

Devotional comments on the book of Ecclesiastes

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Contents

A Guide To The Reader	3
Ecclesiastes 1	3
Ecclesiastes 2	9
Ecclesiastes 3	12
Ecclesiastes 4	17
Ecclesiastes 5	20
Ecclesiastes 6	23
Ecclesiastes 7	26
Ecclesiastes 8	32
Ecclesiastes 9	36
Ecclesiastes 10	38
Ecclesiastes 11	40
Ecclesiastes 12	42

A Guide To The Reader

Pastor recommends that to obtain maximum benefit from his comments you read in full from the Bible every reference whenever one appears. Otherwise the reading of the comments is simply a skimming over the surface. They are rather designed to make you stop and meditate and even look up further references as the Holy Spirit guides you. Do pray before you read that the Holy Spirit will be your Tutor and that the time you spend will be time spent with Him.

Ecclesiastes 1

It is essential to begin the study of Ecclesiastes by reading 1 Kings 11. At the beginning of Solomon's reign we read in 1 Kings 3.1 that "Solomon made affinity with Pharaoh king of Egypt, and took Pharaoh's daughter and brought her into the city of David (1 Kings 3.1). And in verse 3 we read that "Solomon loved the LORD." Here is a believer whose clinging sin was the love of women, many women and the acceptance of their gods. The acceptance of their gods brought with it the acceptance of their norms and culture. There were catastrophic results for the nation because of Solomon's sin; and sorrow in his own life. About 600 years later, Nehemiah could say, to justify his action of contending with mixed marriages (Nehemiah 13.26), "Did not Solomon king of Israel sin by these things? Yet among many nations was there no king like him, who was beloved of his God, and God made him king over all Israel: nevertheless even him did outlandish women cause to sin."

In 1 Kings 11.39 it is written, "I will for this (for the sake of God's promise to David of the Messiah of David's seed) afflict the seed of David, but not for ever."

Solomon personally was afflicted, but not for ever. The Lord's people, His seed, are afflicted for their indwelling sin, but not for ever. The word translated Preacher in the Hebrew means "gathered" or "gatherer" and suggests that here is a man who has repented and who is gathering others around him to teach them repentance and restoration, in the faith which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In the Greek the word translated Preacher is Ecclesiastes. The word "ecclesia" comes from a word which means the calling of an assembly. The New Testament word for church is ecclesia. It is an assembling of those called out from the world. A member of such an assembly was, in Greek days, called an ecclesiastes. It is used here in the sense of the spokesman of such a gathering.

We are left in no doubt as to the author of this inspired book. It is Solomon, for no other son of David was king. Its place lies between the wisdom of Christ which was given him, and therefore given to the church, in accordance with 1 Kings 3. 9-12, the first example of the exercising of this wisdom being found at 1 Kings 3.16-28. Like all things it looks easy when you know how but couldn't be exercised without the Spirit of the Lord. Let us ever pray for the Saviour's wisdom. Its place lies between the wisdom of Christ exercised in faith and in the course of life's duties. Then comes Ecclesiastes which represents the thoughts of a backsliding state. It is a backsliding state, for we know that Solomon loved the Lord, and was loved by Him (1 Kings 3.3; 2 Samuel 12.24,25). Then comes Song of Solomon which, even if it had been

written earlier, has been placed where it is by the Holy Spirit to declare the love between the Saviour and His people. The sequence then of these works of Solomon is firstly the wisdom that is to be had in Christ; then, secondly, the experience of backsliding (which would also resonate, when declared, with unbelievers coming under the sound of the gospel); and thirdly the love of a believer for the Saviour when restored and the Saviour's unceasing love for him/her.

Ecclesiastes is probably just one sermon with its text 1.2 "Vanity of vanities, vanity of vanities; all is vanity" and its conclusion at 12.13,14-15, "let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter."

1.2. The expression "vanity of vanities" is a way of expressing the highest (perhaps one should say lowest) degree of vanity while at the same time implying the logical conclusion of that to which it tends. The word means not so much "vanity" as we would now use the word in the sense of "showing off"; though the expression is derived from the basic sense of emptiness, because it means a vaunting of that which is not backed up by reality or because no reality lies behind it. So it means "empty" and "emptiness." "Pointless," "without purpose." "Pointless" gets the sense well for that is how much of life seems if there is no sense of destiny or purpose to one who has no faith or has fallen away, however temporarily, from that faith.

What a strange thing for a preacher to affirm! We are not to understand him preaching while he is still in a state of backsliding, for that would draw others after him. His purpose, as a repentant sinner returning to the fold, is to redeem others who have been in their own way through a like experience. And he reaches out to any others today whose worldliness and grief has overwhelmed them and at the end come back to haunt them. Turn to the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.

All is not vanity. Though a cynical, world weary sinner might feel it to be so, even such need to be plucked as brands from the burning (Jude 23).

It would be good at this stage to have in our minds some other texts on vanity. In Genesis 3 (the word is not used) but "when the woman saw that the tree was...to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof...and the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked." Such wisdom! Here is the origin of shame. The world's wisdom, our natural bent, leads to a wisdom that is no wisdom and does not satisfy and oftentimes leads to shame.

David declared of his opponent, "If he come to see me, he speaketh vanity" (Psalm 41.6). Thus will the words be with which we are opposed for the sake of the gospel. It is not too much to think that Solomon would have been influenced by the psalms of his father David. David also writes, "Trust in him at all times; ye people, pour out your heart before him: God is a refuge for us. Selah. Surely men of low degree are vanity, and men of high degree are a lie: to be laid in the balance, they are altogether lighter than vanity. Trust not in oppression, and become not vain in robbery: if riches increase, set not your heart upon them" (Psalm 62. 8-10).

"Therefore their days did he consume in vanity, and their years in trouble" (Psalm 78.33).

"The getting of treasures by a lying tongue is a vanity tossed to and fro of them that seek death" (Proverbs 21.6).

“For the creature (that is, creation) was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope” (Romans 8.20). There is a certain pointlessness in all of nature’s cycle which has been enjoined by the Creator because of man’s sin. But nature will one day be consummated (Romans 8.21).

1.3. Here is the opening point of the sermon. The preacher asks his hearers to consider, “What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?” One can imagine that many with no God, or who had lived as if there were no God, would find themselves nodding assent. Solomon had himself taught, (Proverbs 14.23) “in all labour there is profit” but it doesn’t always seem like that in moments of weariness, stress and hardship. We know we earn our living by it but then what is the point of living? So it is possible our thoughts may run. Without faith in Christ, weariness may turn to failure of nerve and giving up; stress to breakdown; hardship to cynicism. Even where there is faith it may become clouded (whether through sinfulness or not) and cause us to swerve aside from our faith. The gospel encourages us to “lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees” (Hebrews 12.12).

1.4. Not only is this a very frequent theme of scripture it is also how we think from time to time. It is a frequent theme of scripture from which we conclude that it an essential step in the reasoning which may turn our hearts under the influence of the Holy Spirit to think on eternal things. When prophetically in Isaiah John the Baptist asks what is to be the opening theme of his gospel message he is told to cry, “All flesh is grass, and all the goodness thereof is as the flower of the field: the grass withereth, the flower fadeth; because the spirit of the Lord bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever” (Isaiah 40. 6-8). This is the beginning of the gospel. Peter quotes this passage. “All flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: but the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you” (1 Peter 1. 24-25).

“Wise men die, likewise the fool and the brutish person perish, and leave their wealth to others. Their inward thought is, that their houses shall continue for ever, and their dwelling places to all generations; they call their lands after their own names. Nevertheless man being in honour abideth not: he is like the beasts that perish. This their way is their folly: yet their posterity approve their sayings” (Psalm 49. 10-13).

To any given generation the earth may appear to abide for ever. But it is not so. “The day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up” (2 Peter 3.10). However, John could write, “I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away” (Revelation 21.1). It is, however, a powerful incentive to turn for salvation to the Lord Jesus Christ when we apprehend how rapidly our lives are drawing to their conclusion.

1.5. The daily input of the Lord into this world by means of the sun is enormous. What appears to be its daily cycle, but is actually the cycle of the earth, has never ceased since its creation in thousands of years. We must not be lulled into a sense of boredom because a thing is repeated, for the sun’s beneficent influence, for example, is unquantifiable in its repetition. Nor must we react to habitual sequences with dullness, because that leads to carelessness and

ultimately to the sort of unbelief expressed in the words, “Where is the promise of his coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation” (2 Peter 3.4) concerning which Peter argues that it clearly is not the case and that such reasoning stems from the desire to reject God, for they are willingly ignorant, they take no steps to counteract this belief which is manifestly untrue.

1.6. The movements of the winds are not arbitrary as a cynic might be tempted to think but by them the Lord regulates weather systems on a short rein, on a daily basis, thereby bringing to bear small or large weather systems to bring disaster or alleviation from disaster, or anything in between, across the inhabitants of the world.

1.7. The movement of waters and their precipitation is incessant and purposeful. The sheer regularity and scale of it is beyond what we as individuals can take in and therefore we easily dismiss it as simply one of the customary things of the world. It is a regularity, but, again, it is very purposeful for the sustaining of the world as we know it. There will be no more sea in the new earth (Revelation 21.1).

1.8. Solomon builds up the power of his argument. Constant labour of any sort is tiring and exacting; sightseeing may be a craving but brings only the desire to see more; and concert going may likewise begin a pleasant enough round of passing the time. All in all it goes nowhere and gets us nowhere, save to pass the time endlessly. This is all there is to unfaith; a faith and a purpose will in some measure alleviate this way of thinking. But then it all turns on what we put our faith in. Other than the Lord Jesus Christ “there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4.12).

1.9. In this verse we have one of the briefest and most famous of sayings. “There is no new thing under the sun.” In different forms and guises, in different ages and cultures, the same principles are always at work with the same results, albeit worked out in different situations and with different personnel. This is the rationale for studying history, for if we understand the reasons for the events of one age we may well understand what is happening in another. If it is our own age we may neither have the understanding to see it or the determination to avoid the unpalatable consequences which history would teach.

1.10. We see from the very first verses of scripture that this statement is true. Is light new? Does creation remain? Is temptation new? Is faith new? Is murder new? Is anger new? Is the falling of the countenance (the putting on of a long face) new? All these things and many others which abide may be found in the first four chapters of Genesis.

1.11. History may record some things, as may unconsulted archives, but generally speaking we as individuals are largely ignorant of those who have lived in our towns before us, of family members of generations ago and even the retirement scenes of formerly prominent individuals with whose names we were familiar in their heyday.

Who will remember us? It is pointless, as Psalm 49.11-13 suggests, even to attempt to leave something memorable behind us for the sake of our own benefit. No, what abides is that God not only remembers us, but will raise up believers in Christ to live for ever with Him. Every time we read a list in scripture it reminds us that what are simply names to us are people

known to God in every aspect of their lives, and in many cases are still alive with Him in the glory, for all live unto Him (Luke 20.38). When Aaron bore the names of the 12 tribes before the Lord (Exodus 28.12) it was to teach the people that believers are never forgotten by our great High Priest, the Lord Jesus Christ, even God, the Three-in One Himself.

1.12-13. There did not appear to be any weariness associated in the giving of the gift of wisdom or the exercising of it in 1 Kings 3. 11-28 any more than there was in the speaking in tongues (languages which had never been laboriously learned) at Pentecost (Acts 2. 1-11). However, it is true that even aptitudes which we have must be improved with difficulty and practice or study. But to speak of “sore travail” suggests that this study is done in an unbelieving way, with no rejoicing in heart that the Lord should have bestowed such insight and such a world of things to be discovered. It reveals the way of the world, not the walk of faith.

If a man would not work neither should he eat (2 Thessalonians 3.10). Work is not always available, but if a man will not work neither let him eat. Nevertheless it will help to keep ourselves in the love of God as we refresh our attitudes to our work by reading with delight Matthew 6. 24-34. There the root of our trouble with regard to our work is revealed – we serve two masters. The one by whom we are employed. And our own leisure funding. A believer is not to be doubleminded. His relaxation is legitimate, but it must always be to serve the one great end of his life, namely to serve the Lord Jesus Christ. There was an old saying, which ran, “the workman does not defraud his master when he pauses to whet his scythe.”

God hath given this sore travail (Genesis 3.17-19) and even the king is not exempt.

1.14. Not only are things vain but they are also often vexatious. They bring complexities, unfairnesses, inequalities and responsibilities for matters which are sometimes out of one’s own control. And many other things also. The spirit may be vexed by the suffering of people and animals (but read again Romans 8. 20-23), by watching loved ones in pain, by observing tragedies and living with the aftermath of accidents in the workplace or outdoors. If we do not behold, understand, acquiesce and welcome the Lord’s providences then we have no means to handle these events other than in a disbelieving way. Rather let us seek as believers to align ourselves with Paul when he wrote, “For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ’s sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong” (2 Corinthians 12.8-10).

1.15. Indeed, “can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? Then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil” (Jeremiah 13.23). But change is possible upon repentance. Nothing is impossible with God (Genesis 18.14; Jeremiah 32.17; Zechariah 8.6; Luke 1.37; Matthew 19.26. If you read all these examples, meditate on the varying circumstances in which the Lord’s power to reverse man’s situations is revealed.) Repentance may work wonderful changes; and whereas it does not always please God to alter the effects or consequences of our actions (as with Solomon and the division of the kingdom) he turns the wrath of man to praise him and restrains the remainder of that wrath and the sin which caused it (Psalm 76.10); and works all things together for good to them that love Him (Romans

8.28). We should not do evil, cheaply thinking that God will put it right (for He may not) or through not caring anyway. We are certainly not to do evil that good may come (Romans 3.8).

1.16. “Communing with our own heart” is a beautiful way of expressing that with which we are all most familiar. But it must be allied in a believer with meditating on the scriptures and, more than that, doing so in the conscious presence of the Saviour and with His Spirit as tutor. To have had more wisdom than any, and yet to have thrown it away, is the height of folly. It is always imprudent to throw away something you have for something you haven’t yet obtained, on the offchance it may turn out even better. It never does. We build, if things are indeed to be better, on the foundations on what we already have that is good, not by rejecting them. Experience is much, but it is not everything. It did not prevent Solomon going off the rails, as we say.

