

Bible Companion Commentary: Ecclesiastes

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BIBLE COMPANION COMMENTARY: ECCLESIASTES

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BIBLE COMPANION
COMMENTARY: ECCLE-
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ECCLESIASTES

PREFACE

This commentary is based around the New European Version of the Bible, which is generally printed with brief commentary on each chapter. This commentary is the hard copy of the more detailed commentary found on the *Bible Companion* app.

Are there errors of thought and intellectual process in these volumes? Surely there are. Let me know about them. But don't fail to see the wood for the trees. Never let the wonder of the simple, basic Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ and His Kingdom become obscured by all the angst over correctly interpreting this or that Bible verse. Believe it, respond to it, be baptized into Him, and let the word become flesh in you as it was so supremely in Him.

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Duncan Heaster

ECCLESIASTES CHAPTER 1

Ecc 1:1 The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem-

This first verse of Ecclesiastes is a prologue, and there is an epilogue to the book, also written by this Divinely inspired editor of the book. The epilogue is the key. The "preacher" argues that life is meaningless and spiritual endeavour is pointless because death is the end. And that is indeed how life is "under the sun". But what makes all the difference is belief in the resurrection of the body, judgment which gives moment to every human thought and action, and the eternity of God's Kingdom beyond. This is what makes all the difference. The book very cleverly leaves this crucial observation to the very end. And that is typical of the 'end stress' which we see so often in the Lord's parables, where the essential point is left until the very end. So Ecclesiastes leaves us finding it hard to disagree with "the preacher"... wallowing in the despair, apathy and depression which is the malaise of our age. Until... we accept that in fact life is meaningful if lived with the Lord, man's search for meaning has an answer- in Him and living in responsibility to His future judgment and Kingdom.

I will explain on :16 why this book is appropriate to Solomon as author, at the time when his wives had turned away his heart from Yahweh. The "preacher", the convener or gatherer of an assembly for teaching, could as well mean the compiler. He says he produced and set in order many Proverbs (Ecc. 12:9), and this confirms that Solomon is the "son of David" in view. His emphasis upon how he was "king in Jerusalem"

suggests he considers his kingship there as a fulfilment of the promises to David, which he considered to be fulfilled in himself. The description of his indulgence in every building project, woman and avenue of human experience in Ecc. 2 can only really apply to Solomon.

But a case has been made for Hezekiah as the author. The huge amount of Solomonic language, and connections with Proverbs, Song of Solomon and his own recorded life history, would mean that I would still take Solomon as the author. But as explained on Prov. 25:1, Hezekiah had a great interest in Solomon, and edited his Proverbs in Prov. 25-29. The author of Ecclesiastes "set in order many Proverbs" (Ecc. 12:9). This clearly connects to Prov. 25:1 recording that the men of Hezekiah copied out Proverbs. I have pointed out throughout that section the relevance of so much of that material to Hezekiah. Thus Prov. 25:19 "Confidence in someone unfaithful in time of trouble is like a bad tooth or a lame foot" is the phrase is used of the Assyrian invasion (s.w. Is. 37:3). There are 130 proverbs following, matching the numerical value of "Hezekiah". This is what forges the connection between Hezekiah and a preacher of "wisdom".

The way Hezekiah followed Solomon's path to apostasy in later life would explain his interest in the book. And so just as he reused Prov. 25-29, as stated in Prov. 25:1, so he may have used Ecclesiastes, as he found it so relevant to his own situation at the end of his life. He too had turned away from God in his heart but still retained Divine wisdom- in terms of theoretical truth. Likewise the observation has been made that there is much language used in Ecclesiastes which is influenced by Persian, as if the book was rewritten in captivity. That too may be

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the case, although I would add that whatever the processes, it was all under the overall inspiration of God. Judah in captivity were as Solomon at the end of his life and Hezekiah in his last 15 years, and the book would therefore have been used as an appeal for their repentance from the vanity of the good life in Persia.

"Son of David" is several times used about descendants of David [not least the Lord Jesus, the "son of David"], and Hezekiah's descent from David is several times stressed. He was saved from death and from destruction by Assyria "for the sake of David [his father]". So it is applicable to Hezekiah and not only Solomon as the immediate biological son of David. Hezekiah did what was "right in the eyes of Yahweh, according to all that David his father had done" (2 Kings 18:3; 2 Chron. 29:2). 2 Kings 20:5: "... say to Hezekiah the leader of my people, 'Thus says Yahweh, the God of David your father'. The author was king over Israel (Ecc. 1:12), but Hezekiah tried to bring Israel and Judah together, offering sacrifice for "all Israel" (2 Chron. 29:24) and inviting "all Israel and Judah" to come to him for a Passover celebration (2 Chron. 30:1,18). However almost every king of Judah ends spiritually weak. None of them die spiritually strong, even if overall God may accept them [as with David]. This was to point up the need for the perfect "king of the Jews", the Lord Jesus.

God "left" Hezekiah, so that "he might know all that was in his heart" (2 Chron. 32:31). If the "he" is Hezekiah, then Ecclesiastes would make sense for him to be the author. For it is the frank assessment by a man of his own heart. And despite Hezekiah's initial blush of zeal for Yahweh at 25 years of age

when he destroyed many idols, his heart was not with Yahweh but was in materialism.

Ecc. 1:16; 2:7,9 have the author proclaiming that he is the greatest king, greater than all who ruled over Jerusalem before him. This is more relevant to Hezekiah than Solomon. 2 Kings 18:5 says that "there were none like him among all the kings of Judah after him, nor among those who were before him". The wealth of Hezekiah is stated clearly: "And a great number brought gifts to Yahweh to Jerusalem and precious things to Hezekiah king of Judah, so that he was exalted in the sight of all nations from that time onward" (2 Chron. 32:23). The mention of huge amounts of silver (Ecc. 2:8) fits with Isaiah's condemnation of Hezekiah: "Their silver has become dross, their best wine has become mixed with water and their princes are rebels... Their land is full of silver and gold, neither is there any end of their treasures" (Is. 1:22,23; 2:7).

The mention of huge possessions of livestock in Ecc. 2:7 fits with 2 Chron. 30:24; 31:3: "Hezekiah king of Judah gave to the assembly 1,000 bulls and 7,000 sheep for Passover offerings, and the princes gave to the assembly 1,000 and 10,000... The contribution of the king from his possessions was for the burnt offering". Likewise "Hezekiah had very great riches and honour... stalls for all kinds of cattle, and sheepfolds. He likewise provided cities for himself, and flocks and herds in abundance, for God had given him very great possessions" (2 Chron. 32:27–29). The building projects of Ecc. 2:4–8 match the archaeological discoveries from Hezekiah's time. The "pool" of Ecc 2:6 is the same word used of his tunnel or pool in 2 Kings 20:20- for which Isaiah condemned him, claiming Hezekiah did it in human strength without trust in God.

Hezekiah described his death as a departure, a going, a walking (Is. 38:10). The same term is used in Ecclesiastes for death (Ecc. 1:4; 3:20; 5:15; 6:4, 6; 9:10; 12:5). His conception of death as unconsciousness where man cannot praise God (Is. 38:10) is repeated in Ecc. 9:10-12. "My generation has been uprooted... like a shepherd's tent" (Is. 38:12) is the same word as in Ecc. 1:4, where he reflects that one generation passes and another comes. Hezekiah saw death as a breaking / shattering of his bones (Is. 38:13), and the same word is used in describing death as a shattering in Ecc. 12:6. Hezekiah sees death as "bitter" (Is. 38:15,17), and he does so again in Ecc. 7:26 "I find more bitter than death the woman ...". We of course note the common phrase "under the sun..." in Ecclesiastes, and wonder if this connects with how the shadow of the sun went back ten degrees for Hezekiah. He uses the same word for "shadow" in Ecc. 6:12; 8:13: "It shall not be well with the wicked, neither shall he lengthen days like a shadow; because he doesn't fear God". It was Hezekiah whose days were lengthened by the shadow. He appears to see himself as having had this experience because he was righteous- when in fact it was by grace alone. It's so sad to read Ecc. 6:13 in this context: "who knows what is good for man in life, all the days of his vain life which he spends like a shadow?", or "who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his enigmatic life, which he passes like a shadow? For who can tell man what will be after him under the sun?". The extra life he was given he felt was "vain", and in any case, the shadow of the sun was declining for him as the 15 years came to a close.

The writer of Ecclesiastes is the "preacher" (Ecc. 12:9), 'qoheleth', the one who addresses an assembly. The related term is used multiple times for how Hezekiah assembled the people and addressed them (2 Chron. 29:23, 28, 31, 32; 30:2, 4, 13, 17, 23, 24 (twice), 25 (twice); 31:18).

Ecc. 9:13-16 speaks of a city surrounded by invaders, saved by a poor wise man. As discussed there, this would be relevant to Isaiah and the siege of Jerusalem in Hezekiah's time. The passages that speak of oppression (Ecc. 4:1-3) and perversion of justice (Ecc. 3:16; 5:8) match with Isaiah's criticism of how things were under Hezekiah's reign. They are not particularly relevant to Solomon's reign. Hezekiah's wealth, both before and after the Assyrian invasion, was considerable.

So I suggest that Solomon was the original author, but the book was rewritten by Hezekiah with references to his own similar experience. But there is evidence from language and style that the book was further rewritten during the exile. And we can understand why. Life seemed pointless for the Judean exiles, God seemed distant, justice was not seen to be done. But the resolution of those concerns was again in the epilogue—there will come a day of resurrection, judgment and God's eternal Kingdom. That is the answer to man's struggle with perceived injustice and God's apparent distance, to the point that it seems life is random event and spiritual effort is pointless.

Ecc 1:2 Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; Vanity of vanities, all is vanity-

Many attempts have been made to claim that Ecclesiastes is a kind of dialogue between a believer, or arguments for belief in Yahweh, and those for unbelief. But all these arguments for some kind of dialectic rather break down, in my opinion, be-

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cause the Preacher himself here states, and repeats it often, that everything is vanity, including wisdom. Such statements are so global that they cannot really be as it were cancelled out by some other side in a dialectic. And there is no clear schema according to which we can discern which verses fall within which side of the supposed dialectic. It's true that there is a difference between the words of the Preacher and those of the narrator, but this kind of thing is common enough in autobiography. For Ecclesiastes is just that; chapter 2 speaks of Solomon's early kingship, and proceeds to conclude with the description of him in very old age in Ecc. 12. The overall thrust of Solomon's argument is clearly against commitment to God, which is to be expected seeing we know that in old age his heart turned away from Yahweh. The few verses which appear to contradict that are, I suggest, Solomon quoting his previous wisdom and mocking it as vanity. Some of the verses which mention "God" appear to reference Him with sarcasm (see on Ecc. 2:24,26; 6:12); and not as commending belief in God at all.

I suggest therefore that there is no such dialectic, but rather we are reading here Solomon's reflections upon his life, as an old man facing death. And this was at a time when the Scriptures tell us his heart had been turned away from Yahweh by his wives; and he died abusing his people (1 Kings 12:11). Seeing Ecclesiastes was clearly written in his old age, it was written at this time when he had turned away. Ecclesiastes therefore never mentions the title "Yahweh", there is no mention of Israel as God's people, nor really of the Mosaic law. If indeed this is a dialectic between faith and unbelief, then we would expect there to be such references to balance out the dialogue. But there is nothing of the sort.

I suggest that we are hearing Solomon straight up, telling it how he feels it to be, baring his heart. A heart which had turned away from Yahweh. There are some similarities between the book and Egyptian literature, not least an Egyptian work, *The Man Who Was Tired of Life*, written between 2300 and 2100 BC, where a man disputed with his soul whether life was worth living. Whilst Solomon's words are recorded by inspiration, this doesn't mean that the content of all that is said in Ecclesiastes is true; for there is a difference between inspiration and revelation, and his thoughts here are hardly a "Thus says the Lord". And so it could be that his Egyptian wives had introduced him to this literature and philosophy, and had indeed turned his heart away from Yahweh and towards this.

I noted throughout commentary on Proverbs that Solomon held God's truths in his mind and preached them; but his heart was far from them, he never personalized them, and his behaviour with women and in whipping his people was all a stellar denial of the truths which he knew and taught. It was beyond hypocrisy, beyond even narcissism, but rather a mindset which arose from assuming himself to be the Messianic son of David, and his kingdom to be the promised Kingdom of God on earth. As he came closer to death and his faculties failed, he ought to have realized his mistake, and looked forward instead to David's greater son, the Lord Jesus. But instead he simply preferred to conclude that for him, all these great ideas were bunk. He made the mistake so many make; that "truth" is truth 'for you', 'for me'; rather than accepting that Divine truth is indeed absolute and global truth for all hearts at all times.

But his wisdom remained with him, and he still taught those truths, although they were far from his own heart. In this he is a valuable warning to all who hold God's truths; his apostasy, recorded for us in such detail with a unique insight into the psychology of those who turn away. This is the value of Ecclesiastes. Just as I will discuss on the Song of Solomon how we have in those songs a unique insight into the mentality of the man who flirts with those outside the faith. And Solomon may even have been self aware of all this on some level, for he concludes Ecclesiastes by saying that his words are intended as goads (Ecc. 12:11); the very observation that "all is vanity" is in fact a goad to action.

This suggestion is true to observed reality. It is not uncommon to encounter those who 'know God's truth' who live absolutely contrary to that truth in their private lives. And yet they are keen to teach that truth to others, even commending it to others, and critical of any attempts to as it were water it down. They may be the conservative hawks of churches or denominations; but they have utterly failed to personalize any of it. They have the Solomon syndrome.

Ecc 1:3 What does man gain from all his labour in which he labours under the sun?-

The Proverbs contain repeated condemnation of laziness. Lack of a zealous work ethic is a rejection of wisdom, according to Solomon. As Solomon explains in Ecc. 2, he was an active person, not lazy by nature. And yet he lacked spirituality. He claimed that his service of God was due to his spirituality, but it was in reality merely a semblance of serving God when it was really just reinforcing his own personality type. His mocking of the "sluggard" or "lazy one" is so frequent (Prov. 6:6,9; 10:26;

13:4; 15:19; 19:24; 20:4; 21:25; 22:13; 24:30; 26:13-16). But it is a reflection of his own works-based approach to righteousness; the 'wise' "do" good things, and the wicked don't do enough good things. Personal spiritual mindedness and relationship with God are simply not emphasized.

As members of His people, doing His will, the labour of our lives is *not* in vain, seeing it is done "in the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58). Paul seems to be alluding to the spirit of Ecclesiastes, which laments that all achievement and labour "under the sun", not "in the Lord", is so tragically vain; there is no sense of final achievement, and this nagging fear about the ultimate validity of life's work must plague all who live outside the sphere of God (Ecc. 1:9-11; 2:18-23). We could understand Paul as specifically disagreeing with Solomon's attitude that all endeavour is vain.

Ecc 1:4 One generation goes, and another generation comes; but the earth remains forever-

This is indeed proof enough that the earth shall not be destroyed, but is rather presented as the territory of God's eternal Kingdom. But that was likely not what Solomon had in view primarily; his idea was that just as he felt helpless in old age and that he had achieved nothing of lasting value, so humanity likewise comes and goes as if on an eternal stage. Solomon uses the Hebrews words used in 1 Chron. 16:17; 17:14; 2 Chron. 9:8 of how David's seed would remain forever. In Ecclesiastes, he rejected any idea that he would live for ever, claiming he had no idea what lay beyond the grave apart from the unconsciousness of death, and considering that any fulfilment of the promises to David had been in him and his kingdom. But now he was to die and his kingdom pass to a son whom he suspected of be-

ing a fool; and his heart had turned away from Yahweh and toward idols. He could be seen as therefore mocking at the very promises which could have been for him the ultimate gospel of the Kingdom.

Ecc 1:5 The sun also rises, and the sun goes down, and hurries to its place where it rises-

In line with :6, the idea may be that for all its hurrying [Heb. 'panting'], the sun just returns to where it was. And in that Solomon saw a parable of himself. He had sought wisdom, thought he had it, and now jettisoned it for himself; and he was back where he was, no personally wiser. As noted on :4, he had rejected the hope of resurrection from the dead and a future kingdom of God on earth. And so he was left with the impression that the natural creation continues as it were on clockwork, headed nowhere. It is that lack of sense of direction and progress towards an end which is the tragedy of rejecting a knowledge of Yahweh and His purpose.

Hezekiah had been shown that the position of the sun was not in fact just a clockwork mechanism- a far greater light could change its effect and shadow. But now he concludes that even that great intervention of God in his life was just part of the time and tide of human experience. He rationalized the wonderful thing God had done until it no longer touched him. And so it is with man today.

Ecc 1:6 The wind goes toward the south, and turns around to the north. It turns around continually as it goes, and the wind returns again to its courses-

This sense of endless, pointless cyclical operation developed in :5-7 is really arguing that the entire natural creation is encoded with the same nihilism and vanity which Solomon

felt in himself. He saw the world in the same way as he saw himself, and that is indeed how we are wired. But for those who have the hope of the Kingdom and an awareness of the work of God's Spirit within them, the outlook is different. They therefore and thereby sense within nature a yearning within it toward the day of God's Kingdom coming on earth, trembling in eager expectation and yearning for that day (Ps. 96:12,13; Is. 55:12; Rom. 8:19). The passage in Rom. 8 connects the work of the Spirit within believers with the work of the same Spirit in all of creation.

Hezekiah had so earnestly wanted more life. But now he concludes that life is just part of a series of cycles (:7), and therefore meaningless. He fails to accept that the time and tide of human history and the history of the planet will in fact be radically interrupted- by the establishment of God's eternal Kingdom through His Messiah.

Ecc 1:7 All the rivers run into the sea, yet the sea is not full. To the place where the rivers flow, there they flow again-

See on :6. For Solomon, his "wisdom" was merely knowledge. The promises to David, the hope of the Kingdom, had no personal bite for him. He muses that "there is a time" for everything (Ecc. 3:1-7), as if his nihilism led him conclude that all behaviour is somehow predestined, all is cyclical, nothing is ultimately new, and even God is caught up in this- for "God seeks again that which He has driven away" (Ecc. 3:15). As water goes around the water cycle (Ecc. 1:7), so everything repeats, things just happen to us (Ecc. 3:1-8), there will be no resurrection, no coming back (Ecc. 3:22 RV); and there is therefore no real point in endeavour (Ecc. 3:9). This attitude reveals a pathetic failure to let the knowledge of God dynamically impact

daily life; there's no appreciation of the Spirit, of God's radical life co-joining with human life, of His mind meeting that of man. Leaving knowledge as mere theory, as so much Bible study can too easily remain, is a dangerous thing. And Solomon is the parade example of it.

Ecc 1:8 All things are full of weariness beyond uttering-

He is really arguing that the entire natural creation is encoded with the same nihilism and vanity which Solomon felt in himself. He saw the world in the same way as he saw himself. LXX "a man will not be able to speak of them". And yet Solomon had spoken of all things by the wisdom given him (1 Kings 4:32,33), but now he says that the vanity of all human experience is beyond speaking of. Whilst Solomon retained his wisdom, he felt that it was not the full answer to the mystery of life; and the answer was, so far as he could see it, that all things are vain and wearisome. Life is not therefore particularly worth living. He therefore effectively renounced his wisdom, as we will note throughout Ecclesiastes. This is the attitude which arises when we fail to personalize wisdom, and refuse to accept that this life is not God's Kingdom; that is yet to come.

Hezekiah had so desired life- but found life without God was a weariness, incredibly boring, just existence. Isaiah had told Hezekiah that although secular young people would faint and be weary, those who fear God would renew their strength and run and not be weary in God's Kingdom (Is. 40:30,31). But Hezekiah had no Kingdom perspective. The complaint "I have laboured / been weary in vain" is met with the strong response "Yet surely my judgment is with the Lord, and my work with my God" for future recompense (Is. 49:4). This is Isaiah's response to Hezekiah's words here. Work for the Lord will be

recompensed- in the future Kingdom. And then, "they shall not labour in vain" (Is. 65:23). But Hezekiah refuses that perspective.

The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing-

Solomon had spent his life ingratiating his senses, and this was his conclusion. *The* lack of "satisfaction" is a major theme in the descriptions of condemnation for those who break the covenant (s.w. Lev. 26:26). And it is the principle we must live by today; that the only satisfaction is in the things of God's Kingdom. Even in this life, the eye is not "satisfied" with seeing or wealth (s.w. Prov. 27:20; Ecc. 1:8; 4:8; 5:10). And those who seek such satisfaction from those things will find that dissatisfaction is the lead characteristic of their condemnation (Ps. 59:15). Tragically Solomon knew the truth of all this but lived otherwise; just as so many do who give lip service to the idea that the things of the flesh cannot satisfy.

It is possible to see Solomon as an anti-Christ, as well as a type of Christ; like Saul, he was both a type of Christ, and also the very opposite of the true Christ. This point is really brought out in Is. 53:11, where the true Messiah is described as being "satisfied" with the travail or labour of His soul, and will thereby bring forth many children. The Hebrew words used occur in close proximity in several passages in Ecclesiastes, where Solomon speaks of how all his "travail" or "labour" has not "satisfied" him, and that it is all the more vain because his children may well not appreciate his labour and will likely squander it (Ecc. 1:8; 4:8; 5:10; 6:3). Likewise the 'Babylon' system of Revelation, replete with its feature of 666, is described in terms which unmistakably apply to Solomon's Kingdom. This feature

of Solomon- being both a type of Christ and yet also the very opposite of the true Christ- reflects the tragic duality which is so characteristic of him.

In Ecc. 2:18,19 he laments that his labours will achieve nothing; doubtless alluding back to his words in Prov. 5:10, where he says that the Gentile wife will make the young Israelite's labours meaningless. Sin never satisfies. "Hell and destruction are never satisfied, and the eyes of man are never satisfied" (Prov. 27:20 RV), Solomon wrote in his youth; and then in old age, he came to basically the same conclusion, having spent his life working back to the truth that he had been taught in his youth (Ecc. 1:8; 4:8). And there are many men and women who have done the same. Those words of Prov. 27 are amongst the proverbs Hezekiah's men copied out. Hezekiah knew this but lived otherwise. Likewise the warning not to eat too much honey is in that same section, but Hezekiah effectively says that this is what he did. We all tend to be empirical learners; and yet this is the great power of God's word, that through it we need not have to learn everything through our failures; but we can receive His Truth, trust it, and simply live by it. Otherwise we shall be like Solomon...

Ecc 1:9 That which has been is that which shall be; and that which has been done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun-

The knowing of God and His Son is not something merely academic, consisting only of facts. It is above all an experience, a thrilling and dynamic one. There is no "new thing under the sun" (Ecc. 1:9)- all in this world is born to roll downhill. And yet in Christ, all things are made new in an ongoing sense. The "new song" which his father David loved to sing (Ps. 33:3; 40:3;

96:1; 98:1 etc.) reflected the sense that the movement of the Spirit results in our living in "newness of life". But for Solomon, all was as it were old and boring. He had no sense of the Spirit's renewing work within him.

