

Understanding the Book of Ecclesiastes - Introduction (Part 1)

The basic perspective and theme of Ecclesiastes.

About the author.

The book of Ecclesiastes has *two* authors: a human author, who calls himself the "Teacher," "Preacher," or "Leader of the Assembly" (different ways to translate the same Hebrew word), and God.

A few verses tell us something about this human author (examples - Eccl. 1:1, 12, 16, as well as indirect comments throughout the book), but his name is not directly stated. Yet of all the people mentioned in Scripture, King Solomon best fits the description.

- It was common for the human authors of Scripture to *not* include their names. Why? It has to do with humility: *Genuine* prophets want *God* to be given the attention!
- There are some instances in which it was *necessary* for the human author's name to be included - such as when the people needed to determine if the prophet was genuine or fake (in accordance with Deuteronomy 13:1-5 and 18:14-22). But in other instances, such as the historical accounts and the wisdom literature, it did not matter, and could be done either way.

Below, we will use the word "Teacher," when referring to the human author. Hopefully, we will be "learners" of what the Teacher has to say!

The typical reactions people have toward the book.

Many people dislike the book of Ecclesiastes. Some view it as "negative" and "pessimistic," a conclusion reached because of the way they interpret various statements they find in the book. Others call it an example of "human wisdom," included in Scripture only because of a few verses of "God's wisdom" in the last chapter. It would be much wiser to reflect on the fact that this book was ultimately written by *God*, using the Teacher (quite likely Solomon) to communicate it to us. So rather than expressing disagreement with it, we should view it as *God's* description of what "life under the sun" is like. In other words, this book tells us *truth* about life.

Reasons for this reaction.

Lack of wisdom

What are some of the specific reasons that so many people dislike the book? Perhaps one reason is related to the fact that Ecclesiastes is part of the Scripture's "*wisdom* literature." This statement may offend some people; but it's an often-repeated *fact* in Scripture, that *few* people ever attain wisdom. This being the case, we should *expect* the book to not be very well received by most people, or at least we should expect it to be misinterpreted!

- This lack of wisdom is not *God's* fault. In the Bible, wisdom is there for the taking. More than that, God includes in Scripture instructions on how to obtain it! But it takes time, humility, a willingness to submit to the teachings of Scripture, and various other characteristics that most people are unwilling to have (or to develop). And trying to obtain wisdom in any other way is to *forfeit* it.
- Consider Job 28 and Proverbs 1:1-7.

The world's influences

Another reason people may dislike or misinterpret Ecclesiastes is because their views are influenced by the world we live in.

- The world around us has taught us a perspective about life - and about the nature of truth itself - that is incompatible with Ecclesiastes (and with many other parts of Scripture).

We live in a "modern" society that has abandoned the foundation of God's Word. This influences many of the ways words and concepts are understood - thus adding to the difficulty of understanding the book of Ecclesiastes.

- It influences one's word *choices* (the words we tend to emphasize). This results in a tendency for certain concepts taught in Scripture to become neglected and others to become overemphasized.
- It influences a person's *definitions* of words, and the *connotations* he gives them.

Influences from the world are not always a deliberate choice on our part - after all, we can't help that we were born where we are. Yet whether the influences are deliberate or accidental, we need to humbly *submit* our thinking to the Word of God. We need to pay attention to Scripture and how it defines reality, and let it *change* the way we think and act. (This is called "repentance.") At times, it may also help if we get a good (and perhaps older) dictionary!

Misunderstandings

Finally, people may dislike Ecclesiastes because its teachings "collide" with views they already have about the Bible. Obviously, this would include instances in which a person's views about Scripture are *false* - when their views are distorted or "one-sided" (neglecting the parts of Scripture that don't appeal to them). But it also includes instances in which a person's views are *true*, but he misunderstands how his views relate to other concepts found in the Bible.

Today, we have more revelation from God than existed at the time Ecclesiastes was written - the Old Testament prophets and the whole New Testament, for instance. And now, being under the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 8:8-12), our emphasis has changed in some issues (though in a way that was anticipated in the Old Covenant). But because of these changes, we sometimes accidentally read into Ecclesiastes concepts that were never intended.

- Some of the Teacher's comments about death illustrate this. He talks about the "finality" of death, from the perspective of the unconscious *corpse* that eventually decomposes into "nothing." But since we (today) tend to think more of the events of eternity that occur *after* death, we tend to object to what the Teacher says. After all, we know full well that a human's existence doesn't come to a permanent "end" at death!

The structure of the book.

There are three main sections to the book:

- *Introduction (1:1-11)* - The main issue is stated here. Since we eventually die and leave this world "under the sun," never to return, none of it has lasting significance or meaning for us. This being the case, what should we be doing while we are here?
- *Main part of the book (1:12-12:7)* - The issue raised in the introduction is examined here, along with various other related issues. The first part of this section (1:12-18) shows us that the Teacher is indeed qualified to accomplish the task of finding the answer.

- *Conclusion (12:8-14)* - Having found the answer to this question, the Teacher gives us a few final instructions that will help us to fulfil our duty in this life.

The main part of the book is written in "first person" (as though the Teacher himself is writing it, like an autobiography). The introduction and conclusion are written in "third person" (as though someone else is describing it). This does not "prove" that the sections were written by two different authors - they are just two different (and legitimate) linguistic styles.

Two ways to respond to the book.

The introduction and conclusion both begin with a statement of the basic issue - the reason why this book is so important. This is the fact that, "Everything is utterly meaningless" (1:2 and 12:8). Stated a different way, *nothing* has a lasting value (or significance) that we can hold on to, for eventually we will lose it all.

How should we respond to this fact? This book is a search for the answer, but our initial reaction to this statement may strongly influence how well we accept what it says. Consider these two possible types of responses:

- **Response #1** - We could decide that we *don't* like what these verses say, and then just ignore the book. Or, we could reach the conclusion that, if "everything is meaningless," then nothing matters, and we can do as we please. We could even go so far as to say that this book teaches us there is no reason to live (and that we might as well die)! *None* of these responses are the response of a wise person! Rather, they are the response of a moral fool or a lazy person. Yet many people will satisfy themselves with these false conclusions, and either go no further, or else let those conclusions distort their perception of the rest of the book.
- **Response #2** - We could decide to examine the issue further, and try to better understand what the statement means, and *why* it is true. If our initial impressions were disturbing, we could choose to find out if there is more to the answer than what we initially thought. This is the response of a *wise* person.

When a wise person reads that everything is utterly meaningless, his response will be to investigate further. He will realize that he *must* learn the significance of this statement, and how it is to influence the way he lives. This is why the book doesn't end after the second verse!

Understanding the Book of Ecclesiastes - Introduction (Part 2)

Basic concepts that help in understanding Ecclesiastes.

Before we begin our study of Ecclesiastes, we will first look at some basic concepts that will help us to understand how to interpret it. Once we do so, what the Teacher says will make a lot more sense to us!

Basic concept #1 - The issue of "here and now" vs. "eternity."

As we read Ecclesiastes, we quickly discover that the book has a "here and now" perspective. Yet if we read it carefully, we will realize that there is also an "eternal" perspective, identical to what is found elsewhere in the Old Testament. It just isn't the main emphasis.

These two perspectives complement each other. There *is* an eternity to look forward to. Yet at the same time, we *do* live in the "here and now" - and Ecclesiastes, if properly understood, shows us the best way to do so.

Basic concept #2 - The concept of "meaningless."

In many translations (especially older ones), Ecclesiastes 1:2 begins with something like, "vanity of vanities." In Old Testament Hebrew, the repetition of a word intensified it; so we could say something like, "vanity in its most extreme form." Now the word "vanity" refers to something that is temporary and without lasting significance, like a breath or vapor. It can be translated in various ways, such as: meaningless, futile, useless, without purpose, pointless, etc. (For our purposes, we will use the word "meaningless.")

- The apostle Paul makes a similar statement in Romans 8:20-21, when he says that all creation was made subject to vanity (frustration, etc.), because of the effects of human sin. He also tells us that, when Jesus returns, this will all change. (Other Scripture passages, such as the last few chapters of Isaiah, also tell us of a future change.)

"*Everything* is meaningless." As we examine the way the Teacher uses this phrase, we discover that it has to do with the pursuit of value and "significance." It has to do with an attempt to attain, reach or accomplish "something that makes life worth living" - something that has *lasting* meaning, or that we can hold on to *and not have to let go*. We could restate it this way: "*Nothing* has a lasting value that we can hold on to."

Everything in Scripture needs to be interpreted within its context. We must not stop with the basic claim that nothing has lasting value. Instead, we need to read further, in order to understand the specific circumstances in which this statement applies! If we do so, we will discover that this "meaninglessness" is related to *another* basic concept: "under the sun."

Basic concept #3 - Living "under the sun."

This is a reference to living "here on this present earth." The emphasis is on *now*, rather than on *eternity*; and this is the primary emphasis of the book.

Though Ecclesiastes acknowledges that there will be a final judgment in the *future* (Eccl. 12:14, etc.), the focus of the book is on what happens *now*. It is from this perspective - "here on this present earth" - that we find such statements as:

- The wise and the foolish *both* die and are forgotten (2:16).
- The dead (who are *no longer* experiencing oppression) are happier than the living (who *are still* experiencing it); and those never born (who have *never* experienced oppression) are even happier (4:1-3).
- People are no better off than animals: *both* die and return to the dust; and those who are still alive *cannot* observe what happens to people (or to animals) after they die (3:18-21).

It should be obvious that none of these statements are accurate, if viewed from the *eternal* perspective. But when looked at with an "under the sun" perspective, they are *all* accurate.

Though the phrase "*under the sun*" refers mainly to living "here on this present earth," the word "sun" itself has a wider range of uses in Ecclesiastes; and is related to every aspect of life:

- *Before birth*: Those who die unborn never see the sun (6:5), nor the evil that is done "under the sun" (4:3).
- *Those living*: They see the sun (7:1), and (in many circumstances) it is *pleasing* to see the sun (11:7). There *can* be happiness in this life - it is a gift from God!
- *At death*: For those approaching death, the sun (and moon and stars) grow dark (12:2, part of a symbolic description of growing old and dying). Once dead, the person will no longer have a part in what happens "under the sun" (6:12; 9:6).
- The sun itself is part of the never-ending cycle of things in this present world (1:5).

Basic concept #4 - "Chasing after wind."

This phrase focuses on our *actions*, the things we *do* as we live "under the sun." The emphasis is on the goals we pursue, and the things we accomplish. They are all described as a pursuit of something that is elusive, and that has no lasting value. Again, we must emphasize that the focus is on this present "under the sun" part of our existence, not on what will happen in eternity.

This phrase is often associated with the word "vanity" or "meaningless" (described previously).

Basic concept #5 - Keeping God in our perspective.

Ecclesiastes is *not* a description of how a person interprets life when God is *ignored*. God's very existence is the *basis* for the book, and the reason for its conclusion!

This is a very important fact: God's existence is acknowledged throughout the book. This *must* influence the way we interpret it, or we will reach terribly wrong conclusions!

Consider what Ecclesiastes says about our relationship as *created beings* to God:

- "God is in heaven and you are on earth! Therefore, let your words be few" (5:2b, in reference to making rash promises to God).
- Enjoyment and satisfaction in life are gifts from God (2:24-25; 3:13; and elsewhere).
- Even the "bad times" in life can be described as being from God (7:13-14), if we remember the context of the verse, and the fact that there is a final Day of Justice (12:13-14). The New Testament also affirms this, when it says that God will use *all* things to accomplish good in our lives, and that *nothing* bad can permanently overcome us (Romans 8:28-39).

These truths should influence *everything* we do; and we find them in the book of Ecclesiastes!

An example of how paying attention to the "God perspective" can influence one's interpretation of Ecclesiastes is seen in the passages that tell us to enjoy life as a *gift from God*. If we ignore the fact that this enjoyment is from *God*, we could easily reach the conclusion that we should live for pleasure - perhaps like the "eat, drink and die" attitude that the apostle Paul opposed (1 Corinthians 15:32b). Our attitude will be much different when we remember that our ability to enjoy life is from God, that we are created beings who owe our every existence to God, and that we will one day be judged by God!

Such an awareness will strongly influence *how* we enjoy life; it will influence our *values*. Rather than being focused on self-indulgence, we will choose to enjoy things in a way that brings glory to God. Instead of pursuing empty pleasure, we will choose to enjoy life in a way that will be for our good and for the good of others. We will fulfil the two greatest commands that tell us to love God and neighbor.

As we read Ecclesiastes and discover what it means to "enjoy life," we will learn that it does *not* refer to wasting it on frivolous pleasure and foolishness (2:1-3). Nor does it mean to have an unending "need" to accumulate possessions that we will never be able to enjoy - a life of discontentment (4:8)! Instead, we learn that it refers to enjoying what God has given us - our "lot in life" (9:9) - and realizing that it is from *God*. In the New Testament, Paul uses the word "contentment" to refer to the same concept (Philippians 4:11-12).

Basic concept #6 - Approaching an issue from many directions at one time.

Normally, when we try to examine an issue or prove something, we tend to reason in a line, going from one point to the next. However, life does not always work that way; and this is reflected in how the Teacher explores certain issues in the book of Ecclesiastes. To us, some of the statements seem to be placed together haphazardly, with no rhyme or reason. But there really *is* a reason for it! The Teacher is exploring various issues from many directions at one time, the same way that life often "hits" us.

- Sometimes, we have difficulty in seeing any connection between verses in a passage, because we simply aren't used to thinking in a "multi-directional" way.
- At other times, the problem is that certain concepts are brought together that we aren't used to associating together. (We may have become accustomed to viewing things the way that the world views them. We may have not yet learned the values that the Bible teaches on the issue.)
- The use of proverbs (see the next basic concept) may also cause a passage to look this way.

Knowing this fact may help us to better appreciate the depth or intensity with which the Teacher examined the issues at hand. It may help us in our own understanding of them. (Even if we don't understand something at the present, we can realize that God put it there for a purpose. He can teach us through what we *do* understand; and perhaps he will help us to understand more of it at some future time.)

Basic concept #7 - The use of proverbs.

In Ecclesiastes 12:9-10, we read that the Teacher was an expert in writing proverbs that accurately communicated basic truth principles. It should not be surprising that he would include proverbs in the book of Ecclesiastes! This is one of the reasons why some parts of the book seem to be a bit disorganized. (An example of this is found in parts of chapters 10-11.) Sometimes it seems as though the Teacher may be changing topics in the middle of a thought; whereas he is actually giving us a proverb - and that proverb's main teaching can be applied to the issue at hand.

Basic concept #8 - The nature of knowledge and wisdom.

