

# ECCLESIASTES

# INTRODUCTION

The Book of Ecclesiastes gives every evidence of being a carefully composed literary essay that must be grasped as a totality before it can be understood in part. The content of the book is defined by nearly identical verses (1:2; 12:8), which circumscribe the book by anticipating and by summarizing the conclusions of the author. The theme is set forth in 1:3: "What profit has a man from all his labor in which he toils under the sun [that is, in this life]?" Or, can true wisdom be found by a human being apart from revelation from God?

The Preacher's quest is for some sort of fixed, unchanging value ("profit") that can be found in this life ("under the sun") that can serve as a basis for proper living. The Hebrew word translated "profit" is *yitron* (1:3), and may also be translated "gain, value." "Vanity" is a key word in the book, translating the Hebrew *hebel* (literally, "breath"), thus indicating what is mortal, transitory, and of no permanence. As he tries each of the avenues proposed by humanity to achieve the value being sought, he finds them elusive ("grasping for the wind") and fleeting, transitory ("vanity").

The "wisdom" of 1:12-18 is found bankrupt of real value. Neither is the answer to be found in pleasure, in wealth, in great accomplishments (2:1-11), in a doctrine of retribution (2:12-17), or in materialism (2:18-26).

If neither accomplishments nor things are *yitron*, what then should be one's attitude toward them, seeing they have no permanent value? The answer introduces the secondary theme of the book: one should enjoy both life and the things with which God has blessed him (3:11, 12; 5:18-20; 9:7-10), remembering that in the end God will judge him for the way this is done (11:7-10).

Even human life itself, in any secular, humanistic sense, cannot be the *yitron* the Preacher seeks. The interplay of death and life is also a subordinate theme for the book.

But returning to the Preacher's grand quest: is it destined to conclude (12:8), as it began (1:2), on a note of despair? The Preacher's constant probing of all existence for meaning shows him to be an optimist, not a pessimist, and his failure to discover any absolute, abiding value in this life ("under the sun") does not mean his quest is a failure. Instead, he finds himself compelled (by his observation that God placed order in the universe at the time of its creation, 3:1-14) to seek the value he seeks in the world to come (not "under the sun" but "above the sun," so to speak). Although he does not specifically state it as such, the logic that undergirds his entire quest compels him to find the only real *yitron* in the fear (reverence) and obedience of God (11:7-12:7). This is affirmed in the epilogue: reverence for God and keeping His commandments are the whole duty of mankind (12:13). This duty must be carried out in full knowledge that, while there is no real justice to be had in this life, God will eventually judge all that is and set it right (11:9; 12:14). On this profound note the book concludes.

(Spirit Filled Life Bible's Introduction to Ecclesiastes, William C. Williams)

## Ecclesiastes 1:1-18

Solomon had dived into nature's depths (1 Kings 4:33), and he had it, more of it perhaps than ever any man had. He spoke in God's name, and was divinely inspired to say it, deliberately, and laid it down as a fundamental principle, on which he grounded the necessity of being religious. One main thing he intended was to show that the everlasting throne and kingdom must be of another world; for all things in this world are subject to meaninglessness, and therefore have not in them sufficient to answer the extent of that promise.

*What does a man gain from all his labor? v. 3.* The business of this world is *labor*; the word implies both care and toil. It is work that wearies men. *What does a man gain from all his labor?* Solomon says (Prov. 14:23), *All hard work brings a profit*; and yet here he denies that there is any profit. As to our present condition in the world, it is true that by labor we get that which we call *profit*; we *eat the labor of our hands*; but here he determines that it is not a real benefit. In short, the wealth and pleasure of this world, if we had ever so much of them, are not sufficient to make us happy. As to the soul, and the life that is to come, we may much more truly say. *What does a man gain from all his labor?* All he gets by it will not supply the wants of the soul, will not atone for the sin of the soul, nor cure its diseases.

To prove the meaninglessness of all things under the sun Solomon here shows the time of our enjoyment of these things is very short. We continue in the world but for one generation, which is continually passing away to make room for another, and we are passing with it. While the stream of mankind is continually flowing, how little enjoyment has one drop of that stream of the pleasant banks between which it glides! We may give God the glory of that constant succession of generations, but as to our own happiness, let us not expect it within such narrow limits, but in an eternal rest and consistency. It is well for mankind in general that the earth endures to the end of time, when it and all the works in it shall be burned up; but what is that of spirits? Man remains on the earth but a little while.

He made it his business to acquaint himself with *all that is done under heaven*, that is done by the providence of God or by the skill and prudence of man. Though he was a prince, he made himself a drudge to learning, was not discouraged by its knots, nor did he shrink from its depths. And this he did not merely to gratify his own genius, but to qualify himself for the service of God and his generation, and to make an experiment how far the enlargement of the knowledge would go towards the settlement and repose of the mind. He saw *all the things that were done under the sun* (v. 14), works of nature in the upper and lower world, works of art, the product of men's wit, in a personal or social capacity. He had as much satisfaction in the success of his searches as ever any man had. Solomon must be acknowledged a competent judge of this matter for he had not only got his head full of notions, but he *experienced much of wisdom and knowledge*, of the power and benefit of knowledge, as well as the entertainment of it; what he knew he had digested, and knew how to use. So industrious was Solomon to improve himself in knowledge that he gained instruction both by the wisdom of prudent men and by the madness of foolish men, by *the field of the slothful*, as well as of *the diligent*.

