the life/death question to remain in an unresolved tension.

### **9:4-6 - Hope of Living**

Even though life and death are realities for both the wicked and the righteous, there is a clear advantage to those who are in the land of the living. The living have hope! If we are alive we have hope, and life is worth living because we have that hope! The text does not specify anything about this hope, but Kaiser suggests that the living have "*the hope of preparation for meeting God,*" "*the hope of living significantly,*" and the "*hope of doing something to the glory of God.*" The advantage of the living is also seen in the expectation of a reward. Those who die bury with them

love, hate, and envy, and they join in the underworld as they leave the land of those living “under the sun.”

### **11:1-2 - Generosity**

The first two verses go together and they advise both generosity and wise investments. The Targum commentary of verse 1 emphasizes generosity, a concept widely developed in Wisdom Literature. *“Give your nourishing bread to the poor who go in ships upon the surface of the water, for after a period of many days you will find its reward in the world to come.”* This generosity formula refers to “both “generous philanthropy,” and “prudent industry.” The German theologian Martin Luther recommended, *“Be generous to everyone while you can, use your riches wherever you can possibly do any good.”* The warning, *“for you know not what disaster may happen on earth,”* points to the uncertainty and unpredictability of life, making it extremely important that we act wisely with our resources. We do not live in fear of disaster or tragedy, but we wisely use each day for loving and living better. Be generous with what you can - while you - we never know for sure when we can't.

### **11:3-6 - Diligence**

As Solomon observed the way things happen under the sun, he noticed that rain falls when the clouds are full. Likewise, if a tree falls, it will lie there. The expression “to the south or to the north” is a *merism*. Wherever a tree falls, it will just lie there. These images could speak to the inevitability of disasters and to the fact that humans cannot control the future. Verse 4 returns to agricultural language. The farmer cannot wait for



ideal conditions; rather, he must be faithful in sowing if he/she wants to reap. The farmer cannot be guided by observing the wind or paying attention to the clouds. Not only are humans incapable of controlling the rain and the wind, we are incapable of knowing the future, which includes not fully comprehending or always understanding what God is doing. It truly is a mystery how *"the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman, and that we "do not know the work of God who makes everything."* In spite of his pessimism and reflective negativity **Solomon was not an atheist or an agnostic.** God was very real to Him even though he frequently chose to disobey Him, he also affirms God's omniscient power and presence. He does know when the rain will fall and He does know where the clouds will go. The idea is for us to be positive, industrious, and diligent. **While we can, we need to sow good seed and keep working...** *"for you do not know which will prosper."* Just like it is a wise strategy to diversify when it comes to money, Solomon says it is wise to diversify when it comes to work and those things that we are passionate about. In Wisdom Literature the wise are never portrayed as lazy; rather, they are industrious and diligent when it comes to work and attitude. The New Testament continues this same idea when the Apostle Paul teaches the believers to *"work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men."*

## **Conclusion**

Reading Ecclesiastes, we can see there are obvious questions in Solomon's viewpoints and processing of the afterlife, we hear him encourage humans to rejoice even celebrate their present work, daily

tasks, and course the infamous "*eat drink and be merry.*" However, none of this means Solomon does not believe in life after death in the Jewish tradition. It is the *dust to dust* processing and regretful lament of a living contradiction - the foolishness of the wisest man to ever live. Solomon talks strongly about the value of a *carpe diem - seize the day* philosophy (chapter 2 verses 24-26, chapter 3 verses 12-14) and making it consistent with the character, attitude and blessing of God, yet uses the reality and inevitability of a life after death settled by reckoning or reward, rejection or reception. The here and now and the hereafter leads and lends itself each to the other. But if one or the other is lived out of proportion by themselves, they can become toxic and even fatalistic. Here is where we must jump in and reflect on our own life and living. I see Solomon as the ultimate example of this; although he had the wisdom to understand God's dust to dust destiny for life after death, he foolishly lost himself in the narcissistic side of eat, drink, and be merry. Although you and I cannot see what will happen after we die, we have to learn to fully trust in the sovereignty of the Creator God who has control of life here and now as well as life beyond this life. This is where we find a healthy spiritual balance for our own lives in the dust to dust wisdom.

Thinking about other connected scripture, we are reminded that Jesus died to redeem us from the meaninglessness Solomon experienced. As true followers of Jesus, you and I just cannot live with the impulsive and inconsistent view of the afterlife that Solomon had. Rather, we need to take comfort in the fact that Christ-followers will spend an eternity in the presence of the Lord - and then make each decision and live each day like

we believe it. Those who reject Jesus' death and resurrection do not have the same hope.

Solomon confirms in these verses that God is in control of the world and that death is inevitable for all. In the movie *National Treasure*, the main character attempts to solve the riddle, "*What is the debt that all men must pay?*" and of course the answer is death. There is no greater proof of our inability to control fate in this world than the fact that we will all die. If I could control my mortality, I would, but I cannot. The Bible is clear in this...

Genesis 3:19,

**"By the sweat of your face you will eat bread, until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you will return."**

So if we are all destined to die and if we have very limited control, then what should we do with this reality? Do we fight, resist and rebel against God for control of something that we cannot control? Or do we accept God's sovereignty and choose to lovingly and respectfully honor and fear Him?