(This applies to most uses of these words throughout Scripture.) Knowledge and wisdom go far beyond "fact accumulating." These words have to do with understanding the proper relationships *between* the facts, and the proper application of them to life. (This includes their application to how we interact with other people, with all creation, and *with God*.)

- We can only attain this wisdom and knowledge, when we start with a right attitude toward God - Job 28:28; Psalm 110:11; Proverbs 1:7; 9:10; etc.

The wicked person may have a superficial form of "wisdom." But *godly* "wisdom" is inseparably bound up with *righteous living*. The righteous person not only grows in his understanding of how the facts fit together and how they apply to life, but he also responds to the facts properly, based on that understanding. (Righteousness and wisdom are *parallel* concepts in Ecclesiastes, as are wickedness and folly.)

There may be a few other concepts that are helpful for understanding specific parts of the book. They will be mentioned at the verses where they apply.

Understanding the Book of Ecclesiastes - 1:1-18; 12:11-12a

Part 1 - Life's basic question; the qualifications needed for answering it.

Who wrote this book? (1:1; also 1:12, 16; and 12:11-12a)

1. Described as the "Teacher," the "Preacher," or perhaps more accurately, "the one who leads us" in the pursuit of truth.
2. Described as David's son, the king, one who was extremely wise, etc. Of all the people mentioned in Scripture, the description fits *only* King Solomon (though his name is not directly stated in the book).
3. The ultimate source is the "One Shepherd" of Israel (12:11-12a); and we are not to add to (or change) what he says!
 - a. This fact makes it less important that we know who the *human* author was!
 - b. The words of Ecclesiastes are "just the right words," and they are truthful (12:10).

A basic observation about life (1:2-11).

The following is a basic observation, a fundamental "fact of life." It is *not* the "conclusion" of the matter, but the "starting point" for what comes in the following chapters. It shows the reason that we *need* the book of Ecclesiastes. (The final conclusion of the matter, after the search for meaning is completed, is found at the end of chapter 12. It is the result of the careful considerations recorded in the rest of the book.)

1. The observation summarized (1:2).
 - a. Nothing in this world gives ultimate (or lasting) meaning to life.
 - b. The concept of "vanity" or "meaningless," in this context, focuses on life in this present world, life "under the sun." The focus is *not* on eternity.
2. The observation demonstrated (1:3-11).
 - a. You will eventually die; the world will keep going on (1:4).
 - b. The activities in this world are never-ending - just a weary repetition of what has already occurred. In other words, there is nothing new - just "more of the same," going nowhere and never reaching a final goal (1:5-9).
 - i. This is demonstrated in nature. It is also seen when we look at the types of things that occur in life - see 3:1-8 for examples. Everything goes on in a wearying repetition of cycles. There is nothing new.
 - c. If you *think* things are changing and something new has arrived - a "new era" - it's just that you don't remember the last time it was here! You simply don't remember that detail in history - the same way you yourself won't be remembered, in the future (1:10-11)!
 - i. From the perspective of eternity, we know that God is moving things toward a final goal. Scripture teaches us this. But from the perspective of "life in this present world," that final endpoint cannot be seen.

In other words, you won't be here for long. And even while you *are* here, you won't have any "earth-changing" impact on the world. Things will keep going on, just like they always have.

- Even when people have "changed the course of history," the same basic issues of life have gone on, *unchanged*. Even though people may invent "new" things, or do things in different ways, it still involves the same basic types of activities that have been a part of life, *from the beginning*.

This description of life is not "pessimism"; rather, it is *truthful*. It is not up for debate, but is a description of "life as it really is, under the sun." With this in mind, is there *anything* worth living for? Or, *how should we live in this present world?* The goal of Ecclesiastes is to examine and answer this question!

The qualifications of the one who examined this issue (1:12-18).

We already know that the *ultimate* author of these words is God, the "One Shepherd" of Israel (12:11). This should be enough to show us that the *human* author was qualified. (God would make him qualified!) But in this section, we read some of the specific details about his qualifications.

Note this, however: Though his qualifications far exceed those of anyone else, that fact does not give him an advantage over us. He, too, must experience the same "world of meaninglessness." His qualifications help him to understand it better (thus enabling *us* to also understand it); but they also intensify his awareness of the helplessness and pain of living in this "life under the sun."

1. Qualified as the God-chosen leader, having all the necessary resources at hand (1:12-15).
 - a. He would devote himself to finding the answer to this dilemma (1:13).
 - i. In chapter 2, we can read about some of the things he did - things that would have required *massive* amounts of resources. No one, not even his successor (2:12b), would be able to match his accomplishments.
 - b. Ultimately, he would discover that the One who is greater than him (God) was in control. This would leave him keenly aware of his own inability to change the way things are (1:14-15).

We know that what God does is *right*. We also read that we *humans* have chosen to sin (compare to 7:29). It began in the garden, with Adam and Eve; and what we see *now* is part of the judgment - a *righteous* judgment - that came as the result of their sin (a sin we indirectly approve of, every time *we* choose to sin). We read elsewhere that this present "meaningless" system of things will come to an end, when Jesus returns and all sin is permanently removed (see Romans 8:19-22). This can be an encouragement for those who belong to Jesus, *even though we must still endure the "heavy burden" of living in this present world* (1:13).

2. Qualified as having a wisdom and knowledge that far exceeded all others (1:16-18).
 - a. With this wisdom, he would even be able to correctly understand the *opposite* of wisdom: madness and folly (1:17)!
 - b. Instead of discovering some hidden "key of wisdom" that would get him *out* from under the problem, his wisdom would only increase his awareness of the problem!
 - i. But it would also teach him (and us) the right way to live.

Note: The fact that increased wisdom results in an increased awareness of the problem does *not* mean that we should *avoid* wisdom! Contrary to a popular saying, ignorance is *not* bliss! Why?

- There is practical value in wisdom, affecting the way we live here, during our temporary stay "under the sun."
- There is a final Day of Judgment, in which we will give account for every thing we have done (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14).

Understanding the Book of Ecclesiastes - 2:1-26

Part 2 - The search for meaning and significance in life.

All of life's activities can be divided into two basic categories, based on their long-term value. Figuratively, one is like "emptying the glass"; whereas the other is like "filling the glass." (Some activities may overlap both categories.)

- **EMPTYING:** Activities that focus on pleasure and entertainment - things that *consume*, but do not produce anything of long term value. We sometimes describe these things as "fun" or "play"; but Scripture also describes many of these activities as "prodigal" or "madness and folly."
- **FILLING:** Activities that focus on accomplishment and production - things that are *constructive* and *do* produce things of value. We often describe this as "work"; but it can include things we do not normally associate with that word. (There are also times when "work" is counterproductive, as shown below.)

When either of these activities represent a person's *lifestyle*, there is a direct relationship between them and the "internal" attitudes or guiding principles of moral folly (resulting in consumption and frivolity) or wisdom (resulting in work and productive activities). These connections are seen throughout the book of Ecclesiastes. For instance, part-way through this present section, the emphasis will change from the "external" activities to the "internal" heart attitudes that govern them.

- Note that the correlation between "work" and "wisdom" is not *always* present. Even though they are *often* connected, there are also instances in which work may be pursued *without* wisdom - such as in the case of the "sinner" (in 2:26), who keeps on working and never stops to experience the gift of joy that comes from God!

For the next 10½ chapters, we will be reading an account of the thoughts and pursuits of the "Teacher" (or "Leader"), as he examines this issue, followed by the conclusion. Yet all the while, we must remember that these are not merely words of a human. As the teacher was thinking it through and writing it down, he was being guided by the one who is described as the "Shepherd" over Israel (12:11).

What he did (2:1-9).

1. He examined activities that *consume* and leave us with nothing (2:1-3).
 - a. This would include activities such as laughter, pleasure, wine and folly.
 - b. Do they have lasting value? No! They are meaningless and foolish. Once they're gone, there is nothing. We are left empty-handed.
 - c. The activities of the fool will *not* be the main focus in this search for meaning. By very nature, such a focus would be foolish! Yet just in case there *is* some merit in such activities, it was necessary to examine them carefully (2:3).
 - d. The person who *abandons* himself to such pursuits will not recognize them for the folly they are. It takes *wisdom* to do that! This is why the Teacher emphasized that his mind was still being "guided by wisdom" (2:3).

Scripture teaches us that there *is* value in some of these things, when done with restraint and within the confines of what wisdom (= Scripture) allows. But few people ever take the time to find out what Scripture says on the matter!

2. He examined activities that *produce* and leave us with accomplishments and possessions (2:4-9).
 - a. The list of his accomplishments far exceeds anything we will ever be able to do. Even his successor, the one who would inherit all this wealth, would not be able to accomplish as much (compare to v. 12b).
 - b. Do such things have lasting value? This is answered in the next section.
 - c. Again, we are told that wisdom remained with him throughout this pursuit of accomplishments and possessions. He did not become "intoxicated" with these things, and thus lose his ability to evaluate them properly!

In Genesis, God gave humans the task of working with creation - ruling over it and using it for good (Genesis 1:28; with the first examples being given in chapter 2). When sin entered the world (Genesis 3), the command was not taken away; but obeying it did become more complicated. As part of the judgment for sin, work would become more difficult and burdensome (Genesis 3:17-19). The results described below would become "the way it is." However, work is *still* good; it is *still* wise.

- Sad to say, the moral fool will be inclined to *avoid* it! And as we will read at the end of the chapter, others, called "sinners" (2:26), will allow themselves to become *enslaved* by it!

The evaluation of his accomplishments (2:10-16).

In the previous verses, we read about some of the actions he pursued. In this present section, the emphasis is on the guiding principles that control those actions - wisdom and folly. (Much of the evaluation of folly and its related activities has already been described in v. 1-3.)

1. About the accomplishments themselves (2:10-11)
 - a. He did *everything* that could be done (2:10a). No one will ever be able to say that he didn't try hard enough!
 - b. There *was* value in these accomplishments; *but it was only short-term*. In the long run, there is no ultimate gain or value. *None* of it gives lasting meaning to life.

The concept of pleasure, delight or happiness can be found in v. 1-2 (related to the fool), as well as in v. 10 and 26 (related to the one who pleases God). Yet there is a fundamental difference between the pleasure of those who pursue consumption (related to folly) and those who pursue accomplishment (related to wisdom). The person who works accomplishes something; and he has something he can take pleasure in *after* the work is done. But the person who pursues pleasure itself has *nothing* left after it is over!

2. A look at the guiding principles: wisdom, as well as madness and folly (2:12-16).
 - a. Wisdom *is* better than folly, just like having sight is better than being blind (2:13-14a).
 - b. Yet in the end, *neither* can keep you from dying. *Neither* can prevent you from being forgotten by future generations (2:14b-16).
 - i. "Under the sun," there is no *lasting* value in being wise. (This just doesn't seem right, even though that's the way it is!)

Reacting to all this - finding value in human activity or "work" (2:17-26).

As we reflect on this issue, we must remember that the concept of "work" can include many types of activities. It can include forms employment that result in earned wages, as well as activities that *don't*. It may be an activity we freely *choose* to do, or one that we do because of obligation or force.

1. Something to *hate*, as "meaningless and misfortune": work for work's sake (2:17-23).
 - a. You may pour your life into your work, with wisdom, knowledge and skill. But you will die and someone else will get all you have attained - someone who *hasn't* worked for it. And that person may waste it away - everything you painfully worked for - in the pursuit of folly! (2:17-21)
 - b. In the long run, it's "All pain, no gain!" What a waste! If this is all you hope for, you might as well give up! (2:22-23)

2. Something to *pursue*, as the "best choice": satisfaction in the fruit of one's work (2:24-26).
 - a. Take time to enjoy the results of your work - eating/drinking, as well as satisfaction in the accomplishments themselves. *And realize that God alone makes it possible for you to do this!* (2:24-25)
 - i. This does *not* mean that the "burdens" of life (1:13b; 3:10) are gone, or that "painful toil" has become enjoyable! This joy occurs in the midst of the toil - and even *because* of it.
 - b. Those who please God get not only the happiness described above; they get wisdom and knowledge as well. Those who *don't* please God get only a lot of pain and frustration (2:26), also described in the previous verses.
 - i. This is a basic principle. Future chapters will examine issues such as injustice and oppression, which appear to *reverse* the outcomes that are described in v. 26.

Some things to consider.

1. In this chapter, we see that the best option is to pursue a lifestyle that combines: 1) enjoyment, wisdom and knowledge, with an awareness of God's goodness in all this, and 2) knowledge of our dependency on God (who alone makes it possible). At this point in our study, there are still many questions to answer; for we have already seen that some of the things in this "best option" appear to be temporary and without lasting value - at least as far as this present life is concerned. But that is why the book doesn't end here. There are more answers to follow!

2. If we got what we *truly* deserve, we would *never* enjoy anything! The ultimate source of all *good* things is God (Matthew 5:45; Acts 14:17; James 1:17). When evil people receive *good* things from God (and it does happen), it shows them their need to repent of their *evil* ways (Romans 2:4) - though most people will suppress that awareness (compare with Romans 1:18-20).
 - a. If we reject God, we will eventually lose all *good* things that are associated with him - at the Day of Judgment.

3. There is a type of happiness (v. 26) that "those who please God" can have, even when the circumstances of life are unpleasant. One of the places we read about this is in the writings of the apostle Paul. While in prison, suffering for the sake of Christ Jesus, Paul tells us that he was able to have contentment *regardless of circumstances*, because of the strength he received from the God he served (Philippians 4:11b-13).
 - a. A person who loves God can be content *even with little*. It is the *sinner* (Ecclesiastes 2:26) who keeps wanting to get "a little more."

4. How does the sinner (2:26) give his accumulations to those who please God? You may want to reflect on some possible ways that this might happen in this present life (including ways that may be indirect or unintended by him). But whether or not it happens in any specific situation, we know that, in the end, those who please God will inherit the earth (Matthew 5:5; etc.) and everything good in it! No matter how much he has accumulated, the unrepentant sinner will lose it all.

Understanding the Book of Ecclesiastes - 3:1-22

Part 3 - God's sovereignty, human responsibility.

Every conscious human has a basic awareness of God - at least *something* about God - because God has embedded that awareness within him (Romans 1:19-20). All creation around us reflects God's glory - an example being the sky and everything in it (Psalm 19:1-6). We ourselves were created as the very "image of God" (Genesis 1:26-27) - a unique position among all created beings.

Sin has marred things, but it has not removed this awareness of God, nor the glory that permeates God's creation. All people *still* have a basic awareness of God's existence - even atheists do - but we tend to *suppress* that awareness, especially when it comes to understanding the nature of reality and the purpose for life. And so, it is with good reason that Scripture warns us that it is the *moral fool* who claims that there is no God (Psalm 14:1+)!

