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Preface

This series on the book of Ecclesiastes was undertaken at Beckenham Community Church on Sunday evenings, between July 27 and October 5, 2025. The series contained a one-week break. Generally, we worked our way through consecutively. It was an exciting adventure to work through a book of the Bible that is not easy to understand, and therefore, easily dismissed. This little booklet is once again a byproduct of preaching and teaching. I am thankful to the Lord that a small group of people regularly gathered for the series. We learned a lot together. The saints were attentive and humble. Our time together was precious.

The book of Ecclesiastes is deeply relevant to western culture. I am not surprised that the Lord spoke to us in various ways throughout the series. People testified to this. The wisdom contained in this Hebrew poetry is profound; not merely negative, but realistic to life, pinpoint in its themes, autobiographical at times, experimental, convicting, poetic in style, and dismantling at times. The book humbled us with its realistic approach to life under the sun, in all its vanity. It speaks to a consumerist culture that strives for satisfaction but devalues the Presence of God and seeks an alternative philosophy to faith. Ecclesiastes does the opposite. God is revealed as supreme. The treasures we often strive for such as wealth, power and pleasure are emptied of meaning when they are 'ends in themselves'. Yet surprisingly, the golden thread of 'meaningless' which runs through the book is not the final word. Rather, faith is! The enjoyment of life is commended! But God is the answer to such a quest for satisfaction. The golden key to a satisfying life is in His hands. We must trust the Lord to open the doors of life for us. As many books do, the best is saved for last. We were left with a simple conclusion to the matter – fear God and keep His commandments – for this is the 'whole' of man. I believe we find wholeness as we undertake that motto for life.

On a personal note, what I remember most in the series was a final prayer in which one of our members stated that she saw and felt something like a 'grey sheet' lifted from off her, bringing freedom, joy and release. She rejoiced in the Lord as a result. It happened at the end of the sermon on 'The Value of Wisdom'. Only God can do such things. He promises to speak to us personally when we simply open the written word, expound it with prayer and care, and do so in His Holy Presence. May the 'grey sheet' of vanity be lifted off each one of us, as we look to Almighty God who bestows life, joy, satisfaction and purpose – and even more so – in the world to come. Hallelujah!

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October 2025
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1. Introducing Ecclesiastes (1:1-11)

Has there been a time when you experienced life to the point of frustration, vexation and annoyance? Perhaps you wondered what the whole purpose of being here is about. If you've ever been in that place, and cannot fit the pieces together, and are dissatisfied with your lot, the book of Ecclesiastes sympathises with you! You have found a friend in Ecclesiastes! However, you have found a friend who provides an answer; or better put, a way forward. Ecclesiastes is an insightful book, which not only presents the depressing side to life, but also provides a way forward in the face of perplexity. This will become clearer as the book unfolds. The best way for us to grasp an overall perspective of Ecclesiastes is to consider four different areas: **(a)** Firstly, let's note the genre of Ecclesiastes. What kind of literature is it? **(b)** Secondly, we consider the authorship of the book from a human standpoint. **(c)** Thirdly, we consider the structure of the book. How does it unfold as a whole unit? **(d)** Lastly, we look at the message of Ecclesiastes. What is this book teaching us?

Let's begin with the genre of Ecclesiastes. What literary category does it belong to? Ecclesiastes belongs to the category of wisdom literature. Wisdom literature includes the book of Job, Proverbs, particular psalms and Ecclesiastes. It is wisdom literature because it is concerned with the experience and observation of life –the right way to live before God. Wisdom literature is concerned with the knowledge of God's ways. It is concerned with living rightly before God. Therefore, themes found in wisdom literature include speech, relationships, decision-making, kingship, justice, suffering, retribution and the finality of death. What is absent is mention of Israel's covenant, the great events of salvation such as the Exodus, the priesthood in Israel, or the sacrificial system of worship. This is largely missing. This is because wisdom literature is mainly about daily living and facing the complexities of life. Ecclesiastes is like that. The word 'wisdom' occurs ~28 times. The word 'wise' occurs ~21 times. It is clearly a 'wisdom book'. Wisdom literature speaks into our heart with a fatherly voice and persuades us to go down a particular pathway which is 'wise'. It reinforces this by setting against that pathway – a way of folly and stupidity. Wisdom is realistic. It presents to us a way of thoughtlessness, which leads to disaster. These two ways are put before us in wisdom literature. This is the genre of the book. Within that genre there is also a sub-genre in the ancient world called '**pessimistic literature**'. This was a style of philosophical reflection on life which tended to be rather negative. Ecclesiastes is not all negative, but it does have this pessimistic style. It is the only book in all of the Bible where a pessimistic style is dominant throughout. This style is associated with those who 'philosophise' about the meaning of life; why we are here and where we are going. Such philosophers often arrived at negative conclusions because they did not know God. Sometimes there was no answer. '*I am born. I blink. I die*' stated one philosopher. That's it. 'We don't know why we are here', it is claimed. 'Nothing makes sense except the fact that we face evil powers greater than ourselves and eventually we die.' A famous piece of writing called the Epic of Gilgamesh states:

*'Gilgamesh, where do you roam? You will not find the eternal life you seek. When the gods created mankind, they appointed death for mankind, kept eternal life in their own hands. So, Gilgamesh, let your stomach be full, day and night enjoy yourself in every way, every day arrange for pleasures, day and night dance and play, wear fresh clothes. Keep your heart washed, bathe in water, appreciate the child who holds your hand, let your wife enjoy herself in your lap. This is the work of mankind.'*¹

¹ Stephanie Dalley, 2000. *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others*, 2nd ed. Oxford University Press. (Found in *Encountering the Old Testament*, Arnold & Beyer, p.329).

Note how the message is gloomy. Now, the Epic of Gilgamesh is not the Word of God. I mention it for the sake of style. Ecclesiastes has a similar style (see 9:7-9). The main difference is that Ecclesiastes is 'wisdom' from God and not all negative. It acknowledges the complexities of life but presents a way forward. It has a pessimistic style, but it presents a God-breathed solution.

That leads us to consider the authorship of Ecclesiastes. Who wrote this great wisdom book? It is inspired of God. It is God-breathed. But who wrote it from a human standpoint? Traditionally the book is attributed to King Solomon. We can understand why. His profile is obvious. Although he is not mentioned by name, the sketch of his life is undeniable. Great wealth and wisdom are typical of Solomon, who was son of David, king in Jerusalem. We see the projects which are part of his story: houses, vineyards, slaves and singers, silver and gold, a harem of women, many proverbs and the quest for satisfaction. All this reminds us of Solomon. We also have the use of first person: *"I was king over Jerusalem ... I denied myself nothing my eyes desires, I refused me heart no pleasure"* – makes us think that Solomon is looking back on his life in retrospect. That's the traditional view. Solomon is old and wise, having learned much. He passes on his life experience in a book. However, there are objections to this straight-forward view of authorship and the objections are convincing. If we look closely, there are really two characters to consider for human authorship. One character is Solomon. But he is not mentioned by name. In fact, the title '**Qohelet**' (Hebrew) is used. The refers to one who leads an assembly. Here, it is translated 'The Teacher'. That is where the word 'Ecclesiastes' comes from. It is derived from the Greek version of Qohelet. He is the main man. His testimony and teaching permeate the book. However, he is probably not the author of the book. The author of the book is an editor, a disciple of Qohelet, who arranges and presents the material to an audience. The point is that Solomon is not the author. It is a disciple of Solomon who arranged his material and in a playful way calls him 'Qohelet', meaning 'Teacher' or 'Preacher'. That is why the book begins in third person: *"The words of **the Teacher**, son of David, king of Jerusalem"* (1:1). That launches the book. Then roughly halfway, it happens again as a reminder. *"'Look', says **the Teacher**, this is what I have discovered"* (7:27). Then at the conclusion of the book, we read: *"Not only was **the Teacher** wise, but he also imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. **The Teacher** searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true ... be careful, my son, of anything in addition to them."* What we have in Ecclesiastes is one man, whose name we do not know, introducing the words of Qohelet. Why is he doing it? He is a disciple of Solomon. He probably existed in a later generation, but studied Solomon's story. He was a wise man too. He wanted to present the life-story and wisdom of Solomon to his own son and to a wider audience. At the same time he does not 'name' Solomon directly. He uses the title 'Qohelet'. It is a creative way of drawing attention to him as a Teacher. In fact, Qohelet is a name and professional title at the same time. Some translate it 'Mr. Preacher'. The author is telling his son, in effect: *'Learn from Mr Preacher. Learn his words and become wise.'* Then these words are presented in first person with Qohelet doing the teaching. For this reason, some have claimed that there are two human authors, which is plausible. Qohelet is giving his testimony and doing the teaching: *"I was king in Israel etc."* Qohelet's words are on display. His profile is obvious. We are to learn from Solomon's story. Yet he probably did not author the book. It was another wise man who imparts this wisdom to his son and to us by extension. Therefore, the best view is that Ecclesiastes was written by an anonymous author, a kind of 'ghostwriter', or disciple and admirer of Solomon. He learned his story and wrote it down as a testimony. He framed with it with an introduction and conclusion. He tells us the 'words of the Teacher'.

That now leads us to consider the structure or arrangement of the book. Like a lot of bible books, a host of different structures are put forward. But they do not always dignify the flow of the book, or its argument and message. Let's consider two structures. The first is a popular scholarly structure. The second structure I think is best. One common structure is based on the number of verses in the book. There are 222 verses in the Hebrew text and exactly halfway at verse 111 we have Ecclesiastes 6:12: *"For who knows what is good for a man in life, during the few and meaningless days he passes through like a shadow? Who can tell him what will happen under the sun after he is gone?"* This comes exactly halfway through the book. There are two questions in that verse. Therefore, some people claim that the book has two halves. 'Who knows what is good?' covers part one. 'Who can tell him what will happen afterwards?' covers part two. Personally, I am not convinced. We need a structure that considers the flow of the argument or message. So, the best structure, I believe, divides the book into five parts. The middle part, which is part three, is the main chunk of the book. The other parts connect with each other. See as follow:

- A. **1:1-11** – **The Author Introduces Qohelet and the Problem.** *"'Vanity of vanities' says the Teacher. 'All is vanity.'"* The problem is introduced. This sets the tone for the whole book.
- B. **1:12 – 2:26** – **The Quest for Meaning Under the Sun and a Partial Answer.** This is where we have Qohelet's personal quest for meaning written in first person. *"I, the teacher, was king over Jerusalem..."*. We have a narrative and testimony. Qohelet wants to find the meaning of life. He investigates the meaning of life through wisdom and pleasure. He reaches a place of frustration. *"I hated life because the work done under the sun was grievous to me. What does man gain from his anxious striving under the sun."* He hits rock bottom in the quest. Yet he presents a partial answer. *"A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God"* (2:24).
- C. **3:1 – 10:20** – **An Account of Life Under the Sun with a Reoccurring Answer.** The author now presents Qohelet's pessimistic findings. This includes his struggles and observations. Along the way, there is an answer. This way of faith, this way forward, reappears. There are depressing observations as well as fresh realisations. There is the negative and the positive. This is the longest section of the book.
- B. **11:1 – 12:8** – **Exhortation to Live By Faith.** We reach a climax in the argument. There is a call to live by faith in God's goodness. Several instructions are given boldly: *"Cast your bread upon the waters ... Sow your seed in the morning ... Remember your Creator in the days of your youth ...Remember him before the silver cord is severed."* This is a call to respond. In the light of all that has been shared, here is a call to surrender one's life to God. It is the climax of the message. Then he finally repeats his thesis. *"Vanity of vanities"* (12:8). This is where Qohelet began. This is where he ends.
- A. **12:9-14** – **The Final Conclusion.** The ghost writer now enters the scene and states: *"Not only was the Teacher wise but he also imparted knowledge to the people"*. This is third person language. The testimony of Qohelet is finished. The ghost writer closes off. *"This is the conclusion of the matter: 'Fear the Lord and keep his commandments'."*

Here are five main parts to the book. This is how the book flows or proceeds forward in its argument. The top part matches the bottom. The second part matches the second last part. The middle part is the

heart of the book. It is a book that has a definite flow, reaching a climax. That leads us to now finally consider – what is the message of Ecclesiastes?

What, then, is the message of Ecclesiastes? There is a negative and a positive factor. There is a depressing side to life which cannot be denied. Yet there is a way forward despite the challenges and complexities. **Let's start with the downside.** The message is that “life under the sun” – which is life by mere observation – is a very frustrating and meaningless business. “*‘Meaningless, meaningless’, says the Teacher, ‘everything is utterly meaningless’*”. That means, completely meaningless! In other Bibles, it is written, “*vanity of vanities, all is vanity.*” Today, in our modern world, we might put it differently: *‘life sucks!’* This is one main message in the book! The Hebrew word translated vanity or meaningless is ‘hevel’. It literally refers to a ‘vapour’ or ‘puff of smoke’. The word is used figuratively to state that life under the sun is empty, fleeting and perplexing. You cannot grasp it or understand it. ‘Hevel’ is stated 37 times overall. It starts the book. It ends the book. It repeats throughout. We are told that human wisdom is meaningless, human labour is meaningless, wealth, rivalry, greed, fame, frivolity and human applause are all meaningless. Yet the earth is full of this! Everybody pursues these things or is driven by these desires. The wise man finds it vexing and exhausting. He throws out the question: “*What does man gain from all his toil under the sun?*” The answer is ‘nothing’. Sinful man does not make any real progress. We toil on but we always arrive in the same place of ‘nothingness’. It’s like chasing the wind! That is the chief point of this poem (1:3-11). “*Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises and the sun sets, and it hurries back to where it rises.*” This poem, with its focus on creation, has been criticised at certain points. But what the writer is stressing is that there is no conceivable end to this futility. In comes one mass of people. Out the door they go. Another generation emerges. But no-one makes any real progress. Nothing is really ‘new’ in the end. Of course, we invent mobile phones. We learn to put a man on the moon. Other forms of unprecedented technology appear on the scene. But the more things change, the more they turn out to be the same. Like the wheel of nature, history turns back on itself. Time goes on, but we never arrive. As for pinning our hopes on people to come, they will not even have the faintest memory of us. So Qoheleth states “nothing is really new under the sun.” His viewpoint at this stage is limited, but it is true. Sinful man makes no progress. Centuries ago he was fighting with spear and bow and arrow. Now he uses nuclear weapons. Is that progress? Nothing is really new in terms of ‘gain’. Rivers keep flowing. The sun goes round and round. The cycle of the day continues on, but there's no purpose he can find under the sun. This is the great theme of the book – that man cannot find the meaning to life. The issue goes back to a fallen creation which is subject to futility. No one can escape this burden. In objection to this, some believers claim that this is only true for those who don't know God such as secular philosophers and atheists. The claim is that once we come to know God, all this vanity disappears, and life is full of meaning. There is an element of truth there, but highly exaggerated. To claim that knowing God brings us to a place where everything now makes sense is a superficial copout. Life is still full of complexities. Life is full of injustices and frustrations. Qohelet is not merely presenting a perspective, but sincere observations. There are rich men who cannot enjoy their wealth. There are wicked people who rule as governors. There are poor men and women who get oppressed. There are wise men and women who are not remembered. The list goes on. Life is full of stupid ironies. When we actually observe these things under the sun, we won't be able to make sense of it. Even when God comes into our life, He doesn't give the answers to everything. Life doesn't suddenly become ‘happy clappy’. There is still this strife, this frustration, this chasing after the wind. It is part of a broken world. Nevertheless, there is a way forward. There is a way to face this. That is the positive message of Ecclesiastes.

The way forward is to know God, to fear God and to trust God. The wise person must accept life day by day by the hand of God. A scholar called Mr. John Wright put it this way: *“God holds the key to all unknown, but he will not give it to you. Since you do not have the key, you must trust Him to open the doors.”*² You see, God holds the key to everything unknown. But God doesn't just give us the key to end all perplexity. He won't give it. God is God. He remains sovereign. The secret things belong to Him. We must believe in God and learn to revere Him. The book states: *“When you go to the house of God, go near to listen rather than offer the sacrifice of fools.”* Not only that. We are to realise that God is good. Trust Him to open the doors. Come to know this God and trust Him day by day. Accept life as it comes from His hand. Qohelet and his disciple know that this is the answer. The best thing for men and women is to find joy in life, joy in their work and joy in their marriage. If they find joy in this way, then, that is the gift of God. That gift is obtainable because God is generous. This answer pops up again and again throughout the book. Then it is finally confirmed when we read that *“God will bring everything into judgement, including every hidden thing”*. Therefore, the wisest thing to do is simply to *“fear God and keep his commandments, this is the whole duty of man.”* In the end, the answer is simple. We must trust God. One day, He is going to iron out all the inconsistencies. He will judge everything and bring a new and final reality. For now, we must learn to accept life day by day by His hand; to receive His gifts, including work, marriage, wisdom and gladness of heart. These are avenues of contentment. That is the only way to face this fallen and frustrating world. Yet, the writer says in effect: ‘Remember, you still won't understand everything. Life is an enigma. There will be the temptation to be a cynic.’ This is good news. Who wants the burden of having to understand everything. Let us trust God who holds the key to all unknown. There is rest and joy and relief through faith in – and reverence for – a great and awesome God. This is the message of this ghost writer. This is the message of a wise man who studied the life and wisdom of Solomon. He was a father, keen to instruct his son. This is also the message that comes from a wise heavenly Father. It is His word to sons and daughters of the Kingdom, to deliver them from vexation and frustration, and to put hope and joy within them, even in a broken world.

*Reflection Questions:

- *How has your understanding of Ecclesiastes been re-shaped?*
- *What are you looking forward to most in the series?*
- *What is one main thing you can remember from: (a) the genre? (b) the authorship? (c) the structure? (d) the message?*

² Eaton, M 2024, *The Branch Exposition of the Bible OT*, p. 924. See also the Hymn: ‘God Holds the Key of all Unknown’.