In his writing, Solomon likes to emphasize the point that order in the world is illusive and it is not within mankind's finite mind to understand God's timeline for events. This challenges anyone who does not believe in God simply because without relationship or belief in Him (either consciously or unconsciously) people are seeking to be gods themselves. **Unregenerate**

**mankind engages in a crusade to control time in order to gain an escape from individual responsibility and to obtain what they think will provide peace and security.** Many people will get stuck in this cycle as they are unable to assign meaning and understanding to the painful events they have experienced. As a result they continue to seek personal answers or choose skepticism about life. Accepting one's limitations and the unpredictability of life is a terrifying ordeal. These passages in Ecclesiastes do not indicate that life is totally out of control. Instead, I hear a plea to be reflective and to accept the truth that God is sovereign. The famous quote from **Socrates** states, "*An unexamined life is not worth living.*" As Socrates emphasized self-examination, so Solomon encourages his readers to become reflective and attentive to what season of life they are in. A contemplative, reflective person will not dwell on the details and troubles of life, but will instead choose to focus on the Creator of the universe.

Solomon also seems to be saying we are responsible for our choices that occur within God's timeline, a timeline of which we know rarely matches our own. Well known psychiatrist **William Glasser** developed his own theory of counseling called *Choice Theory*. Glasser's theory maintains that the only person's behavior (thoughts and actions) that we can control is our own. Glasser further asserts that attempts to control others frequently results in frustration and destruction of close relationships. Solomon originates this theory by indicating that in times of pain loss of control we are to respond in Godly ways. Solomon does not seem to be sending a hedonistic message to pursue pleasure, rather that it is our job

to accept and navigate what we can and can't control. Can we accept the fact that both pain and pleasure will come throughout our lives? Or do we choose to blindly maneuver in our world, looking for something new to satisfy our souls? The emptiness that we feel in our souls cannot be satisfied (chapter 3:11) this side of heaven, and the God-shaped void in our souls will not be satisfied with Satan's distractions (chapter 2:1-11).

At the beginning of chapter 11, Solomon encourages us to cast our bread upon the waters, which in essence is a reference to living generously despite the risks inherent in life (verse 1). Even within the psychological research we see the benefits of living generously. One clinical study by Psychologists Piliavin and Callero found that blood donors experience positive emotions from their generosity. There is even evidence to say that teaching generosity through community service may decrease adolescent criminal activity and may play a role in moral development, emotional balance, self-acceptance, self-esteem, social integration, and developing positive attitudes towards adults. In Proverbs 19:17 Solomon states, *"Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will repay him for his deed,"* which may indicate that being generous actually produces its own reward. In fact one study suggested that the benefits of increased generosity could influence the ***psychoneuroimmunological*** pathways and consequently reduce mortality in aging adults. It's easy in times of uncertainty to make excuses and to not live generously.

Solomon returns to the nagging realization that we have limited control. When faced with uncertainty, we tend to hoard our resources like we like

we see in Ecclesiastes chapter 5, but this is not the instruction we get from these verses (3-5). Instead we are encouraged to live courageously generous, knowing full well that we cannot understand God's ways. But, trusting that His ways benefit and bless our lives more than does our own ways.

We are responsible for our actions. *Adlerian Psychology*, known as *Individual Psychology*, states that we are responsible for acting in social interest - meaning right and useful behavior. Manaster and Corsini further state: *"The natural consequences of social living make one chargeable for one's own actions. The pain and suffering that come from useless (wrong) behavior, from not facing one's responsibility and proceeding with courage are natural consequences of a person's mistaken goals. If you do not hold up your end in life, it will fall on your foot."* We see personal responsibility throughout the Scriptures, including the tasks that were given to Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:16-19, 23). When we sin, we are sinning against God, and throughout Ecclesiastes we see repeated references for man being held responsible before God (chapter 12 verse 14).

Solomon's wisdom warns us that throughout our life we will make many choices, but we must remember the choices we make will be brought before God in His final judgment. Dust to dust - much to consider - much to process - much to do. Dust to Dust...

## **2.10.19**

### **The Elite Eight Ecclesiastical Mysteries**

#### **The Mysterious Ways of God - The Anxious Ways of Man**

##### **Chapters 8, 12**

**Ecclesiastes 8:14-17**

**There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity. And I commend joy, for man has nothing better under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun.**

**When I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how neither day nor night do one's eyes see sleep, then I saw all the work of God, that a man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out.**

**Ecclesiastes 12:13-14**

**The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will**

**bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.**

### **Building a Biblical Premise**

"In life, in nature, in love, and in our humanity, God reveals who He is to us in Christ. Yet certainly we see before us so many profound elements of mystery within our activity and pursuit of God."

Romans 1:18-23

**For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.**

Ephesians 1:7-10

**In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished**



**upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.**

### **Wisdom Keys**

**The Key to Life's Mysteries are Found in God - Not in the Wisdom or Actions of Man.**

**God is as Much a Mystery to Us as He is a Revelation... Don't be Anxious, Both Will Lead us to Him.**

There are many events and circumstances in our life that are difficult to understand, including when bad things happen to good people and when good things happen to those who do evil (chapter 8:14). For many of us, the unpredictability or lack of control of these events and circumstances too often produces genuine fear and crippling anxiety. The human response of fear is used in scripture in different forms including respect and awe.

Proverbs 1:7, 29

**The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction. Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the Lord, would have none of my counsel and**

**despised all my reproof, therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way, and have their fill of their own devices.**

However, anxiety tends to be focused on personal desires or the need for control, and is often projected into the future (8:6, 16-17). As seen in those verses, anxiety can cause sleepless nights. Whereas fear may motivate us to action, we know that anxiety produces both heaviness of heart and that it will ultimately provide no relief to any situation.

Proverbs 12:25

**Anxiety in a man's heart weighs him down,  
but a good word makes him glad.**

In fact, Proverbs 24:19-20 and Psalm 37:1-9 tell us that anxiety is directly linked to envy, jealousy, and even the manipulation of others.

