

ECCLESIASTES

Life and Death under the Sun

A Guide for Study and Reflection

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All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness. *2 Timothy 3:16*

CONTENTS

Introduction.....	4
Chapter 1.....	7
Chapter 2.....	12
Chapter 3:1-13.....	18
Chapter 3:14-22.....	23
Chapter 4.....	29
Chapter 5.....	34
Chapter 6.....	40
Chapter 7:1-14.....	46
Chapter 7:15-29.....	52
Chapter 8.....	59
Chapter 9:1-16.....	64
Chapter 9:17-10:11.....	70
Chapter 11.....	77
Chapter 12.....	80

ABBREVIATIONS

ESV. English Standard Version
KJV. King James Version
NIV. New International Version
NKJV. New King James Version
RSV. Revised Standard Version
WCF. Westminster Confession of Faith
WSC. Westminster Shorter Catechism

INTRODUCTION

The Book of Ecclesiastes contains the observations and reflections of a wise man who spent his life seeking to understand life “under the sun.” It has little to say about God. The word *God* is found only 25 times in the book’s 12 chapters, about two times per chapter. Ecclesiastes says next to nothing about the afterlife, repentance, sin, forgiveness, salvation, prayer, and other matters so prominent in the rest of the Bible. Why then is Ecclesiastes part of God-breathed Scripture?

I believe the book’s primary role in the body of inspired writings is to convince the reader that life “under the sun” (a phrase that occurs 29 times in Ecclesiastes and nowhere else in the Bible) is pointless, meaningless, frustrating, fleeting, and incomprehensible, so as to induce him to turn his attention to eternal things.

The author finds worldly ambition and striving to be “vanity,” that is, a vapor, here today and gone tomorrow. We cannot confidently plan or build for the future because we cannot know what will happen in the future. There is a time for everything, for the undoing of what we strive for as well as for success in our undertakings. Those times are known only to God. He does what he pleases, for weal or woe, and we cannot fathom his purposes or his times. What we can know is that our plans and accomplishments, whether successes or failures, are evanescent, gone as quickly as morning mist. And so are we, for all too soon we die and are forgotten. Whatever we have accomplished under the sun will dissipate and vanish away, and the world will remain the same.

The secularism of our age has rubbed off on Christians just as secularism rubbed off on Israelites three thousand years ago. We are too earthly minded. We are as prone to put our time and toil into bettering our life under the sun as are those who do not have the hope of eternal life. Whether it is growing our business or our professional standing, seeking fame and recognition from the world, pursuing knowledge for its own sake, or simply seeking to enjoy the good things of life to the full, we too pursue vanity.

Two thousand years ago the Apostle John warned:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever. (1 John 2:15-17, ESV)

John was speaking to Christians, but Ecclesiastes proclaimed a similar message to Israel a thousand years earlier.

In light of the vanity of life in this world under the sun, how should we then live? The best course to follow during our brief life under the sun is to enjoy the basic pleasures of life: food, drink, life with our spouse, the warm sunshine—all before old age and its infirmities come upon us, and then death.

The author of Ecclesiastes spends twelve chapters seeking to convince the reader that devoting one's time and effort to the things of this life is futile and meaningless. He ends his book with an admonishment: that, while enjoying the basic pleasures of our very brief lives, we must fear God and keep his commandments, for He will bring everything to judgment after we cease to walk under the sun.

Ecclesiastes is thus a real *preparatio evangelica*, a paving of the way for turning to the Son of Man, “that whosoever believes on him may have *everlasting life*” (John 3:15, emphasis added), life that is not futile, meaningless, and bound to pass away. The person who has no time for religion needs to read this book and take its message to heart.

Authorship. The author doesn't tell us his name. He calls himself the Preacher (ESV, RSV) or Teacher (NIV, NRSV) or Speaker (Revised English Bible)—Hebrew *Qoheleth*. That tells us what he intended to do in writing Ecclesiastes, but doesn't identify him personally.

Some Bible students think he was Solomon. The Preacher says he was the “son of David, king in Jerusalem”; and such was Solomon.¹ He says in 1:16, “I said in my heart, “I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me.” Solomon was renowned for his wisdom. He goes on in chapter 2 to say that he was richer than all who were before him in Jerusalem, and that he gathered silver and gold from kings and provinces. He tells us he is the author or collector of many proverbs (wise sayings)—chapter 10 of Ecclesiastes is entirely a collection of proverbs—and we know that Solomon collected and published proverbs. (Proverbs 1:1, 25:1).

Some commentators think all that is enough to identify the Preacher as King Solomon; nevertheless, other scholars raise doubts that Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes. The term “son of David” is sufficiently elastic to refer to any descendant of David and not just to one of his immediate offspring. Moreover, the Preacher refers twice to all who were in Jerusalem before him, clearly referring to kings (1:16, 29). Only David ruled as king in Jerusalem before Solomon; the term “all” cannot refer to just

¹ In 1:12 the Preacher states that he was “king over *Israel* in Jerusalem.” Only David and Solomon were kings over the whole nation of Israel in Jerusalem. King Saul was king over Israel, but he ruled from Gibeah, not Jerusalem. After Solomon died, the northern and eastern tribes revolted from Solomon's son Rehoboam and chose a king not of David's line. They took the name *Israel*, leaving Rehoboam and his descendants to rule over the kingdom of *Judah*, not *Israel*.

one man. Finally, these scholars note that the Hebrew of Ecclesiastes is unusual, more like the Hebrew of the second or third century BC than the Hebrew of the age of Solomon, who reigned in 1000 BC².

We are left with the fact that the Preacher was a king of David's line, but I don't think we can identify him by name. And when it comes down to it, the author's identity is not really important for understanding Ecclesiastes.

Form and Purpose. Ecclesiastes presents the findings of the Preacher's efforts to make sense of life in this world. He tells us of his quest in 1:13:

I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven.

He relates the various activities he undertook and gives us the conclusions of his search. He also tells the reader what he or she should do, that is, he tells the reader how to live in the light of his findings.

Bible students consider Ecclesiastes a part of the Bible's wisdom literature, and it truly is such. Wisdom is being able to evaluate one's current situation and to know what to do in it; it is *savoir faire* in the literal sense of the French words. Providing such wisdom is what the author (certainly the divine Author) intends to do in his book. Ecclesiastes is not simply an account of the Preacher's search and ruminations on his experiences; it is intended for his readers, for us. Like all Scripture, Ecclesiastes

is breathed out by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 3:16

² Think of the way the English language has evolved from the Middle English of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* to the English of Shakespeare and the King James Bible to the English of the 21st century, all over about the same length of time as the centuries between Solomon and the second century BC.

ECCLESIASTES

Chapter 1

Questions for Thought, Discussion, and Reflection

1. The phrase, “all is vanity,” occurs many times in Ecclesiastes. What does the Preacher mean by *vanity*? It may help to read these verses in several English translations. You can access many English translations at www.biblegateway.com.
2. The Hebrew word translated *vanity* in the ESV literally means *vapor*. Does that help in understanding *vanity*? What does *vapor* suggest about the meaning of *vanity*?
3. What does the phrase “under the sun” tell us about the scope of the Preacher’s reflections and meditations?
4. The Preacher cites several observations to illustrate how “all is vanity” “under the sun.” How do his observations reinforce his conclusion?
5. The Preacher applies all his wisdom, which he says was more than all the wisdom of all who went before him, to understanding what goes on “under the sun.” What does he conclude about his search (vs. 13, 17-18)? Can *we* avoid making the same search?

Answers to Questions

1. The phrase, “all is vanity,” occurs many times in Ecclesiastes. What does the Preacher mean by vanity? It may help to read these verses in several English translations. A convenient way to access many English translations is to go to www.biblegateway.com.

The Preacher does *not* mean pride in one's appearance, self-centered narcissism, or self-importance. Rather, he means emptiness, futility, meaninglessness, and evanescence. See Question 2, below, and Comment 2.

2. The Hebrew word translated vanity in the ESV literally means breath or vapor. Does that help in understanding vanity? What does vapor suggest about the meaning of vanity?

It suggests something that is impermanent, fugitive, ephemeral, vanishing into nothingness as quickly as the morning mist.

3. What does the phrase “under the sun” tell us about the scope of the Preacher’s reflections and meditations?

His focus is on this life on Planet Earth, from birth to death, not on the afterlife or eternity.

4. The Preacher cites several observations to illustrate how “all is vanity” “under the sun.” How do his observations reinforce his conclusion?

“The sun rises and the sun sets, and hastens to the place where it rises.” The sun never varies in its daily journey. From the fourth day of creation on, sunset follows sunrise follows sunset . . . the 24 hour pattern never varies. Nothing we can do will change it (not even daylight savings time).

Similarly, like the sun, the wind returns again and again to the same place. Nothing we do can change that either. The so-called hydrological cycle likewise never comes to an end—the sea is never full, for the clouds never cease to rise from the ocean and replenish the streams, the streams never run dry as they run to the sea.

Daily and seasonal variation in these natural phenomena do not result in any permanent change in the world. So it is with human activity. “A generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.” What we do in our brief lives will pass away. We will be succeeded by a new generation, which will also pass away. Thus, all our striving is vanity—it changes nothing in the long run.

5. The Preacher applies all his wisdom, which he says was more than all the wisdom of all who went before him, to understanding what goes on “under the sun.” What does he conclude about his search (vs. 13, 17-18)? Can we avoid making the same search?

The search for understanding is an unhappy one; it only vexes and perplexes. It ends with the conclusion that life under the sun is meaningless—"vanity." Yet God has put it into man's heart to try to figure the world out, and we must trouble our brains with it as the Preacher did. The author will elaborate this point later.

Comments

1. The Preacher's focus is on the results of human toil and effort directed towards obtaining something—pleasure, riches, fame—or towards being something. It is this quest that he labels vanity (v. 3).
2. In the Bible the word *vanity* doesn't mean what it does in modern English; that is, it doesn't refer to self-absorbed narcissism—the vanity mocked by Carly Simon in her 1971 hit song, “You're So Vain.” See the Introduction and Comment 3, below, for what the word means in the Bible.
3. In the Greek Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, *mataiotes* is the word rendered *vanity* throughout Ecclesiastes in the ESV and several other translations. The Apostle Paul uses the same Greek word in Romans 8:20, where the ESV renders it *futility*. Paul tells us *why* all is vanity:

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. *Romans 8:19-23*

Life under the sun was not meant to be futile and meaningless, but our first parents' fall into sin has rendered it so, and so it will continue to be until the day of resurrection. See also Genesis 3:17-19.³

4. The Preacher declares that there is nothing new under the sun, and that things never really change. Others after him have observed the same thing. Bruce Hornsby, a contemporary pianist/singer, had a hit song in 1986, “The Way It Is,” that has been covered by Tupac, Tim McGraw, the Jonas Brothers, and Supertramp. It expresses the Preacher's conclusion in a contemporary way. You can hear it—and I highly recommend you do—on YouTube.
5. Another aspect of vanity is that, whatever we do and accomplish under the sun, no matter how celebrated we are in our day, we all die and are soon forgotten (1:11).

The busy tribes of flesh and blood,
With all their lives and cares,
Are carried downwards by the flood,
And lost in foll'wing years.

³ The Revised English Bible (formerly the New English Bible) renders the Hebrew word *futility* in Ecclesiastes as well.

Time, like an ever-rolling stream,
 bears all its sons away;
they fly forgotten, as a dream
 dies at the op'ning day.

--Isaac Watts, "O God Our Help in Ages Past"

The Englishman Thomas Gray wrote perhaps the perfect poem on this theme, "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard." The poem is too long to quote here, but I urge you to read it—it's on the Internet. It rings the changes on 1:11 and 2:16.

