

Our Purpose

Relational Concepts has been organized to provide motivational instruction for men and women interested in being used by God in their present positions in the community.

We believe that Christian doctors, mechanics, housewives, realtors, lawyers, secretaries, plumbers, businessmen and women, etc. are the most effective spokespersons the church has.

These people are generally not in a position where they can take the time to go to a Bible college. Our purpose is to bring quality instruction to them, where they are, to be applied in their family and their community.



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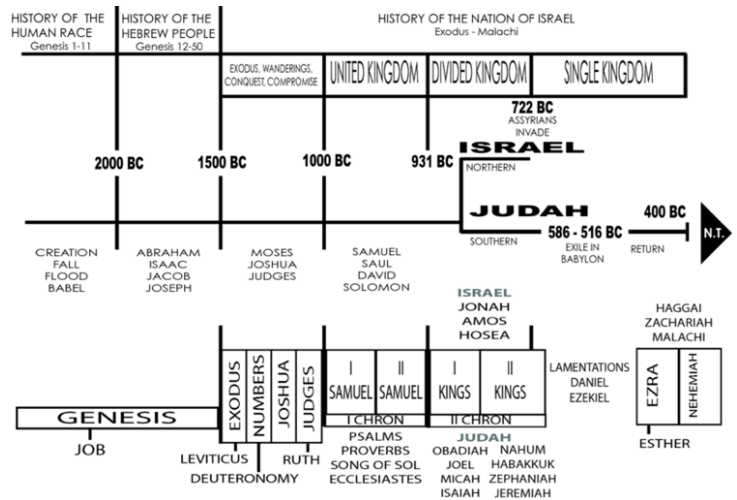
The Book of Ecclesiastes

Author: Solomon

Date: 935 B.C.

Title

The title Ecclesiastes is the Greek derivation of the Hebrew $קֹהֶלֶת$ (*Qoheleth*), which is the word usually translated *Preacher*, meaning “one who calls an assembly.” It is the second word of the book, *the words of the Preacher*. In Greek, it is the word ἐκκλησία (*ekklesia*), which the Greeks used for a public assembly (Acts 19:32). The apostles used the word to designate believers, the New Testament *church*. [Timeline from pinterest.com]



Author

There is no reasonable doubt that the author is Solomon, even though his name does not appear in the book. The author called himself a *son of David king in Jerusalem* (1:1) and *king over Israel in Jerusalem* (1:12). There is also secondary evidence that points to Solomon as the only possible author:

- He said he was wiser than anyone who ruled before him (1:16).
- He spoke of his elaborate building projects (2:4-6).
- He said he had *bought male and female slaves and...had homeborn slaves* (2:7).
- He also said, “*I possessed flocks and herds larger than all who preceded me in Jerusalem*” (2:7).
- He added, “*I collected for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces*” (2:8).
- He claimed, “*I provided for myself male and female singers and the pleasures of men—many concubines*” (2:8). Actually, *he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines* (1 Kings 11:3).

Dates

Saul, David, and Solomon were the first three kings, and the only kings, of the united kingdom of Israel and Judah. Saul became king in 1050 B.C., David in 1010, and Solomon in 970. David became king at about age 30 and reigned for 40 years, dying at age 70 (2 Samuel 5:4-5; 1 Kings 2:10-12). The age of Solomon when he wrote Ecclesiastes depends on the age of David when Bathsheba conceived Solomon. Most likely, David was about 50 and Bathsheba was about 25. Since David died at age 70, Solomon would be about 20 when he became king, hence his prayer for wisdom as a young king. Solomon reigned 40 years (1 Kings 11:42), so he died at about age 60. Therefore, we can conclude that Ecclesiastes was probably written when Solomon was in his mid-50s.

We Cannot Assume Solomon Was Wrong about What He Wrote

- **1 Kings 11:4**, *For when Solomon was old, his wives turned his heart away after other gods; and his heart was not wholly devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been.*

Although he probably wrote Ecclesiastes before that, Solomon became an idolater and did not keep the commandments of God (1 Kings 11:4-7). But his sin does not discredit what he wrote in Proverbs, Song of Solomon, and Ecclesiastes. There are many speakers in the Bible who were wrong. Bad, foolish, and uninformed people make incorrect statements throughout the Bible (like Pharaoh, some bad kings, the false prophets, and Job's friends). But the context clearly tells us they were bad, foolish, or uninformed. In Ecclesiastes, Solomon speaks with authority, as a wise man speaking truth. In one way or another, all the authors of the Bible were sinners. The inspiration of Scripture is about God superintending the sin nature of the author so that what they composed and wrote was without error (Matthew 5:18; Luke 16:17; John 10:35; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; Hebrews 4:12; 2 Peter 1:20-21). The references to Scripture and the Word of God in the New Testament, which Jesus said cannot be broken and will not pass away, incorporate all of what we know as the Old Testament. And that includes Ecclesiastes. Solomon is an example of Walt Henrichsen's comment, "Just because God uses you, does not mean He approves of you."

Parallels with the Book of Job

Most likely, Solomon was aware of the book of Job, since it was one of the earliest books written. It is interesting that Job sat at the bottom of the pain-pleasure scale and Solomon sat at the top (and, by the way, we have more luxury, comforts, and advantages available to us than Solomon), yet Solomon and Job came to many of the same conclusions.

The theme of Job, and a major focus in Ecclesiastes, is that we cannot know what God is doing.

- **Job 38:1-4**, *Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind and said, "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Now gird up your loins like a man, and I will ask you, and you instruct Me! Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? ..."*
- **Ecclesiastes 11:5**, *Just as you do not know the path of the wind and how bones are formed in the womb of the pregnant woman, so you do not know the activity of God who makes all things.* [This concept is repeated in Ecclesiastes 3:11 and 8:17.]

Both Job and Solomon concluded that it would be better to not have been born.

- **Job 3:3, 11, 16**, *"Let the day perish on which I was to be born, and the night which said, 'A boy is conceived.' ... Why did I not die at birth, come forth from the womb and expire? ... Or like a miscarriage which is discarded, I would not be, as infants that never saw light."*
- **Ecclesiastes 4:2-3**, *So I congratulated the dead who are already dead more than the living who are still living. But better off than both of them is the one who has never existed, who has never seen the evil activity that is done under the sun.*

Both Job and Solomon believed God would bring every act of man into judgment.

- **Job 14:3**, *"You also open Your eyes on him and bring him into judgment with Yourself."*
- **Ecclesiastes 12:14**, *For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.* [This concept is repeated in Ecclesiastes 3:17 and 11:9.]

Both Job and Solomon believed we should fear God and keep His commandments.

- **Job 28:28**, *"Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding."*
- **Ecclesiastes 12:13**, *The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person.*

There Is No Proof that Solomon Considered the Afterlife

With a New Testament frame of reference, we expect to find glimpses of an eternal perspective in the Old Testament. And true, there are at least five such glimpses:

1. Samuel came from an afterlife existence to speak with Saul (1 Samuel 28:15).
2. David said, *“I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever”* (Psalm 23:6).
3. Job said, *“I know that my Redeemer lives. And at the last He will take His stand on the earth. Even after my skin is destroyed, yet from my flesh I shall see God”* (Job 19:26).
4. Daniel was told, *“But as for you, go your way to the end; then you will enter into rest and rise again for your allotted portion at the end of the age”* (Daniel 12:13).
5. The fact that Enoch (Genesis 5:24) and Elijah (2 Kings 2:11) were taken by God assumes they were taken to a positive afterlife.

In the Old Testament, afterlife statements are rare, vague, and never the focus of the message. References to the judgment of God are almost always about this life’s punishments, or death. But Jesus changed all that, putting the whole focus on the afterlife. One of the huge differences between the church age and the other ages described in the Bible, is that this church age is the age of grace, where the focus of God’s justice is on afterlife rewards and punishments (1 Corinthians 3:11-15; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Revelation 20:11-15).