**Fret not yourself because of evildoers, and be not envious of the wicked, for the evil man has no future; the lamp of the wicked will be put out. Fret not yourself because of evildoers; be not envious of wrongdoers! For they will soon fade like the grass and wither like the green herb. Trust in the Lord, and do good; dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness. Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will act. He will bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your justice as the noonday. Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him; fret not yourself over the one who prospers in**

**his way, over the man who carries out evil devices! Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath! Fret not yourself; it tends only to evil. For the evildoers shall be cut off, but those who wait for the Lord shall inherit the land.**

Solomon lays out a basic human problem of accepting what we can and cannot control as we toil under the sun. The unpredictability of life events and circumstances are not only difficult to understand but is often beyond our control. Solomon illustrates this in verse 8,

**“No man has power to retain the spirit, or power over the day of death. There is no discharge from war, nor will wickedness deliver those who are given to it.”**

In essence, Solomon is saying that we are helpless to predict nature, our lives, or our dealing with others including our superiors and those with authority. But this is a difficult concept for many of us to accept - we have culturally trended to rebelling against it. Instead, when dealing with others, we prefer to practice something called external control psychology.

Psychiatrist and developer of Reality Therapy and Choice Theory William Glasser, first introduced the idea that people use external control psychology to get the people in their lives to do things they don't want to do. In an effort to control our environment, Glasser believes that we practice this basic psychology: “Punish the people who are doing wrong or what we do not like, so they will do what we say is right and acceptable; then reward them, so they keep doing what we want them to do.”

If we human beings do not accept our own limitations and humbly trust in the sovereignty of God (chapter 12:13), we will be left with very few options. Anxiety manifests in many ways - all are immobilizing. Some folks express their anxiety by attempting to plan out all possible scenarios in their lives as a way to calm the fear they feel and experience. Others will try to command and control those closest to them as a way of protecting themselves or others from harm. Some also experience a desire to control others as a personal attempt to relieve their own anxiety. This line of thinking is commonly practiced every day as a pervasive pattern of resolving situations that seem beyond our control. Extreme cases include physical symptoms, or closed doors and dark rooms. **Is this what Solomon is referring to when he references the "schemes" of man in chapter 7:29?**

**See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.**

He personally wrestles with this issue of control and the fact that justice is not always delivered to those who do evil in chapter 8:11. In verse 12, he instructs us that even though we cannot understand or control our environment; that is not to be our focus. Instead he counsels that if we fear God and obey His commands, wisdom will be given to us.

In the field of secular psychology there are many different theories on the causes of anxiety - they include chemical, genetic, social, and environmental factors as causes and contributors. I came across this

summary from the brilliant work of Austrian Psychotherapist **Alfred Adler**, who used the following logic to illustrate the core cause of anxiety.

**If What is** equal to **What should be...** Contentment

**If What is** greater than **What should be...** Satisfaction

**If What is** less than **What should be...** Anxiety

In this model, if a person sees a discrepancy between how they are and how they should be, then anxiety is the by-product. For example, if a student sees himself as lacking the adequate intelligence to be in college and is given a large and difficult assignment, then anxiety is the result of this felt discrepancy.

This chapter of Ecclesiastes, offers a different solution for dealing with one's seemingly uncontrollable and sometimes unjust environment than experiencing anxiety. Solomon seems to support the notion that we must first accept the reality of our own finite human wisdom and understanding. In Ecclesiastes 3:11 and 8:17 we are instructed that we cannot understand God's plan from the beginning all the way to the end. Although many of us intellectually understand that God has the power of life and death, we often have difficulty accepting and embracing this truth. Instead of simply conceding and accepting the anxious ways of man those who fear God and obey his commands can rest in the sovereignty of God in response to their fear. Instead of allowing anxiety to weigh heavily upon us, we find that His consolation can bring great relief and joy to our souls. Joy is a much richer form of happiness, despite uncertain life events and unknown

circumstances the bible promises us that deep and sustainable joy can be found in following God's commands because these paths are the ones God has set for us (verse 15). As a result we are now instead free to experience the joy and peace promised in Scriptures despite our disappointments with our current reality. Using the logic of Alfred Adler to support foundational and biblical truth the contrast between the mysterious ways of God and the anxious ways of man would look like this.

### **Anxious Ways of Man**

**If What is** less than **What should be...** **Anxiety** (attempts to determine and control the unpredictability and uncertainty of life's events and circumstances).

### **Mysterious Ways of God**

**If What is** less than **What should be...** **Assurance** (choosing to trust/fear God and rest in the sovereignty of God through the uncertainty and unpredictability of life's events and circumstances (Isaiah 26:3-4, Psalm 139:16))

**2.17.19**

**The Elite Eight - Ecclesiastical Mysteries**

**The Work of our Hand - (A Legacy of Meaning)**

**Chapter 5**

**Ecclesiastes 5:1-5**

**Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they are doing evil. Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few. For a dream comes with much business, and a fool's voice with many words.**

**When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. Let not your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands? For when dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity; but God is the one you must fear.**

**Biblical Premise**

**What we say should only be weighed out more than what we do. They are a direct reflection of our heart and are ultimately the greatest measure of our integrity and character. To God - they both really, really matter. And, to the outcome of our personal reputation and public legacy, they even matter more.**

## **Wisdom Keys:**

He knows what we do not know, He sees what we do not see, He plans and prepares for what we cannot possibly yet plan or prepare for.

It is essential that we practice listening first - and speaking second. When we become good at it, then we will have the wisdom needed to become good.

## **All Important Questions**

At the end of his life, Solomon's questions were pretty much all the important ones...

- **Did my life mean something?**
- **Will the work I have done be remembered or important to anyone?**
- **What will my life's legacy be?**

In order to answer those important questions here is right where he goes.

**Worship comes first.** Yep, God takes worship seriously, and so should we.

Solomon's words, "Guard your steps when you go to the house of God."