He tells us what was the result of this trial, to confirm what he had said, that *all is meaningless*. He found that his searches after knowledge were very toilsome, and a weariness to the mind (v. 13). As bread for the body, so that for the soul, must be got and eaten *by the sweat of our face*. "*I have seen all the things of a world full of business, have observed what the children of men are doing; and whatever men think of their own words, I see all of them are meaningless and chasing after wind.*" The more we see of the world the more we see to make us uneasy, and, with Heraclitus, to look on all with weeping eyes. Solomon especially perceived that the knowledge of *wisdom and folly* was *chasing after wind*, v. 17. It vexed him to see many who had wisdom not use it, and many who had folly not strive against it. He found that when he had got some knowledge he could neither gain that satisfaction to himself, nor do that good to others with it which he expected, v. 15. The minds and manners of men are crooked and perverse. Solomon thought, with his wisdom and power together, thoroughly to reform his kingdom, but he was disappointed. All the philosophy and politics in the world will not restore the corrupt nature of man. Learning will not alter men's natural temperaments, nor cure them of their sinful diseases. *What is lacking* in our knowledge is so much that it *cannot be counted*. The more we know the more we see of our own ignorance. On the whole, therefore, he concluded that great scholars do but make themselves great mourners; *for with much wisdom comes much sorrow*, v. 18. Those who gain *more knowledge* have so much the more quick and sensible perception of the calamities of this world. Let us not therefore be driven off from the pursuit of any useful knowledge, but put on patience to break through the sorrow of it; but let us despair of finding true happiness in this knowledge, and expect it only in the knowledge of God and the careful discharge of our duty to him.

(The NIV Matthew Henry Commentary, Matthew Henry)

### **What does the word ecclesiastes mean?**

When we put our trust in "Jehovah", the self existing unchanging God, we have a sure future. When we seek to glorify ourselves instead of God we search after "vain" things. **The word vanity is mentioned 37 times in the book of Ecclesiastes, what does it mean? Is the "vanity of the world" designed for us to see that the only true refuge is God? Did vanity come about because of the fall of Adam and Eve?**

Ps. 39:4-6      Ps. 90:10      Dan. 5:27      Matt. 6:32      Rom. 8:20

**How does Solomon's explanation of the sun, wind and the rivers ever shifting but returning to the point set out related to man? How so is this different from the movement of Christ both in Himself and in us?**

Ecc. 1:9

The wisdom in which Solomon excelled all, by the gift of God, was *concerning earthly things* (v. 13). It is of this earthly wisdom and acuteness, viewed by itself, that Solomon pronounces that its result is only "sore travail." (A. R. Fausset) **What did Solomon say about this type of wisdom brilliant as it was, so that it attracted the notice of the heathen world?**

### **Ecclesiastes 2:1-26**

Solomon having pronounced all as meaningless goes on to show what reason he has to be tired of this world, and with what little reason most men are fond of it.

I. He shows that there is no true happiness and satisfaction to be had in the physical delights, ver. 1-11.

II. He reconsiders wisdom, and allows it to be excellent and useful, and yet sees it insufficient to make a man happy, ver. 12-16.

III. He enquires how far wealth will go towards making men happy, and concludes, from his own experience that to those who set their hearts on it, "it is meaningless and chasing after wind" (ver. 17-23), and that, if there is any good in it, it is only to those who are loosely attached to it, ver. 24-26.

(The NIV Matthew Henry Commentary, Matthew Henry)

**What conclusion did Solomon come to after reviewing "all his hands had done" (Ecc. 2:11)?**

Luke 12:20

Solomon tried (worldly) wisdom (Ecc. 1:12-13) and (foolish) pleasure (Ecc. 2:1-11) He now compares them (Ecc. 2:12-13) and finds that although (worldly) wisdom excelled foolish pleasure yet one event comes upon both which makes all this vanity. **What is that event?**

Gen.11:4 Ecc. 2:13-26

**What is true wisdom?**

2 Chr. 1:1-12 Ecc.2:26 Job 28:28

**Compare the thoughts of Solomon in Ecclesiastes chapter 2 with that of Jesus in Luke 12:22-40.**

"For God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy to a man who is good in His sight" (Ecc. 2:26) **Who is good in His sight and will ungodliness bring discontent and an insatiable covetousness?**

1 Tim. 6:5-6

### **Ecclesiastes 3:1-22**

We live in a world of changes. The different events of time, and conditions of human life, are vastly different from one another, and we are continually passing and repassing between them. In the *course of nature* (James 3:6) sometimes one part is uppermost and by and by the contrary; there is a constant ebbing and flowing, waxing and waning from one extreme to the other. When we are in prosperity, we should be content, and yet not secure—not to be secure because we live in a world of changes, and yet to be content, and, as he had advised (Ecc. 2:24), *to find satisfaction in our work*, in a humble dependence on God, neither lifted up with hopes, nor cast down with fears, but with evenness of mind.

A general proposition is laid down: *There is a time for everything*, v. 1. Those things which seem most contrary the one to the other will, in the revolution of affairs, each take their turn and come into play. The day will give place to the night and the night again to the day. Is it summer? It will be winter. Is it winter? Stay a while, and it will be summer. Every purpose has its time.

If our present state is subject to such vicissitude, *What does the worker gain from his toil?* We must look on ourselves as on our probation in it. There is indeed no profit *in our toil*; the thing itself, when we have it, will do us little good; but, if we make a right use of the determinations of Providence about it, there will be profit in that (v. 10): *I have seen the burden God has laid on men*, not to make up for happiness with it, but to have various graces exercised by the variety of events, to have their dependence on God tested by every change, and to be trained and taught. Every change cuts us out some new work, which we should be more solicitous about, than about the event.

Solomon shows the hand of God in all those changes.

I. We must make the best of *that which is*, and must believe it best for the present, and accommodate ourselves to it: *He has made everything beautiful in its time* (v. 11). Though we see not the complete beauty of Providence, yet we shall see it, and a glorious sight it will be, when the mystery of God shall be finished: Deut. 32:4: Ezek. 1:18.

