

NOTES ON THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES

* * * VANITY OF LIFE UNDER THE SUN * * *

"Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again."
(John 4:13)

"And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof;
but he that doeth the will of God abideth forever."
(1 John 2:17)

S.L.H.
Soli Deo Gloria!

AUTHOR: Solomon (c. 930 BC)

AUTHORSHIP: Critical scholarship of virtually all schools have tended to late date the Book of Ecclesiastes, allegedly on grounds of Hebrew language and style. However, if Ecclesiastes is an inspired book of the Bible, which it is, authorship by Solomon is absolutely demanded. The text of Ecclesiastes asserts that it is the words of "the son of David" (Ecc1:1), who was "king over Israel in Jerusalem" (Ecc1:12), who claims for himself "more wisdom than all they that have been before me" (Ecc1:16; Cp., 1Kgs3:12), and who is responsible for the great architectural accomplishments of the nation (Ecc2:4-6). The clear testimony of the text of Ecclesiastes is that the book was written by King Solomon. Solomon died c. 930 BC, and Ecclesiastes was likely written near the end of his life (cf. Ecc12:1-7, where the author comments on the apparently personal effects of old age).

WISDOM LITERATURE: Ecclesiastes is "wisdom" literature, which in the Hebrew mindset means it contains "advice for living" this present life, **not** instructions for meriting eternal life/salvation (note that this is not the Greek/Roman/contemporary meaning given to wisdom).

BACKGROUND: Ecclesiastes is the memoirs of King Solomon who, despite every human as well as supernatural advantage, failed miserably in life. It is Solomon's record of personal experimentation, having tried everything this life had to offer and found it wanting, written to his son (Ecc12:12; presumably Rehoboam, who would succeed him as king). Since Ecclesiastes is included as an inspired book in the canon of Scripture, the testimony of the wisest of all men endures to the present day as ready counsel to any who would heed it. It is Solomon's desire that we learn from his experiences (i.e., failures). As someone once said, a truly wise man is not one who learns from his own mistakes, but one who learns from the mistakes of others.

Solomon's birth to David and Bathsheba is recorded in 2 Samuel 12:24; the record of his adult life is covered in 1 Kings 1:1-11:43 (2Chron1:1-9:31). If we take seriously the testimony of Scripture regarding King Solomon, he was the wisest man who ever lived (Kgs3:12; 4:29-32), to be surpassed only by the Man Jesus Christ (Matt12:42; Lk11:31). His personal wealth was unprecedented (1Kgs3:13; 10:14), and from Jerusalem he enjoyed worldwide influence (1Kgs10:1-13). Intellectually, he was the epitome of the 'Renaissance Man', speaking 3,000 proverbs (this is much more than has been preserved in the Book of Proverbs) and 1,005 songs (only the Song of Songs was preserved in Scripture; 1Kgs4:32). He was an expert in botany, zoology, ornithology, entomology, and ichthyology (1Kgs4:33-34). He was a master of organization and an architectural genius, constructing both the Temple of the LORD (Kgs5:1-8:11) as well as his own monumental palace (1Kgs7:1-12). Solomon began

his reign as a young man well; he loved the LORD and obeyed His law (1Kgs3:3), honoring Him before the nation and publicly exhorting Israel to wholeheartedly follow the LORD only (1Kgs8:60-61). If we accept the Book of Ecclesiastes as his memoirs, written near the end of his life, then he also ended in fellowship with the LORD (Ecc12:13). Between this start and finish, however, Solomon was drawn away from the LORD for many years (perhaps most of his adult life) as a result of his many marriages to pagan women (1Kgs11:1-3), the majority of which were arranged to seal forbidden political alliances (1Kgs3:1; Ex34:12-16; Cp., 2Cor5:14-17); because of his love for these pagan women, he not only allowed them to continue their practice of idolatry in Israel, he enabled it and even participated in it himself (1Kgs11:2-8)! This heinous sin against the LORD resulted in the division of the Kingdom of Israel into two houses after Solomon's death (1Kgs11:9-13) and ultimately the disqualification of Solomon's dynasty (but not David's; 1Chron17:11-14) as the line leading to the eternal King of Israel in the Messiah (note that Jesus Christ is a descendent of David, but not Solomon; Luk3:23-31).

REFUTATION OF (PAGAN) PHILOSOPHY: Ecclesiastes raised and answered all the great questions of 'philosophy' in the days of Solomon (c. 930 BC), 4 centuries before the so-called rise of philosophy in Greece. In Ecclesiastes, Solomon specifically addressed the philosophies that over millennia would come to be known as Empiricism (Ecc1:4-8), Existentialism (Ecc1:9-11), Virtue Ethics (Ecc2:1-11), Rationalism (Ecc2:12-17), Utilitarianism (Ecc2:18-23), Marxism (Ecc4:1-3), Social Contract (Ecc4:4-6), Ethical Egoism (Ecc4:7-12), Will to Power (Ecc4:13-16), Consensual Democracy (Ecc5:1-20), Piety and Moral Theory of Obligation (Ecc7:1-8:17), and Platonic Aristocracy (Ecc9:11-10:19).