5. Some readers and commentators find the Preacher's conclusions pessimistic. Properly interpreted, they are not so. Realistic, yes, but not pessimistic. We'll comment on this in later lessons.

6. As we make our way through Ecclesiastes, we'll see how the Preacher elaborates the themes introduced in Chapter 1 and how he introduces new twists, even seeming contradictions. We need wisdom as much as he did to "find out" all he has to say.

Chapter 2

Introduction

In Chapter 2 the Preacher expounds on the theme that all is vanity by showing how three different human pursuits end in futility. The ESV conveniently furnishes section headings for them: the vanity of self-indulgence, the vanity of living wisely, and the vanity of toil.

Questions for Thought, Discussion, and Reflection

A. The vanity of self-indulgence (vs. 1-11)

1. What was the aim of the Preacher's self-indulgence?;[

2. What did he do to indulge himself?

3. What conclusions does he draw from these endeavors?

B. The vanity of wisdom (vs. 12-17)

1. The Preacher concludes that wisdom exceeds folly—how so?

2. In spite of the fact that wisdom exceeds folly, the Preacher nevertheless concludes that pursuing wisdom, good as it is, is still vanity—why?

3. The Preacher says he wound up hating life (2:17). That's a strong statement. Why did he hate life?

C. The vanity of toil (vs.18-26)

1. Why did the Preacher hate his toil?
2. In v. 18 the Preacher says he hated his toil, but in v. 24 he says a man should eat, drink, and find enjoyment in his toil. Reconcile these statements.
3. How can one eat, drink, and find enjoyment in his toil when he knows that these too are “vanity and a striving after wind” (v. 26)?

Answers to Questions

A. The vanity of self-indulgence (vs. 1-11)

1. What was the aim of the Preacher's self-indulgence?

He wanted to know if self-indulgence—hedonism—is what life under the sun is all about.

2. What did he do to indulge himself?

He lived a life of mirth and laughter—wine, women, and song. He also built houses and planted vineyards and orchards and gardens, beautiful, peaceful spaces that please the senses. He acquired riches scarcely to be believed. He had many concubines so that he could enjoy sex with a variety of woman. In short, the author pursued pleasure in every way.⁴

3. What conclusions does he draw from these endeavors?

He found all his pleasures to be vanity, and the pursuit of them madness (2:1-2).

B. The vanity of wisdom (vs. 12-17)

1. The Preacher concludes that wisdom exceeds folly—how so?

“The wise person has eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness.” The wise don’t go astray or stumble in the way, for they can see the path ahead. Not so the fool, who blunders and stumbles his way through life.

2. In spite of the fact that wisdom exceeds folly, the Preacher nevertheless concludes that pursuing wisdom, good as it is, is still vanity—why?

The wise man dies and is forgotten just like the fool.

Even though the wise may make their way better through the challenges of life under the sun, their end is the same.

3. The Preacher says he wound up hating life (2:17). That’s a strong statement. Why did he hate life?

He found life under the sun to be grievous. Everything he turned his hand to was vanity. His striving was nothing more than chasing after wind. Furthermore, after his death all would be forgotten.

⁴ The Preacher’s description of himself describes King Solomon to a tee. If the author was not Solomon, he certainly wanted the reader to think of Solomon.

C. The vanity of toil (vs. 18-26)

1. Why did the Preacher hate his toil?

Whatever he is able to gain by toil in this life will go to someone else after he dies, and that someone may be a fool. Even if he's not a fool, it is he who will enjoy the fruit of the wise man's toil. This is not only vanity, but a great evil; it is an injustice

2. In v. 18 the Preacher says he hated his toil, but in v. 24 he says a man should eat, drink, and find enjoyment in his toil. Reconcile these statements.

The difference lies in the object of one's labors. If one strives and labors to accumulate material goods, such toil is vanity, for the fruits of one's labor will go to another. But if one has more modest goals, working to have food and drink and working for the pleasure of the work itself, that is from the hand of God.

After the fall of Adam and Eve, God ordained work for the satisfaction of our basic needs:

And to Adam he said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

Such toil, hard though it may be, has genuine reward.

3. How can one eat, drink, and find enjoyment in his toil when he knows that these too are “vanity and a striving after wind” (v. 26)?

Toil becomes “vanity and a striving after wind” when it is directed towards acquisition beyond our needs, when its aim is to heap up wealth beyond that point. But by the grace of God, our daily toil can yield satisfaction and enjoyment (2:24-25).

Comments

1. The idea that the purpose of life is to maximize our pleasure and minimize our pain is perhaps the dominant (if unconscious or unreflective) factor motivating human behavior. It is embodied in the philosophy of *hedonism*.

The best known exponent of hedonism in the ancient world was Epicurus. Epicurus was not a libertine. He believed that lasting happiness and contentment were obtained by enjoying the good things of this life in moderation. Still, at its root, Epicureanism viewed pleasure as the maximum good

A form of hedonism that has greatly influenced modern Western thought is *utilitarianism*, a philosophy developed in the 19th century by the English eccentric Jeremy Bentham and his disciple, John Stuart Mill.⁵ Bentham summed up his philosophy thusly:

It [happiness] is the greatest good to the greatest number of people which is the measure of right and wrong.

It will not surprise you that Epicurus, Bentham, and Mill did not believe in God. If there was a God (or gods), they had nothing to do with this world.

2. The singer Peggy Lee expressed a weary hedonism in her 1969 hit song, “Is that all there is?” It’s worth watching on YouTube. Like the Preacher, she finds human activity meaningless; like the Preacher. She says the only thing left to do is to seek pleasure—for her, it’s escape from meaninglessness. The Preacher, on the other hand, finds pleasure meaningless as well.

3. The vanity or futility of living wisely is tempered by the fact that it greatly exceeds a life of folly. Yet a life lived wisely is still but a vapor, soon dissipated and gone. The wise man dies and is forgotten just like the fool.

Wisdom benefits one in this life (vs. 13-14), but the Preacher takes a long view. He indicates implicitly that there is a life to come, for if there is no existence after this life, then wisdom (knowing how to live well under the sun) is ultimately meaningless.

4. After our first parents fell into sin in the Garden of Eden, God ordained that man would have to work hard to satisfy his daily needs. However, the curse is tempered by the fact that man can enjoy the products of such toil. Any toil beyond that—for example, working to become rich—is vanity.

⁵ Eccentric? You be the judge: Bentham arranged for his body to be dissected after his death and then reassembled and put on public display as an “auto icon.” This was done, and it can be viewed at University College, London. In 2018 the auto-icon was on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. Google “Bentham auto-icon” to see it.

5. The Preacher concludes that it's vain (futile, empty) for a man to toil in order to acquire many possessions, because when he dies another will enjoy them (v. 19). However, he acknowledges that God has a purpose in all of that: the wicked toils so that what he has gained finally comes into the hands of the man who pleases Him (v. 26). For God the outcome is not vanity; it fulfills his sovereign purpose. And yet, the good man's toil may have the same result as the labor of the wicked (vs. 18-19).

6. Many think that Ecclesiastes 2:24, and other verses in the book such as 3:12, 5:19, and 8:15 gave rise to the saying, "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die." That isn't an accurate reading of Ecclesiastes, for the maxim implies no accountability after death. The Preacher believes in an afterlife. Although the focus of his book is on what happens "under the sun," he knows that "for all these things God will bring you into judgment" (11:9). As we proceed through the book we'll see that more clearly.

Chapter 3:1-13

Introduction

In Chapter 2 the Preacher concludes that “there is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil” (v. 24a), something he repeats regularly throughout the book. He immediately adds, “This also I saw is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can have enjoyment?”

Chapter 3:1-13 follows on by cautioning man, even the righteous man, that there is a time for everything under heaven, both the good and the bad.

Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. “There is a time for every matter under heaven.” Is the saying merely descriptive of the world as it is, or does it imply that God means it to be that way? That is, should we expect one thing to be followed by its opposite in the natural course of things, or is the Preacher saying that God ordains such changes to take place at the proper time, a time of his choosing?
2. There is an appropriate time for everything. Which of the things the Preacher lists in vs. 2-8 would you consider to be good for a person, and which bad?
3. The list of opposites in vs. 2-8 is not an exhaustive catalog of everything that happens under the sun. It is rather representative, giving enough cases to make the Preacher’s point. What opposites can you add to the list that have affected you for better or worse?
4. *Why* do you suppose the Preacher writes 3:1-13? What response does he want to create in the reader? What change does he want the reader to make in his thinking?

5. What does the Preacher mean in v. 11, “he [God] has put eternity in man’s heart (v. 10)?
6. What is the task God has given man to be busy with (vs. 10-12)? Summarize in your own words. Is this the task the Preacher set out to do? Did he succeed?
7. Since the Preacher failed in his God-given task or quest (see Question 6), and we are bound to fail too, what is left for man to do?

Answers to Questions

1. “There is a time for every matter under heaven.” Is the saying merely descriptive of the world as it is, or does it imply that God means it to be that way? That is, should we expect one thing to be followed by its opposite in the natural course of things, or is the Preacher saying that God ordains such changes to take place at the proper time, a time of his choosing?

Trick question: both are true. The saying is descriptive of the world as it is and as we find it to be in our own experience, but God ordains what occurs and when it occurs, all at his good pleasure. This is the consistent teaching of Scripture from beginning to end

2. There is an appropriate time for everything. Which of the things the Preacher lists in vs. 2-8 would you consider good for a person, and which bad?

It seems as though, while they may be necessary and right for the circumstances, killing, losing, hate, and war are never “good.” The rest are sometimes good (e.g., breaking down, weeping, tearing, keeping silence) or always good (e.g., healing, loving, peace).

3. The list of opposites in vs. 2-8 is not an exhaustive catalog of everything that happens under the sun. It is rather representative, giving enough cases to make his point. What opposites can you add to the list that have affected you for better or worse?

Examples that occur to me: sleeping and being awake, singing and not singing, buying and selling, encouraging someone to do something and discouraging someone from doing something . . . I could go on, but you will have your own list

4. Why do you suppose the Preacher writes 3:1-13? What response does he want to create in the reader? What change does he want the reader to make in his thinking?

He wants the reader to accept the changes and reversals that life brings. There is a time and place for the vicissitudes of life under the sun, and we should expect them. In 1:4-7 the author made basically the same point, but the emphasis there was on the fact that things go in cycles, with no permanent change.

5. What does the Preacher mean in v. 11, “he [God] has put eternity in man’s heart (v. 10)?

Although people are generally focused on life under the sun, at times most people know that there is something beyond this life. That conviction is put in human hearts by God. As stated in the Introduction, the Preacher wants to turn our hearts towards

life beyond our brief earthly existence by showing us that this life is futile, meaningless, frustrating, insubstantial, fleeting—in short, it is vanity.

6. *What is the task God has given man to be busy with (vs. 10-12)? Summarize in your own words. Is this the task the Preacher set out to do? Did he succeed?*

Though he has not mentioned it until 3:11, the Preacher set out to “find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.” because God had put eternity in his heart. In this he failed: God’s ways simply cannot be known by wisdom. This truth is taught throughout the Bible:

For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. *Isaiah 55:9*

For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach^[a] to save those who believe. *1 Corinthians 1:19-21*

7. *Since the Preacher failed in his God-given task or quest (see Question 6), and we are bound to fail too, what is left for man to do?*

Man can do no better under the sun than to “eat and drink and take pleasure in his toil” (v. 13).