II. We must wait with patience for the full revelation of that which to us seems intricate and perplexed, acknowledging that we *cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end*, and therefore must judge nothing before the time. While the picture is in drawing, and the house in building, we do not see the beauty of either; but when the artist has given them their finishing strokes, then all appears very good. We see but the middle of God's works, not from the beginning of them (then we should see how admirably the plan was laid in the divine counsels), nor to the end of them, which crowns the action (then we should see the product to be glorious); but we must wait until the veil is torn. Those words, *He has set eternity in their hearts*, are differently understood.

1. Some make them to be a reason why we may know more of God's works than we do. If men only would give themselves to the exact observation of things, they might in most of them perceive an admirable order and design.

2. Others make them to be a reason why we do not know so much of God's works as we might: "We have the world so much in our hearts, are so taken up with thoughts and cares of worldly things, that we have neither time nor spirit to eye God's hand in them."

Here is the meaninglessness of man as mortal. He now comes to speak more generally of *men* in this world, and shows that their reason, without religion and the fear of God, advances them but little above the beasts. Lay no blame on God; let them not say that he made this world to be man's prison and life to be his penance. God made man *a little lower than the angels*; if he is paltry and miserable, it is his own fault. It is no easy matter to convince proud men that *they are but men* (Ps. 9:20), much more to convince bad men *that they are like animals*, being destitute of religion. A worldly, carnal, earthly-minded *man has no advantage over the animal, for everything which he sets his heart on is meaningless*, v. 19. *Man's fate is like that of the animals*; death makes much the same change with a beast that it does with a man. As to their bodies, the change is altogether the same, except the different respects that are paid to them by the survivors. Solomon here observes that *all go to the same place*; the dead bodies of men and beasts putrefy alike; *to dust all return* in their corruption. As to their spirits there is indeed a vast difference, but not a visible one, v. 21. It is certain that *the spirit* of the sons of men at death *rises upwards* to the Father of spirits, who made it; it does not die with the body, but *is redeemed from the grave*, Ps. 49:15. The soul of a man is then like a candle taken out of a dark lantern, which leaves the lantern useless indeed, but does itself shine brighter. Those who live by the senses, as all carnal sensualists do, who *walk in the sight of their eyes*, have no *advantage over the animals*. It is not strange that those live like beasts who think they shall die like beasts, but on such the noble faculties of reason are lost. An inference drawn from it (v. 22): *There is nothing better for a man, as to this world, than to enjoy his work*, that is, Keep a clear conscience, and never admit *iniquity into the place of righteousness*. Live a cheerful life. If God has prospered the work of our hands to us, let us rejoice in it, and not make it a burden.

(The NIV Matthew Henry Commentary, Matthew Henry)

Man has his appointed cycle of seasons and vicissitudes, as the sun, wind and water (Ecc. 1:5-7). There is a time for every purpose (Ecc.3:1)—as there is a fixed "season" in God's purpose (eg. He has fixed the "time" when man is "to be born," and "to die," Ecc. 3:2) so there is a lawful "time" for man to carry out His 'purposes' and inclinations (desires). (A. R. Faussett) **Can needless anxieties be avoided by leaving the disposal of events and the time in God's hands, waiting on Him in patience and with believing prayer?**

**Show how God who permitted Israel to die at one time, will revive her once again.**

Ex. 15:26 Deut. 32:39 1 Kings 3:14 Ps. 44:2 Ps. 68:20 Ps. 71:20 Ps. 80:8, 12, 13, 18 Ps. 102:13-16  
Isa. 6:10 Jer. 18:7, 9 Ezek. 37 Hos. 6:2 Amos 9:11, 15 Hab. 1:12 Hab. 3:2 Matt. 15:13 Rev.2:5

**If judgment instantly followed every sin would our freewill, faith and perseverance be stifled?**

**Is man's part then to enjoy every earthly thing in its proper season (Ecc. 3:12, 13), not setting aside God's order, and not to undertake anything by our own anxious efforts for its accomplishments, but to commit all our ways to God, who has appointed the time and end?**

Ps. 123:1-2 Rom 9:16 Eph. 1:11

### Ecclesiastes 4:1-16

Solomon had a large soul (1 Kings 4:29) and it appeared by this, among other things, that he had a very tender concern for the miserable and the afflicted. He had taken the oppressors to task (Ecc. 3:16, 17); now he observes the oppressed and here he does it as a preacher:

I. The troubles of their condition (v. 1) grieved him. Servants and laborers were oppressed by their masters, debtors by cruel creditors and creditors too by fraudulent debtors, tenants by hard landlords and orphans by treacherous guardians, and, worst of all, subjects oppressed by arbitrary princes and unjust judges. He *saw the tears of the oppressed*, unable to help themselves.

II. Being thus harshly treated, they are tempted to envy those who are dead and in their graves, and to wish they had never been born (v. 2, 3); and Solomon is ready to agree with them. "*I declared that the dead, who had already died, are happier than the living, who are still alive*, and that is all, dragging the long and heavy chain of life, and wearing out its tedious minutes." Better never to have been born than be born to *see the evil work is done under the sun*, and not only to be in no capacity to mend the matter, but to suffer ill for doing well. A good man, however calamitous a condition he is in this world, cannot have cause to wish he had never been born, since he is glorifying the Lord even in the fires.

(The NIV Matthew Henry Commentary, Matthew Henry)

#### **Give the practical lessons set forth by Solomon in Ecclesiastes chapter 4.**

**What attitude should the poor, oppressed and those who never seem to get out of the rut have? Give an Old Testament example of a poor and wise child being better off than a foolish king.**

1 Kings 11:11-13, 26-40      Ecc. 4:13

#### **Ecclesiastes 5:1-20**

Solomon's intent, in driving us off from the world, by showing us it is meaningless, is to drive us to God and to our duty.