THEOLOGICAL ISSUES: 1) Addresses the source of man's need to find meaning and purpose in life (Ecc3:11); 2) addresses the age-old question of the so-called "problem of evil" (Ecc3:16-17; 7:29); and 3) includes a clear statement of the universal depravity of man (Ecc7:20).

MESSAGE OF ECCLESIASTES: The key word in the Book of Ecclesiastes is "**vanity**" (used 37 times in Ecclesiastes, more than half of all uses in the OT), and the key phrase is "**under the sun**" (used 29 times in Ecclesiastes, with no occurrence in the remainder of the Bible). Recognizing the importance of these textual keys and their correct understanding is vital to interpreting the message of Ecclesiastes. Solomon uses "vanity" to mean something that is transitory, not having an intrinsic or enduring quality or value. Solomon uses "under the sun" as a qualifier when he is drawing conclusions from a purely humanistic/naturalistic perspective, obtained by use of human wisdom (which either ignores or rejects divine revelation). In these cases, Solomon's humanistic conclusion is decidedly unbiblical (e.g., Ecc3:18-19); Solomon is not asserting that such humanistic conclusions are true, but demonstrating where humanistic thought leads (Prov26:5).

The message of Ecclesiastes is that everything in this present life is unsubstantial, transitory, without intrinsic meaning/purpose or lasting value, and unable to satisfy the longings of every human heart; everything, that is, "under the sun" (Ecc1:14). Solomon's repeated use of the phrase "under the sun" to qualify his evaluation of this present life is vital to the message of Ecclesiastes. Critics who have failed to recognize the importance of it have often likened Solomon's message to the despair expressed by modern existentialists—nothing could be farther from the truth. Solomon uses "under the sun" with his evaluations to emphasize that these are the conclusions reached when one employs only a temporal and human viewpoint. Everything in this present life is fleeting, transitory, repetitive, and every attempt to find meaning and purpose in it is frustrated when God and His plan are excluded; however, when God and His plan are correctly understood and embraced, everything is imbued with profound meaning and purpose,

including the most mundane and ordinary acts (Ecc2:24; 1Cor10:31; Col3:23). Solomon, having used his royal power, immense wealth and unparalleled intellect to personally investigate every humanistic path to find satisfaction and purpose in this present life, concludes that such humanistic paths all lead to frustration, and that purpose can only be found when this life is viewed from the perspective of the life to come; thus his concluding exhortation is, "Fear God, and keep His commandments" (Ecc12:13-14).

CHAPTER 1

SOLOMON'S HUMANISTIC ASSESSMENT OF LIFE

- [1] The author of the book is asserted to be "the son of David, king in Jerusalem"; further, no one following Solomon ever ruled "over Israel in Jerusalem" (Ecc1:12). Thus, to be faithful to the Biblical text, only Solomon can be accepted as the author of Ecclesiastes.

The word translated "preacher" is *kohleth* in Hebrew. It has the meaning of 'one who calls an assembly together for the purpose of instruction' (apparently Solomon had a public teaching ministry; cf. 1Kgs4:32-34). In the LXX, the Hebrew word was translated into Greek as *ecclesiastes* (note similarity with *ecclesia*, which means congregation), meaning 'one who addresses an assembly'; it is this word from the LXX from which our English Bibles take the name of the book.

- [2] In Hebrew, the repetition of a substantive in the genitive is a superlative; thus, "vanity of vanities" is the Hebrew way of saying 'the greatest of all possible vanities' (Cp., song of songs, holy of holies, etc.). The English word "**vanity**" is a translation of the Hebrew *habel*, which is difficult to concisely render into English; *habel* has no negative moral connotation as does the English "vanity". The Hebrew *habel* has the idea of a vapor, or a shadow (i.e., something without substance, or something that is fleeting, transitory, not of intrinsic or enduring quality or value), as used in Psalm 144:4 (same idea as Js4:14).
- [3] The key phrase in Ecclesiastes is "**under the sun**". When Solomon uses it, he is explicitly reasoning from human viewpoint alone, which either ignores or rejects divine revelation; he is drawing conclusions from a purely naturalistic perspective, obtained by use of human wisdom (note comments on v13 below). In interpreting Ecclesiastes, we must not understand these conclusions of Solomon to be universal truths (or even true at all), as they have been reached apart from the truth of Scripture.
- [4] Paganism (both ancient and modern) always presupposes that the "earth" (i.e., the universe), and only the earth, is eternal. Carl Sagan opened his landmark book/television series *Cosmos* with the assertion that, "The cosmos is all there is, or was, or ever will be"; this is blasphemy, putting the creation in the place of the Creator (Rev1:4,8; 4:8; 11:17; Cp., Rom1:25). Scripture reveals that the earth had a beginning (Gen1:1) and it will have an end (2Pet3:10-12; Rev21:1).
- [6] This observation (c. 930 BC) presupposes a spherical earth.
- [7] This verse includes an implicit recognition of the water cycle (Cp., Job36:27-28).