Comments

1. Verses 1-8 were the basis of a very popular song in the 1960s, “Turn! Turn! Turn!” The iconic folksinger Pete Seeger wrote the lyrics in the 1950s, only slightly changing the words of Ecclesiastes 3:1-8. The song was first recorded by the Limelighters in 1962, but the version that really took off was recorded by the Byrds in 1965. The Byrds’ version is on YouTube and is worth watching.
2. In each pair of opposites in vs. 1-8 one activity undoes the other. This is another proof that “all is vanity.” Just as sunset “undoes” sunrise (so to speak), and just as in the Great Plains the warm spring wind from the Gulf of Mexico “undoes” the previous cold “norther” from Canada every year, so every activity is undone by its opposite in time.
4. Since God has “put eternity in man’s heart,” man—at least the wise man—knows that life under the sun can never be satisfying. To be sure, many people stifle their heart knowledge that eternity awaits beyond this life.
4. Verses 12-13 go beyond 2:24 in that they add that man should also *do good*. Why should we do good? Again, there is the truth, unexpressed up to this point, that we will be held accountable for our actions under the sun at some future time.

Chapter 3:14-22

Introduction

Verses 14-22 speak much more of the work of God than the earlier part of the book. They also reprise the theme of inevitable mortality—man perishes like the beasts. The truth that we must die should cause us to divert our attention from our striving and toil under the sun to the matter of our facing God when we die.

Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. How is God's work different from our work under the sun? (v. 14)
2. Knowing how God's work is different from our work should have what effect on us?
3. What do you suppose the Preacher means in v. 15, "God seeks what has been driven away"?
4. There is wickedness even where there should be righteousness (v.16), but the Preacher doesn't say that this also is vanity, a mere vapor. Why not?
5. God tests men (v. 18). How and why?
6. Does v. 21 indicate that the Preacher is unsure whether our state after death is different from that of the beasts that also die?

7. In the light of vs. 14-21, how should man live? (v. 22)

Answers to Questions

1. How is God's work different from our work under the sun? (v. 14)

God's work endures forever and cannot be changed, whereas our works and achievements are vanity, an insubstantial vapor or mist that all too soon vanishes.

2. Knowing how God's work is different from our work should have what effect on us?

We should fear him, that is, hold him in reverence and awe, and we should fear to sin against him by ignoring or defying him.

3. What do you suppose the Preacher means in v. 15, "God seeks what has been driven away?"

This sentence is enigmatic. It may mean that God brings back that which "already has been," as in 1:9: "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done."

4. There is wickedness even where there should be righteousness (v.16), but the Preacher doesn't say that this also is vanity, a mere vapor. Why not?

Wickedness will not be forgotten like the many vain things of life under the sun. God will remember it and will judge the wicked for their wickedness (v. 17). There is a time and place for judgment (recall v. 1). Verse 17 is one of the verses in Ecclesiastes that implies that God's judgment occurs after our life on earth is over.

5. God tests men (v. 18). How and why?

How does he test man? By showing man how he lives dies like the beasts. We have the same breath of life as animals, and return to dust as they do. What should that realization mean to us—that is the test. Why does he test man? So that he will humble himself and does not be lifted up in pride, but rather will live as one who knows his spirit will return to God to face judgment.

6. Does v. 21 indicate that the Preacher is unsure whether our state after death is different from that of the beasts that also die?

I think not. *Based purely on observation*, one cannot know whether man's spirit returns to God or whether both body and spirit return to the earth like the animals. But the Preacher has already stated that man will face judgment (v. 17). He did not learn this from observing and reflecting on life under the sun. As a Jew, he had the Word of God (as much as had been revealed at the time) to guide him into truth that he could not search out by wisdom.

7. In the light of vs. 14-21, how should man live? (v. 22)

As long as he lives under the sun, man should rejoice in his work (v. 22) and not live in either anticipation or fear of what is to come in this life. (Living as one who will face judgment after this life is over is something else again.

Comments

1. Verses 3:14-15, speaks of what is *fixed*, unlike the first part of the book, which deals with things that change and vanish like a vapor. What is fixed is what God does: it endures forever (v. 4). Nothing can be taken from it or added to it.

God is *sovereign*, that is, he is independent and autonomous, totally free in what he does. He does what he wills. There is no thwarting or opposing his decrees. The Preacher says that knowing that should make us fear Him.

The fact that God will call all things into account (v. 17) is fixed and will not change; see also the last two verses of the book). His judgments will endure forever, and there is no questioning them. Every self-justifying mouth will be stopped (Romans 3:19-20).

2. Question 3 asks what is meant by the phrase, “God seeks what has been driven away.” The words are enigmatic and puzzling. Matthew Henry (1662-1714) suggests a possible meaning in his commentary on Ecclesiastes 3:15:

The world, as it has been, is and will be constant in inconstancy; for *God requires that which is past, that is, repeats what he has formerly done . . . God may recall a past trouble . . . God may call back the comforts that are past*, as he did to Job. We may apply this to our past actions, and our behaviour under the changes that have affected us. God will call us to account for that which is past; and therefore, when we enter into a new condition, we should judge ourselves for our sins in our former condition, prosperous or afflicted. *Emphasis added.*

Isaiah 61:4 tells us that the Lord will restore the fortunes of his people when Jesus comes to reign:

They shall build up the ancient ruins; they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.

This will be a case of the God pursuing what has been driven away.⁶

Another interpretation, suggested to me by a friend, is that the Preacher means that God pursues the lost. That is certainly true: God seeks us before we even think about returning to Him. However, attractive as that interpretation is, it doesn’t fit in with what the Preacher writes before or after.

3. Verses 16-22 revert to the theme of man’s mortality, the ultimate proof that all under the sun is vanity. These verses add to what the Preacher has already concluded.

⁶ We know this will occur when Jesus comes because he applied the prophecy to himself in Luke 4:16-21.

Not only do the wise and the foolish share the same end, but man and beast share the same end. Both have the same breath and both return to dust. See Psalm 49:20.

But there *is* a difference in their ends: “God will judge the righteous and the wicked for every work” (v. 17). That judgment will not occur under the sun; it awaits the afterlife.

Still, what of v. 21? Is the Preacher unsure that man’s spirit has a different end than that of animals? That would contradict v. 17 as well as other scriptures. It is more likely that the Preacher is saying that few recognize the different spiritual ends of man and beast. Again, Matthew Henry seems to have the proper interpretation:

This [is the] great difference there is between the spirits of men and beasts; and a good reason it is why men should set their affections on things above, and lift up their souls to those things, not suffering them, as if they were the souls of brutes, to cleave to this earth. *But who knows this difference?* We cannot see the ascent of the one and the descent of the other with our bodily eyes; and therefore those that live by sense, as all carnal sensualists do, that walk in the sight of their eyes and will not admit any other discoveries, by their own rule of judgment have no preeminence above the beasts. *Who knows, that is, who considers this?* Isa 53:1. *Emphasis added.*

Matthew Henry concluded three hundred years ago that very few recognized the preeminence of human beings over animals. Like other things under the sun, this has not changed. Our own post-Christian society has gone a long way in elevating animal rights to the level of human rights. That makes sense if there is no difference between animals and us. But that is not really what Ecclesiastes (to say nothing of the rest of the Bible) teaches. See Genesis 1:26-31 for starters.

Chapter 4

Introduction

In Chapter 4 the Preacher describes several instances of vanity that he has observed.

Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. The Preacher tells us in 3:16-17 that he saw wickedness where there should be righteousness, and asserts that God will judge the wicked. In 4:1-3 he tells us he saw oppression and observes that the oppressed are not delivered under the sun. What does he conclude from this?
2. Verse 4 gives yet another reason that man's toil is vanity, apart from man's desire to acquire wealth and be prosperous. What is it?
3. Although man's toil is vanity, refraining from work has a bad end (v. 5). What is it?
4. How do vs. 6-8 ring the changes on what the Preacher has already said about man's toil?
5. Why are two better than one? Give several reasons.
6. In the last paragraph of Chapter 4 the Preacher tells of a poor, wise youth and an old, foolish king. What made the king foolish?

7. What happened to the wise boy?

8. The wise boy came to stand in the king's place, but his life was still vanity. Why?

Answers to Questions

1. The Preacher tells us in 3:16-17 that he saw wickedness where there should be righteousness, and asserts that God will judge the wicked. In 4:1-3 he tells us he saw oppression and observes that the oppressed are not delivered under the sun. What does he conclude from this?

The logical conclusion is that God's judgment and the righting of wrongs must take place in the afterlife, not under the sun.

2. Verse 4 gives yet another reason that man's toil is vanity, apart from man's desire to acquire wealth and be prosperous. What is it?

People so often toil to be more successful than their neighbors. It is envy of a neighbor's success that drives many to strive to surpass and excel him. This too is vanity: you may top the person you envy, but someone is bound to come along who can top you.

3. Although man's toil is vanity, refraining from work has a bad end (v. 5). What is it?

Poverty. One "eats his own flesh," wasting away in hunger and misery.

4. How do vs. 6-9 ring the changes on what the Preacher has already said about man's toil?

One should be satisfied working to meet his or her needs. Anything beyond this—amassing wealth, always seeking to acquire more—is vanity, that is, it is meaningless. For whom is the avaricious man toiling if he has no heir? And he is never satisfied with what he has, no matter how much that is, but always toils to acquire more.

5. Why are two better than one? Give several reasons.

Two are able to help one another in trouble. The one will lift up the other when he or she falls. They are able to meet each other's needs, even the need for warmth on cold nights. And they are able to stand together to face an adversary.

6. In the last paragraph of Chapter 4 the Preacher tells of a poor, wise youth and an old, foolish king. What made the king foolish?

He no longer took advice, but relied on his own instincts and wisdom.

7. What happened to the wise boy?

He wound up becoming the king, or perhaps the king's chief minister and power behind the throne.

8. The wise boy came to stand in the king's place, but his life was still vanity. Why?

Though the wise boy did the people much good, the people soon forgot him. Jacob's son Joseph comes to mind.

Comments

1. Scripture declares that God will judge the wicked and make things right for the oppressed. Here are two such passages, one from the Old Testament and one from the New:

[God is he] who executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free, the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous. The LORD watches over the sojourners; he upholds the widow and the fatherless. Psalm 146:7-9

Psalm 146:7-9

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days. Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you. James 5:1-6

James 5:1-6

2. Verse 5 is reminiscent of Proverbs 6:9-11, also penned by Solomon (if in fact Solomon is the Preacher):

How long will you lie there, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man.

Ecclesiastes 4:5 certainly carries the same message. While man's toil is vanity, and prompted by envy, not to toil at all is also vanity and also foolishness.

3. Regarding v. 12, I read a comment somewhere that the third cord in the rope is God. The two need him in addition to needing each other. Whether or not that is what the Preacher had in mind, it is true.

4. The Preacher writes of an old, foolish king who would not listen to advice. This reminds us of Shakespeare's King Lear, who makes a foolish decision when 80 years old and spends the rest of his tragic life regretting it. It also reminds me of a poem by the 19th-century German poet Heinrich Heine. In English the first stanza reads:

There was an old king,
His heart was hard,
His head was gray.
The poor old king,
He took a young wife.

Perhaps the old king's advisors were bold enough to caution him against taking a young bride, but the king wouldn't listen. No doubt his young wife had him twisted around her finger; no doubt she married for money, not love. Poor old king indeed!

Chapter 5

Introduction

Chapter 5 begins with counsel regarding worship and service to God as one lives out his life under the sun, for our worship can also be meaningless, futile, and vain. The Preacher then returns to earlier themes: oppression and injustice, the pursuit of wealth, and man's God-given task in light of the vanity of life under the sun.

Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. Verses 1-7: How should a person behave when he or she approaches the house of God? What kind of behavior should we shun? Why?
2. What constitutes a “sacrifice of fools” (v. 1)?
3. Is God angry when we make vows we renege on (vs. 4-6)?
4. Verses 3 and 7 refer to dreams. What kind of dreams does the Preacher have in mind, and what is dangerous about them?
5. Who is the oppressor in v. 8?
6. Why should an official not give in to the temptation to oppress those under him (v. 8)?
7. What is the meaning of v. 9? How does it apply to us today?