2. The Quest for Meaning (1:12 – 2:26)

This is a long section in the book of Ecclesiastes which runs from **1:12 – 2:26**. The title of this message could be: **‘The Quest for Meaning and Satisfaction.’** These are the words of Qohelet, or ‘The Teacher’. His life is on display. His testimony is in first person. The profile is the profile of Solomon. In this section we learn from his story. That does not guarantee that Solomon wrote the book. The author is possibly a disciple of Solomon, another wise man, who arranged this material for a reason. The overall message to those who read this book is basically this: *‘Life as it really is, cannot be faced, or adequately lived, without God.’* If we put God aside, and leave Him out of the picture, then life under the sun is nothing but a vain and miserable business. In bringing that message to us, the author wants us to see life as it really is. He wants us to face its problems and to ask questions about where it is going. He suggests that life without God is very disillusioning. The only way to face life is in relationship to God, and with faith in God, day by day. We are to receive from His gracious hand. **Another way of putting it is this: The book of Ecclesiastes aims to deliver us from a legitimate form of cynicism.** The problem with many of us is that in earlier days we expected a great deal from life. We expected to be happy. We expected life to be just and fair. We had ambitions as to what we were going to do. But where are we now? Many of us would admit that life has not turned out the way we expected. Life is riddled with unforeseen events that frustrate and annoy. It is therefore easy to become a ‘cynic’. *‘Vanity of vanities’* is understandable. Life can seem pointless at times. *“What does man gain from all his toil under the sun?”* The Teacher is showing us that this is a correct view of life if we leave God out of equation. That is what life is really like if our resources are purely human and limited to this world only. Even when God is part of the picture, it doesn’t mean that life becomes ‘rosy’ either. We must live by faith, despite the absurdities. That is the overall message.

Thus, the first eleven verses include a poem that reinforces this view. After stating that *“everything is meaningless”* (1:2), the poem teaches that man is not making any progress. *“Generations come and go but the earth remains forever.”* The statement does not mean that this broken world is eternal, or that there will never be a new earth. It means that this earth stands in contrast to people who come and go like the wind. Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains in a perpetual state of futility. Man does not move forward despite his endeavors. In fact, nothing is ‘new’. The author is not a fool. He knows that humanity advances in knowledge. We know advancement in science and technology, but man himself does not move forward. He commits his sins, only now in a more sophisticated way. He has greater expertise at his fingertips, but what he does with his fingertips is still *‘vanity of vanities’*. In verses 5-8 there is a ‘secular’ view of nature. We can’t see nature going anywhere. We see the sun going round and round (not in space but in observation), nothing changes. We see no progress in history. Man does not learn from the mistakes of the past. There is no remembrance of former things. He falls into the same old errors. The poem expresses a secular view of life. It is true, but not the whole truth. It is limited, lacking the new reality that arises from further revelation. That now brings us to a new section (1:12). The Teacher answers a few underlying questions. This is written in ‘first person’. He says in effect – *‘I have seen that life is vain. The world is futile. Nature and history seem to go nowhere. How can I face this problem? Are there any ways of living that enable me to solve this enigma of life?’* He explores two possible solutions. The first is a life of human wisdom. Then in 2:1-11 he attempts to solve the problem by living for pleasure.

Let’s return to Ecclesiastes 1:12 where we have the ‘human wisdom’ approach. *“I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. I devoted myself to study and explore by wisdom all that is done*

under heaven. What a heavy burden God has laid on men! I have seen all the things done under the sun; all of them are meaningless; a chasing after the wind.” Here is the Teacher’s testimony. He went on a great quest. The word ‘seek’ or ‘study’ means to go into something as deeply as you can. The word ‘search’ or ‘explore’ means to go into as wide an area as you can. This is a tremendous philosophical quest. He wants to get to the bottom of everything in turns of depth and breadth. However, what he considered was only **“under the sun”**. God is not the object of his study. He went out to learn as much as he could of ‘this world’ by means of observation and reflection. It turns out that he reached some sad conclusions. *“What a heavy burden God has laid upon men”*. The first thing he discovers is that people are very unhappy. God has laid upon them a desire for satisfaction and purpose; they want to know that they are going somewhere but cannot easily find the way. They have a sense of purpose but they cannot find an answer. Thus life is a burden. The result of that is that they are frustrated. *“I have seen all the things that are done under the sun, all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind” (1:14)*. Life for many people is like trying to catch something one cannot reach. It is like trying to grasp a puff of smoke, only to find it disappears into the atmosphere. Some of our aged members might know this by experience. When we were a young man or woman we had high ambitions. We said: *‘I want to be a lawyer. I want to be a doctor. I want to get married and have five kids in a big house.’* We dreamed of who we would be and what we would do. We strove after it, but we didn’t get it. Now life is getting on. We haven’t found that purpose which we were ‘sure’ was out there somehow. Or if we did find it, it was not as wonderful as we imagined it to be. We became a policeman, perhaps, but hated the police force. That, in a sense, was the Teacher’s discovery. Life is a *“striving after wind”* if one leaves God out of the picture. You will not achieve anything that ultimately satisfies. These are his vexing discoveries.

He also discovers that it is fundamentally impossible to solve life’s problems by human wisdom. *“What is twisted cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted” (1:15)*. As he explored life by wisdom and learning, he finds there is a ‘kink’. Life has a ‘twist’, and one cannot straighten it out. We try to understand with rationale thought, and apply the right logic, but at some point we reach a dead end. There is a gap we cannot fill. There is something missing. The problem of man’s existence and the purpose of life remains an enigma. No one can unravel it. All who try to do it find themselves increasingly frustrated. This is the story of philosophy. It is one story after another of some thinker trying to solve the problem of life but not being able to do so. Or they attempt to find ‘certainty’ and ending up in more doubt than ever. There is a famous story in connection with this in the life of the French Philosopher Rene Descartes. He wanted to know if there was anything he could be certain about in life. He couldn’t think of anything. One day he shut himself up in a baker’s oven to solve the problem. He asked questions: *‘Is there anything I can be sure of!’* He concluded with a statement that became famous: **‘Cogito ergo sum’** (**‘I am thinking therefore I am’**). However, modern philosophy would go on to disagree. Modern philosophy would go on to claim that you cannot even prove you exist! Our thoughts are largely constructs of our imagination and based on assumptions. Yet, we continue to trust a great deal in human reason. William Temple called Descartes day in the oven as “the most disastrous day in Western History”. It encouraged the age of enlightenment when humanity put their trust in human reason over God’s revelation. The point is that in the end we cannot solve the enigma of life by means of intellect. It cannot be done. *“What is twisted cannot be straightened. What is lacking cannot be counted.”* The philosopher, Blaise Pascal got it right, when he said: **‘The supreme achievement of intellect is to know that there is a limit to intellect.’** We can think so far, but no further. This was the discovery of Qohelet many years ago. He surpassed all before him. He experienced much of wisdom and knowledge. But the final conclusion was this: *“With much wisdom*

comes much sorrow. The more knowledge, the more grief” (1:18). As he continued this quest, going deeper and further, he found more and more of the problem, but he didn’t find the answer. He found more people unhappy. He found more injustice. He found more to make him sorrowful. The more he learned, the more it grieved his heart as to what life is really like. In the end, his endeavor was a great striving after the wind. Therefore, he cast aside that method of finding an answer. He turned instead to another way (2:1-11), the pursuit of pleasure.

This is Qohelet’s second approach to finding meaning and satisfaction in life – surrender to the pursuit of pleasure. *“I thought in my heart, ‘Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good’. But that also proved to be meaningless. ‘Laughter’ I said ‘is foolishness. And what does pleasure accomplish?’ I tried cheering myself with wine and embracing folly – my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do under heaven during the few days of their lives” (2:1-3).* This second approach to finding an answer to the enigma and burden of life involved a radical surrender to pleasure-seeking. Qohelet will do what he likes when he likes. Anything he wants, he will get. Anything he desires to build, he’ll build it. Anything he wants to hear, he will listen to it. He will feast his senses on this world; obtain as much prosperity and gratification as he can. No doubt it was a life of licentiousness. Crude pleasures, crazy experiences, drunkenness, sexuality and entertainment were part of it. He also invested in sophisticated pleasures, such as art, music, culture, parklands, buildings, herds, flocks, silver and gold. He built houses and planted vineyards. He goes on to say that he acquired various singers, slaves and concubines. *“I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure!”* He ended up receiving some reward from his labour. *“My heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward for all my labour” (2:10b).* He enjoyed a sense of satisfaction. When we throw ourselves into some great project, like the making of a movie, we come out the other side having achieved something, so there is a sense of satisfaction. But Qohelet ends up in the same place. *“When I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless; a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun” (2:11).* No progress was made whatsoever. The life of excessive pleasure didn’t work. How relevant this is to our world! Most of us would know that the pleasures of sin are ‘for a season’. We can live for pleasure and get a kick out of it for a while. We will say: *‘Wow, we are really living!’* – for a season. But those who do so will find themselves bankrupt in every way. Things that once amuse us don’t amuse us anymore. They go stale. So we search for higher experiences. It’s the story of a drug addict. The small hit satisfies, for a while. They go bigger. That doesn’t satisfy. They go as big as they can get! Eventually it all turns sour. We’ve used up our resources. Where do we go from there? It was a ‘striving after wind’. It was like trying to catch hold of something that eludes us. In the end people fumble around in the darkness for years. This is the great characteristic of the 20th century. Many people have turned to drugs and pleasures; going on a trip and searching for a ‘high’. This type of living has a history behind it in Western Culture. Historians claim that it goes back to the 19th century when the world was driven by intellectual pride. People were going to solve the problems of life with human reason and scientific discovery. The theory of evolution emerged. Political theories did too. But people found as this book shows that it didn’t work. World War One began (1914). It was called: *‘The war to end all wars’*. But there was World War Two (1939), the Holocaust, nuclear threat and terrorism. Thus, there came a turn in Western Culture in the 20th century. There was a dramatic shift to personal gratification. Surprisingly, thinking people also turned to drugs! They realised that human reason has not got the answer; so maybe the answer is just to experience life. Modern culture has followed the same route. Blomberg states the matter like this:

*“Modernity presented its grand narrative of human autonomy, reason, science and progress as ‘wise’ par excellence. However, after two world wars, the Holocaust, nuclear threat and the ecological crisis, postmodernism has helped us to see that much of that wisdom was folly. Theologically, therefore, Qohelet’s journey is important...”*³.

Thus, this strange route of Western Culture almost recapitulates Qohelet’s testimony. We hear stories of pop stars taking their lives, intelligent professionals going off on a trip, and wealthy men and women with nothing to live for. This is the end product of secularism, perhaps after 100 years, if problem stretches back to the 1920s, as some claim. Faith in human wisdom and excessive pleasures is not the answer, as Qohelet had already discovered.

‘The Teacher’ ends up saying that out of these two approaches to life, if one must choose, wisdom is better. Human wisdom trumps pleasure-seeking, according to his view. *“I saw that wisdom is better than folly just as light is better than darkness.”* (2:13). If one must compare, wisdom wins. It is better to live with sensibility. It is better to have eyes on our head, and the lights turned on as we walk, instead of fumbling around in the darkness. Many would agree. It is better to be level-headed, and to make something of our life, instead of wasting it on empty pleasures. Yet that discovery doesn’t solve the problem for Qohelet. We are all going to die! This depresses him the most. *“Then I thought in my heart, ‘The fate of the fool will overtake me also. What then do I gain by being wise? ... In days to come both will be forgotten. Like the fool, the wise man too must die!’”* (2:15-16). This terrible event is appointed for everyone. There is nothing in the world so impartial as death – male or female, rich or poor, the wise or the fool. All will face their mortal fate! *“So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me ... I hated all the things I had toiled for ... I must leave it all to the one who comes after me”* (2:17-20). This is what bothers him the most. He must leave behind his wealth, his work, his flocks, his vineyards, concubines and buildings. He will leave it all behind to someone else. There is no guarantee that that person will carry his work forward. Someone will inherit it all and perhaps ruin it all. *“My heart began to despair over all my toilsome labour under the sun”*. This problem keeps him up at night. His mind was anxious. He could not sleep. His thoughts churned over and over. Human wisdom let him down. Pleasures let him down. There is still the problem of death. The wise man dies like the fool. The Teacher hits rock bottom. Maybe you are struggling too, even as a believer. Can you face death? Do you have a sense of purpose? Are you striving for satisfaction but end up bankrupt? Have you attempted a similar pathway to Qohelet? Where are you now? Where are you in relation to life in a vain world? These questions we must face.

There is a way forward. The way forward is not to change the world. We cannot change this broken world. Neither are we to pretend that the world is ‘good’. Wisdom is realistic. The way forward has something to do with ‘faith’ in a good and sovereign God.

“A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God. For without Him who can eat or find enjoyment?”

This is the where the wise man is certain of a way forward. It is not just a case of ‘don’t worry be happy’. It is not a matter of adopting a chill-out kind of attitude. The tough reality of life does not allow it. But he does see that men and women can do nothing better than find true joy and happiness. They are meant to be content. To *“eat and drink”* in Hebrew culture is a picture of contentment and fullness. He sees that such a blessing is possible – only because of God. *“This, I saw, is the gift of God.”* We all have to come to a place where we realize that we are not masters of our own destiny. We cannot carve out life for ourselves. We are not able to work our way towards contentment. It

³ Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, p.125.

cannot be finally done. The riches and most resourceful people cannot do it. It must be a gift. It must come to us from heaven. Contentment must be the gift of God! If that is true then the only way to receive from God is to please Him. So the Teacher finishes this chapter with a contrast. *“To the one who **pleases** Him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner He gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who **pleases** God. This too is vanity a chasing after the wind.”* Note the contrast. It is a contrast between ‘the one who pleases God’ and ‘the sinner’. Although we are all sinners, the word ‘sinner’ here refers to one who does not please God at all. For the way to please God is to believe in Him. It is to trust God as Creator and Redeemer. *“Without faith it is impossible to **please** God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him” (Heb.11:6).* At the most basic level this means we must believe that God ‘is’! That God exists! If God exists, which He does, then He is capable of making himself known, which He has. God has made Himself known. God has made His Presence and Being known through His Word. He has made Himself known primarily through Jesus Christ. His salvation has been revealed supremely through Jesus. Therefore, if you claim to believe in God, seek Him diligently. Seek God through Jesus Christ. Seek God through His Word. Don’t seek God through experiences or religion or some other person you admire. Seek God through Jesus Christ. The only barrier between God and the sinner is sin. We were born for a purpose but through sin we fell out of that purpose. That’s where the problem comes from. Therefore, come to God through Christ because Christ is the only one who has dealt with our sins at the cross. He was crucified in our place, bearing our judgement. Thus, we go on ‘walking’ with God through obedience to Christ and His Word. We continue through prayer and perseverance. This is the only way to please God. If we don’t believe in God, it is an insult. God hates stubborn unbelieving hearts that refuse to trust Him. That is exactly what it means to be a ‘sinner’. A ‘sinner’ is full of unbelief. He is full of excuses. He goes his own way. Therefore, he cannot receive day by day from the hand of God. His life will be meaningless. He will gather up and store away – but in due time – it will be handed over to the one who pleases God. The one who pleases God does not have to gather up and store away. God will bring it to them. Be content, therefore, in God! Ultimately, He is the answer? Are you still a cynic? Are you still disillusioned? Learn to receive life day by day from the hand of God. It is the only way to be content. Believe in Him. Seek Him. Walk with Him. As Augustine stated long ago: *“You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You.”*

*Reflection Questions:

- *What did you connect with most in this message?*
- *How did these two approaches impact you or speak to you in your journey (a) human wisdom approach? (b) pleasure-seeking?*
- *Regarding the way forward (faith), what is most important for you at this time?*

3. The Tyranny of Time (3:1-22)

We could summarise Ecclesiastes 3 with this phrase: ‘The Tyranny of Time’. Ecclesiastes 3 is part of a new section in the book which runs until the end of chapter 10. The first section is brief. It is Ecclesiastes 1:1-11. We are introduced to Qohelet and his problem, which is ‘vanity’. This is followed by a poem from a secular standpoint. Nature and history seem to be going nowhere. Man does not make any progress generation after generation. The second part is Ecclesiastes 1:12 – 2:26. This is Qohelet’s personal quest for meaning and satisfaction. The profile is Solomon. He searched for contentment through human wisdom and pleasure, but he ended up in a disastrous place. After presenting the way forward, we now come to Ecclesiastes 3. This is a new section in the book. It is the main section, which runs for eight chapters. This is where Qohelet testifies to his discoveries in more detail. He makes us face the complexities of life in a broken. At the same time, he gives wisdom and advice. He also returns to the chief answer, which is faith in a good and sovereign God. Let us now consider chapter 3. The great theme of this chapter is ‘time’.