In vv3-7, Solomon observes (reasoning from human viewpoint alone) that the earth and all its processes continue independent of man. Earth's processes seem to be merely cyclical, and man's life appears to have no purpose. What Solomon misses (or leaves unsaid at this early stage of analysis) is that the earth and its processes do not continue independent of God (Gen8:21-22; Col1:17; Heb1:3), and man's purpose is found in the Creator rather than the creation.

Note that in vv4-7, the "earth", "sun", "wind", and "rivers" correspond to classical paganism's four fundamental elements: earth, fire, wind, and water.

- [8] What is true when Solomon observes the natural world (vv4-7) is also true when he observes every human endeavor. All "things" (lit., words) are "full of labor" (i.e., wearied, tired, exhausted), so that words fail him. He has found nothing which satisfies (the extensive list of all that he has tried will begin in Ch2).
- [9] That "there is no new thing under the sun" is Solomon's way of saying it's all been tried, repeatedly, and found to leave the human spirit wanting. Solomon himself will exhaustively experiment with all the world has to offer.
- [10] There is nothing new, "under the sun", left to try in an effort to find satisfaction and meaning in this life. This is the testimony of King Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, who had the position, power, and wealth to try everything. No one will ever think of something that Solomon didn't try.
- [11] Every occasion in which a "new" thing is offered (asserted to satisfy the human spirit and infuse life with meaning) will in the final analysis turn out to be something that was tried long ago, most cases by Solomon himself, but forgotten by the current generation. It has been asserted that 'history repeats itself', but this is not true; it is the natural man that repeat himself (which is the only course available to him in his rebellion against his Creator).

SOLOMON'S EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATIONS

(PHILOSOPHY)

- [12] This verse, taken with v1, is definitive in establishing Solomon as the author of the Book of Ecclesiastes. There were only 3 kings "over [all] Israel" who reigned "in Jerusalem": Saul, David, and Solomon, and only Solomon was "the son of David" (v1). After Solomon, the kingdom was divided.

Solomon begins his empirical investigations to find satisfaction and meaning in this life after he becomes king, giving him the position, power, freedom and wealth to conduct an exhaustive investigation.

- [13] Solomon's stated purpose, "to seek and search out **by wisdom** concerning all things", is precisely the stated purpose of philosophy, from ancient Greece even to today; he will admit later in the book that he failed in this attempt, and that such an approach cannot succeed (Ecc8:16-17). A thousand years later the Apostle Paul, writing from Corinth (i.e., Greece), observed that "the world **by wisdom** knew not God" (1Cor1:21). This is because philosophy has a fatal, fundamental flaw in its very foundation.

The Fatal Flaw of Philosophy. Philosophy means 'the love of wisdom'. The 3 classical branches of philosophy (and the questions for which they seek to derive answers) are: 1) Epistemology (How do I know what I know?), 2) Metaphysics (Is there anything beyond the physical/material world?), and 3) Ethics (What is right behavior for the individual?). However, these are the very questions for which theology (i.e., God's revelation in Scripture) claims to have the absolute answers! The great error of philosophy is its presupposition that truth can be ascertained by human means alone. "Philosophy and science start with the bold confession of faith that not caprice but an inherent orderliness underlies the phenomena, and the explanation of nature is to be sought within nature itself..." (W.K.C. Guthrie, History of Philosophy, Vol. I). In contrast, the Bible asserts that truth can only come by revelation from God (Isa8:20; Jn17:17; Act17:11); Solomon's epistemology is in perfect agreement with this (Prov1:7; 9:10).

The only use of "philosophy" in the New Testament is in Colossians 2:8, used there in a very negative sense¹ even though Greek philosophy was prevalent and revered in the Greco-Roman world of the 1st century. At its heart, philosophy is humanistic, exalting human reason as the ultimate authority. However, we must take serious account of The Fall and its consequences. The Fall affected man's capacity to reason properly and without bias (Prov14:12; 16:25); that is, the noetic effect of The Fall rendered man's autonomous reasoning as "foolishness" (1Cor2:14; 3:19).