The Old Testament *Sheol* is usually a reference to either extreme trouble or death (Jonah 2:2). Even if it refers to a place of the dead, in Ecclesiastes there is no description of that place except the grave.

Neither can an afterlife be assumed by Solomon’s statements that God will bring every act into judgment. True, it can be argued that Solomon’s concept of the judgment of God does not eliminate a belief in the afterlife, but neither does it prove it, and it does not seem likely that Solomon had that in mind. For example, Solomon would be aware of the Pentateuch, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Job, and possibly the writing of Samuel, but the judgments described in these Scriptures were all this-life retributions. Actually, the whole impact of Ecclesiastes assumes a focus on this life only. For example, when Solomon talked about rewards, it was about this life, not the afterlife.

- **Ecclesiastes 5:18**, *Here is what I have seen to be good and fitting: to eat, to drink and enjoy oneself in all one’s labor in which he toils under the sun during the few years of his life which God has given him; for **this is his reward**.*
- **Ecclesiastes 9:10**, *...there is no activity or planning or wisdom in Sheol where you are going.*

We Can Assume What Solomon Wrote Was Incomplete

Although we cannot conclude Solomon was wrong, we do know his conclusions did not include any of the revelation of Christ and the apostles about salvation, this age, or the eternal state (Ephesians 2:20; 3:3-9). That will lead Solomon to some conclusions we will consider incomplete, simply because we have more revelation. But it is not like science, which (ideally) keeps changing its hypothesis with new information. Ecclesiastes focuses on this life without considering the next life, but the focus is foundational. It is not a hypothesis that changes with new information. Christ and the apostles did not change it, they built an eternal perspective on top of it. Solomon’s conclusions are not something that we should change to fit an eternal perspective.

Here are two personal examples:

- Example #1: In high school, I studied algebra, in college, I studied calculus. My algebra teachers didn’t say anything about calculus, but nothing they taught was negated when I studied calculus. Actually, algebra is essential for understanding calculus, just as the perspective of life on earth in Ecclesiastes is essential for understanding the New Testament.

- Example #2: When I went to college, I thought of nothing but passing tests and courses so I could graduate from college. I had no thoughts about life-after-college. Then I decided to go to seminary. My focus in seminary was completely different. It was all about what ministry I would have, life-after-seminary. Ecclesiastes is like my college days, no focus on life after school. The New Testament is like my seminary days, all my focus was about life after school. But the study habits I learned in college made seminary studies possible.

An Application: All of Solomon’s wisdom in Ecclesiastes is about this life. But it is accurate for this life. We should not simply punt to our eternal perspective and ignore the wisdom of Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes is an essential building block of an accurate theology.

Purpose

The purpose of Ecclesiastes is to force the reader to do critical thinking about this life. The book documents Solomon’s journey into critical thinking. In Ecclesiastes, Solomon’s purpose was to take his fellow Israelites with him on his mental journey, which concluded that the wisest way to live is to understand life is vanity, like chasing the wind. Solomon would say, “That has no value,” about everything we could possibly accomplish. The value of a thing is in how it ends. If it ends in nothing, it is nothing. Since our life ends in dust, everything we do amounts to dust. As the old saying goes, “When we die, all the pieces go back in the box.”

The book develops three sequential concepts. But the three concepts are not the outline of the book. He keeps coming back to one of the three concepts throughout the book, so that each paragraph makes one of these three points:

- **Concept #1, A Basic Conclusion:** All of life under the sun, for everyone who lives, has ever lived, or will ever live, accomplishes absolutely nothing.
- **Concept #2, An Intermediate Conclusion:** the best we can do is enjoy the process of our work and the fruits of our labor during our few, futile years under the sun.
- **Concept #3, The Final Conclusion:** Fear God and keep His commandments, not because that will do something for us, but because there is nothing else to do that has any value.

Concept #1, A Basic Conclusion: All of life under the sun, for everyone who lives, has ever lived, or will ever live, accomplishes absolutely nothing.

Question: Which of these things would you consider to be a good thing to do?

- Give to hospitals, cancer research, education, libraries, museums, public meeting places.
Solomon said, *...all is vanity* (19 times) *...and striving after wind* (9 times).
- Improve the culture through better water, air, housing, medicine, etc.
Solomon said, *...all is vanity* (19 times) *...and striving after wind* (9 times).
- Leave a good inheritance for your children.
Solomon said, *...all is vanity* (19 times) *...and striving after wind* (9 times).
- Save lives as a doctor, fireman, policeman, or first responder.
Solomon said, *...all is vanity* (19 times) *...and striving after wind* (9 times).
- Put Christians in positions of leadership such as engineers, doctors, lawyers, teachers.
Solomon said, *...all is vanity* (19 times) *...and striving after wind* (9 times).

I recall talking to a heart surgeon who said he believed he did valuable things, since he saved lives. I asked him where all those people he saved would be 100 years from now.

Concept #2, an Intermediate Conclusion: the best we can do is enjoy the process of our work and the fruits of our labor during our few, futile years under the sun.

Example: Suppose there are two boats in different parts of the North Atlantic Ocean (so they cannot help each other) that hit an iceberg (like the Titanic did) and will sink in one hour. One boat is filled with wealthy people who bring out all their best food and music and entertainers to enjoy their last hour. The other boat is filled with poor people who can only eat a few bologna sandwiches. That's all we know about either boat.

Question: Which boat would Solomon say was better off?

Answer: The wealthy boat.

- **Ecclesiastes 2:24**, *There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good. This also I have seen, that it is from the hand of God*

Concept #3, the Final Conclusion: Fear God and keep His commandments, not because that will do something for us, but because there is nothing else to do, that has any value.

Since all accomplishments are vanity, the best thing we can do in life is to enjoy the process of living, even though that is also vanity. But since an eternal God exists, the one thing of value is to fear Him and keep His commandments, as an end in itself. The fear of God is defined by the context of being afraid of the judgments of God. The commandments would be everything God has commanded, although Solomon's focus would be on the Mosaic Law as revealed in the Pentateuch.

- **Ecclesiastes 5:7**, *For in many dreams and in many words there is emptiness. Rather, fear God.*
- **Ecclesiastes 12:13**, *The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person.*

Theme

The theme of any book is in two parts, the subject and the complement, which together make up a complete statement. The subject answers the question, "What is the author talking about?" and the complement answers the question, "What is the author saying about what he is talking about?"

Concerning Ecclesiastes: The subject is **understanding life is vanity**, meaning all accomplishments are futile, worthless, *striving after wind*.

Question: If all is vanity, then telling people *all is vanity* is also vanity, so why do it?

Answer: Because there is one thing that is not vanity, but you can only understand that when you understand everything else is. Only after we understand that all accomplishments have no value can we realize that all there is to do is enjoy our fleeting life, even though that also has no value because it ends in nothing. However, we are not the only ones who exist. An eternal God [אֱלֹהִים (*Elohim*)] exists. And since He is eternal, there is one, and only one, action that has value. The only thing that can connect us to the eternal, and therefore raise our actions beyond vanity, is to *fear God and keep His commandments*. That is *the conclusion, when all has been heard* (12:13). It is valuable for its own sake, not because we will be comforted by it, profit from it, or be rewarded for it, in this life or the next. It is valuable simply because God is God. Therefore, to *fear God and keep His commandments* is the only act in life that is not vanity and striving after wind. The four magnificent living creatures around the throne of God *do not cease to say*, "HOLY, HOLY, HOLY IS THE LORD GOD, THE ALMIGHTY" (Isaiah 6:3; Revelation 4:8), not because they are comforted by it, profit from it, or are rewarded for it, but simply because God is God.