David's life was full of grief, anguish and joy (2 Sam. 1:19-27; 3:33,34; 12:15-23; 18:33; 19:4; 23:13-17); whereas Solomon's life lacked any pathos, and he concludes that "what has been done is what will be done" (Ecc. 1:9). Because he sought to only replicate his father externally, he never experienced his very own and personal experiences and growth; he did what he perceived was right not because it was what *he* wanted, but because it looked smart, and appeared in line with his father. For those raised Christian, these issues are live and difficult. On a psychological level, it appears that those without personal experience, i.e. experience which is uniquely their own, fall into destructive behaviour- and Solomon would fit that pattern. R.D. Laing comments: "If our experience is destroyed, our behaviour will be destructive" (*The Politics Of Experience* (New York: Pantheon, 1967) p. 12). And it's been observed that increasingly, modern society is creating behaviours rather than experiences (Martin Marty, *A Nation Of Behavers* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1976)). Typical 21st century man or woman has the Solomon syndrome- focused upon others as their heroes, endless learning from others rather than through empirical, personal experience; adopting the conclusions of others without having personally worked them through; indulging in virtual experience [especially, these days, online] rather than actual experience. Both psychology and the Biblical example of Solomon teach that all this tends to self-destructive behaviour in the end.

The "new thing" had been prophesied by Isaiah: "Behold, I will do a new thing. It springs forth now; don't you perceive it?" (Is. 43:19). Jeremiah likewise would speak of how "Yahweh has created a new thing in the earth" (Jer. 31:22). Hezekiah had surely heard Isaiah's words. But chose to disregard them.

Ecc 1:10 Is there a thing of which it may be said, Behold, this is new? It has been long ago, in the ages which were before us-

The answer of course is that yes there is. The engagement of God in human life produces something radically new, and this will come to full term in the establishment of God's Kingdom upon earth when the Lord Jesus returns. That was effectively what was promised to Abraham and David, but Solomon liked to think that he was the fulfilment of it. And so he failed to as it were sing the "new song" which his father David loved to sing (Ps. 33:3; 40:3; 96:1; 98:1 etc.). But for Solomon, all was as it were old and boring. He had no sense of the Spirit's renewing work within him. History only appears to repeat because of human nature being such a constant factor; but the gospel of the Kingdom is that destiny is not dominated by human nature, but will be the result of God's radical intervention in the human narrative upon this earth.

Ecc 1:11 There is no memory of the former; neither shall there be any memory of the latter that are to come, among those that shall come after-

"Memory" is LXX "memorial". He may have in view his half brother Absalom's vain desire to build a memorial to himself (2 Sam. 18:18). It is the Yahweh Name, symbolizing His eternal purpose with the earth, which is the memorial which abides. But Solomon doesn't use the Name in Ecclesiastes. He was concerned about making a memorial from himself, of his

own works, failing to have learned the lesson of Absalom. If he had seen his connection with the Yahweh Name and the longer term purpose of God, instead of assuming that his kingdom was God's Messianic kingdom, then he would have had a memorial. But in the book of Proverbs he sees wisdom as good only in that it gives a good name in this life. But now he was facing death and thinking of the passage of the generations, he concludes that it is vain because man has no lasting memorial in this world. And that is so; but human character is so significant to God that we shall indeed have eternal memorial at the resurrection of the body into God's Kingdom upon earth.

Hezekiah's response to Isaiah is in Is. 56:5: "To them I will give in My house and within My walls a memorial and a name better than of sons and of daughters; I will give them an everlasting name, that shall not be cut off".

Ecc 1:12 I, the Preacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem-

Solomon speaks about him being King in Jerusalem (Ecc. 1:1,12; Prov. 1:1) as if this was the ultimate fulfilment of the Davidic promises. Consider the implications of 2 Chron. 1:9: "O Lord God, let thy promise unto David my father be established: for thou hast made me king over a people like the dust of the earth... give me now wisdom, that I may go out and come in before (i.e. lead) this people". Solomon was asking for wisdom because he thought that he was the Messiah, and he saw wisdom as a Messianic characteristic. He failed to realize that the promises to Abraham and David were only being primarily fulfilled in him (e.g. 1 Kings 4:20); he thought that he was the ultimate fulfilment of them (1 Kings 8:20 states this in so many words). His lack of faith and vision of the future Kingdom lead him to this proud and arrogant conclusion (cp. build-

ing up our own 'Kingdom' in this life through our lack of vision of the Kingdom of God).

Ecc 1:13 I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom concerning all that is done under the sky. It is a heavy burden that God has given to the sons of men to be afflicted with-

"Seek" is the word typically used of how Israel were to seek God, and David often uses it in the Psalms. But Solomon didn't seek relationship with God, but rather sought knowledge. And here we have a profound warning. For in these days of wide Biblical literacy and access to tools enabling even laymen to search out the meaning of the Biblical text, we can so easily end up seeking knowledge of itself, however true, without coming to seek or know God in the Hebraic sense of finding legitimate, two way, live relationship with Him.

David spoke of *seeking and praising God's grace* with his "whole heart" (Ps. 9:1; 119:58; 138:1). Solomon uses the phrase, but speaks of being *obedient* with the "whole heart" (1 Kings 8:23; 2 Chron. 6:14) and applying the "whole heart" to the intellectual search for God (Ecc. 1:13; 8:9). There is a difference. The idea of whole hearted devotion to God was picked up by Solomon, but instead of giving the whole heart to the praise of God's grace, he instead advocated giving the whole heart to ritualistic obedience and intellectual search for God. This has been the trap fallen into by many Protestant groups whose obsession with "truth" has obscured the wonder of God's grace.

Ecc 1:14 I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and behold, all is vanity and a chasing after wind-

This may be true on one level, but it fails to account for the fact work *for God* will indeed endure and have eternal con-

sequence, granted at the final day of judgment. But this perspective is totally denied by Solomon, and he is writing Ecclesiastes as his autobiography in old age, when his heart had already turned aside from Yahweh. It is only for those who reject Yahweh that life is a chasing after wind; the term is used in Hos. 12:1 of how apostate Israel feed upon / chase after the wind, and in Jer. 22:22 of how the wind would chase apostate Judah to their destruction. But they were themselves chasing the wind, so condemnation by being chased by the wind was appropriate. If vanity fills our minds now, then the emptiness of unconsciousness will be an appropriate destiny for us. And the world is so full of vanity, which it seeks to insert into our minds.

Ecc 1:15 That which is crooked can't be made straight; and that which is lacking can't be counted-

This is typical of the kind of fatalism which Ecclesiastes abounds with. Secular people at the end of their lives often come to the conclusion that everything is somehow overruled by 'God', to the point that human behaviour is pretty much all determined and enforced by a force beyond ourselves. Solomon fails to accept the basic thesis of the book of Proverbs; that human actions can be controlled, we have election, and our choices are for real and eternally significant. We can change, and that which is lacking can be made by God's grace and operation in our hearts. And thereby we are accountable for our actions and to Divine judgment. But Solomon didn't believe in this, and so it led him to conclude that human behaviour isn't that significant and is somehow all orchestrated by some higher hand than our own. He may here be alluding to himself, arguing that change is impossible for him.

Hezekiah was told by Isaiah that God would make the crooked ways straight before the presence and coming of Messiah. But Hezekiah wasn't interested in that perspective.

Ecc 1:16 I said to myself, Behold, I have obtained for myself great wisdom above all who were before me in Jerusalem. Yes, my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge-

Those "before me in Jerusalem" has been used by some to argue that the author must have reigned in Jerusalem at a time when many kings had preceded him. But this would create a major problem with the description of the author as being king of *Israel* in *Jerusalem*. It ought to read the king of *Judah* in Jerusalem. But "before" almost never means 'before' in the sense of 'earlier'; the reference is not to "before" in terms of time, but rather is this the common Hebrew word for "in the presence of". All who had come before his presence in Jerusalem didn't match his wisdom. And this is exactly the case with Solomon; many visited him in Jerusalem and heard his wisdom, marvelling that it was greater than theirs.

The constant moral and physical experimentation led Solomon to the deep cynicism of Ecclesiastes: 'If this is the Kingdom, the ultimate experience, then I don't think much of it'. Ecclesiastes emphasizes that Solomon experienced more glory and wisdom than any other who had been in Jerusalem (Ecc. 1:16; 2:7,9); this suggests that he felt he had reached the ultimate experience of the Kingdom, and yet he was not impressed by it. He lacked the faith and humility to look ahead to the future Kingdom, and to realize thereby that all the achievements of this life are as nothing.

Solomon's building of exotic gardens with "all kind of fruit" (Ecc. 2:5) sounds as if he was attempting to reconstruct Eden;

he was so carried away with expressing his own abilities that he effectively created his own kingdom in this life. It seems Solomon's crazy program of building and moral experimentation (outlined in Ecc. 2) began after he had finished building the temple. He seems to have got cynical and depressed after that; he had his kingdom in this life; he looked back and compared himself with others (Ecc. 1:16; 2:7,9), and thereby he became proud. He could see that materially and spiritually (in terms of knowledge) he had far, far outstripped all God's previous servants. It was this comparison with others (there is triple emphasis on it) which well indicates his pride.

The words of Dt. 17:16-20 are evidently a prophecy of Solomon. He did multiply silver, gold, horses and wives; his heart *was* turned away (Dt. 17:16,17= 2 Chron. 9:20). Yet this passage says that if he studied the Law all his life, this would *not* happen, and also his heart would not be "lifted up above his brethren" (v. 20). Solomon's whipping of the people and sense of spiritual and material superiority (Ecc. 1:16; 2:7,9) shows how his heart *was* lifted up. Yet Solomon knew the Law, despite his explicit disobedience to the commands concerning wives, horses etc. But his knowledge of the word didn't bring forth the true humility which it was intended to.

Ecc 1:17 I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also was a chasing after wind-

LXX "My heart knew much- wisdom, and knowledge, parables and understanding". Solomon accepts his wisdom was as it were just in his head or mind. The LXX even implies he considers his desire for wisdom to have been mistaken, "a way-

wardness of spirit". And yet God had rewarded him for that desire. We see here the depth of his apostasy from God.

Ecc 1:18 For in much wisdom is much grief; and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow-

Solomon forgot that his wisdom was a gift from God; he speaks in Ecc. 1:16 of how "I have gotten me great wisdom" (RV). His possession of truth led him to the assumption that this was a reward for his own diligence; whereas it was a gift by grace. Yet he himself knew that the wisdom given *by God* brings joy, whereas human wisdom leads to the grief and depression which afflicted Solomon (Ecc. 1:18 cp. 2:26). Solomon 'had the truth'; he knew so deeply the true principles of Yahweh worship.

ECCLESIASTES CHAPTER 2

Ecc 2:1 I said in my heart, Come now-

The more we come to know ourselves, the more we will perceive the importance of self-talk. I take Ecclesiastes to be Solomon's self-examination at the end of his life. Five times in this short book he describes how "I said in my heart..." (Ecc. 2:1,15 [twice]; 3:17,18). As he looked back and analyzed how and why he had lived and been as he had, he appreciated that it was all a result of his self-talk, how he had spoken to himself in his mind. His introspection reveals just how we talk to ourselves – e.g. "I said in my heart, "Go on now, I will prove you with mirth, therefore enjoy pleasure"" (Ecc. 2:1). We all talk to ourselves; and the records of the Lord's wilderness temptations are an amazing psychological window into the self-talk of God's very own son.

Here again we have Hezekiah showing what was in his heart.

I will test you with mirth: therefore enjoy pleasure; and behold, this also was vanity-

On one hand Solomon condemns mirth (Ecc. 7:4; Prov. 20:32 LXX "If thou abandon thyself to mirth, and stretch forth thine hand in a quarrel, thou shalt be disgraced"). But this is exactly what Solomon did in Ecc. 2:1,2; 8:15. He refused to accept his own wisdom. It was merely a teaching position, and he felt the need to empirically find its truth. He failed to personalize the wisdom he taught, and therefore turned away in the end.

Don't love "pleasure" (Prov. 21:17) and Prov. 14:13 "even in mirth there is sorrow" are both s.w. "mirth" in Ecc. 2:1,2; 8:15. Solomon had to re-learn this for himself rather than accept direct Divine teaching about it. He recognized that fools love mirth (Prov. 7:4) but still he wanted it. He rejected this wisdom and only came to agree with it through doing just what Prov.14:13 condemns (Ecc. 2:2).

Hezekiah reasons that the pursuit of pleasure is "vanity" (Ecc. 2:1,10; 6:9), and likewise he often says that life itself is "vanity" (Ecc. 6:12; 7:15; 9:9; 11:10). So our life experience is according to what we are pursuing. If we pursue vain things, our life is vain. Herein lies the huge power of "seek first the Kingdom of God". If that is our passion, then our life likewise becomes of eternal moment. Self examination is about perceiving what are our core desires, our deepest dreams, our deepest heart wish.

This is why he so often speaks of human work: "all the toil that one has toiled under the sun" (7 times) or "the work that is done" (8 times), "(one's) toil" (12 times) or "all the work" (5 times). He asks what is the profit, the advantage, the gain—using accounting, business terms. And he sees, rightly, that if death is the final end—then it was all pointless, much expenditure for no end result. Surely Paul had reflected on this, when under Divine inspiration he wrote that our labour is *not* vanity "in the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58). He writes that in conclusion of his teaching about the huge significance of the Lord's resurrection, which enables ours. This alone is what makes human labour meaningful and not meaningless. It gives eternal moment to all our being and labour. Striving for a career and hu-

man achievement can be painted as very noble and satisfying. But in the hard stare of death, it all crumbles.

Ecc 2:2 I said of laughter, It is foolishness; and of mirth, What does it accomplish?-

"Mirth" is the word for "pleasure". Solomon sees wisdom as the way to wealth and "pleasure" in this life, and that is the basis for his appeal to men to be wise and accept his wisdom (Prov. 10:23). But David uses the word only of the "pleasure" of the future, restored Kingdom of God on earth (Ps. 126:2); whereas Solomon wanted it all now, just as the 'prosperity gospel' likewise does. And yet as he got older, Solomon realized that such "pleasure" from material things is not in fact pleasure, and he uses the word several times in Ecclesiastes of how pleasure in this life is vain (Ecc. 2:2; 7:3; 10:19). This approach is in fact a contradiction of his seeking after "pleasure" in Proverbs. He came to this nihilistic position because he failed to perceive that the true "pleasure" is not now, but in the future Kingdom. When we finally realized in Ecclesiastes that it was "not now", he came to see death as the greatest enemy; and yet he refuses to have faith in the hope of resurrection.

Ecc 2:3 I searched in my heart how to cheer my flesh with wine, my heart yet guiding me with wisdom, and how to lay hold of folly, until I might see what it was good for the sons of men that they should do under heaven all the days of their lives-

Solomon in Prov. 23:29-31 strongly condemns wine, but later gave himself to wine (Ecc. 2:3). And so he again demonstrated how although his wisdom remained with him and he continued to teach it (Ecc. 2:9), he had failed to personalize that wisdom. It flowed through his mind and his mouth, but took no personal lodgment in his heart. Likewise Solomon

speaks in Ecc. 2:3 as if he were on a journey of discovery as to what would be "good" for a man "all the days of his life"; and yet in Prov. 31:12 he spoke of how the way of wisdom and having a wise wife will bring "good" for a man "all the days of his life". Perhaps this is a tacit admission that Solomon had not had a wise wife; and it is also an admission of the way the wisdom he taught had taken zero lodgment in his own heart. It was all just theoretical truth. This is such a warning to us.

Solomon's mother warned him against alcohol, but her words were totally disregarded by Solomon in his later search for fulfilment in the flesh (Prov. 31:4,5). Despite condemning those who ignore the teaching of their mother, Solomon did just that. He was a stellar example of a man who does the very opposite of the truth he has received from God. This is a stage beyond mere hypocrisy; it is the narcissism of someone playing God, who considers themselves personal obedience to the Divine principles they teach. And this is for all time an acute temptation to those who have God's truth, especially in the area of sexuality and addiction.

His alcoholism contradicted his own earlier condemnations of drink as being for the unwise (e.g. Prov. 20:1). Thus by turning to drink he was throwing off his former wisdom, even though his access to it remained with him (Ecc. 2:9; cp. 'But I still believe the Truth, you know'). His mother pleads with him not to drink lest he "pervert the judgment of any that is afflicted" (Prov. 31:5). And yet on his death, the complaints about his hard oppression of the people indicate that he did just this (due to his taking to drink, according to Prov. 31?). And yet Prov. 31 has Solomon praising his mother for her wisdom; he was proud of his mum, and yet he so miserably disobeyed her.

He seems to have a mindset in which he felt it was impossible for him to be disobedient. The all important thing for him was who his parents and pedigree were.

Solomon later turned to alcohol for a while (Ecc. 2:3)- yet his girlfriend says that Solomon took her to the house of wine (Song 2:4 RVmg.) whilst still young. The seeds of failure were there early on- he preached against wine in Proverbs, and yet still drunk himself.

Ecc 2:4 I made myself great works. I built myself houses. I planted myself vineyards-

Solomon *loved* building (Ecc. 2:4-6)- he built cities and buildings because it was “the desire of Solomon which he desired” (1 Kings 9:19 AVmg.), i.e. one of his dominant desires. So when we read that it was the desire of Solomon to build the temple (1 Kings 9:1,11), he was merely serving God in a way that naturally appealed to him anyway. “The people sacrificed in high places, *because* there was no house built” (1 Kings 3:2) surely reflects Solomon’s perspective, not God’s- for God Himself didn’t need a built house in which sacrifice could be offered. The temple became such an obsession with Solomon that he came to think that no really acceptable worship could occur outside of the idea which he had so developed in his own mind. It’s rather like thinking that one *must* have a physical church building in which to be an ecclesia of the living God-who doesn’t dwell in buildings made with hands.

Ecc 2:5 I made myself gardens and parks, and I planted trees in them of all kinds of fruit-

Solomon didn’t like the idea of God doing something for him (i.e. building the house); in his own mind, he swamped this concept with his obsession for achieving his own works.

The fact that God needs and requires nothing failed to register with him; the fact that salvation is by pure grace meant nothing to him. After Solomon finished the temple, he started work on his own house; Ecc. 2:4 relates how he built houses and all kinds of gardens and parks, imitating the garden of Eden and trying to recreate it on earth, travelling down every road of human experience. The implication of this is that once the temple was finished, he felt that the Kingdom had come, and that he must create it himself. He taught Israel that if they sinned even in captivity, then all they had to do was pray towards the temple and they would be forgiven. He saw in that building some kind of atonement for sins. He lost sight of the importance of the blood that made atonement; he replaced the blood of Christ with a work of his own hands. Indeed, it would seem that God's response to the dedication of the temple in 1 Kings 9:7 corrects what Solomon has said, in that He says that if Israel sin then He will cast the temple too out of His sight; which is rather different to how Solomon instructed the people to gain forgiveness for the sake of the temple if they were in dispersion. He saw the temple as a talisman- the need for real, meaningful change and repentance and spiritual mindedness to enable the dwelling of God went unperceived.

Ecc 2:6 I made myself pools of water, to water from it the forest where trees were reared-

Solomon's use of his wealth to create a garden with special rivers and fruit trees was surely an attempt to reproduce Eden on earth (Ecc. 2:5,6 RV). He thought that he could buy the Kingdom, create the Kingdom paradise on earth, have it now... and so very many have fallen into the same delusion. The Gospel of God's Kingdom and not our own, yet future and not

right now, is a major challenge to all subconscious attempts to build a kingdom of God now in our lives.

Ecc 2:7 I bought male servants and female servants, and had servants born in my house. I also had great possessions of herds and flocks, above all who were before me in Jerusalem-

The constant moral and physical experimentation, rather than just accepting God's wisdom, led Solomon to the deep cynicism of Ecclesiastes: 'If this is the Kingdom, the ultimate experience, then I don't think much of it'. Ecclesiastes emphasizes that Solomon experienced more glory and wisdom than any other who had been in Jerusalem (Ecc. 1:16; 2:7,9); this suggests that he felt he had reached the ultimate experience of the Kingdom, and yet he was not impressed by it. He lacked the faith and humility to look ahead to the future Kingdom, and to realize thereby that all the achievements of this life are as nothing.

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Ecc 2:8 I also gathered silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and of the provinces. I got myself male and female singers, and the delights of the sons of men- musical instruments, and that of all sorts-

These were things he did when he tried to find the meaning of life outside personal faith in God. "I got *myself*", he said- he organized the temple worship, the courses of singers etc., because he liked music and orchestra- not from true service to God. Many like the Queen of Sheba rewarded him for his wisdom with presents- and "I gathered me also silver and gold, and the peculiar treasure of kings and of the provinces" who visited him (Ecc. 2:8). He retained wisdom theoretically, but he allowed the human benefits of 'having the truth' to swamp him. And so we must beware, lest, e.g., the happy social environment which knowing the Truth has generated for some comes to dominate our lives *of itself*; we may 'retain wisdom' as Solomon did, but the fire of real spirituality can drop out of our lives so easily. He also fails to take into account that he did not in fact get the wealth and glory of himself. It was given him

by God because of his initial choice of wisdom above all things. But his heart has now turned away from God and he sees every Divine blessing as in fact attained by his own labour.

The words of 1 Kings 11:1-4 have some interesting implications when analyzed. Even before he built the pagan temples for his wives, his marriages to them are described as "evil in the sight of the Lord" (1 Kings 11:6). Solomon's marriages are often explained away as political maneuverings. But the record says that Solomon "clave unto these in love", surely alluding to God's definition of marriage as a leaving father and mother and cleaving to a wife. Solomon really loved those women; they weren't just political strings to his bow. They would not have turned away his *heart* if they were only political relationships. 1000 seems a rather exorbitant number in any case. And Ecc. 2:8 RV says that Solomon sought "the delights of the sons of men, concubines of all sorts". He took sex to its maximum extent- he had every possible type of woman in his harem. Every hair colour, size, type. "Whatsoever mine eyes desired [this is language elsewhere used about sexual desire] I kept not from them" (Ecc. 2:10). And yet still, he never found one... counting one by one, as he put it. If ever there is a warning against immorality, it is here. The more relationships one has- and our world glorifies this- the less ultimate satisfaction there can be. God's way has to be best.