Human reason is a gift of God (Jas1:17). However, it's proper role is in subordination to the Word of God. It can be used by the regenerated mind to reason outward from God's revealed, absolute truth (Jn17:17) in order to understand God's revelation and that which can be logically deduced from it for the purpose of applying that knowledge in our world. It cannot be used by the unregenerate mind to reason, independent of revelation, to a knowledge of God (1Cor1:21) or any absolute truth.

- [14] Solomon's philosophical investigations, in which he assessed "all the works that are done under the sun", led him to the conclusion that "all is vanity" (i.e., without substance, fleeting, transitory, not of intrinsic or enduring quality or value), and to spend one's life in their pursuit results in "vexation of spirit" (i.e., no satisfaction, no sense of meaning).
- [15] That which is "crooked" is (unregenerate) man; there is no way, "under the sun", he can be "made straight". His positive, meaningful works cannot be "numbered" since they are totally "wanting" (i.e., there are none). Solomon sees no way this situation can be corrected.
- [16] Solomon asserts that he is personally in possession, by divine gift (1Kgs3:12-13), of more "wisdom", "knowledge" and wealth than any other man who has ever lived.
- [17] In this verse Solomon makes use of a figure of speech known as *merism*; by reference to the two extremes of a thing, the totality of everything in between is implied. This literary device is

¹ In Colossians 2:8, one can understand Paul's references to the "tradition of men" as a description of Humanism, and the "rudiments of the world" as Materialism, which form the foundation of all secular philosophies.

common in Biblical Hebrew (e.g., Gen1:1). In Solomon's philosophical investigations, he explored everything from "wisdom" to "madness and folly" (the two extremes of human reason), meaning his philosophical investigation was exhaustive. He concludes that it always leads to "vexation of spirit".

- [18] Remember, Solomon's conclusion is based on human viewpoint and human wisdom alone, applied to this present life only. With those limitations, the more one knows/understands the problem, the greater his "grief" and "sorrow" will be, since the problem only gets worse with increased understanding with no resolution ever presenting itself². It should not be a surprise that a high number of the world's most brilliant philosophers have been driven to despair, madness, and even suicide as a direct result of their studies.

² A perfect example of this is the divergence of attitudes regarding Eastern religions' concept of reincarnation. The attitude toward reincarnation in the West (developed only in the last century or so as the Christian worldview has begun to disintegrate) is one of fascination, something that is "cool", something desirable. The Eastern attitude (developed after contemplating the ramifications of reincarnation for millennia) is one of despair. No matter what form in which one returns, that return is always into the same evil world of sorrow, pain, suffering, and death. The Eastern thinker does not desire reincarnation, but achieving "Nirvana", which is not heaven but a form of extinction—he just wants it to end!

CHAPTER 2

(PLEASURE)

- [1] Historically, many philosophies have set personal pleasure as the greatest good to motivate and direct one's life. Solomon also investigated whether "mirth" (Heb., *pleasure*) and "pleasure" (Heb., *good*, as in what feels good) could provide lasting satisfaction and ultimate meaning in this life. His conclusion will again be, "this also is vanity" (i.e., without substance, fleeting, transitory, not of intrinsic or enduring quality or value).
- [2] Here, "laughter" is the audible expression of pleasure or joy.
- [3] Solomon's investigation of pleasure is said here to include "wine", and we know it included women as well (1Kgs11:3). These pursuits were not wild, unrestrained orgies, but "yet acquainting mine heart with wisdom . . . till I might see what was that good for the sons of men"; in other words, Solomon conducted his pursuit of pleasure along the lines of a scientific investigation; could feeling good bring lasting satisfaction and meaning to the present life? Here, "under the heaven" is synonymous with "under the sun".

(LABOR)

- [4] Solomon investigated personal labor to see if it would bring lasting satisfaction and ultimate meaning to life. He personally poured himself into "great works", which included the design and construction of the LORD's Temple (1Kgs6:1) as well as his own palace (1Kgs7:1). He developed a thousand "vineyards" (Cp., Song8:11-12).
- [5] He developed "gardens" (Cp., Song4:16; 5:1) and "orchards" of fruit trees.
- [6] He invented "pools of water" as advanced irrigation systems to water his extensive gardens and orchards. Solomon was not only an expert in botany (1Kgs4:33), he applied himself to agronomy and agricultural engineering.

(RICHES)

- [7] Solomon amassed immense personal wealth in his search for lasting satisfaction and ultimate meaning in this life. This included "servants", "maidens", "herds" of cattle and "flocks" of sheep and goats, "above all that were in Jerusalem before me" (i.e., there was no one wealthier than Solomon).
- [8] Solomon amassed "silver and gold", but also all the "peculiar treasure" that could be obtained from the many lands that paid tribute to him (1Kgs9:16-21,26-28). He also amassed "singers" to provide entertainment. Note that the Hebrew word rendered "musical instruments" (KJV) may actually refer to concubines (Cp., 1Kgs11:3).
- [9] Not only was Solomon the wisest man who ever lived, his position of power as king and his personal wealth were unequalled. No one before Solomon, or after him, would ever be in a better position than he to perform such an exhaustive investigation.