The Theme of Ecclesiastes

Subject: **Understanding life is vanity,**

Complement: **allows us to fear God and keep His commandments, as an end in itself.**

Outline

Ecclesiastes is in two basic sections. Other than that, its divisions follow the traditional chapters.

I. All Accomplishments Are Futility (1:14, 17; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6, 16; 6:9)

Chapters 1 and 2, The Theme Demonstrated

Chapter 3, God's Providence over Life

Chapters 4 and 5, The Futility of Life's Circumstances

Chapter 6, The Futility of Wealth

II. Wisdom Is Helpful for Living with Futility (7:6, 15; 8:10, 14; 11:8)

Chapter 7, Futility because of Human Sin

Chapter 8, Futility because of Human Ignorance

Chapter 9, The Futility of Human Accomplishments

Chapter 10, The Futility of Future Plans

Chapter 11, The Futility of Work

Chapter 12, Conclusions

Commentary

I. All Accomplishments Are Futility — Chapters 1–6

Chapters 1 and 2, The Theme Demonstrated

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 illustrates **Concept #1, A Basic Conclusion: All of life under the sun, for everyone who lives, has ever lived, or will ever live, accomplishes absolutely nothing.**

Verses 1-2, The first two verses establish Solomon as the author and vanity as the subject of the book. The word for “vanity” is the Hebrew word הֶבֶל (*hevel*) for “meaningless” or “futile,” and Solomon uses it five times in verse two. Life's accomplishments are like eating potato chips. The first chip is fantastic. Then you need to eat more and more chips for the same satisfaction. By the time you get to the bottom of the bag, you are eating handfuls to get the same pleasure as the first chip. When the bag is empty, you think, “Why did I do that !?!” Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

Verse 3, The question. *What advantage does man have in all his work...?* introduces the paragraph showing the answer to be, “nothing.” The phrase *under the sun* תַּחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ (*tachath shemesh*) is used 29 times and only in Ecclesiastes. It is a figure of speech known as a metonymy. The “New Oxford American Dictionary” says it is “the substitution of the name of an attribute or adjunct for that of the thing meant, for example *suit* for *business executive*, or *the track* for *horse racing*.” For Solomon, it is a reference to life on earth, and an introduction to the eight examples of futility he is about to give.

Verse 4, The **first futility** is that of human existence resulting in human genealogy. Generations come and go, and it makes no difference. The earth, and only the earth, *remains forever*.

Verses 5-7, Here Solomon points out the **second, third and fourth futilities**, those of the ceaseless, circular patterns of nature. The sun, the wind, and the water movements of nature never arrive at any

goal or purpose, nor do they accomplish anything. [We might note, it is interesting that Solomon was aware of these circular patterns. These are cycles of nature that science did not realize until centuries later.] As time goes on, science creates physical laws to define the actions of the earth, but they cannot, by observing the earth, tell us about the origin, purpose, destiny, or significance of any of it. *All things are wearisome* (verse 8).

Verse 8, Next, Solomon uses two of the human senses to give us **futilities five and six**. No matter how much the eye sees, or the ear hears, it is not satisfied. If we see something we consider beautiful, we never think, “Well, I don’t ever need to see that again.” Suppose we hear some music we really enjoy. We never think, “My hearing is full, I don’t ever need to hear that song again.” Seeing things and hearing things (like the achievements of all our five senses) accomplish nothing.

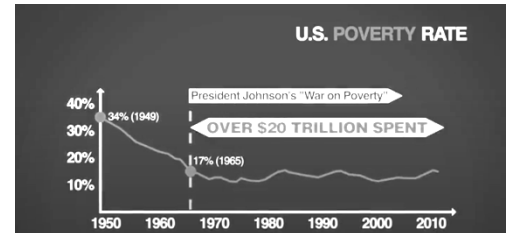
Verses 9-10, The **seventh futility** is human creativity. Solomon says, *that which has been done is that which will be done*. We might say, “Wait a minute, what about planes, trains, and automobiles? What about phones, pads, computers, and going to the moon?” Of course, Solomon was aware of human creativity. He built the temple and his own palace in Jerusalem. He also made elaborate gardens and parks with fruit trees and water pools (2:4-7). But neither his inventions nor ours will enable us to break out of vanity and futility into meaning and purpose. Solomon may have in mind other wealthy monarchs who built things like he did. If he knew about our modern inventions, he might have put it differently, but his conclusion would be the same.

What Solomon did, that was different than all the other wealthy monarchs all over the world all through history, was write the Book of Ecclesiastes. What Solomon did, that was new, is to recognize that nothing is new. What is true in nature, activity without meaning or purpose, is also true of human creativity. Human creativity itself is not new, and it provides no value, meaning, or accomplishment that extends beyond the grave. Of course, nature and human creativity can glorify God, but Solomon’s comments are only about the value of nature to itself and the creativity of humans to themselves. For nature and humanity, life is like the punishment in a prison camp where a prisoner is told to move a pile of bricks from one place to another. When he is finished, the prisoner is told to move them back where they were.

Verse 11, Then Solomon gives us an **eighth futility**, remembering the past and future. Most people’s first response is to disagree with the comment, that there is *no remembrance of earlier things* or *of the later things which will occur*. They will say, “I remember Martin Luther and Abraham Lincoln and the invention of cars and airplanes.” Actually, we remember things which are written and preserved for us about key historical figures and events. But that is an extremely tiny percent of the events that have occurred in the past or will occur in the future.

This is a proverbial statement, and proverbs are statements of wisdom, what is usually true most of the time. There are always exceptions to proverbs, but usually, most of the time, there is *no remembrance of earlier things* or *of the later things which will occur*. For example, you probably don’t remember your great-grandparents, and your great-grandchildren will not remember you. My grandfather created unique buildings to house his equipment. I create unique buildings (woodsheds) to house the firewood I cut and split. My grandchildren have no knowledge of my grandfather’s creativity and my great-grandchildren will know nothing of my creativity. The prominent figures and inventions of history that are remembered would be .000... (and a whole lot of 0s) % of the number of people and creative ideas that have occurred. Every human is creative in some ways, but for almost all of us, almost all of the time, there is *no remembrance of earlier things* or *of the later things which will occur*.

Verses 12-15, In this paragraph, Solomon tells us about his unique advantage in determining and communicating his theme. First, he was *king over Israel in Jerusalem* at a time of peace and prosperity. Second, he made it his goal to set his *mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven*. He also said it is (literally) *a bad job to be occupied with*. Verse 15 is difficult. *What is crooked [wrong or perverted] cannot be straightened [arranged or reestablished] and what is lacking [or deficient] cannot be counted [or measured, as in a money transaction]*. The present and future solutions will not fix the wrongs of the past. This is exactly the opposite of the secular utopians and the Christian kingdom-builders. They believe we can straighten what is crooked, but Solomon says, “No, you can’t.” For example, the war on drugs, the war on poverty, and the war on prejudice have not straightened out anything. The American government has put over \$20 trillion into reducing poverty since Lyndon Johnson started the “War on Poverty” in 1965, and we have not changed the poverty rate at all (stats and chart from Prager University). *What is crooked cannot be straightened*.



Verses 16-18, Next, Solomon demonstrated the futility of wisdom. He said, “*I have magnified and increased wisdom more than all who were over Jerusalem before me.*” The author of 1 Kings gives us some details about Solomon’s wisdom:

- **1 Kings 4:30-34,** *Solomon’s wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the sons of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt... He also spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs were 1,005. He spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon even to the hyssop that grows on the wall; he spoke also of animals and birds and creeping things and fish. Men came from all peoples to hear the wisdom of Solomon, from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom.*

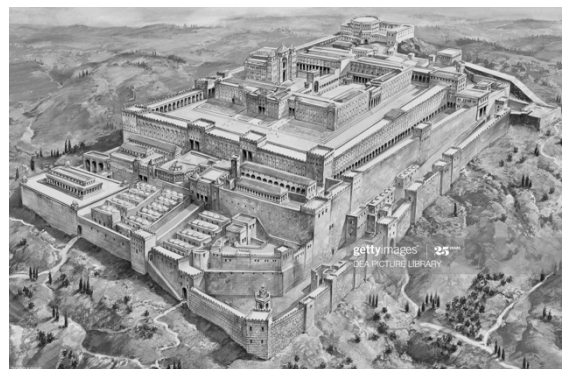
Solomon was not boasting about his wisdom or even claiming that it gave him an advantage. Actually, he discovered that there is no hope in wisdom itself. He equated it with madness and foolishness, concluding his wisdom was only a source of *grief* and *pain*. The reason is, the more you know, the more you understand that everything is vanity, futility, and *striving after wind*.