1.17. We must be careful what we give our hearts over to. Good or bad, these things soon become uncontrollable, because “the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?” (Jeremiah 17.9). It may start with something good and laudable; but it doesn’t take long for a heart “given over” (the expression implies abandonment, and abandonment in this realm has to be to Satan) to know madness and folly, “madness” being understood as recklessness and lack of judgment.

1.18. Christ’s wisdom (1 Corinthians 1.30) is obtainable for each and every situation in the life of a believer. You can never have too much. But, on the other hand, “hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?” and He has declared, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent” (1 Corinthians 1.18-20). The preaching of the gospel is foolishness to them that perish (1 Corinthians 1.18) but unto us who are saved, and therefore gifted with the wisdom of Christ, it is the power of God.

To be wise in some things (with the wisdom of this world) and ridiculously foolish in others (say, for example, in marital affairs) is very vexing and would appear to be a conundrum, but for the clear teaching of the scripture that the wisdom of this world is folly. Unless the Lord teach His senators wisdom (Psalm 105.22) the nations will get themselves inextricably involved in complicated financial matters and matters of warfare. The legal systems will become “legalistic;” which is to say that, in an effort to cover every eventuality, commonsense will be overruled and the law will be thought to be an ass. And so on in all the professions of life. And if church officers are not taught wisdom and seek it before every meeting they will fall into the same trap of accomplishing church business in a worldly way, assuming that the accepted way in which the world does things or thinks, or even in the way in which they previously proceeded (with guidance on that occasion most certainly from the Lord) is necessarily right on this next occasion.

Wisdom is the application of learning to given situations. In and of itself it should not present grief. Study for study’s sake is a weariness to the flesh (12.12) and much learning was wrongly perceived to have given Paul the madness with which Festus thought he was afflicted (Acts 26.24). Knowledge in and of itself should not increase sorrow. But the obtaining of it by much study may; and the realisation of the sins and sorrows of societies may. Once a person has lost faith there is no ultimate meaning in existing, no purpose to impart direction or focus to life, very little in the way of ideals to aim at and no vision to empower one’s destiny.

Ecclesiastes 2

2.1. The word “I” begins the first eight verses and might as well be said to begin the first thirteen. That little word “I” occurs in every verse except one in the first twenty verses. We may very easily lapse into self-will, self-centredness and selfishness without realising it. Others see that we are domineering and manipulative and it betrays itself in our manner and our speech and, though they will not tell us to our face, they find our iniquity to be hateful (Psalm 36.2). A child growing up only has for his earliest days a sense of himself and what it wants. A child needs to be taught, because of inborn sin, to think of others; but for a grown man to demonstrate these traits, and deliberately at that, is overbearing.

The way out of this impasse is through the word of God which teaches us first of all in this connection “not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith” (Romans 12.3). The next step, to bring us out of ourselves and to dethrone “me,” is “to know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; and to esteem them very highly in love for their work’s sake. And be at peace among yourselves” (1 Thessalonians 5.12-13). Those who are the centre of their own lives are often argumentative, self-opinionated concerning many matters and often critical of those who are actually leading the way in the local church and Christian service.

This is a considered, deliberately chosen, approach to life. “I said in mine heart” (2.1); “I said of laughter” (2.2); “I sought in mine heart” (2.3) and even if it were true that this was simply a short-term choice for an experiment, it has to be said that if any of us embark on such a course it is a falling away from Christ, Whose will and direction should be sought in every matter. Particularly is this a dangerous course for young people for whom experimentation may be their ruination to be regretted for ever.

Hedonism is the technical name for the pursuit of pleasure. Because we live in a predominantly hedonistic society this is a particular danger for us. Many societies down the years have been hedonistic – “there is no new thing under the sun” (1.10). Such a society is characterized by the pursuit of pleasure. Work is performed very often, that is if we are employed at all, to enable us to spend on leisure. It is not true of everybody, of course, but it is a danger that Christians must be aware of. “This also is vanity.” It is not the solution to life. It does not provide an escape. It is a cul-de-sac and at some point we will have to retrace our steps and re-think the whole matter of where our life is heading.

2.2. The appeal of the court jester was to be ridiculously and exaggeratedly funny but always with an inherent sadness, with a sense of tragedy, that engaged the affections of those who saw him. Perhaps he was employed to be a picture, without the majority realising the purpose of his presence, of where sheer pleasure leads. It does not drive away tragedy. It leaves a person emptier, a long while detached from reality, when real difficulties strike. Laughter is mad in the sense of careless, unfeeling often; a front, perhaps, lest real emotions be betrayed.

2.3. Wine probably stands here for any form of strong drink. Lonely and isolated drinking bouts destroy a person very rapidly and lead very soon to a sense that time and life are slipping away pointlessly.

A remarkable combination is described here, which many try, and which does not work ultimately though it seems to work. That is, to combine sin, maybe gross sin, maybe debilitating sin, with periods of intense normality. In Solomon's case carrying on studying wisdom while drinking freely. The one disqualifies the other eventually. The time will come when wisdom is called for and a person will not be in a fit state to impart it and may in "half-seas-over" folly even decry the circumstances of the one who needs top-level help or justice. Any combination of hidden and persistent sin and the carrying on of a "normal" life leads to a sense of hypocrisy, of double standards and dealing combined with a sense of self-loathing. "A double minded man is unstable in all his ways" (James 1.8).

Societies that are bored will turn to drink. If it was in Solomon's mind to enter into their experience it brought him down to their level, whereas the faith which is in Christ Jesus our Lord, and the full-orbed living out of that faith, is designed to bring men "out of darkness and into his (Christ's) marvellous light" (1 Peter 2.9); "to open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins" (Acts 26.18). "Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them" (Ephesians 5.11). This is the heart of the failure of Solomon's philosophy here.

2.4-8. We speak of "workaholics" by which we mean those who immerse themselves in their work to escape the unwelcome down-side of life. Though the work Solomon mentions here was not escapism but deliberately sought out the effect is the same. In his case he probably did not do these things himself, but organized and supervised them. Had he lived in our own age he might have commended himself for providing labour. We enjoy in the UK many stately mansions and formal gardens and parks, the work and legacy of rich landowners in their generations. These are the great ones of the earth. "So I was great" (2.9). "And my wisdom remained with me." It almost seems that Solomon is seeing how far he can go in worldliness and carnality before losing the gift of God. It introduces the theme in verse 2 "yet acquainting my heart with wisdom" and virtually closes it here. There is also the element of pride expressed in his words "more than all that were before me."

2. 10-11. Solomon now declares that the earnings from his work licensed him to purchase whatever his eyes desired. This self-confessed aberration of Solomon is corrected in the New Testament. "All that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world" (1 John 2.16). This chosen way of Solomon is not of the Father, and we should not follow in his footsteps, even if in the midst of success and with money to spare. The gratification of our lusts is not the Lord's appointed way for believers. "The LORD is the portion of mine inheritance and of my cup: thou maintainest my lot" (Psalm 16.5). "The LORD's portion is his people" (Deuteronomy 32.9).

Pride exacerbates success with its glory and power. "I looked on all...that my hands had wrought." A sense of gleaming satisfaction, yet the total achievement in the midst of it all is admitted to be "vanity and vexation of spirit." All that wealth brought no profit. Whatever the spare wealth could be spent on afforded no inner satisfaction. It could not be found anywhere. A wealthy king with access to the world's then known resources declares that no ultimate satisfaction, other than that which was entirely fleeting, could be derived anywhere. What an

admission! We do not need to “reinvent the wheel” as the saying is. Let us turn without distraction or delay to the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.

2.12. Indeed, “what can the man do that cometh after the king?” If the king cannot obtain what his soul needs with all his resources, what can others hope to do? Well, his subjects can look elsewhere, to the Saviour.

2.13-17. Here, the inevitable cynicism of self-induced failure overwhelms the king. Whether arrived at by logic or by gut feeling it will lead to the same conclusion, “I hated life” (2.17). Life is wonderful and it is complex; but if it once occurs to us that the sum total of all that we have lived for, indeed all that we are, is to no good purpose then we will hate our lives, particularly when the pains and tragedies of life overtake us. The antidote is to turn to the Saviour. “Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now have I kept thy word. Thou art good, and doest good; teach me thy statutes...It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes” (Psalm 119.67-68,71).

In Solomon’s case he arrived at his conclusion by logic. He reasoned that whether we are wise or foolish we all die. Now is folly or good sense the means to the same end? Or, if they take divergent courses, will it amount to the same thing anyway? Yes, death. If that is the case, does it really matter to have an abundance of wisdom, or to be more clever than another and study hard? You can see the cynicism coming on like a mist enshrouding all his thinking concerning life. He is going to be thoroughly befogged.

Well Solomon is remembered. A fool may be remembered by those nearest him. But it would be a shame to be remembered only for folly and as an example to be learned from and whose manner of life is to be avoided.

Again, it would be good at this point to read Genesis 3.17-21 and think of why it is that work is enjoined by God. Originally “the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it” (Genesis 2.15). There was no toil, only delight and pleasure, attached. Toil was the resulting punishment for Adam’s disobedience and consequent fall. If the toil of work is aggravated by continuing disobedience, forsaking the promised redemption held out to Adam and through the Lord Jesus Christ to his descendants who believe, then it follows that it will be as described in verse 17:- “I hated life; because the work that is wrought under the sun is grievous unto me: for all is vanity and vexation of spirit.” It is the spirit that is fundamentally and ultimately troubled. It is the need of the soul that must be addressed if life’s apparent meaninglessness is to be turned to purpose, redemption, and everlasting life of an excellent quality.

2.18-21. All this is compounded by the thought that what has been hard worked for has to be left behind to others at death. There may be no time to enjoy such things. “Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided?” (Luke 12.20). Read the Lord’s parable at this point in Luke 12.16-21 with His additional comments in Luke 16.22-31.

Churches that have been sound in faith and doctrine over many generations have within our lifetime lost their distinctive doctrines. They have ceased to be the “salt of the earth” (Matthew

5.13). Well might their succession of former pastors reflect, if it were possible, “all my labour wherein I have laboured, and wherein I have showed myself wise under the sun” has been dismantled in one generation.

Despair now creeps on apace (2.20). Literally, “despair” means the loss of hope. “I went about to cause my heart to despair.” All his comings and goings; all the comings and goings of the modern world as it is written, “many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased” (Daniel 12.4) are, without Christ, self-inflicted and self-damaging commuting through life in search of work and pleasure alike, but all, for the most part, distracting and diverting from the true well-being of faith in Christ.

Sometimes in a family an excellent standard of living has been attained with benefit for all by a wise predecessor, only for it all to be squandered in one round of licentious living. Read again Luke 15.11-32 and note how divisive to family loyalty the squanderer becomes, for the portion that remains is a smaller inheritance than it would otherwise have been and this is vanity and a great evil to the “older brother.”

2.22-23. “Rest in the night.” We all know about failure to sleep for worry. Though believers have less cause than the followers of Solomon to conclude that all is vanity, for they are inheritors of eternal life, nevertheless they feel earth’s sorrows too and may be tempted to fill those sleepless hours with vain thoughts. Paul and Silas’ “songs in the night” (Acts 16.25; Job 35.10) sprang from faith though they were in pain. God our Maker gives songs in the night to those who fix their thoughts and hopes upon the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.

2.24-26. Verse 24 is true provided the perspective is right. One might sit at the top of a hill and look east and north and see the pleasant sea; and look west and see the rolling country; while, if he were to look southwards, he might see industry, pollution and beggarly homes. Everything in verse 24 is absolutely correct for a believer in Christ. But the “nothing better” takes on a more subdued hue if it means that simply eating and drinking is the best that can be hoped for, good though it is within its limitations of mere survival. While it is true that “the daily round, the common task, should furnish all we ought to ask” if we are thinking about contentment; but heaven should be the aspect of our prayers.

It is a false conclusion that the sinner heaps up riches for the believer to enjoy. This world is not his home and his portion is the Lord in heaven. There is still more than a little cynical resignation here, though verses 24 and 26 bring a little brightness into an otherwise dull scene. However, there is a truth here also. Every accomplishment of mankind, whether by a believer or unbeliever, is available for later generations, believers included, to take advantage of. Every step forward, every advancement of knowledge, may be taken up by a believer and built upon. This much is, of course, true.

Ecclesiastes 3

3.1. This chapter is one of the two most famous chapters in this book, the other being chapter 12. If we are thinking of the whole book as one sermon, maybe we should think of these as two

“purple patches.” Excellency of speech is not for showcasing the skills of the orator, but to make the content memorable to the hearers that they might recall it effectively afterwards. We say that there is a time and place for everything, which is true. But “place” is not mentioned until verse 20 and then not in that sense exactly. Rather the subject is time and significance. There is a time for everything and a significance in its timing and in its purpose.

It is true that there are 24 hours in the day and that we have time to do everything and for everyone. It is dishonouring to the Lord to declare that we do not have enough time for everything. In that event the management of our time has to be seriously questioned before we can address what purpose the Lord has in raining down events upon us in such quick succession or, alternatively, of making significant rest times available to us. So the meaning of “time” in this passage is “appointed time” not simply “available time” though the latter is, of course, appointed by God. If we can master both the usage of time and understand the significance of the time allotted to us, we are well on the way to being well-instructed in the delightful realms of God’s providential dealings with us and to understanding the times in which we live, which is a rather more advanced subject. If we can not only understand with our minds but also with our emotions concerning God’s appointed times, that will also be a major step forward in our Christian pilgrimage. For it follows that if God has appointed a specific time for study (or anything else at all) then we should not be having half an eye on doing something else. We should be fully immersed for that time in what we are doing. This will then lead on to the divine jewel of contentment for what we are doing at any one time will satisfy us, “redeeming the time because the days are evil” (Ephesians 5.16). The scriptures also teach us that the way we use our time has an impact on unbelievers, urging us to “walk in wisdom toward them that are without (that is, without the faith), redeeming the time” (Colossians 4.5).