This points us to the fact that we should be **faithful, thoughtful, prayerful, and intentional** as we approach our time with God in worship. This kind of priority and focus can be seen when our approach to worshipping God is to listen to Him first - and speak to Him second. In the context of Solomon's life assessment and lament here in chapter 5, not to listen to



God's Word first as the people gathered to worship was the same as offering God what he called "the sacrifice of fools." Even though thoughtless and careless worship was most often done out of ignorance, lack of experience and training, it was still considered in Solomon's day as an evil thing - probably should be the same in our day (just a thought - mull over it for a bit).

In verse 2 of chapter 5, he elaborates on the foolishness of making impulsive and self-centered prayers and proclamations to God rather than first listening to the faithfulness, assurance, and comfort of God.

Solomon says the reason for this is that "God is in heaven and you are on earth." **He knows what we do not know, He sees what we do not see, He plans and prepares for what we cannot possibly yet plan or prepare for.** Here is Solomon's point - when the worshiper speaks first and does not listen to His word, he or she basically takes the place of God in heaven. Trading places with God does not work - and is not acceptable, so our words must be few, and our hearts and ears must be wide open to listen to what God is saying to us. It is implied that the wise person will always listen but the fool will always talk a lot. If the worshiper does happen to make a vow in the presence of the LORD, he/she must be all-in on keeping that promise and fulfilling that vow - God expects it. The command to fulfill one's vow is a not a new concept. In the Law, Moses writes,

**If you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay fulfilling it, for the LORD your God will surely require it of you, and you will be guilty of**

**sin. But if you refrain from vowing, you will not be guilty of sin. You shall be careful to do what has passed your lips, for you have voluntarily vowed to the LORD your God what you have promised with your mouth.**

This did not change with the arrival of Jesus and the new covenant. In fact, he said, I didn't come to get rid of the law, I actually came to fulfill it.

**Interpretation;** our word and our reputation for keeping our word is still a very big deal - we will not only be remembered for it, but our life will be judged by it.

If we do not keep our word, we are seen as a fool. How then can the life of a fool mean something? That should probably answer at least one of those important questions for us today.

### **Did my life mean something?**

Solomon's wisdom says, "the worshiper must count the cost before making a promise through a vow or covenant." When we do not consider whether or not we can keep our word or promises to others it is viewed by God as high level disrespect - us to Him, and us to others. This disrespect draws His anger, at which point God Himself is ready to discredit and destroy the work of our hand. Take a moment to think through the personal applications of this. So then, everything we work towards for our entire life can actually be discredited and destroyed with others because of our disrespect towards the process and consideration used in making a

vow and then the follow-through to keep that vow. **Wow! If I can keep my word, I can honor God and the people I love** - Now I know my life has meaning.

Logically, in Solomon's process one thing leads to another as they say! And having said that, this should probably answer a second one of those all-important questions he asks for us.

**Will the work I have done be remembered or important to anyone?**

While the full relationship between increasing dreams and many words is not clear, the main teaching from Solomon in chapter 5 is clear: **FEAR GOD!**

Matthew 10:27-28

**What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops. And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.**

The concept of the fear of the LORD does not originate with Solomon, it is a concept that originates in the Law of Moses. In this context, a man who does not fear God does not watch what he says. Wisdom Literature indeed associates quick, hasty, hurtful words with foolishness.

Proverbs 29:20

**“Do you see a man who is hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him.”**

Later in Ecclesiastes, Solomon declares that **“a fool multiplies words...”** (10:14). As Christians we are reminded of James' exhortation: **“everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry”** (James 1:19).

What does this tell us? Well, I don't know about you, but I have often times chosen to win, to be funny, cool, or even to be in control instead of choosing to be wise by holding my tongue and my quick and sharp responses. The truth is that in this regard I have been very foolish. But that's just me.

### **Legacy of Meaning**

As Solomon examines those who (like me) have been or who presently are being foolish, he strongly indicates that the fear of God is not only needed but is essential.

But how does the fear of God produce wisdom? And, conversely, why does a lack of fear produce the foolishness Solomon talks about in chapter five?

It is a reasonable question to ask why would God use fear as a method of motivating human beings - until we know who God is. Once we know who He truly is, then the question is actually quite foolish. **Consider that God**

**may have hard-wired a fear system into us for the distinct purposes of both survival and learning.** There are multiple theories regarding human emotion, and nearly all of them describe fear as one of the most important emotions for motivating people into action.

One such theory is known as the Differential Emotions Theory. This theory explains that we have six basic emotions: interest, joy/happiness, anger, sadness, disgust, and fear. All of which serve unique and certain motivational purposes. The negative emotion of fear is thought to originate in a brain structure known as the **amygdala**, which serves the role of aversively motivating the individual to withdraw from whatever environmental stimulus is producing fear.

**[The amygdala is one of two almond-shaped clusters of nuclei located deep and medially within the temporal lobes of the brain in complex vertebrates, including humans. Shown in research to perform a primary role in the processing of memory, decision-making and emotional responses, the amygdalae are considered part of the limbic system.]**

Theorists of the Differential Emotions viewpoint will argue that fear, along with other basic emotions, blends with the developing human mind to cultivate a complex emotional outlook of the world. Ironically, the emotion of fear allows us to more effectively learn from our problems. When this is put into a spiritual context fearing God as the Almighty overtakes our thinking and may make us more effective learners from our spiritual climate and environment. Although one may not subscribe to the notion that emotions play such a central role our human development, or our

relationship with God, there is no doubt that the emotion of fear serves as a powerful teacher and motivator for human behavior.