The first major consideration in Ecclesiastes 3 is that under the sun we face the unavoidable seasons of life. We read: *“There is an appointed time for everything and a season for every activity under heaven.”* Then comes a poem. The poem presents the ‘whole’ of life in these times and seasons. The style is called a ‘merism’. A merism is a style of saying ‘everything’ by using direct opposites. These opposites are supposed to express ‘totality’. A good example is: *“God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1).* This is a ‘merism’. We have opposites – heaven and earth – expressing totality. It means God created everything. In the poem there are two lots of seven pairs. ‘Seven’ expresses fullness. So the poem conveys the totality of life’s experiences. *“There’s a time to be born and a time to die.”* That is life under the sun. We enter the world. We depart the world. ‘Life’ under the sun is the time in between. The poem goes on to present life’s experiences for humanity between birth and death: *“...a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build, a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance, a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them.”* The scattering of the stones comes from the realm of war and agriculture. If someone wanted to ruin the vineyard of an enemy, or make the land unusable, they filled it with stones. Then when it was time to prepare the field for cultivation, it was time to gather all the stones to clear the way. This could also be figurative. It conveys a new beginning. It conveys a time to plant again. This brings us halfway through the poem. Then we have another seven pairs: *“...a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing, a time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to throw away, a time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak, a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace.”* These pairs represent the fullness of life’s experiences under the sun. When we put it together it involves work, community, relationships, pain, emotions, discovery and new beginnings. The wise man is saying in effect: *‘Look at these times and activities. You cannot escape them! You are not able to avoid them! This is what life under the sun really does encompass.’* The point is that we would do well to accept these times and seasons which happen in this world. They are appointed. We must know that. It is one of the struggles of life that we make plans that face the friction of these times. That is why this sermon could be called: ‘The Tyranny of Time’. We face these realities without a choice. We don’t choose our family, our day of birth, our origin. We cannot avoid death. These ‘times’ impose themselves upon us. We are victim to them. The wise man is not teaching us ‘how’ to behave at the right time. He is not teaching us ‘how’ we should respond in every season. He is just saying in this poem *‘this is the way it is’!* The poem simply describes the unavoidable seasons of life. We might make a promise that we

will always love people. We may dream of a world of love and peace. But there will be a time to hate. We cannot avoid it. Maybe it's the person who hurt or traumatised you, or maybe it's a situation which is so terrible, it invokes hatred within. We won't be able to avoid it altogether. That is life. The poem shows us that we are not the lords of history as we might suppose. Even activities like 'killing' and 'healing' and 'tearing down' and 'building up' have a season to them. We may have our plans and stick to our values. But these 'times' impose themselves upon us whether we like it or not, whether we are ready or not. In addition to that, these times and seasons are temporal. That is good, I suppose, when the season is difficult. But what if we enjoy the season we are in? We might be in a 'good' season. A time of peace. A time to dance. A time embrace. A time to keep. These experiences can be 'good' for the soul. But they are soon followed by a 'negative'. A time of war. A time to give up. A time to refrain. These are unavoidable. Everything good is temporal. For everything has its opposite. We cannot change that fact. We exist in this life and these realities are unavoidable. In the end, the question arises again: "*What does man gain from his toil?*" (3:9). Precisely! What does man gain as he conflicts with these seasons? We can have our plans and pursuits. We can say, 'I want to do life this way'. But our dreams collide with these inevitable seasons. We are subject to life under the sun.

The challenge increases because God has placed eternity in our hearts. "*I have seen the burden that God has laid on men. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.*" This adds to the struggle. The reality is that we were created for eternity. We have a longing for what is 'good' to last forever. We desire to be 'loved' forever. When something is beautiful and satisfying, we want it to go on forever. We were created for eternity. It is in our heart. Therein lies the struggle because we cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end. God has "*made everything beautiful in its time.*" That means that God sees the bigger picture and makes everything fit in a suitable way. But when we look at these times and seasons, we don't understand their place in the bigger scheme of things. We cannot 'see' the completion of God's plan. It's like a jigsaw puzzle. God sees the jigsaw puzzle complete. If the puzzle was a landscape, God sees the whole landscape. But we just see a few pieces fitting here and there. We see parts, but not the whole. It is incomplete from our standpoint. We may see a bit of the sky, a bit of land, a bit of sunshine. Some of these bits and pieces disconnected. Only God has the full picture. All these times and seasons have a part to play, but we can't see their part. We have a capacity for eternity. We have a desire for eternity. But we cannot see from the standpoint of eternity. This is hard for us. The impact of that is to have a sense of unfulfillment until we see the final picture. The wise man wants us to know that. Wisdom is realistic. It faces life as it really is.

How do we face this tyranny of time? The final solution is the restoration of all things through the dramatic intervention of God. This is the final coming of the Kingdom. Currently, however, the wise man can only turn our thoughts over to God in order to strengthen faith. "*I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. That each of them may eat and drink and see good in all their toil—this is the gift of God.*" The wise knows that this is the best way to live in the current world scheme, and without giving direct instructions, he states that this must come from God has a gift. He proceeds on: "*I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that people will revere Him. Whatever is has already been, and what will be has been before; and God will call the past to account.*" The wise man invokes a God-centred view of life. We must keep God in front of our eyes. If we are going to find some contentment, by doing good and seeing good in this life, then it must come from God, not from ourselves. This kind of life is not what we 'earn' or 'create' for ourselves.

At the same time, God has his desires too. God wants people to revere Him. Qohelet hints at the solution here. For the question is inevitable: *‘Do we revere God? Do we worship God? Is God really at centre of our thoughts?’* If not, we cannot be pleasing to Him. Whatever God does, it is going to last forever. God’s works have eternal significance. What God does is not temporal! What God does is not a puff of smoke that is here today and gone tomorrow. God’s work has eternal impact. No-one can add to what God does. It is complete. No-one can take from it. It is enduring. Life under the sun is temporal. A time to be born is temporal. A time to uproot is temporal. A time to mend or throw away is temporal. What God does is ‘forever’. This must sharpen our focus. How wonderful that if God saves you, He saves you forever. How wonderful that if God sends you to heaven, you are there forever. How terrible that if God sends you to hell, you are there forever too. This is tremendous! Do we meditate on this? If God uses you in ministry, it lasts forever. There is reward in that. If God works in your life so that you have genuine love for others, that love lasts forever. God’s work has eternal significance. But do men and women “revere Him”? God wants men and women to set Him apart in their hearts as ‘Lord’. God wants men and women to love Him above all other loyalties. The wise man is hinting at the answer. Later he will say “stand in awe of God”. He also shows how it practically works out in daily life. For God alone will bring everything into account. God has the last word on all that happens under the sun. A judgement day is appointed. No one can escape it. At that time, God will call the past to account. Once we realise that, it is easier to learn contentment. The wise man knows. He saw a situation in life where there was great injustice. It was unfitting. *“And I saw something else under the sun: In the place of judgement, wickedness was there. In the place of justice, wickedness was there (3:16-17).* This is real. The wise man saw an event which was absurd. Instead of justice or righteousness being carried out, perhaps at the law courts, wickedness prevailed. It was distasteful to him. He saw the world again, with its evils and absurdities and horrors. Therefore, he applies faith. He realises that God is God. All must answer to God in the end. God will have the final word on that unjust event. The wise man is living by faith. *“I thought in my heart: God will bring to judgement both the righteous and the wicked, for there will be a time for every activity, a time for every deed” (3:17).* He is learning to let God be God, in His time and way. He operates with a God-centred vision and so must we.

Apart from this God-centred perspective, man’s ignorance is so great, he is no different from a beast. The wise man goes on to share: *“As for men, God tests them so that they may see that they are like the animals. Man’s fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both. As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; man has no advantage over the animal.”* This is a tough word, but in a sense, confirmed by those who believe in strict evolution! Man makes his own judgements and lives his own way, but God is testing him, humbling him, showing him that all is vanity in the end. He shares the same fate as animals. Although humanity was made in the image and likeness of God, it is also true that without God, he resembles a beast more than God. For without God, man lives with natural instincts, natural urges and operates with similar cruelty. That is why there is injustice! That is why Qohelet witnessed what he did at the law courts! Eventually, God shows man that he returns to the dust with the animal corpse, sharing the same fate. Only when man returns to His Creator, and learns a godly perspective, does the true image of God shine forth. Apart from this, ignorance reigns on par with the ox of the field. For no one thinks beyond this life under the sun. The wise man states: *“Who knows the spirit of man which goes upwards and the spirit of the animal which goes down into the earth?”* The verse has been understood differently. The point is that sinful man is ignorant, he doesn’t know! This is not the wise man’s own question. He does know! The issue is – do others appreciate what he knows? Do others realise that humans and animals have different

destinies after this life? The spirit of man will rise to face his Creator in judgement. Very few people realise that. Very few people *want* to realise that. That is why they are like animals who live for this life only. So long as man rejects God, he resembles the beasts. Therefore, he will be treated like one.

The wise man closes off this section with a return to the answer: “*So I saw that there is nothing better for a man than to enjoy his work, because that is his lot. For who can bring him to see what will happen after him?*” The point is that there is a way to have contentment, but it is only through God, not by knowing the future. Qohelet has made that clear before. Man has this opportunity to live by faith. Victory is joy in God despite this crooked world. No one can show people what will happen afterwards, in this life or the next. Who knows what seasons await us? We do not know what is next. We may as well find contentment now. Moreover, we have no other opportunity to live ‘this life’ again. We must acknowledge the seasons but not be absorbed in them. Turn your thoughts over to God. Believe He is the Creator and Giver of Life. Believe He is there in your every season. Take to heart that He is the final Judge. That Day is appointed, and it too is unavoidable. Since God and His works are eternal, and since He is the giver of what is good, trust Him with your soul, trust Him with your all, starting today.

***Reflection Questions:**

- *What seasons in the poem are you most familiar with?*
- *Share an example of one season which ‘imposed’ itself upon you without your choice.*
- *When facing the tyranny of time, what matters most in your case right now?*
- *What practices can help you develop a clear God-centered perspective?*

4. Companions in the Crisis (4:1–5:7)

This is a quite a sizeable portion of Scripture (Eccl.4:1-5:7). The focus is: “Companions in the Crisis.” I am sure that at some stage you have felt the need, which we all have, for companionship. To have people close to us, who journey with us, who understand us and comfort us in life’s troubles – are the kind of people we need. Life under the sun, as Qohelet describes, is burdensome and frustrating. Life is full of ‘vanity’ and he is not losing his mind when he says that. It goes back to Genesis 3, where we not only have the fall into sin, but God’s judgment upon the world, because of sin. Therefore, life is tough. It is full of thorns and thistles. So we need companions in the midst of it. Above all, we need the greatest companion, God Himself. No one compares to Him.

Let’s remind ourselves that Ecclesiastes is wisdom literature. One of the characteristics of wisdom literature is that God uses the observations and reflections of a chosen person to bring forth His word. Notice phrases like: *“I saw”* or *“Again, I saw under the sun.”* The wise man is constantly referring to what he saw. He studied and observed life and he presents his findings. At the same time, he doesn’t stop there. He gives advice. He shares reflections. These are given in the form of proverbs. ‘Proverbs’ are short poetic statements that provide insight into life. We might say today: *“Absence makes the heart grow fonder”* or *“Never fish in troubled waters”*. These are one-liners. But proverbs often contain comparisons or parallels. *“Anxiety weighs down the heart. But a good word cheers it up”*. There are other kinds of proverbs. Many have two lines. Some have three lines or more. They illustrate a truth, provide an insight, or reinforce advice. This style is here in Ecclesiastes. It is part of wisdom literature. In Ecclesiastes 4 we have various observations and proverbs and they fit together around the theme of companionship. Life under the sun is difficult. There are times of injustice. There are frictions and rivalries. It is better to have companions than to be an isolated individual. This is the wisdom of chapter 4. Then in chapter 5, we are given wisdom about approaching God. *“Guard your steps when you go to the house of God.”* The reason why this follows on is because the wise man shows us how to have God as our companion. He is the greatest of all. For now, let’s go back to the beginning of chapter 4 and work our way through, keeping in mind this theme of companionship.

The first little unit is Ecclesiastes 4:1-3. Qohelet presents his observation. *“Again, I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun ... I saw the tears of the oppressed ... power was on the side of their oppressors.”* This is what he saw in the world. He saw a group of people trodden upon and treated unjustly. Perhaps it was related to tribe, class, or greed. He thought: ‘Why doesn’t anyone do something about it?’ Power is on the side of the oppressors, the ruling party, who dominate these people. But what troubles the Teacher is that there are no comforters. There is no consolation or solace in the lives of those who suffer. He also says: *“power was on the side of the oppressors – and they have no comforter.”* The oppressors have no comforter either. It’s a dog-eat-dog world. This absence of companionship weighs so heavily upon his heart that he concludes it is better to be dead. *“I declared that the dead, who had already died, are happier than the living, who are still alive. But better than both is the one who has never been born, who has not seen the evil that is done under the sun.”* This is his sad reflection. Life under the sun can be like ‘hell on earth’. There are parts of the world today where oppression exists, without any comforter. This troubles the Teacher so much that he concludes it is better to have never been born than to face the evil under the sun. The Teacher then moves on to another unit in his collection of proverbs. We still keep in mind the theme of companionship (or lack of it). ⁴*“And I saw that all toil and all achievement spring from man’s envy of his neighbour. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.* Here is an eye-opening observation

about society in general. As this wise man observes the day-by-day workers going about their toil, he poses a question! *‘Why are people working so hard? Why do they labour with such vigour?’* It is due to a spirit of competition! People rival one another in society. They want to be better than the Smith’s next door. They want to keep up with the Jones’s, as it is said. If there were no rivalry in their hearts, they wouldn’t be working so hard. But they all want to go a step higher than their neighbour. This disturbs the Teacher. So much labour is not driven by a love for God or a desire to glorify God, but by secret competition and one-upmanship. It is a generalisation. This can even be true even for Christians, for missionaries and churches and pastors. The Apostle Paul mentions in *Philippians 1:15*: *“Some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill”*. People can do ministry with a spirit of competition. How much more for work in this world which is immediately praiseworthy and financially rewarding. So after sharing this observation the Teacher presents a piece of proverbial wisdom: ⁵*“The fool folds his hands and ruins himself. ⁶ Better one handful with tranquillity than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind.”* The point is that there are some people who are fed up with the ‘rat race’. So they become dropouts. *“The fool folds his hands and ruins himself.”* The folding of the hands is a picture of giving up. ‘Jack’ prefers to be a couch potato, but not for the better. It ruins his life. The proverb goes on. *“Better one handful with tranquillity than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind.”* The picture of two hands is the opposite extreme. It is a picture of taking in as much as one can get. Two hands cupped and overflowing are those who desire to achieve as much as possible. They thrive in the rat race. *‘It is better not to be like that’*, says Qohelet. One hand with quietness is best. That is the task that God has given us and nothing more. Only do what God has given you to do. In that way one has the right kind of work as well as peace. But there is a deeper point to all this – lack of companionship. The point is that rivalry ruins relationship. Rivalry and envy destroy love and happy relations in society. Larry King once interviewed a famous tennis player who is now retired. He asked the player. *‘Do you make friends in the locker room?’* The Locker Room is where players bump into each other, chat and share a joke. The Locker Room is also the place where players prepare for the match. So the tennis player confessed: *‘I can’t. The sport is too competitive. I cannot afford to be friends with my opponent.’* According to Qohelet society is like professional sport. The more the competition – the less the companionship.

That brings us to another little unit connected to the same theme. *“Again, I saw something meaningless under the sun: There was a man all alone; he had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth. ‘For whom am I toiling?’ he asked, ‘and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?’ This too is meaningless—a miserable business!”* Here Qohelet observes a wealthy man who has been hard working. He has done well in life in the sense that money is no problem. But although he works hard and has plenty of wealth, he is not content. He doesn’t believe he is toiling for anyone. *“For whom am I toiling ... and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?”* He has no family it seems. Plenty of money with no companionship is meaningless, according to the Teacher. Therefore, he shares a proverb from the realm of travel (Eccl.4:9-12). Travellers in the ancient world were often at risk. For starters, Israel was a place of pits and ravines. One could fall down with no friend to help him out. Israel was also characterised by cold winds, especially at night. One would be cold on their own. Or the traveller might be attacked by bandits. The Teacher uses this to illustrate life: *‘We need company.’ “Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work. If one falls down his friend can help him up. But pity the one who falls and has no one to help him up.”* Remember when Joseph was thrown into a pit by his brothers and he couldn’t get out on his own? The point is – life is like that! There are ‘pits’ in life. If we fall down a ‘hole’, how important it is to have a companion! The same applies to those wintery nights:

“If two lie down together they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone?” A traveller does better with a companion to sleep beside. If not, he would sleep next to his ox. Once again, this is about life. There are long dark nights to endure. We need someone who is close, who shares the struggle, provides warmth and helps in times of attack. *“Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.”* One man cannot stand up to opposition. He needs a helper. A third is even better, especially if that third is God. In Him there is an abundance of strength and endurance for two who are united to Him. A cord of three stands can bear a load indeed! This is the Qohelet’s proverbial way of communicating the value of companionship over isolation.

He develops that further in one more case, before he speaks about God. The context is authority and leadership. It is often said that leadership is a lonely position. Qohelet has observed it. In verses 13-16 he refers to an old foolish king and a wise young lad. The old foolish King is a leader in isolation. Part of his folly is that he *once knew* how to take advice, to have people help him govern. Now, he is old and foolish. He doesn’t even know how to take warning. Rising up from the ranks is a wise young lad. He doesn’t have much money. He perhaps came from prison. He rises to eventually become king! He is much loved and part of it had to do with his wisdom. But there’s a twist in the story. The wise youth, who became successor to the King, ends up in isolation too. The process repeats itself. The next generation were not happy with the successor. He who was once popular at the start, ends up alone. The story highlights the need for leaders to have companions. It also highlights how hard it is for such companions to be found. This reminds me of a movie I enjoyed called ‘The King’. It was about King Henry V of England. He became ‘king’ at a young age. Immediately he faced difficulties in governing. He had one companion. Yet this man said to him just after he was appointed: *‘A King has no friends. Only followers and foes.’* It was a telling word! King Henry faced war and corruption in his government. He knew success in a battle against France. He eventually married the daughter of the King of France. After discovering how he was betrayed, the movie ends with King Henry asking one thing from his reluctant spouse: *‘That you will always speak to me clear and true’*. Do you have friend like that? That’s a real companion – one who sticks by you and tells the truth. How much is that needed in all relationships, especially in leadership, where there is a tendency to be isolated, applauded and/or used.