Again, to understand the purpose of our lives we must first understand the purpose God has for the world, and therefore for the individual members of it. It is too vast a subject to survey here. To study this subject we should begin with Ephesians 1.9 and the surrounding verses concerning “the good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself” and (in verse 11) the predestination of believers “according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will.” What becomes clear is that this purpose is fulfilled in Christ and by gathering believers in Christ into heaven. Within that framework lies the purpose of our lives. “...That we should be to the praise of his glory, who first trusted in Christ” (Ephesians 1.12). Now it is clear that to bring all things to pass for the sake of Christ and His kingdom the Lord must manage every detail of creation and history to that end. The Saviour is “head over all things,” and Head over all things “to the church,” that is, to the sole advantage of that body (Ephesians 1.22-23).

We are ready now to begin to mould our thinking Biblically on the subject of time. This is very important, for we all live within “time” and our usage of it may well have been long conditioned before we became Christians, born-again believers. There may be some reassessment to do. Nothing occurs in the providence of God without a reason or at the wrong time. Though the world uses the expression “to be in the wrong place at the wrong time,” and we understand only too well what is meant, yet it presupposes a purely natural way of looking at things. Yet, though believers look at things in this way, they are not determinists, believing

that though God predestinates, and therefore predestines, He does not do so without taking perfectly into consideration all the make-up of our natures; so that, within most parameters that we are aware of, we are free and certainly not automatons and He also expects us to pray concerning the outcome of events. This is an undeniable mystery but we need to realise this to be able to take on board how we are to react to things we wouldn't choose for ourselves when they happen to us. This would not be an inappropriate time to re-read Hebrews 12.4-11. Times of our lives may be grouped as being seasonal. A time of childhood, youth, manhood or womanhood and old age, for example. A season of training and then of using our expertise and perhaps even of extending the bounds of knowledge. Wherever we live in the world, or at whatever time of history, this is always and everywhere the case.

3.2. It starts with birth as far as the burgeoning awareness of any of us is concerned. Of course, our history lies further back than that, much further even than the nine months of our growth within the womb. In relation to death and dying, it is precisely because "it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment: so Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many" (Hebrews 9.27-28). If any of us come away from the hospital where a dear loved one has died we notice, with some dismay, that the world is carrying on as if nothing had happened. While some are being born, some are dying. I found it quite difficult as a boy (designedly so) to be in detention while others were playing in the sunshine. The experience is shortlived to teach a sharp lesson, but of real, lasting worth. The purposes of our life are played out (worked out) in interaction with the lives of others. So the Lord has appointed it. Our experience of one situation is simultaneous with the opposite experience of another, while contemporary, in some things, with our peers. But even in our own age group where we are all growing in much the same way and learning much the same things as we grow up there may be loving homes for some and broken homes for others and so on.

We may have to start again, in some circumstances. Or what we have begun will last a while, but then we shall have to begin again some new project, or in some new appointment. Beginning again does not necessarily mean destroying the old, but it sometimes does. Society sometimes opts to reverse the building or design strategy of an earlier generation or businesses to restructure.

3.3. According to the scriptures it is a time to kill, for example, if a person is a murderer. There are things which are right for the state to authorise which no individual in his personal capacity must take upon himself to decide or undertake. In that connection not all punishment is retributive; it may rightly be designed, but not primarily designed, to restore. If we have considered, under the heading of "plucking up that which is planted," what might also be termed "breaking down," perhaps we might also consider the breakdown or analysis, whether fiscal or forensic or in any other sphere, with its concomitant result of presenting a balance sheet or solving a crime. It is wonderful in God to create; it is still more wonderful to re-create where first the old must be removed before that which is new can be created whole. Building up may first require dismantling and both require forward thinking.

3.4. Sad and painful times come in many ways. The Lord may appoint them to save us from carelessness in our relationships, our health or our work. The Lord appoints happy times as a foretaste of heaven and as a respite from our labours. Indeed satisfaction, if not laughter, is an

inbuilt reward for work well done. Deep sadness and loss have things to teach us, but so have physical pleasure and movement.

3.5. It is probable that building stones are in mind here. There come times when the old is to be swept away en masse, after a plague or warfare for example, and complete areas rebuilt. And, of course, this may apply to us, as picture language of a totally new beginning with a decided rejection of an old lifestyle and the putting on of a new one in Christ. There are times of separation, as in war or on business; there are times to commence new relationships within the bounds of Christian liberty.

3.6. All manner of experiences are appointed to form a rounded character. Will “getting” bring pride or true wisdom - “with all thy getting get understanding” you recall that Solomon earlier wrote (Proverbs 4.7). Many a ship foundered at sea thereby bankrupting rich businessmen in years gone by. We may lose a day’s work on computer or mislay carefully compiled information. The greater the loss the more significant the testing of our character. Job’s wife bad him, “curse God, and die” (Job 2.9). What, die in sin? Die unforgiven?

There was, for Joseph, a time to lay up in store (Genesis 41.35). There is a time to reject evil lifestyles and bad habits. This summary simply awakens our minds to all the different happenings, all the different opportunities with which God is continually presenting us to yield to the moulding of our lives after righteousness. Sometime we recognise this in theory but find it much more difficult to accept in practice.

3.7. There are times when we must deliberately “rend” that is tear apart, render unfit for further use, old clothing. This is a domestic picture. Maybe we would hoard many old things, long since past their sell-by date. It is quite an emotional wrench to downsize. So the emotional pull is what is signified by “rend;” Referring to the ancient Jewish means of expressing abhorrence by rending their clothes (as in, for example, Genesis 37.29) Joel wrote, “rend your heart and not your garments” (Joel 2.13). Sewing may suggest either patching or making something new; a time to get down to new ideas or to produce new models.

We all recognise that tact requires us to be quiet at times. The psalmist wrote, “I held my peace, even from good” (Psalm 39.2) but soon afterwards came a time to speak, “while I was musing the fire burned: then spake I with my tongue” (Psalm 39.3). Do not be hotheaded or have a rush of blood to the head. Wait for guidance or, in the psalmist’s case, inspiration. Wait for the Lord to direct our steps.

3.8. Sometimes the sterner emotions are proper; we are to love our enemies but the Bible teaches us to hate sin. Paul speaks of “perilous times” (2 Timothy 3.1) for believers, and Daniel prophesies of “troublous times” (Daniel 9.25). “Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin” (Hebrews 12.4). This is our warfare and there are times when we would like to be excused, but it is of the Lord’s appointing. There will come a time when peace shall be taken from the earth (Revelation 6.4). There was war in David’s day and peace in Solomon’s.

3.9. “Time” remains a key factor in the remainder of the chapter but with this verse Solomon’s list comes to a close and he reflects upon what he has so truly written in a backsliding way. “What profit” is it all? The ultimate scripture answer for the believer is in 2 Corinthians 4.17-

5.1, "Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal. For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens." Solomon had lost "sight" of the things which are not seen, which is, in effect, the definition of backsliding. It would not come amiss at this point to read all the passage from Ephesians 4.6 – 5.9.

3.10. A woman's travail is sharp but short. From a backsliding point of view life is a travail, long and unremitting, with not even the prospect of a new-born life at the end. It is a dismal picture without the Lord Jesus Christ.

3.11. "Beautiful in his (its) time." Little things, puppies, cubs, chicks, babies are cute. A man or woman, fit and in prime condition, is beautiful. But we soon decay. Prime time is a short time, and is not to be enjoyed for its own sake else all we desire will vanish with the passing of beauty. What a telling comment is the expression, "he hath set the world in their heart." There are many things which interest us here, but the scripture tells us that "the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows" (1 Timothy 6.10). These interests are like the weeds that choke (Matthew 13.22). "So that" does not mean "in order that" but "with the result that." If you substitute the latter the meaning will become clear:- "he hath set the world in their heart with the result that no man can find out the work that God maketh..." These are the things which separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8.39), as they did in the case of the rich young ruler (Mark 10.21-22).

3.12. Here Solomon's backsliding comes through. There is a good beyond man's labours other than simply rejoicing and doing good. In addition to what we considered above from Ephesians 4, consider also what is written for the believer who, when he is not backsliding, will understand these things fully. "We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2.10).

3.13. Of course, a believer may enjoy as the gift of God all His daily mercies, but these things are simply delightful means to an end, or resting places along life's way to recover strength, not to be enjoyed simply for their own sake.

3.14. Death is irreversible. There are many conditions and occurrences which, though the Lord might do a miracle, are in effect irreversible and it is from these that we learn to trust Him and live in the fear of God. God's ways are indeed perfect and past finding out (Romans 11.33). What comes across here is that, while what Solomon is saying is true, "it is the gift of God" "whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever" it is undermined by his current perspective. It is true also that Job's friends also said some things that were true but what they said was irrelevant to the issue Job was facing because their whole belief system was in error. Folks of all religions or none may believe some things correctly among all the errors of their total faith or unfaith.

3.15. There is no question but that history repeats itself in principle, though not with the same characters and situations. It is also true that God requires an account from us of our past. How

wonderful it is to know that “if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1.9). Without that knowledge the requirement of that which is past is a cause of much trepidation. Still worse, is not to face up to it. To the man who said in the parable, “Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink and be merry,” the Lord Jesus said, “Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee” (Luke 12.19-20). Retirement out of Christ is living on the edge of danger.

3.16-17. Man’s justice is often corrupt, neither does it always take everything into account. However, God’s final judgment day does. There is a time there for a judicial review of every work.

3.18. We can only see our true state in the sight of God if He reveals it to us. A beast has no eternal soul, and if mankind acts as if it had no eternal soul then we are acting like the beasts. Since Adam fell man’s lost estate (condition, standing, status) has not yet been restored but our relation to the beasts is still that of supremacy. Read Psalm 8.4-8.

3.19. Once the notion of man’s eternal soul is taken out of the reckoning then the cynicism of this verse becomes apparent. It is true that we all die and that “nature is red in tooth and claw” but the destinies of man and beast are different; and the destinies of believers and unbelievers differ as widely as heaven from hell.

3.20. They do not all go to one place. If it is merely the grave and the disintegration of our bodies that is being taken into consideration then, within its limits, that is, of course, true.

3.21. But the spirit of man “that goeth upward” must be taken into consideration. Our spirits, our souls are invisible, so we do not know in one sense for we do not see the departure of the human spirit. Because this verse speaks of the spirit of the beast, and beasts do not have eternal souls, we must understand that this verse is only talking about breath and breathing. When breathing ceases both man and beast die. But though it is the end of a beast it is not the end of a man.

3.22. Again, at an earthly level, we shall not see the following generations. But on a spiritual level of course believers will see the glory that is to come. Nothing brings out more clearly the disparity between thinking merely about earthly things and contemplating heavenly things than this verse. The man of this world, or the believer who has temporarily allied himself with this world, can only say his works are his portion. A believer says, “the LORD is the portion of mine inheritance” (Psalm 16.5). Men of the world have their portion in this life alone (Psalm 17.14).

Ecclesiastes 4

4.1. Returning to the theme of vanity, Solomon turns to a different line of thought. This time he begins with the subject of oppression. Oppression is never far away; children meet it first with bullying and thereafter it crops up in various forms of hassle. Twice he uses the expression, “they had no comforter” as something that moved him to the depths of his being.

It is gracious of the Lord Jesus Christ to send us another Comforter, the Holy Spirit, in His physical absence (John 14.16). He knows how His followers would need the comfort which the Holy Spirit brings, not only in the ordinary matters of life but also in the specific oppressions which come upon Christians as such. The days following Solomon would illustrate in the life of the Jewish nation that power was on the side of the oppressors – but these powers were always under the direction of God Himself (Isaiah 14.4).

4.2. But what a conclusion the backslider came to. Better to be dead. Life is so wonderful and full of marvellous capacities that it is the savour of a fatal disease to make life seem worse than death. It is a development of this way of thinking which leads people to say that the dead are at rest. The condition of a dead unbeliever can scarcely be described as rest. Rest from labour it may be but they shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever, being identified in the lake of fire with the devil himself (Revelation 20.10,15).

4.3. This is a weird thought, unless we conclude that Solomon is referring to one who will never be born, seeing that one who is yet to be actually born will experience all the things of which he has been speaking. Better not to be born! Simply to have no life at all, no awareness of any sort, to be a being not in existence, is better than living. These are desperate thoughts and show where unbelief leads. In the earliest days of Job's mourning and affliction he gave vent to such thoughts as these, of which Solomon may well have been aware. He wishes that he had not been, as a hidden untimely birth, as infants which never saw light. Read Job 5.11-19 but realise that as yet Job had not come to a knowledge of eternal life and was in the midst of his anguish and pain. In the midst of grief even the faithful believer might give way for a time till his emotions recover.

4.4-5. If work isn't bad enough, envy of our gifts and accomplishments adds to its drawbacks. It is foolishness to respond by giving up, for then we starve.

4.6. In our study of the book of Proverbs I listed the ones in that book and this which commenced with "Better." This individual proverb seems to be Solomon's conclusion to the balance between work on the one hand and idleness for whatever reason on the other. Sufficiency without shortage; sufficiency without surplus is the middle way he rightly encourages. "Be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee" (Hebrews 13.5). Expansion is the rule of selfish personal profit; true profit would be to walk with God.

4.7-8. In returning to his theme of vanity, Solomon now turned his attention to singleness, perhaps allied to loneliness. It is a haunting verse, "There is one alone, and there is not a second; yea, he hath neither child nor brother: yet there is no end of all his labour." The Lord said, "It is not good that the man should be alone." The Lord Jesus Christ was single. The Holy Spirit moved Paul to write in 1 Corinthians 7.7 "I would that all men were even as I myself. But every man hath his proper gift of God, one after this manner, and another after that." The married state is good; the single state is good. The widow and widower are in the Lord's care. Even if we have no relations, "neither child nor brother" believers are the apple of the Lord's eye. But, unless we are legitimately retired, we must all work. Again, it is sufficient to provide for one's own needs and, if enabled, the needs of the brethren, without being concerned for posterity. It is the one who is amassing wealth who is concerned particularly about what will

happen to it after his death, as Jesus notes, “then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided?” (Luke 12.20).