The human author of Ecclesiastes - the Teacher, or "Leader in the pursuit of truth" - acknowledged the truth that all people innately know. The moral fools of today may attempt to *remove* God from every aspect of life; but the Teacher had the integrity to *acknowledge* God's role in every aspect of life. Furthermore, the Teacher acknowledged God's role, even when asking the "difficult" questions of life, and when exploring issues that most people shy away from.

Pattern and design, a basic fact of life (3:1-8).

1. There is a pattern, there are "seasons" or cycles in life (3:1).
 - a. Just like in the world of nature (1:5-7), so also in the world of human activity.
 - b. God's sovereignty is implied, though not directly stated in these verses. (Statements that *directly* refer to God's relationship to human activity are found in the next section.)
2. Fourteen pairs of "opposites" are given, which illustrate this (3:2-8).
 - a. Whether or not we like it, these things are "facts of life." They *do* happen, whether or not we want them to.
 - b. Some of them occur because of the effects of sin in the world (example - v. 8); others simply because of the nature of creation. Some would have occurred even if sin had never existed.

How should this fact influence our perspective on human activity? This is the focus of the next few sections.

An observation - things we cannot understand (3:9-11).

We go back to the issue of understanding the value of human activity, or "work" (3:9). First, the Teacher will make an observation about something we *cannot* understand. This will be followed by two observations about things that we *can* understand (next section).

This first observation (things we cannot understand) is based on what has already been stated (chapters 1-2; and 3:1-8), and can be broken down into four interrelated parts. Here we have a greater focus on various aspects of God's sovereignty over creation, and our inability to fully comprehend it.

1. God has placed a "burden" upon us (3:10; also chapters 1 and 2).
 - a. The moral fool might criticize or condemn God for doing this; but the Teacher is simply stating it, because it is a fact.
 - b. By searching Scripture, we understand the reason God has done this: It is the consequence of human sin. The Teacher understands this and refers to it later in the book (see 7:29).
 - c. It is also an act of mercy, because our sins deserve something far worse. (See the comments at the end of "Part 2" in this study.)
2. Everything is under God's control, and reflects a beauty of *design*. God is guiding everything in life in such a way, that the events of life are *fitting* for the time when they occur (3:11a, one of the logical conclusions of v. 1-8).
 - a. God's sovereignty is purposeful, not random.
 - b. The word "beautiful" does not refer to esthetic beauty (the opposite of "ugly"), but to the beauty of *design* - the way things fit together. Things may seem messy at times, because of human sin; but God has guaranteed that everything will fit together, "in its time."

Design can be seen everywhere, not only in the world of nature (as described in chapter 1), but in all the activities of humans. People cannot thwart it or undo it. But they *can* respond to it.

- All things were created "very good" (Genesis 1:31). Human sin has complicated matters, so that some things are *not* beautiful in themselves.
 - In some matters, there may be a time delay, before the arrival of "its time." We may even have to wait until the final Day of Justice (Revelation 20:11-15).
 - Verses such as Romans 8:28 fit here. It's a *fact* that God will use all things to accomplish good in the lives of those who love him - though "its time" may not occur immediately. In contrast, those who hate God must also have what is fitting for their hatred - though at the present they may experience blessings, instead. This, too, will happen "in its time," for the very character of God *cannot* allow injustice to continue forever. The beauty of God's *justice* will be known by all. (More about this later in the chapter.)
3. We have a desire to understand or make sense of how this all fits together (v. 11b).
 - a. Depending on one's interpretation of the word "eternity," this may include an awareness that there is something beyond this life, or that we will understand things better in the future (i.e., in eternity).
 - b. In this verse, the word "eternity" is difficult to interpret. But that is not the main point in this passage. Rather, it is the fact stated next:
 4. We *can't* understand the "full picture" of how everything fits together (v. 11c). Much of it remains a mystery to us.
 - a. Even so, God *has* revealed some things to us (whether through creation or through his Word); and we are responsible for the way we respond to them. This includes even our *awareness* of God's sovereignty (even though we don't understand all the details about it)! The next section focuses on this.

Things we can understand - and respond to (3:12-15).

There is a grand, purposeful design in all that happens. Though we may desire to understand it, and to make sense out of life, we *can't* do so; it goes far beyond us. However, there are things we *do* know (even if we don't understand them completely); and we will answer to God for the way we respond to them.

1. We know about the burdens of life. How should we respond to them? (3:12-13)
 - a. Of all the possible responses, there is no better response than this:
 - i. Accept *as from God* any satisfaction and happiness he may bring into our lives
 - ii. Do what is good.
 - b. This is a repeat of the conclusion stated in 2:24-26. The concept of "doing good" (in 3:12) parallels "pleasing God" (in 2:26).
 - c. Do not separate these two responses ("being happy" and "doing good").
 - i. The *opportunity* for being happy is from God, and is an expression of kindness that we don't deserve. This fact should influence the way we respond to it.
 - ii. God does not give us blessings so that we can be preoccupied with ourselves, indulging in personal pleasures. Rather, in *all* things, we have an obligation to respond in a way that demonstrates love for God and love for neighbor (as in Matthew 22:37-40).
 - iii. Therefore, the two *responses* of being happy and doing good *must*, of necessity, go together - or else it is a *wicked, self-loving* response!
 - d. God has no obligation to give us this gift; and in a later chapter (6:2), we will read about a situation in which he *doesn't* give it. We, as sinners who have rebelled against the righteous holiness of God, do not deserve the *gift* of happiness.
 - i. This emphasis on "gift" focuses on God's sovereignty.
 - ii. There are also "human responsibility" aspects that parallel this "sovereignty" perspective. From the *human* perspective, there are many things that we (and others) do, which influence this matter. (An example is seen in the next section - v. 16+.)
2. We know about God's sovereignty. How should we respond to it? (3:14-15)
 - a. There are two responses we must have:
 - i. We must acknowledge God's sovereignty. (This is simply another way of admitting that God is the creator.)
 - ii. We must fear God properly.
 - b. God is in control. We *cannot* change or thwart his perfect design; it cannot be improved.
 - i. The cycles we see in life are under God's control (v. 15).
 - ii. The relationship between the past, present and future are a mystery to us, but not to God, who controls how they relate to each other.
 - c. Fear is the *only* legitimate response that a created being can have toward his creator; and it can come in two forms:
 - i. It can be a *terrifying fear*, if we are his enemies.
 - ii. It can be a *trusting, reverent fear*, if we have repented of our sins and have become his people, his children.
 - iii. Those who *refuse* to have the trusting, reverential fear will someday experience the terrifying fear.

The problem of injustice and oppression (3:16-22).

If God is in control, and our best option is to find satisfaction in what we do (accepting it as a *gift* from God - 2:24; 3:12-13), then what about all the injustice and oppression (3:16) in the world? So often, it seems that we *don't* get the opportunity to find satisfaction in our labor - and many times it's because of what *other* people do! Is God *really* in control?

Injustice violates the very character of God. Because of this, it *cannot* continue forever. There *must* be judgment and justice - for those who cause the injustice and oppression, as well as for those who are the victims of it.

1. There *will* be a day of judgment, both for the righteous and the wicked - the very nature and character of God requires it. But it will occur in its predetermined time (3:17).
 - a. This statement fits quite well with some of the observations that have already been made:
 - i. We have already observed that there is a "time" for everything (3:1-8); also that God is in control of those "times" - thus guaranteeing that they will come to pass.
 - ii. We also know that God has guaranteed that everything will fit together, "in its time" (3:11a). Though at the present, things might not make sense, the time will come in which all things will demonstrate the beauty of God's character and design. Injustice may be an ugly scar, but it is only temporary.
 - b. The New Testament reminds us that people know in their consciences that they deserve to be judged when they sin - even though they may make excuses, or suppress that awareness (Romans 1:32; 2:14-15).
2. Even now, God makes us aware of our own mortality (3:18-20).
 - a. This awareness of impending death reminds us of our need to get ready for that time - assuming we don't respond like the fool does, and suppress that awareness (7:2-4).
 - b. In this matter, we discover that we are no better than the animals. Like the animals, we will return to the dust. (Another passage that says a similar thing is Psalm 49:12.)
 - c. Ultimately, there will be no lasting meaning in what we have done here in this present life. (This is the observation made in chapter 2 and elsewhere). We can apply this fact to the issue of injustice, as much as we can to other events in this present life.
3. Death is a "barrier" that we cannot see across *in either direction* (3:21-22).
 - a. Before we die (v. 21): We cannot see what happens to the spirit of man. We cannot observe any differences between what happens to a human who dies, and what happens to an animal that dies. (Other verses, such as 12:7, remind us that there *are* differences, even though we cannot see them here.)
 - b. After we die (v. 22): There will be a complete break with what happens "under the sun." We will no longer be able to observe what happens in this present world. (This observation has already been stated several times in previous verses.)

This barrier of death is the reason we cannot see the coming judgment (which comes *after* death). Yet on the other hand, this barrier also reaffirms the value of enjoying the results of one's work *now*, if possible (v. 22). Since there will be a complete break with this present life, it will be impossible to enjoy it at a later time! Yet since it is a gift from God, we *should* enjoy it.

Understanding the Book of Ecclesiastes - 4:1-5:7

Part 4 - Human misery and its root; our proper attitude toward God.

We have already seen that the best alternative, while living "under the sun," is to enjoy the fruit of one's work (viewed as being a *gift* from God), and to do good (also described as living in a way that pleases God). At the same time, we realize that many people do *not* enjoy the gift of God, and that one of the reasons for this is the oppression and injustice that exists in the world. Here, we look at the root of the problem, and discover that it is much deeper and more widespread than we first thought.

Oppression's root cause - something that can affect us all (4:1-16).

It is true that injustice and oppression are horrible. Yet they are just symptoms of a much deeper issue - one that can affect us *all*. Oppression may be the method chosen by those who have power to oppress; but there are other ways that we can make our *own* lives miserable. We can't always blame others for our problems!

1. The horribleness of oppression (4:1-3).
 - a. The oppressed - no power, no comfort, just tears (v. 1). It is just plain horrible!
 - b. Compared to this, the *dead* (corpses) are happier - their oppression is over. And those *unborn* (perhaps even *un-conceived*) are even happier; because for them, oppression has never even started.

2. The root cause - competition, rivalry, envy (4:4-6).
 - a. This can be described in many ways, such as, "racing to the top," "getting ahead," "climbing the ladder of success," "keeping up with the Joneses (neighbors)" or "being the first on the block to own one." Every time we want something because others have it, or we want something bigger or better than what they have, this attitude is present.
 - b. This is an attitude that *anyone* can have, not just oppressors! And it is normally associated with the characteristic described in the next section: greed.
 - c. This being the case, what attitude should we have?
 - i. Do nothing? NO! (This is what the moral *fool* does, and it is self-destructive.)
 - ii. Rest with "one handful"? YES! (This is a reference to contentment.)
 - iii. Be in constant pursuit of "two handfuls"? NO! (This is a reference to the competition, rivalry and envy, described in v. 4.)
 - d. This does not say we should *never* strive to attain anything. Motives and lifestyle are the main issues here. (People tend to make excuses and "justify" their wants, rather than facing reality and dealing with their motives.)

3. A related issue - greed (4:7-12).
 - a. Not only do we tend to want the most or the best of something, but we also tend to want it for *ourselves...* even if we *can't* enjoy it!
 - b. The "worst case scenario" (v. 8): Totally alone, totally absorbed in one's work, and totally unable to enjoy the results of that work.
 - i. To what degree are you like this person? (The word "totally" doesn't have to apply, for you to be like him.)

- c. The "better" choice (v. 9-12): Cooperation, working together, sharing. There are many benefits to this, including intangible benefits that the envious and greedy person might not even comprehend! This is illustrated in several ways, based on the typical needs that people would tend to have, at the time this passage was written:
 - i. Helping each other, when problems arise (v. 10). (The self-focused person has no one to come to his rescue.)
 - ii. Keeping each other warm (v. 11). Today, we might focus on friendship and encouragement. But at the time this was written, without modern-day heating conveniences, helping each other keep warm could often be a real need in the winter.
 - iii. Protection (v. 12). Greater safety in numbers.

- 4. A warning: Even if we do succeed in "getting to the top," it won't have lasting meaning (4:13-16)!
 - a. This is an example that is strikingly similar to the experiences of Solomon's father, David.
 - i. The "old and foolish king" is descriptive of what King Saul was like, especially near the end of his reign.
 - ii. David started out in very humble circumstances (though not necessarily the exact ways described here, in v. 14).
 - iii. Ultimately, the entire nation followed David as king. Yet twice, in David's later years, there were uprisings against him - once led by his son Absalom (2 Samuel 15+), and once led by a Benjaminite named Sheba (2 Samuel 20).
 - b. Here is an additional fact that we are reminded about, several times in Ecclesiastes (as well as in other Scriptures): Even if we are able to keep everything we manage to attain, we will still lose it all at death. In the end, we keep *nothing*.

Watch your attitude! (5:1-7)

This applies equally to the oppressor and the oppressed (and to everyone else). Yet this passage is probably more relevant to the oppressed person, who dreams of better days. Such a person may be inclined to complain to God about his circumstances, and to make rash promises, attempting to get God to change them.

Though this passage is written within the context of the Old Testament sacrificial system and the activities that would occur at the temple, it's meaning is obvious, and it is applicable in all ages.

1. Be quiet and listen to God, rather than demanding that he listen to you! (5:1-3)
2. Keep the promises you make to God. It's even better if you *don't* make promises! (5:4-7)
3. The only *right* attitude of a created being toward his Creator is to have a reverent, humble, trusting fear (v. 7).
 - a. Those who have this type of fear will *not* have to experience the terror-type of fear that God's enemies will experience at the Day of Justice.

Understanding the Book of Ecclesiastes - 5:8-6:9

Part 5 - The reality of riches: Everyone wants them, but they're not all they seem to be.

We have already come across the issue of injustice and oppression in two previous passages. It's a horrible reality (4:1-3), and it *will* be judged by God (3:17). We who experience it look forward to the day that it will be no more. But that day is still future, and will not occur until our life "under the sun" is over.

We may be tempted to spend our time complaining to God, or trying to bargain with him (offering promises in exchange for better circumstances). But we are reminded that, when we enter God's presence, we must watch our attitude and be careful about what we say (5:1-7). God is the sovereign, righteous creator, not a human (or other creature) who we can contend with.

In this present section, we are shown the perspective we should have toward matters such as injustice, riches and contentment.

Don't be surprised when injustice and oppression occur (5:8-9).

When looking at the issue of injustice and oppression, we need to face reality, rather than hiding from it. Instead of wearing ourselves out complaining, or daydreaming about how we would like things to be, we should face the fact that injustice and oppression are *not* going away in this present life "under the sun." (As we read elsewhere in Scripture, they are just a symptom of human sin, and won't go away until human sin is removed from the earth.)