What I see with Solomon is a reoccurring idea in the book of Ecclesiastes in which he demonstrates how foolishness forms in the hearts of men (verses 1-7). He shows how the core beliefs we hold influence our thoughts and the actions that will subsequently follow. **Solomon exhorts us to discipline our minds before God. He also warns us that we must first fear God (Proverbs 2:5).** We are then responsible to be careful and attentive to listen with a heart centered on honoring God through our obedience (verse 2). In essence, if the heart of the believer is driven by a set of core beliefs that are centered on trusting God, accepting forgiveness of sins, and being faithful to the Word of God, then we will take delight in obeying God (chapter 12:13) and will in turn provide hope for our future.

Solomon goes a step further to warn us of the patterns of behavior that foolishness will follow. He identifies the core beliefs of the fools who do not humble themselves before God when they approach the house of God (verse 1) and do not accept their lowly position before the God of the universe. A proud arrogant fool does not have a healthy fear of the Lord, which in turn leads him or her to impulsive thoughts and erratic behavior (verses 2-7). The foolish fail to see that because their core beliefs are faulty and incorrect, they are heading rapidly toward a waterfall of impulsive thoughts, feelings, and actions that will have a cascade of huge consequences (verse 1).

As Solomon states in verses 1-5, when one does not fear God, he or she is hasty to speak and act. Fools will ultimately demonstrate hastiness in their speech, which will produce vows and promises before God and lead them to sin because they will be unable to fulfill what they promise. It is in this hastiness with a lack of truth and clarity that man has many dreams and plans that do not come to fruition or that fail to satisfy his soul.

**Schemes and Dreams... is not necessarily the name of a good food truck or neighborhood bar. It is actually the foolishness of men and women who talk to too soon too much, who listen to very little, who promise too much and who do not keep their word too often.**

This answers Solomon's last important question.

**What will my life's legacy be?**

Interestingly, Solomon seems to continue this theme of demonstrating a logical sequence of how core beliefs, thoughts, actions, and consequences interact. He illustrates the trap of money when one has a delusion that money will satisfy or answer those important questions we have addressed with Solomon today. This delusion leads to errors in thinking, errors in judgment, and then to foolish actions. By tracing behavior backwards, one inevitably will find a false belief that is contrary to fearing God. In the classic movie trilogy, Godfather, there is a clear example of this delusion and error. The life of the lead character, Michael Corleone, presents a clear depiction of the pursuit of wealth, excess, and strife.

Michael Corleone is able to amass large amounts of wealth through many illegal and corrupt ventures and activities - as well as through the legalization of gambling in Nevada. He spends most of his life trying to protect the family fortune while seeking to secure a financial future for his empire. His monetary pursuits, his association with organized crime, and his absence from his family cost him two marriages, countless damaged relationships, and the death of two siblings and one child, and his own exile to a Sicilian villa. In the final scene of the Godfather trilogy, Michael Corleone is sitting by himself in a chair in front of his Sicilian villa where he dies alone and essentially forgotten.



2.24.19

Elite Eight - Ecclesiastical Mysteries

Wisdom and Foolishness - The Beginning and End of Things

Chapter 7

Verses 1-14

A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of birth. It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of face the heart is made glad. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth. It is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools. For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fools; this also is vanity. Surely oppression drives the wise into madness, and a bribe corrupts the heart. Better is the end of a thing than its beginning, and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit.

**Biblical Premise:**

Matthew 7:24-27

Jesus said, **Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do**

**them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.**

### **Wisdom Keys:**

**In reality, the beginning and end of things is that the end of a thing is always the beginning of the next. God sits outside of both the beginning and the end - He waits for us to end our foolishness so we can begin again in wisdom.**

Solomon's opening line from chapter seven, "**A good name is better than precious ointment**" is similar to Proverbs 22:1, "**A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches.**" Right or wrong, someone's name links to his or her reputation (in our world immediately viral). Just like the fragrance of an expensive ointment fills the room, so can one's good reputation be a blessing to those around him. The insight of ancient Hebrew scribe and allegorist Ben Sira is profound,

"Take care of your name, for it will remain for you longer than a thousand stores of gold. The goodness of life lasts only for a few days, but the goodness of a name lasts forever."

While the first part of Solomon's saying is fairly simple to understand, the second part is more difficult - "**and the day of death than the day of birth.**" Why would someone's death-day be better than his or her birth-day? We typically celebrate one's birthday, but grieve and mourn one's death day.

Maybe Solomon praises the day of death for someone one who found no meaning or satisfaction in a God-fearing, meaningful life. If so, that's pretty harsh - even for Solomon. He does not say why the end of one's life was better than the beginning, but I personally believe his intention is to actually force the point of the process. The process of life's beginning to end and how we will navigate wisely or foolishly. He calls for an honest reflection and evaluation on how one should live beginning to end - good times and bad times. This of course relates to the lasting impact and influence of a person's good name and reputation which is important. Reputations are built and torn down in many ways. Having built a reputation of a good and generous life of loving, serving and honoring God the day one dies would not be grievous or sad but grateful and joyous. Something to welcome not to fear, the person without that reputation does not have that.

If we look at verses 2-4 he connects the two ideas by saying...**"there is much to be gained by an honest reflection of death."** While verse 1 does not tell why a good name is better than precious ointment, or why the death day is better than the birthday, it is probably because verse 2 gives us the reason that mourning is better than laughter and feasting: because **"the living will take it to heart."** While food at a feast goes through the stomach, honest reflection goes through the heart, and death reminds us that we are mortal and finite, our earthly journey will eventually come to an end (verse 2). If one's death day is "better than one's birthday, Solomon concludes that **"sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of face the heart is made glad."** The Hebrew text sets the contrast between good and

bad: **“For in sadness of face the heart is made good.”** Following that thinking subsequently, he says that the wise will seek to be at a memorial rather than a celebration. The wise and the fool are compared and contrasted in a very no-nonsense way. Both have a heart, but one seeks a place where the heart will contemplate while the other seeks a place where the heart seeks enjoyment. **“The wise, knowing life’s futility, are melancholy, while fools have a good time.”**

In verse 5, Solomon says, **“It is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools.”** In King David’s book of Psalms, God is always the one who corrects and rebukes. Here, Solomon suggests that the wise serve as God’s agents to correct the ones who need it. No matter how humbling or difficult it is sometimes to hear correction from another person is better than listening to the demeaning and deceptive droning of a foolish and shallow person.