That brings us to Ecclesiastes 5 where there seems to be a turn. For the first time in the book, we have a commandment. So far there has been no actual commandment. Now there is a series of commands – which all relate to God. *“Guard your steps when you go to the house of God and draw near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong.”* The question is why suddenly do we have these commands? The reason is that this is the great answer to our need of companionship! The greatest Companion of all time is God. We cannot do life without God. We were told earlier: *“who can enjoy life without Him?”* (2:25). God is sovereign over the times and seasons. God is generous and kind. Yet He is also the judge. We are to leave injustices in His hands. We must receive day by day from Him. So how can we have this God as our Companion? We need companionship in world of vanity. We need friends. But the trouble is that they let us down as we let others down. Friends also pass from this life. How can we have a companion who will **always** be there? Who will **never** let us down? That Companion is God. We must learn how to approach God, and draw near, and enjoy Him as our Companion. So the wise man gives a series of commands. *“Guard your steps when you go to the house of God”*. We must beware of carelessness. He is thinking at the time of the Temple in Jerusalem. It was the focal point of worship and sacrifice. There, one

would lay their hands on the head of the lamb who was killed in their place. The Temple was also a prayer and devotion. The priests were also working. God was especially willing to meet the Israelites worshipper there. So Qohelet says: *'Be careful how you come.'* You see, we can approach God, and know God, and have Him as our Companion. In Christ, atonement has taken place. There is acceptance in God's presence. There is forgiveness of our sins. Nevertheless, we are to be careful how we come. God is holy. He is the majestic King over the universe. Not long ago, a well-known singer from a famous church in California told a crowd of people on TV: *'This will probably offend you, but oh well. I view the Holy Spirit as the genie from Aladdin. He's funny. He's sneaky. He is blue!'* This was her statement about God the Holy Spirit. He is the genie from Alladin! Is that your view of God? Remember Moses in the wilderness. He saw the burning bush and the brightness of God's glory. He looked with interest. He strolled into God's presence to investigate. He was rebuked. *"Moses, Moses, do not come any closer. Put off your sandals. The place where you are standing is holy ground."* Why was it holy ground? The Holy God was there! He cannot look upon iniquity. He is clothed with pure light. Can we have God as our companion? Yes! But we must be careful how we go about it. We are not to come casually or superficially to offer the sacrifice of fools. A fool is always ignorant. A fool does not consider the majesty of God. *"So watch your steps"* says the Teacher *"draw near to listen"*. Don't rush, or treat God as another 'thing' on the agenda. He is the one great Companion we need. So come humbly and reverently before the Almighty.

The Teacher doesn't stop there. He goes on to mention our speech. We are not to be *"quick"* and *"hasty in our heart to utter anything before God."* He says: *"God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few. As a dream comes when there are many cares, so the speech of a fool when there are many words."* This mention of speech is a call to integrity, to reality. God is not some earthly idol. We are speaking to a transcendent Holy God. All speech in heaven is not fluff or nonsense. The worshipper must say what they mean and mean what they say. But on earth, we are so often consumed with our cares. We 'daydream' in the house of God. We sit there adding up that account, pondering our duties, playing on the phone. So when we speak, we pour out empty words. There is no depth or reality. Much of it is 'fluff'. All of this, says the Teacher, is due to ignorance of the Majesty of God. The same applies to vows. They were promises made directly to God by the worshipper. Very often, vows were made at the Jewish Temple. It was only too easy to make a vow and not fulfil it. That is not the way to be companions with God. So the Teacher says: *"When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. ⁵It is better not to vow than to make one and not fulfill it. ⁶Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. And do not protest to the temple messenger; 'My vow was a mistake.'* Commandments about worship come flooding in! It is not accidental. Here is a man or woman who wants God as their 'Companion'. So they make a vow. That was easy enough. Perhaps it feels 'good' too. ***'God, I promise that I will ...'*** In Ancient Israel, it usually involved a 'gift' or 'offering' or 'act of obedience' which was verbally professed to the priest. Let's imagine a man who vows, then leaves and forgets. So the temple messenger comes. *'Remember! You made a vow.'* *'Oh yeah. That's right.'* He protests. *'Oh, my vow was a mistake!'* He wants to wiggle his way out of it. Qoheleth says – this is not the way to be friends with God. He may be angry with you and ruin the work of your hands. The same applies to us in the New Covenant. Vows are not a major feature in the New Testament, but integrity of speech matters. It is better not to make a vow than to make one and leave it unfulfilled. There are modern worship songs that seem to have vows, or something nearest to them. *'God, I will love you all my life!'* *'God, I will always live for you!'* It is better not to 'vow' than to lie in the end. But if there is someone here who feels they must 'vow' – which you don't have to as a new covenant believer – then vow to believe all that God says! Vow to

believe God when he says that we are sinners by nature but saints in Christ. Vow to believe God who has done everything for our salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ. Vow – if you must – to believe all His words and works. Vow to believe God when He says that He wants fellowship with you through the blood of the Lamb. If you feel you must ‘vow’ – and I generally suggest that you don’t – then vow to revere God. Stand in awe of God. Express that by coming carefully to the house of worship. “*Guard your steps ... draw near to listen.*” Come to hear Word of God. Show gratitude for the blood of the Lamb which saves your soul. Seek to obey God no matter what He puts before you to do. Then, you will have a Friend indeed. Some people joke around when they say: “*I have friends in high places!*” It should more accurately said: “*I have a Friend in a high and holy place!*” God wants to be our Companion! Let’s learn how to be His companion. He will not unravel the mysteries of life for us. But He is the best Companion of all.

*Reflection Questions:

- *Who are your closest companions? What makes them a true companion?*
- *Out of all the scenarios and proverbs mentioned in Ecclesiastes 4, which one resonates with you the most and why:*
 - *the oppressed who have no comforter (with the reflection that it is better not to be born than to see the evil done under the sun)*
 - *the rivalry in society (with the proverb about one handful with tranquility),*
 - *the lonely rich man (with the proverb about two being better than one) ...OR*
 - *the old foolish King and the wise young man.*
- *To enjoy God as your Companion, what needs to change in your attitude, approach and conduct?*

5. The Failure of Wealth (5:8 – 6:12)

Let us remember that the book of Ecclesiastes is concerned to deliver us from ‘secularism’. Secularism is an approach to life under the sun that disregards the God of the Bible, and therefore, lives as though God does not exist. It is the life of unbelief. Qohelet is posing to us that it cannot be done. With all of life’s difficulties and perplexities, it is impossible to face life as it is without God. Qohelet is also concerned to deliver us from **cynicism**, where we become bitter and frustrated with life to the point of exhaustion. He wants to deliver us from despair and hopelessness. The story for many of us is that we often enter the world with a lot of optimism. We think life is going to be good and fair. The cards will play out well for us. We think we are going to achieve our dreams. If ‘this’ is what I want, then I just apply my effort and achieve or obtain. But is not as simple as that, teaches Qohelet. Life is not actually nice and fair. To approach life with a high level of optimism is dangerous for us. We will fall into a heap. We must be realistic – and realistically – the world is broken. Terrible events take place and we will find ourselves disappointed. Our secular approach will not be sufficient to face the mess. So Qohelet wants to deliver us from secularism as well as cynicism. He is seeking to show us that we can only find contentment in God. **Ecclesiastes 5-6 reinforces this truth as we consider the failure of wealth.**

The **observations** that the wise man presents as well as the **reflections** and **proverbs** cluster around the theme of wealth and poverty. You may remember when we considered **Ecclesiastes 4:1-5:7**, the observations and reflections clustered around the theme of companionship. This time the theme is wealth and prosperity. Qohelet is trying to show us that wealth is not the answer to the problem of vanity. It cannot satisfy. It is not wrong to be wealthy. But it is not the answer either. Therefore, the love of wealth is a snare to the soul. This is the main point he drives home in chapters 5-6. Let’s open this up. *“If you see the **poor** oppressed in a district, and justice and rights denied, do not be surprised at such things; for one official is eyed by a higher one, and over them both are others higher still. The increase from the land is taken by all; the king himself profits from the fields.”* Then he shares a proverb: *“Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income. This too is meaningless.”* The wise man wants to highlight the failure of wealth by teaching us that it can never satisfy the soul. The way he does this is to say: *‘Look, if you observe the poor and oppressed and downtrodden, don't be surprised because that’s life! Life under the sun is full of greed and bureaucracy from higher authorities who oppress those in the lower strata of society. The poor will have a hard time on some occasions. The King will demand more profit. This is life!’* It is tempting therefore to think that money will be the answer as we see the poor treated badly. We may think that money is our escape from such situations. Money is going to going to save me from the calamity of oppression. Perhaps it will. But Qohelet wants us to be aware of the problems of money. *“Whoever loves money never has money enough. Whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income. This too is meaningless.”* He shows us that, actually, if we pursue money as the answer, we will never be satisfied. It will never be enough. The covetous are cursed with continual dissatisfaction. They always long for more no matter how much they have. ‘It will happen to you’, teaches Qohelet. He goes on to say that this will ruin our life. As we increase in prosperity, so our level of satisfaction rises. We demand more and so do others. So we pursue more. But there is no end to the circle: *“As goods increase so to those who consume them and what benefit are they to their owner except to feast his eyes on them.”* More money is met with a higher level of consumption. Our friends and extended family widen as everybody wants to consume what we have. The same happens in society in general.

Qohelet is trying to show us the failure of wealth to satisfy the overall situation. In the end, it is only beneficial to look upon them.

Qohelet then advances this further by suggesting that wealth increases our anxiety levels. *“The sleep of a labourer is sweet whether he eats little or much, but the abundance of a rich man permits him no sleep.”* The rich man and the labourer are set side by side in a contrast. For as we observe a rich man in society, we tend to think he is doing well – his life is sorted out, his problems taken care of, he has security and peace. ‘Don’t be fooled’. The sleep of a labourer is sweet – even with little food! That labourer who is just earning enough to get through is the one who is sleeping in peace. The silence of God in this proverb is telling. There is the quiet suggestion that God permits the labourer to sleep. The rich man is too concerned about his wealth, which is idolatry. He is concerned about how much he possesses and whether it will be lost. So, the abundance of the rich man perhaps permits him no sleep because he does not have peace. His anxious thoughts churn throughout the night, worrying about the loss of his fortunes. Qohelet goes on to show that such anxiety is not a false anxiety. Wealth can be lost. *“I have seen a grievous evil under the sun: wealth hoarded to the harm of its owner, or wealth lost through some misfortune, so that when he has a son, there is nothing left for him. Naked a man comes from his mother's womb, and as he comes, so he departs, he can take nothing from his labour that he can carry in his hand” (5:13-14).* Here we see that the anxiety of the rich man is justified. What Qohelet has seen under the sun is wealth hoarded to the harm of its owner. It is so easily lost, and when it is lost, the good old days are gone as something happens which takes all away. Wealth flies off on the wings of the wind. All this is to the harm of the owner, whose heart was tied to his wealth. How painful for the wealthy to be in a place of prosperity and then lose it all in one blunder. This is the failure of wealth – that it is not as secure as we wish. One of the greatest ministers in England was Bishop JC Ryle (1816-1900). He came from a very wealthy family because his father was a banker. Ryle had a great inheritance lined up. One day he came home from a good night out and his father told him that the bank had collapsed. They were destitute overnight. It totally changed the life of Bishop Ryle. He later stated that the turning point was good for him. The failure of wealth is seen in its temporal existence. If it is not lost at some point in this life – it will be at the point of death. *“Naked a man comes from his mother's womb, and as he comes, so he departs, he can take nothing from his labour that he can carry in his hand.”* The proverb is precise. It does not say that you can take nothing with you at all. It says that you can take nothing with you *“in your hand”*. The material side to life is left behind. The financial side to life under the sun does not exist in the next world. There are no earthly possessions and bank accounts in the world beyond the grave. Yet some things we do take with us. We take our conscience with us. We take our character with us. We take our works with us. They follow us. We are to give an account to God of the deeds done in the body. This follows on. But we cannot take our wealth with us. This is the failure of wealth. It simply does not last. It cannot satisfy.

“Then I realise that it is good and proper for a man to eat and drink and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labour under the sun during the few days of life God has given him – for this is his lot.” Qohelet goes on to say that when God gives any man wealth and possessions and enables him to enjoy them – *“this is the gift of God.”* This is the solution to the issue of contentment. Before we look at that in any detail, there is one more evil under the sun to share that contrasts with the solution. The wise man sees something that weighs heavily on men. *“God gives a man wealth and possessions and honour so that he lacks nothing his heart desires, but God does not enable him to enjoy them and a stranger enjoys them instead. This is a meaningless and grievous evil.”* This is the final nail in the

coffin for wealth. It fails to guarantee personal enjoyment. God has the final word on this matter! God is above all things and oversees all the details of life. He has the final word on whether a man can enjoy what he possesses. It is a staggering truth. Let us think of a man who has not lost his wealth. He has possessions, great prosperity and honour – nothing his heart desires is lacking in his hands. We conclude he must be ‘satisfied’. Yet we read that: *“God does not enable him to enjoy them”*. God puts a barrier in the way. We know not how, but God prevents the enjoyment of his possessions. A stranger does instead. This is such a grief that – according to Qohelet – it is better to have never seen the light of the sun. *“A man may have a hundred children and live many years, yet no matter how long he lives, if he cannot enjoy his prosperity and receive a proper burial, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he. It comes without meaning, it departs in darkness and in darkness its name is shrouded, though it never saw the sun or knew anything, it has more rest than that man, even if he lives a thousand years twice over, but fails to enjoy his prosperity, do not all go to the same place?”* At the end of the day, wealth and prosperity have no answer to the problem of death. And in life, if God does not allow us to enjoy our lot, it is a terrible woe. It is a shame and disgrace. It is better to have never been born. Michael Eaton put it like this: *“It is better to miscarry at birth than to miscarry throughout life”*.⁴ For at least the stillborn child, who did not see the light of the sun, was spared the frustrations and evils of this age, which are exacerbated through the failure of wealth. Again, death is a leveller. The stillborn who passed away in darkness had more rest than the frantic insatiable dissatisfied sinner. Qohelet ends chapter 6 where he began by making the point that wealth does not satisfy. *“All the man's efforts are for his mouth yet his appetite is never satisfied. What advantage has a wise man over a fool? What does a poor man gain by knowing how to conduct himself before others? Better what the eyes sees than the roving of the appetite.”* The roving of the appetite is a continual vexation that cannot be quenched by material wealth. Such an appetite is grief to bear. This is just as true for the rich as for the poor. Wealth, moreover, is a deceiver. It is not wrong to be rich, but the love of money and the pursuit of wealth is a snare. It will never satisfy in and of itself. It will betray our deepest desires for satisfaction in this life. It also has no answer to the problem of death. Qohelet then stresses that the situation cannot be changed. *“Whatever exists has already been named and what man is has been known. No man can contend with One who is stronger than he”*. The ‘One Who Is Stronger’ is a reference to God. For only God is capable of changing the situation, but no man can. We are not stronger than God who has the final word on these matters. If God does not allow us to enjoy our wealth, we cannot enjoy our wealth. No man can know the future. Who knows what is good too? No man really knows the future or what is good. Only God knows what is good. Only God knows the future. The wise man closes all the doors except the door of faith.

The failure of wealth opens the door to faith in God. *“Then I realised that it is good and proper for a man to eat and drink and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labour under the sun during the few days of life God has given him – for this is his lot.”* We are to receive our lot from God. We are to receive from God what He has for us and to trust that this is sufficient, day by day. We are to receive everything from God – our home, our wife or husband, our children, our income, our vocation. It all must be received from God. More than that, we must look to God to be able to enjoy what He gives us. It is great for God to give us ‘blessings’ of one kind and another. But only God can enable us to enjoy them. Only God can empower a fallen creature to enjoy the wife he has, or the husband she has, and the life they share, with what they possess. In and through God, one can find more fulfilment in the little He gives compared to the abundance of what cannot be enjoyed, even if it is close at hand. That enjoyment is something that is experienced in the heart. The wise man says that the happy soul

⁴ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, p.106.

“seldom reflects on the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with gladness of heart.” What a blessing this is! Happiness is found in God and it is found in God blessing the heart of man. The heart is where all the issues of life spring from. The heart is where we are to find joy and satisfaction! Where is our heart? Is our heart with God? If our heart is with God – He keeps us occupied and pre-occupied with gladness within. We seldom live with regret. We seldom look back and say, ‘I wish I had done this!’ God keeps you occupied with a happy heart. That is what Qohelet wants for us. He aims to deliver us from cynicism. He aims to deliver us from regret. He aims to deliver us from secularism – by closing all the doors except the door of faith. For wealth is not the answer to the vanity of life. It will fail, at least in the face of death. But God never fails. Let us trust Him for everything. Amen.

***Reflection Questions:**

- *How strong is the pull of temptation for you when it comes to wealth (rate yourself out of 10)?*
- *How are you travelling when it comes to finding contentment in God? What areas are still a struggle for you?*
- *Write a prayer that asks God to help you enjoy your lot.*

6. The Value of Wisdom (7:1 – 8:1)

Let us remember that Ecclesiastes does, at times, have a pessimistic style of writing. But it is not a pessimistic piece of nonsense. It calls us to face reality. Qohelet and his disciple are responsible for this material. They show us what life under the sun is really like. Life has afflictions, injustices and troubles. In fact, it cannot be fully understood. Trying to do so will lead to frustration. So, this world is difficult. It is tempting to despair; to give up on life altogether. Yet the book encourages readers not to do that. We are encouraged to face life with God, and with faith in God, and to accept that the anomalies of life will one day be straightened out. That brings us to a point where Qohelet speaks about wisdom (7:1-8:1). **He wants to show us the value of wisdom.** It is not only knowledge. It is knowledge applied to everyday life. It is skill at living properly before God. We would do well to be hungry for wisdom. In the New Testament, James writes: *“If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault and it shall be given to him”* (1:5). Thus, wisdom is from God. It must be sought in Him. May this message stir our hearts to seek for wisdom as we face life under the sun. But what will wisdom do for us? That is a good question to ask! This chapter provides the answers.