Chapter 2

Ecclesiastes 2:1-23 Illustrates Concept #1, A Basic Conclusion: All of life under the sun, for everyone who lives, has ever lived, or will ever live, accomplishes absolutely nothing.

Verses 1-8, Here, Solomon lists 14 different ways he tested wisdom with pleasure:

1. wine (verse 3)
2. vineyards (verse 4)
3. gardens (verse 5)
4. parks (verse 5)
5. fruit trees (verse 5)
6. ponds of water (verse 6)
7. male, female, and homeborn slaves (verse 7)
8. flocks (verse 7)
9. herds (verse 7)
10. silver (verse 8)
11. gold (verse 8)
12. the treasure of kings (verse 8)
13. male and female singers (verse 8)
14. the pleasures of men—many [300 (1 Kings 11:3)] concubines (verse 8)



[Drawing of Solomon’s temple from gettyimages.com]

- **1 Kings 10:18-21**, *Moreover, the king made a great throne of ivory and overlaid it with refined gold. There were six steps to the throne and a round top to the throne at its rear, and arms on each side of the seat, and two lions standing beside the arms. Twelve lions were standing there on the six steps on the one side and on the other; nothing like it was made for any other kingdom. All King Solomon's drinking vessels were of gold, and all the vessels of the house of the forest of Lebanon were of pure gold. None was of silver; it was not considered valuable in the days of Solomon.*

Verses 9-11, After his list of accomplishments, Solomon adds three basic observations:

- (1) His wisdom stood by him
 - (2) His heart was pleased, and this was his only reward, and
 - (3) All of it was *vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun*
- **1 Kings 4:22-23 and 26-27**, *Solomon's provision for one day was thirty kors [187.5 bushels or 6.6 cubic meters] of fine flour and sixty kors [375 bushels or 13.2 cubic meters] of meal, ten fat oxen, twenty pasture-fed oxen, a hundred sheep besides deer, gazelles, roebucks, and fattened fowl...Solomon had 40,000 [one manuscript says 4,000] stalls of horses for his chariots, and 12,000 horsemen.*

[Remember, Joshua destroyed the chariots and hamstringed the horses, but Solomon used both.] *Those deputies [mentioned earlier] provided for King Solomon and all who came to King Solomon's table, each in his month; they left nothing lacking.*



[Drawing of Solomon welcoming the Queen of Sheba, from steemit.com]

Verses 12-17, Then Solomon compared the wise man to the fool and made four observations:

1. Neither can do anything except what has already been done.
2. The wise man has the advantage of thinking further into the future.
3. Both of them die.
4. There will be no lasting remembrance of either of them.

But in verse 12, he compares wisdom to both foolishness and madness. Wisdom is an understanding of the way things usually are most of the time, which allows us to see further down the road, *but the fool walks in darkness*. The word for *madness* (in verse 12) “stresses the irrational aspect of insanity” [“The Word Study Old Testament”]. The point is that wisdom is better than foolishness because it allows us to enjoy the process and product of our labor, but in the end neither have an advantage over insanity.

Verses 18-23, Solomon follows this with the realization that he will leave all he has accomplished *to the man who will come after him*, who might be a wise man or a fool. Then he gives an interesting principle:

Verse 21, *When there is a man who has labored with wisdom, knowledge and skill, then he gives his legacy to one who has not labored with them. This too is vanity and a great evil.*

Although he applies it to his heir, the principle is, it is *a great evil* when people, who work hard with wisdom, are forced to give what they earn to those who do not work and are not wise. These

thoughts brought Solomon to saying *his task is painful and grievous; even at night his mind does not rest.*

Verses 24-26 Illustrate Concept #2, An Intermediate Conclusion: the best we can do, is enjoy the process of our work and the fruits of our labor, during our few, futile years, under the sun.

At the end of this first section of the book, Solomon turns his thoughts toward God. In the midst of all this futility, Solomon does not forget God. His comments here imply three principles:

1. The capacity to tell yourself that your labor is good comes from *the hand of God.*
2. A person cannot have enjoyment without God.
3. The person who is good in God's sight will have wisdom and joy, unavailable to the sinner.

Chapter 3, God's Providence over Life

Ecclesiastes 3:1-11 illustrates Concept #1, A basic conclusion: All of life under the sun, for everyone who lives, has ever lived, or will ever live, accomplishes absolutely nothing.

Verse 1, Verse 1 is not a complete sentence. It literally reads, *To every time and time to every delight* [NASB "event," KJV "purpose"] *under the heavens....* The Hebrew word translated *event* (NASB) or *purpose* (KJV) is *חֶפֶז* (*chephets*), the common word translated *desire* or *delight* virtually all of the time. [For example, Ecclesiastes 8:6 reads, *For there is a proper time and procedure for every delight.*] There is no justification for translating it *event* or *purpose*. Solomon is saying there are things we delight in. But they are negated by someone who delights in the opposite things, or a time when we delight in the opposite things, thus negating any accomplishment anyone delights in. There are two different words for "time." Most likely the idea is, *to every agreed upon time and to every appointment time.*

There are two common misinterpretations of this phrase:

1. The NASB translation, *There is an appointed time*, is unjustified since it seems to imply that the point of the list is that these are things predestined by God. They are, of course, and Solomon would not deny that, but God's predestination is not his point here.
2. Another common misinterpretation is that there is an appropriate time for everything. But whether or not these things are appropriate is never suggested by the context. Solomon's point is about futility, not what is appropriate.

His point is consistent with his theme of the book. Solomon is saying that all these things negate the value of each other, and therefore accomplish nothing. They are only futility, vanity, striving after wind.

Verses 2-8, Then Solomon gives a list of 14 life-events. Sometimes he starts with what is good, and sometimes he starts with what is bad (or our perspective of good and bad). Therefore, he is not talking about what is good or bad or what becomes good or bad. His point is that these things are temporary and cancel out the significance of each other. There is *a time to*, implies a wisdom or understanding of what is appropriate. But that understanding (delight or beauty) is futile because it is negated by another understanding. For example: death makes birth futile, uprooting makes planting futile, killing makes healing futile, ... and so forth.

Verses 9-11, Solomon sums up his list with the rhetorical question: *What profit [or advantage] is there to the worker from that in which he toils?* The implied answer is, nothing. The *task* [or *effort*] which God has given us only occupies our time, it does not yield any profit or advantage. Then he makes three observations:

- (1) *He has made everything appropriate* [literally *beautiful*, translated *fitting* in 5:18] *in its time*. Even though we cannot profit from it, God has arranged things in such a way that there is a right time for everything He has created.
- (2) *He has also set eternity in their heart*. We humans have an eternal perspective, but it is only frustrating. We can think about an afterlife, but we cannot know anything about it, or even if it exists. Romans 1 and 2 tell us that we can know about God and morality through creation and our conscience. But natural revelation cannot get us to the realization of an afterlife. Only the special revelation of God recorded in Scripture gets us to an afterlife perspective. And Solomon does not take that into consideration in Ecclesiastes.
- (3) *Yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end*. Our eternal perspective is only frustrating, since our knowledge of the eternal is only thinkable, not actual. Our eternal thoughts also tempt us to wonder what God is doing, especially in our own lives. But those thoughts are only futility, vanity, striving after wind (a concept repeated in 8:17 and 11:5).