8. Why is love of money a vain thing (vs. 9-17)?

9. What *is* good in this vain life under the sun (vs. 18-20)?

10. Life under the sun is vanity, yet we can find joy and contentment in it. What is the source of that joy and contentment?

11. Interpret v. 20.

Answers to Questions

1. Verses 1-7: How should a person behave when he or she approaches the house of God? What kind of behavior should we shun? Why?

We should guard our steps; that is, we should enter the house of God fully aware that we have entered into the Presence of the Almighty. We need to come before him with reverence and a serious intent to hear his word. We come to listen, not to speak rashly.

2. What constitutes a “sacrifice of fools” (v. 1)?

a. Worship offered while we have unconfessed sin amount to a sacrifice of fools. Jesus said:

So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

Matthew 5:23-24

b. Worship offered in an offhand, superficial manner qualifies as a sacrifice of fools.

c. The animal sacrifices of the Preacher's day were figures of the sacrifice of Christ, which we now commemorate in the Lord's Supper. If Christians are not conscious of the body and blood of the Lord which the bread and wine of the Supper represent, their participation is a sacrifice of fools for them:

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. *1 Corinthians 11:27-29*

3. Is God angry when we make vows we renege on (vs. 4-6)?

Yes indeed.

4. Verses 3 and 7 refer to dreams. What kind of dreams does the Preacher have in mind, and what is dangerous about them?

It seems they are the great things a person dreams of gaining or achieving, things one asks God for without stopping to think if they are pleasing to Him.

5. Who is the oppressor in v. 8?

A wicked official. He may oppress for his own gain, or for revenge, out of a delight in cruelty, or just to throw his weight around.

6. Why should an official not give in to the temptation to oppress those under him (v. 8)?

He is being watched by those above him and by God. He will be held to account, maybe in this world, certainly in the next.

7. What is the meaning of v. 9? How does it apply to us today?

In the Preacher's day most people were farmers. A king committed to cultivated fields would have ordered what was necessary to assure a good harvest and the prosperity of his people. Their welfare was his chief concern. Nowadays we have no king and not many in our country are farmers, but a government devoted to the economic welfare of the people is a real advantage.

8. Why is love of money a vain thing (vs. 9-17)?

- a. Money does not satisfy—the acquisitive person never thinks he has enough.
- b. Others will eat up the rich man's wealth.
- c. The rich man is liable to loss his money in a bad venture..
- d. The rich man may have no heir to inherit his wealth.
- e. When the rich man dies he leaves it all behind. Like Job, he came into the world naked and will leave it naked, with nothing.

9. What is good in this vain life under the sun (vs. 18-20)?

It is good for a person to eat and drink and find enjoyment in what God has given him, accepting his lot with thanksgiving.

10. Life under the sun is vanity, yet we can find joy and contentment in it. What is the source of that joy and contentment?

A man should remember that it is God who has blessed him—it is not ultimately by his own effort that he has been successful.

11. Interpret v. 20.

The person who enjoys what God has given him doesn't think back and dwell on what was or might have been. He lives in the present, though mindful of a future beyond life under the sun.

Comments

1. From time immemorial all peoples seem to have offered sacrifices, some to the true God, some to false gods. As to those who sacrificed to the true God, often He was not pleased with their offerings.⁷ As early as Genesis 4 we read that Cain and Abel, the first children of Adam and Eve, each brought an offering to the LORD, but God had no regard for Cain's offering:

... the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. The LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door.

Genesis 4:4-6

Sin was the reason God rejected Cain's offering (Hebrews 11:12, 1 John 3:12).

God prescribed sacrifices for the Jews, some required and some optional, to be offered freely. But God rejected Jewish sacrifices if they were offered by one holding tight to his sin:

Hear, O earth; behold, I am bringing disaster upon this people, the fruit of their devices, because they have not paid attention to my words; and as for my law, they have rejected it. What use to me is frankincense that comes from Sheba, or sweet cane from a distant land? Your burnt offerings are not acceptable, nor your sacrifices pleasing to me. Jeremiah 6:19-20

It seems from the Preacher's admonition that God also rejected offerings, probably sacrifices offered voluntarily, if they were prompted by a foolish impulse or thoughtlessly. Such vows were not only foolish but also sinful. Consider the adulteress in Proverbs 7:10-15:

And behold, the woman meets him, dressed as a prostitute, wily of heart. She is loud and wayward, her feet do not stay at home;² now in the street, now in the market, and at every corner she lies in wait. She seizes him and kisses him, and with bold face she says to him, "*I had to offer sacrifices, and today I have paid my vows;* so now I have come out to meet you, to seek you eagerly, and I have found you." (emphasis added.)

She foolishly thought that God would overlook her adultery because she offered a sacrifice in fulfillment of a vow. Do people do similar things today, thinking vain promises and gifts will move God to overlook sin? We know they do. Let us not do such—it is vanity, a sacrifice of fools..

2. Verses 1-7 admonish us to be careful with our words, for we shall have to give account of every careless word to God in the Judgment. Jesus made this point in his teaching:

⁷ God did accept sacrifices from some people who were not Jews. Two such men were Melchizedek and Job (Genesis 14:18, Job 42:7-9).

I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.

Matthew 12:36-37

3. Verse 2 cautions against slipshod, thoughtless talk about God that may slip into blasphemy. The current use of “OMG” as an exclamation is such talk, in my opinion, being short for “Oh my God!!” The verse also cautions against a rash vow or promise; see verses 4-7.
4. The two statements in v 4 are true, but it isn’t clear how they relate to what precedes them or what follows, other than that they are manifestations of vanity and emptiness: what is more fleeting than a dream? What is emptier than many words? See v. 7.
5. The messenger referred to in v. 6 is a temple functionary sent to receive the animal or money that was vowed. How embarrassing and shameful to send him away empty handed!
6. One should not be amazed at oppression and the denial of justice prevail in a province (v. 8), for it exists with the connivance of corrupt officials at all levels.
7. The Hebrew of v. 9 is unclear, making it a verse that makes even Hebrew scholars scratch their heads. However, the Preacher may be drawing a contrast between the oppressive rulers in v. 8 and a king who has the prosperity of his land in mind. Surely a king who is devoted to the well-being of his farming subjects is a good ruler, unlike kings who oppress those under them.
8. Verses 13-14 point out another way that riches are vanity. Even if one is not faced with the possibility that all he has gained will go to a fool at his death, he may lose all his wealth in a bad venture and have nothing to pass on to his heirs, be they fools or wise. This also is vanity.
9. To be able to enjoy the fruit of one’s toil in this life is the gift of God, for even if one is content to live a simple, happy life, it is the Lord who makes that possible.

Chapter 6

Introduction

As indicated by the section heading in the ESV Bible, this chapter continues with examples of the vanity of wealth and honor that the Preacher began to enumerate in the second part of Chapter 5.

Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. Relate 6:1-2 to 5:18-19.
2. Having many children and living a long life are great blessings, but they are still vanity if something is lacking. What is that something (v. 3)?
3. Why is the lot of a stillborn child better than the lot of the man described in vs. 3, 6?
4. The stillborn child finds rest (v. 5). Is that rest the absence of a life of vanity filled with frustration, grief, and evil, or does it go farther—is it the rest of heaven? If so, what comfort can we take in light of the millions of children who are aborted every year and never experience life under the sun?
5. Verses 3 and 7 speak of those who can find no satisfaction in the things of this life. How does v. 9 speak to man's dissatisfaction?
6. What is the advantage of having many words at his disposal to a man who disputes with one stronger than he (vs. 10-11)? What does the Preacher conclude about such disputing?

6. Why can't we know what is good for us to do (other than enjoy the fruit of our toil) in this brief life (v.12)?

Answers to Questions

1. Relate 6:1-2 to 5:19.

In 5:19 the Preacher says it is the gift of God to be able to enjoy the wealth and possessions God has given him. But 6:1-2 says it is a vanity—frustration and futility—and a great evil if God has given a man wealth and possessions but has not also given him the power to enjoy them, but has given the power to enjoy them to a stronger person.

2. Having many children and living a long life are great blessings, but they are still vanity if something is lacking. What is that something (v. 3)?

a. Dissatisfaction with all the good things he has.

b. No burial. I believe the Preacher refers to a burial ceremony attended by family, friends, and associates who came to show their love, respect, and honor. By contrast, consider Ebenezer Scrooge in Dickens' classic tale, *A Christmas Carol*. In his third dream Scrooge saw his newly-dug grave bereft of mourners and flowers. His body had been laid in the ground by paid gravediggers. No one came to the funeral; apparently there was no funeral. No one cared that Scrooge was dead. He was interred, but not buried with a proper burial; he died unlamented and soon to be forgotten. His death was vanity, the capstone of a vain life.

3. Why is the lot of a stillborn child better than the lot of the man described in vs. 3, 6?

The stillborn child came forth, was buried, and was soon forgotten, all meaningless. Yet it found rest in death, unlike than the man who had lived many years under the sun but never enjoyed any good.

4. The stillborn child finds rest (v. 5). Is that rest the absence of a life of vanity full of frustration, grief, and evil, or does it go farther—is it the rest of heaven? If so, what comfort can we take in light of the millions of children who are aborted every year and never experience life under the sun?

I believe that the rest goes beyond not suffering the vanity of life under the sun.

For we who have believed enter that rest. *Hebrews 4:3*

So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God. *Hebrews 4:9*

Bible-believing scholars and theologians of all stripes believe that children dying in infancy, including the stillborn and aborted, are covered by the blood of Christ and have a place in heaven. Though (at present) we are impotent in the face of the forces that perpetrate abortion, we can take comfort that those children who never see the sun are with the Lord.

5. Verses 3 and 7 speak of those who can find no satisfaction in the things of this life. How does v. 9 speak to man's dissatisfaction?

Those who are satisfied with what they see before them—their daily bread, the fruit of their toil—have it better than those whose appetite and desire is for something far off that they don't have. The latter are never satisfied; they always long for greener pastures.

6. What is the advantage of having many words at his disposal to a man who disputes with one stronger than he (vs. 10-11)? What does the Preacher conclude about such disputing?

There is no advantage at all. Mere words without the wherewithal to back up one's position are just hot air—another form of vanity. Many empty words yield no benefit at all.

7. Why can't we know what is good for us to do (other than to enjoy the fruit of our toil) in this brief life (v.12)?

We often don't know what is good for us, though we may think we do. How often have you done or gained something you thought would be good that turned out to be anything but good? One reason we don't know what is good for us in this life is that we can't see what will be after us under the sun once we have died.

A case in point from history: In the third century AD the Romans began to employ Germanic mercenaries to defend the boundaries of their empire. They invited whole tribes to settle the frontier in exchange for their help in fending off other barbarian tribes and peoples. But over time, Rome's Visigoth and Ostrogoth mercenaries and allies took over almost all of the Western Roman Empire. That didn't turn out well!

On a personal level, consider a man who invested his wealth in certain blue chip stocks in 1980 so as to ensure that his widow and children will be well provided for after he died. How could he have known then that his holdings in Sears and Roebuck, Kodak, JC Penney, and Kmart would have lost almost all their value forty years later?