Firstly, wisdom is valuable because it sobers the mind. It is like a light bulb. Wisdom sees ‘reality’ for what it is. When you turn the light on, you see everything in the room. Before that, everything was hidden in the dark. That is what wisdom does for us. It is not ‘illusionary’. It brings clarity. This is how Qohelet puts it: *“A good name is better than fine perfume and the day of death better than the day of birth. It is better to go to a house of mourning than a house of feasting, because death is the destiny of every man and the living should take this to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, because a sad face is good for the heart. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure.”* Here is a classic contrast between the wise and the foolish. It surprises us that the wise are in the house of mourning! But wisdom unveils reality. It shows us what is ‘better’. It is to ‘better’ to be aware of death. It is ‘better’ to know that death is real and must be faced. Then we might prepare for it. The fool, on the other hand, drugs their conscience with fun, pleasure and empty laughter. It blinds them to reality. That is why the fool prefers to ‘party’. But the party doesn’t make one think properly. It is an opportunity for intoxication, a form of denial. The funeral, on the other hand, makes you realise: *‘you are going to die’*. That’s a good thing to keep in mind. That is wisdom. Remember the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen.19). God was getting ready to rain down burning sulphur upon that evil city. A few angels came to evacuate Lot and his family. The matter was urgent. Lot spoke to his sons-in-law about getting out immediately. But the sons-in-law thought he was joking. Their heart was in the house of pleasure. So they perished as fools. That is what too much pleasure does for the mind. It drugs the mind. But wisdom faces reality. It is like a light bulb turned on. We see what’s really happening – and what is really happening is that we are going to die. Therefore, it is wise as to get ready for that event. It is wise to consider what life to live and what name to leave behind. That’s better than fine perfume. It is better to be known as an upright man or woman. That has eternal significance. Only the wise see it that way. There was once a fellow in Bible College who was a very fun character. He was often joking around and being silly. One day, a student in our cohort passed away from cancer. At the funeral he came up to me afterwards with a serious look on his face: *‘This day is a wakeup call for me!’* Life and death are not a joke. Each day that passes we closer to the grave. Many of the wisest saints in history have been forced to see it that way. It’s the story of the great 17th century Puritan Richard Baxter. His life, writings and ministry were remarkably fruitful after he survived a terrible illness. He said: *‘I preached as a dying man to*

dying men. Take John Bunyan for example. In the English Civil War, a fellow soldier took his place in a dangerous siege. That soldier was unexpectedly shot by a musket bullet. It helped lead to Bunyan's conversion. On the day that 18th century revivalist Howel Harris was converted, he was previously told: *'If you're not ready to die, you're not ready to live'*. It also led to his conversion. It so often happens. Wisdom gets us facing reality – especially the reality of death. The wisest thing to do is to prepare for that event.

Why else is wisdom valuable? It is a shelter for life! *“Wisdom, like an inheritance, is a good thing – and benefits those who see the sun. Wisdom is a shelter as money is a shelter. But the advantage of knowledge is this: that wisdom preserves the life of its possessor” (7:11-12).* What a wonderful word! Wisdom helps us face life under the sun! Circling around this truth are various proverbs concerned with trouble and affliction. Qohelet states: *“Oppression turns a wise man into a fool, and a bribe corrupts the heart.”* It is a warning to keep your head. We are not to take unethical shortcuts. He goes on: *“The end of a matter is better than its beginning and patience is better than pride. Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools. Do not say, ‘why were the good old days better than these?’ For it is not wise to ask such questions.”* These wise words are all about how to face life with its various trials. Wisdom teaches us patience. If there is a difficulty, we've got to keep in mind that there is an end. The end is better than the beginning. God will bring a positive outcome at the conclusion of the trial. He will use it for good. It is better to wait on God and something precious will emerge in due time. It is also wise to rid ourselves of an angry bitter spirit. Qohelet has been trying to deliver us from cynicism, which includes regret. Dwelling on 'the good old days' is not the way forward. It is partly a case of memory loss. This is how wisdom preserves our life. It provides perspective. Wisdom settles our hearts, so we don't fly off the handle and make foolish decisions under pressure. Qohelet reinforces this: *“Who can straighten what God has made crooked? When times are good, be happy. When times are bad, consider – God has made one as well as the other. Therefore, a man cannot discover anything about his future.”* The teaching is again reinforced. The world cannot be changed until God changes it. For now, it remains permanently crooked. There is no point trying to fix it or master it! When a good day arrives, be happy. When a bad day comes, remember that the world is broken. Over-analysing this matter is pointless. No one knows whether a good day or bad day will come tomorrow. Anything can happen. This largely has to do with the fallenness of men and women and the judgment of God in response. *“Cursed is the ground because of you” (Gen.3:17b).* There are thorns and thistles in life. It is not until a new world is created that we can expect nothing but good. Today there are good days and bad days. That's life in the overall situation. Take it in your stride. Let wisdom preserve your life. Let wisdom preserve your thoughts and emotions. It is like a shelter in that respect. The storm comes. The rain falls. The lightning strike flashes. The howling wind blows. The sun is obscured. Life can be gloomy! Ah, but you've got cover! Wisdom preserves your heart in the storm. Instead of panic and fear and regret, you have peace with God. Though you do not understand, God knows, and that is enough.

Qohelet goes on to speak further about what he saw. *“In this meaningless life of mine I have seen a righteous man perishing in his righteousness and a wicked man living long in his wickedness.”* This is no change of subject. It is another strange anomaly in life. The wicked may live a long and prosperous life. It does not always happen, but it can happen. They do not repent and nothing happens. Meanwhile, the righteous person dies young. We are going to face these glitches. It was Asaph's problem in Psalm 73. He envied the wicked and their prosperity. He nearly gave up his faith. But something changed. He entered the sanctuary of God. The light switched on. His earthly limited

perspective was changed into an eternal perspective. He saw with greater scope. He understood the final destiny of the wicked, that judgement was coming. His soul was safe in God's hands and thus he had peace. That is what wisdom will do for us. It preserves the life it its possessor. Qohelet goes on to give advice: *"Do not be over-righteous, neither be overwise – why destroy yourself? Do not be overwicked and do not be a fool – why die before your time?"* Then we are told that the man who fears God will avoid both extremes. There is no point trying to be a 'perfectionist'. Trying to be over-righteous is playacting and pride after all. It is trying to be too good, but it leads to a façade. This ends up being exhausting! At the same time – says Qohelet – don't be overwicked. You can die before your time. The wicked do not always live long in their prosperity. They can die through their own folly. We must avoid both extremes through the fear of God. That is wisdom. For life under the sun is harsh. It is unfair. It is incomprehensible. But wisdom is a shelter. It preserves your soul in the storms of life. It safeguards from one extreme to the next.

Why else is wisdom valuable? Wisdom gives us strength. *"Wisdom makes one wise man more powerful than ten rulers in a city."* Then we read. *"For there is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins. Do not pay attention to everything people say, or you may hear your servant cursing you – for you know in your heart that many times you yourself have cursed others."* There is a fascinating shift from the strength of wisdom to the reality of sin. The topic of sin continues for the rest of the chapter. The point is that wisdom preserves us from the very thing that makes us weak. If there is something that will weaken our lives, weaken our consciences, weaken our character, weaken our faith and weaken our fellowship with God – it is sin. Sin is folly. That is why one wise man is stronger than ten rulers in a city. Those ten rulers are sinners, but the wise man presumably has victory over sin. Qohelet will go on to say: *"Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good" (9:18).* What a staggering proverb! The wise are stronger because they know how to please their Sovereign. They know how to face circumstances with God on their side. They know the right decisions to make and how to avoid the pitfalls of evil. At the same time, the wise know how to shun the sins of others who might weaken them with words. *"Do not pay attention to every word people say, or you may hear your servant cursing you – for you know in your heart that many times you yourself have cursed others."* Again, this is a case of preservation. It is no surprise to be cursed. The wise man knows he himself has cursed others. There is no point ruminating on what is inevitable among sinners. *"All this I tested by wisdom and I said: 'I am determined to be wise' – but this was beyond me. Whatever wisdom may be, it is far off and most profound – who can discover it? So I turned my mind to understand ... the stupidity of wickedness and the madness of folly."* Qohelet (or his disciple) could not obtain absolute wisdom. It was far beyond him. But he has enough wisdom to get by in this world. It turns out that he studied sinfulness. He knew it needed to be studied. To be strong is to be strong against sin. He discovered that a particular woman must be avoided. She is a snare. The woman of lust who captures the heart of a man and binds him with chains is more bitter than death. If anyone will weaken a man – it is her! Only the wise escape. But not many do! This highlights how 'rare' wisdom is. He observed a thousand men and only one was *"upright"*. He observed a thousand women but none of them were upright. This should not cause tension in 'the battle of sexes'. We are reminded that 'the Teacher' has the profile of Solomon. King Solomon of Israel had relations with 1000 women in his life. He had 700 wives and 300 concubines. None of them did him much good. They turned his heart away from God in the worship of idols. Solomon's heart was not as devoted to God as it once was. Those women made him weak! He started well but reared off from the middle to the end. In the end what is revealed here is not a competition between the sexes, or the triumph of man over woman, but the pervasiveness of sin in all humanity. God made human

beings upright. But man went in search of many schemes. His heart strayed from His Maker. Nothing has changed. Humanity searches on to no avail. The constant exploration of gratification and advancement without God is no real progress. Sinners want to do life their own way. But wisdom is doing things God's way. It is not that God is unwilling to give wisdom. Man has gone in search of many schemes instead of seeking the wisdom of God.

To conclude this section, we read: “Who is like the wise man? Who knows the explanation of things? Wisdom brightens a man’s face and changes its hard appearance?” (8:1). This, again, portrays what wisdom does for us. It is a rare treasure in a barren world. Those who are wise know that as a fact. Life makes your face hard. It is full of affliction. It makes everyone look stiff and stern. But wisdom brightens a man’s face against that. It gives him light and joy. He can smile. He can rejoice. He has peace with God. He can know – in the darkest times – that there is life for him beyond the grave. The wise man is a happy man. His face shines. For those of us in the New Covenant era, wisdom is found in the Lord Jesus Christ. “*He is our wisdom – that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption*” (1Cor.1:30). Therefore, seek fellowship with Christ if you would be wise. Let Him be your wisdom. He will enable you to face reality. He will prepare you for death. Let Him shelter you in life. Let Him be your strength in all things. And in a stern cruel world, your face will shine.

*Reflection Questions:

- *How has your understanding of wisdom been reshaped because of Ecclesiastes 7:1-8:1?*
- *Share a time when the Lord made you face the reality of death. What has been your response to this?*
- *In what way can wisdom be a ‘shelter’ in your life right now?*
- *Reflect on a time when wisdom made you strong against sin.*

7. The Powers That Be (8:2-17)

Let us remind ourselves that Ecclesiastes is wisdom literature. It is concerned about living rightly before God in the real world. There are contrasts in wisdom literature; wise and foolish, righteous and wicked, rich and poor, diligent and lazy. These contrasts are in Ecclesiastes too. Its goal is to make us wise in the real world. Life under sun is marked by vanity, evil, toil, frustration and death – so we must know how to handle ourselves. Qohelet and his disciple have gone before us to pass on wisdom that we might face the anomalies of life with faith in God and wisdom from God. So far, Qohelet has dealt with big matters. He has mentioned the unavoidable times and seasons of life. He has mentioned companionship, the failure of wealth, the value of wisdom and now authority. ‘The powers that be’ are those authority structures over society which are also unavoidable. The big question is: *‘How do we relate wisely to authority structures?’* If the world is fallen, as Qohelet observes, then so are kings and governors and presidents! For many Australian citizens, like me, love of autonomy and independence tend to mar any appreciation of authority. We use regular nicknames for our Prime Ministers! Perhaps we have a bit to learn. On a more serious note, defiance and revolution are not Scriptural ways, as we shall see.

The main point to stress is that we are to obey the governing authorities with a consciousness of God. *“Obey the king's command, I say, because you took an oath before God. Do not be in a hurry to leave the king's presence. Do not stand up for a bad cause, for he will do whatever he pleases. Since a king's word is supreme, who can say to him, ‘what are you doing?’”* Applying this to our own day, the general instruction is to obey ‘the powers that be’ – including the family structure, work, state and national government. We obey who is ‘in charge’ of that domain. We are good citizens in that respect. The reasons are the same in the New Testament, particularly **Romans 13**. The Apostle teaches that governing authorities have been established by God. The world is fallen. If there are no authority structures, anarchy reigns. God brought nations and rulers into being to govern and order human life under the sun. The highest reason for this obedience is a consciousness of Almighty God. He is behind it all. In Ancient Israel, citizens took an oath to obey God and the king. That is why Qohelet mentions the oath. It happened in the life of Solomon (1Chron.29:24). The people pledged their allegiance his rule. This idea is reinforced in Romans 13, not with the mention of an oath, but in the call from God for Christians to obey governing powers, even at the time, the power of Rome! It is not that we worship the governing authorities. Nor do we worship what the government tells us to worship. The command to ‘obey’ has its exceptions. Nevertheless, we are conscious that God has placed these authorities in their roles, due to the evil of the world, until the final inbreaking of the kingdom of God changes everything completely. The other reason for doing so is that, generally, it will go well with us. *“Do not be in a hurry to leave the King's presence. Do not stand up for a bad cause, for he will do whatever he please. Whoever obeys his command will come to no harm.”* To leave the king's presence in a hurry suggested that you were defying the king's word. It was a sign of dismissiveness. One might rush out of the king's presence in a rage or in disagreement. This is unwise. The king had power to punish. This is reinforced in **Romans 13**. *“Do you want to be free from fear of one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing”* (Rom.13:3-4). The point is that it is unwise to show signs of defiance. We are to obey the governing authorities with respect. It is to be seen as a generalisation. There are exceptions. But generally, it is true: *“you will come to no harm.”* We learn this from many cases in church history. Take for instance the 300 years of persecution from the Roman Empire against the early church. Many think it was 300 years of *constant*

persecution. Actually, there were ten short sharp fiery persecutions that did not last long. There was persecution under Nero, for example, when the streets of Rome were lit up with the burning bodies of Christians. There was a sharp persecution under Domitian who demanded he be addressed as a divinity. However, most of the time, when the church obeyed the governing authorities properly, it went well with them. It is generally true that if we submit to the authority structure, then we earn respect, and are given tolerance. But if we fight for tolerance, we tend to lose it. That is generally how it works – though there are exceptions. The Huguenots in 17th century France are an interesting case. Many claim they were too aggressive in their religious mission against the French Government to propagate the Protestant faith. Thus, they were almost exterminated. Many fled to Holland and England. Protestantism almost became extinct in France as a result. That is not a good outcome. Others in England worked for toleration. At the beginning of the 16th century Reformation Christians were persecuted. Leaders such as Bishop Latimer and Hooper were imprisoned. John Knox was exiled. Yet, Archbishop Cranmer remained. He was in a leading civic position and chose to submit to King Henry VIII. *‘I hear you are the biggest heretic in the country’* the King told Cranmer! But Cranmer just got on with his obedience to the King and eventually earned his respect. The true gospel of Jesus Christ eventually gained freedom in England. The lesson is that when people are loyal to the governing authorities, they generally win their way to tolerance. *“If you do what is good, you will receive his approval” (Rom.13).*

This begs the question – what about when we are commanded to sin? What about when powers authorise what is evil? The short answer is that we must obey God rather than men at that point (Ac.5:29). Ecclesiastes does not state it that bluntly but has wisdom to share: *“Whoever obeys his command will come to no harm, and the wise heart will know the proper time and procedure. For there is a proper time and procedure for every matter, though a man’s misery weighs heavily upon him.”* The reference to man’s misery is probably a reference to the vanity of the world – a key theme in this book. For life is indeed burdensome. Failure in government makes it worse. Our phrase of interest is: *“the wise in heart will know the proper time and procedure”*. In difficult cases, the wise must bide their time. If the government is going down the wrong track, we are not to panic. We are not to start a revolution. We don’t defy our employer or defy the state. We stay inside the boundaries and watch for our God-given opportunity to protest or change course. It is the story of Esther. There was a plan to exterminate the Jews. The Persian Emperor planned to wipe them out and Haman the official was behind the plan. What did Mordecai do? He did not start a rebellion. Mordecai told Esther the Queen: *“Who knows if you have come into the kingdom at such a time as this!”* She entered the King’s presence to receive the golden sceptre. Eventually, her request was: *“Oh King, spare my people! For I and my people have been sold for destruction and slaughter!”* She stayed inside the authority structure. She waited for the God-given time and procedure. The Jewish people were eventually saved. We see similar examples in the lives of Daniel and Nehemiah who all worked within the authority structure. They were highly respected. When something came up which was worthy of protest, or needed change, they waited for the proper time and procedure. God is the One who opens a way. So overall, we are to obey the governing authorities, but not in everything. The governing authorities are not allowed to forbid the preaching of the gospel. They are not allowed to encroach upon the life of the church or end our gatherings. At the same time *“...the wise in heart will know the proper time and procedure.”* We work within the structure and wait for God’s time. With all that in mind, it is fair to conclude that the Bible is generally against revolutions. It is not favourable to revolt against the existing government. Revolutions don’t make a positive difference anyway. Classic examples include the revolution against Haile Selassie in 1974 which did not take life forward as

promised. It led to violent tribal-based politics which remain to this day. One of the greatest of all examples was the French Revolution. In 1789, the King and Queen of France were guillotined. Everyone proclaimed ‘liberty-equality-fraternity’. But the one who granted them such freedom soon proclaimed himself ‘Emperor Napoleon’. A saying emerged in the French language: *‘plus ca’ change – plus c’est la mene’ chose.*’ (the more things change, the more they stay the same). Revolutions very rarely have the favour of God upon them. Authority is instituted by God. Believers are called by God to work within those structures. Even in times of protest, the wise will wait for the proper time and procedure.