The specific example in this passage refers to corrupt government officials - people who have the power to oppress those who cannot fight back (compare to 4:1).

1. Don't be surprised when it occurs (5:8).
2. It may be helpful for us to remember that there sometimes *are* positive benefits, when those in power profit from the land (5:9).
 - a. The reference to the king (v. 9b) does not seem to have the negative connotations that are present in the previous verse. It is difficult to translate, but most translations suggest something good, or at least neutral.
 - b. During the time period when this was written, the king would not only *profit* from the land, but he would also *protect* it from foreign armies. He might benefit the land in other ways, as well.
 - c. Perhaps in our *modern* context, we might apply this to taxes. Obviously, we would object to any underhanded methods that government officials might use to make themselves rich. We might also object to some of the uses of our tax dollars. Even so, there will be benefits and positive results from at least *some* of our tax dollars - though we may find it easy to forget this fact!

The "dark side" of wealth (5:10-15).

Many people who *don't* have wealth spend all their time longing for it, and daydreaming about what they think they would accomplish if they had it. In reality, however, wealth does not work the way we might expect. There is a "dark side" to wealth that causes it to be much less "fulfilling" than we tend to expect. It even has the potential to destroy us!

As we look at this passage, we must remember that it wasn't written by a *poor* person, who was trying to rationalize (and feel better) about his impoverished condition. Rather, it was an honest evaluation by a *rich* person, someone who had successfully attained all the wealth and achievements that most of us can only dream about. (Examples of his wealth can be found in chapter 2.) He experienced it all, and he knew how "meaningless" wealth can actually be.

1. Wealth (and all that comes with it) does not give lasting satisfaction (v. 10).
 - a. A person who craves wealth will *always* want "just a little more."
2. The more a person has, the more it gets consumed by others (v. 11).
 - a. Having wealth is expensive! There are costs of maintaining it, replacing it, insuring it, storing it, protecting it. The people who provide these services need to be paid; there are taxes to pay on it, etc.
 - b. At times, it may benefit others *more* than it benefits the owner!
3. It comes with increased stress and anxiety (v. 12).
 - a. In this matter, the person who *lacks* wealth is often better off.
4. It may result in harm (v. 13).
 - a. The harm may be self-induced (stress, anxiety, wearing one's self out attaining it, etc.) or caused by others (people who would injure or kill, in order to obtain it).
 - b. This does not even include the potential *eternal* consequences, if the wealth has not been used for the glory of God and the good of other people. The eternal consequences are far worse than those which are mentioned in this passage.
5. It may be quickly lost (v. 14).
 - a. Theft, natural disaster, economic collapse, etc.
6. In the end, it will be gone (v. 15).
 - a. You will die and take none of it with you.

So what should we conclude? (5:16-20)

1. Ultimately, we will lose it all (5:16-17).
 - a. We must face the "ultimate reality" that, no matter what happens at the present, we *will* lose it all at death.
 - b. All the pain, trouble and distress that our pursuit of wealth has caused us will have resulted in *nothing* we can hold on to.

2. How much better it is to be content with what we have, than to destroy ourselves attempting to gain what we don't have! (5:18-20)
 - a. This does not necessarily mean living in poverty. Sometimes God does give wealth (v. 19-20); *but whether or not this happens, our "lot in life" must be received as a gift from God.* We must respond accordingly, and with the right attitude (toward both God and people).
 - b. This is the same conclusion that has been reached in several previous chapters. By the time we are finished with the book of Ecclesiastes, we will have examined "life under the sun" from every possible angle, and seen that every angle points to the same conclusion!

Many do not have this gift of contentment and happiness. In previous verses, we learn some of the reasons why - reasons that are often the result of one's own choices (examples - 4:8; 5:10, 13), or because of the sins of others (examples - 4:1). From the "sovereignty" perspective (which never goes against the "human responsibility" perspective), God *providentially* does not give them the gift. This is one of the facts mentioned in the next paragraph.

Wealth and contentment are *not* the same thing, and do not always go together (6:1-9).

The ability to be content with what we have is a *gift* (5:19, and other passages) - something we don't earn or deserve. The ability to attain wealth is also described as a gift - *but it is a separate gift.* We need reminded that it is possible for a person to have the one gift without experiencing the other.

- We tend to forget who God is, and think that he *owes* us enjoyment; but this is not the case.
- In 5:19-20, we read about the possibility of having *both* wealth and enjoyment. In other passages, we have read about enjoyment without wealth. But here we read about wealth without the enjoyment.

We need to remember that the enjoyment that God offers is related to *contentment*. Forgetting this fact can result in a misinterpretation of many verses in Ecclesiastes!

1. Sometimes, God may allow a person to become wealthy, yet *not* give him the ability to enjoy it (6:1-2).
 - a. This is described as a horrible situation - an "evil" or a "misfortune."
 - i. The word can be translated either way. Yet "misfortune" is probably the best choice, because we tend to associate the word "evil" with something sinful.
 - ii. In this verse, sin is not the focus; for God is not sinning when he doesn't give someone an undeserved gift!
 - b. We have already read several passages about people who were able to accumulate wealth, but who lacked joy and contentment. Most of those verses focused on the "human responsibility" perspective - the things that *people* do, which prevent them from experiencing that joy.
 - i. Two of the reasons that were mentioned are envy and greed (chapter 4). Since these are so much a natural part of the human heart, it is *natural* for us to pursue wealth (whether or not we succeed in our endeavor).
 - ii. However, it is *unnatural* for us to pursue contentment.

- iii. From the "sovereignty" perspective, God may allow us to attain what we are pursuing (the wealth). And he may allow us to *not* attain what we are *not* pursuing (the joy of contentment)!
- c. An accurate evaluation of such a horrible situation:
 - i. No matter how long the person lives and how much he gains, if he *doesn't* enjoy it, he is worse-off than a stillborn child.
 - ii. This statement is made from the same "under the sun" perspective as are the similar comments in 4:1-3. The stillborn child never attained a meaningful life "under the sun," but it experienced more rest than the wealthy person described here!
 - iii. In the end, *both* are dead; but along the way, the wealthy man experienced much more pain and hardship (as mentioned in 5:16-17).
- 2. We need to remember that human desires *cannot* be fully satisfied (6:7-9).
 - a. This inability to be satisfied (mentioned here), was first mentioned in the very first chapter of Ecclesiastes (1:8). It's just a fact of life.
 - i. It is natural for people to pursue desires that can never be satisfied (v. 7) - unending cravings for whatever becomes the center of one's attention (compare to 5:10).
 - ii. Being wise will not result in a greater attainment or satisfaction of such cravings. Neither will knowing the right way to live or interact with others (v. 8).
 - b. This demonstrates, once again, that contentment is the best choice.
 - i. Being satisfied with what you see (i.e., what you have) is better than a constant (and meaningless) pursuit of what you desire, but don't have (v. 9).
 - ii. In several of the passages we have already read, this is described as God's *gift* of contentment and enjoyment.

Understanding the Book of Ecclesiastes - 6:10-7:14

Part 6 - A "future-oriented" way of living and planning - learning how the wise person lives.

Unless we are moral fools, we will realize the truthfulness of what we just studied (though it might not be what we *want* to hear): 1) oppression and injustice are going to continue in this world, 2) riches are not all that they seem to be, and 3) God's gift of enjoyment (with contentment) is the best thing we can pursue, as far as this life "under the sun" is concerned.

Now, if we're supposed to be content with whatever enjoyment we can attain, *should* we make plans for the future? Or should we just focus on the enjoyment (and being content)? The *wise* answer is a definite "YES!" to making plans. However, just like in everything else, there is a *wise* way to do it... and there is a *foolish* way. We must learn the wise way, if we are going to have worthwhile plans.

In this section, much is said about human responsibility and one's choices of action. Yet the section begins and ends with a focus on God's sovereignty. This is because sovereignty and responsibility go together. (The *pagans* invented the idea that the two work *against* each other!)

God's knowledge vs. human ignorance (6:10-12).

The first point, the foundation, is this: There is much that we humans *do not* understand. In contrast, God understands all that exists. This fact should be the foundation on which we determine how we should plan for the future.

1. God has complete knowledge and sovereign control over all (6:10a).
 - a. Though the word "God" is not found in this verse, it is implied. The emphasis here is on the *presence* of one who knows and has determined the significance of all things.
 - i. At the conclusion of this section (7:13), a direct reference *is* made to God.
 - b. The wisdom of God - demonstrated by his "naming" and "knowing" all things (v. 10a).
 - i. In the Bible, the concept of "naming" something involved understanding its significance - a display of wisdom.
 - ii. The wisdom and knowledge described here includes a full comprehension of the nature of humans - something that we humans don't fully comprehend!
 - iii. God's knowledge extends to past, present and future. It is related to his sovereignty, and by it, all things that will happen are "fore-ordained." (We can also use the word "predestined.")
2. Our response to this fact (6:10b-11).
 - a. The proper response does *not* include trying to fight against God or arguing with him! (This is what the wicked do - Romans 9:20.)
 - b. The right response is to submit to God with reverent fear (5:7) - rather than arguing with empty words (6:11).
 - i. It is the *wicked* person who does not have this referent fear of God - Psalm 36:1.

- c. We know that everything God does is right and good; and if we respond this way (with reverent fear), everything that happens to us will ultimately result in what is good - just like Romans 8:28 tells us. (See also the last part of this section.)
3. Human ignorance about the future (6:12).
- a. The questions are rhetorical, and the implied answer is "no."
 - b. We do *not* understand all the factors that influence our lives. Because of this, we *cannot* determine the best plan for our lives.
 - c. Nor do we have any control over what will happen after we die (including what will happen with all our wealth).

This being the case, can we know *anything* of value, to help us determine the way we should live? YES! And we are about to find out what - though it involves things that the average person does *not* want to hear. (It all depends on whether we are wise, or a moral fool.)

A focus on eternity (7:1-6).

Death is the *ultimate* issue, for it is the inevitable conclusion of "life under the sun." *Only a moral fool wouldn't prepare for it!*

- Note that "preparing for death" is *not* the same as "trying to die." On the average, the wise person may live longer than the moral fool, simply because the wise person's *lifestyle choices* are influenced by wisdom (as illustrated in 7:7-12).
1. The issue (7:1).
- a. A person's inner character (his "name") is better than his external appearance. So also, arriving at one's destiny is better than beginning the journey.
 - i. A person's "name" represents the person - who he is, his character, etc.
 - ii. Compare this with v. 8, "the end of a matter is better than its beginning."
 - b. Our stay "under the sun" is guaranteed to be temporary. Though there are moments of happiness and joy, it is characterized by turmoil, pain and sorrow, etc.
 - c. The "day of birth" brings a person into this world of trouble. The "day of death" brings him into rest, when the burden is over.
 - i. The focus here is *not* on what happens *after* death. For those who choose the way of the moral fool, what happens after death will *not* be "eternal rest."
2. How the wise person will prepare; it's contrast to the way of the moral fool (7:2-6).
- a. The wise will take to heart the *fact* that death is coming, and will be sober-minded about it. The fool will ignore this fact, and will focus on empty entertainment ("partying") and on matters that have no lasting meaning.
 - b. The wise will be found in places where they are reminded of their coming destiny; they want to be prepared for it. The fool will be found in places where they can ignore their coming destiny; they would rather be consumed with entertainment and self-indulgence.
 - c. Even the most unpleasant words spoken by the wise will have long-term value and moral benefit for the heart. In contrast, even the most pleasant-sounding words coming from the moral fool will be short-lived - empty and with no long-term value.

In the New Testament, people also looked forward to death; but in most passages, there is a greater emphasis on what would come *after* death. For instance, the apostle Paul longed to be with Christ (2 Corinthians 5:4; Philippians 1:21-24). When the time finally drew near, he looked forward to his impending death, having "fought the good fight" (2 Timothy 4:7-8).

- What happens *after* death is mentioned occasionally in Ecclesiastes (such as at the end of chapter 12), but examining what comes in the "hereafter" wasn't the main purpose of the book.

A focus on life *before* eternity - life "under the sun" (7:7-12).

There are only two options - wisdom or folly. The wise person will patiently pursue the goal of attaining wisdom (though it is a difficult thing to do - 7:23-24), as well as the righteous life that comes with wisdom. (After all, the fear of God is the starting point for attaining wisdom - Proverbs 1:7.)

In contrast, the moral fool will prefer the pursuit of wealth and pleasures (even boasting about things he has yet to attain). He will do this, even though his pursuit leaves him full of impatience and anger, and even though it finally destroys him (and others as well).

1. First, we must realize that the pursuit of wealth (as one's goal in life) is *incompatible* with the pursuit of wisdom (7:7).
 - a. When wealth is one's ultimate goal, *any* means of attaining it will be used, whether it means mistreating others, or trying to influence them with bribery.
2. The need to be future-focused ... but in the right way! (7:8-10)
 - a. Patiently pursuing the goal (and reaching it) is better than boasting about what has not yet been accomplished! (7:8)
 - b. A wise "future-focus" is incompatible with certain traits that characterize a fool:
 - i. Being irritable and easily provoked is incompatible with the patience that is needed (7:9).
 - ii. Constantly longing for the past is incompatible with a future-focus (7:10).

The moral fool tends to live for the moment. Every time something goes wrong, he will be quick to look back to what he calls the "good times" - the empty, frivolous activities he enjoyed on other occasions. He does not consider the fact that *both* good and bad times are from God (v. 13-14). In addition, he may have forgotten that the past *also* had difficult times!

3. The superiority of wisdom (7:11-12)
 - a. Wisdom is good and beneficial, even *now*, in this life "under the sun" (7:11).
 - b. When compared to wealth (7:12):
 - i. *Both* have value, at least as far as providing certain types of protection.
 - ii. On the other hand, only wisdom is life-giving. (In previous chapters, we have already observed ways that wealth can destroy a person.)

Note that, other than wisdom, the passage does not list specific goals for us to pursue. This is because anything that is compatible with wisdom is a legitimate pursuit in life. Besides, plans and goals can change, as the next section shows us.

The acceptance of all circumstances as being from God (7:13-14).

We've already seen that we do not have the ability to recognize the best plan for our lives (6:12). Even if it were possible, circumstances beyond our control could change our plans. In this section, we are shown the *wise* response to this fact.

Because of human sin in the world, unpleasant circumstances *must* occur - and they do. It should not surprise us, for we deserve only judgment. *It is the pleasant circumstances that we do not deserve* - yet God, in a display of undeserved kindness, often gives us the *gift* of happiness and joy.

These verses focus on the "sovereignty" aspect of this issue, which guarantees that *both* good and bad times will occur - instead of only the bad times that we deserve.