Comments

1. The Preacher says it is a heavy burden for mankind (v.1) and a grievous evil (v. 2) to lack nothing and have many possessions and honor if one is unable to enjoy them. We have only to read the current news to find examples of this. Indeed, if one lives a long life and has many children—a blessing from the LORD—but is not satisfied with the good God has given him, a still born child is better off than he!
- 2 A stillborn child finds rest (v. 5). This truth should comfort us when we grieve over our stillborn children and the millions of abortions performed in our country year after year. Abortion is a great evil, but the unborn child finds rest—not simply in the grave, but rest with God.
3. Verses 7-9 repeat the truth that the fruit of one's toil is not enough for many. Even the wise may yearn for more; certainly the poor may remain unsatisfied although they be wise (v. 8). The man described here, whether rich or poor, wise or foolish, has an appetite that cannot be sated. The immediate reference may be to the food one eats (v. 7), but v. 9 suggests that people have other appetites that wander beyond what they see before them, appetites that remain unquenched. This too is vanity.
4. “Whatever comes to be has already been named” (v. 10). In the Old Testament the act of naming someone or something shows the authority and power of the namer over the named. Who is the Namer of all things but God?
5. Human experience shows that one cannot win an argument with one who is stronger, even though he uses many words (vs. 10-11). Indeed, the more words, the more futile the attempt—the more vanity. Words may prevail when one's adversary is weak, but they will not overcome a strong adversary. Furthermore, does the “winner” really win? Man cannot know what will come after. A talker or a stronger person may win the argument or the battle but ultimately lose the war; there is no way of knowing (v. 12).
6. Verse 10a, immediately preceding verses 10b-11, suggests that the “one stronger than he” may be God. Men do dispute with God—but never successfully. Even righteous Job disputed with God, using many words to justify himself. He wanted to argue with God face to face:

Today also my complaint is bitter; my hand is heavy on account of my groaning. Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his seat!

I would lay my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments. I would know what he would answer me and understand what he would say to me. Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power? No; he would pay attention to me. There an upright man could argue with him, and I would be acquitted forever by my judge.

Job 23:2-7

But when the LORD did answer Job, the first thing he said was this mild rebuke:

Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind and said: “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Dress for action like a man; I will question you, and you make it known to me”
Job 38:1-3.

After the LORD questioned him, Job could only admit that what he had uttered was without knowledge:

Then Job answered the LORD and said:

“I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted . . . Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.” Job 42:1-3

The Apostle Paul tells us that at the Last Judgment no one, not even those accustomed to winning arguments under the sun, will be able to utter a word in the presence of God:

Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.
Romans 3:19

Chapter 7:1-14

Introduction

This section of Ecclesiastes consists of a collection of proverbs. That Ecclesiastes should contain proverbs should not surprise us if Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes, for most of the Book of Proverbs was also written by him. The proverbs in Ecclesiastes relate to the themes the Preacher has already expounded in earlier chapters, such as the vanity of life under the sun, the end of life, and a man's inability to do anything that will endure after his death.

Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. Verse 1 declares that the day of death is better than the day of birth. How does that follow from what the Preacher has been writing for some six chapters? How does the second part of the verse relate to the first part?
2. Why is it better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting (vs. 2-3)?
3. How or why does sadness of face make the heart glad (v. 3)?
4. How or why does oppression drive the wise into madness (v.7)? Is it oppression the wise man sees with his eyes or oppression he experiences himself?
5. Verse 8 declares that the end of a thing is better than its beginning. Why is that so?

6. Verse 10: Why is it unwise to ask, “Why were the former days better than these?” Can you answer in terms of what the Preacher has written in chapters 1-6?

7. What is the value of wisdom to those under the sun (vs. 11-12)?

8 The Preacher tells us to *consider* the truth that what God has made crooked cannot be made straight. What conclusions about life under the sun do you draw from a due consideration of this fact?

9. When adversity comes, what should one do? (v. 14)

Answers to Questions

1. Verse 1 declares that the day of death is better than the day of birth. How does that follow from what the Preacher has been writing for some six chapters? How does the second part of the verse relate to the first part?

a. When we die our vain life is over. No more striving after wind, no more frustration, disappointment, and futility; no more unexpected reversals of fortune. Of course, without the prospect of an afterlife, death also means the end of anything good for us.

b. Not until death can one's life, work, and character be properly evaluated; only then can one's good name be praised with the certainty that one will not do something wicked or foolish to damage his or her reputation. As the Preacher says later in 10:1, "Dead flies make the perfumer's ointment give off a stench, so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor."

2. Why is it better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting (vs. 2-4)?

At a funeral or memorial service one is forced to confront the truth that we all must die. The wise man lays that to heart and orders his life accordingly:

So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.
90:12

Psalm

In the house of feasting, on the other hand, we live for the pleasure of the moment, and the truth that we must die is the farthest thing from our minds.

3. How or why does sadness of face make the heart glad (v. 3)?

See Comment 3.

4. How or why does oppression drive the wise into madness (v.7)? Is it oppression the wise man sees with his eyes or oppression he experiences himself?

a. Perhaps the wise man is overcome by a sense of outrage and fury passing mere indignation at the wrong done to the helpless. As Don McLean sang in his monster hit, "American Pie,"

my hands were clenched in fists of rage...
no angel born in hell could break that Satan spell

Truly, the injustice and misery of oppression can induce momentary (at least) madness.

b. It seems to be oppression he has witnessed rather than anything in his own experience.

5. Verse 8 declares that the end of a thing is better than its beginning. Why is that so?

Unless one patiently sees a thing through to its end, one cannot know that it will turn out successfully. Many projects are undertaken only to fail of their objective.

6. Verse 10: Why is it unwise to ask, “Why were the former days better than these?” Can you answer in terms of what the Preacher has written in chapters 1-6?

One should know by Chapter 7 that life under the sun has *always* been vanity and a striving after wind. As the Preacher wrote in 1:9, “What has been is what will be and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun” (1:9). If they are bad now, know that they always were. As the saying goes, “Things aren’t as good as they used to be, and they never were.”

7. What is the value of wisdom to those under the sun (vs. 11-12)?

Wisdom provides protection. Through wisdom a person may increase his wealth; it may even enable him to preserve his life.

8. The Preacher tells us to consider the truth that what God has made crooked cannot be made straight. What conclusions about life under the sun do you draw from a due consideration of this fact?

Certain unfortunate circumstances of life can’t be remedied. Some physical deformities or chronic illnesses, certain mental illnesses, intellectual dullness, even an unpleasant singing voice are examples of things God has made crooked that can’t be made straight. I don’t think the Preacher has in mind social conditions like slavery or poverty: those are not things God has made crooked, and even in ancient times they could sometimes be changed. But God determines adversity as well as “crooked” features of life that can’t be ameliorated. See the answer to Question 9, below.

9. When adversity comes, what should one do? (v. 14)

We must accept that it, as well as blessing, comes from our sovereign, loving God. We are called to trust, not to demand an explanation.

Comments

1. “The day of death [is better] than the day of birth.” The Preacher probably means that the day of death brings an end to a life of futility and frustration under the sun. It is the day the spirit returns to God (3:21). The day of birth, on the other hand, is the beginning of a meaningless, vain life.

At funerals and memorial services following the day of death preachers, family members, and friends often praise good men for their character. Don’t we want to have a good name (v. 1) at our day of death?

2. Verses 2-4: We can learn far more from funerals than we can ever learn from partying. Funerals are sobering affairs for the wise; they remind us that “only one life, will soon be past; only what’s done for Christ will last.” In contrast, one never thinks about the future on festive occasions.

3. “Sorrow is better than laughter.” What the Preacher had in mind is not clear, but the Apostle Paul gives us one reason:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.
2 Corinthians 1:3-7

4. “Surely oppression drives the wise into madness” (v. 7), for he finds that all his wisdom cannot end oppression or corruption (v. 7b), plunging the wise man into frustration and depression. Alternatively, the Preacher may mean that even the wise can be driven mad when they themselves are oppressed

5. Verse 8b should be read with v. 9, for v. 9a repeats the theme of v. 8b.. Anger often stems from impatience and frustration—road rage is the poster child for this kind of anger. Anger at injustice and wickedness is probably not in view.

6. Verse 10: How often we hear people gripe that things were better when they were young! Perhaps their memories are selective; for the Preacher tells us that it is not from wisdom that they complain. From the beginning of Ecclesiastes the Preacher has repeatedly concluded that what is now is what has always been and that there is nothing new under the sun, only we don’t remember the past (1:9-11).

7. “Wisdom is good with an inheritance” (v. 11). Without wisdom wealth is quickly squandered and dissipated by the fool who inherits it (2:18-19).

8. Verse 13-14 (see also 1:15): The Preacher tells us to *consider* the fact that no one can make straight what God has made crooked. He has made the day of adversity as well as the day of prosperity. What can we learn from contemplation of this reality?

The first thing we learn is that it is *God* who made it (whatever *it* is) crooked. Physical and mental limitations that cannot be remedied come first to mind. He it is who sends adversity. God is sovereign. The “crookedness” is his will; he could have done otherwise.

We naturally ask, Why, Lord? The Preacher gives us all the answer we will get in 8:17:

I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man clams to know, he cannot find it out.

The second thing we learn by considering the work of God is that *some things cannot be changed*. The corollary to this truth is that we need to accept it. Now, we do not reject God’s sovereignty by prying for relief from a bad situation or trying to change it—for example, seeking a cure for a hitherto incurable condition. But when we come to know that a condition is irremediable, we need to accept that as being the will of our good God, even if we can’t discern his purpose.

Chapter 7:15-29

Introduction

In this passage the Preacher tells the reader more of what he has observed and found in his vain life under the sun.

Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. What do you suppose the Preacher means by “overly righteous”?

2. Interpret vs. 16-17 in the light of v. 15.

3. Interpret v. 18.

4. Look for other Bible verses say the same thing as v. 20 and list some here.

5. In 2:9-14 the Preacher writes about wisdom and folly and of his attempt to be wise. How successful has he been in that effort (v. 25)?

6. The Preacher found something more bitter than death. What is it (v.26)? See also Proverbs 2:16-19 and 5:1-23;

6. Who is able to escape the temptress? (v. 26)

7. The Preacher writes of what he has found and what he has not been able to find in vs. 27-29. What has he found?

Answers to Questions

1. What do you suppose the Preacher means by “overly righteous”?

See Comment 1.

2. Interpret vs. 16-17 in the light of v. 15.

Verse 15 states that sometimes a righteous person perishes in spite of his righteousness. Well then, can I avoid perishing if I am super righteous? Not at all: being overly righteous or wise can lead to destruction. How so?

Many people dislike and resent those who are or pretend to be righteous. They mock them as “holier than thou.” The Apostle John wrote:

We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother’s righteous. Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you.
1 John 3:12-13

Peter likewise tells us that the world hates us when we don’t join them in doing evil:

[the Gentiles] are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you . . .
1 Peter 4:4

In short, the world hates the righteous and those who pretend to be righteous, and sometimes that hatred results in persecution and even death.

As for being overly wicked, Scripture states in too many places to enumerate that they often meet with a premature bad end, whether due to punishment by authority or simply as a result of their own behavior.

3. Interpret v. 18.

Take advantage of every opportunity, for you don’t know which will yield fruit. See Comment 2 for an expanded answer.

4. Look for other Bible verses say the same thing as v. 20 and list some here.

Here are two you should memorize:

For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. *Romans 3:23*

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. *1 John 1:8*

In Romans 3:9 the Apostle Paul writes, “We have already charged that all, both Jews and Gentiles, are under sin.” He then quotes six passages from the Old Testament to back up his charge (Romans 3:10-18).

5. In 2:9-14 the Preacher writes about wisdom and folly and of his attempt to be wise. How successful has he been in that effort (v. 25-28?)

He confesses that he repeatedly sought to understand “the scheme of things” without success.

6. The Preacher found something more bitter than death. What is it (v.26)? See also Proverbs 2:16-19 and 5:1-23;

The temptress who ensnares men. See Chapters 5 and 7 of Proverbs, where Solomon expands on this theme.

6. Who is able to escape the temptress? (v. 26)

The man who pleases God (by taking heed to the warnings in his Word and obeying his command).

7. The Preacher writes of what he has found and what he has not been able to find in vs. 27-29. What has he found?

See Comment 5.

Comments

1.”Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise”—what in the world can that mean?