Ecc 2:9 So I was great, and increased more than all who were before me in Jerusalem-

Solomon claimed about his wisdom that "By me kings reign, and princes decree justice" (Prov. 8:15). He had been given wisdom in order to reign over Israel on God's behalf, but from that good basis he had slipped into considering himself

as therefore automatically just and right in whatever abuse of power he chose to exercise (see on Prov. 8:14). And he ends his reign abusing and whipping his people. He maintained his intellectual grasp of wisdom to the end, but he didn't reign nor live by it. He is proof enough that mere intellectual assent to God's truth is not going to save anyone, nor is "keeping the faith" in intellectual terms the thing which is to be emphasized. For Solomon did this, and it didn't save him.

My wisdom also remained with me-

The idea of several of Solomon's proverbs is that "the righteous" are those with "understanding", and it is this understanding which feeds and gives life to others. This is true enough; our sharing with others and influence upon them can indeed lead them to life and not to die eternally. But Solomon appears to again have his own self justification in view; for he considered that he was the preeminently righteous because he was the teacher of Israel, giving them the wisdom given him. But Solomon fell away from Yahweh, even though he says his wisdom remained with him (Ecc. 2:9), and he continued to teach others that wisdom to the end of his life (Ecc. 12:9). And so it was simply not true that teaching others makes a person righteous, as Solomon supposed often in Proverbs (e.g. Prov. 10:21).

Solomon had earlier claimed in Prov. 14:33: "Wisdom remains in the heart of one who has understanding, and is even made known in the inward part of fools". But now, in the disillusion of Ecclesiastes, Solomon later alludes to this in saying that although he cast off his faith in Yahweh, and his heart turned aside to idols, his Divinely given wisdom [in an intellectual sense] remained with him. He seems to be saying that if one has wisdom, it will always remain in the heart, and there-

by justify a man. But this isn't the case; one can know Divine truths and yet live otherwise, without at all personalizing them. And so turn away from the true God, just as Solomon did.

Solomon had God's wisdom throughout his apostasy (Ecc. 2:9), as the Truth ever remains with us. God put that wisdom in his heart in order for him to help others, both in Israel and in the world (2 Chron. 9:23); yet Solomon failed to realize that he needed to apply it to himself. In the same way as Solomon criticized flirting with Gentile girls but then went and did this himself, so he said many other things in his wisdom which actually condemned himself. Thus "the prince that lacketh understanding is also a great oppressor" (Prov. 28:16). Yet Solomon did oppress the people- despite possessing wisdom. He insists that throughout his life, his wisdom had remained with him (Ecc. 2:9 RVmg.). So what does this indicate? Surely that the wisdom which he had did not affect his life practically, and thus it was as if he lacked wisdom completely. Mere possession of truth leads to great temptations- for like Solomon, we can reason that this alone justifies us in any behaviour. And again, consider Prov. 29:4 RVmg: "The king by judgment establisheth the land [another self-conscious justification of himself in his early reign]: but he that imposeth tribute overthroweth it". And this was exactly what Solomon did, in imposing unbearable tribute upon his people. He so clearly sees what is wrong- and then goes and does it. This is one of the features of our nature. And we all have this same tendency. The more we know what is wrong, the more we are inclined to do it.

Ecc 2:10 Whatever my eyes desired, I didn't keep from them. I didn't withhold my heart from any joy, for my heart rejoiced

because of all my labour, and this was my portion from all my labour-

It's interesting how often in Proverbs that Solomon warns about only eating a limited amount of the honey you may find (e.g. Prov. 25:16). Yet Ecclesiastes 1 and 2 show how Solomon found honey as it were, he had the opportunity to do and experience what he wanted- and he ate so much he became spiritually sick.

Most people spend their lives pushing down one or two avenues of self-fulfilment- to own a large home, a nice car (cp. horses and chariots), to achieve some level of sexual and domestic fulfilment, financial power etc. Solomon fantastically succeeded in all these avenues- and came to realize that still he was unfulfilled. He became a workaholic, rejoicing in his own labour- but that too, as many a middle aged man can testify, brought nothing. If only we can perceive it, Solomon provides a fantastic challenge. If we believe the Biblical record of Solomon, none of these avenues will hold much attraction for us any more. But our community- the young especially- throw the majority of their energy into one or two of these avenues. Just a handful who learn the lesson of Solomon could turn the world upside down for Christ- especially given the financial and linguistic possibilities of our age. Yet in all such aspirations to burning zeal and achievement (would we had more of it!), the other lessons of Solomon must be learnt. His building of the temple was "all *Solomon's* desire which he was pleased to do" (1 Kings 9:1). There is a semantic connection between the Hebrew words for "desire" and "pleased" - the point of which is to emphasize that Solomon's work for God was only an expression of his own zest for self-fulfilment; he served the Truth

in ways which only confirmed his own natural inclinations. Appreciating the spirit and blood of Christ, his own weakness, the grace of God, and the subsequent desire to live a life of self sacrifice, of carrying a cross in ways we wouldn't naturally chose- this was all foreign to Solomon. And is it so foreign to us? Solomon's materialism and self-fulfilment are sure warnings to our age.

Ecc 2:11 Then I looked at all the works that my hands had worked, and at the labour that I had laboured to do; and behold, all was vanity and a chasing after wind, and there was no profit under the sun-

Solomon had taught not to labour to be rich (Prov. 23:4), but he had done just this. He refused now to accept that his wealth and glory had all been given by God in response to his desire for wisdom above all things. He considered that he had worked for it all; and so he was disillusioned with it. For only the gift of God's grace, appreciated as such, will not tarnish in our own minds.

Ecc 2:12 I turned myself to consider wisdom, madness, and folly: for what can the king's successor do? Just that which has been done long ago-

Solomon often seems to doubt the wisdom and strength of his son Rehoboam. Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are full of warnings to him, and Ecclesiastes laments the tragedy of a powerful man having a fool or weakling following him and squandering the kingdom built up. And that is indeed what happened. Solomon had persuaded himself that he was the unique and total fulfilment of the promises to David. He refused to consider any future Messiah, nor that his line should end in such a Mes-

siah. He was totally self obsessed. He saw that no amount of personal possession of wisdom could affect his successor.

Ecc 2:13 Then I saw that wisdom excels folly, as far as light excels darkness-

This must be interpreted in the light of Solomon's cynical statements about his wisdom, and the comment in :15 that the reality of death means that there is no ultimate advantage of wisdom over folly. So he may simply mean, as he often does in the book of Proverbs, that wisdom indeed gives a smoother ride in this life, just as it is better to walk in the light than in darkness. But he never attaches to wisdom any eternal or future advantage; because he sees only this life. "Excel" is the word used only by Solomon in Ecclesiastes for "profit" (Ecc. 1:3; 2:11,13; 3:9; 5:9,16; 7:12). And he has just stated, as he often does, that there is no "profit" or excellence. Because all ends in death. So he here means that wisdom profits more than folly in this life- but in the wider context of Ecclesiastes, we must understand that he sees no profit in anything, ultimately, including in wisdom.

Ecc 2:14 The wise man's eyes are in his head, and the fool walks in darkness- and yet I perceived that one event happens to them all-

Not being 'wise in our own eyes' is a major theme of Solomon's Proverbs (Prov. 3:7; 12:15; 26:12,16; 28:11). We are to recognize that there is no inherent wisdom in man; it must be taught to us from God's word. And yet we live in a postmodern world, where what seems or feels good to our own gut is taken to be the highest personal truth. This was what led Judah to condemnation (s.w. Is. 5:21), because trusting in their own opinions and gut feelings left them insensitive to God's

word. Paul quotes the idea in Rom. 12:16; to be wise in our own eyes means that we ignore those whom we naturally consider worthy of being ignored. But that is not necessarily the way of the Spirit. But when Solomon lost his faith, he comments that whether a man has wise eyes or not (s.w.) is irrelevant in the face of death (Ecc. 2:14). He clearly conceived wisdom as only helpful for this life; he had no real personal faith in the resurrection of the dead or the establishment of the future Kingdom of God. And this led him to ultimately despise his own wisdom as futile.

Ecc 2:15 Then I said in my heart, As it happens to the fool, so will it happen even to me; and why was I then more wise? Then I said in my heart that this also is vanity-

The blasphemy of those statements in Ecclesiastes that wisdom is meaningless is hard to plumb. As discussed on Ecc. 1:1, this is indeed the position of Solomon, and not just part of a dialogue. Deep within his heart, Solomon's attitude was that "As it happeneth to the fool, so it happeneth even to me (the man made wise by God); and why was I then more wise?" (Ecc. 2:15). Ecc. 7:16 is in similar vein: "Be not righteous over much; neither make thyself over wise"- even though wisdom and righteousness are what God desires from us above all! This despising of wisdom and the truly spiritually ambitious life was due to Solomon's lack of faith in a resurrection; he had his kingdom in this life, and he failed to see the blinding necessity of a resurrection, judgment and change of nature. This is again a kind of regret expressed by Solomon that he had asked God for wisdom, and God's commendation of his choice is thereby despised by Solomon.

LXX "This is also vanity, because the fool speaks of his abundance". The Lord's parable of the rich fool appears to allude to this; but Solomon has himself in view. He is therefore understood by the Lord as the rich fool. Despite all his theoretical wisdom.

Ecc 2:16 For of the wise man, even as of the fool, there is no memory for ever, since in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. Indeed, the wise man must die just like the fool!-

What makes the difference for Solomon is the issue of death and the absence for him of any hope of eternity. Had he accepted the gospel of the Kingdom, believed in by Abraham and David, he would have reasoned differently. In the end, Solomon felt that for himself, it was as well to be righteous as to be wicked, for in death there was no further difference (Ecc. 9:2,5,9). He knows judgment will come (Ecc. 11:9), at least for the young people, but he reasons as if it won't- at least not for him. He knows, but he doesn't know on the personal, experiential level. This is why there are apparently contradictory statements in Ecclesiastes. For example, the wise dies as the fool, with no more eternal remembrance than the fool (Ecc. 2:15,16). This, Solomon, says, is what he himself believes in his own heart. But in Ecc. 7:12 he says that wisdom gives life to those who have it. But then again in Prov. 9:16-18 he observes that although wisdom can help, its benefits are easily undone, so easily as to make it useless. I don't see these different perspectives as being the difference between life in the world and life in the spiritual realm. They are all spoken *with conviction* by Solomon, which, to my mind, ruins the idea that he himself believed the Truth but was simply outlining what life is like without God. He advocates both ways. My resolution of this is that

he knew and preached God's Truth, but for him personally, it meant nothing at all. And therefore in practice he advocated the life of self-enjoyment, acting *as if* all the other truth of wisdom was not operative in practice.

Ecc 2:17 So I hated life, because the work that is worked under the sun was grievous to me; for all is vanity and a chasing after wind-

Hezekiah once so wanted life, but now he hates living. This is the classic case of the coveted possession becoming obnoxious and love turning to hate.

And here is the challenge. The man who had everything, wealth, women, career, artistic fulfilment, with long life and good health to 'enjoy' it... ended up hating life, because he found it all so vain without God. Finally, life is only worth anything if lived for God. And people spend their lives trying to get just a fraction of Solomon's experiences. Solomon here says he hates life, but in :18 he defines this as meaning he hated all his labour / works which he had done. His life was his works. It was all about external achievement. He had no internal spiritual life or development to look back at. The New Testament puts works and grace in counterpoint. And Solomon knew nothing of grace, nothing of the spirit of David his father, who perceived that we can but accept grace, rather than attempt to justify ourselves by works. There must be far more to our lives than our works. For then we are but human doings rather than human beings.

"The work that is worked" is the phrase used for how Israel were to "do your work" for six days and then observe the Sabbath (Ex. 23:12). That provision was to teach them that life is more than works; and the spirit of the Sabbath was to point

forward to salvation by grace in Christ. This lesson was totally lost upon Solomon. The history of Israel repeatedly talked of how their salvation was the work which *God* worked (s.w. Dt. 11:3,7 etc.). But Solomon ignored God's work because he was so obsessed with his own work, passing off the work God worked as beyond understanding (Ecc. 3:11 s.w.).

Ecc 2:18 I hated all my labour in which I laboured under the sun, because I must leave it to the man who comes after me-

See on :17. I will suggest on :21 that the labour in view may also be his labour for wisdom. In Ecc. 2:18,19 he laments that his labours will achieve nothing; doubtless alluding back to his words in Prov. 5:10, where he says that the Gentile wife will make the young Israelite's labours meaningless. Sin never satisfies. "Hell and destruction are never satisfied, and the eyes of man are never satisfied" (Prov. 27:20 RV), Solomon wrote in his youth; and then in old age, he came to basically the same conclusion, having spent his life working back to the truth that he had been taught in his youth (Ecc. 1:8; 4:8). And there are many men and women who have done the same. We all tend to be empirical learners; and yet this is the great power of God's word, that through it we need not have to learn everything through our failures; but we can receive His Truth, trust it, and simply live by it. Otherwise we shall be like Solomon...

We get the sense from :18,19 that Hezekiah already sensed from a child that Manasseh would be unwise. He got no joy from having sons, despite his begging to be given more life in order to have them. And this isn't the only point in Ecclesiastes where he is clearly skeptical about his children. He certainly has no pride nor confidence in them. Alternatively, it could be that the totality of death weighed so heavily upon him that

Hezekiah considered that even your children and descendants can't ameliorate death for you personally. That betrays narcissism, and is in line with his attitude to Isaiah when told that his children will be eunuchs in Babylon and therefore his line would die out. More positively, we can reason that the hope of resurrection to a future eternity helps us not be narcissistic in this life. Hezekiah's obsession with death is really a form of narcissism.

Ecc 2:19 Who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have rule over all of my labour in which I have laboured, and in which I have shown myself wise under the sun. This also is vanity-

Again we see Solomon's fear that his inheritance would be wasted by his son Rehoboam. And he likely had many sons by his many wives, whom he considered fools. If his focus had been upon the fulfilment of the promises to David through a Davidic line [through Solomon] culminating in Messiah, he would have perhaps not struggled so much with this issue of having to leave everything to an heir. But he considered himself the fulfilment of the promises about the great son of David. So to now have to leave his labours to his own possibly unwise son... was a crushing anticlimax.

He had spoken in Proverbs of bringing up a child in the way he should go; whereas by the time of Ecc. 2:19 and his experience with his own children, he comments about his heir: "Who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man or a fool?". He simply didn't see the relevance of his wisdom to his own personal family life. Yet he proudly insisted: "Who is as the wise man?", as if the possession of theoretical truth and wisdom was the ultimate possession; and he then goes on to say that this

made him beyond criticism (Ecc. 8:2-4). This surely *must* be a danger for any community or individual who considers they have "the truth" and who considers the possession of it to be of the utmost importance.

Ecc 2:20 Therefore I began to cause my heart to despair concerning all the labour in which I had laboured-

Solomon's complaint at the pointlessness of wisdom in Ecc. 2:15-20 is liberally sprinkled with personal pronouns; his self-centeredness was part of his materialism and lack of faith in the Kingdom. And for us too, familiarity with the glorious principles of Divine Truth with which we have been entrusted can lead us to the blasphemy of saying, in effect, that those principles are unimportant; they come to mean little to us personally, and thereby we effectively deny their value and worth. "To despair" is the same word translated "without hope" (Is. 57:10; Jer. 2:25; 18:12). He had no hope beyond the grave exactly because he had vainly sought justification by works rather than by grace.

Under the sun-

As explained on Ecc. 1:2, I do not see any dialectical argument in Ecclesiastes, oscillating between life "under the sun" and on another hand, some more spiritual perspective. That other perspective is not made clear nor defined. I suggested that Solomon is talking about his life, in his old age position of having turned his heart away from Yahweh and to idols. I suggest it is simply a phrase used by Solomon to describe "life", perhaps influenced by his Egyptian wives, who at this point had turned his heart away from Yahweh to their idols,

of which "the sun" was one of the most significant. It may well be a phrase taken from the Egyptian wisdom literature which had influenced Solomon. The only other Biblical usage of the phrase outside of Ecclesiastes is in 2 Sam. 12:12, where the consequences of David's sin with Solomon's mother were to be worked out openly and publically "under the sun". It could be that despite trying to whitewash David and his sin in Proverbs, Solomon at the end of his life feels he is for ever living with the consequence of that sin of his parents; and thus he blames everything he sees as wrong with his life upon that. This would be a typical thing for a man to do, in psychological terms. And I have noted throughout Proverbs how often Solomon is having a dig at Absalom and others who played their part in the outworking of the consequences of the sin. See on :22.

Ecc 2:21 For there is a man whose labour is with wisdom, with knowledge, and with skillfulness; yet he shall leave it for his portion to a man who has not laboured for it. This also is vanity and a great evil-

He refers to himself when he writes at the end of his life of the man whose labour is in wisdom [cp. his labouring to write out so many Proverbs], and yet it is all pointless in that he will leave it all to a fool after him- he had already seen the unspirituality of his children (Ecc. 2:21). This thinking reflects a perception that his wisdom was totally irrelevant to himself- he wrote it all down for others, but not for himself. Right at the end of Ecclesiastes he chuffles that he still preaches his wisdom to the youth, although he himself has the attitude that it is all meaningless. This is one explanation of the paradox within Ecclesiastes- the teaching of Divine truth, whilst lamenting the pointlessness of it.

More than anything, Solomon was incurably selfish. Having spent his life writing and teaching wisdom, he makes one of his autobiographical comments: "There is a man whose labour is in wisdom...yet to man that hath not laboured therein shall he leave it for his portion. This also is vanity and a great evil" (Ecc. 2:21). Solomon saw "wisdom" as something he had worked for [forgetting it was God's gracious gift to him], and he treated it as a material possession. Because he saw that he couldn't take it with him, he felt therefore it was useless- he didn't, it seems, want to leave it to his son because he felt it was only for him. This was the spirit of the man who buried his talent of Divine Truth in the ground and thought that would be enough- he wouldn't risk it with others or share it with them. And so Solomon ended up hating all his labour for wisdom (Ecc. 2:18, 21) because at the end of his life that mere knowledge and teaching of it to others hadn't transformed or immortalized his personal life. The rejected at the day of judgment may well, tragically, feel the same.

All the wisdom and relationship with God that a man develops in his life cannot benefit anyone else; each soul must discover for himself (Ecc. 2:21). The emphasis which we have always given to *personal* Bible study and a lack of authoritarian spiritual leaders is surely correct. It was God's will that Israel should be without a human king. Their lack of such human leadership is described as them each doing what was right in their own eyes. Far from being the negative comment this is often taken to be, the idea is surely that while they were without a human King, as God intended, the people did what was right in their own judgment; they worked out their own relationship with God for themselves. It is significant that a quarter of the

names listed in Heb. 11 were from the period of the Judges, when there was no human King.

Ecc 2:22 For what has a man of all his labour, and of the striving of his heart, in which he labours under the sun?-

As in :21, the labour in view is particularly Solomon's mental labour, striving in his heart, toward wisdom. He was given wisdom as a gift by Divine grace, but he ended up rejecting that and trying to work it all through in his own strength.

As members of His people, doing His will, the labour of our lives is *not* in vain, seeing it is done "in the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58). This provides a definition of life "under the sun"; it is life not lived "in the Lord". But see on :20. Paul seems to be alluding to the spirit of Ecclesiastes, which laments that all achievement and labour "under the sun", not "in the Lord", is so tragically vain; there is no sense of final achievement, and this nagging fear about the ultimate validity of life's work must plague all who live outside the sphere of God (Ecc. 1:9-11; 2:18-23). We could understand Paul as specifically disagreeing with Solomon's attitude that all endeavour is vain.

Ecc 2:23 For all his days are sorrows, and his travail is grief; yes, even in the night his heart takes no rest. This also is vanity-

Solomon has been alluding to himself in the previous verses, lamenting his chasing after wisdom; and here he, the man with every available pleasure, laments that his days are full of sorrow and he can't sleep peacefully at night. Yet Solomon had prayed that when God's people were in grief and sorrow because of their sins, they could pray to God using his temple, and be forgiven and have their grief assuaged (2 Chron. 6:29). Yet in Ecc. 2:23, Solomon laments that all his days are spent in grief and sorrows (s.w.). The way out of the depression with which

he ended his days was repentance and acceptance of God's free grace and forgiveness. But he refused to do this, and turned his heart away from Yahweh.

Ecc 2:24 There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and make his soul enjoy good in his labour. This also I saw, that it is from the hand of God-

Paul quotes Solomon's words in Ecc. 2:24 as the words of those who have no faith that there will be a resurrection (1 Cor. 15:32). The rich fool likewise disbelieved the resurrection, and his words also allude to those of Solomon (Lk. 12:19 = Ecc. 2:24; 11:9). The core problem with Solomon was that he refused any notion of being personally judged, and the hope of eternal life as a consequence for belief and action in this life. Solomon is arguing that a man should just enjoy life now and be satisfied with his work. Because work in the area of wisdom leads to grief and bad conscience about sin (see on :20-23). Solomon's attitude to work is out of step with the teaching in Genesis 3. Labour is a curse to man, and yet is pregnant with blessing if the victory of the seed of the woman is accepted. But Solomon had closed his mind to any future Messianic figure, considering himself to be that. And so his attitude to labour is mistaken. He considers it the best thing that can be done in a life lived without God. For he is writing this at a time when his heart was turned away from Yahweh to idols. And yet this raises the question as to how we are to understand his comment that "This also I saw, that it is from the hand of God". There is indeed so much better for a man than to just enjoy this life and live without God and the hope of resurrection and judgment. So it could be that as elsewhere in Ecclesiastes, this is Solomon

referring to God with some sarcasm, as in :26, where he refers to God's gift of wisdom to a man like himself as vanity.

We also see here one of many allusions to the curse in Eden, to labour in order to eat. And that curse is given by "the hand of God". One may as well just accept that, and try to find a bit of joy and satisfaction in the experience. Koheleth doesn't go onwards to focus upon the promise of Gen. 3:15, that the curse does have the prospect of being gloriously lifted through Messiah's work.

Ecc 2:25 For who can eat, or who can have enjoyment, more than I?-

In this we see the challenge of Solomon to us all. For he experienced, over a long, healthy lifetime, all the "enjoyment" which other men spend their lives trying to achieve just a fraction of. And yet it still filled his days with sorrow, without accepting God's ways for himself.

"More than me" or "If not me", Heb. "Except me". This fits Hezekiah's unique position, having been given life but now hating it (:17), and therefore finding the things that sustain life (eating and drinking) repulsive.

Ecc 2:26 For to the man who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge, and joy; but to the sinner He gives travail, to gather and to heap up, that He may give to him who pleases God. This also is vanity and a chasing after wind-

Solomon has himself in view, as in :25. He pleased God by choosing wisdom and so was given it, as he was given joy by God (Song 3:11), but he comments that this is all vanity. Because God had also given him wealth, which he had gathered and heaped up in store cities [the same Hebrew word is used]; and he complains that this is God treating him as a sinner. For

the "travail" is what he complains of in Ecc. 1:13; 2:23; 3:10; 4:4. This is the kind of sarcastic, blasphemous attitude to God which we noted on :24.