Verses 12-13 illustrate Concept #2, An intermediate conclusion: the best we can do, is enjoy the process of our work and the fruits of our labor, during our few, futile years, under the sun.

Since nothing man accomplishes is profitable, and he can only observe the beauty God has established in creation, and he can learn nothing about the afterlife, his only option is to enjoy this life. This is also vanity, but it is the best he can do with his futile accomplishments. Solomon gives this suggestion repeatedly (2:24; 5:18-19; 8:15). Possibly the best way to translate of 3:13 is to see it as a conditional sentence: “If any man eats and drinks and finds satisfaction in all his toil, it is a gift of God” (Christian D. Ginsburg; *The Song of Songs and Coheleth*, pp. 311-2, included in BKC).

Verses 14-15 illustrate Concept #3, The final conclusion: Fear God and keep His commandments, not because that will do something for us, but because there is nothing else to do that has any value.

Next, Solomon makes four observations about the work of God:

- (1) *Everything God does will remain forever*. This does not mean God always preserves everything He has created. For example, God created the heavens and the earth. But the *heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up* (2 Peter 3:10). However, although God’s specific creations are not necessarily eternal, everything God does is connected to His eternal plan, which *will remain forever*.
- (2) *There is nothing to add to it and there is nothing to take from it*. We cannot add anything to what God does. He might use us to do what He is doing, but any attempt to add to or take away from what He is doing is vanity and striving after wind.
- (3) *God has so worked that men should fear Him*. The fear of God is the beginning of both knowledge and wisdom (Proverbs 1:7; 9:10; Psalm 111:10). When all is said and done, everyone will fear God (Isaiah 45:23; Romans 14:11; Philippians 2:10).
- (4) *God seeks what has passed by*. God has created nature to operate in endless cycle (as in 3:1).

Verses 16-22 conclude with Concept #2, An intermediate conclusion: the best we can do, is enjoy the process of our work and the fruits of our labor, during our few, futile years under the sun.

Verses 16-17, Solomon also gives a principle of judgment that is emphasized throughout the Bible—God will judge both the wicked and the righteous. First, he observes that sin (*wickedness*) is everywhere, even in the places that should display justice (4:1) and righteousness (8:14). But God will judge *both the righteous man and the wicked man* (8:6). When man is good, he reflects the glory of God, and when man is wicked, God’s judgment reflects the glory of God. Either way, God gets

the glory. Ultimately, all the wicked are judged at the Great White Throne (Revelation 20:11-15). But those who have become positionally righteous by receiving Christ (John 1:12; 2 Corinthians 5:2) will also be judged at the Judgment Seat of Christ (1 Corinthians 3:11-15; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Matthew 25:34; Revelation 20:4-6). Solomon ends this paragraph with the statement, *for a time for every matter and for every deed is there*. The word translated *matter* is *חֶפְזִים* (*chephets*), the same word meaning *desire* or *delight*, as in 3:1. Since God's judgment is here connected to *חֶפְזִים* (*chephets*), it may be saying God will also judge our delights and desires.

Verses 18-22, Solomon then talks to himself (literally, *I said to my heart*) and concludes that the only difference between man and beasts is that man is capable of wickedness and righteousness, both of which are judged by God. But as to life on earth, both equally die and turn back to dust. Then (in verse 21) Solomon makes an interesting observation. *Who knows that the breath [רוּחַ (ruach), also the common word for spirit] of man ascends upward and the breath of the beast descends downward to the earth?* Natural revelation, what we can know from nature and our conscience (Romans 1 and 2) tells us there is an eternal God of justice, and our sin is without excuse. But (as discussed in 3:9-11) there is no way to conclude anything about the afterlife, or even if there is an afterlife. Life after death and eternal life cannot be known from our life on earth under the sun. We can only know those things from the special revelation of God, recorded in the Bible. Solomon concludes, what we call chapter 3, with **Concept #2**.

Chapters 4 and 5, The Futility of Life's Circumstances

Chapter 4, verses 1-12, continues the illustrations of Concept #2, An intermediate conclusion: the best we can do, is enjoy the process of our work and the fruits of our labor, during our few, futile years under the sun.

Verses 1-3 begin this section observing *the tears of the oppressed*, with the understanding that most people cannot achieve **Concept #2**, the enjoyment of the process or product of their work. Since this life under the sun is the only life we can know about, and most people suffer in this life, Solomon concludes about both the living and the dead, *better off than both of them is the one who never existed*.

There is actually a modern secular theory that aligns with that conclusion, it is called "Antinatalism." David Benatar, a professor of philosophy and head of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Cape Town in South Africa, represents this idea. In 2006, he published a book entitled "Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence." Here is what he said about his book:

The central idea of this book is that coming into existence is always a serious harm. That idea will be defended at length, but the basic insight is quite simple: Although the good things in one's life make it go better than it otherwise would have gone, one could not have been deprived by their absence if one had not existed. Those who never exist cannot be deprived. However, by coming into existence one does suffer quite serious harms that could not have befallen one had one not come into existence.

This is one of the ideas shared by Job:

- **Job 3:1-4**, *Afterward Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. And Job said, "Let the day perish on which I was to be born, And the night which said, 'A boy is conceived.' May that day be darkness; let not God above care for it, nor light shine on it."*
- **Job 3:11 and 16**, *"Why did I not die at birth, come forth from the womb and expire? ... Or like a miscarriage which is discarded, I would not be, as infants that never saw light."*
- **Job 14:1**, *"Man, who is born of woman, is short-lived and full of turmoil."*

The difference between Job and Solomon, and Professor Benatar, is that Benatar is an atheist, so he has no **ultimate conclusion: we should fear God and keep His commandments**. He can only agree with Solomon's **intermediate conclusion**, and the problem with that is most people cannot get there. Without God, Benatar can also only make the conclusions of humanism, derived from evolution. With no eternal God, there is no hope and hence no value in human suffering. And the only way to eliminate it is to eliminate existence.

But there is a logical problem with Benatar's Antinatalism. Since non-existence does not exist, it is rather strange to talk about it as if it is valuable. If it is better to not exist, then it is better for everyone to not exist. Which means (without God) there would be no one existing to ask the question about the value of existence. If there is no God, how can we make value judgments about the non-existing state of non-existence, since no one exists there to make the judgments?

An Application: There are two kinds of atheists. The most prominent are just God-haters. They will say something like, "A good, loving, sovereign God would not allow the suffering we see in the world." The implication is, "If God exists, He is bad, not loving, or not sovereign." The other, truer, atheists are like Professor Benatar. They are anti-supernaturalists, who can only believe we evolved into a state of suffering naturally. The only possible evaluation of evolution is that it is unfortunate that we evolved into existence because existence includes inevitable suffering.

Verses 4-6, Then Solomon gives us an observation most hard-working and successful people will not like to hear. He said, *every labor* [it is the word for *trouble, labor* or *toil*] *and every skill* [skilled or professional labor] *which is done is the result of rivalry* [or *jealousy*] *between a man and his neighbor*. Of course, Solomon's proverbial statements are usually true most of the time, not always true all of the time. Nonetheless, if there are exceptions, they are rare. And in case you are thinking you are an exception, probably not!

The fool who *folds his hands and consumes his own flesh* (in verse 5) is not resting, he is just lazy. Solomon uses this same folding-hands illustration to depict laziness in Proverbs 6:10 and 24:33.