1. We cannot change the way things are (7:13). Pleasant and unpleasant circumstances will *both* occur.
 - a. If we had our way, we would only want pleasant circumstances - the very thing we *don't* deserve!
2. How should we respond? (7:14)
 - a. Be happy when we can. But when we *can't*, remember that God is in control of *both* types of circumstances.
 - i. Viewing them both as being *from God* implies the need for a proper response. Those who fear and love God can rest assured that God will keep the promises he has given to his people.
 - ii. Today, we can look to verses such as Romans 8:28: "God uses all things to accomplish good in the lives of those who love him." But the truth of that verse was applicable long before it was written down in Scripture - all the way back to the beginning of history.
3. Since good and bad times can both occur, this further demonstrates the impossibility for us to know what will happen in the future.
 - a. James said the same thing, about 1000 years later (James 4:13-17).

Yet, even though we may be unable to know specific details about what will happen in the future, we *can* know that wisdom is the best path to pursue! In fact, wisdom can be present (and can grow) in *all* circumstances. In contrast to this, wealth can't.

The next section focuses on this pursuit of wisdom, and the righteousness that goes with it.

Understanding the Book of Ecclesiastes - 7:15-8:1

Part 7 - The pursuit of wisdom and righteousness.

There *is* a type of "wisdom" that even the wicked can pursue. If they are willing to do some of the things mentioned in the book of Proverbs, they might have a better (or longer) life. Yet no matter how much of this "wisdom" the wicked may possess, in the end, they will be shown to be moral fools. Such "wisdom" will not deliver them from *eternal* death at the Day of Justice (though their judgment might not be as severe as for someone who has totally rejected every aspect of wisdom).

The type of wisdom that God - the *righteous* God - requires begins with the *fear of God* (Proverbs 1:7; 9:10), and results in a *hatred of evil* (Proverbs 8:13). Because of this, godly wisdom and righteous conduct go together - they are inseparable. In the same way, wickedness and folly go together - they are inseparable.

- Any other type of "wisdom" is superficial (at best), and of the devil (at worst - James 3:14-16). It even leads people to view *genuine* wisdom as mere foolishness! (1 Corinthians 1:17-2:10; etc.)

This section of Ecclesiastes focuses on the pursuit of wisdom and righteousness. Some verses may mention "wisdom" and others may mention "righteousness" (or a similar concept); but in any case, the focus is on the *same* pursuit. Knowing this will help us, when we try to understand what the Teacher (the *human* author of Ecclesiastes) is telling us. (The same goes for words that describe the *opposite* concept: "wickedness" and "folly.")

- This is obvious in Ecclesiastes 7:16-18. Righteousness and wisdom (v. 16) are called "the one thing" (v. 18a); and wickedness and folly (v. 17) are called "the other" (v. 18b).

Things do not always happen the way they should (7:15).

1. Sometimes a righteous person dies young.
2. Sometimes a wicked person lives a long life.

This is one aspect of the injustice that occurs in this world. Though there is a *tendency* for the righteous to live longer, and the wicked to die younger, it does not always happen this way. So how should we respond to this fact? That is the focus of the next section.

- A similar issue is examined in a later chapter: People sometimes get unjustly rewarded or punished in this life. (See 8:14.)

How should we respond to this? (7:16-22)

There are three verses that are easily misunderstood in chapter 7, and the *first* of them occurs here, in v. 16. Since we live in a *different* era, and under a *different* covenant (brought into existence by Jesus' death and resurrection), our understanding of certain concepts is sometimes different from the way they were understood in the past. In this passage, paying attention to the context will help us to know what is meant.

1. First, don't act more righteous and wise than you really are (v. 16).
 - a. Does this verse tell us that we ought to "go out and sin a little"? (This is the way some people misinterpret the passage.) No! To reach such a conclusion would lead us in a direction that

contradicts the rest of Scripture - including the explanation in v. 18, which emphasizes the "fear of God"!

- b. It is best to understand this as a reference to a *superficial* righteousness (or "self-righteousness") that does not match the reality of the situation - namely, the fact that we have all sinned (v. 20). The Teacher is not opposed to righteousness, but to pretension and hypocrisy.
 - i. Though we should be actively pursuing righteousness, we should not wear ourselves out (or "destroy" ourselves), trying to act *more* righteous than we are. Admit the truth; don't be a hypocrite!

This "righteousness" is probably similar to the "righteousness" that Jesus warned against, in the Sermon on the Mount: a righteousness that is only "skin deep," and does not reflect one's true character.

- This was the righteousness of the religious leaders of Jesus' day; and we are told that we must have a righteousness that *surpasses* theirs (Matthew 5:20)! It must be a different kind of righteousness - a "righteousness from God" (Romans 1:17; 3:21-24).
2. Second, don't conclude that righteousness *doesn't* matter, and that it's OK to "go ahead and sin" all you want (v. 17).
 - a. Injustice doesn't *always* occur, and you might get the early death that you would deserve! And even if you *don't* die early, wickedness will definitely not *extend* your life (8:13)!
 - b. We also know that there are *eternal* consequences, though the emphasis here is on *physical* death.
 3. Here is the *right* way to respond (7:18-22).
 - a. The fear of God - it will keep you from going to the above extremes (v. 18; see also 5:1-7).
 - b. The pursuit of wisdom - it will guide and protect you (v. 19).
 - i. The strength mentioned here is not a reference to *physical* strength.
 - ii. Here are some examples of wisdom's strength, found in the book of Ecclesiastes: Wisdom has the strength to change a person's attitude about circumstances (8:1). It can show him how to respond to those who are in authority (the people who are often the oppressors, 8:5). It can even deliver an entire city out of a difficult situation (9:13-18), even when most of the inhabitants do not appreciate the value of wisdom!
 - c. An awareness of our own weaknesses (7:20-22).
 - i. We are *not* sinless (v. 20). This is why we are not to act "over-righteous" (v. 16)!
 - ii. This fact is to influence the way we treat others (v. 21-22). We *know* that we have often sinned against *others*, so we should not become preoccupied with the way others sin against *us*.

The following sections focus on two parts of this response: the pursuit of wisdom, and the effect that sin has on this pursuit.

(Just a reminder: Godly "wisdom," refers not only to an understanding of *facts*, but to *righteous living* - understanding how those facts fit together and how they apply to life, and then responding properly, based on that understanding.)

The pursuit of wisdom (and righteousness) is not easy (7:23-26).

The Teacher himself responded in the right way, by doing the things he has just described. The entire book of Ecclesiastes is an expression his pursuit of wisdom; but the passage we are now examining describes some specific details about the struggle he experienced during his pursuit.

As we examine the Teacher's experience, we discover that genuine wisdom is *not* easy to attain! As we pursue it, we may find ourselves horrified by the wickedness and folly that has been a part of our lives. Yet we will also be able to praise God for his deliverance from such things. In the end, wisdom (and the righteous life that comes from it) will have a beneficial (and life-changing) effect on us (Ecclesiastes 8:1).

1. The Teacher resolved to pursue wisdom, and he *refused to give-up*, when he found it to be a difficult pursuit (7:23-25a).
 - a. His initial discovery was that wisdom is quite elusive - difficult to attain (v. 23-24). In fact, a *full* comprehension of wisdom is impossible!
 - i. This is the same conclusion that we find in Job 28:12-22.
 - b. So he devoted himself fully to this pursuit, to learn what could be understood (v. 25a).
 - i. This included trying to understand *why* wisdom was so difficult to attain.
 - ii. In the New Testament, we read about the need for *patience* and *perseverance*, in our pursuit of righteousness. This is basically the same as what the Teacher was doing - just stated in a different way.
2. The pursuit of wisdom must (and will) include an understanding of the nature of its *opposite*: folly and wickedness (v. 25b-26).
 - a. If we *do* attain wisdom, we will become horrified by the ways that folly and wickedness have influenced our lives.
 - b. The Teacher's bitter experience is described in this passage.
 - c. Only by the pursuit of a life that pleases God (an expression of wisdom), can a person be delivered from the snares of folly and wickedness.
 - i. In the Teacher's experience, this involved the snares of the women who led him into sin. In our experience, it might be something else.

This was Solomon's experience. He married women who worshiped false gods, and was led astray by them (1 Kings 11:1-8). Though this passage in Ecclesiastes may be a record of his repentance, he suffered bitterly for the remainder of his life. And after he died, all the glory of his kingdom would be brought to nothing. (See 1 Kings 11:9-39.)

- In Ecclesiastes 2, we read that, when we die, everything we accomplish in life must be left to the one who comes after us... "and who knows whether he will be a wise person or a fool?" (2:19) In Solomon's case, that person would be a fool; and the kingdom would be destroyed.
- Sin has consequences; and there are some consequences "under the sun" that not even *repentance* can remove.

This is the *second* passage in this section, that people sometimes misinterpret. The Teacher was *not* being "anti-woman." He was speaking about a certain type of woman - the type that caused his own downfall. This entire passage (v. 23-29) is a record of the Teacher's personal experience, given to us so that we can learn from it and apply what he learned to our own pursuit of wisdom.

Why is the pursuit of wisdom and righteousness so difficult? (7:27-29)

1. During the Teacher's elusive pursuit of wisdom, one thing stood out above all else: *Nobody* is upright! Wisdom and righteousness simply *aren't* a "natural" part of the human experience (7:27-28, compare with v. 29).
2. Furthermore, we cannot blame *God* for this problem (v. 29)!
 - a. At creation, God made people upright.
 - b. It is we, the human race, who have chosen to go our own way!

This passage includes the *third* often-misinterpreted text. Verse 28 mentions "one" upright man and "no" upright women; and some interpret it as suggesting that there *are* some upright men (but no upright women). Yet this cannot be correct, for such an interpretation would contradict his final conclusion, in v. 29!

Though some interpret this verse as a continuation of the Teacher's own bitter experience (mentioned in v. 26), a better explanation is this: The wording in v. 28 may simply be a literary technique that was common at that time, but is rarely used in today's world. The first number in the passage ("one") is *not* intended to be the actual intended number; it just poetically leads us toward that actual number ("none").

In several other Old Testament passages, we see a similar literary phenomenon. A number may be mentioned in the first part of a verse, followed by a *different* number in the second part of the verse. As we read the context, we discover that the *second* number is the one that was intended. The first number mentioned is just "leading" us to it.

- Some passages that use this technique are: Proverbs 6:16; 30:18-19; and the first two chapters of Amos. (The Amos passages illustrate a *second* use of this "two-number" technique - to indicate "many," instead of a specific number.)
- In Ecclesiastes 7:28, most translations connect the two lines with the word "but," which suggests a contrast. The Hebrew word is simply a connector, and it is up to the translator to determine whether to translate it as "but," or "and," or "also" - or even to omit it, if doing so fits the context. There is no need to interpret the two parts of this verse as a *contrast*!

The benefits of wisdom are worth the effort! (8:1)

It is true, that the pursuit of wisdom is a difficult task. Though we spend our entire lives pursuing it, we will not succeed in attaining *all* of it. Yet what we *do* attain will be worth the effort.

1. *Nobody* can be compared to a wise person, in his ability to understand (and respond to) life.
 - a. "Who is like a wise person (etc.?)" These are rhetorical questions, and the implied answer is that *nobody* is like the person who has wisdom and understanding.
2. If a person attains wisdom, it will affect his entire attitude toward life.
 - a. This change in attitude may even be visible in his countenance!

This verse serves as a transition, bringing this section to a close, and providing a starting point for the next section.

Understanding the Book of Ecclesiastes - 8:2-15

Part 8 - Living in a world of oppression and injustice.

There are many sources of oppression and injustice. When the book of Ecclesiastes was written, much of the oppression came from government. Slaves might also experience oppression, if their master wasn't God-fearing and obedient to Scripture.

Today, things haven't changed much. In many countries, the government is still the main source of oppression. And even though slavery might not exist in a society (at least officially), there are other situations in which a person may be oppressed by someone who has authority over him. This includes the corporate business world, which sometimes mistreats employees worse than some of the slaves mentioned in the Bible. (Note that the commands given to slaves and masters, in verses such as Ephesians 6:5-9, are fully applicable to the relationships that exist between employees and employer.)

- The further a government (or *any* authority) departs from the commands of Scripture, the greater the oppression. This is why it seems that oppression of all kinds is becoming more widespread throughout the world.

In this section, we are told how to respond to the oppression and injustice that comes from *government*. This will show us a principle that will be applicable in any other situation that involves responding to someone who has authority over us.

As stated before, Ecclesiastes 8:1 is the "transition verse" that connects the pursuit of wisdom (chapter 7) to its practical application in life. The pursuit of wisdom is difficult; but it is worth the effort! If we succeed in this pursuit, it will affect our whole *attitude* toward how we live. It will also affect our *actions* - the righteous conduct that comes from the application of wisdom to life. The verses that follow illustrate how this works, within the context of responding to an unjust authority. (What we learn, we can then apply to other situations.)

The need to obey authority (8:2-5).

Ultimately, this obligation goes back to the command of Exodus 20:12, "*Honor your father and your mother.*" In addition to teaching us the proper attitude toward our parents, this command was intended to be a general principle about our attitude toward *any* legitimate authority.

- Obedience is to be our normal response. The only exception found in Scripture is when an authority tries to get us to sin against a *higher* authority (such as, against God).
- This is why the New Testament tells us to submit to authority (example - Romans 13:7); yet also gives us an example of *not* doing so (Acts 5:27-32).

1. Authority must be obeyed (8:2).
 - a. ISRAEL'S SITUATION: Why the reference to an oath? In 1 Chronicles 29:24, the representatives of the people made a commitment - a *pledge* or solemn promise - to obey (submit to) King Solomon. Such a pledge would be binding, not only for them, but for those they represented - and even for their offspring not yet born.
 - i. In today's rebellious world - especially in "western" societies - people have placed so much emphasis on the *individual*, that they have nearly lost the ability to comprehend the *corporate* or *group* aspect of human interactions. (There are many societies in the world that do not have this problem, and verses such as this would seem quite normal to them.)

- b. OUR SITUATION: Though life today is different than in Old Testament Israel, we still find ourselves in situations in which we have the obligation to obey others. Whether it is because of our own choice or because of the actions of others, we may be a citizen of a country, an employee of a huge corporation, a member of an organization, etc.
 - i. In some cases, we may be able to get out from under the authority - such as by transferring from one job to another. But as long as we remain under an authority, the obligation to obey remains.
 - ii. As already stated, we have *no* obligation to obey a command that goes against a *higher* authority.
2. We must obey, even when doing so is undesirable (8:3-5).
- a. Do not be quick to rebel against an authority's command. Do not be quick to oppose or criticize the one in authority! (8:3-4)
 - b. Obedience will keep a person out of trouble (v. 5a).
 - i. This is what we can normally expect. Persecution for righteousness' sake is a separate issue. (See Romans 13:3-4; 1 Peter 3:13-14; 4:15-16; etc.)
 - c. A person with wisdom will know the right way to respond (v. 5b).