Contrary to what he states here, he wasn't given wisdom because he pleased God. He had already married a Gentile woman before he became king. Rather was he given wisdom by grace, as a gift, and not as a reward for his righteousness. Many passages in Solomon's writings seem to indirectly and subtly justify himself. They may be perfectly true, reflecting the wisdom of God, and yet he was using his knowledge of God's Truth to justify himself as being right- instead of being humbled by wisdom and the true knowledge of God. Consider: "God giveth to a man that is good in his sight wisdom and knowledge" (Ecc. 2:26). He didn't want to understand that God's offer to him as a young man, and his grant to him of wisdom, was by pure grace. Solomon suggests that his mere possession of truth made him a "good" man.

It would seem from Ecclesiastes that Solomon lost any personal hope even of resurrection, and because of this he wonders why he ever initially had asked for wisdom: "I myself perceived that one event [death] happeneth to them all. Then said I in mine heart, As it happeneth to the fool, so will it happen even to me; and why was I then more wise?" (Ecc. 2:14,15 RV). "God giveth to the man that is good in his sight wisdom... this also is vanity" (Ecc. 2:26). This is a definite reference back to himself, who was given wisdom, and he considers the gift meaningless because the wise die the same death as the fool. So he now saw it as vanity, seeing there was no personal future hope. What this teaches us is that unless we personally believe we will be in the Kingdom, then all our wisdom is of no value

to us personally... and in the end, we will like Solomon live a life that reflects this.

Hezekiah had pleaded that he was "good" in God's sight. But he sees the blessing of that as actually being a curse.

We too have a tendency to build up masses of Biblical and spiritual knowledge, and to let the mere acquisition of it stop us from practicing it.

ECCLESIASTES CHAPTER 3

Ecc 3:1 For everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven-

"The time" in view appears to be the day of judgment. Having spoken of how there is a *time* "to plant... pluck up... kill... heal" etc., we are then told that "God shall judge the righteous and the wicked (at the second coming): for there is a time there for every purpose and for every work" (Ecc. 3:1-8,17). Thus our actions and purposes in every department of life will be examined at "the place of judgment" (Ecc. 3:16). Because all things will in some ways be judged, and are even now, *therefore* we must fear God and keep His commands (Ecc. 3:1; 12:13,14). However in :9,10, Solomon seems to be saying that God has burdened men with a life whose every aspect [which he now lists] is without profit and vain. And he may be sarcastic (as noted on Ecc. 2:24,26) when he suggests "God" will bring men to judgment for all things in their lives. Or it may be that the whole of this chapter could be a description of how he once thought; he once said in his heart that there would be a future judgment of all things by God (:17). But the contradictions he now sees in the idea of a Divine judgment leads him up to the final conclusion in :22, that because "God" cannot resurrect man to judgment, therefore man may as well get on and enjoy life in a moderate kind of way. Elsewhere Solomon effectively denies any idea of future judgment by God, and so I am inclined to view this chapter as a description of what he once believed, which by the end of the chapter we see he has now jettisoned.

Ecc 3:2 a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted-

As noted on :1, the "time" for these things may mean 'a time for judgment' (:17). We are judged for the time of our birth and death in the sense that God takes into account human lifespan. A sinful man may only encounter God's ways later in life, starting at a certain point on the spectrum, God expects him to move a particular distance from there. Others live long lives and heard God's call in childhood; and a further distance of development is perhaps hoped for from them. God Himself planted and then plucked up His people and also other nations (Jer. 12:17; 18:7). There is a time to pull out of projects, to give up. But we will be judged as to how, when and with what motives we do so.

Hezekiah had once learnt that even if there is a time to die, even that is open to dialogue. For God gave him another 15 years added to his "days", his appointed time. See on :14. He rationalized the miracle as meaning that in any case, his "time" to die was simply 15 years from the point when he had been terminally ill. Now he just sees all events in human life as predetermined in a fatalistic way. He had pleaded with God to give him more life so that he could produce sons, but now he sees that there is simply a time to give birth and a time to die. It's so tragic when God does great things for man, but they are then later rationalized and philosophized away- as faith and relationship with God grow cold. Indeed the Hebrew here is translated by Blenkinsopp "A time to give birth and a time to put an end to one's life". Giving birth is a conscious act and appears parallel with consciously choosing to end life. In this case, the author sees suicide as a possibility and not, theoretically, a bad one. All

so tragic that Hezekiah, who had been given extra life, should reason like this.

Ecc 3:3 a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up-

As noted on :2, God Himself breaks down and builds up, kills and heals. We cannot do all these things, but perhaps Solomon has himself in view. Or maybe he is commenting upon the legislation in the law of Moses which required these things to be done. Although in :9 he argues that there is no profit in any of these things.

Ecc 3:4 a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance-

Solomon speaks elsewhere of the spiritual advantage of going to a funeral to weep and mourn, rather than to a wedding to laugh and dance. And here he seems to be saying that for our attitude to all these things, our behaviour in joy or grief, we will be brought into judgment at some time (:17).

Ecc 3:5 a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing-

"Cast away" is "cast", perhaps alluding to stoning people. I suggested on :3,9 that Solomon may have the Mosaic legislations partially in view. He recognizes that there are times when we withdraw from relationships, and times when we form them. And again, there is a time for judgment for all these things (:17).

Ecc 3:6 a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away-

The opposition between seeking and losing suggests that the losing is effectively the opposite of seeking. The idea is that

there is a time to seek, and also a time to accept as lost, and give up seeking. It could be argued that the parables of Lk. 15 imply that God never gives up seeking. This would be one of many examples of where later scripture takes issue with what koheleth says in this book. But in practical reality, there does come a time to cease dialogue, to accept the loss, as God did with Israel. And there is a time for those inevitable choices to be judged (:17). There is a time when we accept that things are lost, cast away. But when and how we decide that, and from what motives, will have its time for judgment.

Ecc 3:7 a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak-

In these examples, it is impossible to define the precise time when we should keep silence compared to speaking out, to unite in relationship or move away in it. And trying to define the precisely correct moment is unwise and inappropriate. But our motives and reasons will have their time for judgment (:17). As noted on :6, many of the examples given seem to be pertinent to human relationships (:8 also).

Ecc 3:8 a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace-

I observed on :6,7 that Solomon seems to have in view how human relationships begin and at times come to an end. He accepts that relationships sometimes come to an end, and there is even a time for contention. But when, how, with what motives... has its time for judgment (:17).

For Solomon, his "wisdom" was merely knowledge. The promises to David, the hope of the Kingdom, had no personal bite for him. He muses that "there is a time" for everything (Ecc. 3:1-7), as if his nihilism led him conclude that all be-

haviour is somehow predestined, all is cyclical, nothing is ultimately new, and even God is caught up in this- for "God seeks again that which He has driven away" (Ecc. 3:15). As water goes around the water cycle (Ecc. 1:7), so everything repeats, things just happen to us (Ecc. 3:1-8), there will be no resurrection, no coming back (Ecc. 3:22 RV); and there is therefore no real point in spiritual endeavour (Ecc. 3:9). This attitude reveals a pathetic failure to let the knowledge of God dynamically impact daily life; there's no appreciation of the Spirit, of God's radical life co-joining with human life, of His mind meeting that of man. Leaving knowledge as mere theory, as so much Bible study can too easily remain, is a dangerous thing. And Solomon is the parade example of it.

The idea of Ecc. 10:11 and so often in Ecclesiastes is that no matter how wise you are, random chance event trumps all wisdom you may have. This is the idea that "there is a time for" everything. This reflects a studied refusal by Hezekiah / Solomon to accept the higher hand of providence leading to an ultimate end- future salvation in God's Kingdom. Even God's miraculous deliverance of Hezekiah from war and giving him peace is now renegotiated in his mind- there was just a fore-ordained time for that. The grace of God's action, and His response to prayer, is thereby nullified in Hezekiah's mind.

Ecc 3:9 What profit has he who works in that in which he labours?-

"Profit" is a favourite theme of Solomon. He had an incredibly utilitarian view of life, wanting to see the tangible effect of work in this life. Some of the things in :2-8 may allude to obedience to Mosaic legislation, yet he considers this of no profit; just as Israel later did (Mal. 3:16 perhaps alludes to Solomon's

claim that there was no profit in working). I noted on Ecc. 2:17,18 that he ends up hating his life because he hates his works. The parallel between works and life meant that he was a human doing rather than a human being. He saw no ultimate profit in his works and life because he was now going to die. He had no sense at all that the works of the righteous "follow them" (Rev. 14:13), and we shall be given the eternal consequence of our works (Rev. 22:12). He concludes Ecclesiastes by admitting that this is the final truth (Ecc. 12:14), but this was not his personal belief nor how he had lived his life. He finally comes to the right conclusion, and had known it all along on some level, occasionally alluding to in his book of Proverbs; but he did not personalize it. He looked for the result of works in this life and didn't find it, and so he hated life, hated his works, and his heart turned away from God to idols. This is the kind of realization which men facing death often come to, but still they refuse to personalize it. We have all surely encountered this kind of thing. And this is our challenge; to personalize it, and live right now as if we are in God's judgment presence, for things great and small, things public and hidden.

The idea is that all human labour, physically and spiritually, is in vain. Ecc. 12:14 adjusts this by the inspired editor warning that in fact it is not vain because it will be incorporated somehow into our final judgment at the last day. Paul criticizes this by arguing that because of the resurrection [which koheleth denies], our labour is not in vain "in the Lord". And Isaiah critiques this position by saying that Messiah will be satisfied by the toil / travail of His soul (Is. 53:11). Hezekiah could have been a Messiah figure. But he failed, and didn't want to look

forward to the future Messiah whose labour would not be in vain- in that it would bring forth the resurrection of all in Him.

Ecc 3:10 I have seen the burden which God has given to the sons of men to be afflicted with-

This "burden" or "travail" is something Solomon laments throughout Ecclesiastes, and considers himself the parade example of it. He seems to complain that God has given this to people. I suggested on :8 that he considers the time for everything to be somehow predestined, and yet complains that for all these things God seeks to judge people (:17). And so he considers this to be a burden God has given to men to afflict them with. And yet the Biblical idea of travail or burden is that God brings these things in order to spiritually develop His people, to do them good in their latter end (s.w. Dt. 8:2,3,16). The travail of Israel in Egypt was to bring a new nation to birth. But Solomon has no sense of ultimate, eternal outcomes; he expects an immediate consequence right now in this life. And so he considers God unreasonable.

Being "afflicted" was what went on throughout his father David's life (s.w. 1 Kings 2:26; Ps. 132:1). But unlike David, he sees no positive outcome for it.

Ecc 3:11 He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in their hearts, yet so that man can't find out the work that God has done from the beginning even to the end-

On Ecc. 2:17 I noted that Solomon despised all the 'work that he had worked', because he was obsessed with his own works rather than God's works of salvation by grace. "The work that is worked" is the phrase used for how Israel were to "do your work" for six days and then observe the Sabbath (Ex. 23:12). That provision was to teach them that life is more than

works; and the spirit of the Sabbath was to point forward to salvation by grace in Christ. This lesson was totally lost upon Solomon. The history of Israel repeatedly talked of how their salvation was the work which *God* worked (s.w. Dt. 11:3,7 etc.). But Solomon ignored God's work because he was so obsessed with his own work, briefly passing off the work God worked as beyond understanding (Ecc. 3:11 s.w.), and any grasp upon eternity as therefore having been made too difficult by God. He made the mistake so many make, assuming that God's word and work is a riddle to be solved, with eternal life as the reward for figuring it out. God is not like that, hiding as it were behind the Bible or some doctrinal system which He has established as a code to be broken before He deals with men. He is far more proactive than that in seeking our salvation. And to those who truly love Him, His teachings are plain, as they were to David (Jn. 7:17).

But it seems Solomon or Hezekiah liked to think that finding God was a far too difficult intellectual exercise to be achievable, and God had in fact made it so (Ecc. 3:11; 8:17). Because, presumably, He wants to hide Himself from His own creations. Indeed there is the implication that God is cruel to have placed a desire for eternity in man's structure, and yet make it unattainable for him. Man sees a beautiful sunset and reaches for his camera to photograph it, sensing the eternal, but not able to make ultimate sense of it. It's the same idea as the comment that what is crooked cannot be made straight (Ecc. 1:15; 7:13), especially when God has made it crooked (although Isaiah's response is that the crooked will be made straight before Messiah). The argument seems to be that nobody can get totally right with God because He doesn't let them have the chance to

change. This is part of the travail or curse which God gave man (:10). But this was just a convenient excuse to not pursue relationship with God. Paul rightly says that God is not far from every man. It is also a studied denial of the possibility of future eternity, at the resurrection. And we hear it today. Isaiah, as so often, comments on this verse by saying that God does declare [Heb. 'explain'] the end from the beginning- it can be found out through His word (Is. 46:10).

The goodness of God can lead *all men* to repentance (Rom. 2:4). God has set a sense of the eternal in the human heart (Ecc. 3:11 AVmg). An awareness of judgment is alive as a basic instinct in people. God is "not far from every one of us... forasmuch as we are [all] the offspring of God" (Acts 17:27-29- stated in a preaching context), being created in His image. But Solomon passes all this off as too hard for any human being. The truth was that he presented it as too difficult because he didn't actually want eternity as God offers it, in *His* Kingdom; he wanted an eternal now, enjoying his own titillations of his own flesh. And he considered that it was better never to have existed (Ecc. 4:3).

Ecc 3:12 I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice, and to do good as long as they live-

As noted on :1, his sense may be that he *now* knows [so he thinks] that it is better to just enjoy life, because God cannot resurrect to judgment (:22). Heb. "So long as they are alive" reflects Hezekiah's position with a defined period left to live.

Ecc 3:13 Also that every man should eat and drink, and enjoy good in all his labour, is the gift of God-

I have suggested on Ecc. 3:1,17,24 that Solomon is accusing God of being unable to resurrect and judge, and therefore his previous understanding that everything will be brought to judgment was misplaced. Solomon concludes Ecclesiastes however with an admission that this is in fact the case; all in human life will be judged finally. So I take chapter 3 as bravado, which in the face of his final death he has to admit was wrong, although he still fails to repent and accept the personal implications of this. The idea that work is a "gift of God" appears to be deconstructed in the New Testament allusions to this; for they insist that the "gift of God" is the grace of salvation without human works (Eph. 2:8; Rom. 5:15; 6:23; Jn. 4:10). This suggests that as in Ecc. 2:24,26, Solomon uses this idea of "this is the gift of God" wrongly and sarcastically. As often, the allusion is to early Genesis- where God 'gave' labour as part of the curse, labouring to "eat and drink" until he dies.

Ecc 3:14 I know that whatever God does, it shall be forever. Nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; and God has done it, that men should fear before Him-

This must be taken in the context of Solomon's denial that God can resurrect to judgment (:22), and his complaint that all the life choices of :2-7 are predestined and so God is burdening man with the idea of judging them (:8). Solomon reasons as if he has no perspective of eternity at all. I suggested on :8 that God is being accused of predestining the behaviour of people and then calling them to judgment. This is what Solomon once believed, but he is mocking that belief. And saying that in this case, then God is just putting men in fear of Him. Human behaviour is irrelevant, Solomon is saying, because nothing can be added nor subtracted from God's permanent actions.

The comment that nothing can be added to what God does clearly alludes to the adding of 15 years to Hezekiah's days. Perhaps Hezekiah is lamenting that nothing more could now be added to his 15 years. But verse 14 has alluded to the curse in Eden, and so here the idea may be that that curse from God cannot be changed. But that is a studied denial of the implications of Gen. 3:15, that the curse will be reversed through the future Messiah.

Ecc 3:15 That which is has been long ago, and that which is to be has been long ago: and God seeks again that which is passed away-

This continues Solomon's accusation that God is unreasonable in demanding judgment for that which is past, because everything is merely cyclical, as Solomon began Ecclesiastes by complaining. The "new song" which his father David loved to sing (Ps. 33:3; 40:3; 96:1; 98:1 etc.) reflected the sense that the movement of the Spirit results in our living in "newness of life". But for Solomon, all was as it were old and boring. He had no sense of the Spirit's renewing work within him. The previous verses have alluded to the curse in Eden, which koheleth sees as having been given by God "long ago", and is an unreasonable 'seeking again' by God of the past sin in Eden. Instead of wallowing in the curse, koheleth should have seen that the answer to the problem is in the Christ.

Ecc 3:16 Moreover I saw under the sun, in the place of justice, that wickedness was there; and in the place of righteousness, that wickedness was there-

Solomon may simply mean that there is no justice in this world, and therefore he had been attracted toward the idea that the final judgment is from God, and at a future time (:17). But

"the place of justice" is the phrase used of the place to be established under the Mosaic law for justice (Dt. 17:8). Solomon is saying that the Mosaic idea didn't work, because there was wickedness even in the place of justice. He has little to say about the Mosaic law even in Proverbs, apart from appropriating the language of blessing for obedience to obedience to his Proverbs, which he seems to see as a replacement torah. He was specifically disobedient to the commands about trading in horses and marriage to Gentiles. So specifically disobedient that it was as if he wished to as it were trash the Mosaic law and demonstrate it was obsolete or inapplicable to him.

This is relevant to Hezekiah because their leaders judged for bribes at his time (Mic. 3:11). "The place of righteousness" was the term for the middle court where laws were made, according to Rashi. But this was where Isaiah had received the gracious message of Hezekiah's salvation. But now Hezekiah shrugs that off as just a corrupt place. He has no concept of future judgment, and laments that in this life there is no justice in courts, as he does also in Ecc. 5:8. Hence the inspired editor concludes the book with the good news that there is in fact judgment to come.

Ecc 3:17 I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked; for there is a time there for every purpose and for every work-

This could mean that this is what he once said in his heart. The whole of this chapter could be a description of how he once thought, and the contradictions he now sees in the idea of a Divine judgment leads him up to the final conclusion in :22, that because "God" cannot resurrect man to judgment, therefore man may as well get on and enjoy life in a moderate kind

of way. The inspired epilogue reminds us that indeed, God will do this, as the Preacher once believed (Ecc. 12:14).

"Purpose" is the word for "delight". David's "delight" was in God's law (Ps. 1:2 s.w.) and also in the things of the future Kingdom of God (s.w. 2 Sam. 23:5); our "delight" in those things is reflected in our attitudes to God's word. And we shall be finally judged according to our 'delights', our dominant desires (s.w. Ecc. 3:17; 8:6). The Lord Jesus was devoted to sharing Yahweh's "delight" (Is. 53:10). We shall be judged according to what are our dominant desires.

Solomon had previously correctly understood that "God shall judge the righteous and the wicked (at the second coming): for there is a time there for *every* purpose and for *every* work... for God shall bring *every* work into judgment, with *every* secret thing, whether it be good or bad" (Ecc. 3:17; 12:14). Note the emphasis on "*every*". Even what we have spoken in the ear will be shouted out (Lk. 12:3) -implying others will somehow observe our judgment, cp. Mt. 12:41. If the judgment is merely a yes/no statement which has been worked out taking our whole life into consideration, then this emphasis on every work having a time for consideration and judgment "there" is pointless. However, these verses must be considered in conjunction with those which speak of God's 'forgetting' of bad deeds on account of how people later chose to live. This need not mean that they are erased from God's infinite knowledge; all too often we perceive God's memory as a vast memory bank which can have our sins erased from it. But His knowledge knows no such bounds of human perception; yet He is willing not to hold those things against us, and to therefore count us as having never committed them.

Ecc 3:18 I said in my heart, As for the sons of men, God tests them, so that they may see that they themselves are like animals-

Again we see the outworking of God's judgment upon Hezekiah- he was "left" by God, so that Hezekiah might know what was in his own heart. And here he writes it down.

As suggested on :17, this may be Solomon's recollection of how he had previously [correctly] understood things. Although all this leads up to the conclusion in :22; that Solomon no longer considers God able to raise the dead and bring them to judgment. But what he writes here as the restatement of his previous position, when he still believed Divine wisdom, is therefore true. Ecc. 3:18 says that God 'tests' man by making him see that he is just an animal; i.e. those who are humble enough to be His true people will realize the truth of this, but those who are not will fail this 'test'. It is a considerable task to clear our thinking of the influence of humanism. The plain words of Ps. 39:5 are a help: "Man at his best state is but vapour". "It is not for man to direct his steps" (Jer. 10:23 N.I.V.).

Having spoken of the coming of judgment, Ecc. 3:18 RV comments: "It is because of the sons of men, that God might manifest them [i.e. to themselves], and that they might see that they themselves are beasts". The purpose of the judgment is for us, to teach us the gripping truth of the mortality of man. This theory we know, as doctrine. But only in the chilling reality of the judgment will we know it in reality. Again and again I repeat: the judgment seat is for our benefit, not God's. "For he [God] needeth not further to consider a man; that he should go before God in judgment" (Job 34:23 RV). Yet man will go before God in judgment- but for our benefit.

Ecc 3:19 For that which happens to the sons of men happens to animals. Even one thing happens to them. As the one dies, so the other dies. Yes, they have all one breath; and man has no advantage over the animals: for all is vanity-

"Advantage" is the word for "profit". He sees poverty as the result of laziness, and profit / plenty coming from hard work (Prov. 14:23; 21:5); but now his advancing years remind him that there is no ultimate profit because death cuts it short, and reveals man as no better than an animal in the way he dies. Solomon fails to appreciate the wider narrative in spiritual life. The good news is for the poor, which group may include the lazy. And works will not save, and God's salvation is what is ultimately required by man. But Solomon had no eternal perspective, because he thought his kingdom was God's. And so as he got older and closer to death, he reasons that the reality of death means that man has no profit or preeminence (s.w. Ecc. 3:19). If he had accepted the Gospel of the future Kingdom of God, he would have focused more upon salvation by grace through faith, and less upon the supremacy of hard work and profit / preeminence in this life.

I suggested on :17,18 that this is a recapitulation of how Solomon had previously understood things when he still held to God's truth. So despite the wrong things he says at times in Ecclesiastes, I believe these descriptions of the death state are true; and they corroborate other Bible passages which teach the same. For indeed there is no immortal soul nor conscious survival of death. The spirit which animates people is that possessed by animals.

The repeated stress that "all is vanity" is never met by a corresponding assurance that all will be resolved in God's King-

dom. Because the author has no faith or Kingdom perspective. Paul makes another allusion to Ecclesiastes when he was inspired to write in Rom. 8:20,21 that "The creation was subjected to frustration (*mataiotes*, the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *hebel*, "vanity") not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God". The counterpoint to the experience of "vanity" is that the believer has Hope of the Kingdom, by grace. But even when faced with terminal illness, and in thanking God for being saved from it, Hezekiah makes no mention of the future Kingdom. And in Ecclesiastes he dwells solely upon the "vanity" of the present world.