Commentators have offered a variety of interpretations. At least one commentator sees the Preacher writing from a strictly empirical point of view in most of Ecclesiastes. He states only what can be learned from observation events under the sun.⁸ As far as he can tell from what he sees, being extreme, either in trying to be super religious or in giving one’s self to wickedness, only leads to trouble. The wise man practices moderation in all things; he avoids standing out one way or the other.

Another interpretation holds that the Preacher is warning the reader against what in later centuries would be called Phariseism. I lead towards this interpretation. The Pharisees were a Jewish sect in Jesus’ day who were so keen on being righteous that they even made up laws and traditions beyond what God requires in his Word and enjoined them on their followers. They were overly or super-righteous.

Jesus quoted the prophet Isaiah in condemning this practice (Matthew 15:1-9):

This people honors me with their lips but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men

Historically, Phariseism was not confined to the Pharisees. Sadly, the Christian church throughout the ages created and continues to create explicit and implicit rules beyond what the Scripture requires Keeping these rules (e.g., don’t smoke, don’t drink alcohol), one can think one’s self extra righteous.

Those who know and keep such rules, as well as those who simply know a lot about a lot of things—more than the next person—are the intellectually conceited over-wise. The Apostle Paul applies the Preacher’s words to some Jews in his day:

But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law; and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth— you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. *Romans 2:17-23*

⁸ According to this interpretation, in Ecclesiastes the Preacher aims is to show the meaninglessness and futility of a secular point of view. Secularism, i.e., an empirical focus on what can be seen in this life, leads to cynicism and despair. The Preacher hopes that once a man is reduced to despair he will be open to considering the truth of God that the Preacher interjects into his ruminations with increasing frequency as the book reaches its close.

Christians today can fall into the sin of being over righteous and over wise as well as people in the Preacher's time and in Paul's time.

2. Verse 18 is puzzling at first glance. What is "this" and what is "that"? Are they the righteousness and wickedness, or the wisdom and folly, of the immediately preceding verses? Are they opportunities, with associated risks, that present themselves?

The reason for taking hold of whatever comes one's way suggests that the second possible interpretation is what the Preacher has in mind. Whatever course of action presents itself, take it if it doesn't seem foolish, even though failure or loss is a possible outcome as well as success, for the God-fearer will be delivered in either case. Trust God to give you success, or at least to deliver you from harm in the endeavor.

3. Verse 20: See Romans 3:9-20. Paul should not have had to labor to prove that all without exception are sinners to those who remembered the words of the Preacher.

4. Verses 22-29 tell us that the Preacher turned his wisdom to seeking to understand the big picture, the cosmic scheme of things, and found it was beyond him. Ecclesiastes presents some things he found out: the vanity and futility of man's toil and efforts under the sun, the inevitability of death, the enjoyment of the fruit of one's toil in this life without seeking to gain more than that. But the things he found out do not explain God's grand design for the world. Not only was the Preacher unable to attain to that knowledge, he makes it clear that no one can.

5. What shall we think of the Preacher's discussion of women in vs. 26-28? Feminists today dismiss the Bible as reinforcing patriarchy and of viewing woman negatively. Is that the Preacher's viewpoint?

We cannot deny that the Old Testament world was patriarchal. Neither can we deny that a patriarchal world, where men are sinners who have departed from uprightness (v. 29), is a place where women are often treated as second-class human beings *and* as temptations to men. The book of Proverbs—written by Solomon, who is likely the Preacher—warns against the seductive adulteress (see Proverbs 5, 6:20-7:27).⁹ We need to be honest and conclude that the Preacher partook of the patriarchal view of his culture. But that doesn't invalidate his conclusion regarding the seductress.

⁹ We should note that the author(s) of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes place the blame for falling into sexual sin on the male, as does St. Paul (Romans 5:12-17). Patriarchy is a two-edged sword.

The Preacher's conclusion, that he had found but one man in a thousand and no woman at all—what does it mean? *What was he looking for* that he could scarcely find among men and not at all among women?

He can't mean that he found but one righteous man in a thousand and never a righteous woman, for he has already said that there is no righteous person on earth (v 20). Was he seeking a human being who could resist sexual temptation—and failed almost completely? That can't be it either: it is manifestly untrue that men are, even slightly, less prone than women to fall sexually. Nor can he mean that few men and no women grasp the riddle of life. If he could not, no one could.

The ESV Study Bible notes suggest that he means he couldn't find hardly any man and not a single woman he could understand (taking "found" in the sense of "find out").

Chapter 8

Introduction

In Chapter 8 the Preacher tells the reader more of what he has observed and found in his vain life under the sun.

Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. If even the wise cannot find out the grand scheme of things under the sun, what good is wisdom?
2. Why obey the king's command? See also Romans 13:1-2.
3. Verse 3a: Why would one be in a hurry to leave the king's presence? Why resist that urge?
4. What does v. 3b mean? Does it mean we should oppose the king when he undertakes an evil cause, that we should not openly oppose him, or something else?
5. The king may be arbitrary in his supremacy. What will deliver a man in his presence (vs. 5-6)? Can you think of any examples from the Old Testament?
6. What things are out of our power to change? (vs. 7-8)
7. What does the Preacher have to say about the wicked who prosper under the sun? (vs. 10-13)

8. Verse 14 repeats the observation of 7:15. With that in mind, how should one live?
9. Verses 16-17 repeat conclusions found in 2:23 and 7:14, 23-24. Why do you suppose the Preacher keeps returning to these themes?

Answers to Questions

1. If even the wise cannot find out the grand scheme of things under the sun, what good is wisdom?

Here the Preacher says it brings happiness. But see 2:12-17, where this judgment is tempered by the realization that the wise die just like the foolish. He will have more to say on this in 13-18.

2. Why obey the king's command? See also Romans 13:1-2.

a. God has placed the king in authority. As far as David and his seed are concerned, God promised the kingship by an oath:

I will tell of the decree:
The LORD said to me, “You are my Son;
 today I have begotten you.
Ask of me, and I will make the nations your
 heritage, and the ends of the earth your
 possession.
You shall break^[a] them with a rod of iron
 and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.”

Psalm 2:7-9

To the original readers of Ecclesiastes that meant that they must keep the king's command for conscience's sake. We also, though we are not Jews, are required by God to obey our rulers, provided they don't require disobedience to God's command; see Comment 2.

b. The king has power, as well as authority, to punish those who disobey. The wise knows where safety and self-interest lie.

3. Verse 3a: Why would one be in a hurry to leave the king's presence? Why resist that urge?

The words are directed to one who has access to the king. If we say or do something that angers the king, the natural inclination is to get out of his sight as soon as possible. But absenting one's self may make the king even angrier, as David found out with King Saul (1 Samuel 20:24-34). It is better to remain in his presence and to try to mollify him.

4. What does v. 3b mean? Does it mean we should oppose the king when he undertakes an evil cause, that we should not openly oppose him, or something else?

The meaning seems to be that we ought not to persist in advocating a cause the king finds evil. It is even riskier to question his actions openly: “What are you doing?”

5. The king may be arbitrary in his supremacy. What will deliver a man in his presence (vs. 5-6)? Can you think of any examples from the Old Testament?

Obeying is the surest road to deliverance. Obeying and maintaining one's own integrity may seem tricky, but the wise will know the time and way.

6. What things are out of our power to change? (vs. 7-8)

The Preacher mentions the prolonging of our life and staving off the day of death, and avoiding getting caught up in war.

7. What does the Preacher have to say about the wicked who prosper under the sun? (vs. 10-13)

The wicked may not be punished in this life, but in the end it will not go well with him. He may be praised by men and receive a fine burial, but his days are still vanity and a shadow because he did not fear God. On the contrary, it will go well with those who fear God. These verses imply a reckoning and settling of accounts after death for both the righteous and the wicked.

8. Verse 14 repeats the observation of 7:15. With that in mind, how should one live?

Psalm 73 expresses the frustration of the righteous man who sees the wicked flourishing while he, although living a life of integrity, doesn't prosper. But he saw things clearly when he went into the house of God. Read Psalm 73 to see how one should live in the light of the apparent injustice of the prosperity of the wicked.

9. Verses 16-17 repeat conclusions found in 2:23 and 7:14, 23-24. Why do you suppose the Preacher keeps returning to these themes?

It's important to know from the beginning that we will never be able to understand God's work under the sun, so that we give up our preoccupation with that search and strive instead simply to obey God and enjoy the fruit of our toil. *God owes us no explanation of "the meaning of life" other than what he tells us in his Word.*

Comments

1. The Preacher observed men who walk in danger of offending the king, who can do them harm because of his superior force—cases where “man has power over man to his hurt” (v 9). We observe the same today, at home and abroad. It may be a political ruler who can do us harm; it may be our boss. In vs. 2-9 he Preacher gives advice to the man who has to walk on eggshells before an arbitrary superior.

2. The Preacher advises keeping the king’s commandment first of all because, whether the king is good or bad, God has put him on the throne. St. Paul declares the same:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.
Romans 13:1-2

3. It is only natural to want to make one’s self scarce when someone with power to harm you proposes a wicked course of action. The Preacher tells his readers not to do that.¹⁰ The wise man will not take an open stand against the king’s command (v 3b), but he will know the time and the way to act uprightly (vs. 5-6). Nevertheless, though a man act wisely and uprightly, and in so doing avoids incurring the king’s displeasure or wrath, he does not know how things will turn out (v. 7).

4. The truth that one cannot know how a situation or course of action will play out is related to the truth that we have no power over great and important events in our lives. We can’t avoid death or even choose the day of our dying (suicide excepted); we can’t avoid getting swept up in war if it is to come. This is true especially of wicked kings. They may wage war, but they can’t control the outcome. They expect victory, but the result is their destruction (v. 8). Just ask Napoleon or Adolf Hitler.

5. Verses 14-15 repeat the conclusion of 7:14, 3:13, and 5:18.

6. The Preacher concludes in vs. 16-17 that we simply cannot find out the meaning of what God is doing under the sun. He continues this thought into the beginning of Chapter 9, our next lesson.¹¹

¹⁰ The Revised Standard Version (RSV), virtually alone among English translations, renders the Hebrew in the opposite sense: “go from his presence, do not delay when the matter is unpleasant, for he does whatever he pleases.”

¹¹ The chapter divisions in our English Bible are not part of the original Hebrew. Sometimes they are unhappy, dividing thought that should be kept together.

Chapter 9:1-16

Introduction

Chapter 9 rings the changes on themes the Preacher has already brought up in earlier chapters.

Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. "The same event" happens to all (v. 2). What event is that?

2. What is the Preacher's verdict on the fact, (hich he has confirmed by personal observation, that the same event happens to all?

3. Consider v. 3b: Do all deserve to die—the righteous as well as the wicked, the clean as well as the unclean, him who sacrifices as well as him who does not sacrifice?

4. Why is a living dog better than a dead lion.(vs. 4-5)?

5. Does v. 5 suggest that the dead are unconscious, that they are unremembered, or something else?

6 Verse 6 is the prelude to vs. 7-10. How so?

7. How do vs. 11-12 reprise observations the Preacher has made earlier in his book?

8. In vs. 13-16 the Preacher says he observed something that seemed great to him (v. 13). What was it about what he observed that so impressed him?

Answers to Questions

1. "The same event" happens to all (v. 2). What event is that?

Death.

2. What is the Preacher's verdict on the fact (which he has confirmed by personal observation) that the same event happens to all?

It is an evil.

3. Consider v. 3b: Do all deserve to die—the righteous as well as the wicked, the clean as well as the unclean, him who sacrifices as well as him who does not sacrifice?

Yes, because “the hearts of the children of man are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live” (v. 3). In 7:20 the Preacher declared, “Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.” When he writes in 9:3 of the righteous, he means those who live upright but not perfect lives. Scripture teaches that the soul that sins shall die, and that, “whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it” (James 2:10).