Responding the right way, regardless of the consequences (8:6-8).

- 1. There *is* a right way to respond, even though it may seem quite unpleasant (v. 6).
- 2. The outcome may be unpredictable (v. 7-8a). This fact applies to all - to the authority, as well as to those under authority.
 - a. There are certain things we cannot *know* - such as the outcome of our actions, or what others who come after us will do.
 - b. There are certain things we cannot *control* - such as the laws of nature, or the day we will die. (We cannot *prevent* death, when the day arrives for it to occur.)
- 3. But we *do* know this: Those who are wicked will be trapped by their own wickedness (v. 8b).
 - a. Whether this statement applies to the oppressive ruler or to the rebel (opinions vary), the outcome is the same: they will be trapped.
 - b. This is further explained in the next section, which contrasts the final outcomes of the wicked and of those who fear God.

The final outcome - the wicked vs. those who fear God (8:9-13).

Some parts of this section seem to apply to the oppressive leader; other parts to the person who rebels against authority. There may be some uncertainty in how to interpret certain parts of this section (see v. 9). However, there is *no question* regarding what the text says about the final outcome. And this final outcome is what we must focus on!

- 1. In this life "under the sun," people have power to hurt each other (v.9).
 - a. The original Hebrew text is worded in such a way, that it is difficult to determine who is the one being hurt. Some interpret the verse as saying that the oppressor hurts *himself*. Others interpret it as saying that the oppressor hurts *other people*.
 - b. Both views are compatible with what can be observed in this world; and one's choice of interpretation does *not* change the outcome, given in v. 12-13.

2. Quite often, wickedness seems to get rewarded (v. 10-11).
 - a. Wicked people often act as though they are righteous. They live and die with a good reputation, even though they are wicked (v. 10)! We must remember that this pretension has *no* lasting meaning or significance (v. 10b).
 - b. In addition, when such people get away with crimes they have already committed, they are often emboldened to commit more evil (v. 11). This lack of punishment is like a reward!
3. Nevertheless, no matter how much evil the wicked may get away with, their *final outcome* will not be good (v. 12-13).
 - a. It will go better with God-fearing people.
 - b. It will *not* go well with the wicked. They have become ensnared by their wickedness (v. 8b) and are *not* ready to stand before God. When their time to die comes, nothing they have done will prevent it from happening.

Living *wisely*, in a world of oppression and injustice (8:14-15).

There *is* a final day of justice (see 3:17). Only then will we clearly understand the meaning and significance of things that happen in this life. At the present, things often seem *backwards* to what they should be, with the righteous being punished, and the wicked being rewarded.

1. In this life "on earth" (= "under the sun"), we find ourselves living in an unjust situation: The righteous get punishment the wicked deserve; the wicked get rewards the righteous deserve (v. 14).
2. How should we respond (v. 15)?
 - a. We must remember that this situation has *no lasting significance* (end of v. 14)!
 - b. Because such things have no lasting significance, the ultimate conclusion is the *same* as what we have read about several times in past chapters:
 - i. Verses 12-13 have already shown us that our *first* priority is to be "God fearing," so that all will go well with us in the eternal *future*.
 - ii. This being the case, our best pursuit for the *present* is to enjoy what God has given us. This is the enjoyment, joy and contentment we have read about several times previously.
 - iii. The various aspects of this enjoyment that were mentioned in previous chapters, are implied here, as well. It is a gift from God and should be viewed as such; it is connected with doing good and pleasing God; it is an enjoyment associated with *work* (instead of the various pursuits that the fool goes after); etc.

There is nothing better than this. All the injustices that concern us for the moment are temporary, with no lasting meaning. In the end, we see that God's way of contentment is better than the wicked person's way of evil and oppression. Being satisfied with what we have is better than destroying others in order to gain more.

The oppression and injustice we endure may be a great burden to us; but if we respond with wisdom, we know the *final* outcome. And though our experiences *right now* may be quite unpredictable, we have a firm, steadfast assurance we can hold on to: We are "in God's hands," no matter what happens "under the sun." We will learn about this in the next section.

Understanding the Book of Ecclesiastes - 8:16-9:10

Part 9 - Living "in God's hands."

Life "under the sun": We live and we die - and it is so unpredictable! Yet in all this, there *is* something the righteous can be certain about: They are "in God's hands." And so, life *has* value!

Trying to make sense of the "burden of life" (8:16-9:2).

Scripture *never* presents God's sovereignty and human responsibility as being in conflict with each other. (Such an idea originated with the godless pagans of the past - such as the Greek philosophers - not with God!) In this first section, we are reminded of the "sovereignty" aspect of things; the section that follows turns our focus back to the "human responsibility" aspect.

1. When we try to understand life, with all its weariness and toil (and unpredictability)... (8:16-17)
 - a. We can *see* what God has done.
 - i. This theme goes back to the very first chapter. God is sovereign over all. He has given us - rebellious, sinful humanity - a burdensome existence that ends with death.
 - ii. We may not like it; but we need to remember that this is the consequence of human sin. It is the result of a human *choice* (i.e., the human race, in Adam), and has now become part of human *nature*. (See also 9:3, below.)
 - iii. In reality, we actually deserve *worse* than what we have. Sometimes we experience joy in our "life under the sun" - and this joy is an undeserved *blessing* from God.
 - b. We cannot *understand* what God has done, even if we think we can.
 - i. God is *infinite*; we humans are *finite*. Humans cannot comprehend the actions of the *infinite* God, no matter how wise we might be. Even if we had the wisdom of King Solomon, our capabilities would *still* be too limited to comprehend what God does.
2. But there is one thing we can be certain of: The righteous/wise person is "in God's hands" (9:1-2).
 - a. This is true *no matter what happens* - whether "love or hate" awaits him.
 - b. This is true, even though he will eventually die, just like all other people do.

As seen elsewhere in this book, righteousness and wisdom go together, and wickedness and folly go together. There is no such thing as a righteous fool or a wicked wise person - except perhaps on a superficial, pretentious level! (That would simply be a wicked fool pretending to be something he isn't!)

Reflecting on death (our "common destiny") and on life *before* death (9:3-10).

1. Death *is* a horrible thing (an "evil")... *but so is the human heart* (9:3).
 - a. The horribleness of death: the *same* fate awaits both the righteous and the wicked. In this life "under the sun," *all* eventually become corpses.
 - b. The horribleness of the human heart: full of evil and madness. (This is the type of "madness" that is associated with folly, in previous chapters.)
 - i. We are guilty, as individuals and as a human race. This evil and madness is the reason we must die... and the reason for the burden that God has placed upon us.

This describes the human condition. Yet, thanks to God, we are offered the opportunity to repent of our sins and turn to God. We are given the opportunity to fear God and to have a wise, righteous life. In fact, in many Scripture passages, we learn that God *commands* us to do these things. And though such things go contrary to our natural inclinations, God offers us the *power* to do them, if we are but willing to trust him to do what he has already promised to do!

- This is *grace in action*. We are offered something we *don't* in any way deserve. *Only a moral fool would refuse to do these things!*
 - In the book of Ecclesiastes, these things are described in terms such as fearing God, having wisdom, and being righteous.
2. Even so, life *before* death has value (9:4-6).
- a. People who are living have *hope*.
 - i. They are able to anticipate the future and to consciously reflect on it. This would include an awareness of their impending death (v. 5), which is a good thing to reflect on (see 7:1-6). But it also includes the joys of life, described below (and in many other passages).
 - ii. While people are alive, they have the opportunity to do what is necessary, in order to be "in God's hands" (v. 1).
 - b. People who are dead (corpses) have nothing.
 - i. Corpses can't even comprehend the fact that they are dead! They are as unresponsive as a rock.
 - ii. They have forgotten anything they once knew; they themselves eventually become forgotten; and they have no further influence in this world "under the sun."
 - c. These two conditions are contrasted by the dog/lion proverb (v. 4b). The lowliest person who is alive can do more than the richest corpse!
3. So how should we respond? (9:7-10)
- a. Live with a joyful heart all the days that we can, accepting it as being from God, our "lot" in life (9:7-9).
 - i. This attitude is to influence everything we do - things such as how we eat and drink, our appearance and demeanor, and even the way we interact with our spouse.
 - b. Live a productive life - put all your energy into it! (9:10)
 - i. Don't wait until you're a corpse! At that time it's too late to develop a productive or a *wise* lifestyle!

We should respond the same way we have been told to respond several other times in Ecclesiastes. In each instance, there may be a slightly different focus (since the issue being examined may be different); but they are all *one* response. And it is a response that always includes God in it - either an awareness that all we enjoy is *from* God (as mentioned in this passage), or else a response that would naturally flow from that fact (such as living in a way that pleases God). We can live this way *only* if we are living "in God's hands."

- This is the *wise* response to life... which also means it is the *righteous* response to life.
- It is *never* associated with the worthless pleasure-oriented folly that moral fools delight in (as described in 2:1-3), but in a joy that is the *fruit* of one's labor and toil, the results of a *productive* life that honors God.
- It is a joy associated with the fulfilling of one's calling - a calling which goes all the way back to the instructions God gave Adam, to work with creation and to develop it in ways that would accomplish good (Genesis 1:26, 28). (The New Testament says it this way: We are to do *all* things in a way that brings honor to God - 1 Corinthians 10:31.)

Understanding the Book of Ecclesiastes - 9:11-10:7

Part 10 - Living "under the sun," when clouds interrupt our joy.

We have just read that our best objective in life is to rejoice in the blessings that come from God, and to enjoy the fruits of our labor, as we diligently use the gifts and abilities God has given us. It would be wonderful if we could do these things all the days of our lives, without anything getting in the way!

However, there are *many* things that get in the way of this joy and fulfillment. As we all know, life can be quite frustrating! At the heart of the matter are two main issues: 1) the nature of life itself ("under the sun"), and 2) the nature of people.

We have already seen that the righteous, wise person is "in God's hands," no matter what happens to him - whether "love or hate" awaits him (9:1-2). Come what may, he can *rejoice* in the fact that he *is* "in God's hands," and attempt to respond in *all* circumstances in a way that is righteous and wise.

Living in a world influenced by "time and chance" (9:11-12).

1. Expected or "normal" outcomes are not always guaranteed (9:11a).
 - a. When we properly use our skills and abilities, we can normally expect certain outcomes related to success. However, success does not *always* happen. The rest of the verse explains why.
2. "Time and chance" influence what happens in life (9:11b).
 - a. "Time" is a reference back to chapter 3. In this life "under the sun," there are (and *must* be) bad times mixed in with the good. It's all part of living in a world that has been affected by sin.
 - i. In chapter 3, we saw that God is sovereign, and works all things in a way that results in the ultimate good of those who love him (as in Romans 8:28).
 - ii. In previous centuries, Christians used the word "Providence," to describe God's use of nature to accomplish his purposes. However, since so many people in the church have become influenced by the godless idea that nature runs itself *without* God, this term has become largely forgotten.
 - b. "Chance" could also be translated as "occurrences." Though it may look random to us, it is *not* the "blind chance" that the world often refers to. We who know God realize that he is in control of the world; even though we are unable to comprehend the *way* he controls it! (Refer back to 8:17. It is impossible for a created being, who by nature is *finite*, to fully comprehend the *infinite*, uncreated God.)
3. We do not know when this "time and chance" may occur. "Evil" (distressing) times come unexpectedly (9:12).
 - a. James, in the New Testament, reminds us that we should *always* submit our plans to the will of God (James 4:13-17); for ultimately, we are *not* "the masters of our own fate."
 - b. Since this refers to things outside our control, we have no reason to be preoccupied with worrying about them. Trusting God, who has promised to use all things for our ultimate good, is a much better response!

Living among people (including leaders) are *predisposed* to folly (9:13-10:7).

Even when people *know* the benefits of wisdom and righteousness, they tend to go after folly. If we are among the few who choose to pursue *wisdom*, then we might as well face this fact and get used to it, as best as we can. We will have to endure the consequences of other people's folly, all the days of our lives "under the sun." (On the other hand, if we *don't* pursue wisdom, we will be contributing to our own problems!)

1. An illustration of this fact (9:13-16).
 - a. The impressive value of wisdom: It delivered a small city that was about to be destroyed by a powerful enemy.
 - i. It was delivered by a poor person, who was rich in wisdom, but was considered insignificant by the citizens of the city.
 - ii. Something similar to this happened during the reign of King David (2 Samuel 20:16-22), though it might not be the situation referred to in this verse.
 - b. The response of the people: They "forgot" about the person who delivered them! (They did not consider him - or his wisdom - to be worth remembering.)
 - c. The conclusion: Wisdom *is* the better alternative; even though most people don't have much interest in it, *even when they see its benefits!*

In this illustration, *both* the people and their rulers are fools. There is, apparently, only one wise person - and nobody (among the fools) thinks very highly of him. It is within this context (one wise person surrounded by fools), that we are given the following advice, to encourage us to continue in a life of wisdom and righteousness.

2. A reminder that there is a radical difference between wisdom and folly (9:17-10:3).
 - a. Wisdom *is* better (v. 17)
 - i. This is shown in the above illustration.
 - ii. Even the behavior of the wise person is different. The fool is loud and brash, clamoring for attention; the wise person quietly speaks the truth (wisdom) and is heard by those who love the truth.
 - iii. In this context, the "*ruler* of fools" is one of the fools, perhaps the noisiest!
 - b. Folly is destructive (9:18-10:1).
 - i. A fool is like a contaminant.
 - ii. If we compared wisdom to the creation of a beautiful building (which takes time, effort and skill), we could compare folly to blowing it up (which takes seconds, and quickly undoes what may have taken years to accomplish.)
 - c. Each way of life (wisdom or folly) is a reflection of what is in the individual's heart (10:2-3).
 - i. The wise person's heart: It leads him to choose the way of life that protects him.
 - ii. The foolish person's heart: It leads him to choose the way of life that leaves him vulnerable... *and it is obvious at all times* (v. 3).
 - iii. Coming from the heart, these are ultimately *moral* issues. It's not that the fool just makes a few "mistakes"!

This symbolic use of "right" and "left" (v. 2) grew out of the fact that most people are right-handed. Since a right-handed person tends to be stronger and more skilled in his right hand, the right hand came to be

associated (symbolically) with strength, skill, good, etc. To the average person (being right-handed), the left hand came to be associated (symbolically) with weakness, clumsiness, bad, etc. (It would be the opposite for a left-handed person; but being in the minority, the right-handed people influenced the way this symbolism developed!)