Ecc 3:20 All go to one place. All are from the dust, and all turn to dust again-

The "all" here refers in the context to both man and animals. As noted on :19, this is summary of how Solomon had correctly understood things; indeed he is here quoting Gen. 3:19; Job 10:9; 34:15; Ps. 104:29. There is no inherent immortality in man; in the way he dies, he is as an animal. The division between the righteous and unrighteous is not at death, seeing all go to the same place; rather is it at the resurrection to judgment at the last day. This belief is necessitated by the simple fact that at death, all go to the same place; not some to heaven and some to "hell".

This is one of many allusions to the curse in Eden, whereby "to dust you shall return" (Gen. 3:19), alluding also to the Genesis 2 description of human formation from dust and spirit of God, which must return to Him. There are many allusions to the curse in Ecclesiastes, especially in the verses which speak of

man's labour being in vain and just to satisfy his appetite / need to eat. Especially Ecc. 5:17 "All his days he also eats in darkness, he is frustrated, and has sickness and wrath". "God made man upright" (Ecc. 7:29), "one sinner destroys much good." (Ecc. 9:18 cp. Rom. 5:18 "for as by one man sin entered the world... so death passed upon all men"). But Genesis 3 held out the great Hope of redemption from the curse through Messiah. But the koheleth doesn't want to factor that in. He sees death as the final impenetrable frontier, the ultimate boundary, which no man can pass beyond. Although he surely knew Gen. 3:15 as well as he knew Gen. 3:19. Unlike Abraham, he refused to rejoice at the prospect of the day of Christ. But he wallows in the curse [as so much art and human thinking does today, just endlessly lamenting that we are only human], rather than the long term blessing of Eden restored in the Kingdom. But we are intended to perceive this glaring omission- and thereby to be led out of postmodern meaninglessness, to Christ. For it is His resurrection which changes the whole narrative about wallowing in the curse. This is how Ecclesiastes leads to Christ. As Spurgeon used to say, from every town, village and hamlet of England, there is a London road that leads towards London. And so all Scripture leads to the Lord Jesus.

Ecc 3:21 Who knows the spirit of man, whether it goes upward, and the spirit of the animal, whether it goes downward to the earth?-

This is not saying that the spirit of man goes upward to heaven, and the spirit of animals goes downward. "Who knows..." as in :22 means 'It is not the case that...'. The wrong idea is being deconstructed- there is no such distinction; for Solomon has just stated in :20 that man and animals all go to

the same place. There is no reincarnation, but death is simply a return to the dust and the life force is retracted by God.

Ecc 3:22 Therefore I saw that there is nothing better, than that a man should rejoice in his works; for that is his portion: for who can bring him to see what will be after him?-

It may be that the whole of this chapter could be a description of how he once thought; he once said in his heart that there would be a future judgment of all things by God (:17). But the contradictions he now sees in the idea of a Divine judgment leads him up to this final conclusion in :22, that because "God" cannot resurrect man to judgment, therefore man may as well get on and enjoy life in a moderate kind of way. "Who can..." as in :21 means 'It is not the case that...'. Elsewhere Solomon effectively denies any idea of future judgment by God, and so I am inclined to view this chapter as a description of what he once believed, which by the end of the chapter we see he has now jettisoned.

The question "who can bring [a man] to see what will be after him?" is answerable- God, through the Lord Jesus. But Messiah was not in Hezekiah's worldview. And so he is left in the misery of having only this life. Likewise the refrain "There is nothing better" begs the question: 'Is there really nothing better?'. And there is a far better thing- resurrection to eternal life in God's Kingdom: "There is *nothing better* for a man than that he should eat and drink, and make his soul enjoy good in his labour (Ecc. 2:24)... I know that there is *nothing better* for them than to rejoice, and to do good as long as they live (Ecc. 3:12)... Therefore I saw that there is *nothing better*, than that a man should rejoice in his works; for that is his portion: for who can bring him to see what will be after him?" (Ecc. 3:22)...

I commended mirth, because a man has *no better thing* under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be joyful" (Ecc. 8:15). Surely Heb. 11:40 has all this in mind: "God having provided *some better thing* for us..." at the resurrection. And "better" is a big theme: "Better things... a better hope... a better possession and an enduring one... a better country" (Heb. 6:9; 7:19; 10:34; 11:16).

ECCLESIASTES CHAPTER 4

Ecc 4:1 Then I returned and saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun: and behold, the tears of those who were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power; but they had no comforter-

“Surely oppression maketh a wise man foolish” (Ecc. 7:7 RV), he commented at the end of his life- even though *right then* he was chastising the people with whips, oppressing them (1 Kings 12:11). 1 Kings 5:13-16 reveals that Solomon had 153,000 full time and 90,000 part time male servants. Israel's complaint that Solomon had whipped them implies that he treated them like slaves, with himself as the slave-driver. 600,000 adults came out of Egypt (Ex.12:37), and assuming the population only rose slightly over the next 550 years, we have the picture of an Israel where almost half the males (i.e. probably the majority of the working population) were press-ganged into slavery to a despotic King Solomon.

He knew the true wisdom, he saw his reflection so accurately in the mirror, but resigned from its personal implications. He could even write that “I returned and considered all the oppression that are done under the sun [by himself!]: and behold the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power [Solomon was king and had set up the tax system in a clever and biased way]; but they had no comforter” (Ecc. 4:1; 5:8). It was a real case of spiritual schizophrenia- he sorrowed for the people he oppressed. He even seems to say that there is nothing to be surprised at in the poor being oppressed, because

the whole hierarchy of officialdom above them do the same (Ecc. 5:2). He saw his sin as inevitable, as part of his participation in humanity- he didn't own up to his own desperate need for grace. Yet he also knew that "man lords it over man [cp. Solomon's oppression of the people] to his own hurt" (Ecc. 8:9 RSV). But still he did so.

"Oppression" in Ecc. 4 is the same word used by Hezekiah about his suffering and illness (Is. 38:19 "I am oppressed"). If the verses in Ecc. 4:1-4 are relevant to Hezekiah, then it is as if he is regretting having been given 15 years extra to live. He concludes life is meaningless, despite having been given 15 years extra. Ecclesiastes stresses that death is inevitable- and who more than Hezekiah during his last 15 years to appreciate that? He thinks that death is preferable to life (Ecc. 6:3; 7:1). Because he saw no point in life as he saw the inevitable end approaching, at the end of the 15 years. Ecclesiastes has an obsession with death- and that fits Hezekiah perfectly.

Ecc 4:2 Therefore I praised the dead who have been long dead more than the living who are yet alive-

For all his wealth, power and the ability to enjoy it, Solomon sees life and existence as a bad thing. And this is the final end of those who live life for themselves and not for God. I noted on Ecc. 2:17,18 that Solomon "hated life" just as he hated his own works; because he was a human doing rather than a human being.

Ecc 4:3 Yes, better than them both is him who has not yet been, who has not seen the evil work that is done under the sun-

I suggested on :2 that Solomon included himself in this bitter regret of life and existence. Life is God's great gift; but Solomon despises it. What he says here is really blasphemous.

Because he sees no possibility of eternity (see on Ecc. 3:11), he therefore considers existence futile. If he had believed as David his father had, then the perspective of the Kingdom would have changed his entire outlook.

Ecc 4:4 Then I saw all the labour and achievement that is the envy of a man's neighbour. This also is vanity and a striving after wind-

Solomon has much to say about the evil of envy (e.g. Prov. 14:30; 23:17; 24:1,19; 27:4). And indeed, envy is so bitter that one may as well not labour or achieve more than our neighbour, because the resultant envy makes all our apparent success but vanity. But true as his condemnations of envy are, he surely has in mind the way that Ephraim envied Judah, and envied his throne (s.w. Is. 11:13). This all came to full term after his death, when Ephraim departed from Judah under Jeroboam. Again, Solomon is harnessing Divine truth to his own agenda of self justification. And we who claim to hold His truths must take warning. But as he faced death, he came to realize that all such envy is as nothing before the reality of death, which he understood as the end of life, as he had assumed this life was the time for reward and expresses no personal hope in a resurrection of the body (Ecc. 4:4; 9:6).

Ecc 4:5 The fool folds his hands together and ruins himself-

LXX "and eats his own flesh". This caricature continues the kind of mockery of the poor as being lazy and foolish which Solomon indulges in throughout Proverbs. He never totally quits his works based attitude, and justification of his own native personality type as a hard worker.

Ecc 4:6 Better is a handful, with quietness, than two handfuls with labour and chasing after wind-

LXX "waywardness of spirit". This continues Solomon's theme of :4 that excessive labour isn't worth the grief. Whilst absolute laziness is wrong (:5), Solomon urges a quiet life, with moderate effort, with quietness and ability to enjoy what you have as the important thing. This all reflects his nihilism and refusal to lift his spiritual horizons higher. The idea of working with God and for His glory was quite out of his mind.

Ecc 4:7 Then I returned and saw vanity under the sun-

"Returned" is the standard word used for changing the mind. I suggested on Ecc. 3:17,18 that Solomon is now changing his mind in his old age, rejecting the Divine truths he earlier held, in accordance with how we read that his heart turned away from Yahweh and to idols (1 Kings 11:3).

Ecc 4:8 There is one who is alone, and he has neither son nor brother. There is no end to all of his labour, neither are his eyes satisfied with wealth. For whom then, do I labour, and deprive my soul of enjoyment? This also is vanity. Yes, it is a miserable business-

The Lord surely built His parable of the lonely, rich fool on this. His punchline was "And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" (Lk. 12:19-20), alluding to "For whom then do I labour?". But the Lord's parable was not just wallowing in the folly of hard work when you can't long enjoy it. It connects with His teaching that correct use of wealth [giving it away] results in "treasure in heaven", a reward to be given to us when the Lord returns in judgment (Mt. 6:19; Mk. 10:21).

The Lord appears to have this character in mind when He frames the parable of the rich fool. And yet Solomon has himself in view. He laboured for yet more wealth, when God had given him huge wealth. And he sees his problem; his eyes could

never be satisfied. And indeed, the Millionaire always wants another million... Solomon had lost his brothers, whom he saw as competitors to the throne and had constantly criticized in the Proverbs. And he had no son he appeared confident of as his successor. Solomon really sounds like the spoilt child he was. He complains that his soul was 'deprived of enjoyment' because he had wanted too much wealth.

The lack of "satisfaction" is a major theme in the descriptions of condemnation for those who break the covenant (s.w. Lev. 26:26). And it is the principle we must live by today; that the only satisfaction is in the things of God's Kingdom. Even in this life, the eye is not "satisfied" with seeing or wealth (s.w. Prov. 27:20; Ecc. 1:8; 4:8; 5:10). And those who seek such satisfaction from those things will find that dissatisfaction is the lead characteristic of their condemnation (Ps. 59:15). Tragically Solomon knew the truth of all this but lived otherwise; just as so many do who give lip service to the idea that the things of the flesh cannot satisfy.

Solomon later concludes that despite having every material blessing, a man can still not be satisfied (s.w. Ecc. 4:8; 6:3). But in Proverbs he thinks that the righteous *do* satisfy their souls in this life (Prov. 13:25). But he thought that this would be experienced in this life, rather than in any future Kingdom of God on earth. As he got closer to death, he realized that he had not satisfied his soul despite all his wealth. And so he concluded that righteousness was vain, and turned away from Yahweh. This is what happens when we lose the perspective of the future Kingdom of God.

It is possible to see Solomon as an anti-Christ, as well as a type of Christ; like Saul, he was both a type of Christ, and

also the very opposite of the true Christ. This point is really brought out in Is. 53:11, where the true Messiah is described as being “satisfied” with the travail or labour of his soul, and will thereby bring forth many children. The Hebrew words used occur in close proximity in several passages in Ecclesiastes, where Solomon speaks of how all his “travail” or “labour” has not “satisfied” him, and that it is all the more vain because his children may well not appreciate his labour and will likely squander it (Ecc. 1:8; 4:8; 5:10; 6:3). Likewise the ‘Babylon’ system of Revelation, replete with its feature of 666, is described in terms which unmistakably apply to Solomon’s Kingdom. This feature of Solomon- being both a type of Christ and yet also the very opposite of the true Christ- reflects the tragic duality which we will observe at such length in our later studies.

In Ecc. 2:18,19 he laments that his labours will achieve nothing; doubtless alluding back to his words in Prov. 5:10, where he says that the Gentile wife will make the young Israelite’s labours meaningless. Sin never satisfies. “Hell and destruction are never satisfied, and the eyes of man are never satisfied” (Prov. 27:20 RV), Solomon wrote in his youth; and then in old age, he came to basically the same conclusion, having spent his life working back to the truth that he had been taught in his youth (Ecc. 1:8; 4:8). And there are many men and women who have done the same. We all tend to be empirical learners; and yet this is the great power of God’s word, that through it we need not have to learn everything through our failures; but we can receive His Truth, trust it, and simply live by it. Otherwise we shall be like Solomon...

Ecc 4:9 Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labour-

Despite having 1000 wives and every relationship he fancied, Solomon complains in :8 of the existential loneliness which faced him. He wishes for just one good friend, and surely he has in view the Genesis language of one man and one woman, two people, being joined as one by God. He hankers too late for just one wife. But instead of repenting for his unbridled lust and moving forward in God's grace, he just hankers for what he cannot now have. The good reward for the labour of the two people would refer to children which the two of them have raised (Ps. 127:3).

Koheleth often alludes to early Genesis, and here we have another example- to Gen. 2:18, "It is not good that the man should be alone", and the "labour" refers to the curse of how man would labour with sweat until he returns to dust. But he considers this as an example of "vanity under the sun" (:7). Whatever blessings there are in life, even ones from God, and no matter how Divine wisdom might make life more enduring, all is dwarfed beneath the shadow of death as the ultimate, final end. Paul really does have koheleth in mind when he writes that we are most miserable, if in this life only we have hope in Christ with no perspective of resurrection.

Ecc 4:10 For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow; but woe to him who is alone when he falls, and doesn't have another to lift him up-

Solomon felt alone in his wealth (:8), and seems to accept he has fallen in some sense. Perhaps he means spiritually; and he complains he has nobody to help him up. He had married hundreds of Gentile women, despite the warning that they would turn away his heart. And yet instead of repenting and asking for God to "lift him up", as David asked (s.w. Ps. 41:10;

113:7), he just continues complaining that he has nobody to lift him up.

Ecc 4:11 Again, if two lie together, then they have warmth; but how can one keep warm alone?-

Solomon's whining that he didn't have a single wife, as a result of his polygamy, is now starting to sound pathetic and irritating. Poor Solomon is cold because he has no wife to lie next to him. He has become bitter with them all, and is unlike his father David, who in his old age was kept warm by Abishag lying with him (1 Kings 1:1-4). But Solomon seems to allude to this and lament that in his old age, he didn't have anyone to do this for him.

Ecc 4:12 If a man prevails against one who is alone, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken-

Solomon still has himself in view, as the one left existentially alone because of his wealth (see on :8). And now in :13 he again has himself in view; Ecclesiastes truly is Solomon's autobiography and lament over his own old age. The sense in this verse seems to be that Solomon felt weak and alone, and had nobody supporting him. Just one other would make two of them, and even better would be just one more, making a threefold cord.

Ecc 4:13 Better is a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who doesn't know how to receive admonition any more-

Solomon has so much to say about "correction" or instruction coming from the possession of wisdom (Prov. 8:10,33; 10:17; 12:1; 13:1,24; 15:5,10,32; 16:22; 19:20,27; 22:15; 23:12,13). But in the end he chastised or corrected his people by whipping them (s.w. 1 Kings 12:11,14). Solomon initially asked for wisdom in order to guide his people, but he ended up

whipping / physically chastising them into conformity with his wishes rather than allowing wisdom to correct. Again, he was playing God; for it is God through His wisdom who chastises, and not man. But Solomon thought he was effectively God to his people. This is why Solomon argues that servants cannot be corrected by words (Prov. 29:19 s.w.), and a child must be physically chastised (s.w. Prov. 19:18; 29:17 cp. Prov. 13:24; 23:13), regardless of his screams of pain. This kind of thing is a denial of his claims elsewhere that it is Divine wisdom which chastises / corrects, and such correction is from God and not man. Solomon's final description of himself as an old and foolish king who refuses to be admonished says it all (Ecc. 4:13); he admonishes others (s.w. Ecc. 12:12), but refuses to be admonished or corrected by his own wisdom. He failed to personalize it.

Ecclesiastes is in many ways Solomon's self-examination; and it was accurate. He indicates that the temple had actually made him stumble, and that his numerous sacrifices had been the sacrifices of a fool, rather than the wise man he had appeared to be (Ecc. 5:1); and surely he was casting a sideways glance at himself when he spoke of the wise child (cp. Solomon initially, 1 Kings 3:7) being greater than the old and foolish king who would no longer be admonished (Ecc. 4:13; even though Solomon had advisers, 1 Kings 12:6). Yet he chose to do absolutely nothing about this; once again, his accurate spiritual knowledge had no real practical influence upon him. For he had urged in Prov. 15:22 the need to take admonishment from others.

Ecc 4:14 For out of prison he came forth to be king; yes, even in his kingdom he was born poor-

He writes here of catastrophe overtaking the obstinate old king who will learn nothing. Revolution sweeps him away and brings to the throne a young claimant who has been kept in prison (cp. Jeroboam in Egypt). In spite of his rank the new monarch has grown up in relative poverty; and in the end, "all the living", the people of the land, at first serve with the first king but later forget him. This was Solomon's fear, his fantasy... so piercingly accurate in his self-understanding.

LXX "because he also that was in his kingdom has become poor" implies that the new king would arise because of the poverty of the people in the kingdom. Ordinary people in Solomon's later reign were enslaved to him and beaten by him (1 Kings 12:11). Solomon so precisely understands the situation in his own kingdom, and how therefore a new king will arise. This is a feature of Ecclesiastes; Solomon so well understands his position, but refuses to do anything about it. Again we see that understanding of "truth" alone will not save, but rather drive into depression and nihilism unless it is personalized and believed. And this is seen in so many in Protestant groups devoted to 'finding Bible truth'.

Ecc 4:15 I saw all the living who walk under the sun, that they were with the youth, the other, who succeeded him-

Solomon's premonitions about the successful revolt of Jeroboam were correct, but he exaggerates them hugely into almost apocalyptic scales, with "all the living under the sun" following this "youth". He was only young compared to Solomon. Solomon had never entertained much hope of the future Messianic kingdom promised to David, seeing his kingdom as that promised Kingdom of God. And the result was that he starts to have deeply irrational fears about the future of his own king-

dom. These fears and even accurate imaginations reflect his lack of faith in the Kingdom of God.

Ecc 4:16 There was no end of all the people, even of all them over whom he was- yet those who come after shall not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and a chasing after wind-

To rejoice in a person was to politically follow or support them (Is. 8:6). Solomon sees the new king as having apparently endless support from people, and yet this too would fade away-as all things do. Again, Solomon's premonitions were so accurate.

Hezekiah had traded 15 years of personal peace for his descendants being eunuchs in captivity, and his people going into exile in Babylon. He knew full well that those who came after him would not rejoice in him. But he considered death to be so final that even that was but vanity. And seeking to have a good name after death was also a mere chasing after wind. We see here how totally limited were his horizons, bounded by his belief that death was the final limit and boundary to human existence. The tragedy is that he need not have seen life like that.

ECCLESIASTES CHAPTER 5

Ecc 5:1 Guard your steps when you go to God's house; for to draw near to listen is better than to give the sacrifice of fools, for they don't know that they do evil-

The following verses are badly translated; the translators seem to want to give the impression that koheleth was a righteous man giving good advice about worshipping God. I suggest rather that here we have cynicism about worship. Ecclesiastes is in many ways Solomon's self-examination; and it was accurate. He indicates here that the temple had actually made him stumble [he therefore warns others not to stumble when they go into God's house], and that his numerous sacrifices had been the sacrifices of a fool, rather than the wise man he had appeared to be. The same phrase 'going into God's house' is used of Hezekiah going into the temple with the Assyrian letter. Both Solomon and Hezekiah are recorded as having offered huge numbers of sacrifices; but now he realizes that he would have done better to personally listen to Divine instruction than offer them all as a fool. He should have 'drawn near', an idiom for offering sacrifice, with an obedient and open ear rather than with thousands of animals. He analyzes so clearly where he had gone wrong, he sees it all; but does nothing about it, refusing to personalize the truths he perceived. Surely he was casting a sideways glance at himself when he spoke of the wise child (cp. Solomon initially, 1 Kings 3:7) being greater than the old and foolish king who would no longer be admonished (Ecc. 4:13; even though Solomon had advisers, 1 Kings 12:6). Yet he chose to do absolutely nothing about this; once again, his ac-

curate spiritual knowledge had no real practical influence upon him. 'Guarding the steps' could be an allusion to the practice of removing footwear when entering a holy place; although this seems an irrelevant exhortation. So I suggest it is parallel with 'drawing near' in offering sacrifice. And Solomon is saying that the use of the temple for huge scarifies, as he had done at its dedication, was not the right thing; rather would be it be better to be obedient. But Solomon wasn't obedient, so we conclude again that he has penetrating insight into his own failures and weaknesses, but refused to personalize and act upon that insight. This is a human feature so true to observed reality in spiritual life. This chapter appears to be Solomon's critique of the temple cult he had started.

It's possible to read :1,2 as Hezekiah / Solomon warning men not to as it were mess with God, because He doesn't suffer fools gladly. Better to be very cautious with Him, lest you get into trouble. Recognize He exists but don't make any vows, don't get too close, because He's likely to then judge you. Keep Him at arm's length; exactly the view of postmodernism today, who cannot bring themselves to profess atheism but at least self classify as agnostics. Such a tragically far cry from Hezekiah's pleading with God to give him some more life, and then being so humbly grateful when God responded. This idea of keeping God at a distance is perhaps why the author uses *elohim* and not the Yahweh Name when talking about God. He is not in covenant relationship with Yahweh.

Ecc 5:2 Don't be rash with your mouth, and don't let your heart be hasty to utter anything before God-

As :1 is Solomon's self criticism regarding the temple, I suggest that this talk about the danger of vows is also Solomon

looking back at himself. Indeed I am seeking to demonstrate in this commentary that all of Ecclesiastes is Solomon's autobiography and reflections about himself. Hasty oaths might be a sideways stab back at Saul, who enforced such a hasty oath about not eating honey. Solomon throughout Proverbs is always alluding to the individuals who had stood against David his father, and that bitterness and perceived need to knock down potential opposition remained with him all his days. For he is now writing this in his old age. But the oath in view is I suggest that of David regarding the building of the temple, which Solomon fulfilled (Ps. 132:2). This allows us to interpret these verses in context. The criticism of the temple in :1 leads on to this criticism of oath taking in :2. The context is then seamless; whereas other interpretations tend to make these verses out of context with each other.