Going on, then, if we obey the authorities we must do so with an awareness of man and his inherent weakness. Qohelet puts it poetically: *“Since no man knows the future, who can tell him what is to come? No man has power over the wind (or spirit) to contain it – so no-one has power over the day of his death. As no-one is discharged in time of war, so wickedness will not release those who practice it.”* In other words, ‘The Powers That Be’ are human like everyone else – so they cannot solve the enigma of life. If we think too highly of them, we shall be disappointed. Qohelet is trying to deliver us from cynicism. We must be sober minded. Governments are not ‘messiahs’. Men are fallen and limited. No matter how much power man possesses, he is never ‘sovereign’. He cannot control the wind. He cannot predict the future. He cannot resist the day of his own death! Neither will wickedness release those who practice it. There exists a sinful bondage over natural man. The wise will keep this in mind. We are to obey the authorities with a consciousness of God, but we do so with an awareness of man. To reinforce this, Qohelet presents his observations which circle around the theme of governing. He saw injustice and oppression. *“There is a time when man lords it over others to their (or ‘his’) hurt.”* Qohelet also saw the wicked given an honourable burial. It is hard to know if the wicked were *“praised”* or *“forgotten”*.⁵ The point is that it was a glorious funeral for the wicked! Their evil was not accounted for. They went in and out of the Holy City, living a life of evil and hypocrisy, yet received an honourable burial. *“This too is meaningless.”* Qohelet goes on: *“When the sentence for a crime is not quickly carried out, the hearts of people are filled with schemes to do wrong.”* This is true from parliament to the local classroom. If the teacher didn't carry out a consequence when it was deserved, everyone thought there would never be a consequence. It leads to a form of anarchy. He also saw a terrible inconsistency. *“Righteous men who get what the wicked deserve and wicked men who get what the righteous deserve.”* How life is unfair, especially under the government of sinful man. *“A wicked person can commit a hundred crimes and still live a long time!”* We are left to realise that there is no full and proper retribution here on earth. We should not expect rulers to be the answer. The ‘powers that be’ are not the answer to the problem of sin, to the need of salvation, to the reality of death or to personal joy. We imagine a ‘perfect’ country. There isn't one. We dream of a ‘perfect’ governor, there isn't one. It doesn't exist. We can replace the existing government with a better one, but there will still be injustices that cannot be understood. The chapter finishes: *“No-one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. Despite all his efforts to search it out, man cannot discover its meaning. Even if a wise man claims he knows, he cannot really comprehend it.”* Qohelet is saving us the energy of pursuing the impossible. Even if the wise claim to know how life all fits together, they do not know as they think. Where does that leave us?

We are left to revere the highest power and authority; and that of course is Almighty God. God is sovereign over all that is seen and unseen. He will sort out all the anomalies of life in His own time. He will bring about a final restitution of all things. Therefore, in the midst of this chapter, Qohelet

⁵ Verse 10 is difficult to translate.

shares a piece of wisdom. *“Although a wicked man commits as hundred crimes and still lives a long time, I know that it will go better with God-fearing men who are reverent before God. Yet because the wicked do not fear God, it will not go well with them, and their days will not lengthen like a shadow.”* How do we make sense of this? There is a ‘hint’ of eternity here. This is how Ecclesiastes works. Most of the time, it is life under the sun. We are given observations and reflections about life on earth. Yet, in rare moments, the wise man sees beyond. He knows of an afterlife. There is life beyond the grave. The wicked will *“not lengthen their days like a shadow”* – because God will not grant them eternal life. Someone may commit a hundred thousand crimes and still live a long time. But all must answer to God in the end. The lives of God-fearing men and women will lengthen into eternity. For God – the highest authority – has the final word on who lives forever in His kingdom. God-fearing men, therefore, may not be honoured in this life. They may not receive a proper burial. Their names may be forgotten. But Qohelet knows it go better with them. They will be honoured before God in the life to come. In the meantime, God is the source of their joy as they live under the sun. Qohelet returns to the answer: *“So I commend the enjoyment of life because nothing is better for a man under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany him in his work all the days of the life God has given him under the sun.”* As we notice throughout this ‘wisdom book’, God is the source of a happy and contented life. He gives you your days. God has given us today. God will give us tomorrow when we wake up the next morning. In the days God has given us, He remains the author of our blessings. That includes food, drink, companionship, work and home life. The Lord enables us to enjoy what He has given even if it is less than the man next door. He is the source of our contentment no matter what governing structure we live under. No matter what country we are in, no matter who is ruling at the time, God is the source of our joy. This also means that we remain pilgrims under the sun. No matter where we are placed in this world. No matter what governing regime exists. We will always be a pilgrim. This is because the source of our joy is not found in the things of this life. It is found in God who gives us life, who gives us what we need for life, and enables us to enjoy it all. *“I commend the enjoyment of life ... all the days God has given you.”*

As we come to the conclusion – how do we relate to the governing authorities? We obey the governing authorities with a consciousness of God. God put those authorities there because of what the world is like. Whoever obeys the governing authorities will, generally speaking, come to no harm. When we are commanded to do wrong, we are free to resist with respect. But know that there is a proper time and procedure for every matter. Remember too, that in the end, ‘The Powers That Be’ do not have the final word on our lives. We are even told that no one has power over the day of his death. It is God who has the final word on our days, including the time to die. That leaves us to stand in awe of the highest authority – Almighty God, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer and Alpha and Omega. He is sovereign. He is good. In Him do we trust from day to day.

*Reflection Questions:

- *Has your understanding of our relationship to authority been reshaped? Explain.*
- *Discuss a time when: (a) You were in a place of authority and faced a challenge (b) You were subject to authority and faced a challenge.*
- *What can you do to look beyond this troublesome life and remember God and eternity?*

8. A Call to Seize the Day (9:1-12)

Ecclesiastes 9:1-12 should be regarded as one section. We could entitle this: *'A Call to Seize the Day'*. It is about how to live well in the face of certain death. This may not be our everyday topic, but in the Book of Ecclesiastes, which is a wisdom book, readers are compelled to face the greatest themes in life. Notice that Qohelet, the Teacher, gives a **bold charge** which comes at the centre of the chapter: *"Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for it is now that God favours what you do."* He then continues to summon his listeners to enjoy life, to enjoy marriage and to work well throughout all the days of this meaningless life under the sun.

Let us note that this call to 'seize the day' is not shallow or superficial. It is not a call to just eat and drink and be happy because life is one big party. That is a philosophy called 'hedonism' – where people indulge in endless pleasure because there is nothing to live for. The Apostle Paul mentions this as a false teaching in 1Corinthians 15:32. If there is no resurrection, *"let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die."* It may appear similar to what we find in Ecclesiastes, but it is very different. The call to 'seize the day' is a call to live by faith. Nevertheless, Qohelet does not turn a blind eye to the harsh reality of life either. Qohelet has reflected on life under the sun and how incomprehensible it is. The world is broken. There is no clear retribution principle fulfilled in this life. Circumstances are cruel and difficult. Sometimes greedy people prosper over those who are faithful and righteous. This is not a shallow problem. It is the result of sin in the human heart as well as God's judgement. Soon, Qohelet highlights the fact that there is a **common destiny** for all people. Everyone will die. Everyone faces the same fate. Death is a great equaliser, no matter who we are. Qohelet builds that out poetically; whether one is righteous or wicked, good or bad, clean or unclean, offers sacrifices or doesn't, they have an appointment which cannot be avoided. *"As it is with the good man, so with the sinner; as it is with those who take oaths, so with those afraid to take them. This is the evil in everything that happens under the sun: The same destiny overtakes all."* He goes on to say: *"The hearts of men, moreover, are full of evil, and there is madness in their hearts while they live, and afterwards, they join the dead."* This is no 'sugar-coated' perspective on life, with an invitation to enjoy the party. This is reality. Human hearts lie in the grip of madness and sin. Death is 'an evil' that overtakes us all. It was never part of God's original creation, and goes against what we were designed for, causing distress for the human race. Death is no respecter of persons. This is where everyone is headed. It was also true for Jesus! He was assigned a grave with the wicked (Is.53:9). It is in the face of this reality – the certainty of death – that we are to seize the day. Qohelet is a realist. Wisdom is no liar. True faith must face reality for what it is. This is reinforced with a word of insight. *"Anyone who is among the living has hope – even a live dog is better off than a dead lion! For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing. They have no further reward, and even the memory of them is forgotten; their love, their hate, and their jealousy have long since vanished. Never again will they have a part in anything that happens under the sun."* Here we have a poetic contrast between the living and the dead. The point is that while there is life, there is hope. The living have 'hope' in the sense that they have an opportunity which is no longer available to the dead. That opportunity is to take death seriously, so as to find hope in God. The living have an opportunity to 'seize the day' by faith and to use this life properly before their time is up. The dead on the other hand will never return to this life. The dead have no further opportunity to know God or trust God or please God under the sun. The dead have long since vanished and everyone on earth forgets about them after a while. But the living have an opportunity to find hope in the face of death. That is the meaning of the proverb: *"Even a live dog is better off than a dead lion."* A dog in the ancient world was despised as a dirty creature. But

the lion was esteemed as a glorious creature, mighty among the beasts. Nevertheless, there's no point being a dead lion. There's no point living life to the maximum and conquering all as 'king of the jungle', only to end up dead and void of hope. The presumption is that the lion was great in life but did not know God. Now it knows nothing of 'this life' anymore. It has lost its chance. On the contrary, a live dog is better off. Keep in mind that this is not about animals. It is about us. You might be dirty and despised, like a dog in the ancient world, but you have an opportunity for a living hope. You have an opportunity now to 'seize the day' by the grace of God, to live with faith in God, and to face death with a sense of victory. "*Better a live dog than a dead lion.*" The live dog has a chance. The lion's chances are lost.

There is a sense of urgency about this. According to Qohelet, we don't really know what's around the corner. Life is unpredictable: "*...the righteous and the wise and what they do are in God's hands, but no man knows whether love or hate awaits him*" (9:1). This is reinforced in verses 11-12. Qohelet saw something else under the sun: "*The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise, or wealth to the brilliant, or favour to the learned, but time and chance happen to them all.*" He goes on: "*No man knows when his hour will come. As fish are caught in a cruel net, or birds are taken in a snare, so men are trapped by evil times that fall unexpectedly upon them.*" He is making the point that life's circumstances are not as predictable as one would think. We see a race and think the fastest man will win. We see a fight and think the strongest will triumph. We see everything naturally, in straight lines. But this is not necessarily so. "*Time and chance happen to them all*". No one is master of life's circumstances. Life is crooked, not straight and predictable. Things happen that are unforeseen. No-one thought that Charlie Kirk, the conservative evangelical, would be shot openly at a rally in Utah this week. He died at the age of 31, leaving behind a wife and two young children. Who saw that coming? Perhaps only the killer. "*No man knows when his hour will come.*" It is true for all kinds of circumstances, and in particular, death. We are like fish swimming freely in the ocean, then all of a sudden, a fisherman drops his net and we are hauled up into the boat without a choice. Evil times impose themselves upon us, unexpectedly. This intensifies the need for us to 'seize the day'. Life is unpredictable. Death is sure to happen – but when we don't when. So Qohelet delivers this call, this charge, to 'seize the day' while there is time.

What is this call to seize the day? It comes in the middle of the chapter. It is directed to a son, or a young married man, but is applicable to all of us: "*Go, eat your food with gladness and drink your wine with a joyful heart. For it is now that God favours what you do. Always be clothed in white and always anoint your head with oil. Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun, all your meaningless days. For this is your lot in life and in your toilsome labour under the sun.*" This is part of the charge. This is how to live in the face of death. It comes with a sense of urgency. We are summoned, even commanded, to enjoy life as God would have us! Does this surprise you? For a lot of people, the way to live in the face of death is to live with detachment. There is an idea that we must 'detach' ourselves from pleasure. Some claim that we must loosen ourselves from worldly things so as to be ready to lose them altogether. In a similar way, people claim we must prepare for the worst by being strict on ourselves. We do this by not enjoying food and drink too much; and not being engrossed in marital love and happiness. As the saying goes: 'Find more in God and less in everything else'. It depends on what this means. Such an approach often lends itself to false religion, where people are overly scrupulous. The tendency is to isolate ourselves from God's gifts. We become afraid of being too attached, therefore, we live with separation. We dare not be too comfortable, because we can die at any moment, like fish caught in a

cruel net. We live on the edge of eternity, and therefore, must separate from the temporal. This is the opposite of 'hedonism', as mentioned previously. However, the wise man in Ecclesiastes is not a fan. He does not advocate a detached or strict life which is void of enjoyment, or void of intimacy, or suspicious of the temporal. He knows life is temporal! He has observed more than anyone! Even marriage is temporal. Surprisingly, his teaching is that temporal life is an opportunity. Those who are dead no longer have that opportunity. His charge is to seize the day by faith in a generous God. We are to live and enjoy what God gives. 'Go' means don't hesitate. Don't hesitate to sit down and enjoy your meal with friends. Forget about being overly scrupulous. Forget about self-righteous abstinence. Enjoy your loved ones. Enjoy your wife. Enjoy the marriage covenant. Enjoy intimacy together. Don't chase other lovers, for that is foolish. He has warned us about that. Enjoy marriage to the maximum. Give it time and input. *"Always be clothed in white. Always anoint your head with oil."* This is reinforcing the same thing. These actions are symbolic of hope, joy, festivity and comfort. Israel is characterised by a hot and dry climate. The skin needs relief. The body must cool down. So put on oil, dress yourself in white and enjoy a good meal. This is the opposite of distress. Qohelet advises that we relieve ourselves! Life has enough trouble of its own. We are not to spend too much time wearing graveclothes and restricting ourselves from life's gifts. It is hard enough already! Even in the midst of this charge, Qohelet still says that this life is one of *"meaningless days"*. There is still a lot of labour and frustration to contend with. We are not to add to the problem by being a 'killjoy'. We must remember that God is not against pleasure. God is against greed and selfishness. He has given us pleasures to enjoy, so enjoy them. We should enjoy the sunshine, the natural surroundings, exercise, companionship, food, drink, time at the table, intimacy, friendship, good clothing, relief for the skin and body. Enjoy it. For this is part of your lot in a cruel and crooked world.

There is one more thing to highlight about the call to seize the day. Qohelet has already mentioned it: ***"...it is now that God favours what you do"***. He then finishes the charge in verse 10: *"Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the grave where you are going, there is neither working nor planning, nor knowledge nor wisdom."* Let us not skip over this aspect of **doing**. Life involves activity. This is to be enjoyed too. But this is not a call to be a workaholic. A workaholic does not enjoy life because they do not stop to smell the roses. They do not spend enough time with their spouse or children or in recreational pursuits. Work is their 'god'. It kills them, yet they plough on in slavery. Qohelet is not a believer in that. He has also refuted perfectionism. Rather, he styles 'work' in a poetic way: ***"Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might."*** It is close enough to a proverb. The point is that God has made us for particular tasks, and God puts those tasks before us to do. It is part of His providence. God has called us to activity. Hands were made for work. God has made us fit for that work. *"Whatever your hand finds to do..."*. This is referring to work which matches the skillset of the worker. If God has called you to be a doctor, then be a doctor, and do it with all your might. If God has called you to be a teacher, then be a teacher, and do it with all your might. The same applies to other tasks and responsibilities. Find what God has made you for. The work will fit with who you are. You'll be happy in it too. The work will flow naturally with how you were made. You will be free to give it your best. Unfortunately, the opposite is also true. When we try to do what we have not been made for – it is miserable. Don't try to be something you are not. We are then like a fish out of water. But if you find what God has made you for, then the grace of God will be there too. The grace of God Almighty will be with you. You'll know His smile upon your life and work. You'll know His joy in your heart. There will still be times of hard work and toil. But there will be grace. You'll be happy, enjoying the lot that God has given you. It is also encouraging to keep in mind that *"...what the righteous and the wise do are in God's hands."* What we do for God

somehow remains in His grasp. There is something everlasting about that work. There is something eternal about God-given work. It is eternally rewarding. Praise God for that!

Therefore, in the light of this, now is the time to seize the day. Remember, there is a common destiny for all. This is reality. We do not turn a blind eye to it. Qohelet is a realist! Unless the Lord returns in our lifetime, we will go to the grave. When we do, there is no more opportunity to return to this life – to work or plan or gain wisdom and reward. There is no further opportunity to please the Lord under the sun. We have this life to please the Lord. We have this life to know God and put our hope in God. This is your time now! Seize the day by trusting God every step of the way. That’s the way to live in the face of death. Then hopefully, when the hour comes, we don’t know ‘how’ or ‘when’, we will be ready. We will be ready to die, because we have really lived. The way to die is to really live. The way to really live is to know that you will die. Nevertheless, when the hour comes, God will sweeten everything by His grace. Those who know the Lord will be transported into the holy presence of God, where death will be no more. As for new covenant believers today, we give thanks to God through Jesus Christ. He has “*destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel*” (2Timothy 1:10). Hallelujah!

*Reflection Questions:

- *How did God use this message to speak to you?*
- *In what way does Qohelet highlight the harsh reality of life. Why do you think he does this?*
- *Explain ‘hedonism’ and its opposite.*
- *How has your understanding of ‘pleasure’ or ‘enjoyment’ been challenged or reshaped?*
- *How can you seize the day right now? Or, how can you make the most of the time God has given you?*
- *What tasks or responsibilities do you believe God has made you for?*

9. Wisdom and the Dangers of Folly (9:13–10:20)

This portion of Scripture focusses on “*Wisdom and the Dangers of Folly*.” It is a portion which closes off the long middle section of the Book. That long middle section runs from 3:1–10:20. It is about facing the vanity of life under the sun. Let us keep in mind that Ecclesiastes is a ‘wisdom book’. That is its literary genre. Therefore, the style is observational, proverbial and reflective. Qohelet mentions a lot about what he saw. He also shares poetic proverbs and meditative thoughts. Nevertheless, these are not miscellaneous musings. His wisdom clusters around various themes, which are tied to the overall theme, the futility of life under the sun.