- [10] Solomon pursued such investigations without restraint of any kind. Note that as King of Israel subject to the Law of Moses, many of his activities were forbidden (e.g., Deut17:14-20).

(ASSESSMENT)

- [11] After personally investigating philosophy, pleasure, labor, and riches as sources of lasting satisfaction and ultimate meaning in this life, with the time, energy and resources available to none other, Solomon concludes "all was vanity" (i.e., without substance, fleeting, transitory, not of intrinsic or enduring quality or value) and only results in "vexation of spirit" (i.e., frustration, despair, meaninglessness). From a purely humanistic perspective, "under the sun", there is no "profit" in any of them.
- [17] Since no meaning or purpose for life can be found in any pursuit "under the sun", Solomon "**hated** life". It is not only meaningless, but also "grievous" (i.e., a burden).

CHAPTER 3

MEANING AND PURPOSE TO BE FOUND "BEYOND THE SUN"

- [1] At the end of Ch2, Solomon concluded that human life (assessed from an "under the sun", humanistic point of view) had no meaning or purpose. And yet, Solomon intuitively sees "purpose under the heaven" (perhaps taking a grander point of view that merely "under the sun"). There is obvious order and design in the universe, which clearly points to the God of the Bible as Creator (Ps19:1-6; Rom1:19-20). Unbelief "suppresses" that knowledge "in unrighteousness" (Rom1:18), but must somehow explain this order and apparent design that is everywhere apparent. It does so by means of **Evolutionism** (which has existed in a variety of pagan forms for millennia before Charles Darwin).

The Teleological Argument. William Paley (*Natural Theology*, 1802) intuitively used the **Teleological Argument** for the existence of God (i.e., inferring a Designer from the evidence of design inherent in the universe) to great effect more than 2 centuries ago (using the analogy of a watch, but drawing inferences especially from human anatomy); this approach has been reinvigorated by the contemporary *Intelligent Design Movement*, which takes a mathematically much more rigorous approach. However, the problem with the teleological 'proof' for the existence of God, used apart from Scripture by Aquinas, Paley, and the modern IDM proponents, is that at best it establishes the existence of a 'god', not the God of the Bible.

Solomon observes that every human activity has a proper "time" (i.e., point in time, either on the calendar or in a human life) and "season" (i.e., duration). Activities that are good, are not good at all times; even things that are generally bad, may not be bad at all times.

In vv2-8, Solomon contrasts 14 activities, 7 sets of pairs that are polar opposites; when used figuratively the number 7 suggests completeness, and the use of polar opposites is again a form of *merism* that expresses totality (i.e., Solomon believes this list, in a literary sense, exhausts all possibilities). In every case, the activity is only good when undertaken at the appointed time

and appropriate season—otherwise it is bad (i.e., context is important and necessary in the assessment). This is evidence of design and purpose “under the heaven”. It is not the answer to purpose that Solomon seeks, but it points in the direction of the answer. Human activities pursued “under the sun”, assessed in isolation, seem to have no meaning or purpose; **they require a context to be so**. In the appropriate context, every human activity has meaning and purpose!

- [2] (1) Birth, death; (2) planting, harvesting.
- [3] (3) Kill, heal; (4) destroy, build.
- [4] (5) Weep, laugh; (6) mourn, rejoice.
- [5] (7) Scatter, gather; (8) embrace, refrain from embracing.
- [6] (9) Get, lose; (10) keep, cast away.
- [7] (11) Rend, sew; (12) keep silent, speak.
- [8] (13) Love, hate; (14) war, peace.
- [9] If there is such obvious design and order in the universe, there must be meaning to human activity in this life.
- [10] This meaning/purpose for our lives cannot be found by looking within the creation (vv1-9); this is the **wrong context**. Rather, it will be found by looking to the Creator, “God” (vv11-22).
- [11] God has made everything “beautiful in its time” (i.e., fit together perfectly in its proper context). He has also “set the world [Heb., *olam*, better understood as ‘eternity’] in their heart”. By God’s design (cf. Gen1:26), every man possesses God-consciousness; the unbeliever works hard to suppress this God-consciousness, but he is never successful (Rom1:18-21). It was this inherent God-consciousness resident in every man that the Apostle Paul always used as his point of contact with pagan unbelievers (Act14:15-17; 17:22-29); that is, Paul never undertook to prove the existence of God to the unbeliever, but started with the understanding that every man in his heart of hearts knows God, but has suppressed that knowledge.