It is a true observation that though there is no end of labour yet there is no satisfaction in its provisions beyond that of the necessities of livelihood.

4.9-12. Four reasons are given for the advantage of joint efforts; not only the partnership of marriage but of business and other affairs also. In principle these reasons might be said to hold good (at least in part) for joint enterprises of teams, corporate businesses and nationhood but this is not the subject here.

The first reason is that joint enterprise more than doubles the result of the output, as when we say that the team is more than the sum of its parts. In the example of the married life children are that good reward together with happy family life. The second is the support that one will give the other in adversity as illustrated by the situation of a fall in which life might be endangered if help were not soon forthcoming. The third is that of mutual warmth when it is cold at night, which is an example of mutual encouragement and comfort. Fourthly when there is opposition two may see off a threatened or actual physical attack. In such circumstances the help of a third might be enlisted; and while, as we say, “two’s company, three’s a crowd” and a third should not be admitted into the most intimate relationships which the world describes as “the eternal triangle,” there are occasions nevertheless when a third party will truly be of invaluable assistance.

4.13-14. There is here a triple contrast; between a king and one who is poor; between a wise person and a foolish; and between a child and an old man. Better to be poor, wise, and as young as a child than to have the riches and authority of a king who has grown foolish with age and will not be advised. The situation is envisaged in which an imprisoned child might be liberated even to sovereignty, whereas the land of those who live under an aged and ill-advised monarch becomes impoverished. If the Lord Jesus Christ shall make His children free, they shall be free indeed (John 8.36). “The LORD is high above all nations, and his glory above the heavens...He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth the needy out of the dunghill; that he may set him with princes, even with the princes of his people” (Psalm 113.4,7-8).

4.15-16. “I considered all the living which walk under the sun.” “There is no end of all the people.” If monarchy has drawbacks so has democracy. In a possible allusion to this verse, the poet Dryden writes,

“Crowds err not, though to both extremes they run;
To kill the father and recall the son.”

A crowd is fickle; a monarch may be fickle. Without the wisdom of Christ the government of a nation, or the government of our tongues and hearts, is subject to mood. However frustrating these things are, we must still resolutely put our trust in the Saviour that at His coming all will be put right and that the saints will live for ever with Him in blissful separation from all that spoils. “And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away” (Revelation 21.4).

Ecclesiastes 5

5.1. Paul writes that we should know how we ought to behave ourselves in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth (1 Timothy 3.15). When we read an expression like this we are always to think along two lines. We are to think of the church as the family, the household, of the people of the Lord Jesus Christ. And we are to think of the actual entering into the sanctuary of the Lord to worship. Each passage on this subject should be tested to see which meaning fits best or if both are equally alike relevant. “God is greatly to be feared in the assembly of the saints, and to be had in reverence of all them that are about him” (Psalm 89.7).

“Keep thy foot” is picture language for “do not slip;” as we would say, “keep your footing.” There are two particular ways mentioned in this and the following verses in which we might err, and thereby offend Almighty God by the disposition of our thoughts in worship. One concerns our worship in Jesus’ name, our Substitute. The second concerns making vows.

“Hearing” is of paramount importance. “I will hear what God the LORD will speak: for he will speak peace unto his people, and to his saints: but let them not turn again to folly” (Psalm 85.8). “Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 8.17). The Lord speaks to us by the Holy Spirit opening our minds to the significance of the words of the Bible and enabling us to act on them. The old priest Eli instructed the young Samuel to respond to the Lord’s calling by saying, “Speak, LORD; for thy servant heareth” (1 Samuel 3.9-10). Samuel did exactly that and a very “distinguished career” followed as a consequence of that perpetual attitude. We should approach the reading of the Bible and the preaching of the gospel in exactly the same way, saying, “Speak, LORD, for thy servant heareth.”

All the Old Testament sacrifices were designed by the Lord God to point in one way or another to the Lord Jesus Christ. Rather than just presenting the required sacrifices habitually slavishly, it would have been good to seek to understand their significance. Most important of all would have been to believe by faith that God actually did forgive the offerer’s sins through the sacrifice substituting for the worshipper; and that in lieu, in anticipation of the death of Christ on Calvary. They do evil who enter into the courts of the Lord without an offering; and in bringing an offering do so heedlessly.

Our offering is the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ who became a substitution to make atonement for the sins of every believer, each of whom may say, “Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us” (1 Corinthians 5.7).

Believers offer up spiritual sacrifices also by their faith. These are described as the consecration of our lives (Romans 12.1); praise and thanksgiving (Hebrews 13.15); and giving to and supporting believers in the front line (as Paul) or in need (as the Jerusalem saints) (Philippians 4.14-19; Hebrews 13.16).

5.2-3. For the most part, Protestants are not in the habit of making vows except in the matter of marriage vows. To be hasty reminds us of Esau, not that he made a vow, but that he wanted instant gratification and despised even such a valuable right as his birthright to get it, thus earning himself the disdain of God and the title of “profane.” (Genesis 25.29-34; Hebrews 12.16-17). It is possible to make vows equally rashly (even marriage vows) but they cannot be

recalled simply because we have second thoughts. The misuse of a vow in quite another way is highlighted by the Saviour in the matter of Corban in Mark 7.9-13.

In the very apt illustration of a dream we are shown how the multitude of a foolish man's words is never more disastrous than in church. "A dream cometh through the multitude of business." So many things are our concern, so many things to be thought through at once. So these things affect the mind in sleep and resolve themselves into an amalgam, perhaps a jumble, of fleeting thoughts from apparently nowhere, or from times past mingling with the present. The multitude of a fool's words are of no greater significance and such words, wide-ranging and of little consequence, should have no place in his worship.

5.4-5. Christians, for the most part, take the view that it is better not to vow at all, except the marriage vows. They, like all vows, should be kept. In case we should ever try to disown the vows we make then, it is part of the service that the congregation is called upon to bear witness that they were made to one another in the presence of God in a public service and in the presence of that congregation.

5.6-7. The word "angel" refers to whomever is God's representative at the time. The officiating priest, or minister perhaps. The word "messenger" is the same word as "angel" and in Malachi 2.7 we have the words, "the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth: for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts." That is, the angel. Paul writes to Timothy (1 Timothy 5.21), "I charge thee before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, and the elect angels, that thou observe these things..." and also to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 11.9-10), "neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man. For this cause ought the woman to have power on her head because of the angels." Whatever be the precise significance of this latter passage it is clear that what is done publicly is done before the Lord's messengers, earthly and, in some cases, heavenly. The Lord Jesus Christ appeared in the Old Testament as the captain of the host of the Lord (Joshua 5.14) but also as the Angel of the covenant (Genesis 48.16), which might even be the significance in this verse in Ecclesiastes.

Sarah laughed within herself but denied before the Angel that she had done so. The Scripture indicates that the one who remained to talk with Abraham was the LORD (Genesis 18.13) and she became afraid when she heard His comment to her husband Abraham. She denied her invisible transaction, her laughing within herself, which in the nature of it was unproveable. Except to God that is. When He said, "Nay; but thou didst laugh" that was a stinging rebuke from such a One (Genesis 18.9-15). Solomon threatens a more severe retribution, if God's anger is aroused by denying that we meant what we said, when we did mean it at the time.

Whether words or dreams there is much that is superfluous. Our words, and most especially vows if we do make them, should be spoken in the reverential fear of God.

While not vows but oaths, when we swear in court that we speak only the truth, it will be a matter of God's severe retribution at the judgment day if we were playing fast and loose with Him when it was a matter of great importance for the establishing of the truth.

5.8. The Lord God, in each of His three Persons, is higher than the highest, He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Revelation 17.14;19.16). Proud monarchs and rulers of all sorts (especially

minor autocrats) may deny it, but they are to be assured “there be higher than they.” If they are unwilling to put a matter within their jurisdiction right, then ultimate judgment on that great Judgment Day is no mean thing. In a right-minded person that very thought should be sufficient to compel him to change his ways. Even, perhaps, for the wrong reason as in Luke 18.1-5.

5.9. Urban dwellers are apt to forget that they are dependent for food upon the land. “The king himself is served by the field.” There is no getting away from it and we should render thanks to the Lord for all His goodness and pray for famine be averted.

5.10-11. In making all his observations from the perspective of a former backslider Solomon notes that a principle description of that state is dissatisfaction. Not dissatisfaction with one’s lot merely, but dissatisfaction with wealth and all its trappings. The more you get, the more you want; whereas, as we have earlier noted, contentment (Hebrews 13.5) is the mark of a believer. Because of the believer’s former unsaved lifestyle, however, he/she may have to be disciplined by the Holy Spirit’s instruction in the scriptures to learn that contentment. We can produce or purchase more than we need and it is of no advantage. The same might be said of the purchasing of many books if they remain unread.

5.12. How many there are who would like to go home and leave their work behind them. We teach our children, in preparing them for life, that they must do homework as there is not enough time in school to teach them everything they need to know so soon! It is a great mercy to learn how to lay down one’s work for the night. “Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof” (Matthew 6.34).

5.13-15. Solomon uses the expression “under the sun” from time to time to mean “all over the world, everywhere.” It does not matter what the culture, or what the industry (or, indeed, what period of history) surplus riches invite robbery, murder, the efforts of security, and many other associated concerns, some of which were highlighted by the Lord Jesus Christ in Luke 12.14-20. “The life is more than meat, and the body is more than raiment.” In an extended passage (Luke 12 13-34). the Lord Jesus invites us to consider these things in depth without the cynicism which backsliding brings into play. He concludes His strong teaching with, “where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

Solomon recalls Job’s words, of which it is most probable he was fully aware, “Naked came I out of my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away: blessed be the name of the LORD” (Job 1.21). The dead were usually clothed to be buried unless they died in battle and were stripped for spoils. It is picture language to express that we arrive in this world with no resources, except a functioning body and the family background. We come with nothing and we leave all that we have worked for behind. Job’s response was “blessed be the name of the Lord.” It does not matter if we must leave all behind, in our turn, if we are entering into eternal life, the gift of God, with so much more in prospect that this world ever afforded, even if it was all subsequently lost.

5.16. It is not a sore evil, except to the unbeliever. The redeemed, though they lived under the curse “dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return” (Genesis 4.19), as all do, yet enter into an immortal glory which more than makes up for whatever drawbacks life has brought us

within the parameters of that curse. A believer does not “labour for the wind;” that is, for it all to be blown away. It is very disappointing when reverses occur, and a great swathe, perhaps, of life’s work is obliterated, but faith in Christ and the working of all things together for good” (Romans 8.28) more than makes up ultimately for these things. And the testing of our faith, meanwhile, is the ultimate possession when it comes forth as gold and is found to be a matter of praise, glory and honour when the Lord Jesus Christ appears (1 Peter 1.7).

5.17. Darkness, sorrow, wrath, sickness. We can see that something is wrong. Yet this is the state of an unbeliever. How different from praise, glory and honour! It might be a better preparation for an unbeliever to be saved that he should appreciate this darkness, sorrow, wrath and sickness and turn to the Saviour for life (John 1.4; 5.24;14.6) than that he should be bright and breezy and blissfully unaware of his/her impending fate. However, as we see in Revelation 16.9,11) those who know darkness, sorrow, wrath and sickness do not always repent and may make matters worse by blaspheming God. “Curse God, and die” (Job 2.9) said Job’s wife to Job. It would be better to retain our integrity by confessing our sin and the rightness of God to do with us as He pleases and to cry to Him for pardon and eternal salvation.

5.18-19. As we have seen the believer’s portion is not merely for this life, but God is his portion for eternity (Psalm 16.5). It is “good and comely” to enjoy the good of all our labour, “giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 5.20).

5.20. This part of the Preacher’s sermon ends on an upbeat note. Provided only that the joy is not simply joie de vivre, the joy of living, but joy in Christ then for the pleasure of such joy much detail of our lives will remain forgotten. However, we must not write off the former days of our lives; for out of them has been wrought “a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory” (2 Corinthians 4.17).

Ecclesiastes 6

6.1-2. Beware of the love of accumulating, or of hoarding - especially wealth. This is such a common occurrence in all ages and in all societies that Solomon cautions us not to embark on that way, for it is an evil disease and is one of the expressions of pointless, meaningless living. If we store up more than is necessary, even bearing in mind emergency contingencies, then it is likely that we will never have the use of them, or enough of them. They will go to rot; or will be given away or, if surplus books, clothing, or a collection of any sort, sold at auction after our death. The key thing is that we will never have the use of them. We have them while we live; but we scarcely ever look at them. It begets a warped, proud spirit within, for we trust them as our reserves instead of trusting the Lord for our daily supplies. “Their eyes stand out with fatness: they have more than heart could wish...these are the ungodly, who prosper in the world; they increase in riches” (Psalm 73.7,12).

6.3-5. We are told in 2 Chronicles 11.21 that Rehoboam had 28 sons and 60 daughters, a total of 88. And that Ahab had a minimum of 70 children, having seventy sons in Samaria, while there may have been some elsewhere, to say nothing of daughters (2 Kings 10.1). For all Rehoboam’s

faults he made good use of them for the strengthening of the kingdom by dispersing them as leaders in every area (2 Chronicles 11.22-23). We are to think of Solomon meaning “*even if*” a man has 100 children, and if it were also to happen that his soul were not filled with good that that would be a disastrous scenario. Perhaps, as he observed the early days of his son Rehoboam, Solomon thought he might yet beget 100 children; perhaps Rehoboam was aware of Solomon his father’s preaching and took steps to ensure that he heeded the advice, for we read that “he dealt wisely” in this matter, though not in the matter recorded in 2 Chronicles 10.13.