In the Hezekiah context, this may be Hezekiah regretting his oath to God after his healing, to just walk quietly all his days singing praise to Yahweh in the temple.

For God is in heaven, and you on earth-

Descriptions of God's dwelling place clearly indicate that He has a personal location: "God is in heaven" (Ecc. 5:2); "For He looked down from the height of His sanctuary; From heaven the LORD viewed the earth" (Ps. 102:19); "Hear in heaven your dwelling place" (1 Kings 8:39). Yet more specifically than this, we read that God has a "throne" (2 Chron. 9:8; Ps. 11:4; Is. 6:1; 66:1). Such language is hard to apply to an undefined essence which exists somewhere in heavenly realms. God is spoken of as "coming down" when He manifests Himself. This suggests a heavenly location of God. It is impossible to understand

the idea of 'God manifestation' without appreciating the personal nature of God.

But I suggest that Solomon is again talking about God tongue in cheek, with some level of sarcasm; for he was writing this when his heart had turned away from God (1 Kings 11:3). I suggest we are reading here Solomon's regret that David had taken the oath about building the temple, because he is now rejecting the temple cult. He built "houses" of worship for the gods of his wives, and worshipped them instead of Yahweh (1 Kings 11:4-8), worshipping in those temples rather than in Yahweh's temple. So we can understand his reflections in Ecc. 5 as meaning that he was regretting David had vowed to build the temple, leaving him to fulfil it; and his references to Yahweh dwelling in the temple are therefore to be read as sarcastic.

Therefore let your words be few-

The context is of oaths, so the idea is, keep the words you say before God very few. The idea is, 'don't make oaths'. Not few in the sense that we don't pray for very long, but few in terms of their simplicity and directness. The Lord warned us against the complicated prayer forms of the Pharisees; and asked us to *mean* our words of 'yes' and 'no' rather than use more sophisticated assurances.

Ecc 5:3 For as a dream comes with a multitude of cares, so a fool's speech with a multitude of words-

I have argued throughout that Ecclesiastes is Solomon's self reflection, a kind of autobiography. It is also a rejection and renunciation of his faith, because he wrote it at the end of his life, when his heart had been turned aside from God (1 Kings 11:3). If we enquire what reference a "dream" may have

to Solomon's historical life, we naturally think of the dream at the start of his life when he was offered whatever he wanted, and he chose wisdom (1 Kings 3:5). Several times in Ecclesiastes he appears to regret that choice, as he considers there to be no ultimate advantage to wisdom or going God's way because death ends it all, and God, Solomon thinks, cannot resurrect the dead to judgment (Ecc. 3:22). And so in Ecc. 5:3 Solomon seems to be saying that that dream was simply self-induced, an outcome of his "multitude of cares", and the "multitude of words" of wisdom he had written in response to it was but "a fool's speech". Like many who have had the direct involvement of God in their lives in youth, he came to rationalize it as nothing at all Divine, considering his dream had just been some Freudian reflection of his own internal "cares". And this kind of rationalizing of the Divine over time is absolutely true to observed experience in those who turn away from God.

Ecc 5:4 When you vow a vow to God, don't defer to pay it; for He has no pleasure in fools. Pay that which you vow-

As noted on :2, Solomon's writings (especially in Proverbs) are full of allusion to historical incidents which condemn the enemies of the line of David, or justify David. He may have in view David's vow to build the temple (Ps. 132:2), which God in fact made to be deferred until Solomon fulfilled it. Even in old age, Solomon was still bent on justifying his father David and fighting the battles of yesterday, as so many. I suggested on :1-3 that Solomon is here rejecting the temple cult, but he justifies his building of the temple on the grounds that David had made a vow to God about it, and so Solomon had had no option but to fulfil it.

Ecc 5:5 It is better that you should not vow, than that you should vow and not pay-

This continues Solomon's criticism of his father's vow to build the temple, and is justifying his building of it. He had to make such a statement, because as noted on :2, Solomon built "houses" of worship for the gods of his wives, and worshipped them instead of Yahweh (1 Kings 11:4-8), worshipping in those temples rather than in Yahweh's temple. So here in his old age, having made that change, he is justifying why he had built a temple for Yahweh in the first place, although he had at this point ceased using it himself.

Ecc 5:6 Don't allow your mouth to lead you into sin. Don't protest before the messenger that this was a mistake. Why should God be angry at your voice, and destroy the work of your hands?-

The "messenger" is the word for "angel", but is used of the priests before whom David had apparently taken the vow to build the temple in Ps. 132:2. Solomon implies that the entire plan of building a temple for Yahweh "was a mistake", but David, and he too at the time, had feared God's wrath if he didn't fulfil the vow. He is justifying how he had forsaken Yahweh's temple for the temples he had built nearby for the gods of his wives. He is saying that the temple of Yahweh had been a "sin" and "mistake", but he is justifying in his autobiography why he had built it. Likewise as explained on Ecc. 8:16 he again laments his wasting time and effort building Yahweh's temple. He uses the same word in Ecc. 10:5 to describe his own "mistake" or "error" as the ruler.

However there was in Judaism the idea that a specific Angel dwelt in the temple and oversaw it, and that is not without Biblical support. The idea was that the presence of Yahweh in

the temple was through an Angel, which in Ezekiel's time departed from the temple. Hezekiah had had dealings with this one Angel before, when it went out and slew the 185,000 Assyrian soldiers about to take Jerusalem and slay Hezekiah. But now he reasons that it's best to keep at arm's length from the Angel and not provoke him, as he was prone to lash out against God's people for the slightest legal infringement of the Mosaic law. How tragic.

Koheleth's concern was that the work of a man's hands would be destroyed by God because of some minor infringement of Divine law. He was trying to avoid this, to hide from God. Whereas the response of Isaiah was that God's people who engaged with Him would "long enjoy [eternally] the work of their hands" (Is. 65:22).

Ecc 5:7 For in the multitude of dreams there are vanities, as well as in many words: but you must fear God-

The criticism of "many words" in Ecc. 5:7 and 6:11 seems a reference to his own writing down of the wisdom God had given him, codifying it into books such as the compilation we have in the book of Proverbs (Ecc. 12:10,12). He associates the "many words" with "dreams", perhaps an intensive plural for "a great dream". It was as a result of the dream of 1 Kings 3:5 that he was given the "many words" of wisdom which he now considered unhelpful and irrelevant because death meant that there was no particular ultimate advantage of wisdom over folly; wisdom was at best profitable in this life in some short term sense. And he therefore associates "many words" with folly (Ecc. 10:14). He considers he had been foolish by preaching and believing those many words of Divine wisdom. Now, for him, the true wisdom was in idolatry and not Yahweh worship

in His temple. For he had forsaken worshipping at Yahweh's temple and instead worshipped in the idol temples he had built nearby (1 Kings 11:4-8). So "But you must fear God!" can be read as sarcasm, seeing he had forsaken God.

The idea is, Don't listen to your dreams but rather fear God, be frightened of Him, in the sense of the preceding verse- be fearful of Him, because He can lash out and destroy you for the slightest infringement, seeing He doesn't suffer fools gladly. All this is quite a different God to how we see Him acting in the Bible, and in our own lives. God does suffer fools like us. This could be Solomon now doubting whether his dream at Gibeon, and the subsequent gift of wisdom, was in fact valid or merely a random dream. It could also be Hezekiah considering that his relationship with God through the visions of Isaiah was all no more than confused dreaming and not reality.

Ecc 5:8 If you see the oppression of the poor, and the violent taking away of justice and righteousness in a district, don't marvel at the matter: for one official is eyed by a higher one; and there are officials over them-

The "oppression" in view was that by Solomon. "Surely oppression maketh a wise man foolish" (Ecc. 7:7 RV), he commented at the end of his life- even though *right then* he was chastising the people with whips, oppressing them (1 Kings 12:11). He came to whip his people (1 Kings 12:14), treating them as he thought fools should be treated (Prov.26:3)- suggesting that he came to see himself as the only wise man, the only one truly in touch with reality, and therefore despising everyone else. 1 Kings 5:13-16 reveals that Solomon had 153,000 full time and 90,000 part time male servants. Israel's complaint that Solomon had whipped them implies that he

treated them like slaves, with himself as the slave-driver. 600,000 adults came out of Egypt (Ex.12:37), and assuming the population only rose slightly over the next 550 years, we have the picture of an Israel where almost half the males (i.e. probably the majority of the working population) were press-ganged into slavery to a despotic King Solomon.

Solomon seems to be saying that if anyone complained about his slave drivers, they were to remember that there was a hierarchy of control above them which ended in one man-himself. He is playing God here, as do all who abuse others, appropriating Divine language to himself.

He knew the true wisdom, he saw his reflection so accurately in the mirror, but resigned from its personal implications. He could even write that "I returned and considered all the oppression that are done under the sun [by himself!]: and behold the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power [Solomon was king and had set up the tax system in a clever and biased way]; but they had no comforter" (Ecc. 4:1; 5:8). It was a real case of spiritual schizophrenia- he sorrowed for the people he oppressed. He even seems to say that there is nothing to be surprised at in the poor being oppressed, because the whole hierarchy of officialdom above them do the same (Ecc. 5:2). He saw his sin as inevitable, as part of his participation in humanity- he didn't own up to his own desperate need for grace. Yet he also knew that "man lords it over man [cp. Solomon's oppression of the people] to his own hurt" (Ecc. 8:9 RSV).

These abuses are similar to those Isaiah accused Hezekiah's Judah of, in Is. 1-35. But despite that, by grace God saved them

from Assyria. As the Rabbis interpret it [Rashi]: "If you see that they oppress the poor and deprive [them of] justice, and you see charity coming toward the city, [i.e.] that the Holy One, Blessed Is He, lavishes goodness upon them and does not mete out retribution upon them, do not wonder about the will of the Omnipresent, for so is His custom, to be slow to anger". Isaiah's response is that oppression is not inevitable and is a sin (Is. 59:13), the oppressed were to be set free (Is. 58:7) and Israel's Hope was to be free from oppression, "it shall not come near you" (Is. 54:14) in the Kingdom. The same Hebrew word is used.

This is relevant to Hezekiah because their leaders judged for bribes at his time (Mic. 3:11). He has no concept of future judgment, and laments that in this life there is no justice in courts, as he does also in Ecc. 3:16. Here he sees the whole pyramid of the justice system as being corrupt right through. Hence the inspired editor concludes the book with the good news that there is in fact judgment to come for absolutely everything (Ecc. 12:14). Without the perspective of Divine judgment at the end, present injustice weighs heavily upon the human soul, as we see in today's society. But when people say they are "glad that justice was done", there are left multiple unanswered issues, and their 'gladness' is in fact only cosmetic. Because for justice to be fully done requires the Divine hand.

"Don't marvel at the matter [of abuse]" is another example of Hezekiah arguing that sin is inevitable and should not be much of a shock to people. He is saying that if you see corruption at a lower level, don't be surprised, because the entire hierarchy of human society is corrupt- and you can do nothing about it. This is very different to Isaiah's perspective, which is

to call for urgent repentance from such corruption rather than just accepting such a status quo, on the basis that sin is inevitable.

Ecc 5:9 Moreover the profit of the earth is for all. The king profits from the field-

"But the advantage of a country consists always in a king given to the arable land". This could be Solomon's self justification for his interest in agriculture which he spoke of in Ecc. 2.

He said that a King "who maketh himself servant to the cultivated field" brings profit to the land (Ecc. 5:9 RVmg.)- as if he was justifying his zealous commitment to agriculture and considering the people of God to be so blessed by his presence amongst them. The mere possession of wisdom, of intellectual truth, can so easily lead us to this kind of empty self-congratulation. It was really Solomon's self-justification.

"Even the wild land when cultivated has a king" (Ecc. 5:9, Lukyn Williams' translation) seems to be justifying the bringing of newly cultivated land under Solomon's immediate taxation; Solomon is merely describing a state of misrule by him without drawing any conclusions (so L.G. Sargent concludes, *Ecclesiastes* p. 49). He analyzes his sins so well, as do many imprisoned criminals. But still without repentance. And yet we each have the potential for this schizophrenia within us; we are, as Paul so strikingly describes, two different people within us, fighting for mastery of the soul (Rom. 7).

Ecc 5:10 He who loves silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he who loves abundance, with increase: this also is vanity-

This is yet another piece of self-realization which doesn't seem to have resulted in motivating Solomon to grab hold on his inner being and shake himself. The lack of "satisfaction" is a major theme in the descriptions of condemnation for those who break the covenant (s.w. Lev. 26:26). And it is the principle we must live by today; that the only satisfaction is in the things of God's Kingdom. Even in this life, the eye is not "satisfied" with seeing or wealth (s.w. Prov. 27:20; Ecc. 1:8; 4:8; 5:10). And those who seek such satisfaction from those things will find that dissatisfaction is the lead characteristic of their condemnation (Ps. 59:15). Tragically Solomon knew the truth of all this but lived otherwise; just as so many do who give lip service to the idea that the things of the flesh cannot satisfy.

It is possible to see Solomon as an anti-Christ, as well as a type of Christ; like Saul, he was both a type of Christ, and also the very opposite of the true Christ. This point is really brought out in Is. 53:11, where the true Messiah is described as being "satisfied" with the travail or labour of his soul, and will thereby bring forth many children. The Hebrew words used occur in close proximity in several passages in Ecclesiastes, where Solomon speaks of how all his "travail" or "labour" has not "satisfied" him, and that it is all the more vain because his children may well not appreciate his labour and will likely squander it (Ecc. 1:8; 4:8; 5:10; 6:3). Likewise the 'Babylon' system of Revelation, replete with its feature of 666, is described in terms which unmistakably apply to Solomon's Kingdom. This feature of Solomon- being both a type of Christ and yet also the very opposite of the true Christ- reflects the tragic duality which we will observe at such length in our later studies.

That man is not "satisfied" is a major theme with koheleth (Ecc. 1:8; 4:8; 5:10; 6:3). But Isaiah's response is that it is the sinner who is not satisfied (Is. 9:20), and it is Messiah who will be satisfied by the labour / travail of His soul (Is. 53:11), as will be the righteous who are saved by Him during the Kingdom (Is. 58:11; 66:11 "the Lord will guide you continually and satisfy your soul").

5:11 When goods increase, those who eat them are increased; and what advantage is there to its owner, except to feast on them with his eyes?-

"He that loveth silver (as Solomon did, Ecc. 2:8; 1 Kings 10:21-29) shall not be satisfied with silver (as he wasn't- see Ecc. 2); nor he that loveth abundance (s.w. used about the abundance of Solomon's wives, 2 Chron. 11:23) with increase. When goods increase, they are increased that eat them (cp. the large numbers at his table, 1 Kings 4:27)" (Ecc. 5:10,11). The Hebrew word translated "not be satisfied" occurs around 25 times in the Proverbs, with Solomon warning of how the way of the flesh couldn't satisfy. Solomon said all this with an eye on himself. He laments how when wealth is increased, "they are increased that eat them" (Ecc. 5:11 AV)- and yet he prided himself on how many people sat at his table eating his food, how many courtiers he had... He preached it to others, he felt deeply the truth of it, but he saw no personal way out of it. All he had was the accurate knowledge of his situation, but no real motivation to change- like the alcoholic or drug abuser who knows every aspect of the harm of his habit.

This sounds similar to the descriptions of Hezekiah's abundance of wealth after the Assyrian defeat.

Ecc 5:12 The sleep of a labouring man is sweet, whether he eats little or much; but the abundance of the rich will not allow him to sleep-

This references Solomon's own insomnia, a characteristic which surfaces again in his description of his own old age in Ecc. 12:4. He complains at the effect of his own wealth and avarice. If he had accepted that his wealth was a gift from God by grace, in response to his choice of wisdom, then he would not have had all this regret about being wealthy.

Ecc 5:13 There is a grievous evil which I have seen under the sun: wealth kept by its owner to his harm-

Again Solomon has himself in view; see on :12. He felt he had been harmed by wealth, as many old wealthy people do as they look back on their broken families and ruined personal lives. "Harm" is the word for "evil". Solomon feels that not being able to take wealth beyond the grave is "evil" (Ecc. 4:8; 5:13; 6:2). If Solomon had instead humbled himself to accept that his wealth was a gift from God by grace, in response to his choice of wisdom, then he would not have had all this regret about being wealthy. Perhaps the real force of all this is the word "kept". Wealth is to be used for others during our lifetimes, not "kept". Otherwise we will end up with the angst of Solomon about how that wealth will be used after us.

This is Hezekiah's reflection that his wealth would be seen by him but would be taken to Babylon and his son would therefore not enjoy it. As Isaiah had said.

The idea of the Hebrew may be that a man saved his wealth against the day of harm / evil, but that day came and took away his wealth, and he had nothing left to leave his son as an inheritance. I suggest on :15 that the allusion may be to Job.

Ecc 5:14 Those riches perish by misfortune, and if he has fathered a son, there is nothing in his hand-

Again this is true to observed reality; at the end of their lives, the wealthy often regret that they are passing on wealth to a son who is not going to use it appropriately. This was clearly Solomon's fear for Rehoboam, as witnessed several times in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. It is all an outcome of the inevitable truth expressed in :15, that we cannot personally take wealth with us beyond the grave. The hoarding of personal wealth always invites the fear as to what shall happen if misfortune takes it from us; hence GNB "and then lose it all in some bad deal and end up with nothing left to pass on to their children".

Ecc 5:15 As he came forth from his mother's womb, naked shall he go again as he came, and shall take nothing for his labour, which he may carry away in his hand-

This inability to take personal wealth beyond the grave is "evil" (:16) for Solomon. But he is raging against what is God's plan, the nature of things instituted by God in order to drive us to Him, and generosity towards Him in this life in the perspective of eternal life and service in His future Kingdom. That is the only perspective which makes any sense and enables us to live with wealth without it being a cause of endless angst to us. Solomon appears to be almost quoting Job's conclusion in Job 1:21; but Job goes on to say that because of this feature of the human condition, entering and exiting life naked, "blessed be the name of Yahweh". But Solomon had turned away from Yahweh and so is left with nothing but pain as he comes to this realization. And idolatry gave him no satisfactory explanation for

it either. This verse is quoted in 1 Tim. 6:7, and the surrounding context of 1 Tim. 6:5-10 is an exhortation not to be like Solomon at this point. Solomon is consistently read in a negative light in the New Testament, and never as an example of repentance or faith.

The wish to be a miscarried foetus in Ecc. 6:3 is exactly the feeling of Job (Job 3:16). Already Job 1:21 "Naked I came out of my mother's womb and naked I shall return" has been alluded to here in Ecc. 5:15. But Job had sure hope of resurrection, whereas koheleth would not be led by his feelings to that conclusion and hope. Just as he alludes to the curse in Eden but not the promise of hope made in Eden, so he dwells upon the depressive phases of Job and not the hope Job expresses.

Is. 49:4 dismisses the argument that labour is in vain: "But I thought, 'I have worked in vain; I have expended my energy for absolutely nothing. But the LORD will vindicate me; my God will reward me'. Likewise Is. 55:2 "Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? and your labour for that which satisfieth not? hearken diligently unto me, and eat ye that which is good, and let your soul delight itself in fatness". God's word and its promised fulfilment is the answer to man's vain existence: "The promise that I make does not return to me, having accomplished nothing ['in vain']. No, it is realized as I desire and is fulfilled as I intend" (Is. 55:11). Labour will not be in vain in the Kingdom, nor will man labour for others or just to keep himself alive: "My chosen will long enjoy the work of their hands. They will not labor in vain nor give birth for calamity; for they are the offspring of Yahweh's blessed and their descendants with them" (Is. 65:22,23).

Isaiah also seems to dialogue back with the claims that a man comes from the womb, clueless as to what went on there (Ecc. 11:5), and then dies and shall be forgotten. He several times states that it is Yahweh who formed His people in the womb, and because He is eternal, He will eternally have a parental bond and concern for them and will lead them through to life eternal, just as He brought them to physical life from the womb (Is. 44:2,24; 46:3; 49:1,5,15).

Ecc 5:16 This also is a grievous evil, that in all points as he came, so shall he go. And what profit does he have who labours for the wind?-

See on :15. The language here is similar to that in Mal. 3:16, where Judah lament that there is no profit in obeying God. Perhaps Malachi is alluding to Solomon's attitude here as the characteristic of God's condemned, rejected people. The fact we can't take wealth with us is only a grievous evil for those like Solomon who don't understand wealth within the context of it being God's gift, to be used for Him.

"What profit...?" is a major theme in Ecclesiastes and is alluded to in 1 Cor. 15, where Paul asks "What advantage...?" is there if there is no future resurrection of the body.

Ecc 5:17 All his days he also eats in darkness, he is frustrated, and has sickness and wrath-

This again is Solomon's description of his self perception. He was frustrated and angry as he faced death and final sickness; and he feels that this is in fact how he has always been, eating his sumptuous meals in the darkness of depression. And this again is absolutely true to observed experience; the feelings of old age depression are extrapolated by the sufferer and assumed to have been how their entire lives have been, whether

or not that was the case. He comments again in Ecc. 6:4 that his whole life has begun and ended in darkness.

The reality of death meant to Solomon that any apparent sweetness to life ends because of the problem of eternal death. Solomon refuses any idea of resurrection or victory over death. The essence of the purpose and achievement of God through His Son was understood by Abraham, Job, David and many others. But Solomon steadfastly refused it. And he seems to now be kicking over the traces of his earlier glorification of his father David. For David has used the same words in glorying in that fact the darkness shines as the day to Yahweh (Ps. 139:12). Solomon uses the term here for how men live their lives in "days of darkness" but in Ecc. 11:8 he uses this term of death. He sees life as being lived in the same unconscious spirit of death; he has no conception of God's light and life breaking in to human life right now.

Koheleth sees darkness as inevitable. Man by nature lives in it and then dies in eternal darkness (Ecc. 5:17; 6:4). Isaiah's response is that God's light from Zion can burst into that darkness: "Therefore is judgment far from us, neither doth justice overtake us: we wait for light, but behold obscurity; for brightness, but we walk in darkness. We grope for the wall like the blind, and we grope as if we had no eyes: we stumble at noon-day as in the night... Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the LORD is risen upon thee. For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people: but the LORD shall arise upon thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee... the LORD shall be unto thee an everlasting light" (Is. 59:9,10; 60:1,2,19).