I. He here sends us to *the house of God*, to the place of public worship. Let our disappointments in the creature turn our eyes to the Creator. In the word and prayer there is a balm for every wound.

II. We must be very cautious in all approaches to God (v. 2): *Do not be quick with your mouth*, in making prayers, or protestations, or promises; *do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God*. If we come without an errand, we shall go away without any advantage. What we *utter before God* must come from *the heart*, and therefore we must never let our tongue outrun our thoughts in our devotions. Thoughts are words to God. It is not enough that what we say comes from the heart, but it must come from a composed heart, and not from a sudden heat or passion. *God is in heaven*, where he *is far exalted above all our blessing and praise*. *We are on earth*, the footstool of his throne, unworthy to have any communion with him. Therefore we must be grave, humble, serious, and reverent in speaking to him.

Solomon, from the meaninglessness of riches hoarded up, here (vers. 18-20) infers that the best course we can take is to use well what we have, to serve God with it, to do good with it, and take the comfort of it to ourselves and our families; this he had pressed before, Ecc. 2:24: 3:22. Life is God's gift, and he has appointed us *the number of the days* of our life (Job 14:5); let us therefore spend those days in *servicing the Lord our God with joyfulness and gladness of heart*. We must not do the business of our calling as a drudgery, and make ourselves slaves to it, but we must *be happy in our work*, not grasp at more business than we can go through without perplexity and disquiet. Those who cheerfully use what God has given them thus honor the giver, fulfill the intention of the gift, act rationally and generously, do good in the world, and make what they have turn to the best account, and this is both their credit and their comfort; *it is good and proper*; there is duty and decency in it. A heart to do thus is such a gift of God's grace as crowns all the gifts of his providence. This is the way to relieve ourselves against the many toils and troubles which our lives on earth are inclined to (v. 20): *He seldom reflects on the days of his life*, the days of his sorrow and grievous travail, his working days, his weeping days. He shall either forget them or remember them as waters that pass away; he shall not much lay to heart his crosses, nor long retain the bitter relish of them, *because God keeps him occupied with gladness of heart*, balances all the grievances of his labor with the joy of it and recompenses him for it by causing him to *eat the fruit of his labor*.

(The NIV Matthew Henry Commentary, Matthew Henry)

**A vow is a bond on the soul (Num. 30:2), so why make a vow to God that may not be able to be kept? What is the results of a vow not fulfilled?**

1 Sam. 1:11    Ps. 66:13-14    Matt. 5:33-37    Acts 5:1-5    James 1:26

**How should a vow be made to God?**

Josh. 21:45    Judges 11:35    1 Sam. 14:24    Ps. 76:11

**How does the man in Ecclesiastes 5:10 differ from the one in Ecclesiastes 5:19?**

## Ecclesiastes 6:1-12

In this chapter,

I. The royal preacher goes on further to show the meaninglessness of worldly wealth. Riches, in the hands of a man who is wise and generous, are good for something, but in the hands of a sordid, sneaking, covetous miser, they are good for nothing. He takes an account of the possessions and enjoyments which such a man may have. He has wealth (ver. 2), he has children to inherit it (ver. 3), and lives long, ver. 3, 6. He shows the meaninglessness of riches as pertaining only to the body, and giving no satisfaction to the mind (ver. 7, 8), and of those boundless desires with which covetous people vex themselves (ver. 9), which, if they are gratified ever so fully, leave a man but a man still, ver. 10.

II. He concludes this discourse on the meaninglessness of the creature with this plain inference from the whole. That it is folly to think of making up a happiness for ourselves in the things of this world, ver. 11, 12. Our satisfaction must be in another life, not in this.

(The NIV Matthew Henry Commentary, Matthew Henry)

### **What is the “evil” spoken of in Ecclesiastes 6:1?**

## Ecclesiastes 7:1-29

Solomon had given many proofs of the meaninglessness of this world. In this chapter,

I. He recommends to us some good means to be used for the redress of these grievances, that we may make the best of the bad, as,

1. Care of our reputation, ver. 1.

2. Seriousness, ver. 2-6.

3. Calmness of spirit, ver. 7-10.

4. Prudence in the management of all our affairs, ver. 11, 12.

5. Submission to the will of God in all events, ver. 13-15.

6. A conscientious avoiding of all dangerous extremes, ver. 16-18.

7. Mildness and tenderness towards those who have been injurious to us, ver. 19-22. In short, to keep our temper and to maintain a strict government of our passions.

II. He laments his own iniquity, the having of many wives, by which he was drawn away from God and his duty, ver. 23-29.

(The NIV Matthew Henry Commentary, Matthew Henry)

### **Has Solomon brought out something in Ecclesiastes 7:23-29 that leads him to disgrace in the latter days of his life?**

Prov. 5:3-4      Ecc. 7:26

## Ecclesiastes 8:1-17

The wise man is the good man, who knows God and glorifies him. *Who is like the wise man?* Heavenly wisdom will make a man an incomparable man. No man without grace, though he may be learned, or noble, or rich, is to be compared with a man who has true grace and is therefore accepted by God. It makes him useful among his neighbors: *Who* but the wise man *knows the explanation of things*, that is, understands the times and events. *Wisdom brightens a man's face*, as Moses's face shone when he came down from the mount; it gives a man an honor and a luster on his whole conversation. *The strength of his face*, the sourness and severity of his *countenance* (so some understand the last clause), *is changed* by it into that which is sweet and obliging. Even those whose natural temperament is rough and morose, by *wisdom* are strangely altered. It emboldens a man against his adversaries. *The hard appearance of his face shall be doubled by wisdom*; it will add to his courage when he not only has an honest cause to plead, but by his wisdom knows how to manage it.