Jezebel had no burial (1 Kings 22.23-24; 2 Kings 9.30-37). An untimely birth means a stillbirth or an aborted birth. Solomon’s reasoning here is that such a one is better off. By not surviving there was no struggle throughout life only to die later; and, for all there might be of a long life, precious little was the ultimate achievement if there was no “soul good” or the life ended in such shame as to warrant no burial or in battle where there was no time for burial. The use of the expression “his soul be not filled with good” is a stark reminder that if we are not saved through the precious blood of the Lord Jesus Christ our life will have been lived in vain. Others might benefit from our life; our children would have their lives because we lived. But as to ourselves, without eternal salvation, and especially if life itself were lived in harsh times, no ultimate personal benefit would have accrued to us for our days on earth.

6.6 Taking up the “even if” thought once again, Solomon says that even if we had the chance to live “a thousand years twice told” death would still be the end of it, if we did not have eternal life. It would still have been characterised by unremitting labour and be simply a repetition over a greater length of time of the same old circumstances.

“Told” means counted. A “teller” in a bank is the counting clerk, or the counter clerk. When Psalm 90.9 tells us, “we spend our years as a tale that is told” the picture is not of storytelling but of counting. A tally that is counted out.

“Do not all go to one place?” No. If all that is meant were death and the grave that would be true. But after death the judgment, and in consequence of that we do not all go to the same place. The great multitudes of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake “some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt” (Daniel 12.2). The Lord Jesus Christ has an extended passage of teaching on this very subject, which it would be good to read now, in Matthew 25. 30-46 with His unmistakable conclusion that “these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal” (Matthew 25.46). No, we do not all go to one place. “As it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment: so Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many” (Hebrews 9.27-28). Precisely because there is a judgment to come, the Lord Jesus Christ made an atonement for the sins of His people.

6.7. Eating to live is one thing; living to eat is quite another. An exorbitant appetite for food, or lusting after any other thing, is deadly. “Put a knife to thy throat, if thou be a man given to appetite” (Proverbs 23.2). It is magnificently summed up by the apostle John, “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes,

and pride of life, is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever" (1 John 2.15-17).

6.8. It is cynical to think that there is no point in a wise man exercising wisdom because he will die just like the fool. Likewise, it is cynical to think that there is no advantage to a poor honest labourer over a layabout in this life, purely because we all die. However, such thoughts are as a schoolmaster to bring us to Christ, for it is true that without the salvation that is in Christ we shall all be lost, though some will have a severer judgment than others. "That servant, which knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more" (Luke 12.47-48).

6.9. Unbridled lust rears out of control whatever form it takes. The Lord Jesus Christ said, "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: but I say unto you, that whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart" (Matthew 5.27-28). This is a variation of "a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush," and even of the observation that the grass always appears greener in the other field. Actually to possess, and to enjoy that possession with contentment, whatever it be, is much better, and certainly much safer morally, than always to be alighting on this or that figment of the imagination.

6.10. History repeats itself. The characters and situations differ but the principles remain the same. The name Adam means "of the earth." "The first man is of the earth, earthy: the second man is the Lord from heaven" (1 Corinthians 15.47). In Genesis 2.19-20 we read, "And out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof. And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field." New things are still discovered and new names given, but the meaning here is that there is no situation which has not been met with somewhere before, nor any situation with which the Lord cannot deal or in which we cannot refer to Him for help. Each situation is of man's doing or devising and invariably because of his sin. The whole sequence of the accomplishments on the one hand, and the savage tempers on the other, of those who are banished from the presence of God which are catalogued in Genesis 4, comes to a climax resulting in the flood and is resumed again in the descendants of the flood.

Nothing is too hard for the Lord to control, even the flood, in taming unruly mankind. "Now the Egyptians are men and not God; and their horses flesh, and not spirit. When the Lord shall stretch out his hand, both he that helpeth shall fall, and he that is holpen shall fall down, and they shall all fail together" (Isaiah 31.3). This verse invites our considered attention to mankind's limitations and may be summed up by the saying, "the best of men is but a man at best."

6.11-12. "Who knoweth what is good for man in this life?" Only God. "He knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold...He performeth the thing that is appointed for me: and many such things are with him" (Job 23.10,14). The Lord has given us

the scriptures by which we may discover during our appointed time in this life how to conduct ourselves in a way that will, indeed, be good for us. “Now the God of peace...make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is wellpleasing in his sight through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.” (Hebrews 13.20-21).

Ecclesiastes 7

7.1. Much of this chapter is almost like a chapter of Proverbs, though the sermonic style peeps through, as, for example, at verses 13, 23 and 27.

At Proverbs 22.1 Solomon uses a different picture, “A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches,” but it is true that once someone’s reputation is besmirched, even if a person’s name is cleared, some defilement always seems to cling in the minds of many affecting their attitude towards such an one. It should not be so, but lingering doubt is not easy to get rid of and must be prayed about if our relationships are to be right. The series of proverbs in verses 1-4 all have some allusion to sorrow and mourning.

When the preacher could say that the day of death is better than the day of one’s birth it reveals that life and hope are what has been dealt a blow by backsliding. There is, of course, a sense in which the day of death is better. It signals the entry into glory for a believer. The completion of one’s allotted tasks on earth is clearly more satisfactory than training for them and beginning them, when the outcome is in doubt. But no one stepping out into new things, beginning school, university, a career or starting a new home will begin without excitement, hope and energy. So we must note two things particularly from this verse. Firstly, that life, spiritual life, and hope are the casualties when we backslide. And, secondly, that if the end is to be better than the beginning we must pursue our faith to the last. “Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life” (Revelation 2.10).

7.2. Again, the same parameters must be understood here. More advantage is to be had from a funeral service if we lay to heart concerning the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ which leads to a glorious life after death for eternity. The party, the pleasant social gathering, is mostly just for the pleasure it gives at the time, though it may serve to build proper relationships. A believer may enjoy these gatherings; whereas an all-night partygoer may abuse them. Let us take every available opportunity to consider the “issues from death” (Psalm 68.20) and the issues of life (Proverbs 4.23).

7.3. If our laughter is mere escapism or the snigger of a guilty or unbelieving conscience (Genesis 18.12-13) then it is a betrayal of what laughter is all about. There is a time to laugh (Ecclesiastes 3.4). It is true, however, that the Lord does choose to use our sorrows to draw us closer than ever to the Saviour and that embrace will brace us to new endeavours with renewed hope.

7.4. The Lord Jesus Christ said, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matthew 6.21-22) prefacing it with the words, “lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal.”

The house of mourning may cause us to meditate on eternal things but it should not be our only stimulant to do so. It is certainly foolish to avoid facing our mortality and what will happen to us after death, which has the judgment of God upon our lives hot upon its heels.

7.5. Would you prefer to listen to a song or a rebuke. The one is entertainment. The other medicine. The one is soon forgotten; the other has within it the seed-germ of helping us to make a new beginning.

7.6. Thorn bushes were frequently used as firewood. They burned with a crackling sound and splattered their incendiary sparks dangerously and without warning in any direction. A fool's laughter is loose, irreverent and may defile or harm speaker and hearer alike. All to no purpose. Let believers redeem the time, because the days are evil (Ephesians 5.16).

7.7. Continual, unremitting stress of any sort may test the patience and cause a person to "break," to act spontaneously against all his better nature. In the same way a bribe may cause even the wisest to waver; it undermines the most strongly held convictions as to what is right. These are both temptations to be resisted. This verse bears some resemblance in its handling of temptation to Proverbs 30.8-9, "give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me: lest I be full, and deny thee, and say, Who is the LORD? Or lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God in vain."

7.8. Sportspersons sometimes brag before a contest concerning how they will destroy the opposition and, to their shame, it doesn't always turn out as they have predicted. It would have been better not to have boasted at all. Not until all our aims and ideals have been completed are we in a position to look back; or, after our death, others are able to make a true assessment of our lives. But what counts, of course, is the evaluation our Saviour makes of our lives. To be patient in spirit is the fruit, the end of a lifetime's apprenticeship in practising humility and meekness in all sorts of situations. By nature we are proud, and the patience represents the end of that particular "thing", the pursuit of humble waiting upon the Lord.

7.9. Hastiness of response together with anger are two common natural traits which, combined, are an explosive mix. It is foolish to nurture these in our hearts. David was greatly helped by Abigail in 1 Samuel 25 22-23; it is worth studying the whole of 1 Samuel 25 to see the build-up to such a situation, for such a hasty and angry response can easily catch us out in the most unexpected of incidents.

7.10. Firstly, we have to note that the older we get, the more likely we are to look back fondly upon the earlier days of our lives and feel that things are not what they were. A common way of expressing it is to declare, perhaps, that "the country has gone to pot." Historians may in after years assess it that one period in the life of a country was nobler than another; but, by and large, we are too near to events to make an objective evaluation. We are too influenced by feelings; we "feel" that things are worse, which they may or may not be.

Secondly, as we say, comparisons are odious. That is, if we restrict ourselves to unfavourable comparisons. It is not improper and would be a wiser enquiry to be asking how we can improve ourselves, by attaining higher standards of faith.

Thirdly, our eternal reward (2 Corinthians 4.17) is forged out of the very circumstances of whatever sort in which our lives are placed. It is to no advantage to us whether earlier days were better or worse. But the real problem of this question concerning the former days is that it fortifies an already critical spirit which should have no place in our lives and certainly should not be nurtured.

7.11. A little bit more of the cynicism of the backslider comes across here. Is wisdom only of service with an inheritance? Can it not be exercised without one? Does not the Lord Jesus Christ bestow His wisdom upon the foolish things of the world. Read again 1 Corinthians 1.24-31, especially noting verse 30.

7.12. Wisdom is not to be compared with money; “she is more precious than rubies” (Proverbs 3.15). The best commentary on this verse is to read Proverbs 3.1-26.

7.13. The Lord Jesus Christ made the crooked straight (Luke 13.11-13) in fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah 40.4. This is in itself a declaration that He, and only He, being the Son of God, is able to change crooked natures by dealing with the sin within and to create new life, a new birth.

7.14. The day of adversity is a time for taking stock, praying and meditating. What is the Lord saying to me? Am I to take a new direction? How may I draw closer to the Saviour? How may I have a closer walk with Him, more daily guidance? Considering our ways (Haggai 1.5,7) may entail asking questions of ourselves, as is the case in Haggai’s prophecy. In verse 13 we were encouraged to consider an aspect of God’s creation; in this verse something of His providence in our lives.

“To the end that man should find nothing after him.” Our lives should be complete in themselves. Not what we bequeath to others should be our concern. Nor our unfinished labours. The aim of our reconsideration at any given point of our lives is to apply ourselves to the wisdom of knowing what the Lord requires of us in any particular day. Thus shall our lives fulfil their potential.

7.15. “The days of my vanity” may mean the “days of my backsliding,” for it is Solomon’s backsliding which has led him to consider the emptiness of things, the meaninglessness of things out of Christ and, how, without Christ, sin takes up once again a disproportionate time in our lives – for God has given much that is healthily good to appreciate. However, if the use of “vanity” here points us to his backsliding, it may be that we may consider each of his uses of “vanity” throughout as referring principally to backsliding. It is backsliding that gives a jaundiced view of life, of the Christian faith and of others. It is backsliding that undermines life and hope. So long has Solomon been in this state of backsliding that he is able to say in this verse that he has seen all things during the time of his backsliding. He has seen everything from this lower, debased perspective. He can see injustice, and how, not infrequently, a just man perishes in his righteousness – murdered ignominiously, toppled perhaps from his position of influence by an evil regime, his study and learning gone to waste. But backsliding loses the perspective that, in the Lord’s hands, these things bring judgment at the day of judgment upon the wicked, being called into evidence against them; and bring redemption in the person of the Saviour whose atoning death brings in His people’s salvation. A believer’s life

is utterly founded upon the merits of the Saviour's death. A falling away from the Saviour inevitably brings in its wake a despair concerning the triumph of righteousness over evil in any situation through the Lord Jesus Christ.

7.16. Can you be too righteous? Too wise? We may be too "wise in our own conceits" (Romans 11.25; 12.16). We may be self-righteous, but, then, we should not be that at all, let alone overmuch. The destruction spoken of here is the destruction of isolation when people avoid us because of our insufferable pomposity which does, in fact, destroy us. We should not affect wisdom, righteousness or any other good thing but in "the simplicity that is in Christ" "let each esteem other better than themselves" (Philippians 2.3).

7.17. Again, the same parameters hold good here. Should we turn a blind eye to allow some wickedness knowingly in our lives? It does not say overmuch foolish, but there is some sense of implication of that. Wickedness may lead to the death sentence and certainly, without repentance, to everlasting damnation. And folly may lead to an early death, through carelessness of our health, putting ourselves into unwise or dangerous situations unnecessarily or by indulgent living or immoral practices.

7.18. Here is a general principle, elegantly expressed. "It is good that thou shouldst take hold of this; yea, also from this withdraw not thine hand: for he that feareth God shall come forth of them all." Let us take heed to the word of God; let us not be selective in the things we obey from His word, and the things we don't as it suits us. Let us master the things which are wise and sensible; for the scriptures never lead astray and always strengthen our hand. Deliverance from all our troubles is by the Lord of the scriptures (Luke 1.74).

7.19. The word of the Lord revealed to one person will be of more avail than a committee. But the contrast here is principally that wisdom is better than might. "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the LORD of hosts" (Zechariah 4.6). The Spirit of the Lord controls the hearts and minds of thousands with ease, and to walk in His ways and under His direction, through the scriptures of which He is the author, is to know spiritual power.

7.20. As has been observed before, the best of men is but man at best. All good, whether good intentions, good motives or worthy achievements are flawed, for example, by pride. The nearer one is to the Lord Jesus Christ the more we appreciate this truth; whereas an unbeliever will think that he is all right, and will find difficulty with the words, "There is none that doeth good, no, not one" (Psalm 14.3; 53.1; Romans 3.12).