The interpretation difficulty is in verse 6, where *One hand full of rest* [or *quiet*] *is better than two fists full of labor and* [which we have already learned from verse 4 is] *striving after wind*. So, the *hand full of rest* (which is a good thing) probably does not represent the fool who *folds his hands* in verse 5 (which is a bad thing). To put verse 6 mathematically: Labor = 0, laziness = -1, rest from labor is +1. Therefore, verse 6 says $1 \times 1 = 1$ [*one hand full of rest*] is better than $2 \times 0 = 0$ [*two fists full of labor*]. Even the process of the labor of verse 4 is vanity (= 0) because it is based in jealousy, but *rest* from that labor at least has short-term, this life, value (+1).

Verses 7-8, Then Solomon gives an example of this *vanity under the sun*, the one who has no heir and never asks himself *for whom am I laboring and depriving myself of pleasure?* The reason depriving himself of pleasure is bad is because of the **intermediate conclusion: the best we can do, is enjoy the process of our work and the fruits of our labor, during our few, futile years under the sun**. We see this with workaholics who are alienating their families while thinking, or saying, they are doing it for their families.

Verses 9-12, *Two are better than one and a chord of three* [strands] *is not quickly torn apart*. Here we see the value of one or two close friends. The value is not in many friends but in one or two. Solomon gives four reasons for their value:

- (1) *Because they have a good return for their labor*—friends working together can accomplish more.
- (2) *If either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion*—friends can help each other's weakness.

- (3) *If two lie down together they keep warm*—friends can meet each other’s needs.
 (4) *If one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him*—friends can better resist attacks.

Verses 13-16 illustrate **Concept #1, A basic conclusion: All of life under the sun, for everyone who lives, has ever lived, or will ever live, accomplishes absolutely nothing.** The principle is in verse 13, *A poor yet wise lad is better than an old and foolish king who no longer knows how to receive instruction.* The story, which is probably not a real situation, is about a poor boy who, for some unknown reason, goes to prison and then comes out of prison to become king (examples would be Vladimir Lenin and Nelson Mandela). But then he becomes old and *no longer knows how to receive instruction*, so he is replaced by a second lad. But he, too, will fall into disfavor *and even the ones who will come later will not be happy with him, for this too is vanity and striving after wind.*

Chapter 5, verses 1-7 illustrate **Concept #3, The final conclusion: Fear God and keep His commandments, not because that will do something for us, but because there is nothing else to do, that has any value.**

Verses 1-7 have an unusual prayer principle, **don’t talk too much.** This is illustrated in three ways:

- **First** is the one who goes into the house of God (the temple Solomon built as a house of prayer) to talk to God. What he should do is go into the house of God to listen to the Word of God.
- **Second** is one who believes he comes to God, or hears from God, through a *dream* (verse 3). What exactly the dream represents is unclear, but it is contrasted with the one who will *draw near to listen* and paralleled with *the voice of a fool [who comes to God] through many words.* The point is, *For in many dreams and in many words there is emptiness. Rather, fear God* (verse 7).
- **Third** is the more common warning about making vows. If you make a vow, then pay your vow, but Jesus and James say to *make no oath at all* (Numbers 30:2; Psalm 50:14; 66:13-14; 76:11; Matthew 5:33-37; James 5:12). Here is Ryrie’s application:
 Do not make a rash or ill-considered bargain with the Lord, nor twist a wish into a demanding prayer (under the guise of “vision” or “faith”). [Study Bible note of Ecclesiastes 5:2]

Verses 8-20 illustrate **Concept #2, the intermediate conclusion: The best we can do, is enjoy the process of our work and the fruits of our labor, during our few, futile years under the sun.**

Verses 8-9, This paragraph, though a bit hard to translate, makes the point that we should not be surprised by the corruption of public officials. Three kinds of corruption are mentioned:

- (1) oppression of the poor
- (2) denial of justice
- (3) denial of righteousness

All the officials take something for themselves, *even the king is served by the fields* [NET Bible].

Verses 10-17, In this paragraph, Solomon makes six observations about the futility of accumulating wealth:

- (1) Verse 10, *he who loves money (literally silver) will not be satisfied (or filled).*
 A 2010 study out of Princeton University found that there is a correlation between happiness and wealth, to a point of about \$75,000 per year. When people make more than \$75,000 a year, their happiness does not increase... [a USA statistic (www.cnbc.com).]
- (2) Verse 11, *When good things increase, those who consume them increase.* It is a part of the nature of wealth; as it increases, so do those who consume (literally *eat*) them. The meaning of the last phrase of the verse is debated. *What is the advantage to their owners except to look on?* might

mean the owner is helpless and can only watch his wealth be consumed, or it can mean that he has to constantly keep an eye on his wealth.

- (3) Verse 12 makes a contrast between *the sleep of the working man* [which] *is pleasant* [and] *the full stomach of the rich man* [which] *does not allow him to sleep*, apparently because he is in constant fear of losing his wealth to a growing number of people who desire it (via theft, false friends, fraud, etc.).
- (4) Verses 13-14 tell us about *grievous evil* [the common Hebrew word רָעָה (*ra*) can mean *unfortunate, catastrophic* or *evil*]. This evil is wealth being *horded* [or *guarded* or *kept for the owners thereof* (KJV)]. Horded wealth always has the danger of being lost in an unwise, unfortunate, or evil investment.
- (5) Verses 15-16 argue that even if a man's wealth is not lost, he cannot take it with him in death.
- (6) Verse 17 adds, *Throughout his life he also eats in darkness with great vexation, sickness and anger*. The word NASB translates *vexation* is usually translated *anger*, their word for *anger* here is usually translated *wrath*, and the word חָלִי (*chali*) is almost always translated *sickness*. Solomon may be describing himself here, since he died 10 years younger than David or Saul.

Verses 18-20, Here we have another rendering of Solomon's **Concept #2**. In this case, he emphasizes two temporary enjoyments:

- (1) To eat and drink and
- (2) To enjoy our labor (sometimes translated *toil* or *trouble*)

In verse 20, Solomon gives a reason why these futile things of eating, drinking, and laboring are valuable, even though vanity. Because he will not think about his uselessness or that it will all end in his death, *because God keeps him occupied with the gladness of his heart*.

Chapter 6, The Futility of Wealth

Chapter 6 continues the illustrations of Concept #1, A basic conclusion: All of life under the sun, for everyone who lives, has ever lived, or will ever live, accomplishes absolutely nothing.

Verses 1-6, The interpretive issue in this paragraph is whether verses 1 and 2 are the first example of, or in contrast to, verses 3-6. In verses 1 and 2, Solomon does not specify what it means that a stranger or foreigner enjoys the *riches and wealth and honor* that God has given a wealthy man. Possibly the wealthy man is sick, or loses it all through robbery, or a lawsuit, or an unwise investment. At any rate, *God has given him riches and wealth and honor*, and *God has not empowered him to eat from them*. Solomon sees both the wealth and the inability to enjoy the wealth as an act of God.

An Application: The answer to the question, "Which of the circumstances in my life came from God?" seems to be "All of them" (see 7:14).

We might also notice that the description of the wealthy man whose *soul lacks nothing* (in 6:2a) fits almost everyone in the western, or "first-world" countries today. In verses 3-6, Solomon uses two hyperbolic statements—a man who fathers a hundred children and a man who lives a thousand years twice. If the man whose *soul lacks nothing of all that he desires* (in verse 2) is also meant to be a hyperbolic description, then the paragraph has three hyperbolas that make one point—the miscarriage is *better off than he*. The idea is, the one whose soul lacks nothing, the one who fathers a hundred children, and the one who lives two thousand years and the miscarriage, all end up in the grave. The difference is, the miscarriage does not miss the wealth or experience pain or loss. So *better the miscarriage than he*.

Verses 7-9, Since the word translated *appetite* by the NASB and the KJV is the common word for *soul*, verse 7 probably means that all our labor fills our mouth but not our soul. Verse 8 speaks of two people, a wise (presumably rich) man and a wise poor man, neither of which end up with an advantage over the fool. Verse 9 (literally) says *better the appearance of the eye than the walk of the soul*. Ryrie is probably correct when he says it means, “It is better to enjoy present good than to long for future delights” (Study Bible). Verse 9 has the last occurrence of the phrase *striving after wind* which dominates the first half of the book (1:14, 17; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6, 16; 6:9).