4. Why is a living dog better than a dead lion (vs. 4-5)?

While they are living, the poor, the miserable, the despised—the “dogs” of this world—can still hope that things will be better; the dead, though they were “lions” among men, no longer can hope for any reward under the sun.

5. Does v. 5 suggest that the dead are unconscious, that they are unremembered, or something else?

The verse does not speak to that question. I believe he is asserting that the dead know nothing of what is going on under the sun after they die and depart from the earth. “The memory of them is forgotten” may mean that (1) the living soon completely forget those who have died, or it may mean that (2) the dead forget everything they said and did under the sun. The Preacher made the first point earlier (1:11, 2:16); it’s possible (but not likely in my opinion) that he is now making the second point, a corollary to the truth that the dead know nothing of what is going on under the sun. See Comment 2.

6. Verse 6 is the prelude to vs. 7-10. How so?

People should enjoy the good things of this life while they can, since they will no longer be able to do so once they have died. Those good things are the portion God gives as the result of one’s toil—food and drink, life and love with one’s spouse, and whatever else brings joy to the heart. See 3:24-25.

7. How do vs 11-12 reprise observations the Preacher has made earlier in his book?

He observed in 3:1-8 that “there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven.” Our best efforts may lead to success or to failure, to weal or woe, since all things, both good and evil, have their place according to God’s sovereign will, which is undisclosed to us. “Man proposes, but God disposes.” Hence the race is not always to the swift nor riches to the wise.

8. In vs. 13-16 the Preacher says he observed something that seemed great to him (v. 13). What was it about what he observed that so impressed him?

He saw that a poor wise man delivered a city from destruction, yet the people of the city were neither grateful nor even remembered what he had done. This amazed him: how could wisdom and goodness meet with such ingratitude? How could such great deliverance be so quickly forgotten?

Comments

1. It is “an evil in all that is done under the sun, that the same event happens to all” (v. 3). By *evil* the Preacher means *calamity*; however, the question of moral evil raises its head: Should not the righteous have a better end than the wicked?

We need to keep in mind that the Preacher is describing what he sees “under the sun.” His gloomy conclusion is correct if life under the sun is all there is. Modern secular man, who has no thought of an afterlife, must concur with the Preacher if he has eyes to see and a mind to reason.

But the Preacher knows that man enters another world when he leaves this one, a world where God will bring the righteous and the wicked into judgment. Recall 8:12:

Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him.

Peeking ahead to the end of the book we read:

The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with¹ every secret thing, whether good or evil.

The Preacher (or the divine Author behind him) intends to bring his readers to the point where, disillusioned, they turn away from their ambitions, pursuits, and accomplishments under the sun and begin to consider the eternal state with its rewards and punishments.

2. “The dead know nothing” (v. 5). What does the Preacher mean? Does he mean that the dead are in an unconscious state? The Apostle Paul refers to dying as falling asleep and to death as sleep (1 Corinthians 15:18, 51). While most theologians interpret his words as a figure of speech, some Christians take those words to mean that the soul remains unconscious until the resurrection. Do the Preacher’s words support that view?

Taking v. 5 in both the immediate context and in line with the overall thrust of Ecclesiastes, the answer is No. Rather, the Preacher seems to mean that the dead know nothing anymore of what goes on under the sun now that they have left the world. “They have no more share in all that is done under the sun” (v. 6).

The fact that the dead know nothing of what is going on in the world they left behind deals a fatal blow to the idea that Mom and Dad in heaven are watching how the lives of their children and grandchildren play out on earth. It also means that it is useless to pray to the saints, beseeching them to pray to God on our behalf. The dead are indeed conscious, whether in heaven or hell, but they know nothing of what is happening under the sun.

3. Verses 7-10 cheer up the person discouraged by the vanity of this world. We should enjoy the basic blessings of life with a merry heart, for God has already

approved what we do. It is the portion He has appointed for us. Striving for some lasting accomplishment is vanity, but enjoying the fruits of our toil is what God intends for our life under the sun. See also 3:12-13, 6:18-19.

4. Time and chance happen to all. God knows and determines our lot, but to us the good and bad, the expected and unexpected happen seemingly at random. It's not only the big picture that we cannot find out; we cannot find out what lies ahead for us in this life.

5. The Preacher was greatly impressed by the events he recounts in vs. 13-16. The poor man's wisdom didn't bring him any benefit: see also 1:12-16. However, lest we conclude that wisdom isn't really worth pursuing, in the next lesson we'll see that the Preacher goes on to tell how wisdom greatly exceeds folly.

Chapter 9:17-10:20

Introduction

Chapter 9:17 should really be part of the next chapter, for it introduces a series of proverbs extolling wisdom and deprecating folly. They don't relate to the vanity of life under the sun, but do offer wisdom for living well in this world.

Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. “A little folly outweighs wisdom and honor” (v. 1). Can you think of specific people to whom this applies? If they are public figures, name them.
2. What light does 10:4 shed on 8:3-4?
3. Can you think of any political situations past or present that are well described by vs. 5-7?
4. What is the takeaway from vs. 8-9?
5. Verse 11 is meant for more than snake charmers. What warning does it have for us? What wisdom can we take away from the verse?
6. Verses 12-14 deal with the words of a fool. Summarize their message.

7. In light of the Preacher's oft-repeated conclusion that acquiring and saving up wealth is vanity, what does he mean by "money answers everything" (v. 19)

8. Verse 20 may not be literally true (and the readers of Ecclesiastes know that), but it speaks a truth, very much in evidence in our age of social media. Summarize that truth. Can you think of any recent illustrations of this warning?

Answers to Questions

1. “A little folly outweighs wisdom and honor” (v. 1). Can you think of specific people to whom this applies? If they are public figures, name them.

See Comment 1 for some examples. You will be able to think of more, both personal acquaintances and public figures.

2. What light does 10:4 shed on 8:3-4?

Verses 8:3-4 and 10:4 seem to refer to cases where the king is angry *with you*. If you remain in the king’s presence when he is angry, by speaking soothing words you may be able to calm him down. But if you leave the king in his anger, he may stew and work himself up with wrath and decree calamity for you.

3. Can you think of any political situations past or present that are well described by vs. 5-7?

As to the past, King Rehoboam comes to mind; see Comment 6. As to present examples, I leave them to class discussion.¹²

4. What is the takeaway from vs. 8-9?

Risk is inherent in even those basic activities of life that are not normally hazardous. See also Proverbs 15:1. Verse 11 also warns of behavior known to be risky. In that case one ought to consider well the risk before undertaking the deed.

5. Verse 11 is meant for more than snake charmers. What warning does it have for us? What wisdom can we take away from the verse?

We shouldn’t overestimate our ability to handle risky situations. Too often the man who says, “Hold my beer. Hey guys, watch this,” has spoken his last words. The adulterer who thinks he won’t be discovered by a jealous husband, the bank teller who is sure she will be able to replace the money she “borrowed” before the books are audited, the dead teen who thought he could safely drink one more beer before he was too impaired to drive—these are examples of catastrophic overconfidence.

6. Verses 12-14 deal with the words of a fool. Summarize their message.

Our words will get us into trouble if we are senseless fools who can’t control our tongue.

¹² Regarding the rich sitting in a low place, here we should assume that the rich gained their wealth by prudence; they are wise, not fools. They should be in a place of honor, but under a foolish ruler they are not.

7. In light of the Preacher's oft-repeated conclusion that acquiring and saving up wealth is vanity, what does he mean by "money answers everything" (v. 19)

Money makes living in this world easier. It opens doors and smooths out rough places. But it can easily become one's god. Similarly, prescription opioids reduce pain, but it's easy to misuse them and become addicted; some addicts even overdose and die.

8. Verse 20 may not be literally true (and the readers of Ecclesiastes know that), but it speaks a truth, very much in evidence in our age of social media. Summarize that truth. Can you think of any recent illustrations of this warning?

Things we think we believed we said in secret are too often made known to our embarrassment or hurt. A friend may tell a third party something you revealed "in confidence." It becomes widely known before you can turn around. A pregnancy is disclosed; an unkind remark spoken in private gets back the person disparaged; deliberations of governmental officials are leaked to the press; investors get word of an impending merger that was to be kept under wraps.

When Samson told Delilah the secret of his strength in the privacy of his bedroom, he never dreamed she would tell the Philistines (Judges 16:4-22).

Here is an example of this truth I encountered this very day on Facebook.

"I owe a public apology to _____. He said that I could tag him in this post. _____ is the person who wrote the anonymous review of the Coles book. Apparently, ____'s name was mentioned in the thread. I was unaware of those comments before I wrote that the anonymous poster was "not brave". _____ contacted me privately and I have offered him a personal apology.

Another recent case of secrets made public is the over 7500 emails Hillary Clinton personally sent from her private server while she was Secretary of State. Wikileaks won their release under the Freedom of Information Act and made them public. None of the emails was damning to Ms. Clinton, but at the very least their existence was an embarrassment to her, since some dealt with government business and by law should have been sent from government computers.

Comments

1. Dominique Strauss-Kahn was a spectacularly successful French public servant and politician, having served in the 1990s and early 21st century in a variety of governmental posts. He even ran unsuccessfully for President of France in 2007. From 2007 to 2011 he was Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund, a very prestigious post. He had a reputation for being a fiscal genius.

But a “little folly,” in the words of the Preacher, brought his career and personal reputation crashing down. On May 15, 2011, he was arrested for sexually assaulting a hotel maid in New York—he was actually pulled off an airplane by the police.

Other admired public figures have likewise lost their reputation and become objects of public disgust: think of former presidential candidates Gary Hart and John Edwards, Senator Al Franken, and actor Jussie Smollett for starters. As for clergymen, Cardinal George Pell, formerly Archbishop of Sydney, Australia, later a top adviser to the current pope, was recently sentenced to six years in prison for sexually abusing two boys.

Women are not exempt from “a little folly.” Elizabeth Holmes founded Theranos, a company that claimed to have developed a revolutionary blood test. By early 2018 Forbes Magazine recognized her as the youngest and wealthiest self-made female billionaire ever. The media lauded Holmes as an example of what a woman could achieve in today’s world of business. Then her business and reputation crashed when investigators uncovered fraud on a massive scale, for which a grand jury has recently indicted her.

I don’t want to weary you with more examples. You will have no trouble adding to the list yourself.

2. Verse 2. In biblical symbolism the right often represents the good and the left the bad. See Exodus 15:12, Psalm 98:1, and Acts 2:33, where God’s right hand represents his power and favor. In Jesus’ description of the final judgment he will place the sheep, whom he welcomes into his eternal kingdom, on his right and the goats, who represent those doomed to eternal fire, on the left (Matthew 24:31-46).

In the Bible *right* and *left* have nothing to do with political conservatism and liberalism.¹³

¹³ Right and left as political designations derive from the practice of seating the conservative delegates to the right and the radicals to the left of the presiding officer in the post-revolutionary French National Assembly.

3. Verse 4. If you offend and anger the king (or your boss), don't flee the scene (see also 8:3) and don't argue with him. Calmly mollify him:

A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. *Proverbs 15:1*

4. The hazards of life furnish more examples of our inability to predict our future, a truth the Preacher rings the changes on throughout the book (5:13-14, 7:14, 8:17, 9:11-12).

5. "The lips of a fool consume him." The fool literally talks himself into madness (v. 13). He multiplies words, speaking grandly of the future and of what he will do, even though no man knows the future (v. 14).

6. Rulers who lack the right training (like slaves—see vs. 6-7) or are simply immature (like children—v. 16) bring woe on a country. Henri Christophe and Toussaint L'Ouverture were slaves in Haiti who succeeded in driving out their French colonial masters. Militarily they were successful, but as "emperors" of an independent Haiti they presided over economic collapse and misery.