In verses 6-8 Solomon shows that even the wisest may yet be surprised by a calamity which they had not any foresight of, and therefore it is our wisdom to expect and prepare for sudden changes. *No man knows the future* himself; and *who can tell him what is to come?* (v. 7). The stars cannot foretell what will come, or any of the methods of divination. God has, in wisdom, concealed from us the knowledge of future events, that we may be always ready for changes. *For there is a proper time and procedure for every matter*. Only one way, one method, one proper opportunity, therefore *a man's misery weighs heavily upon him*. Men are miserable because they are not sufficiently sagacious and attentive. Whatever other evils may be avoided, we are all under a fatal necessity of dying (v. 8). When the soul is required it must be resigned. *No man has power over his own spirit, to retain it*, when it is summoned to return to God who gave it. Death

is an enemy that we must all contend with, sooner or later: *There is no discharge in that war.* Men's wickedness, by which they often evade or outface the justice of the prince, cannot secure them from the arrest of death, nor can the most obstinate sinner harden his heart against those terrors.

Wise and good men, have, of old, been perplexed with this difficulty, how the prosperity of the wicked and the troubles of the righteous can be reconciled with the holiness and goodness of the God who governs the world.

He would not have us undertake to give a reason for that which God does, for *his way is in the sea and his path in the great waters*, past finding out, v. 16, 17. Both he himself and many others had very closely studied the point, and searched far into the reasons of the prosperity of the wicked and the afflictions of the righteous. It was all labor in vain, v. 17. When we look on *all that God has done* and his providence, and compare one part with another, we *cannot comprehend* that there is any certain method by which *what goes on under the sun* is directed. God's ways are above ours, nor is he tied to his own former ways, but *his judgments are a great deep.*

(The NIV Matthew Henry Commentary, Matthew Henry)

Observing the face of people can tell much about the person, usually more than the words they say. **What does the first few verses of chapter 8 say of the outward appearance of a wise man?**

**What are some of the other benefits of having divine wisdom?**

Ex. 34:29-30 Deut. 28:50 Ecc. 7:19 Ecc. 8:1 Isa. 40:31 Dan. 8:23 Jam. 3:17

**What is said in this chapter of just men and wicked men? Can either of them understand the work God is doing on the earth?**

### **Ecclesiastes 9:1-18**

It has been observed concerning those who have pretended to search for the philosophers' stone that, though they could never find what they sought for, yet in the search they have hit on many other useful discoveries and experiments. Thus Solomon, when, at the close of the previous chapter, he *applied his mind to understand the work of God*, he found out that which abundantly recompensed him for the search, and therefore *he considered all this in his heart*, and weighed it deliberately, that he might *declare* it for the good of others.

The great difficulty which Solomon met with in studying providence was the little difference that is made between good men and bad in the distribution of comforts and crosses. This has perplexed the minds of many wise men.

Solomon, in a fret, had *declared the dead happier than the living* (Ecc. 4:2); but here (ver. 4-10), considering the advantages of life to prepare for a better life, he seems to be of another mind.

He shows the advantages which the living have above those who are dead, v. 4-6. If a man's condition is, on any account, bad, *there is hope* it will be amended. If *the heart is full of evil, and there is madness in it*, yet while there is life *there is hope* that by the grace of God there may be a blessed change. *The living know that they will die*; it is a thing yet to come, and therefore provision may be made for it. *The dead know nothing. They have no further reward* for their toils about the world, but all they got must be left to others; they have a reward for their holy actions, but not for their worldly ones. The things of this world will not be a portion for the soul. The world can only be an annuity for life, not a *portion forever*. There is an end of their affections, their friendships and enmities: *Their love, their hate and their jealousy have long since vanished.*

(The NIV Matthew Henry Commentary, Matthew Henry)

When the wicked prosper it is hard for us to understand. **What mindset do you need to understand the blessings that come upon the wicked?**

Job 5:9 Ps. 73:16-17 Ecc. 3:11 Ecc. 7:16 Ecc. 8:6, 7, 14, 17 Ecc. 9:1, 11, 12

**Show how the destiny of the righteous and the wise are in God's hands.**

Deut. 33:3 Ps. 31:15 Jer. 12:1 John 10:29

**Show the destiny of the sons of evil.**

Ecc. 9:3

### **Ecclesiastes 10:1-20**

*A little folly* is a great blemish to him who has a reputation for *wisdom and honor*, and is as harmful to his good name as *dead flies* are to a sweet perfume. True wisdom will gain a man a reputation, which is like a box of precious ointment.



The reputation that is gained by a great deal of wisdom, may be easily lost, by a *little folly*, because envy fastens onto eminence, and makes the worst of the mistakes of those who are hailed for wisdom.

*The heart of the wise inclines to the right*, so that he goes about his business with dexterity, *but the heart of the fool, to the left*; it is always at a loss when he has anything to do that is of importance, and therefore he goes awkwardly about it.

How apt fools are at every turn to proclaim their own folly, and expose themselves; he who is either silly or wicked *shows everyone how stupid he is* (v. 3), that is, he reveals his folly as plainly as if he had told them so.

(The NIV Matthew Henry Commentary, Matthew Henry)

### **What point is Solomon trying to get across in His analogy of the dead flies in the ointment (Ecc. 10:1)?**

Gen. 34:30    2 Sam. 12:14    1 Kings 11    2 Chr. 18    2 Chr. 19:2    2 Chr. 35:2    Ecc. 7:1    1 Cor. 5:6    Gal. 5:9

### **Show how Solomon in Ecclesiastes 10:4-11 aims to keep subjects loyal and dutiful to the government?**

### **What is Solomon saying in Ecclesiastes 10:10 when he compares wisdom with a blunt or sharp ax?**

### **Ecclesiastes 11:1-10**

Solomon presses rich people to abound in liberality to the poor (v. 1-6).