However, “no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end”. That is, it is fallen man’s God-implanted capacity to discern something of God’s eternal purpose behind all the temporal, transient aspects of this present life “under the sun”, and discerning something of it to cling to it in faith (Cp., Rom4:16-22). But because of his finiteness as a creature, to which must be added the noetic effects of the Fall, man can never understand God’s purpose completely or correctly by an exercise of his reason alone. Man’s intellectual life of 60 or 70 years allows him to observe only a tiny part of what God is doing in history, so he will never be able to realize God’s larger plan and purpose for eternity. This is the reason why no man can sit in judgment of God’s actions; he only sees a part, and any part can only be appropriately judged in the context of the whole (which no man can see). The key to understanding the purpose and meaning of God’s plan for eternity, and for every human life, is not reason, but **revelation**.

- [12] Apart from this eternal context, Solomon says the best a man can do is try to “rejoice” and try to find “good in his life”; but he

has already testified that such joy and good as this does not provide lasting satisfaction or ultimate meaning.

- [13] To "eat", and to "drink", and to "enjoy the good of all his labor" does bring some satisfaction (albeit not lasting satisfaction; cf. Jn4:13), even to the unbeliever. Even this is "the gift of God", part of His common grace shown to all His creatures (Act14:17) which ought to motivate all men to seek Him (Act17:27).
- [14] Nonetheless, satisfaction that lasts "**forever**" can come only from "God"; this is set in contrast with all man's activities, from an "under the sun" perspective, which Solomon has concluded are **vanity** (i.e., without substance, fleeting, transitory, not of intrinsic or enduring quality or value). All that God does is so that "men should fear before him", which is the source of genuine wisdom, knowledge, and understanding (Solomon's epistemology; Prov1:7; 9:10).

SOLOMON'S THEODICY

- [16] Solomon is not naïve (remember, he's the wisest man who ever lived). When he asserts that God's eternal plan and purpose is perfect (v14), he recognizes that this raises some philosophical difficulties. These philosophical difficulties, with which modern thinkers still struggle today, were well-known and widely discussed in Solomon's day (c. 930 BC; cf. the Book of Job). Namely, if God is perfect, and His eternal purpose is good, why is there "wickedness" and "iniquity" (and injustice) in His creation? This is Solomon's recognition of the 'Problem of Evil'.
- [17] Solomon recognizes at the beginning that such a condition of injustice in the creation can only persist "for a time"; ultimately, God must "judge" His creation (Act17:30-31). Man ought to live his life in light of a knowledge of a coming judgment. Solomon elaborates on this subject in Chapter 7.

CHAPTER 7

- [15] Solomon raises the age-old question, 'Why do the righteous suffer, and the wicked prosper?'
- [16] Human wisdom might conclude that if righteous does not ensure prosperity, one shouldn't expend too much effort in its pursuit.
- [17] Similarly, if wickedness does not necessarily result in suffering, or place any limitation on prosperity, why work hard to refrain from it.
- [18] The hypothetical conclusions of vv16-17 result from humanistic, "under the sun" thinking. They are not sound conclusions in light of eternity and the coming judgment of God (cf. Prov28:5).
- [19] Since human righteousness does not ensure prosperity, perhaps something else, such as "wisdom", will be helpful. Solomon asserts that "wisdom", indeed, is greatly beneficial in living the present life (this is the Hebrew concept of wisdom).
- [20] Here is Solomon's concise assertion of the universal depravity of man (Rom3:10-12,23). Put here as it is, it seems to call attention to the fact that all men, even the "righteous" of v15, deserve God's judgment. For man, righteousness and wickedness are merely gradations in his rebellion against God. There is no man that has merited God's favor.