The allusion is to the curse in Eden, just as Ecc. 3:20 alludes "to dust you shall return" (Gen. 3:19). There are many allusions to the curse in Ecclesiastes, especially in the verses which speak of man's labour being in vain and just to satisfy his appetite / need to eat. Especially Ecc. 5:17 "All his days he also eats in darkness, he is frustrated, and has sickness and wrath". But Genesis 3 held out the great Hope of redemption from the curse through Messiah. But the koheleth doesn't want to factor that in. Although he surely knew Gen. 3:15 as well as he knew Gen. 3:19. But he wallows in the curse rather than the long term blessing of Eden restored in the Kingdom.

Micah, a prophet contemporary with Hezekiah, seems to deconstruct this by stating "When I sit in darkness, Yahweh will be a light to me" (Mic. 7:8). But for Hezekiah, he saw only the darkness. "Frustrated" is literally 'to have much sorrow'. Paul seems to allude here: "They that will be (i.e. set their hearts on being) rich, pierce themselves through with many sorrows" (1 Tim. 6:6). But he advocates another way to live, whereas Hezekiah just mopes in the curse of living a secular life. "Sickness and wrath" may refer to the anger of a man who realizes his time is coming to an end and he must die. This would fit Hezekiah very well.

In the Hezekiah context, we see how he feels he along with all men struggles with "sickness" all his days (Ecc. 5:17). And he sees as an "evil disease" the fact a foreigner, a Gentile, will consume his wealth- just as Isaiah said the Babylonians would do (Ecc. 6:2). Hezekiah had been miraculously healed of one sickness(s.w. Is. 38:9 "he had been sick, and had recovered of his sickness"), but he complains that the wealth he had chosen after it was the most evil sickness; and he now complains that his

"sickness" is with him every day. He failed to have an abiding gratitude for his healing.

Ecc 5:18 Behold, that which I have seen to be good and proper is for one to eat and to drink, and to enjoy good in all his labour, in which he labours under the sun, all the days of his life which God has given him; for this is his portion-

This reference to God as the giver of life may be sarcastic; see on :19,20. For elsewhere Solomon has argued that his conclusion that man should just enjoy his life is because God lacks the ability to resurrect and judge him (Ecc. 3:22). Seeing Solomon feels he has lived in the darkness of depression because of his wealth (:17), he commends the simple labourer who at least experiences some joy as a result of his labour.

There is here an allusion to the curse upon man in Eden (Gen. 3:17), to labour in order to eat until he dies. And the Preacher is saying that this is fair enough, what can't be avoided must be endured, and the only trick is to try to enjoy the experience whilst it lasts. He sees [rightly] that being a 'high achiever' is rendered meaningless by death. This is a studied refusal of the good news implicit in Gen. 3:15 that the seed of the woman would ultimately achieve a reversal of this curse. But the Preacher is closed minded to the work of Messiah and His future Kingdom- they are the factors which can unseat his pessimistic view.

Ecc 5:19 Every man also to whom God has given riches and wealth, and has given him power to eat of it, and to take his portion, and to rejoice in his labour- this is the gift of God-

Solomon clearly has himself in view, for he was the one to whom God gave wealth as well as the opportunity to enjoy it. He apparently recognizes this as indeed "the gift of God", but

then blames God for having given him a life which therefore had no time for self reflection, because of the joy of this life which God had given him. But even this apparent gratitude to God is nuanced by Solomon's complaint in Ecc. 6:2 that he has been given wealth, but his death stops him from ultimately enjoying it. The idea that work is a "gift of God" appears to be deconstructed in the New Testament allusions to this; for they insist that the "gift of God" is the grace of salvation without human works (Eph. 2:8; Rom. 5:15; 6:23; Jn. 4:10). This suggests that as in Ecc. 2:24,26; 3:13, Solomon uses the idea of "this is the gift of God" wrongly and sarcastically.

The added days of 15 years initially appeared long, but Hezekiah now perceives the extreme brevity of life.

Ecc 5:20 For he shall not often reflect on the days of his life; because God occupies him with the joy of his heart-

The Hebrew is better "He remembers (or should remember) that the days of his life are not many". See on :19. Solomon blames his lack of self examination on God, who has given him wealth and the opportunity to indulge it in "the joy of his heart". And yet in :17 Solomon feels he has lived in the darkness of depression because of his wealth. So here he appears to be mocking God, who supposedly, so he now reasons, gives man so much joy in his heart that he never has time for self examination. I suggested on :19 that Solomon is being sarcastic about God; he is for sure wrongly accusing and representing Him. And seeing he had been given so much Divine wisdom, this is a grievous failure by him. The Hebrew could also be "God causes him to work for the enjoyment of his heart", as if any joy God gives is the result of the labour God cursed man with.

ECCLESIASTES CHAPTER 6

Ecc 6:1 There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, and it is heavy on men-

Solomon feels that not being able to take wealth beyond the grave is "evil" (Ecc. 4:8; 5:13; 6:2). If Solomon had instead humbled himself to accept that his wealth was a gift from God by grace, in response to his choice of wisdom, then he would not have had all this regret about being wealthy and being unable to use it beyond the grave.

Ecc 6:2 a man to whom God gives riches, wealth, and honour, so that he lacks nothing for his soul of all that he desires, yet God gives him no power to eat of it, but an alien eats it. This is vanity, and it is an evil disease-

Solomon clearly has himself in view, for he was the one to whom God gave wealth, and in Ecc. 5:19 he says that God has also given him in this life the opportunity to enjoy it. He recognizes this as indeed "the gift of God", but then blames God for having given him a life which therefore had no time for self reflection, because of the joy of this life which God had given him (Ecc. 5:20). But even this apparent gratitude to God is nuanced by Solomon's complaint in Ecc. 6:2 that he has been given wealth, but his death stops him from ultimately enjoying it. He really is acting even in old age as the spoilt child he had always been. His comment that wealth is a gift from God is nuanced by his statements here, making it sarcastic. And this is far from the only place in Ecclesiastes where the author is sarcastic about God's gifts. The prospect of eternal death led him to see

any gifts in this life as of very limited value and therefore also "vanity".

Truth flowed through Solomon's mouth with ease, but took no lodgment at all in his heart. Truth, absolute and pure, flows through our hands in such volume. Bible study after Bible study, chapter after chapter... But does it mean anything at all to us? Prov. 6:26 warns the young man that the Gentile woman will take his money and leave him destitute at the end. These words seem to be alluded to by Solomon years later in Ecc. 6:2, where he laments that despite his wealth and success, a Gentile would have it all after his death. He saw in later life that his warnings to the young men of Israel had been in the form of painting a picture of a typical young man who epitomized youthful folly; but now he saw that he had been making a detailed prophecy of himself.

The stranger / Gentile that would take Hezekiah's wealth was Babylon. Hezekiah had a very short time to enjoy his wealth and couldn't do so. In the Hezekiah context, we see how he feels he along with all men struggles with "sickness" all his days (Ecc. 5:17). And he sees as an "evil disease" the fact a foreigner, a Gentile, will consume his wealth- just as Isaiah said the Babylonians would do (Ecc. 6:2). Hezekiah had been miraculously healed of one disease (s.w. Is. 38:9 "he had been sick, and had recovered of his sickness"), but he complains that the wealth he had chosen after it was the most evil sickness; and he now complains that his "sickness" is with him every day. He failed to have an abiding gratitude for his healing.

Ecc 6:3 If a man fathers a hundred children, and lives many years, so that the days of his years are many, but his soul is not

filled with good, and moreover he has no burial; I say, that a still-born child is better than he-

Having had 1000 wives, Solomon surely is the man in view, who had fathered many children and also lived a long life. But for all his wealth, and the ability to enjoy it in this life (Ecc. 5:19), he felt his soul had not been filled with good, and that he would be despised after his death, his name covered in darkness and shame (:4). This is the meaning of the idiom of a man having no burial; it is not always to be taken literally. See on Ecc. 7:1. He knew he had oppressed his people and would be bitterly remembered for it after his death (1 Kings 12:11). He understands so well his situation; and yet refuses to repent.

Solomon concludes that despite having every material blessing, a man can still not be satisfied (s.w. Ecc. 4:8; 6:3). But in Proverbs he thinks that the righteous *do* satisfy their souls in this life (Prov. 13:25). But he thought that this would be experienced in this life, rather than in any future Kingdom of God on earth. As he got closer to death, he realized that he had not satisfied his soul despite all his wealth. And so he concluded that righteousness was vain, and turned away from Yahweh. This is what happens when we lose the perspective of the future Kingdom of God.

It is possible to see Solomon as an anti-Christ, as well as a type of Christ; like Saul, he was both a type of Christ, and also the very opposite of the true Christ. This point is really brought out in Is. 53:11, where the true Messiah is described as being “satisfied” with the travail or labour of his soul, and will thereby bring forth many children. The Hebrew words used occur in close proximity in several passages in Ecclesiastes, where Solomon speaks of how all his “travail” or “labour” has not “sat-

isfied" him, and that it is all the more vain because his children may well not appreciate his labour and will likely squander it (Ecc. 1:8; 4:8; 5:10; 6:3). Likewise the 'Babylon' system of Revelation, replete with its feature of 666, is described in terms which unmistakably apply to Solomon's Kingdom. This feature of Solomon- being both a type of Christ and yet also the very opposite of the true Christ- reflects the tragic duality which we will observe at such length in our later studies.

Seeing the Preacher has no future hope, he considers style of burial to be quite significant. Whereas for those with Hope of the Kingdom, burial is insignificant. We note he considers that length of life and number of children are irrelevant and not really blessings because the eternal finality of death is so huge. But these are the very blessings promised for obedience to the old covenant. He therefore despises what blessings God does offer- so major does death loom in his thinking. Alternatively, "no burial" may mean 'no good burial', with people lamenting his passing and praising him for his life. Hezekiah sacrificed the future blessing of his own sons, his people, Jerusalem and the temple- for the sake of 15 years peaceful life for himself. So he knew he would not be much lamented for. When terminally ill, he lamented that he had no male heir. Now he says that even having 100 sons is meaningless seeing that death [as he wants to understand it] is final and eternal.

Hezekiah considers that it were better never to have been born, seeing life is so tragic. The Lord may allude to this when saying of Judas "It would have been better if that man had not been born" (Mt. 26:24). But Hezekiah seems to eagerly want to appropriate this ultimate curse to himself, because he just would not accept any future dimension to life.

The wish to be a miscarried foetus is exactly the feeling of Job (Job 3:16). Already Job 1:21 "Naked I came out of my mother's womb and naked I shall return" has been alluded to in Ecc. 5:15. But Job had sure hope of resurrection, whereas koheleth would not be led by his feelings to that conclusion and hope. Just as he alludes to the curse in Eden but not the promise of hope made in Eden, so he dwells upon the depressive phases of Job and not the hope Job expresses.

Ecc 6:4 for it comes in vanity, and departs in darkness, and its name is covered with darkness-

The "it" is the soul or person of :3. Solomon feels he may as well not have existed, and considers himself no better than a stillborn child (:3). In Ecc. 5:17 Solomon has complained that he had lived his whole life in the depression of darkness. He knows he will be despised after his death because of his oppression of his people (see on :3). This continues the thought of Ecc. 5:17; that he was frustrated and angry as he faced death and final sickness; and he feels that this is in fact how he has always been, eating his sumptuous meals in the darkness of depression. And this again is absolutely true to observed experience; the feelings of old age depression are extrapolated by the sufferer and assumed to have been how their entire lives have been, whether or not that was the case.

Koheleth sees darkness as inevitable. Man by nature lives in it and then dies in eternal darkness (Ecc. 5:17; 6:4). Isaiah's response is that God's light from Zion can burst into that darkness: "Therefore is judgment far from us, neither doth justice overtake us: we wait for light, but behold obscurity; for brightness, but we walk in darkness. We grope for the wall like the blind, and we grope as if we had no eyes: we stumble at noon-

day as in the night... Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the LORD is risen upon thee. For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people: but the LORD shall arise upon thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee... the LORD shall be unto thee an everlasting light" (Is. 59:9,10; 60:1,2,19).

Ecc 6:5 Moreover it has not seen the sun nor known it. This has rest rather than the other-

GNB: "It never sees the light of day or knows what life is like, but at least it has found rest". The reference is to the still-born child of :3, but Solomon is saying that whether one lives just a few moments in the womb or thousands of years (:6), the reality of the "rest" of death is such that life has no meaning. Solomon's abuse of his own people, whipping them at the end (1 Kings 12:11), was a reflection of how he failed to perceive the value and meaning of his own life, and this was reflected [as it is in the behaviour of abusers today] in how he treated the lives of others. If Solomon had accepted the basic Biblical truth that life is a gift from God, as his father David had understood (Ps. 139:15), then he would have realized his need to use that life for God and not himself. And his value of the human person and the lives of others would have subsequently been transformed. The same is true of Hezekiah, who traded 15 years of personal peace for the welfare of his sons and his people.

Ecc 6:6 Yes, though he live a thousand years twice told, and yet fails to enjoy good, don't all go to one place?-

Solomon speaks in Ecclesiastes 6 of the tragedy of possessing all things but being unable to enjoy them, because fulfilling one's own natural desires one after another really isn't much of a life. And thus he came to despise the concept of eternal life

because he saw no point in life itself (see on :5); "A thousand years" was likely a figure for eternity. He conceived of eternal life as being life as we now know it; and he didn't really want to live for ever as he'd fulfilled every natural desire. There's a real warning for us here. If we see the eternity of the Kingdom as a big carrot for us, it may not actually be that motivating for us in the long run of spiritual life. It is the quality and nature of that life which is surely important to us, and not the mere infinity of it. Indeed, eternal life as we now know it would be a curse rather than a blessing.

Hezekiah had been given 15 years, not so long, but he now realizes that if had been given 2000 years he would still be unhappy. Or perhaps the idea is 1000 x 1000, one million years. Long life is shown not to be the benchmark of happiness nor success. He traded eternity for 15 years but later realized that was a bad deal. He now reflects that eternity for 2000 or one million years would be an equally bad deal. For what can a man give in exchange for his soul. Probably the Lord came to that understanding from reflection upon Ecclesiastes. Even the whole world would be a bad deal. The Lord's mind went over this path in the wilderness temptations. God left Hezekiah, as He departed from Saul, after the visitors from Babylon came. To show Hezekiah what was in his heart. And here we have it all written down.

Ecc 6:7 All the labour of man is for his mouth, and yet the appetite is not filled-

The appetite [Heb. 'soul'] continues the commentary upon the human person or soul which began in :3. These verses explain the sense of weariness and vanity which there is in our world. Human labour is required just to keep alive, but there

is no satisfaction from it in ultimate terms. Solomon is here rejecting the whole message of the Gospel in Gen. 3. Indeed man is cursed to eat bread in the sweat of his face; but Gen. 3:15 opens up the possibility of overcoming that curse, through the Messianic seed of the woman. But Solomon had no place in his thinking for this Messianic seed, assuming he was the one. And so, like all who reject Christ, he was left labouring in the sweat of his face for a soul / appetite which can never be fulfilled without Him.

Ecc 6:8 For what advantage has the wise more than the fool? What has the poor man, who knows how to walk before the living?-

This shows how effectively he despised his wisdom; he lost sight of the Kingdom which it led to ultimately, and the God manifestation which it could enable in this life. LXX "since the poor man knows how to walk before life?". Solomon in Proverbs has consistently seen the poor as foolish, poor because they are fools. But he now thinks that the fools walk as do the "wise" and there is no real ultimate advantage of wisdom over folly. This is a specific retraction of all his wisdom as published in his anthology of his wisdom in the book of Proverbs.

Ecc 6:9 Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the desire. This also is vanity and a chasing after wind-

LXX "waywardness of spirit", parallel with the wandering of desire. Again Solomon has himself in view, for in Ecc. 2 he describes how his desire wandered and he sought to fulfil those desires, be they sexual or in the desire to engage in science, agriculture, building schemes etc. Again, we note that Solomon's self criticism was so penetrating and accurate. But mere possession of knowledge, correct analysis, will not save. It is humble

faith in grace which is needed in order to elicit repentance, but Solomon had none of that.

The idea may be that what you have in your hand now in present reality is better than fantasy. Hezekiah is the classic example of this- he traded 15 years of peace here and now for the unseen things of the future Kingdom, which he sees now as merely fantasy, the wandering of desire into abstract things. And that is how secular man sees the Gospel of the Kingdom. It's hard cash right now, experienced reality at this moment, that trumps any hope of future blessing.

Solomon's proverbs about not eating too much honey (Prov. 25:16) clearly mean that we shouldn't over indulge legitimate human pleasures. But his approach in Ecclesiastes was the studied opposite of this. He openly says that he indulged himself in every human pleasure to the extreme, until it meant nothing. And yet he had warned against doing this very thing. Having stated that he sees no particular advantage of Divine wisdom, Solomon goes on to allude to his own wandering of desire (Ecc. 6:9); he had been given all a man could wish, his desire knew no bounds, and yet it wandered. This is yet another powerful challenge from Solomon; his every desire was satisfied, but still he felt that his desires were unfulfilled (Ecc. 1:8; 6:7). So much of our mental and physical energy goes into gratification of desire, even though it is heavily camouflaged beneath social respectability and achieving the norms of our community. Yet if we believe the lesson of Solomon, the only man who actually had every desire gratified, then we will shun all this- and fix our hope and every striving on Christ and his Kingdom alone.

Ecc 6:10 Whatever has been, its name was given long ago; and it is known what man is; neither can he contend with him who is mightier than he-

This continues the theme which Solomon developed at the beginning of Ecclesiastes; that all is cyclical, without ultimate progress. Nothing is new. And if there is indeed a God, then He is "mightier" than man, and so all relationship with Him is pointless, seeing that He will not allow man to take his wealth with him beyond the grave. This denial that anything radically new can appear, no deeper insight into the human condition, is another way of Solomon abrogating his previous wisdom. For that wisdom had indeed sought to explain "what man is" and to furnish new insights and understanding. Solomon seems to have in mind Job's desperate thoughts, that no man can contend with God because of His mightiness (Job 9:3). But he fails to as it were read to the end of the book, where Job repents, and is brought to the glorious realization that relationship with God is wonderfully possible, and indeed eagerly sought by God with man.

Hezekiah had reasoned with God to get another 15 years, but now he concludes that God foreknew that and so he rationalized away the wonder of intercessory prayer. This is a big theme in Ecclesiastes: "Is there a thing of which it may be said, Behold, this is new? It has been long ago, in the ages which were before us... what can the king's successor do? Just that which has been done long ago... That which is has been long ago, and that which is to be has been long ago" (Ecc. 1:10; 2:12; 3:15). Contra this, true spirituality is about "singing a new song" and living in newness of life. Is. 56:12 puts these ideas of endless repetition in the mouths of the condemned:

"Let us drink wine for tomorrow will be just like today!". Ecc. 6:10 laments that there is nothing named that has not already been named. But Is. 62:2 speaks of a day when God's people shall be named by a new name that has not previously been named.

Ecc 6:11 For there are many words that create vanity. What does that profit man?-

This is said by Solomon in the context of abrogating the importance of the wisdom he has previously taught; see on :8. The "many words" would then be a reference to the many words he had written himself in codifying that wisdom. The criticism of "many words" in Ecc. 5:7 and 6:11 seems a reference to his own writing down of the wisdom God had given him, codifying it into books such as the compilation we have in the book of Proverbs (Ecc. 12:10,12). He associates the "many words" with "dreams", perhaps an intensive plural for "a great dream" (Ecc. 5:7). It was as a result of the dream of 1 Kings 3:5 that he was given the "many words" of wisdom which he now considered unhelpful and irrelevant because death meant that there was no particular ultimate advantage of wisdom over folly; wisdom was at best profitable in this life in some short term sense. And he therefore associates "many words" with folly (Ecc. 10:14). He considers he had been foolish by preaching and believing those many words of Divine wisdom. Now, for him, the true wisdom was in idolatry and not Yahweh worship in His temple. For he had forsaken worshipping at Yahweh's temple and instead worshipped in the idol temples he had built nearby (1 Kings 11:4-8).

Again we see the theme of "profit", and note Paul's allusion to it- that indeed there is no advantage / profit in life if the dead rise not.

Ecc 6:12 For who knows what is good for man in life, all the days of his vain life which he spends like a shadow? For who can tell a man what will be after him under the sun?-

The obvious answer is "God", but Solomon had turned away from God to idols. Surely Solomon writes this knowing that his words elicit the answer: "God". Yet he believed that God was powerless to resurrect man to judgment after his death (Ecc. 3:22), and so we can read this as deep sarcasm against God.

The allusion is to the days added by the returned shadow. Hezekiah cynically reflects that the shadow all the same comes forward. "Who can tell a man...?" recalls the complaint in Ecc. 3 that 'Who can resurrect a man to see the future?'. The answer is God, through the work of His Son.

God did not create in vain, He "did not say Seek me, in vain" (Is. 45:18,19). Isaiah has the *lack* of vanity as a major theme after Is. 40. He is as it were in dialogue with Ecclesiastes. God showed Israel new things but they refused to perceive them, "they are created now and not from the beginning" (Is. 48:6,7); this is Isaiah's counter to Hezekiah's complaint that there is no new thing. "I have not spoken in secret " (Is. 48:16) , "Seek ye the LORD while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near" (Is. 55:6) answers the complaint that God is too hard to understand and is concealing Himself.

Hezekiah reasons that the pursuit of pleasure is "vanity" (Ecc. 2:1,10; 6:9), and likewise he often says that life itself is "vanity" (Ecc. 6:12; 7:15; 9:9; 11:10). So our life experience is according to what we are pursuing. If we pursue vain things, our life is vain. Herein lies the huge power of "seek first the Kingdom of God". If that is our passion, then our life likewise becomes of eternal moment. Self examination is about perceiving what are our core desires, our deepest dreams, our deepest heart wish.

Hezekiah saw the brevity of life very sharply, seeing he knew he only had 15 years left. This is why he so often speaks of human work: "all the toil that one has toiled under the sun" (7 times) or "the work that is done" (8 times), "(one's) toil" (12 times) or "all the work" (5 times). He asks what is the profit, the advantage, the gain- using accounting, business terms. He uses the idea 17 times in Ecclesiastes. And he sees, rightly, that if death is the final end- then it was all pointless, much expenditure for no end result. Surely Paul had reflected on this in 1 Cor. 15, which seems a sustained reflection on Ecclesiastes. Under Divine inspiration he wrote that "what advantage is there if the dead rise not", and our labour is NOT vanity "in the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58). He writes that in conclusion of his teaching about the huge significance of the Lord's resurrection, which enables ours. This alone is what makes human labour meaningful and not meaningless. It gives eternal moment to all our being and labour. Striving for a career and human achievement can be painted as very noble and satisfying. But in the hard stare of death, it all crumbles.