7.21. The prophet Isaiah speaks of the day of Christ when, among other things, "all that watch for iniquity are cut off: that make a man an offender for a word, and lay a snare for him that reproveth in the gate, and turn aside the just for a thing of nought" (Isaiah 29.20-21). Ignoring, taking no notice of everything that is said about us is best practice. It is a good policy. As we say, "what the eye does not see, the heart does not grieve about" and similarly what the ear does not hear will be of no significance to us. Some words that are spoken may foment rebellion in a nation and undermine true government; but as a general rule for the private individual this is good instruction. One rash word overheard may turn our hearts against somebody concerning whom there is no reason, apart from this one little thing, to have ill-feeling.

7.22. The words of the Lord Jesus Christ are apt here. "Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?" (Matthew 7.1-3). Granted that our brother has faults; but the Lord sees that we have greater faults than those we see in him.

7.23. See what backsliding has done. The Lord had said to Solomon, "lo, I have given thee a wise and an understanding heart; so that there was none like unto thee before thee, neither after thee shall any arise like unto thee" (1 Kings 3.12). He has thrown it all away, so that he is constrained to say that wisdom was something that was far from him. He did repent and was restored to close fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ and was enabled to write the Song of Solomon. If we have thrown our advantages away, let us repent, for the Lord our God is merciful and will "restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten" (Joel 2.25).

7.24-26. There are some depths which are best not peered into. There were some in Thyatira which pretended to secrets in religion only divulged to the initiated. They claimed that theirs was a really deep religion. They spoke of depths; Christ calls their doings "depths of Satan" (Revelation 2.19-25). "When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof..." (Genesis 3.6). And what was the wisdom which she discovered? That she and her husband were naked! (Genesis 3.7). To indulge in disobedience to the Lord's revealed word brings only shame, not wisdom. Now this is the wisdom which Solomon sought at this stage (for his initial wisdom was a gift and needed no seeking), a wisdom which mixes the good with the evil - with dire consequences.

Why did he want to know by experience the wickedness of folly? This is no wisdom; certainly not Christ's wisdom (1 Corinthians 1.30) where that wisdom is linked with sanctification.

Just as Adam and his wife discovered that they were naked as a result of their disobedient pursuit of wisdom, so Solomon finds (doubtless from experience) the bitterness of the opportunistic predatory instincts of the adulteress, the harlot. "Whoso pleaseth God shall escape from her."

7.27-28. It is stated rather cynically, implying that women are not so favoured with wisdom and trustworthiness as men, that in a sample of one thousand he found but one man and no women who could be considered right towards God. Another sample might have discovered ten women and no men. It is a jaundiced view owing to sin.

One believer among a thousand is not many viewed from one perspective; but, among the billions of the earth, neither is it rare. We must most certainly ensure by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ that we are "one in a thousand." A preacher (messenger) and teacher (interpreter) (Job 33.23) may be one among a thousand, but the Saviour is the "chiefest among ten thousand" (Song of Solomon 5.10).

Man has fallen and made many inventions, that is, substitute religions. It began with Cain who substituted his choice of the fruit of the ground rather than the Lord's chosen way of sacrifice by blood, which pointed to the coming Saviour (Genesis 4.3-4; Hebrews 11.4). Invented religion

is powerfully exposed at 1 Kings 12.32-33 where the feast at Bethel was in imitation of the sanctioned feast at Jerusalem. The latter was on the fifteenth day of the seventh month; the imitation looked almost the same but the devil was in the altered detail. So it is with all false religion. Read 1 Kings 12.25-33 and see the seeds which, being sown, led the king to substitute a false religion.

“My people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water” (Jeremiah 2.13).

All man-made religions are from below, whereas the faith which is in Christ Jesus is revealed from heaven above. They are leaky and impart no life.

When in Jeremiah 6.16 the Lord bids us, “stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls. But they said, We will not walk therein” we are given to understand that even in those days there was a massive declension from the true, revealed faith from heaven. That declension began, following Adam’s fall, with the false worship which Cain offered which, in its turn, led to murder. False religion has never ceased from that time onwards and we have to do a reality check ourselves and ask which path we are on.

The picture in Jeremiah is of standing at a major crossroads. A crossroads in our life, perhaps. But all the options are new roads, picturing modernizing tendencies in religion. The one who asks knows that there were earlier “green lanes” once trodden by many, but now they are all but obliterated. They are to ask if anyone remembers where they are located and, when found, if anyone will join them on the old abandoned paths. But, when discovered, nobody wants to take the narrow way that leads to life (Matthew 7.14). The way revealed by the Lord in His holy scriptures is too demanding, too narrow. The modern roads are easier, though they rush people to destruction (Matthew 7.13). They are unwilling to forsake their sin, their culture or their generation to tread the paths the fathers trod.

“They have sought out many inventions.” There is one sphere where to be modern is no advance. And that is in the sphere of worshipping God and of pleasing Him by our lives. That way was revealed from the beginning. The salvation which is through the Lord Jesus Christ is shown straight after the fall, at Genesis 3.15. Speaking of the seed that is to come, that is Jesus Christ (Galatians 3.16), the Lord declares that He will defeat Satan, though Satan will accomplish His death, by the power of His atoning blood and by His resurrection. “For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Corinthians 15 21-22). This is the ancient way declared by God from the beginning. There is no other. Invented substitutes will not save anyone. Only the Lord Jesus Christ saves. “There is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4.12).

Ecclesiastes 8

8.1. It was the pursuit of wisdom which brought about the fall. “And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat. And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons” (Genesis 3.6-7).

Wisdom exercised in disobedience to God brought the knowledge and experience of shame and embarrassment. On the other hand, we see (1 Kings 3.12-14) that Solomon was given an extraordinary gift of wisdom in answer to his prayer for “an understanding heart to judge thy people, that I may discern between good and bad” (1 Kings 3.9). It might seem to be conditional on Solomon’s walking in God’s ways (1 Kings 3.14) though that requirement is only linked there to long life. Now “the gifts and calling of God are without repentance” (Romans 11.29) and the plural use of gifts implies not only the election spoken of in Romans but other promises too. The question is whether by his disobedience Solomon forfeited his wisdom. Now “Christ is made unto us wisdom” (1 Corinthians 1.30). If Solomon’s gift was not withdrawn through his backsliding, described in Nehemiah 13.26, was the wisdom exercised in that time purely a natural, but not a spiritual, wisdom? In Proverbs 8.16 Solomon speaks of applying his heart to know wisdom, where wisdom seems to be the observation of life and drawing conclusions; whereas the gift of God which he was given did not seem to require any searching out (1 Kings 3. 16-28). There it was exercised in the cause of justice which is the reason it was asked for. We do not know the nature of the “hard questions” which the queen of Sheba asked (1 Kings 10.1-9) and which drew from Solomon full and satisfying answers but she does bear credible witness to his wisdom in verses 6,7 and 8. Perhaps we should think that the exercise of this gift is directly from the Lord in the matter of justice and it was for him to search out and understand the ways of man for the purpose of exercising that wisdom. He does so as a fallen man, a backslider at times.

So that the answer to the question “who is as the wise man?” may be summarised as the believer in Christ who specifically asks for His wisdom and guidance in every situation. The backslider is unlikely to make such a precise and timely request, but the truth of the efficacy of wisdom is still valid. Solomon is indicating that any believer may aspire after this wisdom although it was given to him as a gift at the outset of his reign. The question might then be put another way, “who is like me when I first pursued wisdom?” he himself being the example of that “wise man.”

The truth that wisdom is the application of knowledge is affirmed by its description as interpretation. Whether it is the interpretation of the scriptures; that interpretation which enables a person to separate between the precious and the vile; the interpretation of the significance of providences; or the application of facts to the developing of inventions or discoveries; the wisdom which is from God empowers, giving confidence and assurance.

8.2-5. Civil disobedience finds no place in scripture except where the demands of King Jesus clash with the demands of an earthly monarch or lesser leader. Peter declared this specific principle twice. “Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye.” Having already told the Sanhedrin these words, Peter is rather more terse the

next time, saying, “We ought to obey God rather than men” (Acts 4.19;5.29). Where the laws of the land are unscriptural as, for example, the requirement of capital punishment, then we must bide our time for the Lord’s opportunity, “if thou mayest be made free, use it rather” (1 Corinthians 7.21). “The oath of God” refers to God’s covenant with His people. The people of the new covenant should be most eager to keep the commandment of the Saviour, especially bearing in mind His words, “He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me,” “If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love” and “This is my commandment, that ye love one another, as I have loved you” (John 14.21; 15.10,12).

8.3. If we imagine a courtier in Solomon’s or any other ancient court being summoned to wait upon the king, he must neither be impatient, nor, if he is, show that he is impatient to leave the king’s presence to be about his own affairs. It would provoke the king’s anger. The king’s pleasure is the life of his subjects. So we are to put first the requirements, the commandments of King Jesus. “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (Matthew 6.33). Still less are we to desire to leave the King’s presence to be free to pursue evil.

8.4. The first recorded spoken words are the words of God (Genesis 1.3), “And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.” Power accompanied the word to bring to pass what was spoken. An earthly monarch has a lesser, delegated authority but his word still goes. Whereas the decisions of a democracy may always be questioned, those of a monarch may not so long as he is effectively in power. “O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus?” (Romans 9.20).

8.5. “Protection He affords to all Who make His name their trust” runs the paraphrase of Psalm 34 (the hymn “Through all the changing scenes of life”). The whole of Psalm 121 declares that same protection. This is the significance of “shall feel no evil thing.” Not that a believer will not come across evil, or be afflicted by evil, but the Lord will always turn it to the believer’s advantage in the service of His kingdom. Discernment (1 Kings 3. 9,11) is a keynote of the wisdom that is from above. The discernment particularly emphasised here is the aptitude to tell when the time is right to proceed with any matter or the patience to wait for that time; and the skill to tell the difference in all sorts of situations between the good and the bad.

8.6. This leads naturally to the conclusion that “the misery of man is great upon him.” Now you would not have thought this to be other than a jaundiced conclusion. The Lord wishes us to see the discrepancy between exercising wisdom in full faith and, as here, in a backsliding state. If that wisdom only enables us to see misery and conclude that life is nothing but misery something has gone wrong somewhere. Of course, to an unrepentant sinner there is judgment to come for each and every issue of his life and that certainly brings misery; but at the same time it is an incentive to repent. The misery and the cure are affirmed together in Hebrews 9.27-28, “As it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment: so Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many.”

8.7-8. The misery of a guilty sinner lies in not knowing what will happen to him and when, and especially the time of his death. Not knowing the time of death is no big deal, for would any of us want to know the actual date of our death years beforehand or know how or of what we are going to die? Not to know the way ahead is best practice, but can only be enjoyed by trusting the Saviour. “Trust in him (the Lord) at all times” (Psalm 62.8). No proclamation of

freedom to escape physical death can be given in advance, though those who belong to the Lord Jesus Christ at His coming will not know physical death. Even the wicked in hell will not be enjoying the wickedness they prized while here on earth; they will enjoy nothing.

8.9. Rehoboam could be said to have ruled to his own personal hurt when he took too much notice of his peers (1 Kings 12.6-11) inciting Jeroboam to revolt; and this led to the division of the kingdom as the rest of 1 Kings 12 shows. Of course, this had not yet happened in the day when Solomon preached. What is the lesson? We might learn to follow the advice of senior counsellors which Rehoboam failed to do; but a king should follow what was revealed by the Lord to King David, “He that ruleth over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God. And he shall be as the light of the morning, when the sun riseth, even a morning without clouds; as the tender grass springing out of the earth by clear shining after rain” (2 Samuel 23.3-4).

8.10. Nihilism (from the Latin word “nihil” meaning “nothing”) may well be a very appropriate way of describing “all is vanity.” Nihilism is a world view of life which is developed when God is left out of the reckoning. There is thought to be no purpose in life; the natural (but fallen) nobilities of life, listed in Philippians 4.8 are not exercised because there is seen to be no point and they become atrophied. On the one hand scripture declares, “And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things. Those things (writes Paul) which ye have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, do: and the God of peace shall be with you” (Philippians 4. 7-9). On the other hand, if God be rejected, if there be no virtue, then, as in the days of the judges, it is every man for himself; the survival (not always even the survival) of the fittest. If God is taken out of the reckoning there is no One to whom to give account. It then becomes perfectly acceptable to steal and murder and to disobey every other commandment and teaching of the scripture. When this happens dog eats dog, That is to say instead of the rule of law applying equally to all, the disorder of lawlessness applies to all, even to the perpetrators of it themselves. Death continues; and it continues on a massively contrived and hastened scale through ethnic “cleansings,” holocausts and religious zealotries. Because there is no point, then people do not matter and the welfare of animals may be preferred to the welfare of people. Human life becomes expendable. Wherever God is rejected, and therefore systems of belief opposed to the Bible countenanced, this is what inevitably happens and is happening to the western world now. Nihilism leads nowhere and is fundamentally untrue. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life (John 14.6). Ultimately those who espouse this “nihilistic” view will be forgotten; but, of course, it is at the core of their viewpoint that this is of no significance anyway. Scripture urges us not to embrace such a “nihilistic” view of life.

8.11. This is a famous proverb and always to be borne in mind. It is very easy to do things which our conscience tells us to be wrong, but because nothing seems to happen we carry on sinning. But we are none the less, without repentance, heaping up trouble. “Despisest thou the riches of his (God’s) goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance? But after thy hardness and impenitent heart

treasurest up unto thyself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God; who will render to every man according to his deeds.” (Romans 2.4-6).

8.12. This affirmation draws the conclusion from the previous verse that, never mind the sinner, the believer must not follow the way of evil through being tempted to think he can get away with his fault because the wicked do it and appear to be unpunished.

8.13. “My days are like a shadow that declineth,” says the Psalmist in the midst of being cast down; the sun is setting, the shadows lengthen but the day will soon cease. Again in Psalm 144.4, “Man is like to vanity: his days are as a shadow that passeth way.” If a believer’s life in the normal run of things may be felt properly to be fleeting; if a sorely tried believer may feel the same even more urgently; how much more would it benefit the wicked to be aware that he has not long to repent!