As for child kings, King Rehoboam, Solomon's own son, is a case in point (1 Kings 12:1-24). He was not a child, but he was an immature young man easily influenced by equally immature peers. True child kings have ruled in various countries at various times; Google *child king* to learn more about them. You will find that most were but the puppets of regents who did their countries harm rather than good.

7. A mid-20th century commentary on v. 18 is the song, *Mañana*, sung by Peggy Lee in 1948. You can listen to it on YouTube. Alert: it's pretty racist by contemporary standards. The last verse of the song most illustrates v. 18:

The window she is broken and the rain is comin' in
If someone doesn't fix it I'll be soaking to my skin
But if we wait a day or two the rain may go away
And we don't need a window on such a sunny day.

Do you know anyone who lives like that?

8. Dynamite makes clearing stumps from a field easier, but handling dynamite has inherent danger for the inexperienced. Similarly, there's no doubt that money makes life under the sun easier (v. 19), but Scripture frequently warns of the spiritual peril of the love of money.

9. The Preacher didn't intend his reference to birds spreading tales to be taken literally (v. 20), but he knew the wise would interpret his words aright. How often are whispered secrets revealed to the world! One simply cannot trust even a close, well-meaning friend to keep a secret. The same is true of deeds done in secret. A Mexican

proverb runs, “I didn’t think the blood would reach the river.” The English equivalent is, “Murder will out.”

Solomon is not speaking of the Final Judgment here, where every thought will be revealed and where we will have to give account of every word spoken in private as well as public, He affirms that truth in the very last verse of his book, but here he is speaking of what happens under the sun, warning the reader to avoid the anger of those with power to do us harm by guarding our lips even in private.

Chapter 11

Introduction

Verses 1-4 continue the string of proverbs begun in chapter 10. The remaining verses reprise observations we've encountered earlier.

Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. Some commentators suggest that to “cast your bread upon the waters” (v. 1) means to send grain ships off to market. Few of us are grain merchants. What do the Preacher’s words mean for us?
2. Is v. 2 equivalent to, “Don’t put all your eggs into one basket,” or to the advice of financial advisers to diversify one’s investments? If not, what is the Preacher advising?
3. Verse 3 states facts known to all. What is the meaning of those facts for a wise man?
4. What is the meaning of v. 4 for us who are not farmers?
5. Verse 6 explains a previous verse in this chapter. What is it?
6. Sum up vs. 7-10 in a sentence or two.

Answers to Questions

1. Some commentators suggest that to “cast your bread upon the waters” (v. 1) means to send grain ships off to market. Few of us are grain merchants. What do the Preacher’s words mean for us?

It may take a while for our efforts to produce results (“after many days,” v. 1). Adopt a prudent course for your life and stick with it patiently as you wait for it to pay dividends.

2. Is v. 2 equivalent to, “Don’t put all your eggs into one basket,” or to the advice of financial advisers to diversify one’s investments? If not, what is the Preacher advising?

Yes, it is basically equivalent to “Don’t put all your eggs in one basket.” Diversify indeed, for no one investment or activity is absolutely certain of success in this world under the sun.

3. Verse 3 states facts known to all. What is the meaning of those facts for a wise man?

a. Even though life is full of unexpected surprises, some events *can* be foreseen and predicted. Don’t plan a picnic if the clouds are darkening in the hope that maybe this time it won’t rain.

b. Some events yield results, whether good or evil, that will not change on their own. Once the tree has fallen, it remains where it fell. One can move a fallen tree, but it will not move itself. Don’t expect bad things to get better if you just wait long enough.

4. What is the meaning of v. 4 for us who are not farmers?

Verse 3 is the flip side of verse 2a. While darkening clouds mean rain is certain, mere wind and gray clouds don’t necessarily lead to rain. One can be so cautious and fearful that something bad is bound to come that he does nothing. There are foolish risks and there are necessary risks; the wise man can evaluate them properly.

5. Verse 6 explains a previous verse in this chapter. What is it?

It elucidates the meaning of v. 2.

6. Sum up vs. 7-10 in a sentence or two.

Be happy and enjoy the pleasures of life while you are young, for the day of death comes sooner than you think, when you will not be able to enjoy life (see Chapter 12!) Only remember, God will bring all you do into judgment. The clear implication of the Preacher’s words is that some of youth’s pleasures are not only vanity, but violations of God’s law for which one will have to give account. See Comment 2.

Comments

1. Verses 1-4 seem to be advice for making a living. It may take a while for our efforts to produce results (“after many days,” v. 1) Eschew get-rich-quick schemes and plan for the long haul.

Don’t put all your eggs in one basket. Diversify your investments, since any particular endeavor may end badly (v. 2).

Don’t ignore signs that always point to a certain outcome: if the clouds are low and black, rain is sure to come, and you need to act accordingly—don’t be heedless or in a state of denial (v. 3).

Some events produce a lasting result, no matter how much you hope things will change for the better on their own: the tree on the ground is not going to move (v. 3).

Verse 4 may be a warning to watch for signs that a particular bad outcome is bound to result from a proposed activity (the wind will blow the sown seed everywhere but where you want; the rain may ruin the mown hay while it lies on the ground.) On the other hand, v. 4 may be intended to encourage the pessimist to go ahead with what needs to be done (“nothing ventured, nothing gained.”) If you are always thinking about what may go wrong you will never do anything. Verse 6 suggests this interpretation for v. 4.

2. By this point in the book the reader may be discouraged with life. Verses 7-10 provide a partial (at least) corrective to pessimism. It is pleasant to live here under the sun. We ought to rejoice in the days of our lives, in spite of the fact that the days of darkness will be many (see chapter 12) and the fact that all our striving is vanity.

“Enjoy yourself, it’s later than you think,” a song popular in the 1950s approximates the Preacher’s advice. First sung by Guy Lombardo and the Royal Canadians and later covered by Doris Day, you can hear it on YouTube. However, the song doesn’t mention that for all you do God will call you into judgment.

Young people find it easier to rejoice and be happy in their day to day life than the aged (see chapter 12). Youth look forward to the future; they have desires, ambitions, and vigor that are but memories to the old. The Preacher encourages the young to shake off their worries (they have them too) and enjoy life while they can; but he also cautions them that God will bring them into judgment at the end of days.

The Preacher will continue in that vein in the first part of chapter 12.

Chapter 12

Introduction

Chapter 12 segues from 11:9-10, which is addressed to the young, into a reflection on old age, followed by concluding remarks.

Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. Why should the young, who have so much life ahead of them, think about the end of life?
2. Verses 2-4 picture aspects of old age. What do the following figures represent?
 - a. The light of the sun and moon and stars are darkened.
 - b. The clouds return after rain.
 - b. The keepers of the house tremble.
 - c. The strong men are bent.
 - d. The grinders cease because they are few.
 - e. Those who look through the window are dimmed.

f. The doors on the street are shut.

3. Verses. 4b-5 picture more aspects of old age. What do each of the phrases tell what it's like to be old?

4. What do the figures of v. 6 represent?

5. Youth is vanity (11:10) and old age is vanity (12:8). From birth to death all is vanity. Of what value then are the words of the wise? (vs. 11-12)

6. Is there any value in books other than those containing the wisdom of the one Shepherd? (vs. 11b-12)

7. Bearing that in mind, how is the wise man to live? (v. 12)

Answers to Questions

1. Why should the young, who have so much life ahead of them, think about the end of life?

Remember Him now, before the evil days come, in which life no longer brings pleasure. Then you may be in such discomfort that your mind is fixed on your infirmities and you don't think about God.

2. Verses 2-4 picture aspects of old age. What do the following figures represent?

a. The light of the sun and moon and stars are darkened.

Life is dreary.

b. The clouds return after rain.

One ailment succeeds another. Just when you've recovered from one illness or disorder, some other malady appears.

b. The keepers of the house tremble.

These would be the arms.

c. The strong men are bent.

These would be the legs.

d. The grinders cease because they are few.

You start to lose your teeth.

e. Those who look through the window are dimmed.

Your eyes fail; perhaps cataracts form.

f. The doors on the street are shut.

You grow deaf.

3. Verses. 4b-5 picture more aspects of old age. What do each of the phrases tell what it's like to be old?

a. You have trouble sleeping; the least little sounds wakes you.

b. "All the daughters of song are brought low" possibly means that music, indeed all entertainment, ceases to please.

c. "The almond tree blossoms": your hair turns white.

d. "The grasshopper drags itself along": You have no energy. You move slowly, with effort.

e. “Desire fails”: This may refer to sexual desire. Remember King David in his old age (1 Kings 1:1-4).

See Comments 3 and 4 for an expanded discussion of these figures.

4. *What do the figures of v. 6 represent?*

The precise symbolism is uncertain, but they all refer somehow to death. We observe that in all cases something is broken so that it is ruined.

5. *Youth is vanity (11:10) and old age is vanity (12:8). From birth to death all is vanity. Of what value then are the words of the wise? (vs. 11-12)*

The words of the wise are like cattle goads: they keep us from wandering from the proper path.

6. *Is there any value in books other than those containing the wisdom of the one Shepherd? (vs. 11b-12)*

Not insofar as showing us the meaning of life and giving direction for living is concerned.

7. *Bearing that in mind, how is the wise man to live? (v. 12)*

“Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.” Why should we live this way? Because God will bring all our deeds into judgment. Then, if not before, we will realize that everything under the sun that we desired and strove for was vanity. Then all will know that they should have lived with eternity in view.

Comments

1. It is important for us to remember our Creator when we are young, for the infirmities of daily life tend to dominate our thoughts when we are old. Aches and pains, limitations on what we are able to do, the inability to enjoy the pleasures of the table, of making love, and of sleep are ever on our minds. The Preacher goes on to describe those frailties and ailments in figures which are easy to understand—especially if one is old.
2. Comparing a failing body to a falling down house was the theme of *This Old House*, a song written and sung by Stuart Hamblen in 1954. Immensely popular (it rose to the top of the charts), it has been covered by Rosemary Clooney, the Statler Brothers, and others. You can hear several versions on YouTube.
3. Verse 4: The elderly rise up at the song of a bird, that is, they wake up early, at the crack of dawn, when birds begin to sing. The phrase does not necessarily mean that they can hear the birds (see v. 4a, “the doors on the street are shut;” see Comment 3, below.) The phrase may simply mean that the elderly are light sleepers and wake up too early.
4. Verses 4 and 5 contain some figures hard to interpret with confidence.

- a. What are the “daughters of song” of v. 4? The New International Version (NIV) and the New Living Translation (NLT) interpret them as the songs of birds that wake an old person much too early:

when people rise up at the sound of birds,
but all their songs grow faint. *NIV*

Now you rise at the first chirping of the birds,
but then all their sounds will grow faint. *NLT*

On the other hand, it may simply mean that the old are often hard of hearing, so that they no longer enjoy the pleasures of music.

- b. As for the grasshopper dragging itself along, perhaps the NLT has captured the meaning with the paraphrase:

you drag along without energy like a dying grasshopper

The New American Bible (NAB) has:

the locust grows sluggish

Both translations express the thought that old age is a time of physical weakness.

- c. The phrase “desire fails” in the ESV is a paraphrase for “the caper berry has no effect,” which is how several modern translations render it. Apparently the caper berry was an ancient aphrodisiac. The elderly frequently lack sexual interest or ability.

d. Verse 5b. Some commentators suggest that the blossoming of the almond tree refers to one's hair turning white when old. It is impossible to know for certain what the Preacher's figure represents here

5. Commentators have speculated on the symbolism in v. 6, but all we can be sure of is that the figures refer in some way to death.

6. In 3:21 The Preacher asked

Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth?

He answers his own question in 12:7

the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

7. Verse 9 is one more indicator that the Preacher was King Solomon. Solomon collected many of the proverbs in the Book of Proverbs.