I. The duty itself is recommended to us, v. 1. *Cast your bread upon the waters, your grain upon the low places* (so some understand it), alluding to the farmer, who *goes forth, bearing precious seed*, keeping back some grain from his family to be used for seed, knowing that without that he can have no harvest another year; thus the charitable man takes some of his grain for seed, to supply the poor, that he may *sow by every stream* (Isa. 32:20), because as he sows so he must *reap*, Gal. 6:7. Give freely to the poor, though it may seem thrown away and lost, as that which is *cast upon the waters*. Send it a voyage, send it as a venture, as merchants who trade by sea. Trust it *upon the waters*; it shall not sink. *"Give portions to seven, yes to eight*, that is, be free and liberal in works of charity." Give not a pittance, but a *portion*, a meal. Give to many, *to seven, yes to eight*; if you meet with seven objects of charity, give to them all, and then, if you meet with an eighth, give to that one, and, if with eight more, give to them all too. God is rich in mercy to all, to us, though unworthy; he *gives liberally and without reproach* concerning former gifts.

II. The reasons with which it is impressed on us. "Though you *cast it upon the waters*, and it seems lost, yet *after many days you will find it again*, as the farmer finds his seed again in a plentiful harvest. The return may be slow, but it is sure and will be so much the more plentiful." Wheat, the most valuable grain, lies longest in the ground. Our opportunity for well-doing is very uncertain: *"You do not know what disaster may come upon the land*, which may deprive you of your estate, and put you out of a capacity to do good. Many make use of this as an argument against giving to the poor, because they know not what hard times may come when they may lack themselves; whereas we should therefore the rather be charitable, that, when *evil days come*, we may have the comfort of having done good while we were able.

III. The excuses of the uncharitable.

1. Some will say that what they have is their own, and will ask. *Why should we cast it thus upon the waters?* Look up, man, and consider how soon you would be starved in a barren ground, *if the clouds over your head should plead thus*, that they have their waters for themselves. Are the heavens thus bountiful to the poor earth, that is so far below them, and will you grudge your bounty to your poor brother, who is *bone of your bone*?

2. Some will say that their sphere of usefulness is low and narrow; they cannot do the good that they see others can, who are in more public stations, and therefore they will sit still and do nothing. Indeed, he says, *in the place where the tree falls*, or happens to be, *there will it lie*, for the benefit of those to whom it belongs; every man must labor to be a blessing to that place, whatever it is, where the providence of God casts him; wherever we are we may find good work to do if we have but hearts to do it.

3. Some will object to the many discouragements they have met with in their charity. They have been reproached for it as proud and pharisaical; they shall be despised if they do not give as others do; they have taxes to pay and they know not what use will be made of their charity; these, and a hundred such objections, he answers, in one word (v. 4): *Whoever watches the wind will not plant*, which denotes doing good; *whoever looks at the clouds will not reap*, which denotes receiving good. If we stand thus magnifying every little difficulty, starting objections and fancying hardship where there is none, we shall never go on with our work. If the farmer should decline, or leave off, sowing for the sake of every flying cloud, and reaping for the sake of every blast of wind, he would do poorly for all his work at the year's end.

4. Some will say, "We do not see in which way what we expend in charity should ever be made up to us." To this he answers, *"You cannot understand the work of God*, nor is it fit you should. You may be sure he will make good his word of promise, though he does not tell you how." Our ignorance of the work of God he shows, in two instances;

(1) *We do not know the path of the wind, we cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going, or when it will turn; yet the sailors lie ready waiting for it, until it turns about in their favor; so we must do our duty, in expectation of the time appointed for the blessing. Or it may be understood of the human soul; we know that God made us, and gave us these souls, but how they entered into these bodies, move them, and operate upon them, we know not; the soul is a mystery to itself, no marvel then that the work of God is so to us.*

(2) *We do not know how the body is formed in a mother's womb. We cannot describe the manner either of the formation of the body or of its information with a soul; both, we know, are the work of God, and we acquiesce in his work. Let him therefore who has done the greater for us be cheerfully depended on to do the lesser.*

5. Some say, "We have been charitable, and never yet saw any return for it; many days are past, and we have *not found it again*," to which he answers (v. 6), *Yet go on, proceed and persevere in well doing. Sow your seed in the morning, and at evening let not your hands be idle. In the morning of youth extend yourself to do good; give out of the little you have; and at evening of old age yield not to the common temptation of old people to be miserly; even then let not your hands be idle, but do good to the last, for you do not know which work of charity will succeed, both as to others and as to yourself, this or that, but have reason to hope that both will do equally well.*

Having by many excellent precepts taught us how to live well, the preacher comes now to teach us how to die well (v. 7-11).

I. He applies himself to the aged: *Light is sweet*: the light of the sun is so; *it pleases the eyes to see it*. It is pleasant to see the light; the heathen were so charmed with the pleasure of it that they worshipped the sun. It is pleasant by it to see other things. It cannot be denied that life is sweet. It is sweet to all men; nature says it is so; nor can death be desired for its own sake unless as a end to present evils or a passage to future good. *However many years a man may live, let him remember the days of darkness* are coming. Here is,

(1) A summer's day supposed to be enjoyed—that life may continue long, even many years, and that, by the goodness of God, it may be made comforting and a man may *enjoy them all*. However, some rejoice in their many years more than others; if these two things meet, a prosperous state and a cheerful spirit, these two indeed may do much towards enabling a man to *enjoy them all*, and yet the most cheerful spirit has its discouragements; jovial sinners have their melancholy qualms, and cheerful saints have their gracious sorrows; so that it is but a supposition, not a case in fact, that a man should *live many years and enjoy them all*. But,

(2) Here is a winter's night to be expected after this summer's day: *But let this hearty old man remember the days of darkness, for they will be many*. They are many, but they are not infinite. As the longest day will have its night, so the longest night will have its morning. *The days of darkness* will come with much the less terror if we have thought of them before.