Verses 10-12, If we did not know that Solomon believed in God, this paragraph would sound like fatalism, a view often held by atheists, universalists, and deists. Fatalism says, “Whatever is going to happen is going to happen, all events are inevitable.” But since Solomon believes in predestination, all events are predestined by a sovereign, omnipotent, eternal God. So, the idea of this paragraph is that God is sovereign, and man is not.

- *Whatever exists has already been named* [in that it has been determined by God].
- *It is known* [by God] *what man is*
- *For he* [man] *cannot dispute with him* [God] *who is stronger than he is.*
- *For there are many words* [of man] *which increase futility* [in light of the sovereignty of God].

The reason for these statements is to tell us that pursuing our desires is vanity and striving after wind.

II. Wisdom Is Helpful for Living with Futility — Chapters 7–12

Chapter 7, Futility Because of Human Sin

Chapter 7 also illustrates **Concept #1, A basic conclusion: All of life under the sun, for everyone who lives, has ever lived, or will ever live, accomplishes absolutely nothing.**

Verses 1-4, The second half of the book begins with parables about suffering and death.

- Verse 1, *The day of one’s death is better than the day of one’s birth* because death ends suffering and futility, but death with *a good name, is better than a good ointment* while living.
- Verse 2, Going to a house of mourning plugs you into the reality of your impending death, whereas a house of feasting falsely gives the impression that it is valuable to not think about suffering and death.
- Verse 3, The condition of one’s *heart* (seat of desires) is more important than outward appearances.
- Verse 4, Similar to the meaning of verse 2, the wise are attracted to a house of mourning and fools are attracted to a house of pleasure (literally, *joy*).

Verses 5-12, Next, Solomon lists eight principles (as parables) about wisdom:

- Verse 5, Wisdom listens to the rebuke of a wise man.
- Verse 6, Wisdom avoids foolish laughter.
- Verse 7, Wisdom avoids bribes.
- Verse 8, Wisdom has patience to see how a matter ends.
- Verse 9, Wisdom avoids going quickly to anger.
- Verse 10, Wisdom does not look longingly at the past.
- Verse 11, Wisdom takes advantage of an inheritance and looks to pass on an inheritance.
- Verse 12, Wisdom comes from knowledge and, like money, it gives *protection* (literally *shade*).

Verses 13-14, These verses are about the sovereign work of God. God brings both prosperity and adversity into our lives, and *who is able to straighten what He has bent* (as in 1:15)?

Verses 15-22, These verses are about the value and limit of righteous living.

- Verse 15, Righteousness will not necessarily give you a longer life (as in Psalm 73).
- Verses 16-19, The interesting statement here is *Do not be excessively* [increase in number or multiply] *righteous and do not be overly* [more] *wise*. The meaning seems to be revealed in the next phrase: *Why should you ruin yourself?* The word *ruin* is to be *desolate* or *appalled*. Righteousness by itself, isolated from the fear of God, leads to legalism which defines righteousness with rules. When righteousness is pushed to legalism, it makes life *desolate*. Examples might (although not necessarily) include a monastery, a legalistic church, or segregated religious community. Although righteous legalistic rules [like, “don’t drink, smoke and chew, or go with girls who do”] can deliver a fool, they can also keep one from enjoying life, and Solomon said, that is the only thing you can do for yourself in life. Excessive wisdom also prevents enjoying life because wisdom reveals the vanity of life. On the other hand, unrighteousness and foolishness will cause you to *die before your time*. *The one who fears God comes forth with both of them*. Even though it has the danger of keeping one from enjoying life, *wisdom strengthens a wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city*.
- Verses 20-22, Righteousness has another problem, it is unattainable. *There is not a righteous man on earth...who never sins*. Solomon’s example is that every servant curses his master, and every master will curse someone else.

Verses 23-29, This paragraph is about the limitations of wisdom.

- Verses 23-24, Wisdom is always unattainable, *far off and exceedingly deep* (KJV).
- Verses 25-29, Wisdom is also unhelpful (*the evil of folly and the foolishness of madness*) in understanding the sin nature of men and women. Solomon’s conclusion in the matter is:
I am still seeking but have not found. I have found one man among a thousand, but I have not found a woman among all these.

I am amazed at the length commentators will go to try to explain away the most obvious meaning of this paragraph. Some say it is about how hard it is to find a wise and upright woman. Actually, Solomon said he has not found one, but he is still looking. Some say the woman represents a symbolic personification of folly. But Solomon is talking about people, not sinfulness as a concept.

Some say the Hebrew word אָדָם, (*adam*) is the generic word for mankind, not just males. True, sometimes (as in verse 29), but here Solomon uses it in contrast with the word אִשָּׁה (*ishshah*) for *woman*, a word which can only mean woman or wife. The statement, *I have found one man among a thousand, but I have not found a woman among all these*, is clearly a hyperbola, but since we do not know what specifics Solomon had in mind, to guess would be an unwarranted speculation. If Solomon thinks men are better, in some way, than women, they are not much better. Suffice it to say, Solomon did not have success applying his wisdom to understanding the nature of men or women. Notice, this is as much a statement of the limitations of his wisdom as it is about the nature of men and women. At any rate, his conclusion is,

*I have found only this, that God made men [אָדָם (*adam*)] upright, but they have sought out many devices.*

Chapter 8, Futility Because of Human Ignorance

Chapter 8:1-9 mostly illustrates **Concept #1, A basic conclusion: All of life under the sun, for everyone who lives, has ever lived, or will ever live, accomplishes absolutely nothing.** However, verse 12 illustrates **Concept #3** and verse 15 illustrates **Concept #2.**

Verses 1-5, After stating the value of wisdom for the one understanding life (literally, *it lights up his face*), Solomon applies it to obeying the government. The only government was a monarchy, so wisdom was applied to obeying the king and his commandments. This was not just because of wisdom, it was also an *oath before [or of] God*. It is a promise to obey governing authorities. [The only “civil disobedience” exception in the Bible is when the government tells you to disobey God (Acts 5:29).]

Verses 6-9, Next, Solomon gives some examples which illustrate that there are many unpleasant life-situations which cannot be avoided.

- Verses 6-7, *a man’s trouble is heavy upon him* and no one *can tell him what will happen*.
- Verses 8-9, *No man has authority:*
 - *to restrain the wind*
 - *over the day of death*
 - *in the time of war*
 - when someone else has *authority over another man to his hurt*

Verses 10-17, Here Solomon gives four reasons for his **intermediate** and his **ultimate** conclusions. His **intermediate conclusion** here stated as, *there is nothing good for a man under the sun except to eat and to drink and to be merry* (verse 15), and his **ultimate conclusion** here stated as *those who fear God* (verses 12-13). The four reasons are:

1. There is no justice for the wicked – verse 10
2. Delayed justice encourages crime – verse 11
3. Sinners can lengthen their lives – verse 12
4. It is impossible for man to figure out what God has done or what He is doing – verses 16-17

Chapter 9, The Futility of Human Accomplishments

Chapter 9 has two paragraphs. Notice the apparent antinomy. The first paragraph emphasizes the sovereignty of God over human accomplishments (the deeds of the righteous and the wise are *in the hand of God* – verse 1). The second paragraph emphasizes chance, *for time and chance overtake them all* – verse 11). Apparently, chance and the sovereignty of God are both true.

Chapter 9:1-10 illustrates Concept #2, the intermediate conclusion: the best we can do, is enjoy the process of our work and the fruits of our labor, during our few, futile years, under the sun.

Verses 1-10 emphasize God’s sovereignty over human accomplishments.