The saying in verse 6 is, **“The laughter of fools is as irritating as the crackling of thorns on fire.”** The laughter of fools provides no instruction or edification, just like thorns on fire produce no heat. They are both useless.

Finally, verse 7. The word translated “oppression” can also be translated “cheating,” or “dishonest.” Neither cheating nor receiving bribes should be part of the wise lifestyle. If cheating and dishonesty finds its way into one’s life, the wise one becomes a fool and the fool a dishonest cheat. The teaching against taking bribes doesn’t originate with Solomon. In the

Torah, Moses wrote, **“You shall not pervert justice. You shall not show partiality, and you shall not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of the righteous.”** Solomon’s conclusion probably came from the personal experience of his own disobedience. Alarming, even wisdom is not foolproof when the foolishness of disobedience is allowed to continue.

## **Conclusion**

“God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”

- C. S. Lewis

In this mystery Solomon pushes us to wrestle with concepts such as death, reputation, balanced living, the pursuit of wisdom, and reverent humility. Our current trends on those concepts are interesting: don’t talk about death so reputations don’t matter, live out of the box not in balance, information is more important than wisdom, and humility is boring and won’t get many “likes.” But from the beginning of this chapter we can see the value of reputation and its importance as one eventually considers death. In the house of mourning we learn to value this life and gain a perspective that our time on earth is short lived. The realization of our own death calls our current decisions thinking into question. We must also acknowledge that we will be held accountable for our actions (12:14). Furthermore, we must also acknowledge that the pursuit of wisdom is far better than the lifestyle and the outcome of a fool.

Although one cannot rely on secular literature and ideology to determine what is considered wise in the world's eyes, there are still some fascinating links. The qualified and those interested studying such things found that wisdom was most frequently linked with social intelligence, emotional maturity, fewer mental health problems and breakdowns, sociability, open-mindedness, and even-temperedness. In other similar studies, researchers found that wisdom resulted in better transition for men and women through mid-life crisis and hormonal changes.

Interestingly, the research on wisdom found no connection between life's problems (bad days) and life satisfaction (good days). In fact, top psychologists found that those who experienced troubles and life difficulty actually showed increased wisdom compared with those who did not experience hardship and struggle. This would suggest that to the wise person circumstances are opportunities for growth and not necessarily barriers and obstacles to life. One variable that appears very important in developing wisdom in the psychological community is called **ego resilience**: how one finds meaning and purpose during stressful times. Sound familiar?

The point of this mystery is this: **We will not successfully navigate the beginning and end of things if we choose foolishness over wisdom in those most critical moments. There must be meaning and there absolutely must be purpose to both the beginning and the end of all things.** Solomon shows us the possibility of constructive life lessons in the suffering and difficulty. Enduring hardship using this template creates the opportunity

for wisdom to be gained while all but eliminating the foolish outcome of senseless and useless suffering.

"The greatest danger of trials, compromise, impatience, anger, tragedy, discontent and difficulty is not always the experience itself, but foolishly having the experience without gaining any wisdom."

- steve isaac

In this life we will all face various degrees of adversity and trouble - it is those who determine to find wisdom who learn how to overcome what comes next. Wisdom is indispensable; all of life is under the hand of God. So the first 6 verses of chapter 7 follow the overall theme of Ecclesiastes with the question: Will the life of faith survive hard and troublesome times when the 'good old days' have gone and the 'days of adversity' come? This is the mystery of wisdom and foolishness - the beginning and the end of things.

### **3.3.19**

## **Ecclesiastes: Reality and Wisdom in the Midst of the Unrealistic and Foolish**

### **Family – Faith - Finish**

Introduction: As we conclude our series of diving into the book of Ecclesiastes I would like to remind us of Pastor Steve's introduction to our study. By doing this it helps us to set our minds (as well as our hearts) to be in a better position to receive the Wisdom of Solomon and glean insight into how God's Truth can help us navigate some of the deeper questions we face in this life. So here it is: 'The mysteries of fallen human existence are self-admitted and well documented, and because of our appetite for social media, who we are and what we are capable of (both good and bad) is just simply, as they say "out there." For most Americans we are living life pretty close to how we want to live it. And for most of us, we are asking just about every question under the sun, while pretty much having access to everything under it as well. But once we have exhausted our vain dabbling into secular existence, when we have finished filtering all of life and people through our lens of negativity and pessimism, and when we are finally worn out and sick to death of wallowing in our self-loathing and self-pitied pride the ancient truths of Ecclesiastes will tell us there is something different and there is something more! We ask, "What is it?" Ecclesiastes will tell us - there is God. Because there is God there will be justice and peace one day. Whether we admit it or not we humans do not know or have all the answers (nor do we even ask all the right questions). But please hear me, it does not mean there are no answers - even to the



wrong questions. That is why Ecclesiastes calls us to look for reality and wisdom in the midst of the unrealistic and foolish - because God is the answer.' So with this premise in mind we can be assured that a study in the book of Ecclesiastes is not in vain, but rather a valuable endeavor that should lead us to a renewed commitment to live our life being mindful that there is a God and an Eternity beyond what goes on down here, 'Under the Sun.'