II. He applies himself to the young to awaken them to think of death (v. 9, 10).

1. An ironic concession to the futilities and pleasures of youth: *Be happy, young man, while you are young*. Solomon speaks thus ironically to the young man to expose his folly, and the absurdity of a voluptuous vicious course of life.

2. A powerful check given to these futilities and pleasures: *Know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment*.

3. A word of caution and exhortation inferred from all this, v. 10. Let young people look to themselves and manage well both their souls and their bodies. Let them take care that their minds are not lifted up with pride, nor disturbed with anger, or any sinful passion: *Banish anxiety, or anger, from your heart*: the word denotes any disorder or perturbation of the mind. Young people are apt to be impatient of restraint and control, to fret at anything that is humbling, and their proud hearts rise against everything that crosses and contradicts them. Let them keep at a distance from everything which will be sorrow in the reflection. Let them take care that their bodies are not defiled by intemperance, uncleanness, or any fleshly lusts: *Cast off the troubles of your body*, and let not the members of your body be instruments of unrighteousness.

III. The preacher urges that which is the great argument of his discourse, the meaninglessness of all present things, their uncertainty and insufficiency.

1. He reminds old people of this (v. 8): *Everything to come is meaningless; yes, however many years a man may live and enjoy them all*.

2. He reminds young people of this: *Youth and vigor are meaningless*. The pleasures and advantages of childhood and youth are passing away; these flowers will wither, and these blossoms fall; let them therefore be knit into good fruit, which will continue and abound to a good account.

(The NIV Matthew Henry Commentary, Matthew Henry)

### What is the meaning of each of the verses from Ecclesiastes 11:1-8?

In Ecclesiastes 11:9 what is Solomon saying to the youth who is especially prone to have an optimistic view of the future?

Num. 15:39 Deut. 29:17-9 Ecc. 2:24 Ecc. 3:13, 18 Ecc. 12:1 Col. 2:23

## Ecclesiastes 12:1-14

*An exhortation to young people to begin early to be religious and not to put off to old age (ver. 1-7).*

I. A call to young people to think of God, and mind their duty to him, when they are young: *Remember your Creator in the days of your youth.* "You who are young flatter yourselves with expectations of great things from the world, but it yields no solid satisfaction to a soul; therefore *remember your Creator*, and so guard yourselves against the harms that arise from the meaninglessness of the creature." It is the royal physician's antidote against the particular diseases of youth, the indulgence of sensual pleasures, the meaninglessness which childhood and youth are subject to; to prevent and cure this, *remember your Creator*. God is our Creator, he *made us and not we ourselves*, and is therefore our rightful Lord. We must pay him the honor and duty which we owe him as our Creator. *Remember your Creators*; the word is plural, as it is in Job 35:10. For God said, *Let us make man*, us, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. "Begin in the beginning of your days to remember him from whom you had your being. Call him to mind through all the days of your youth, and never forget him. Guard thus against the temptations of youth, and thus employ the advantages of it."

II. A reason to enforce this command: *Before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, "I find no pleasure in them."*

1. Do it quickly, "Before sickness and death come." Before old age comes, *years when we will say, "We find no pleasure in them,"*—when our *strength* shall be *labor and sorrow*,—when there will be *no pleasure* but in the reflection of a good life on earth and the expectation of a better life in heaven.

2. These two arguments he enlarges on in the following verses, only inverting the order. It is the greatest absurdity and ingratitude imaginable to give the cream and flower of our days to the devil, and reserve the bran, and refuse, and dregs of them for God. If the calamities of age will be such as are here represented, we shall have need of something to support and comfort us then, and nothing will be more effective than the testimony of our consciences that we began early to remember our Creator. How can we expect God should help us when we are old, if we will not serve him when we are young? The weaknesses of old age are here elegantly described in figurative expressions. Then *the sun* and *the light* of it, *the moon* and *the stars*, and the light which they borrow from it, *grow dark*. They look dim to old people, in consequence of the decay of their sight; their intellectual powers and faculties, which are as lights in the soul, are weakened; their understanding and memory fail them. Then *the clouds return after the rain*: no sooner has one cloud blown over than another succeeds it, so it is with old people, when they have gotten over from one pain or ailment, they are seized with another. Then *the keepers of the house tremble*. The head, which is as the watch-tower, shakes, and the arms and hands, which are ready for the preservation of the body, shake too, and grow feeble. Then *the strong men stoop*; the legs cannot serve for traveling as they have done, but are soon tired. Then *the grinders cease because they are few*; the teeth cease to do their part, *because they are few*. *Those looking through the windows grow dim*. Moses was a rare instance of one who, when 120 years old, had good eyesight. *The doors to the street are closed*. Old people keep within doors, and care not for going out for entertainments. Old people *rise up at the sound of birds*. They have no sound sleep as young people have, but a little thing disturbs them, even the chirping of a bird. With them *all their songs grow faint*. Old people grow hard of hearing, and unapt to distinguish sounds and voices. They are *afraid of heights*, afraid to go to the top of any high place, either because, for lack of breath, they cannot reach it, or, their heads being giddy, they dare not venture to it. *The almond tree blossoms*. The old man's hair has grown white, so that his head looks like an almond tree in blossom. *The grasshopper drags himself along and desire no longer is stirred*. Old men can bear nothing; the lightest thing sits heavily on them, both on their bodies and on their minds, a little thing sinks and breaks them. It is probable that Solomon wrote this when he was himself old, and could speak feelingly of the weaknesses of age, which perhaps grew the faster on him for the indulgence he had given himself in sensual pleasures. All this makes a good reason why we should *remember our Creator in the days of our youth*, that he may remember us when *the days of trouble come*, and his comforts may delight our souls when the delights of the senses are in a manner worn off. Death will place us in an unchangeable state: *Man shall then go to his eternal home*. He has gone to his rest, to the place where he is to remain. He has gone *to his house of eternity*. This should make us willing to die, that, at death, we must *go home*; and why should we not long to go to our Father's house? Death will be an occasion of sorrow to our friends who love us. When *man goes to his eternal home the mourners go about the streets*—the real mourners, and the mourners for ceremony, who were hired to weep for the dead, both to express and to incite the real mourning. Death will dissolve the frame of nature and take down the earthly house of this tabernacle, which is elegantly described, v. 6. Then shall *the silver cord*, by which soul and body were wonderfully fastened together, *be severed*, that sacred knot untied; *the golden bowl*, which held the waters of life for us, *is broken*; then shall *the pitcher* with which we used to draw water, for the constant support of life and the repair of its decays, *be shattered, even at the spring*, so that it can draw no more; and *the wheel* (all those organs that serve for the collecting and distributing of nourishment) shall be *broken*, and disabled to do their work any more. The body shall become like a watch when the spring is broken, the motion of all the wheels is stopped and they all stand still. Death will resolve us into our first principles, v. 7. Man is a strange sort of creature, a ray of heaven united to a clod of earth; at death these are separated, and each goes to the place from which it came. The