We learn from Ecclesiastes that **wisdom** is skill at living well before God. It largely involves the application of knowledge to an everyday complex life. This involves the whole person. Wisdom is having a clear and sensible mind, a God-fearing heart, an attitude of trust in the Lord and diligent hands for what matters most. At the same time, being ‘wise’ does not mean that life will always roll in our favour. The world remains broken, complex and unpredictable. Our human nature is far from perfect too. There is within us a tendency towards folly, and this can outdo wisdom. Although wisdom is far better than folly, it is also true that folly is powerful. Folly can undo the work of wisdom and ruin lives. To put it in a nutshell, the theme of this portion is more about the dangers of folly. This comes with a gentle warning. Folly can be detrimental, not only for the fool, but for others as well. That is why we also have reference to kings and rulers, whose decisions impact lives. Let’s open up the dangers of folly so that we may be hungry for more wisdom.

We begin with a story that captivated the Teacher’s attention. It was the story of a small city. A great king marched against the city to subjugate it. The king had great might. But there in the city was a poor youth. He was no-one special in society. But he was wise. Of all the people, he alone knew how to save the city from the invasion. Scholars have understood this story in two ways, depending on how a few Hebrew words are translated. One view is that the wise youth saved the city. Then afterwards he was long forgotten and no one cared about him anymore. The other view is that he did not save the city, because no one paid attention to his wisdom at the time of the invasion. So the city was ransacked, and lives were ruined. The story can be understood both ways. Nonetheless, the point is that his wisdom was so valuable for that occasion. It was stronger than weapons of war. Yet folly seemed to triumph. No one cared about the importance of his wisdom – either at the time of the invasion or afterwards. Qohelet reinforces this with a few proverbs: “*The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouts of a ruler of fools.*” Then we read: “*Wisdom is better than weapons of war, (as seen in the story), but one sinner destroys much good*”. No matter how we understand the story, the truth remains: wisdom is precious and powerful, but sin and folly can undo it all. Some think the boy did not save the city because everybody was listening to the shouts of the city’s king instead, who was hounding everyone with a different plan. Either way, few people listen to the quiet words of the wise over-against a noisy ruler. Qohelet reinforces that idea: “*As dead flies give perfume a bad smell, so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honour. The heart of the wise inclines to the right, the heart of the fool to the left, even as he walks along the road, the fool lacks sense and shows everyone how stupid he is.*” Again, this shows how wisdom can achieve a lot, but folly can undo it all. The two are pitched against each other. The good smell of wisdom is ruined by the bad smell of folly. With regard to the left and right, this has been understood by scholars in the light of an ancient world paradigm. The most obvious point is the contrast. The right hand was seen as the strong hand, the hand that saves. But left handedness was viewed negatively in some ancient cultures. It was seen

as strange and contradictory. Thus, folly stands in contradiction to wisdom. This is important for our own lives because we are a mixture of both. Sometimes we are very wise. We are conscious of God, handle our lives well and make the right choices. Other times we are foolish. We make rash decisions. We forget about God. We blurt out silly words without thinking. No true believer is an absolute fool and no true believer is absolutely wise either. We are a mixture. Thus, the challenge is to live more consistently by wisdom.

We open this up further to understand folly as a failure to handle ourselves properly. This needs to be emphasised because we tend to think superficially about circumstances. If someone is wise, they handle the circumstance properly. If they are foolish, they don't handle the circumstance properly. Although there is no denying this, if we look carefully through the text, the real problem with folly is that people don't handle themselves properly. *"Even as he walks along the road, the fool lacks sense, and shows everyone how stupid he is" (10:3).* The fool is not thinking about where he is going. He is distracted, reckless and shows no sense. Why? He does not handle himself properly. This is the opposite of wisdom: *"If a ruler's anger rises against you, do not leave your post, calmness can lay great errors to rest."* Here we see that wisdom is handling oneself under great pressure. It is being calm in the situation. There is a situation, of course. It is dangerous. But the wise handle that situation by essentially controlling themselves, by staying calm. The fool in contrast has no self-control. This impacts government and society on a larger scale. When a foolish ruler makes irrational decisions, it impacts everyone else. A foolish ruler puts all the wrong people in the wrong places. The ruler puts fools in high positions and the rich in low positions. The 'rich' would include those of education and class. *"I have seen slaves on horseback while princes go on foot like slaves."* This point is that the ruler has no sense! He makes absurd decisions. It is unfitting. If he would have a clear mind, and orderly thoughts, then errors of judgement would largely disappear.

Following this are a series of proverbs which may appear to have a range of different themes, but continue to reinforce the dangers of folly, which include **careless presumption**. *"Whoever digs a pit may (or will?) fall into it; whoever breaks through a wall may be bitten by a snake. Whoever quarries stones may be injured by them; whoever splits logs may be endangered by them. If the axe is dull and its edge unsharpened, more strength is needed, but skill will bring success. If a snake bites before it is charmed, there is no profit for the charmer."* These are a unique set of proverbs and reflections. It is not easy to establish a connection between them. Some scholars see a retribution principle, at least initially. To break through a wall and get bitten by a snake may be a sign of God's judgement. To dig your own pit and fall into it repeats the same idea. A providential judgement has occurred due to one's own sin or failure. Hence, this could be a retribution principle. However, it might not be. The emphasis is certainly on the danger of careless presumption. Life has its hazards. You can dig a pit and end up in it. You can break down a wall down and find a snake on the other side. It could be a retribution principle, or it could be the bitter irregularities of life. This is not foreign to the book. Life is complex and perilous. Mining stones can lead to injury. Splitting logs can spill blood. If one is a snake charmer, they had better charm the snake before it bites. All these activities have dangers attached, without those dangers being a punishment for previous misbehaviour. If we don't handle ourselves properly because we are careless and presumptuous, then, we put ourselves in a dangerous place. We might find ourselves in a pit, or poisoned by a snake, or splitting our foot with an axe. This is not because we don't handle the circumstance (per se) – but because we don't handle ourselves well. We don't think or look ahead. We are too audacious and over-confident. This is not to be valued in a complex and unpredictable world. If we fail with ourselves first, that is disastrous. The self-confident snake-

charmer underestimated the crafty creature. He just thought ‘all would be well’, to the loss of his income and life. Thus, all the proverbs illustrate the idea that presumption belongs to the realm of folly and is therefore dangerous. The wise will think before they act. This is reinforced again when it comes to words. There is a contrast between the speech of the wise and the speech of the fool. Words are the great test of self-control. *“Words from a wise man’s mouth are gracious. But a fool is consumed by his own lips.”* More words keep pouring out of the fool. In the end, his speech is *“wicked madness.”* The fool also multiplies words. No-one can tell him what is going to happen because he will not listen. The fool shuts their ears. There is no self-control. Remember James chapter 3? If one can control the tongue, they can direct the whole body. It is like the rudder of a ship, the bridle on a horse. To steer that little rudder moves the whole ship in that same direction. The bridle controls the whole horse too. Likewise, the tongue is the little master of our life. But the fool cannot control the tongue. He is consumed with his own lips. It reinforces the point, once again, that wisdom and folly are largely about how we handle ourselves, and this is seen most evidently, in one’s speech.

We are nearing the end of the Ecclesiastes 10. *“A fool’s work wearies him, he does not know the way to town” (10:15).* Then we move on to the theme of land and kingship. However, the idea of sloth carries over into the final stage of the chapter where we have a contrast between a wise king and an immature king. *“Woe to you, O land, whose king is a child.”* This is the same word that Solomon used when he became king and confessed: *“I’m only a child” (1Kings 3:7).* This is a reference to immaturity. Solomon pleaded for wisdom, which was the right request. Not everyone does this.

*“Woe to you, O land, if your king is a **child**, and whose princes feast in the morning. Blessed are you, O land, whose king is of noble birth and whose princes eat at the proper time for strength and not for drunkenness. If a man is lazy, the rafters sag; if his hands are idle, the house leaks.”*

We return to the context of kingship. Folly is costly because when the fool is lazy, the work suffers. The fool does not apply himself to the labour. Therefore, it is a woe (disaster) for land and nation if the king is immature and lets the princes and servants eat whenever they want to. Greed and self-indulgence will hinder work of highest importance. This will bring calamity upon the nation. The childish King – who cannot handle himself – let’s everyone get away with it. All goes wrong from the top down. On the contrary: *“Blessed, are you, O land, whose king is of noble birth and whose princes eat at the proper time, for strength and not for drunkenness.”* It is the same point from the opposite angle. Diligence is good! Hard working hands matter when the task is important. How important it is to have princes and servants who are dedicated to help govern the nation. They are wise when they eat for the sake of strength! Everything in its right place! But take note of a man who is lazy, and check out his house, it is falling apart. Laziness belongs to the realm of folly. Those who work hard, and put the affairs of the nation above their own stomachs, are a blessing for the nation.

This brings us to a noteworthy proverb: *“A feast is made for laughter and wine makes life merry, but money answers all”.* This proverb is not as random as we think, for mention of feasting and drinking has just been made. Qohelet does not despise laughter or food or happiness. He recommends these! But everything in its place! Money trumps all because we can do more with it. How versatile and useful is money under the sun! But do we use it properly? Obviously, this proverb that can be misused. Money is not the answer in an ‘absolute’ sense. We have already noted the failure of wealth to satisfy the soul, the failure of wealth to solve the enigma of life. Chapter five made that clear. However, ‘money’ is not to be despised either. It is more versatile. It can be used to provide for the feast, to provide for the wine, and much more. Doesn’t society know? Many people chase money, and in a

sense, we know the reasons. But Qohelet takes a balanced approach in light of the whole book. Although money ‘answers all’, it must not be worshipped, and it cannot solve the enigma of life. “Whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income” (5:10). Qohelet finds the balance. So must we today. Do not despise money. Learn to use it well, with God always in first place. We finish with a wise command. “Do not revile the king even in your thoughts or curse the rich in your bedroom, because a bird of the air may carry your words and a bird on the wing may report what you say”. Mr Preacher finishes with another illustration of **self-control**. It is a dangerous thing to curse those in authority, or to speak against the king or to speak against the rich. To do so is to despise their power, which may be used against us. Somehow, there may be a leak. A ‘little bird’ will tell what we said, and it will not go well with us. It all comes back to the dangers of folly in every area of life – whoever we are in society. Folly has its pitfalls. If we cannot handle ourselves, we will surely fall again and again. Oh, how folly spoils the work of wisdom! It rivals wisdom. And yet ironically, it shows us how important it is to seek wisdom.

As we close, let us remember that we are a complex mixture of both wisdom and folly. King Solomon himself was the greatest mixture. He was the wisest man that ever lived, and yet he was perhaps one of the greatest fools who ruined his life by worshipping idols and marrying foreign women who led his heart astray. The wisest man became one of the greatest fools, and therein we have a tremendous mixture. We are a mixture too. The goal is to reduce the mixture. We need more wisdom and less folly. We need more self-control, more common sense, more preparation of the heart, more diligence for what matters, more of the fear of God, and less folly. We need less presumption, less arrogance and less irrationality. This is the road to glory. Nevertheless, there will still be dangers in this complex world. There will still be things that happen that we cannot control. Bad things can happen to the wise. We have seen that in the book. But it is still better to be wise! Folly is dangerous for society! Even if a wicked man gets away with evil, folly is always more dangerous. Folly can ruin your life. The call is to be wise. We must learn to handle ourselves before God. Where is our heart? Do we revere God deep within? On what is our mind occupied? Do we think before we act? What about our tongue? Do we think before we speak? What about our hands? Do they work for what is most important? Let us learn to handle ourselves first. Let us cast aside careless presumption and embrace a careful walk with God. Then we come at every situation with wisdom, day after day. And although wisdom has its challenges, it is still a shelter, it still has its eternal rewards.

*Reflection Questions:

- *How did God use this message to speak to you personally about wisdom and the dangers of folly?*
- *Identify three characteristics of the fool and three characteristics of the wise?*
- *What proverb or example in the text was most relevant to you? Or struck you the most? (i.e.: the pit, the snake charmer, the poor wise youth, the immature king etc.).*
- *Share two examples from your own life testimony which demonstrate:*
(a) an example of folly, or careless presumption, which was dangerous
(b) an example of wisdom which blessed you in the end.

10. The Final Charge (11:1–12:8)

In the book of Ecclesiastes, we have come to ‘The Final Charge’. In this section, from chapter 11:1–12:8, Qohelet gives his final appeal to live by faith. He has done that throughout the book, but at this final stage, it comes with greater urgency. He delivers a series of exhortations to live a life of bold and diligent faith in our Creator God. We are to do this before it is too late. At this stage, Qohelet (or his disciple) has delivered the bulk of what he wants to say. He has told us about the vanity of life. He has told us how life under the sun is marked by perplexity and difficulty. The background to this scenario is that the world is fallen. God created man upright but he went in search of many schemes. Thus, the world is broken. God's judgement is upon this sinful world and it is therefore marked by death. *“The wages of sin is death.”* Life under the sun is therefore fleeting. Money won't save humanity. Friendships come to an end. Pleasures are short lived. Youth is only for a time. Everyone must die and face God's judgement. Qohelet is not backward in presenting the real problem. But he does not leave us there either. We come to a final exhortation to faith. Let us consider this seriously.

Qohelet, or Mr Preacher, begins with a couple of exhortations. *“Cast your bread upon the waters for after many days you will find it again. Give portions to seven, yes to eight, for you do not know what disaster will come upon the land.”* This is an appeal to live by faith. Keep in mind that this is **poetry**. These are poetic proverbs. The metaphor is from the realm of commerce and sea trade. In the Ancient World, there was a great sea trade between Western Asia and the cities on the Mediterranean Coast. What people often did was take a bold step. They placed their trading goods on a raft or boat. They secured it, protected it and drifted it off upon the Mediterranean Sea. It would reach a certain land and the people would receive what was sent. Then they would prepare their goods and finances to ship it back to where it came from. This is how sea trade often occurred. One was really putting everything out there by surrendering up their goods as they drifted across the waters. Giving seven or eight portions of trade, and perhaps also giving to others generously out of one's profit, is also mentioned. Only keep in mind that this is poetry. This message from Qohelet is really about faith. We are to surrender our life to God. We are to come to a place where we yield up our life to the Lord completely; knowing that eventually there will be blessing and reward from Him. As we are bold in our faith, God will be generous in return. We are to take this to heart, because there is a tendency to be satisfied with knowledge alone. We easily rest content that we know about God; that we know His acts in history; that we know Him personally as our Saviour. That is important. But this must lead to more. We must be exhorted to live wholeheartedly for God. Qohelet says in effect: ‘Do it! Trust in God boldly. Surrender your life to Him; your desires, future, marriage, vocation.’ We are encouraged to yield ourselves up to God in total commitment. We are to believe that in the end there will be blessing and reward from Him. Think of the mother of Moses (Ex.2). How hard it must have been to hide precious baby Moses from the prospect of murder from the Egyptian King! His mother placed him in a papyrus basket and drifted him down the Nile River. She had an arrangement with her daughter. It was bold faith indeed! The message from Qohelet is to do that with your own life. Surrender your life to God. We may not know how we will be blessed in the end. It might be a long time before we are. Yet we are urged to step out in faith and do what is pleasing to Him. Our life will come back to us better than ever. God will bless our faithfulness. To lose one's life in the Lord is to find it again in Him. Qohelet is exhorting his readers down this road of faith.

He is also suggesting in a poetic way that we be **diligent** about this. We are not to procrastinate, and the following proverbs convey that message in the context of expected trouble. *“If clouds are full of*

water; they pour rain upon the earth. Whether a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where it falls there it will lie. Whoever watches the wind will not plant, whoever looks at the clouds will not reap. As you do not know the path of the wind, or how the body is formed in a mother's womb, so you cannot understand the work of God, the Maker of all things." The subject has not changed. It is still an exhortation to live with a bold and diligent faith. Only now, Qohelet stresses that we should not procrastinate. The trouble is that life is unpredictable. There is something scary about that. We don't know what is coming next. He has already made mention of this: *"You do not know what disaster will come upon the land" (11:2b)*. It seems that there will be a disaster that comes upon the land at some point. Things happen. If a cloud is full of water, it pours out rain. If a tree falls down, there it will lie. Nature has its way. Nature takes its own course. Thus, Qohelet encourages us not to let that hinder faith. Don't just stand there watching the wind or looking at the clouds. Get moving for God! We are not going to understand everything anyway. We know not how God moves. We know not how nature operates, or what will happen next. It is beyond us. Nevertheless, 'don't let that stop you. Still give yourself to God!' urges the Preacher. The key thing is not to be paralysed. Don't feel that you cannot take one step forward because of terror or ignorance. He then closes off that short block by appealing to us once again. *"Sow your seed in the morning, and at evening let not your hands be idle, for you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well."* The imagery is from the realm of farming and trade. Again, it is ultimately about faith. We are to invest in a range of endeavours. We are to give ourselves in faith to a range of pursuits. We are to believe that God will bless us one or another. We don't know which endeavour will succeed. We have no real way of knowing. That's ok. We must look to God and serve Him anyway. Let nothing hold you back from diligent trust and obedience to God.