Ecclesiastes 9:7-10: (NET)

**"Go, eat your food with joy, and drink your wine with a happy heart, because God has already approved your works. Let your clothes always be white, and do not spare precious ointment on your head. Enjoy life with your beloved wife during all the days of your fleeting life that God has given you on earth during all your fleeting days; for that is your reward in life and in your burdensome work on earth. Whatever you find to do with your hands, do it with all your might, because there is neither work nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom in the grave, the place where you will eventually go."**

So, what is one to do 'under the sun?' Solomon's wisdom... **"Eat, drink," and be "merry!"** Not an endless party - but rather doing these every day, monotonous and repetitive activities differently from the way that someone with no hope does them. Eating should be accompanied by joy - not miserable gluttony. Drinking should be accompanied by a merry heart - not a drunken hangover. The point is this - joy and happiness do not originate with food or drink, but rather with the understanding that God

has already approved of you through Christ. Since we do live under the sun, we can enjoy the things of this life because of the Son. But we enjoy the things of this life with an understanding of and with obedience to what Jesus teaches in Matthew 6:19-20 (NKJ),

**“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.”**

It is fine to enjoy the things of this world as long as that does not become your focus and goal. To do this is to be foolish and unwise as Solomon has pointed out before. If we understand, as Solomon has taught, that this life is fleeting, then our hearts should rightly be concerned with the things that will make a difference for all of eternity. This idea of eating and drinking and being merry was actually a practice of the early church, in Acts 2:46-47 (NLT) we read,

**“They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord’s Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved.”**

This joyous practice of the simple things of life became a witness for the love of God and it helped draw people to Him. The key here is the balance

of enjoying the blessings of God here in this world with our hearts and minds fixated on the things of the next. Paul's instruction on dealing with this balance is found in 1 Corinthians 10:23,(ERV)

**“All things are allowed,” you say. But not all things are good. “All things are allowed.” But some things don't help anyone. Try to do what is good for others, not just what is good for yourselves.”**

In this we have the balance between enjoying the good pleasures of this life and having our lives also glorify God as well, thus fulfilling the 'laying up treasures in heaven.'

In contrast to living our lives in this manner we have the example of the Pharisees of Jesus' day. Writer Calvin Miller speaks about the Pharisees during the time of Jesus and their lack of genuine joy for life. The Pharisees were not only pious but were especially legalistic and rigid with their faith and religion. Their laughter was so rare that if you saw a Pharisee smiling or laughing, you would take a video of it and post it everywhere and it would soon be viral because of its rarity. The Pharisees projected and taught a stern and angry God. From time to time their God would even have to shout down from the balcony of heaven, 'Are you having a good time?' If ever a Pharisee felt bold enough to answer, 'Yes, God, we are!' then their God would shout back, 'Well, stop! Are you religious leaders or not?' This is one of the reasons that Jesus had such a problem with these religious leaders, they grossly misrepresented God's attitude towards His people and if we go around all the time taking

ourselves too seriously and never enjoy life, then we are not representing Him well either.

An interesting bit of history here is in Solomon's phrase in verse 8,

**“Let your clothes always be white, and do not spare precious ointment on your head.”**

Cultural historians teach us that the expressed enjoyment of life in ancient Israel could have included wearing white clothes and anointing oneself with oils. White could symbolize “purity, festivity, or elevated social status,” while anointing oneself with oils goes back to ancient Egypt. Hebrew tradition says that some Rabbis “taught that the clean clothes and oil represent good deeds and Torah, so that one could themselves be morally ready for God's ‘banquet’ on their day of death.”

In verse 9 Solomon gives instruction concerning a man and his wife. This no doubt in Solomon's old age was a painful reminder of his failures in this area. In verse 9 he says,

**“Enjoy life with your beloved wife during all the days of your fleeting life that God has given you on earth during all your fleeting days; for that is your reward in life and in your burdensome work on earth.”**

Previously in Ecclesiastes Solomon laments that a good wife has eluded him, in Ecclesiastes 7:26-28 (NLT) he writes

**"I discovered that a seductive woman is a trap more bitter than death. Her passion is a snare, and her soft hands are chains. Those who are pleasing to God will escape her, but sinners will be caught in her snare. "This is my conclusion," says the Teacher. "I discovered this after looking at the matter from every possible angle. Though I have searched repeatedly, I have not found what I was looking for. Only one out of a thousand men is virtuous, but not one woman!"**

Umm, yeah, I guess after having 700 wives and 300 concubines (1 Kings 11:3) you could say that Solomon had looked at this issue from every angle! But, like Bono, he still hadn't found what he was looking for! And for all of the single ladies and gentlemen out there, this brings us to the important issue of making sure that you are including God into the equation of when you are seriously looking into getting married. God can and will direct you in this matter. The point that Solomon is making here is that your wife, or your husband and your family is a gift from God. It is your reward in this life here on earth. They are precious. We should value them, honor them and spend our time with them. Their place must be one of priority in our lives. In his teaching on the Keys to Loving Relationships, Gary Smalley instructs husbands and wives to care for and cherish each other as a violinist might care for an original Stradivarius. He says that when you look at them imagine the label, "Stradivarius" is stamped on their forehead and then love and take care of them accordingly. Solomon writes in Proverbs 18:22 (NKJ),

**“He who finds a wife finds a good thing. And obtains favor from the Lord.”**

Also in Proverbs 12:4 (NKJ) we have,

**“An excellent wife is the crown of her husband,”**

And finally in Proverbs 31:10 (NKJ) we read,

**“Who can find a virtuous wife? For her worth is far above rubies.”**

We live in a world today that pushes against and devalues the family; we must fight against this trend. The world fights against the family because it is the first institution that God created. A faithful husband that loves and honors his wife is an example of God's love to the world. A faithful wife that cares for her husband and children is an example of God's care and grace to the world. Faithful and obedient children are examples to the world on how we ought to come to God and how we ought to be obedient to His instruction. This is why the world fights against the Godly family, because they are fighting against God Himself.