- [21] It is certain that others will (unjustly) malign you.
- [22] It is just as certain that you will (unjustly) malign others.
- [23] But "wisdom" (i.e., human reason), as beneficial as it is, is not sufficient. It alone cannot lead to a knowledge of God (1Cor1:21), nor can it unravel the deep mysteries and paradoxes of life, such as the so-called 'Problem of Evil' that Solomon raised in Ecclesiastes 3:16.
- [24] But how is one to come to this deep understanding of God, his eternal purpose, and resolve the paradoxes in this life if not by wisdom?
- [25] Solomon's desire is to understand the deep things of God, including the "reason" for "wickedness" and "folly". He applies his "wisdom" in an attempt to understand "folly". Here, "folly" brings with it the moral overtones of wickedness, iniquity, sin, and rebellion against God (cf. Ps14:1; 53:1).
- [26] Solomon personifies "folly" as a "woman", even as he does Lady Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9. The "sinner" who is ensnared by Lady Folly will find himself in a condition worse than death (i.e., death is better than a life lived in pursuit of folly); only the wise man who "pleaseth God" can "escape from her".
- [27] Solomon's diligent search to understand the paradox of the 'Problem of Evil' by wisdom has failed, and he must resort to **revelation**. God has given the explanation, and Solomon must accept it by faith (where 'faith' is nothing mystical, but simply accepting and believing the testimony of God in His Word).
- [29] Unbelief has long attacked Christianity, and continues to do so today, regarding the so-called 'Problem of Evil', as if the existence of evil refutes the Biblical concept of an all-powerful and benevolent God. Hardly, seeing that Solomon concisely addressed this issue even in his day, penned c. 930 BC; Solomon acknowledges the existence of injustice in the world (Ecc3:16), attributes it to the creature who was made "upright" by the Creator God (Ecc7:29), but concludes that in His appointed time God will judge sinners and eradicate evil (Ecc3:17). The word used for "man", whom "God made . . . upright", is the Hebrew *adam*, and may very well be used here as the proper name Adam. It was Adam whom God made "upright", without any moral or spiritual defect (so that God cannot be morally accountable for Adam's sin), but "they" (i.e., all men since Adam) have followed Adam in rebelling against God in every manner imaginable.

Solomon's answer is that in the beginning God created the world, and everything in it, "very good" (i.e., perfect, meaning free of sin and evil; Gen1:31). It was the free choice of Adam, His creature, that corrupted God's perfect creation (this corruption has since continued in all of Adam's descendents). As an omnipotent and sovereign Creator, God could eradicate sin/evil (and He ultimately will), but He allows it to continue temporarily for reasons that do not impute His goodness (indeed, His reasons rather magnify His goodness).

On this issue, see the supplementary material given in the APPENDIX: A) The Problem of Evil, B) CHART: The Problem of Evil in the Pagan vs. Biblical Worldviews, and C) The Divine Permission of Sin.

CHAPTER 11

SOLOMON'S CONCLUSIONS

- [9] Solomon begins drawing the book to a conclusion. He exhorts the young to enjoy this life. Through the course of the book Solomon has confessed that enjoyment can be found in eating and drinking (Ecc2:24; 3:13; 8:15; 9:7), wearing nice clothes and anointing the head (Ecc9:8), enjoying the pleasures of marriage (Ecc9:9), and finding satisfaction in productive labor (Ecc2:24; 3:22; 5:18). There is nothing inherently wrong with any of these human pursuits. In fact, from the divine perspective, all of these so-called mundane aspects of life, recognized as gifts of God and undertaken to glorify Him, have profound meaning and purpose (Ecc2:24; 5:18-19; Cp., 1Cor10:31; Col3:23; contrast with Prov21:4).

Nonetheless, one must be conscious of the fact that lasting satisfaction and ultimate meaning is not to be found in any of these mundane particulars, and that in the end our lives will be judged by God.

CHAPTER 12

- [1] "Remember now [at all times, at every moment] thy Creator"; we must consciously reject humanistic, naturalistic, materialistic thought. Our thinking in every area of life (i.e., our *worldview*) must always begin with God, our Creator (2Cor10:5), who has revealed Himself to us and given us an infallible standard of truth (Jn17:17).

It is especially important to begin building such a godly life "in the days of thy youth", since the opportunities and virility of youth quickly pass away (Ecc11:10). Failure to "remember . . . thy Creator" when young will decrease the intended "pleasure" of old age. As an illustration of physical and mental limitations that increasingly come as one grows older, in vv2-7 Solomon offers an extended allegory on old age under the figure of a 'grand estate'.

- [8] Solomon reiterates the conclusion with which he opened the book (Ecc1:2; Cp., 1Jn2:17). In attempting to find lasting satisfaction and ultimate meaning in this present life, his conclusion is that "all is vanity" (i.e., something without substance, or something that is fleeting, transitory, not of intrinsic or enduring quality or value). This is the case, that is, from a humanistic, naturalistic, materialistic (i.e., "under the sun") perspective.

But whereas Solomon concluded that every aspect of a life lived apart from God is "vanity", the Apostle Paul asserted, "my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that **your labor is not in vain in the Lord**" (1Cor15:58).

- [9] This conclusion comes from Solomon, the "wise[st]" man who has ever lived (1Kgs3:12; 4:29-31), with the position, power, and freedom to try everything. The implication is that no one who has ever come along after Solomon, including us, will ever think of something that Solomon did not contemplate or attempt. When Solomon says that nothing "under the sun" provides lasting

satisfaction or ultimate meaning, this is an absolutely comprehensive and exhaustive assertion.