8.14. Injustice rightly goes against the grain. Where the wrong people are punished being innocent, and the guilty go free to perpetuate their sin, is such a situation which could rob a person of his morale and lead to bitterness. But it need not do so. Though vanity is mentioned twice in this verse, it is not the proper conclusion for a believer in the full exercise of his faith; and once again we see the debilitating effect of backsliding in that it leads, almost inevitably, to an entrenched view of life as without purpose. The Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, suffered “the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God” (1 Peter 3.18). Believers, however unjustly treated, are in Him and the injustice they suffer will be transformed to become their weight of glory in Christ. Not so with the unrepentant wicked, whose continuance in sin simply leads to greater condemnation.

8.15. Mirth is certainly not the answer except in a burying one’s head in the sand sort of way. Eating, drinking and being merry will pall as days decline, as Solomon will make clear in chapter 12. However, granted a believer understands his high calling as outlined in the comment on the previous verse, then Paul says to us by the Spirit, “Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice” (Philippians 4.4).

8.16. “He that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep” (Psalm 121.4). A person consistently deprived of sleep is greatly weakened. Only of the Lord is this a proper description that He “neither day nor night seeth sleep with his eyes.” The greatness of God, in sustaining all things and knowing all that is going on even to the thoughts of every person’s heart even if they do not become speech or action, is so great that it is unknowable, unimaginable, to His fallen creatures. In this sense it is also true that we know in part (1 Corinthians 13.12). We are certainly known (1 Corinthians 13.12) but no mortal may know another’s heart and therefore, however much knowledge in any field of learning and observation any single individual has, he shall not be able to find it all. However, this must not inhibit our discovery of the things which the Lord has made. Moreover we should attribute the things, which we are only now discovering, to the Lord who knew everything from the beginning and created everything in the beginning.

Ecclesiastes 9

9.1. "The hand of God." To see the hand of God means to observe His providing, His providence. It is good to be able to see His providence, but another matter altogether to interpret it. The interpretation of His ways on a daily basis is only revealed as a gift of His wisdom, and is very often withheld.

"For all this" is an expression which conveys the significance "nevertheless." Though men's activities (8.16) are too numerous to discover; though "all the work of God" (8.17) be observable and its extent is too vast to take in; still, it is good to declare all this, to draw attention for our consideration that we may glorify God and justify Him in all His governing ways towards us. The righteous and the wise are in the hand of God. Though this refers partly to the self-righteous and the worldly wise, for the ways of all are in the Lord's hands, it most especially refers at its highest and kindest level to the believer, saved by Christ's righteousness through the blood of Calvary.

It would be good to read Psalm 19 at this point. It is a psalm of two halves; one part declaring the revelation of God's glory through the created order; the other (from verse 7) the revelation of God's glory through the scriptures. Now if all we had was creation and its wonders, with no scriptures, we could not tell from nature what God Himself feels about us or intends towards us. In other words, "no man knoweth either love or hatred by all that is before them." The elect will view creation from the standpoint of eternal salvation; the natural man does not have this guide to interpret happenings.

9.2-3. Ultimately, the one thing that happens to all, which none escapes, is death. Death is the key which applies throughout these verses. Is there one event to the righteous and to the wicked? Yes, death. Is there one event to the good and to the clean and to the unclean? Yes, death. And so on, throughout verses 2 and 3. But there are many other things which mankind has in common. The need to eat and drink; to wash and be toileted; to breathe and to exercise; to walk and to run. All this is from God. But what leads to death is the Lord's curse upon the sin which we inherit from Adam. "All have sinned" (Romans 3.23). So to whatever extent it reveals itself in each individual "the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live." "And after that they go to the dead." What a vigorous, but haunting, expression! "Seek ye the LORD while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near: let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon" (Isaiah 55.6-7). "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3.16).

9.4-6. Continual sin can become unbearable and drive a person to despair. The gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ is the antidote for our own sin and shows us also how to handle the sin that is in the world without our going out of it (1 Corinthians 5.10). It is better to be alive than dead and the balance of our mind is disturbed to think otherwise.

The dead are aware. The dead are tormented day and night for ever and ever (Revelation 20.10,15). But the expression, "the dead know not anything" is like the expression, "before I go hence and be no more" in Psalm 39.13. The Psalmist doesn't mean that he will exist no more,

for David is eternally saved. It means that he will have no further part to play on earth. So, “the dead know not anything” means that they have no further part to play on earth; more than that, as likely as not the memory of them is forgotten, certainly a generation or two along the line.

Psalm 49.10-20 is a commentary on the same theme. It is worth reading these verses at this juncture. “Their inward thought is, that their houses shall continue for ever, and their dwelling places to all generations; they call their lands after their own names...this their way is their folly” (Psalm 49.11,13), for they have no more “a portion for ever in any thing that is done under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 9.6).

9.7-10. The proper reaction to the sin of life and our inability to understand the complexities of the providences of God is to embrace the life which we do know within the orbit of our family and daily work. To affirm life is to honour the Lord who gives it. But there is this caveat, “for God now accepteth thy works.” We are not justified by works but by faith in Jesus Christ (Galatians 2.16). The believer in Christ, who sees and understands more than any other, except God, the unmitigated disaster of sin in the world, may by faith have the most positive of all approaches to living in this world. “In everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you” (1Thessalonians 5.18). “Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 5.20).

“Thou art my portion, O LORD” (Psalm 119.57). “The LORD’s portion is his people” (Deuteronomy 32.9). This mutual relationship is the highest portion of all. It activates and invigorates all other portions of our affairs. It is a marvellous thing that the Lord who owns His whole created order delights especially in the people saved by the blood of His Son’s sacrifice on Calvary. By contrast, believers who have access to God by faith (Romans 5.2) involve themselves, overmuch sometimes, in many insignificant portions of this world’s offerings. This passage of Ecclesiastes isolates the significant portions in which we may have justifiable interest:- food and clothing; family and work.

“Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might” is always and everywhere true, a glorious generalisation applicable to all mankind; but nowhere more shiningly applicable than for a believer saved by grace. “Ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God’s” (1 Corinthians 6.20).

9.11-12. Returning to the subject of God’s providential dealings, Solomon brings to our attention (in fulfilment of his avowed aim in verse 1 “to declare all this”) other mysterious providences. Now, because God is perfect; perfectly wise, perfectly just; perfectly holy there is a reason for all things and God could give (He has no need to explain to anybody) a perfect explanation for every individual providence. But to each individual observing only those things that come to his own view and the view of his acquaintances, or the way of daily news bulletins it all seems inexplicable and complex. Chance, accident and luck are descriptions from the isolated point of view of a sinner. God orders all events and there is no chance, accident or luck with Him. We speak of someone being in the wrong place at the wrong time and having an accident; and so it seems. But God who has purposes way beyond our understanding and an intricate fulfilment of a multitude of purposes affecting individuals, societies and nations has no vain, loose events and “all things work together for good to them

that love God, who are the called according to his purpose” (Romans 8.28); while Christ is Head over all things to the church (Ephesians 1.22). “Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is” (Ephesians 5.17).

The whole book of Job who pleased God and yet was caught up in massive damage to his goods and his person in order to prove to Satan that in the fiercest affliction men would not curse God but bless Him illustrates verse 12. Individuals may seem trapped in evil not entirely their own fault “when it falleth suddenly upon them” but every believer plays his/her part in resisting the evil of Satan and “filling up that which is behind” of Christ’s sufferings (Colossians 1.24).

9.13-18. “Wisdom” or “wise” appear in every verse but one until the end of the chapter. It is important, it seemed great to Solomon, that we should expect that wisdom does not immediately seem to triumph or that men and nations do not take heed of the right way. Our little but valuable contribution may be overlooked but God sees and knows. We should not because of that become cynical, but rather always remember that “wisdom is better than strength.” “Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the LORD of hosts” (Zechariah 4.6). Gouge in his comment on Hebrews 13.7 says, “It is taxed as a foul blemish in that city which was delivered by wisdom of a poor wise man, that no man remembered that same poor man.” Though Wisdom crieth in the streets, that is publicly, (Proverbs 1.20), fools will still hate knowledge. We say that the pen is mightier than the sword; if what is written is wise that is true, but the Bible puts it more extensively that “wisdom is better than weapons of war.” One murderous act, one rape, one “accident” ruins a lifetime.

Ecclesiastes 10

10.1. As a little leaven leavens the whole lump (1 Corinthians 5.6) so the whole reputation is brought into disrepute. There is perhaps a little difference in the picture language. Leaven speaks, maybe, of something fundamental, thoroughly mixed whereas flies arrive out of the blue and may draw attention more particularly to external influences. But, either way, our characters prove to be flawed. We need to resist temptation and those things which, if indulged, would disqualify our work or our walk.

10.2. If we are wise all our powers, head and heart, are engaged to govern our affairs. If we are foolish then we give way to every lust the heart feels drawn to.

10.3. You may note a foolish man by his demeanour. His words, his gait (Proverbs 6.12-14), all he says and does, will reveal his crass stupidity. What a change the gospel brings! “And an highway shall be there, and a way, and it shall be called The way of holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it; but it shall be for those: the wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein” (Isaiah 35.8).

10.4. If a ruler speaks angrily and leaves it at that without sentence of banishment and death, it would be good to remain loyal, constant and faithful. His anger will subside and, if he be of that sort of disposition, he may even later value that loyalty and so you will be more trusted.

Those in authority who have outbursts of temper are sometimes glad of those who put up with them when many wouldn't and so one's position is safeguarded. At all events, we should think twice before walking out on any responsibility because of the character failings of those in charge.

If the King of Kings convicts of sin, through the third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, a sincere, unfeigned repentance "pacifieth great offences" through the blood of His everlasting covenant (Hebrews 13.20).

10. 5-7. Those in authority make errors when they appoint by favouritism, friendship, kinship or bribe those who are unsuitable in ability or temperament to bear responsibility. It often happens and is detrimental to the best interests of the nation, or local community. Should we be in a position to make appointments let us see to it that we appoint those of true, tried intrinsic worth and ability.

10.8-9. Here are four examples of a settled plan to harm others. They serve as examples of any form of evil which "the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do" (8.11). The warnings of scripture, of whatsoever sort they are, should be heeded carefully, for there is a sting at the end of them and the sting of death is sin" (1 Corinthians 15.56).

Each of these examples would be very vivid in the experience of countryside dwellers. Some would have been digging a pit and at some point slipped or seen others do so. There was a very great risk, as they were only too well aware, of disturbing snakes in their natural habitat while extending one's property. There is a real possibility of dropping a heavy rock on one's foot and perhaps being lame for the rest of life. Perhaps a finger might be chopped off while using the axe or cleaver, or a splinter fly into the eye. These things all readily happen and demonstrate the real possibility of "having our fingers burned" by involvement in sinful activity.

10.10. This is an elegant proverb. If the scythe or sickle is not sharpened then much more brute force is required to secure the desired purpose. Those who plan the management and logistics of any job will always have the upper edge over those whose labour is manual. "Wisdom is profitable to direct." Let us seek the wisdom of the Spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ to guide us unerringly through our lives - its conduct and its work.

10.11. A snake needs no invitation to bite; it is its instinct. Those who need no invitation to talk on and on are time wasters at the very least and, more seriously, purveyors of malicious gossip. Paul cautions Timothy concerning those who have time on their hands through widowhood, "they learn to be idle, wandering about from house to house; and not only idle, but tattlers also and busybodies, speaking things which they ought not" (1 Timothy 5.13).

10.12-14. The inhabitants of Nazareth heard the words of the Lord Jesus Christ "and all bare him witness, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth" (Luke 4.22) though they rejected them and Him. "Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man" (Colossians 4.6). The speech of a foolish person goes from bad to worse, gaining momentum in its excess of foul thoughts and language. He has so much to say of no consequence that it is impossible to tell what he is

going to say next. There is no stopping him or correcting him. In all these proverbs, while it is not stated, it is implied that we will ensure that we do not fall into the errors spoken of.

10.15. There is a wry humour here similar to that of Proverbs 21.25 and 26.15. Any excuse for not rising to go to work will do. If it is meant that those who are wearied are the onlookers or employers or fellowlabourers, the meaning is that the foolish need to ask instruction so often about how to do a thing, never learning, that it is not worth the bother of employing them.

10.16-17. In later years there would be two young kings, Joash aged 7 (2 Chronicles 24.1); and Josiah aged 8 (2 Chronicles 34.1) both reigning into manhood. Jehoida was the regent for Joash and while he was alive all went well; but the minute he died Joash went astray. On the other hand when Josiah was 15 or 16 “he began to seek after the God of David his father” (2 Chronicles 34.3). If a child king is treated as a king while still a child in matters of state or pandered to, things are likely to go wrong, but if well advised it bodes well for the future.

10.18. Getting behind with one’s work through illness can be very depressing, but when it is through laziness the matters get worse and worse and the jobs which need to be done mount up. Where there is no effort and no plan it is a recipe for failure and, perhaps, personal disaster.

10.19. The money that is wasted on extravagance might well be spent more profitably on necessities or be needed for essentials in days to come. Laughter and merriment may provide light relief from the stresses of work but should not be procured at great expense.

10.20. It was the fear of Job that, “it may be that my sons have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts” (Job 1.5). For that reason he offered burnt offerings for them. Who knows what a person may think in the heart? Our burnt offering is Christ, sacrificed on Calvary, who is the atonement for all the unseen thoughts of the heart and to Whom we should constantly resort in repentance for cleansing. Secret thoughts are known to God; and when thoughts become words or actions they are soon betrayed; to our great detriment and danger.

Ecclesiastes 11

11.1. The general thrust of this proverb is clear; what is challenging is the picture language. If literal bread were thrown into a pond or a river it would, in the former case, be eaten by ducks or fish and, in the latter, be swept away. If not devoured it would go mouldy and disintegrate.