3. Advice for the wise, when his wisdom is not accepted (10:4).
 - a. This advice is directed toward the wise person who is in a position of responsibility under a leader (perhaps a foolish leader). The principle taught here would apply to all who serve or work for someone else.
 - b. Keep acting wise. Keep responding like a wise person, rather than acting brashly like a fool!
 - c. In the long run, a wise response may resolve the issue.
 - i. If you respond like a fool and brashly quit, you may end up being replaced by a fool - one of the people mentioned in the verses that follow!
 - ii. In some circumstances, your foolish response might also be interpreted as rebelling against that authority!
 - d. This verse doesn't state that the leader is one of the fools. Maybe he is one; but perhaps his response is based on misinformation - and a wise response might show him his error. Even if there *is* a legitimate reason for the leader's rage, a wise response is still the better alternative.

4. Do not be surprised that there are so many fools in high positions (10:5-7).
 - a. Unqualified people get into positions of power, and qualified people are removed from those positions - and often the ruler himself is the one who does it.
 - b. If the leader himself is one of the fools (as in 9:17), it will happen more frequently.
 - c. This is one of those "evil" (= unfortunate) things that happen - and it happens all the time. We must remember that it's just a "fact of life."

Being "in God's hands" is not a mere idealistic dream; it's *reality* for those who have become his children. We who are part of this group can be *honest* about life: We do not have to focus only on *pleasant* things that occur, but can acknowledge the *unpleasant* things, such as those described above. We can admit that there are times when there is nothing to do, but commit ourselves into God's hands (where we already are - 9:1). Or said another way, we can reaffirm our commitment to *trust* God to do what is right, whether or not we understand it.

How should we live in this "life under the sun," a place where there is no lasting meaning for us? We have examined the issue from every side, looked at the pleasant and unpleasant things that happen in life, and seen that the way of wisdom and righteousness is far superior to the way of folly and wickedness.

In the next section, one of the last in the book, we will learn some wise perspectives that will enable us to *maximize* our potential for having a life that is productive, filled with joy, and honoring to God. We won't be able to totally *remove* the negative factors we have just examined (the unexpected happenings of life and the effects of the moral fools who surround us), but we can at least *minimize* their effect on us.

Understanding the Book of Ecclesiastes - 10:8-11:6

Part 11 - How to maximize success in a difficult world.

The best goal we can have in life is to rejoice in the blessings that come from God, and to enjoy the fruits of our labor, as we diligently use the gifts and abilities God has given us. Yet the world seems filled with "booby traps" that are just waiting for an opportunity to prevent us from reaching this goal.

How should we respond to these things? This section focuses on the *wise* response, the way we should live life, so that we can minimize problems and maximize success. As will be seen, we *don't* close our eyes to potential problems; we anticipate them, rather than living in denial. The first two sections emphasize the proper application of wisdom to life; the last two sections focus on our response to the two hindrances described in previous verses (living with "time and chance," and living among moral fools).

In these sections, many of the verses are in the form of proverbs. Often they seem to deal with random issues; but the principles they teach apply to the main focus of the sections.

Exercise wisdom in what you *do* (10:8-11).

1. Wisdom in planning: Wisdom anticipates the potential risks that may be involved (10:8-9).
 - a. All activities are associated with some type of risk, some risks being more obvious than others. The wise person will plan and prepare, to minimize the risk; the fool will blindly rush into the activity.
 - b. The walls, described in v. 8, were made of stones (sometimes with dirt packed between the stones). They were often used as fences, along the edge of a field.
 - c. Two of these examples are used to illustrate other principles, in v. 10-11.
2. Wisdom in application: Wisdom needs *applied*, not just *known*! (10:10)
 - a. An obvious example: A dull axe (v. 10) requires more effort for success. This is an obvious fact. The *wise* choice would be to sharpen it! (Some translations use the word "skill" instead of "wisdom.")
3. Wisdom in timing: Wisdom needs applied at the right time - *before* it is too late! (10:11)
 - a. An obvious example: It's one thing to *know* that there is a snake in the wall (v. 8); it's another thing to deal with the snake before it bites you!
 - b. Today we may use different techniques for dealing with snakes, but the principle still applies.

Exercise wisdom in what you *say* (10:12-15).

Most of this section focuses on how worthless the *fool's* words are. The wise person's words are to be the *opposite* of this!

1. The value of a wise person's words (10:12a). His words are a blessing; they are beneficial, even to others.
2. The worthlessness of a fool's words (10:12b-15).
 - a. They not only have no value to others, but they are self-destructive to the fool himself!
 - b. His words are that way from beginning to end; and they just don't seem to stop coming.
 - c. He is confident about what he *doesn't* know (v. 14). He talks confidently about future plans and events, something that *nobody* can know with certainty. (James 4:13-17 also affirms this fact.)
 - d. He is ignorant about what he *ought to* know (v. 15). He lacks direction even in matters that are obvious.

Responding to the folly of others, especially when it comes from leaders (10:16-20).

If you exercise wisdom in the ways instructed above, you will not have to suffer from *your own* acts of folly. But you still need to deal with the folly of others. The emphasis here is on responding to the folly of *leaders*, because their actions often have the greatest impact on our lives. Yet the principles may be applicable in *any* similar situation. (This section focuses on a basic principle that should guide our response. For more specific details and instructions related to this issue, refer to the book of Proverbs.)

In most instances, you will be unable to *change* the actions of an incompetent and oppressive leader. But what you *can* do is focus on your own response - your own actions and attitude toward the leader. (Further instructions for interacting with leaders can be found elsewhere in the book, such as in Ecclesiastes 10:4.)

1. The striking contrast between good and bad leaders (10:16-17).
 - a. How horrible it is, when the leaders are foolish and self-serving!
 - b. How wonderful it is, when the leaders are more concerned about the good of the people!
2. Two proverbs that illustrate the horrible nature of foolish and self-serving leaders (10:18-19).
 - a. They neglect their duties, and let the nation "fall apart."
 - b. They pamper themselves and act as though more money will solve all the problems.
3. How should you respond? (10:20)
 - a. Watch your attitude! Don't wish evil on them, even if you think it's safe to do so!
 - i. In some areas of the world, such an act could be interpreted as an act of rebellion, or even treason!

Responding to "time and chance" (11:1-6).

You cannot do much to control the actions of fools (previous verses); but you *can* work to minimize the likelihood of experiencing "evil times." (You might even be able to lessen the "random damage" caused by a fool's actions!)

In this section, the emphasis is on living a *productive* life, and doing so in a way that will minimize the "unexpected" (i.e., misfortune).

1. Spread out your efforts, to minimize the effects of "time and chance" (11:1-2).
 - a. The illustration is based on the idea of investing one's resources in a way that minimizes the potential for loss. If we invest all our resources in one venture and it fails, we have lost everything. But if we invest them in several ventures (we could use the word "diversify"), we are more likely to make a profit, even if some of the ventures fail.
 - i. The specific example given in v. 1 has to do with maritime trade, which was a risky business, but could reap huge profits, if successful. Because of the risk, it was unwise to put *all* of one's resources into *one* ship! (King Solomon was involved in this type of venture - 1 Kings 9:26-28; 10:22.)
 - ii. Developing multiple skills and abilities can be quite advantageous in many ways, even if they are *not* related to a person's main form of employment.
 - b. These verses have sometimes been interpreted as an exhortation for us to be generous - and at some point in the future, when we need it, others will be generous to us. However, the concept of diversifying one's efforts (in order to minimize the negative effects of "time and chance") better fits the context.
 - i. Those who *do* prefer to view these verses as an exhortation for generosity must remember that "finding it again" (or "receiving it back") cannot be the *motivation* for our generosity (even if "receiving it back" *does* sometimes happen). We are to be generous simply because we love God and neighbor, not because we might get "paid back" at some future time!

2. Don't let "fear of the unknown" hinder your efforts (11:3-4).
 - a. If the unknown happens, it will happen; and you can't control how it happens (v. 3).
 - b. If you wait for "a perfect day," it will never arrive (v. 4)!

3. You *cannot* understand the way God does things (11:5).
 - a. This goes back to what we've already observed, in 8:17. Though we can *observe* what God does in creation, we cannot *understand* it. (This also goes back to the issue of how life *must* be, in a world that suffers under the curse of human sin.)
 - b. We need to acknowledge God for who he is (our Maker), and realize that his ways go far beyond our ability to comprehend them. Implied is our need to humbly accept what he does.
 - i. God is holy and righteous; it is *we* who have sinned - and who's very thought process has been influenced by sin (9:3).

4. Therefore, work diligently and energetically, because you *don't* know the final outcome - what will or won't succeed (11:6).
 - a. We are to do *our* part, and leave the final outcome to God.

If we do the four things mentioned above, we will *maximize* our potential for a joyful, productive life - one received as a blessing from God (along with the implied responsibilities that have been mentioned at various times in the book). But there is one final thing we need to do: prepare for the future. This life "under the sun" will one day come to an end... and *now* is the only time we can prepare for it. (This issue is the focus of the next section.)

Understanding the Book of Ecclesiastes - 11:7-12:7

Part 12 - Experiencing the fullness of life.

Life, as God created it, was meant to be filled with joy. It could be no other way, since all creation was designed to reflect the wisdom and glory of God!

Human sin has made a mess of things; the joy is no longer easy to attain. Yet strive for it we must; in fact, we are *commanded* to do so. But we must remember that success is only possible when we also pursue the way of wisdom and righteousness - the way described in the book of Ecclesiastes.

At the beginning of our journey through Ecclesiastes, we learned that folly, wickedness, and a focus on empty pleasure, would not get us to the joy and happiness that comes from God. It is a dead end, the same dead end described in the New Testament as the way of the moral fool (Luke 12:19-20). It is the attitude of the person who *ignores* (or *denies*) the coming judgment (1 Corinthians 15:32b).

For the person who pursues wisdom and righteousness, the very nature of joy and happiness will be influenced by wisdom and righteousness. His values will be different from the fool's values; his perspective will be different. Even sorrow will take on a different perspective! The "house of mourning," in chapter 7, will result *not* in the sorrow that overtakes moral fools, but in a *godly* sorrow that has long-term benefits. (A good example of the results of godly sorrow are found in 2 Corinthians 7:10-11.)

We need to remember this fact, if we want to rightly understand the instructions found in this section. The moral fool will misinterpret some of them (such as the instruction to "enjoy life") and ignore others (such as the instruction to "remember your Creator") - all influenced by his own values and perspectives. Only the person who pursues wisdom and righteousness will be able to understand and do these things rightly.

Rejoice in life; prepare for the future (11:7-8).

This command looks at life as God made it, not focusing on the burdens that came because of human sin. As much as you can, live life the way God made it to be lived!

1. Life *is* a blessing; enjoy it as much as you can! (11:7-8a)
 - a. Light (v. 7), a reference to life, is described as "sweet," a word that is often associated with the taste of honey (Judges 14:18; Psalm 19:10; Proverbs 16:24).
 - b. Life should be savored. Enjoy the gift of God! (But don't forget the next verse.)

2. Remember that life "under the sun" *will* end, and everything "under the sun" will lose its significance (11:8b).
 - a. What we do in this life *will* have an impact on our eternal destiny (Revelation 20:11-15 and following). But as far as what happens *here* ("under the sun," in a world that is burdened by the effects of human sin), everything will be over and gone for us; we will never return to it.
 - b. Ultimately, the "days of darkness" - the opposite of the "light" of v. 7 - refers to death. But some of the aspects of old age (12:3-5a) may seem to be included, as one's ability to experience the joy of life begins to diminish (as the "light" begins to fade).

We are not left to guess *how* we are to do these two things (rejoicing in life and preparing for the future). The next two sections give us some basic instructions that will help us to do so. For both, the key to maximum joy and fulfillment is to *start when you are young*. Don't wait until it is too late, or until habits and values are developed that make it difficult or impossible to do so!

How to rejoice in life (11:9-10).

These instructions are for the person who has chosen to follow wisdom and righteousness - the person who has taken to heart what has already been stated in the previous chapters. For him, the command to "follow the ways of your heart" will *not* result in a desire to pursue folly, wickedness, and empty pleasure! (The moral fool needs to *repent* before attempting to follow these instructions.)

1. Start while you are young (11:9a).
 - a. Don't throw your life away. Don't give it over to folly, during the time of life when you can best enjoy God's blessings!

2. Do what you like! Just remember that there will be consequences for what you do. (11:9b)
 - a. An awareness of future judgment will influence one's conduct. As already stated, these instructions are given within the context of being controlled by wisdom and righteousness.
 - i. When we read verses about judgment, we tend to think of the *final* Day of Judgment, when we will give account to God for all we've done. That day is coming; but often, there are consequences of folly which occur *in this life* and are themselves a "judgment"!
 - ii. On the average, the tendency is for a moral fool to have a much more miserable (and often shorter) life than would be experienced by the person who pursues wisdom. (The book of Proverbs has much to say about this matter.) There are times when it doesn't seem to happen this way, such as when there is injustice; but such times are only temporary, and will be dealt with at the final Day of Justice (if not sooner).
 - b. There is *freedom* in following God! He has given each of us abilities and interests that are often different from what others have. We are free to develop them in any way that wisdom and righteousness enable us to do so!
 - c. Obviously, "time and chance" (9:11-12) are unpredictable. But the next verse shows us how to respond to it.

3. Don't be preoccupied with the sorrows of life (11:10).
 - a. We are to "shove aside" the hindrances that interfere with our ability to rejoice in life - the things that cause anxiety and trouble. These hindrances may have a number of causes, such as:
 - i. The pursuit of folly and wickedness will result in all sorts of unnecessary anxiety and trouble.
 - ii. Unnecessary stress can come from worrying about the future - things that *haven't* happened, and we don't even know if they *will* happen! (For such matters, we need to remember Matthew 6:34. We have enough issues to deal with in *one* day; so don't add to them all the problems that *might* occur tomorrow or in the following weeks, months or years!)
 - b. We need to face the fact that the "prime of life" will *not* last; and that the command in this verse applies even to this issue. *Don't waste your youth, waiting for old age to come!*
 - i. *Worrying* about old age is not the same as *preparing* for it. Preparing for the future is legitimate and desirable, as long as it doesn't become a substitute for trusting God.

It is good to enjoy life, when it is tempered by an awareness of a coming judgment (also mentioned in 12:13-14). A wise person will respond to this awareness with a desire to "fear God and keep his commandments" (12:13). It will influence not only the way he rejoices in *life* (the verses just examined), but in the way he rejoices in the *giver of life* (the focus of the next section).

Note that these two sections are interrelated, and it is impossible to do the one without the other.

How to prepare for the future (12:1-7).