Before we leave this section and go onto the next I want to spend a few minutes on what Solomon says in verse 10,

**“Whatever you find to do with your hands, do it with all your might.”**

I am sure that many of you are instantly reminded of Jesus' teaching in Luke 9:62 (NLT),

**"But Jesus told him, "Anyone who puts a hand to the plow and then looks back is not fit for the Kingdom of God."**

To me it is interesting with all of Solomon's talk about how this life is fleeting that he places a value on manual worldly labor. But it reminds us of the point that Solomon is making here in Ecclesiastes as a whole, that this life is fleeting but what we do in this life can and should have eternal consequence. If we are all just about the party without a thought of eternity then we are of no heavenly consequence. If we are all about earthly labor without making a contribution towards heaven, then our lives really are meaningless.

Ok, let's move along to our next section in Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes 11:7-10 (NKJ)

**"Truly the light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to behold the sun; but if a man lives many years and rejoices in them all, yet let him remember the days of darkness, for they will be many. All that is coming is vanity. Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth; walk in the ways of your heart, and in the sight of your eyes; but know that for all these God will bring you into judgment. Therefore remove sorrow from your heart,**

**And put away evil from your flesh, for childhood and youth are vanity."**

Solomon now revisits the idea of joy. Frankly, for a grateful person just seeing the light of the sun should cause one to rejoice. Yet, this grateful joy needs to be tempered with the knowledge that in life there will also be dark and difficult days. Here, Solomon illustrates the contrast of life by using light and darkness imagery. Sometimes, those dark days seem far too many. This does not mean that Solomon is a skeptic or pessimist. But he is a realist. Life is made up of good and bad days - that is a fact. The conclusion, "all that comes is transitory," seems pessimistic, but it is not; it is realistic.

The next word of wisdom from Solomon - Rejoice! In this context it is the imperative for the young, but could also include the old. This is not a signal or call to sin. Rather, this type of rejoicing is to be done purposefully and responsibly. This is big picture thinking - keeping in mind both God and the judgment day - not just the beginning but also the end. This true joy will be made up of the good things that one feels in the heart and the beautiful things that one sees with the eyes. **There must be a belief that "perfect freedom – must have a goal worth reaching, a righteous reward to strive for, and there, in that, we find fulfillment."**

When we have a Godly big picture in mind we can endure a lot and still come out on top. Listen to the words of Paul in 2 Corinthians 11: 23-27 (NLT),



**“I have worked harder, been put in prison more often, been whipped times without number, and faced death again and again. Five different times the Jewish leaders gave me thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. Once I spent a whole night and a day adrift at sea. I have traveled on many long journeys. I have faced danger from rivers and from robbers. I have faced danger from my own people, the Jews, as well as from the Gentiles. I have faced danger in the cities, in the deserts, and on the seas. And I have faced danger from men who claim to be believers but are not. I have worked hard and long, enduring many sleepless nights. I have been hungry and thirsty and have often gone without food. I have shivered in the cold, without enough clothing to keep me warm.”**

Does this sound like any kind of life that you would want to live? But listen to what Paul says in the next chapter, 2 Corinthians 12:9-10 (NLT),

**“Each time he said, “My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.” So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. That’s why I take pleasure in my weaknesses and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”**

If you want to have fulfillment, contentment and even joy during the hard times in life, then have a righteous goal. Live a life that has an eternal destiny in mind. Get busy with the plans that God has for your life. But what should you do when your life has been marred by hard and painful times and those difficult times keep coming at you? You should do these two things; first you **Forget What Is Behind You**. Paul teaches this in Philippians 3:13-14 (NKJ),

**“Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”**

And the second thing you have to do is **Turn It Over To God**. Also in Philippians (4: 6-7 NKJ) Paul teaches,

**“Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.”**

These two things are not easy; they take a great faith in God; faith in His love for us and faith in His plans for us.

Now let's move on to our final portion of Ecclesiastes and to the close of our series.

Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 (NLT)

**“That’s the whole story. Here now is my final conclusion: Fear God and obey his commands, for this is everyone’s duty. God will judge us for everything we do, including every secret thing, whether good or bad.”**

I like how Solomon presents the closing of his book. It wasn't enough for him just to conclude, he wanted to be sure that you paid attention to his closing. He even says it, “That’s the whole story. Here now is my final conclusion.” My translation of his closing sounds like this, “In my last days, I Solomon have written to you my final thoughts about life the universe and everything. These are my final ponderings of great wisdom and they are here now for your contemplation. And now here at the end, after I have written everything that I wanted to say. And all that I have said now leads me to finally say this, so pay attention! ‘Fear God and obey his commands, for this is everyone’s duty. God will judge us for everything we do, including every secret thing, whether good or bad.’” Can't you just hear how he stresses this final point? He is saying that all of his learning and all of his wisdom has led him to this final conclusion about how mankind ought to live: **Fear God and obey his commands**. If you do this then your life has value purpose and meaning. If you don't, all is vanity.

**My Closing Thoughts on Ecclesiastes:**

**For me Ecclesiastes presents to us a Great Contradiction and a Great Choice.**

**The Great Contradiction is this:**

**Life Is Meaningless - Life Has Great Value**

**The Great Choice is this:**

**We Can Live For Ourselves - We Can Live For God**

It is our choice to which side of the Contradiction our life will land. But make no mistake about it, God does have a plan for our lives that will make them more meaningful than we can possibly imagine. The choice is ours. Let us Choose Wisely.