So we are to think metaphorically. Bread may stand for food in general as it does where it is first mentioned, in Genesis 3.19. Waters may certainly stand for people, as in Revelation 17.15, “the waters which thou sawest, where the whore sitteth, are peoples, and multitudes, and nations, and tongues.” The usage here is also plural, whereas it is “thy” bread. What a person “casts” in such circumstances is to all intents and purposes normally lost.

Therefore there is a losing which is a gaining. By providing food, and by extension any other needful commodity, to those who cannot repay, it will be made up to the generous soul. When their turn of need comes, the Lord will see to it, even if the very people previously helped are

not the means of that repayment. “I mean not that other men be eased, and ye burdened: but by an equality, that now at this time your abundance may be a supply for their want, that their abundance also may be a supply for your want: that there may be equality: as it is written “He that gathered much had nothing over; and he that had gathered little had no lack” (2 Corinthians 8.13-15).

Solomon speaks generally, Paul among the brethren, though Solomon might well be thought to refer to his subjects.

11.2 Furthermore, generosity by definition is not to be stinting, else it would not be generosity. While we have the chance, while we have the means, let us provide for as many as we may and even find a space for an extra. Circumstances may change for the worse and it may be no longer possible later.

11.3 The power of this verse lies in its obviousness, so that we ask ourselves what is the point of the observation. Quite simply, where we live is where our generosity is to be shown. It is “nigh thee” (Romans 10.8), “very nigh thee” (Deuteronomy 30.14). It is a common failing that we do not look to do our “great things” at home.

11.4. With weather forecasting prominently thrust before us these days this is a very apt illustration. It is often better to make a start in any enterprise until circumstances dictate otherwise than to indulge our laziness and make no attempt; only to discover the circumstances would have been favourable and the job done had we set about it.

11.5. Two attributes are combined in this proverb. Invisibility and wonder. “The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit” (John 3.8). Wonderfully hidden these things are, and yet they are happening all the time. Scientists may be discovering things but they have been going on all the time. These things constantly remind us that we are to stand in awe of things that are beyond us but have always been known by the Lord who created and continues them. If we have atheistic inclinations such thoughts as these should teach us that atheistic inclinations are seriously in error.

11.6. If it is seedtime we may expect to be about the sowing at all hours. The Lord Jesus Christ applies the picture language of sowing to the spreading of the gospel (Luke 8. 4-15). Whatever the time of day, whatever the period of our lives, gospel opportunities are there for the taking. It is not for us to reckon that this or that opportunity is inappropriate. The best scenario of all is that they might all prove to be sown on good ground.

11.7-8. If the enjoyment of the light and warmth of the sun for growth and wellbeing is pleasant as well as necessary, how much more is this true of the gospel of salvation. Paul speaks of, “the light of the glorious gospel of Christ” (2 Corinthians 4.4), and the Psalmist says, “The LORD is my light and my salvation” (Psalm 27.1). It is a “horror of great darkness” (Genesis 15.12) to be in the Egypt of sin. To spend one’s life in the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ is much wiser. The alternative spiritually is a thick “darkness which may be felt” (Genesis 10. 21,22). “Woe unto them...that put darkness for light, and light for darkness” (Isaiah 5.20). By nature men love darkness rather than light (John 3.19) but the Lord Jesus

Christ said, "I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life" (John 8.12).

Days of darkness are many without Christ for "the whole world lieth in wickedness" (1 John 5.19). Once life is over "shall thy wonders be known in the dark?" (Psalm 88.12, that is, in death. "Give glory to the LORD your God, before he cause darkness, and before your feet stumble upon the dark mountains, and, while ye look for (ie "expect") light, he turn it into the shadow of death and make it gross darkness" (Jeremiah 13.16). The days of darkness in that case shall be many for Solomon speaks in the next chapter that "man goeth to his long home" (12.5); for a long time – even eternity.

"All that cometh is vanity." If we embrace nihilism, (that there is no God, nothing beyond this life and therefore no hope and no accountability to anyone, with all that follows) it may be possible to rejoice in sheer youthfulness while it lasts but it is shortlived and takes no account of the aspirations, the love and hope (to say nothing of other attributes) which we find within us. Any attempted explanation of the meaning of life which does not take these things into account is no explanation at all, for these are the noblest and highest attributes of man. They can only be explained if we allow that there is a Higher than man, who because He first enjoyed these qualities from everlasting, endowed man with them as a heritage to be treasured, not overruled, in any consideration of his makeup.

9-10. So the crucial failing of the backsliding state is here revealed. It proposes living as if there is no eternity, living for the flesh and for the hour in the sure knowledge that it is inviting God's judgment. One might imagine that verse 9 was ironical, but verse 10 shows that this is the serious dilemma of the backsliding state. It is seriously flawed and inconsistent, as the middle of these verses eminently displays. If we indulge in the attitudes of verse 9 it is not so straightforward to "remove sorrow from thy heart, and put away evil from thy flesh." To "walk in the ways of thine heart" is to invite sorrow and evil. While it is true (Psalm 37.4) that "he (the LORD) shall give thee the desires of thine heart" it is on the condition that we delight ourselves in Him. The true way is to "repent and believe the gospel" (Mark 1.15) even from childhood. The conclusion (verse 10) to remove sorrow from the heart may only be through the repentance which is at the core of the gospel message; but it is no part of gospel preaching to invite the young to walk in the natural ways of their heart and invite the judgment of God thereby. Faithful preaching is always "Repent and believe the gospel." A preacher in an unsaved or backslidden state preaches a defective gospel; which, while it may please our Almighty, sovereign God to overrule, is not to be the norm.

Ecclesiastes 12

12.1. In one of the strikingly memorable passages of scripture, memorable because haunting, Solomon encourages the young to serve the Lord from their youth up, while they are young and can give their best strength to His service. It is a characteristic of

youth that they cannot really envisage what it is like to be old or that they will ever be old themselves.

The whole passage, however, still reveals the backsliding state of the preacher. He can only urge the young to be God-fearers, not saved young men and women. His whole conclusion is, "Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man" (verse 13) whereas the gospel message which is to be directed to the young, as to all, is to repent and believe the gospel (Matthew 3.2; 4.17: Mark 1.15).

Now we know that the Lord loved Solomon in the sense that he was chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world (2 Samuel 12.24; Nehemiah 13.26). We also know from 1 Chronicles 28.9 that the Lord declared to him, "if thou seek him, he will be found of thee; but if thou forsake him, he will cast thee off for ever." The next book of Scripture, the Song of Solomon, is a profound description of the mutual love of the Lord Jesus Christ for His people, and they for Him, and Solomon could only have written it as a believer restored from backsliding. We must conclude that Solomon repented and returned fully to the Lord and that the Lord who loved him from the beginning pursued him until he was restored. This is delicately described, among other revelations of the heavenly relationship, in the Song (SS 2.8-13).

12.2. A most poignant description of old age follows, in highly poetic picture language. Of course, elderly believers may serve the Lord; the meaning is that it is not the best time to commence the Lord's service, though if the Lord calls in old age, He will give strength and make up for lost years. What is being urged is that the young are not to put off being the Lord's and serving Him until they are old.

Solomon would have been aware of Psalm 90 seeing that it was written by Moses. "The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away...O satisfy us early with thy mercy; that we may rejoice and be glad all our days" (Psalm 90.10,14).

Verse 2 is a summary description; from verse 3 onwards we have a list of the drawbacks of old age, as one by one the various parts of the body are listed in their failing state. Sight is likely to be undimmed and the body untroubled by constantly recurring disability and sickness in our prime.

12.3. Interpreters differ from one another when it comes to allotting which part of the body conforms to which description. The following is my suggestion only.

Different parts of the body may tremble as age takes hold. Of those that tremble, we must ask ourselves what part can be described as keeping us? It cannot mean the head, for it is the plural "keepers;" unless the head which directs the other parts be meant as well as, say, the arms and hands. The hands work for our keep and they may

certainly shake with disease and/or age. So I suggest it makes sense to regard hands as the prime part of the body indicated here.

All our lives long our legs have supported us well. These are the strong men that bow themselves. The grinders are the teeth, and those that look out of the windows the eyes.

12.4. All the doors of the houses in a street are shut when the dwellers are either out or otherwise engaged indoors. They are not about. It is listening, speaking and sleeping that are “not about” so much as we age. Conversation is limited now that hearing is impaired and eating more difficult, for mealtimes were a ready source of eating, speaking and listening. Deafness may make a person start at a sudden small sound. Or it may refer to sleeplessness when a person is wakeful and rises up as soon as the dawn chorus commences. The ability to appreciate, and certainly to join in, music and dancing is greatly reduced. Barzillai’s description of his failing capacities is worth reading at this point, 2 Samuel 19.35.

12.5. We may be afraid of heights from a very young age, but heights which are no heights at all may now trouble the older person. Looking from head height down two stairs may seem a long way and the risk of falling may prey on the mind. Perhaps fears “in the way” refer to fears of tripping or being bumped into while walking. Most think that the blossom of the almond tree is a picture for a mop of white hair. “The grasshopper shall be a burden” – what a wonderful expression this is! His weight (though light), his jerky movement, his repetitive noise – it is all too much. Even such little inconveniences are a burden, and cause strain and annoyance. Desire to do anything fails; it is difficult to muster the effort to do even the smallest, most straightforward mundane thing.

Again, “his long home” is a most evocative expression. The leaving of this world is for a long, long time; it is permanent. And, though distance is not the way to measure heaven or hell, death is a far cry from our presence in this world. The family must needs carry on, but they go about their business in their mourning attire.

12.6. Again, these most moving, poignant, haunting expressions for death are so evocative. All the things mentioned beforehand concerning the failing senses are precursors of that final dissolution, the separation of our souls from our bodies, which is death. “Or ever,” which means “before the time ever comes,” these things will have certainly occurred.

The silver cord is very likely the tongue. “The tongue of the just is as choice silver” (Proverbs 10.20). We speak of “stringing words together.” The loosing of the tongue is used of the restoration of speech (Mark 7.35) but its final loosing is that it may speak no more. The golden bowl probably means the head, and especially the brain with all

its priceless functions. Inasmuch as a fountain is a natural springing of water and a cistern requires pumping, it is as good an interpretation as any to think of the pitcher broken as the final acts of breathing and the wheel broken to be the final pumping actions of the heart.

12.7. Then the dust returns to the earth as it was. “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return” (Genesis 3.19). “And the LORD God formed man out of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul” (Genesis 2.7). The two elements of our being are here despatched to their abode – the body to the earth and the spirit or soul to the presence of God for final judgment.

12.8. So is this all there is? Absolute and thorough emptiness and meaninglessness? Nihilism – the attitude that because it is all meaningless, nothing matters and everything goes. According to this thinking there are no standards and no accounts to give. There is no God - so destroy the Bible which says God is and persecute the believers who affirm God is. Commit murder, for human life is as nothing, and suicide (self-murder) because it is all too much and the sooner it is over the better.

The Holy Spirit, the author of the scriptures, gives us this book at this level, authored by Solomon, that we may see where the mixing of sin with our faith, dross with the gold, leads us. Simply to fear God but not to know Him or be walking with Him any more is to have no greater hope than to expect our day of judgment. With what longing we should return to the Lord if we have backslidden lest our thoughts become hopeless like these.

12.9. “He still taught the people knowledge.” In season and out of season we are to keep at our tasks, the maintaining of law and order, the earning of our living, the teaching of our children. Even the godless must keep busy at life. It still has to be done.

12.10. Words govern actions; acceptable words persuade the mind; powerful imagery causes the emotions to flow and thus colour the mind and its actions. It is a gift of God to be able to seek out and find such words calculated to have the maximum influence. But more than any oratory, the preaching of the word of God is the supreme use of words. To bring men and women, boys and girls to the supreme and only Saviour, to the highest life of all, which is in Him, and to assist them to sustain that life is the ultimate end to which words can be put.

12.11. Words of wisdom encourage, inspire. They give heart to the weary to continue; to the lost that they are to be found; to men of vision in the prime of life not to betray their faith. Words may pierce the conscience and be painful as the real goad inflicts

pain. But the effect is to keep us moving forward resolutely at our tasks, according to that which the Lord lays before us. Again, the picture language alters to that of a master builder expertly fixing crucial nails which are to bear much weight in the buildings he is constructing (assembling). Such words are to be more than instant helps at any given stage of life. They are the expression of fundamental principles; of the doctrines on which our lives hang.

The individual scripture writers, the individual preachers bring words of experience and, indeed, in the case of the scripture writers, perfection. But all these words are from God Himself, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He is the Shepherd. The Holy Scriptures are His word. The Gospel is the word of life in the Lord Jesus Christ. Sermons and commentaries all expound the Bible. They are all “given from one shepherd.”

12.12. Every generation requires its own books and this will be so, in whatever form, until the end of time. Study for the one whose full-time work it is to shepherd the flock is as much a weariness as other work for it comes in the sweat of the face (Genesis 3.19). Of Paul Festus said dramatically (with a loud voice), “much learning doth make thee mad” (Acts 26.24). Believers are to be people of the Book, the Bible, but not bookish. While temperaments differ, broadly speaking believers are to be people-orientated not book-orientated. We must not grow weary in well doing (Galatians 6.9; 2 Thessalonians 3.13) or of being admonished, that we may grow in grace.

12.13. Micah 6.8 says, “He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?” It is the walking humbly with God, the close and intimate fellowship, that is missing here in Ecclesiastes. It portrays the God-fearing, but unsaved or backsliding, relationship. Whereas the summary in Micah speaks from a saved perspective. Justice and mercy are to be shown by all, believers and unbelievers alike. But only those who are walking with God in Christ, who have peace with God through His blood, may exercise these graces effectively and with God’s approval.

12.14. Again, it is true that after death there is judgment (Hebrews 9.27). It is a fitting place to end a book of wisdom. There is a resurrection of the just and of the unjust (John 5.29; Daniel 12.2). But whereas God as Creator may suffice the unsaved God-fearer, and be all that the backslider dare admit in his backslidden state; Christ the Saviour, the Redeemer, is the theme of the restored saint in the fullness of his walk with God in Christ.