body, that clod of clay *returns to its own ground*. The soul, that beam of light *returns to that God* who, when he *formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into him the breath of life*, to make him a *living being* (Gen. 2:7). The soul does not die with the body; it is *redeemed from the grave* (Ps. 49:15); it can subsist without it and will in a state of separation from it, as the candle burns, and burns brighter, when it is taken out of the dark lantern.

Solomon is here drawing towards a close (ver. 8-12). He repeats his text (v. 8). He recommends what he had written on this subject by divine direction and inspiration to our serious consideration.

1. They are the words of one who was a convert, one repentant, who could speak from costly experience of the meaninglessness of the world and the folly of expecting great things from it. He was *Koheleth*, one gathered in from his wanderings. *Meaningless! Meaningless!* says this repentant man.

2. They are the words of one who was wise, endued with extraordinary measures of wisdom, famous for it among his neighbors, who all sought to him *to hear his wisdom*, and therefore a competent judge of this matter.

3. He was one who made it his business to do good, and to use wisdom aright.

4. He took a great deal of pains and care to do good, intending to *impart knowledge to the people*. He chose the most profitable way of preaching, by proverbs or short sentences.

5. He put what he had to say in such a dress as he thought would be most pleasing: *He searched to find just the right words*, words of delight (v. 10); that good matter might not be spoiled by a bad style.

6. *What he wrote was upright and true*. Most are for smooth things, that flatter them, rather than right things, that direct them (Isa. 30:10), but to those who understand themselves, and their own interest, *true words* will always be *the right words*.

7. That which he and other holy men wrote will be of great advantage to us, especially by the exposition of it, v. 11. The words are *like nails* to those who are wavering and inconstant, to attach them to that which is good. They are *like goads* to such as are dull and draw back, and *nails* to such as are desultory and draw aside, that what good there is in us may be *in a firm place*, Ezra 9:8. Solemn assemblies for religious worship are an ancient divine institution, intended for the honor of God and the edification of his church. There must be masters of these assemblies, who are Christ's ministers. Their business is to fasten the *words of the wise*, and drive them as *nails* to the head, for this purpose also the word of God is like a *hammer*, Jer. 23:29.

8. That which is written, and thus recommended to us, is of divine origin. Though it comes to us through various hands (many *wise men*), yet it is *given by one* and the same *Shepherd*, the *Shepherd of Israel, who leads Joseph like a flock*, Ps. 80:1.

9. The sacred inspired writings, if we will but make use of them, are sufficient to guide us in the way to true happiness. "Nothing now remains but to tell you that *of making many books there is no end*." Let men write ever so many books for the conduct of human life, write until they have tired themselves with much study, they cannot give better instructions than those we have from the word of God.

The great enquiry which Solomon pursues (v. 13-14) in this book is, *What is worthwhile for men to do?* Ecc. 2:3. What is the true way to true happiness, the certain means to attain our great end? He had found it, by the help of that revelation which God long ago made to man (Job. 28:28), that serious godliness is the only way to true happiness: *Here is the conclusion of the matter*.

I. The summary of religion. Setting aside all matters of doubtful disputation, to be religious is *to fear God and keep his commandments*.

1. The root of religion is the fear of God reigning in the heart, a reverence for his majesty, a deference to his authority, and a dread of his wrath.

2. The rule of religion is the law of God revealed in the scriptures. Our fear towards God must be taught by his commandments (Isa. 29:13), and those we must keep and carefully observe.

II. The vast importance of it: *This is the whole duty of man*; it is all his business and all his blessedness; our whole duty is summed up in this and our whole comfort is bound up in this.

III. A powerful inducement to this, v. 14. We shall see of what vast consequence it is to us that we be religious if we consider the account we must every one of us shortly give of himself to God. *God will bring every deed into judgment*. The great thing to be then judged concerning *every deed* is whether it is good or evil. It highly concerns us now to be very strict in our walking with God, that we may *render our account with joy*.

(The NIV Matthew Henry Commentary, Matthew Henry)

**What is meant in Ecclesiastes 12:6 of the "silver cord loosed", "Or the golden broken bowl is broken", "Or the pitcher shattered"?**

**Although a person can be saved and brought into eternity with God at the last moment of life, like the thief on the cross; what advantage is it to "fear God and keep His commandment" (Ecc. 12:13) early in life? Why is fearing God and keeping His commandments the conclusion of the whole matter?**