1. Start while you are young (12:1a).
 - a. As stated in the previous section, don't throw away your life, by being a moral fool!
 - b. Those who claim they'll wait until they are older *rarely* make changes later in life. Our choices in life result in habits and attitudes that become increasingly difficult to change, the longer they are practiced.
 - c. The person who wants to live life to its fullest - a life with the greatest amount of joy and happiness - will start when young.
 - i. It will maximize his ability to enjoy life in the way that God made it to be enjoyed.
 - ii. It will steer him away from the short-lived frivolity of the fools, which ultimately brings disaster, pain, misery and emptiness into life.
 - iii. It will best enable him to be prepared for the future (see the following sections).
2. Preparation for the future is directly tied to one's willingness to "remember your Creator."
 - a. "Remembering your Creator" doesn't mean "occasionally think about him"! Thinking about who he is, our relationship to him, and the response that such facts necessitate, needs to be a *lifestyle*.
 - b. If we truly "remember" who he is, we will respond appropriately, having what Scripture calls the "fear of God" (5:1-7). We will acknowledge God's sovereignty (lordship) over our lives, and will be willing to obey him. In other words, *we will choose to do things that result in wisdom and righteousness*.

This is the *only* way to live life in its fullness and in a way that leaves *no regrets*. It is also the only way to be ready for what lies ahead.

The next three sections mention the progression from youth to death. All three are actually part of one sentence, and are *all* connected to the command, "Remember (obey) your Creator"!

3. Remember your Creator *before you* lose the ability to enjoy life (12:1b).
 - a. This reaffirms the first part of the verse, and the fact that youthfulness *will* eventually come to an end. (Most young people seem to forget this fact!) Joy will *decrease*; trouble and affliction will *increase*.
4. Remember your Creator *before you* grow old and die (12:2-5).
 - a. The number of infirmities that come with old age and approaching death (v. 2) will increase.
 - i. The "light is sweet" (11:7), but the day will come in which the dark "storms" of life make the "light" more difficult to see.
 - ii. These "storms" will come with ever-increasing frequency; the "clouds" will keep coming back.

- b. The body will wear out (v. 3-5a).
 - i. The symbolism in this passage is difficult to interpret. (Suggestions are given.) But even by reading it *without* interpreting it, the idea of "wearing out and dying" is obvious!
 - ii. Weakness and trembling; becoming bent and feeble; fewer teeth; eyesight beginning to fail (v. 3).
 - iii. Further loss of teeth (lips sinking in); unable to sleep; difficulty hearing (v. 4).
 - iv. Weakness and fear; white hair or similar (the color of the almond tree blossom); difficulty in moving around; loss of desire, including sexual desire (v. 5a).
 - c. Death will finally arrive (v. 5b).
 - i. In this context (describing what happens to the *body*), "eternal home" may refer to the grave or to "the dust of the earth." In terms of "life under the sun," this is the end of it.
5. Remember your Creator *before* you forever leave this world "under the sun" (12:6-7).
- a. The finality of death is pictured two ways:
 - i. The cord that holds the lamp (bowl) has snapped, the lamp has broken, and the light is extinguished.
 - ii. The water pitcher is shattered, the wheel assembly used to draw water from the well is broken, and the water is gone (no longer accessible).
6. At this point (death), the *full reality* of "meaninglessness" will take over. There will be no more meaning for you "under the sun," because you will never return there.
- a. Your body will return to the "dust" from which it came (just as God said it would, in Genesis 3:19).
 - i. People may slow down the decay process with preservatives; but in the end, there will be nothing left that can be called "you."
 - b. Your spirit will return to God, who gave it to you in the first place.
 - i. This is probably a reference back to Genesis 2:7.

The Teacher did not know many of the things that *we* know about the future - things related to eternity, the resurrection, and the new heaven and earth (Revelation 21:1+). Such things had not yet been revealed in Scripture. But he *did* recognize that there was a fundamental difference between humans and animals - a difference also seen in the book of Genesis. Unlike animals, God personally breathed the "breath of life" into humans (Genesis 2:7); and at death, some part of the human - called the "spirit" (or "breath") will return to God (Ecclesiastes 12:7).

- The Hebrew words in these two verses are different. The Genesis word for "breath" is more inclusive of the totality of human life; the Ecclesiastes word for "spirit" (or "breath") has a greater emphasis on the aspect of a human that relates to God.

The search for meaning is over. The person who heeds what is written in this book will have success. He will be "in God's hands" (9:1) and will experience the greatest possible joy for the circumstances that surround him in life.

And so, the original premise - the observation made in 1:2 - is repeated in v. 8. We will look at it in the next section. But even now, *it will do us well for us to take it to heart!*

Understanding the Book of Ecclesiastes - 12:8-14

Part 13 - It's time to start living!

The search for meaning is over. We have the answer. Now it's time to put to practice what we have learned.

We are not left to *guess* how to apply what we have learned. Rather, we are directed to a large repository of wisdom that can teach us how. We are also reminded of our primary obligation in life, namely to "fear God."

To start with, the Teacher reaffirms the main point, the theme of the book. It is because this theme is true, that we so desperately need to follow the instructions found in the rest of the chapter.

The theme, the basic fact about life, is reaffirmed (12:8).

1. *Nothing* has lasting meaning or value, in this "life under the sun" (12:8).
 - a. Though the phrase "life under the sun" isn't found in this verse, that is the context in which the statement occurs (as seen in the past 11 chapters).
 - b. What we do in this life does have *eternal* consequences - it will all be judged, and our eternal destinies will be influenced by it. But this will *not* occur within the context of living "under the sun"; for we will *never* return here. (There will be a *new* heaven and earth after the Day of Judgment. This world "under the sun," with all its burdens and pain, will be forever gone.)

Because this statement is true, we need to respond to it *wisely*. Don't hide from it, but face it head on! We need to take to heart (and put to practice) what is stated in the next few verses. Merely *knowing* the truth is not enough.

In a sense, the final paragraphs in this book reiterate the themes of the previous section (11:7-12:7), but with a different emphasis. In the previous section, we were told what to do, and were given some instructions about how to do it - begin when young, remember that we will answer to God for all that we do, etc. But now it is time for us to *start* doing it! In the following verses, the Teacher gives us our "action plan."

"Words of wisdom" will teach us how to live (12:9-12).

All Scripture is needed, in order for us to live a life of godliness. However, the "words of wisdom," described here, provide specific insight in how to live properly (and wisely) "under the sun."

1. The Teacher carefully prepared many proverbs to teach us how to live (12:9-10).
 - a. What he did: He did not hoard the wisdom he attained, but shared it with others.
 - i. He learned... now it's our turn to do so!
 - b. How he did it: He examined the issues and prepared many proverbs, carefully writing them in just the right way, so that what they said would be righteous and true.
 - i. Even today, we have a collection of these proverbs in written form - the book of Proverbs!

2. All genuine "words of wisdom" have their origin in God (12:11).
 - a. They all have the same purpose - to direct and establish us in the way that is righteous and wise.
 - i. Like a "goad" or "prod" - to drive us along.
 - ii. Like "nails" - to provide us with firm stability.
 - b. They all have the same source - the "One Shepherd" of Israel.
 - i. This is *why* the Teacher's words are "upright and true" (v. 10).

Most of the book of Proverbs was written by Solomon (under the influence of the Spirit of God). However, there were a number of other wise teachers who contributed specific sections of the book - Agur son of Jakeh (Proverbs 30), King Lemuel (Proverbs 31:1-9), and a group of wise teachers who have chosen to remain anonymous (Proverbs 22:17-24:34). We know nothing further about any of these other contributors; but we *do* know that their contributions were guided by the same "One Shepherd" who guided Solomon.

3. Beware of counterfeits - words that are of *human* origin! (12:12)
 - a. Don't add to the words of the "One Shepherd"!
 - b. There is no end to the production of fads and counterfeits; and all they will accomplish is to wear you out as you chase after them!

Human teachings have value *only to the extent that they agree with Scripture*. So rather than wearing ourselves out trying to find something "new" in them, we should go to the source of truth itself!

Ultimately, the "fear of God" is the *only* thing that matters (12:13-14).

Throughout the book, we have read that we should attempt to enjoy life "under the sun" as a gift from God. We have the freedom to do it in whatever way we like. It doesn't matter how we do it, provided that we do it in a way that is compatible with wisdom and righteousness.

However, there is one thing that *does* matter, and this is our obligation to fear God and obey him. This obligation transcends life "under the sun," and is not negotiable. It is a permanent and eternal obligation for all human beings. We are not "free" to disobey this obligation, without eternal consequences.

1. Our ultimate obligation: "Fear God." The fruit of this "fear" will be obedience (12:13).
 - a. The word "fear" (when referring to God) is sometimes translated as "awe" or "reverence" (or similar words). In Ecclesiastes, direct references to this "fear" are found in 3:14; 5:7; 7:18; 8:12-13; and here. (There are also indirect references to it, such as a reminder to have the right attitude when we approach God - 5:1-3.)
 - i. There are about 250 other passages in Scripture that focus on the concept "fear of God."
 - ii. False teachers often treat the concepts "fear of God" and "love of God" as incompatible opposites; and they downplay the whole concept of "fear." Yet Scripture tells us that the two go together! (Example: Deuteronomy 10:12.)
 - b. Both "fear" and "obedience" are related to wisdom. "Fear" is the *foundation* for wisdom; "obedience" is the *expression* or *fruit* of wisdom.
 - c. This summarizes our full obligation. When we have done these things, everything else will fall into place.

"Fear of God" is the *foundational* issue. If we relentlessly pursue the "fear of God," we will *want* to follow the "words of wisdom" (v. 9-12), and we will *want* to obey God's commandments (v. 13). We will also *want* to enjoy life in a wise and righteous manner.

2. The same fear and obedience that we need "under the sun" will also prepare us for our future life "beyond the sun" (12:14).
 - a. A day of justice and judgment is coming. Every human activity, whether done in public or hidden from view, will be judged for what it is: either good or evil. (Nothing will be "neutral.")
 - i. This judgment will include an evaluation of *motives* (1 Corinthians 4:5).
 - ii. This passage mentions the *fact* of judgment. In the Old Testament, very little was known about the *details* of judgment. (Most of what we know today was revealed by Jesus Christ and the apostles.)
 - b. This conclusion is fully compatible with the message of the New Testament. After all, what value is it to *gain* the whole world (which we will lose anyway), and in doing so, to *lose* our own life for all eternity? (Mark 8:35-37, part of the description of what it means to "follow Jesus.")

In the book of Ecclesiastes, we are often told to enjoy the life that comes from God. And we discover that only a life built on the foundation of the "fear of God" can do so. We also discover that the benefits of this "fear of God" go *beyond* the enjoyment of life, and prepare us for what lies ahead *after* life "under the sun." This is the "ultimate conclusion" of Ecclesiastes - and we can read more about it in other books of the Bible.

"In the past, God allowed the nations to go their ways; but he has never left himself without a testimony for all to see. He shows his kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons. He provides food for us to enjoy and fills our hearts with happiness." (A paraphrase of Act 14:16-17.)

The Concept of Future Judgment

The concept of future judgment was not as well known in the Old Testament era, as it is today. Much more revelation has been given to us by Jesus Christ and the apostles.

Yet even during the Old Testament era, people knew that there was value in serving God, even in this present life! And though much of their understanding about what happens "after life" was vague and uncertain, they knew instinctively that there was "something." Scripture tells us that even *without* revelation from God, people know instinctively, in their consciences, that certain types of conduct deserve judgment and condemnation (Romans 1:32; 2:14-15).

Here is a partial description of the development of the concept of judgment and the "after life" in Scripture:

3. Adam knew about the promise of a future judgment against the force of evil that empowered the serpent. He also knew that there would be two types of "seed" or "offspring" (Genesis 3:15). Convinced that this was true, Adam's response was to name his wife "Eve" (3:20), which means "Living" - referring not

merely to "biological life" (a different word), but to the *living* "seed" of verse 15 (which would come from her). What else Adam may have known about a future judgment is not revealed.

4. When God spoke to Moses at the burning bush, he identified himself as "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" (Exodus 3:6). He could not say this if they had ceased to exist! According to Jesus, they were still alive in some manner - and this fact implied a future resurrection! (Matthew 22:32, etc.)
5. Even in this present life, it was well known that following God had its advantages. The very actions of the wicked would normally bring judgment to them! This is the theme of many of the "sayings of the wise" (Proverbs), as well as many of the Psalms. This is the message of some of Job's friends - who misapplied the truth to Job, because they forgot this next point:
6. In an imperfect world, injustice *does* occur; justice doesn't *always* fall upon the wicked when we think it should. This was pointed out by Job - who also realized that the very nature of God implies that injustice must somehow be "made right." And so he anticipated a future time when he would be vindicated, even if it was after his body had been destroyed by his afflictions (Job 19:25-27). The books of Psalms, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes also make reference to injustice and how we should respond to it.
7. When things go bad for the righteous, they are *still* "in God's hands" (Ecclesiastes 9:1). This statement does not give us specific details about the "after life"; but it is an expression of trust and reliance on the God who will take care of such matters. In Psalm 73, Asaph, who had almost given up hope, was encouraged when he realized that, even under the *worst* conditions, the righteous would ultimately be better off than the wicked. God will be with the righteous forever; but the wicked will be destroyed (Psalm 73:23-26; compared to 73:18-20).
8. The Old Testament word that refers to where people go when they die ("Sheol") can often be translated accurately as the "grave." Yet in some passages, something *beyond* the grave seems implied. (Note also that there are other Hebrew words that can be used, if we want to refer *only* to the dead body or the place where bodies are put.) In the New Testament, the corresponding word ("Hades"), is used with a greater emphasis on judgment and on things that happen *after* death.
9. In Ecclesiastes, we find a few passages that anticipate a final justice. One example is at the end of chapter 12; another is in 3:17. Also the Teacher realizes that, at death, the human spirit does not return to the *dust*, but to the God who gave it (12:7).
10. The prophet Daniel was told about a future day, in which many of the dead will "awake" to eternal life. Others will "awake" to eternal contempt - they will be objects of contempt and abhorrence. In other words, there *is* a future resurrection - pleasant for some, but not for others.
11. Jesus greatly expands our awareness of what happens after physical death. The apostles give us further details. Ultimately, we have the book of Revelation, which describes the final judgment, the New Jerusalem, and the final destiny of the righteous and the wicked.

Down through history, people have had varying degrees of understanding about what will happen after death. But that does *not* mean that people today have an advantage over those of the past. Ultimately, we don't follow God because of our understanding (or ignorance) about events that will occur after death. We follow God because he is worthy of being followed. We follow God because he is God and we are his creatures. This is all the reason we need. And he has opened our eyes to see it, and changed our hearts to accept it.