- Verse 1 tells us there is a sovereign, omnipotent, involved God. But man cannot know what God is doing, or what God has planned for his life. *Man does not know whether it will be love or hatred; anything awaits him* [better translated, *by all that is before him* (KJV)]. Notice how this is explained as chosen vs. not chosen in Malachi 1:1-3. Using the same words for love and hate, God says, *“I have loved Jacob; but I have hated Esau.”*
- Verses 2-6 tell us that the death of man negates any value to his accomplishments. Actually, man only has hope while he is alive, but he will not be alive very long.
- Verses 7-10 emphasize Solomon’s **intermediate conclusion**, here by saying, *eat your bread in happiness and drink your wine with a cheerful heart... Enjoy life with the woman whom you love all the days of your fleeting life*. Verse 7 includes the phrase *for God has already approved your works*, probably referring to the predestination of God, not the judgment of God, over man’s accomplishments.

Verses 11-18 illustrate Concept #1. A basic conclusion: All of life under the sun, for everyone who lives, has ever lived, or will ever live, accomplishes absolutely nothing.

- Verse 11 gives five examples where time and chance overcome human accomplishments:
 1. *race is not to the swift*
 2. *the battle is not to the warriors*
 3. *neither is bread to the wise*
 4. *nor wealth to the discerning*
 5. *nor favor to men of ability*
- Verse 12 tells us that everyone is subject to times of misfortune which man is unable to predict.
- Verses 13-18 tell the story of a poor but wise man who delivers his city from an aggressive great king. But nobody remembered the poor wise man. Therefore, Solomon concluded:
 - (1) Although, *wisdom is better than strength*, it makes no difference in the long run – verse 16.
 - (2) Quiet wisdom is better than the shouts of a ruler, but it makes no difference in the long run – verse 17.
 - (3) *Wisdom is better than weapons of war*, but it makes no difference in the long run, because *one sinner destroys much good*.

Chapter 10, The Futility of Future Plans

Chapter 10 illustrates Concept #1, A basic conclusion: All of life under the sun, for everyone who lives, has ever lived, or will ever live, accomplishes absolutely nothing. Chapter 10 lists proverbs which make the point that wisdom is valuable, but a little foolishness can destroy, wipe out and negate, great wisdom.

Verse 1, As something as small as a fly can destroy perfume, so a little foolishness can destroy wisdom.

Verse 2, Wisdom is compared to the right hand, usually the strongest hand, where most soldiers would carry their sword, whereas foolishness is compared to using the left or usually weakest hand. [And no, the right and left are not political positions.]

Verse 3, Everything a fool does, like just walking down the road, reveals his foolish heart.

Verse 4, A wise person will remain calm when the spirit of a governing official, say, a policeman or a judge, raises up against him, because keeping composure puts to rest the sin of a bad temper.

Verses 5-7, Government does not always function wisely. Leaders should be wealthy, because wisdom creates wealth, and fools should be slaves because they commit crimes and cannot pay their debts. Often, however, fools sit in high places of authority and those who should be leaders are treated like slaves.

Verses 8-11, Five examples of the potential futility of plans include:

1. If you plan to dig a pit, you may fall into it yourself, verse 8
2. If you plan to tear down a wall, you may get bit by a snake hiding in the wall, verse 8
3. If you plan to quarry stones, you may be hurt by the stones, verse 9
4. If you plan to split logs, you may overexert yourself, especially if your ax is dull, verses 9-10
5. If you plan to charm a snake, you may get bit by the snake, verse 11

Verses 12-15, The paragraph uses two different words for “fool” (one in verse 12 and one in verse 14) and three different words for foolishness (in verse 13). The main point is that a fool talks a lot,

but he has no idea how to accomplish his foolish ideas. *He does not even know how to go to a city, and the ways of a city are necessary for his ideas to succeed.*

Verses 16-20, The paragraph is about government. When a government is irresponsible and its leaders are in it for their own wealth and pleasure, the whole land suffers. When a government is responsible, the whole land is blessed. A bad government will be characterized by:

- Irresponsibility, *Through indolence the rafters sag, and through slackness the house leaks,* verse 18
- A focus on pleasure, *Men prepare a meal for enjoyment, and wine makes life merry,* verse 19
- A focus on money, *money is the answer to everything,* verse 19
- A limitation on free speech and criticism, *in your bedchamber do not curse a king,* verse 20

Chapter 11, The Futility of Work

Chapter 11 illustrates **Concept #2, the intermediate conclusion: the best we can do, is enjoy the process of our work and the fruits of our labor, during our few, futile years, under the sun.** However, he ends the chapter with thoughts about **Concept #3**

There are two paragraphs in chapter 11. Verses 1-6 give us some advice about successful work. Verses 7-10 tell us that our successful work has no value beyond the grave.

Verses 1-6 give us five principles for work and doing business:

- (1) Verse 1, Make some long-term investments.
- (2) Verse 2, Have investments in more than one project.
- (3) Verses 3-4, Realize that the random events of the natural world will impact your business, but do not let that stop you from doing business.
- (4) Verse 5, Know that the work of God will impact your business, but you can never know what God is doing (a principle repeated from 3:11 and 8:17).
- (5) Verse 6, Work diligently at whatever you do, because you do not know what work will prosper.

Don Glenn summarized this paragraph well:

Solomon urged people toward constant, diligent effort and prudent diversified investment of their energies and resources, recognizing that all is in God's sovereign control. [The Bible Knowledge Commentary.]

Verses 7-10 give us four principles about the perspective of work and doing business:

- (1) Verse 7, Life is good, while you are alive.
- (2) Verse 8, Live life, while focusing on the fact that you are going to die. Life without a focus on death means living in foolishness.
- (3) Verse 9, Live life, focused on your heart's desires while at the same time understanding that God will judge those things you do based on your heart's desires.
- (4) Verse 10, Avoid anger and evil in your youth, because youth is fleeting, and these habits will follow you to old age.

Chapter 12, Conclusions

Chapter 12 is about **Concept #3, The final conclusion: Fear God and keep His commandments, not because that will do something for us, but because there is nothing else to do, that has any value.**

Chapter 12 has four paragraphs. Verses 1-6 describe old age. Verses 7 and 8 give the conclusion about life and its accomplishments. Verses 9-12 give us Solomon's reason for writing. Verses 13 and 14 are the final conclusion, the only thing in life that is not vanity.

Verses 1-6, give us five reasons life is vanity because of old age:

1. Verse 1, When you are old, your former youthfulness will not comfort you.
2. Verse 2-4, When you are old, you will not be able to see well, hear well, or continue your work.
3. Verse 5, When you are old, you will be afraid of being hurt by your normal surroundings.
4. Verse 5, When you are old, your inevitable focus is on going to the grave, which is your *eternal home, while mourners go about in the street.*
5. Verse 6, When you are old, wealth and material things are no longer of value to you.

Verses 7 and 8 give us the final conclusion of life's desires and accomplishments.

Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it. "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher, "all is vanity!"

Verses 9-12 give us Solomon's life goals:

- Verse 9, to be *a wise man*
- Verse 9, to teach *the people knowledge*
- Verse 9, to have *pondered, searched out and arranged many proverbs*
- Verse 10, *to write words of truth correctly*
- Verse 11, to communicate wisdom from God, *given by one Shepherd*

But (in verse 12) he also added, *my son, be warned: the writing of many books is endless, and (literally) studying is wearing to the flesh.*

Verses 13-14 give us Solomon's final conclusion:

The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.

Observations:

- Fearing God and keeping His commandments is good, simply and exclusively because an omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent, just, eternal, sovereign, singular, infinite, true, holy, immutable, loving God exists.
- Fearing God and keeping His commandments is the basis upon which every person who ever lived on earth is judged.
- God brings everything that was ever done by humans into judgment, open or hidden, good or evil.

This concludes our study of the Book of Ecclesiastes