Apparently, Solomon "the Preacher" (Heb., *koheleth*; 'one who calls an assembly together for the purpose of instruction') spent the final days of his life instructing Israel in these conclusions, and "set in order many proverbs" (1Kgs4:32; perhaps he distilled from his 3,000 proverbs those that would be preserved in the Book of Proverbs).

- [10] Whatever we may think of Solomon's life, his words "written" in the Book of Ecclesiastes (as well as Proverbs and The Song of Songs) are "words of truth" (i.e., they are the inspired and infallible words of God). The conclusions recorded by Solomon are not human wisdom, but the wisdom of God.
- [11] As a "goad" is used to motivate sheep to move in the direction the "shepherd" desires, so these "words of the wise" (i.e., Solomon from the human perspective, but ultimately God; 2Pet1:21) are intended to spur men to live godly lives (i.e., God's Word is never given to merely impart knowledge for the sake of knowledge). As "nails" are the instruments used to hold together a structure assembled by the "master" craftsman, so the "words of the wise" (i.e., God's **revelation**, not humanistic, naturalistic, materialistic conclusions) is that which binds together a Biblical worldview.
- [12] Solomon's desire is that "by these" inspired words his own son, Rehoboam, would "be admonished" (unfortunately, this was apparently not the case; 1Kgs12:1-15); the fact that these words are recorded in Scripture implies that it is God's desire that we would all be admonished by them.

By connotation, the "many books" here are books of human wisdom. While not dismissing the appropriate role of the human intellect (Ecc9:17-18), Solomon recognizes human wisdom is inherently limited (Ecc8:17); man can never know God or correctly understand His work by reason alone. In contrast with the "many books" of human wisdom, there is only one book of divine wisdom (i.e., the Bible). We should expend much more time and energy in the "study" of the Bible than of any book of human wisdom.

- [13] Here is the concise conclusion: 1) GOD (emphatic in the Hebrew) is to be "fear[ed]" (i.e., honored, revered, given pre-eminence in our thinking above men or any other created thing), and 2) His commandments are to be kept (Solomon started well; 1Kgs8:60-61); note that Solomon violated most of them in the empirical investigations conducted throughout his life, resulting in severe discipline from the LORD (1Kgs11:1-13), all for no lasting benefit whatsoever. The "whole" of man's life should be built upon these precepts (Cp., Job28:28).
- [14] Life should be lived with the certain knowledge that every human "work" will eventually be brought into "judgment" by God. This is true both for the believer (whose good works will be judged at the Bema for the purpose of reward; 1Cor3:12-15; 2Cor5:10) and the unbeliever (whose wicked works will be judged to determine the degree of suffering in eternity; Luk12:47-48; Rev20:11-15).

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APPENDIX

- A. The Problem of Evil.** The so-called "Problem of Evil" has long been used to attack the God of the Bible. The challenge proceeds as follows: 1) the Bible presents God as both good and all-powerful; 2) the world is filled with injustice and evil; therefore, 3) either God chooses to permit evil (in which case He is not good) or He is not able to prevent evil (in which case He is not all-powerful); thus, a contradiction exists in the God of the Bible. This conclusion, however, is a false dichotomy. God's permission of evil does not preclude His goodness, but in fact magnifies it (see "The Divine Permission of Sin"). The so-called "Problem of Evil" is not an issue to cause Christians to be put on the defense; rather, it is an issue on which we can launch an effective attack against all non-Biblical worldviews (see **CHART** on "The Problem of Evil in the Pagan vs. Biblical Worldviews"). ONLY the Biblical worldview has an explanation for the origin of evil (Genesis 3) and an ultimate solution for it (Revelation 20).
- B. CHART:** "The Problem of Evil in the Pagan vs. Biblical Worldviews"
- C. The Divine Permission of Sin.** God is not the author of evil, nor did He cause man to sin (Rom9:14; Jas1:13). Adam and Eve (and the angels before them) sinned as an exercise of their own free wills. However, in His absolute sovereignty God did **permit** sin; that is, God had the power to exclude sin from His creation (e.g., this will be true in the new creation), but He chose not to do so. WHY? Such a decision must have a morally sufficient reason and a doxological purpose. God will use even creature sin to increase the overall good (Rom8:28) and bring glory to Himself (Prov16:4; Rom9:22). As part of His revelation to His creatures, God wished to display His attributes of love, mercy and grace (Jn1:14-18; 1Jn4:8-10). How does He do this? By permitting sin, God set up a cosmic stage upon which He can display His attributes of love, mercy and grace in the greatest of all ways (2Pet3:15). God will be supremely glorified in His work of redemption, which is good, but which is possible only if He permits sin. However, His mercy and grace will be shown only to some, not all. In saving some, God displays His love, mercy and grace; in judging some, God displays His holiness, righteousness and justice (Rom9:14-24).