That brings us nearer to the final stage in this charge where there is a stirring call to remembrance. The subject has not changed. It is still a call to live by faith from beginning to end. Only now it is suggested that we start when we are young. Qohelet links it all with the whole journey of life. *"Light is sweet, and it pleases the eyes to see the sun."* This could be a reference to birth, when we first arrive into this world, to see the light of the sun. Or it may be a reference to the dawning of a new day, which often symbolises birth or new life. Either way, the mood is positive. Life begins with a sense of optimism. But more has to be said. *"However many years a man may live, let him enjoy them all, but let him remember the days of darkness, for they will be many. Everything to come is meaningless. Be happy, young man, while you are young and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see, but know that for all these things, God will bring you to judgement."* Contrary to first impressions – this is not an encouragement to wild living. Rather, faith opens the way to enjoy life wisely. Yes, we are to enjoy life under the sun. God has many gifts to bestow. He gives the sunshine, food, drink, days of youth, love and pleasure. In addition, spiritual life in communion with God is not to be denied. Life has a sweetness to it and we should not hold back on enjoying the Giver and His gifts. The season of youth especially is a time of energy and vitality. There is something good about this, but there is also something fleeting about it too. So a few things must be kept in mind. To enjoy life wisely, one must be sober-minded. Understand that dark days are coming. Understand how vain and perplexing life can be. Tough times are ahead in a fallen world. God is also watching. God will judge our lives. 'Remember that', says Qohelet. Therefore, it is by faith that we should enjoy life properly because it is then balanced with a good conscience, particularly in relation to God. The 17th century English Puritans wrote a lot about conscience, far more than is considered today. Nathaniel Vincent was not alone, for example, when writing a treatise on this subject stating that: *'Conscience is a heaven or hell on earth'*. Other Puritans

agreed. A bad conscience extinguishes the enjoyment of life, but a good conscience is liberating. A good conscience is free from guilt. We are free to commune with God and enjoy life as He would have us. But wild living and self-indulgence damage our conscience as well as our health. Qohelet has some advice at this point: *“So then, banish anxiety from your heart and cast off the troubles of the flesh – for youth and vigour are vanity.”* Anxiety and the troubles of the body are enhanced by reckless living, especially when age catches up with us. This is best avoided. Overall, youth and vigour are fleeting, like ‘hevel’ – that puff of smoke that is here today and gone tomorrow. All the more reason to remember God at an early age.

The journey of life continues on and Qohelet has not ended the charge. We now reach the point where the only thing left to do is to urge readers to really live by faith, before it is too late. In Ecclesiastes 12:1-8 this charge is given its final thrust. Time is slipping away. Qohelet appeals to us: *“Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come, and the years approach when you say, ‘I find no pleasure in them’”*. Then in the next few verses, he portrays in a series of poetic pictures, what it is like to get old. *“Before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark”*. Life is like a series of lights, but the trouble is that as life goes on, year after year, the lights begin to go out. The sun goes out and we are not as bright as we used to be. The daylight goes and we become a little darker. At least the moon is shining. But in due time the moon dies out and only the stars are left. Eventually the stars themselves are put out too. We are growing old. We are nearing the grave. The loss of vigour shows. *“Remember your Creator in the days of your youth ... before the stars grow dark ... and the clouds return after the rain.”* The last clause is challenging. After clouds and rains have had their time, all goes over, so we think, *‘we might get a bit of sunshine here’*. But the clouds return! There are further troubles. This what it is like to age. If this is true – why not yield your lives up to God now? Qohelet goes on. *“When the keepers of the house tremble and the strong men stoop”*. This is a reference to our arms and legs. That which held us up and enabled us to walk and work begin to weaken. Men and women now stoop in those latter years. *“When the grinders cease because they are few and those looking through the windows grow dim.”* This refers to our teeth. Our teeth are our ‘grinders’. They served us in life, but as time goes by, we lose them. *“And those looking through the windows grow dim”* refers to our eyes. We cannot ‘see’ as clearly as we once did. All goes dim. *“When the doors to the street are closed and the sound of grinding fades; when men rise up at the sound of birds, but all their songs grow faint; when men are afraid of heights and of dangers in the streets.”* ‘Remember God before then!’ – appeals Qohelet. This is the setting in of old age. All the signs are there; loss of hearing, remaining indoors, less contact with the outside world, little sleep and early rising. A lot goes on outside, but it cannot be heard. The songs of birds grow faint. We become afraid of heights and dangers. We are not as stable as we used to be. Qohelet continues: *“When the almond tree blossoms...”*. That is, our hair goes grey. At one point in the year, the top of the almond tree blossomed, and it all went grey. *“And the grasshopper drags himself along and desire is no longer stirred. Then man goes to his eternal home and mourners go about the streets.”* Here is the final stage. We drag ourselves along like an injured grasshopper. We can hardly stroll. We are ungainly and awkward. There is little appetite for anything. We then pass away – and a funeral is held in our name. The point is – will we not yield our lives to God before then? Will we not surrender to a life of faith before then? For there is such a thing as ‘too late!’

The following images now convey the reality of death. This theme is no stranger to the book. *“Remember Him – before the silver cord is severed and the golden bowl is broken; before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, or the wheel broken at the well.”* The poetry is tragic and beautiful. A lamp

hangs in a palace or temple. It is a golden lamp which hangs down from the ceiling, held by a silver chain. It is valuable and precious. In this lamp, the oil of life burns away. Mr Preacher says, *“Remember Him before the silver cord is severed...”*. There will be a time when that lamp crashes to the floor and the oil of life runs out. *“Before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, or the wheel broken at the well”*. The thought is reinforced. The pitcher that was once lowered down into the well to collect water is now broken. Neither does the wheel rotate as it once did. Thus, no water can be drunk. Qohelet appeals to us: *“Remember your Creator before that day comes...”*. That day is when the wheels of life no longer turn for you. It is the day of death. **Remember before then!** *‘Remember’* is a strong word. It means to stay loyal to God. It is not just a case of recollection. It is more than that. *‘Remember’* has the sense of staying loyal to the covenant God made with you. It is like a married man who leaves home and goes out with the boys. There are many people at the party. There are many women present. *‘Remember your wife!’* she tells him. It means to stay loyal to the covenant. Or think of Psalm 137. A few surviving Israelites were weeping in Babylon as humiliated foreigners. Jerusalem had been invaded. The psalmist cried – *“if I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand lose its skill. May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you...”*. The psalmist is not merely thinking of Jerusalem. He is, but it is more than that. He is clinging in hope to Jerusalem’s revival. He wants to be loyal to his Jewish faith and heritage, until the end. This is the gist of the charge. Stay loyal to the King of kings! Perhaps we have yielded our life to the Lord. Perhaps we have devoted our lives to God, even in our youth. Now, stay loyal until the end! Remain faithful to God before the house crumbles and the oil of life runs out. How much more should we be like in light of the new covenant in Christ! God has done so much more in Jesus Christ. From this standpoint, we see more than Qohelet did. Let us, therefore, *“cast our breath upon the waters”*, and find blessing in return. Let us trust and obey, every step of the way, until our final breathe.

*Reflection Questions:

- *How did God use this portion of Scripture to speak to your heart and minister to you?*
- *In what ways do you find the Hebrew poetry challenging and stimulating. Give examples.*
- *Is there anything that causes you to procrastinate, or hold back, when it comes to fully trusting God and/or yielding your life to Him?*
- *Is ‘death’ something that you take seriously or prepare for in this life? Explain.*
- *What disciples or practices will help you to stay loyal to God until the end of your days?*

Concluding the Matter (12:8-14)

In our journey through the book of Ecclesiastes we finally come to the conclusion of the matter. That conclusion begins where it all began. *“Vanity of vanities”, or “Meaningless. Meaningless!” says the Teacher; “everything is meaningless” (1:2; 12:8).* This is the legendary statement that marks the book. It reminds us that life under the sun is ultimately an enigma. It is a ‘puzzle’ with no human solution. We also read about the Teacher and his wisdom, as well as the sayings of the wise, which then lead us to the final word: *“Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole of man”*. This is the end of Ecclesiastes. We are left to heed the words of the wise. That is how we are to respond to this book. We must ‘heed’, or to take to heart, the words of the wise.

As you can see from the text, this conclusion involves a shift in the use of language. The Teacher (Qohelet) is now spoken about objectively. It’s as though the disciple has now stepped in to close things off. This disciple is an admirer of Qohelet. He is, I believe, the predominant editor of the book. He steps in to bring everything to a conclusion. He does so by validating Qohelet and his wisdom. *“Not only was the Teacher wise, but he also imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true.”* This is a validation of Qohelet’s wisdom. In the following verse, we read that such wisdom is given by *“one Shepherd”*. This is the Lord Himself. The words of Qohelet are ‘God-breathed’. Moreover, through this validation we learn something about the teaching ministry. What Qohelet did was not simply for the purpose of becoming wise, but for making other people wise. He cared about others. He cared about the truth in other people’s lives. He cared that other people would have knowledge to live by. Therefore, he put in an enormous amount of effort to think and search and find just the right words. He set in order these God-given proverbs, as carefully as possible, so that everything he wrote was upright and true. He wanted these wisdom-sayings to be accurate and digestible for other people. This is a validation of any teaching ministry. It is not there to confuse people, but to bring clarity. This is something which is obviously noteworthy for the church today. When we think about a Teacher, or a teaching ministry, we tend to think of someone who passes on information. This is like lecturing at a College. At worst, it is all ‘brains on a stick’. But where is the application to life? To be a Teacher in the covenant community of God, or to be a Teacher for the people of faith, is not ‘brains on a stick’ and nothing else. It is to be a ‘shepherd’ who cares about the souls of others; who cares about what they believe; who cares about the direction of their lives. This is what every teaching ministry should be like. It involves a lot of hard work to make the word of God digestible and understandable for other people. This is done so that it may direct their lives accordingly. We are not supposed to have ‘teachers’ on the left and ‘pastors’ on the right. The God-given-teacher should be pastoral and the pastor should also be a solid teacher. The two go together. Teaching itself is not just information transfer either. Teaching invests in the souls of others. It is interested in direct and destiny. So this is a validation of Qohelet's ministry at the close of the book. He worked hard, not so everyone could say: *‘how wise you are!’* Rather, he wanted others to be blessed. *“Not only was the Teacher wise, but he imparted knowledge to the people.”*

At the same time, it is suggested that the teaching ministry is difficult for hearers too. Teachers must work hard for others. Yet listeners find it hard too. There is something painful about true wisdom. *“The words of the wise are like goads, their collected sayings like firmly embedded nails – given by one shepherd. Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them.”* Therein lies the challenge that the assembly of God’s people must face. Wisdom contains sayings that function like *“goads”* or

“firmly embedded nails.” Both images refer to something sharp. *“Goad”* is not a word that we commonly use today. It is a sharp stick that farmers used for driving cattle. A ‘goad’ was used to prick and prod an animal. This was done for directing the animal’s course and stimulating action. Hence, there’s a bit of pain involved. *“It is hard for you to kick against the goads”* the Lord said to Saul of Tarsus in his rage against the church (Ac.26:14). Yes, it is hard. Contact with a goad hurts. It pricks. In the same way, wisdom-sayings from God have a tendency to pierce our hearts. *“Firmly embedded nails”* do some piercing too. Only this time the nails speak of something that sticks and stabilises. That is what the wisdom of God is like. It pricks and prods and stimulates into action. Yet it has the power to hold us together just as firmly embedded nails do for wood and construction. They have power to clasp and hold our lives in order. They are given by one Shepherd. This is the true teaching ministry and how we ought to see it. It is not a ministry of just passing on information that is interesting. It is not a ministry that ‘tickles the ears’ or confirms what everyone already believes. It is a ministry of truth for life. This can be painful. There is such a thing as being ‘hurt’ by the Word of God. People are going to get hurt in a church where God’s wisdom reigns. A good church is where people get hurt by the Word. A bad church is where people get hurt through gossip, malice, rivalry, betrayal and greed. A good church is also a church where there is enough love to comfort the people who are hurt, as we all receive the Word which is *“sharper than any two-edged sword”* (Heb.4:12). No animal enjoyed the sharp end of the stick. It pricked them, deliberately. The tool was used to shift them in a direction contrary to their natural stride. So it is with the sayings of the wise. They are sharp. They direct us against our nature. It can hurt the Teacher to bring wisdom that pierces others – and pierces themselves first – and it hurts others when goads and hammers and nails are needed for the changing of their lives. Yet this is necessary. We are held together by the Wisdom of God. Without this wisdom, our lives fall apart. In fact, discipleship then ceases to happen. That opens the way for a gentle warning. *“Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them. Of the making of making many books, there is no end, and much study wearies the body.”* There may be a father-son conversation going on here. Perhaps the disciple of Qohelet is speaking to his own son. Either way, it is a gentle warning to all about literature beyond the written word of God. *‘Be warned of anything in addition.’* The temptation is to search for wisdom that does not prick or cut. The temptation is to search for an alternative wisdom that is less humbling, less painful. But the warning is that such ‘wisdom’, when considered equal to God’s word, is dangerous for our lives. It leads us down the wrong track. It also dissatisfies. *“Of making many books, there is no end, and much study wearies the body.”* Qohelet knows this by experience. The irony is that if we study an alternative wisdom which we hope will be easier, it leads to exhaustion. There is no end to the books that can be made. There are more and more materials to read. There are more and more scholarly journals. What a sad thing it is to see Christian-scholars who are as dry as dust because they have wearied themselves studying literature that is not the Living Word of God. On the other hand, true wisdom which cuts, never kills. It always makes alive in the end. God’s wisdom is satisfying! God’s wisdom is the way forward in a meaningless world. No other book is ‘inspired’. Nor do other books hold or stabilise our lives. The Bible is supreme.

That leads us to the conclusion of conclusions! Many books have been written. Much ink has been used on paper. Remember, Ecclesiastes was written before the printing press! How many more books have been produced since then! So what does wisdom have to say? What is it in a nutshell? *“All has been heard. Here is the conclusion of the matter: **Fear God and keep His commandments.** For this is the whole of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.”* This is what it comes down to! We can read book after book, but this is it

in a nutshell. If we are to be wise, we must fear God. This has been mentioned in Ecclesiastes before (see 3:14; 5:7; 7:18). Now he drives it home as the final answer. To fear God is a posture of the heart. It is a particular attitude and mentality. But it is not terror. It is not the dread of hell or of painful consequences. It is something more relational. It is to stand in awe of the being of God, who has become our Father. It is to see something of His glory, and to have that impression abiding upon the heart. The true fear of God includes amazement at the grace of God. We have a knowledge that we should be struck dead in God's Holy Presence. Instead, we have received the golden sceptre of grace. As a result, a serious reverence abides upon the heart. To fear the Lord is to love God so much that we fear the loss of His fellowship. This fear of God fades within, if we are not careful in a world which its own trend. How it faded in Solomon's life! He started well as King. He stood in awe of God. He wanted to be wise and rule God's kingdom in righteousness. He oversaw the building of the Temple. He knelt down before God in front of the whole assembly of Israel, spread out his hands, and prayed an amazing prayer of dedication. There was reverence for God in Solomon's heart, but he went astray. Through his many wives he chose to worship idols. He compromised. That amazing sense of awe was lost to Him. His heart became rebellious in the second half of his life. It led to the split of the whole of Israel as a kingdom. This is what happens to us on a smaller scale, but nevertheless in a real way, when we have frequent contact with the world and its wisdom. The result is that the 'fear of God' begins to fade within our heart. We read in Romans that "*there is no fear of God before their eyes*" (Rom.3:18). That is the world. The world of unbelievers have no sense of the beauty, glory, and majesty of God. It shows in how they speak and behave. They are unaware that a judgment is coming that will secure their final destiny. This easily rubs off on us, like dust on our shoes as we walk the streets. Thus, there is need for the fear of the Lord to grip our hearts. Reading the Scriptures with focus, commitment to prayer, the breaking of bread and fellowship with the saints are important here. How precious when "*God encamps around those that fear Him*" (Ps.34:7). We also read that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and here, the sum of wisdom. We read "*the fear of the Lord is a fountain of life...*" (Prov.14:27). This is what makes life meaningful.

"Fear God and keep His commandments." The second part is also important. We are to do what the Lord says! This is not obedience out of slavish fear. It is obedience with a sense of privilege. God is the King of kings. Since this is not the prevailing worldview, and other agencies demand our loyalty, it is easy to compromise obedience to God. But the wise man says, 'Let's keep it simple. Revere God and keep His commandments.' We do not exist to keep society's commandments. We do not exist to follow everyone else's commandments. We are to do what our King says! If God says, "*love one another*", we love one another. It is permanent. If God says, "*obey the governing authorities*", we do so, except when we are ordered to sin. If God tells husbands, "*love your wives*", they should do so in the Lord. We do 'His' commandments – because they are the commandments of our Creator. That is the whole of man. That is why we exist. It reminds us of the very beginning when the first two people existed in that special garden of Eden. They were called into obedience to their Maker. Obedience is 'love' for God. In their case, they disobeyed God's clear command by seeking an 'alternative wisdom' through the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. History fell from there. The breaking of the one commandment, through disregard of God, initiated all this mess. It is what brought meaninglessness into the world. The whole of man went missing. Humanity was created to respond in obedience to his Creator. Therein lies royal blessing, glory, joy and honour. All the more reason to obey when we also realise that the Creator is the Judge of all. "*For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.*" Again, this is not a reason for living paralysed with dread. It is, rather, intended to liberate us. The King has the final word. God has the final word upon

our lives. The use of our time, the use of our gifts, the decisions we make, the spending of our strength, the use of our money, the opportunities we take, matter to God. He will bring everything into judgment. He misses nothing. Every injustice will be dealt with. Every small action, every little deed, is taken into consideration. This does not mean God is finicky. It means God is honest. God is truthful. We are accountable. If much is left unjudged or undealt with in this life, it will not be ignored on Judgement Day. God will bring every deed into judgement, every hidden thing.

Therefore, the most meaningful life is a life that bows in reverence before the King of kings, heeds His Word and puts it into practice. This is the conclusion of the matter. This is the ‘whole’ of man. We are to live in the Presence of God with awe. We are to respond to His glorious commands with delight. That can hurt at times. It is not always easy to obey the Lord. But it is true wisdom. We can read a thousand other books. But this comes from the One Good Shepherd. *“Fear God and keep His commandments. For God will bring everything into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.”* If that is our motto for life under the sun ... then all is not vanity after all.

*Reflection Questions:

- *How is Qohelet validated in this final concluding paragraph?*
- *Share your understanding of who Qohelet is, who his disciple is, and what this has to do with Solomon’s profile?*
- *Share two examples of when you found wisdom-teaching to be piercing, or sharp, in your experience of local church. How did you respond in the end?*
- *What does it mean to fear the Lord? Explain it negatively (what it does not mean) and positively (what it does mean)? Find one example for each, from someone’s life in Scripture.*
- *How can the truth about God’s judgement impact your faith and reorient your walk in life?*

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