ECCLESIASTES CHAPTER 7

Ecc 7:1 A good name is better than fine perfume; and the day of death better than the day of one's birth-

This is how Solomon imagines things should ideally be. But for him, he had just lamented that his name would be despised after his death, and his burial would therefore be with shame (see on Ecc. 6:3,4). And indeed, after his death the people complained of how he had so bitterly whipped and abused them (1 Kings 12:11). He accurately foresaw it all, including Rehoboam's rebellion and the division of the kingdom. But he does nothing about it.

This is yet another example of Hezekiah's cynicism now God had given him 15 years to live. He saw death as better than life, because his life was not devoted to God and he had no future hope of the Kingdom. The parallel is between having "a good name" and "the day of death". His only hope for the future was in having a good name amongst his generation in the nations around him after his death. In the Hezekiah context, we recall that he was given much precious ointment (Is. 38:2). But he sacrificed the future welfare of his sons and his people for 15 years of personal prosperity, risking leaving a bad name for himself at death. He now realizes this, but makes no repentance.

Ecc 7:2 It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting: for that is the end of all men-

But Solomon admits he himself is as the old king who will no longer be admonished (Ecc. 4:13). But he urges others to be admonished (Ecc. 12:12), and to go to funerals instead of

wedding parties [of which Solomon must have had many], so that they might "take to heart" wisdom (Ecc. 7:2), although Solomon says this was "far from me" himself (Ecc. 7:23). He preached God's truth, he accepted it as true, whilst refusing to personalize it himself. He really is a parade example of the dangers inherent in glorying in our mere possession of Divine truth.

The idea could be that if you go to a wedding, then the couple will "take this to heart" and may bless you in future. But if you go to a funeral, you will not get any blessing from the dead person. But we note the view that a funeral "is the end of all men". He has no hope beyond the grave. This was the root problem for both Solomon and Hezekiah.

And the living should take this to heart- The only other occurrence of this phrase is also in Ecclesiastes, at Ecc. 9:1 where Solomon says that the conclusions he is now giving in the book are because he has 'laid it to his heart' ("I considered in my heart [same Hebrew phrase], in order to declare all this"). Solomon says that faced with death, a wise man [he clearly has himself in view] will consider or lay life to his heart. Ecclesiastes appears to be Solomon's reflections as an old man facing death, rejecting the Divine wisdom he was given as a young man, whilst still holding on to it in some ways. His encounter with his own upcoming death is cited by him as the source of his new wave of wisdom. This spiritual biography of Solomon is recorded for our learning as a unique insight into the deepest psychology of a man who turns away from God's Truth to his own human reflections and meanderings. This is frequently how God in His wisdom teaches us- through the example of

failures. This isn't negative psychology- increasingly universities now teach through 'problem based learning'.

Ecc 7:3 Sorrow is better than laughter; for by the sadness of the face the heart is made good-

The idea is that going to a funeral and sorrowing is better than the laughter of a wedding feast (Ecc. 7:2,3). Yet despite realizing this on an intellectual level, Solomon personally commended mirth / laughter to himself (Ecc. 8:15), and advises removing sorrow from the heart (Ecc. 11:10). Again we see Solomon's amazing ability, indeed the ability of human nature, to comprehend truth on one level, and yet reason and live exactly and precisely and consciously the opposite.

Solomon sees wisdom as the way to wealth and "pleasure" in this life, and that is the basis for his appeal to men to be wise and accept his wisdom (Prov. 10:23). But David uses the word only of the "pleasure" of the future, restored Kingdom of God on earth (Ps. 126:2); whereas Solomon wanted it all now, just as the 'prosperity gospel' likewise does. And yet as he got older, Solomon realized that such "pleasure" from material things is not in fact pleasure, and he uses the word several times in Ecclesiastes of how pleasure in this life is vain (Ecc. 2:2; 7:3; 10:19). This approach is in fact a contradiction of his seeking after "pleasure" in Proverbs. He came to this nihilistic position because he failed to perceive that the true "pleasure" is not now, but in the future Kingdom.

Ecc 7:4 The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth-

He speaks of how laughter, mirth and songs are not the pursuit of the wise- and yet these are the very things he gave himself to, whilst at the same time possessing theoretical wis-

dom (Ecc. 7:3-5). On one hand Solomon condemns mirth (Ecc. 7:4; Prov. 20:32 LXX "If thou abandon thyself to mirth, and stretch forth thine hand in a quarrel, thou shalt be disgraced"). But this is exactly what Solomon did in Ecc. 2:1,2; 8:15. He refused to accept his own wisdom. It was merely a teaching position, and he felt the need to empirically find its truth. he failed to personalize the wisdom he taught, and therefore turned away in the end.

Ecc 7:5 It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise, than for a man to hear the song of fools-

But Solomon chose to surround himself with singers and every kind of music (Ecc. 2:8). He realizes that the singers were what he calls "fools", but he still indulged in it. Just as someone might openly confess that certain entertainment is foolish and unspiritual, but still indulge in it. Whilst knowing that he needed rebuke from the wise, it would seem that Solomon never accepted it. But he knew on another level that this was what he should do. This idea of knowing on one level but not another is fundamental to understanding human behaviour. We have a profound and realistic insight into it in the autobiography and piercing self analysis of Ecclesiastes.

Ecc 7:6 For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fool. This also is vanity-

But knowing this, Solomon commends mirth in Ecc. 8:15. On one hand Solomon condemns mirth (Ecc. 7:4,6; Prov. 20:32 LXX "If thou abandon thyself to mirth, and stretch forth thine hand in a quarrel, thou shalt be disgraced"). But this is exactly what Solomon commends in Ecc. 2:1,2; 8:15. He refused to accept his own wisdom. It was merely a teaching position, and he felt the need to empirically find its truth.

he failed to personalize the wisdom he taught, and therefore turned away in the end.

Ecc 7:7 Surely extortion makes the wise man foolish; and a bribe destroys the understanding-

"Surely oppression maketh a wise man foolish" (Ecc. 7:7 RV), he commented at the end of his life- even though *right then* he was chastising the people with whips, oppressing them (1 Kings 12:11). He knew the true wisdom, he saw his reflection so accurately in the mirror, a wise man made foolish, but resigned from its personal implications. He could even write that "I returned and considered all the oppression that are done under the sun [by himself!]: and behold the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power [Solomon was king and had set up the tax system in a clever and biased way]; but they had no comforter" (Ecc. 4:1; 5:8). It was a real case of spiritual schizophrenia- he sorrowed for the people he oppressed. He even seems to say that there is nothing to be surprised at in the poor being oppressed, because the whole hierarchy of officialdom above them do the same (Ecc. 5:2). He saw his sin as inevitable, as part of his participation in humanity- he didn't own up to his own desperate need for grace. Yet he also knew that "man lords it over man [cp. Solomon's oppression of the people] to his own hurt" (Ecc. 8:9 RSV).

The Hebrew for "oppression" is also translated "quarreling".

Ecc 7:8 Better is the end of a thing than its beginning. The patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit-

This again is an example of Solomon's piercing self examination. Indeed he was "proud in spirit" and impatient. He wanted the outcome of wisdom immediately, in this life, and

has no faith expressed in any future Kingdom of God on earth, a future day of judgment or eternal recompense in it. Despite knowing that the end is better than the beginning, he was too impatient to wait for that "end", and so turned away from Yahweh to idols who apparently offered immediate gratification.

Ecc 7:9 Don't be hasty in your spirit to be angry, for anger rests in the bosom of fools-

GNB "it is foolish to harbor a grudge". It seems that Solomon is here painting an accurate picture of himself. The book of Proverbs is full of sideways swipes at his half brothers, Absalom especially. Despite all his material wealth, Solomon died an angry man full of regrets; because he had not accepted God's grace.

Ecc 7:10 Don't say, Why were the former days better than these? For you do not ask wisely about this-

Is this Solomon's cynical take on Dt. 4:32, where God challenged Israel to think of the former days and marvel at God's power displayed in them...?

The Lord recognized the essential conservatism of human nature when He observed that no matter how good the new wine, we will think that "the old is better" (Lk. 5:39), taking it as read that "the former days [are perceived to be] better than these" (Ecc. 7:10). Yes, for all our much vaunted liberalism and open mindedness, our reasonable openness to new ideas which we assume we have- we are conservatives by nature. Don't disturb me or upset my social club. The seed of the Gospel was sown in our lives so that we might bring forth fruit. Not to just be retained and to lay dormant. The Lord's judgment of the one talent man may seem unusually harsh- he who carefully preserved the talent (and the same Greek word is used later in the

New Testament about the need to “preserve” the Truth). He didn’t spend it on himself. Didn’t lose it. Didn’t let it get dirty. Didn’t forget where he buried it. But his inaction was the basis of his condemnation.

LXX "Say not, What has happened, that the former days were better than these? for thou dost not enquire in wisdom concerning this". Yet I suggested on :9 that Solomon went to his grave with regrets, lamenting that the glory days of his father David had not continued. But they were not really glory days, only in Solomon's biased recollection.

Ecc 7:11 Wisdom is as good as an inheritance. Yes, it is more excellent for those who see the sun-

GNB "Everyone who lives ought to be wise; it is as good as receiving an inheritance". But Solomon elsewhere despises wisdom, considering it to have no ultimate advantage over folly, because of the problem of eternal death which he sees it as unable to affect. His worry about the inheritance he would leave, and whether Rehoboam would be wise, is because he realizes that wisdom cannot be passed on. The idea may be that an inheritance is no good unless it has wisdom with it. Hezekiah would have thought this about Manasseh, who inherited his vast wealth but had no wisdom.

Ecc 7:12 For wisdom is a defence, even as money is a defence; but the excellency of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of him who has it-

The comparison of wisdom with money reflects how Solomon sees wisdom as only helpful in this life, on a secular level. Hence LXX "For wisdom in its shadow is as the shadow of silver: and the excellence of the knowledge of wisdom will give life to him that has it". And many comments in Proverbs

seem to highlight only the secular advantages of being wise. Solomon repeatedly complains that the wise and foolish die the same death, and so his comment that wisdom preserves life must apply only to its use in preserving secular life.

Even if we insist that "wisdom gives life" means 'eternal life' [which I doubt, as Solomon has no real belief in this, especially at the end of his life], then we can simply reflect that Solomon did not accept this as true for himself. In the end, Solomon felt that for himself, it was as well to be righteous as to be wicked, for in death there was no further difference (Ecc. 9:2,5,9). He knows judgment will come (Ecc. 11:9), at least for the young people, but he reasons as if it won't- at least not for him. He knows, but he doesn't know on the personal, experiential level. This is why there are apparently contradictory statements in Ecclesiastes. For example, the wise dies as the fool, with no more eternal remembrance than the fool (Ecc. 2:15,16). This, Solomon, says, is what he himself believes in his own heart. But in Ecc. 7:12 he says that wisdom gives life to those who have it. But then again in Ecc. 9:16-18 he observes that although wisdom can help, its benefits are easily undone, so easily as to make it useless. I don't see these different perspectives as being the difference between life in the world and life in the spiritual realm. They are all spoken *with conviction* by Solomon, which, to my mind, ruins the idea that he himself believed the Truth but was simply outlining what life is like without God. My resolution of this is that he knew and preached God's Truth, but for him personally, it meant nothing at all. And therefore in practice he advocated the life of self-enjoyment, acting *as if* all the other truth of wisdom was not operative in practice.

"Defence" is Heb. 'shadow'. There are so many allusions to shadows in Ecclesiastes, understandable if Hezekiah was the author, reflecting on the result of the shadow going back to give him another few years before death. He now realizes that only wisdom can preserve life. And his life had been preserved for 15 years for other reasons, and he felt he had no hope of anything more- because he accepts that wisdom is personally "far from me".

Ecc 7:13 Consider the work of God, for who can make that straight, which He has made crooked?-

The Hebrew and also LXX understands the "crooked" as a person, "for who shall be able to straighten him whom God has made crooked?". This could continue Solomon's cynical approach that all is predetermined by God and therefore His demand to judge people is unreasonable (see on Ecc. 3:15). But Solomon may have in view the reality of death, which could not be escaped. "Made crooked" is s.w. Ecc. 12:3 about the old man being 'bowed down'. Given the context of death, the idea may be that the effects of the aging process are from God and cannot be undone by man. This would pave the way for the teaching of :14, that the nature and extent of our lives and life experiences are all controlled by God and [according to Solomon] we cannot intervene in those processes; and therefore relationship with Him is pointless. But we must remember that he wrote this in old age, as his autobiography, when he had already turned away from God. So I assume this is all said tongue in cheek about God.

In contrast to Hezekiah reasoning with God that he not die when intended, he has now retreated to the position of thinking that all is foreordained and human spiritual effort

makes no difference. This was very much the spirit in which at the end of Isaiah 39 he accepts God's judgment upon him, rather than again seeking to reason with God to change that possible outcome. This is the same idea as in :14, that joy and adversity come from God on whatever days He chooses, and man cannot change that. Likewise in :15, Hezekiah reasons that being righteous or wicked is irrelevant because everything is chance dictated by a Divine hand that operates at random. This was a studied rejection of the grace shown Hezekiah by Yahweh. For his healing and Zion's deliverance from Assyria had not been random, but a conscious gift of grace. Indeed in :16 he goes further and warns against being overly righteous as the stress he imagines comes with it might destroy you before your time.

Ecc 7:14 In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider; yes, God has made the one side by side with the other, to the end that man should not find out anything after Him-

As explained on :13, Solomon is writing about "God" at a time when he has turned away from Him. The Hebrew here is difficult, but the idea may be that we receive from God the right amount of good and evil, so that by the end of our lives there is no need for anything to be added. This would mean that every experience in life is designed by God and is perfectly designed right to the end, so that we have been developed, at least potentially, to the point He wishes. This is true; but then Solomon mocks that truth by saying that this is so that man cannot find out about the future after death (Ecc. 3:22; 6:12; 10:14). Even at Solomon's time, the hope of resurrection from the dead and final judgment and reward in God's Kingdom up-

on the earth was well established. David so clearly believed it. But Solomon willfully refuses to.

Ecc 7:15 All this have I seen in my days of vanity: there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who lives long in his evil-doing-

This is exactly the postmodern mindset of our world today- to have no passion, to dip into everything in moderation, to live in the mire of mediocrity. GNB "My life has been useless, but in it I have seen everything". Experiencing / seeing things does not make life meaningful. One can travel the world sight-seeing, but still life is useless unless used for God. The reasoning here is that righteousness like wisdom is pointless; a righteous man dies you whereas the wicked may live long. Solomon refuses to accept the perspective of resurrection from the dead and a final judgment with eternal consequence in God's future Kingdom. And therefore indeed righteousness appears pointless and futile. We note that Solomon stresses that this is his personal conclusion and belief. Without doubt he has personally rejected righteousness and wisdom.

Koheleth's words here directly contradict the Old Covenant's promise of long life in return for obedience. But he never uses the term "Yahweh" and reasons as if he is not in covenant with Yahweh. Hezekiah is here ignoring the wonder of the grace shown to him- that his premature death had been reversed and his days extended by grace alone.

Like Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 4:27), Solomon could have prolonged his days as king over Israel if he walked in the ways of David (1 Kings 3:14), which we are specifically told he did

not. Seeing Solomon reigned 40 years, this promise of prolonged days surely implied supernaturally prolonged life, beyond usual human lifespans. Indeed the term is used of how the Lord Jesus "prolonged his days" eternally (Is. 53:10). Hence Solomon twice uses the word to speak of how wise rulers could prolong their reigns (Prov. 28:2,16). He surely has himself in view; but failed to realize this potential. Indeed he cynically uses the word in Ecc. 7:15; 8:12 in claiming that it is the wicked and not the obedient who have their days prolonged.

Ecc 7:16 Don't be overly righteous, neither make yourself overly wise. Why should you destroy yourself?-

This is again a kind of regret expressed by Solomon that he had asked God for wisdom, and God's commendation of his choice is thereby despised by Solomon. He has often said that wisdom is useful for this life; but he advises a life of moderation. He thinks that righteousness has no eternal reward (see on :15), and in fact too much wisdom could be self destructive. He seems to have himself in view as the parade example.

The Hebrew term for "righteous over much" occurs only elsewhere in the Proverbs, where Solomon uses it as something to be praised and respected (Prov. 28:28; 29:2,16). But now Solomon despises his desire and respect for wisdom and righteousness, considering that the way of wisdom, as he now saw it, was to be both wise and foolish, to sin a little and be righteous a little. The philosophy of 'balance' he now reached, having a little of both, was in fact how he had lived his life in practice all along. Now in his old age he tries to intellectually and spiritually justify it.

"Overly wise" is a term which occurs only once elsewhere in the Old Testament, in Ecc. 2:15, where Solomon recalls that

he had made himself "more wise" by asking for wisdom. Now in his cynicism he regrets that request for wisdom which had at the time been so pleasing to God. The blasphemy of those statements in Ecclesiastes that wisdom is meaningless is hard to plumb. Deep within his heart, Solomon's attitude was that "As it happeneth to the fool, so it happeneth even to me (the man made wise by God); and why was I then more wise?" (Ecc. 2:15). Ecc. 7:16 is in similar vein: "Be not righteous over much; neither make thyself over wise"- even though wisdom and righteousness are what God desires from us above all! This despising of wisdom and the truly spiritually ambitious life was due to Solomon's lack of faith in a resurrection; he had his kingdom in this life, and he failed to see the blinding necessity of a resurrection, judgment and change of nature.

Ecc 7:17 Don't be too wicked, neither be foolish. Why should you die before your time?-

Solomon had earlier taught that the righteous / wise live long lives, and therefore the unwise have shorter lives (Prov. 9:11; 10:27). But now in Ecc. 7:15 he says this isn't true to observed reality. Long life was the promise for obedience to the old covenant (s.w. Dt. 11:21). But it is not always the case, as Job learned (s.w. Job 29:18); righteous men like David and Hezekiah felt their days had been shortened (s.w. Ps. 89:45; 102:23). And it was so with the Lord Jesus. And faithful men often lament that the wicked seem to get long life, whilst the righteous don't. The answer to that conundrum is that final blessing of long life is at the resurrection, at the last day; and not in this life. But Solomon didn't see that; he thought that long life now was the only reward. He failed to perceive the real meaning of the Gospel of the Kingdom.

Koheleth's position is precisely that of postmodernist man today. And that is the vital relevance of Ecclesiastes for today. Abuse alcohol or drugs with temperate, moderate indulgence... but not too often, lest you become addicted. Be a good guy... but everything in balance, don't get too into righteousness. And he will go on in Ecc. 8 to advocate keeping a careful distance from "God".

Ecc 7:18 It is good that you should take hold of this. Yes, also from that don't withdraw your hand; for he who fears God will come forth from them all-

The "this" and "that" refer to excessive wisdom / righteousness and excessive folly (:16,17). Again Solomon appears to refer to God skeptically, suggesting that true worship of God is beyond being righteous or sinful. ESV: "It is good that you should take hold of this, and from that withhold not your hand, for the one who fears God shall come out from both of them". Solomon here explicitly preaches what he practiced in his life- the 'little of both' syndrome. "The one who fears God shall come out from both of them" could perhaps be paraphrased as meaning 'The truly spiritual person will mature beyond this simplistic understanding of sin and righteousness'. This is new age philosophy- that morality is but a paradigm which the spiritually mature have grown or [supposedly] matured out of.

As discussed on :13, Hezekiah in this section is arguing that both righteousness and sin lead to the same meaningless end. So here he advises to take hold of "this", the righteousness of :16, and also take hold also of folly (:17). But "he that fears God shall discharge himself of them all" (Heb.). I take that as absolute cynicism about God, although the translators scram-

ble to cover over the full force of the skepticism. He's saying 'And if you fear God you get some blessing, right, isn't that the idea, and so the blessing will be to get out of this meaningless life by dying and then you won't have any more choices between righteousness and folly'.

Ecc 7:19 Wisdom is a strength to the wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city-

Solomon perhaps perceives that after him there will come many rulers in the city of Jerusalem, but they will be many because of their lack of wisdom. He likes to imagine that he as the wise man had therefore had a long reign.

Verse 20 appears to continue the theme of verses 15-20- and so verse 19 must fit in to that theme, surely. Perhaps the idea is that the truly wise are stronger than any apparently strong people in society- in that, as taught at the end of :18, they have matured beyond living by a paradigm of sin and righteousness. Thus Solomon has effectively rejected the wisdom given him by God and come to a new 'wisdom' or a-morality. This would explain the reference to two types of wisdom in :23,24 [see notes there].

Despite the previous verses arguing that righteousness is a meaningless choice in the ultimate view of life and death, Hezekiah cannot avoid the niggles of obvious Divine truth. He has to go on to say that wisdom is of course very useful. Although we may perceive a difference in his reasoning between his view of righteousness and wisdom. Wisdom is, after all, a handy thing to have in this life. Even if, as he considers, it has no impact on the utter finality of death. The ten rulers in the city [of Jerusalem] could refer to the fact there had been ten

kings in Jerusalem over Judah before Hezekiah. And he considers them all fools.

Ecc 7:20 Surely there is not a righteous man on earth, who does good and doesn't sin-

This is true but it appears to be using this truth as a justification for downgrading 'sin' to something inevitable, merely part of being human as he has argued in :15-17. See on :18. This is a far cry from the Hezekiah who gratefully thanked God for casting all his sins behind His back. He now sees sin as inevitable and not, therefore, something that should be an issue for God. And having earlier in this section argued that the choice between righteousness and folly is without eternal consequence, he now nuances that by saying that in any case, nobody is truly righteous. So, the idea of choosing righteousness is thereby purely theoretical and therefore meaningless. Hezekiah's faulty reasoning here could have been avoided had he been focused upon the future Messiah- for He would be the one righteous man on earth who did good and didn't sin.

Ecc 7:21 Also don't take heed to all words that are spoken, lest you hear your servant curse you-

Again, whilst this is true, the implication is that sin is inevitable and that morality or obedience to commandment is not something to overly worry about. See on :18. Perhaps Solomon had in view David paying too much attention to the cursing of his servant Shimei, and [as the Psalms show] beating himself up over it.

Ecc 7:22 for often your own heart knows that you yourself have likewise cursed others-

LXX "For many times he shall trespass against thee, and repeatedly shall he afflict thine heart; for thus also hast thou

cursed others". Surely Solomon has in view his problems with his servant Jeroboam, whose rebellion against him was clearly very upsetting to Solomon deep within him. He considered himself omnipotent, and his servant had upset that narrative.

Ecc 7:23 All this have I proved in wisdom. I said, I will be wise; but it was far from me-

This was Solomon's problem. He admits as noted on Ecc. 10:2 that his wisdom was never in his heart, it "was far from me" as he expresses it here. The wisdom he asked for and so desired in his youth was given to him, but it was far from him personally- just as God's Truth can be far from the heart of those who find, possess, maintain and teach it today. And so he considers that his own later wisdom was greater than the wisdom given him by God at the start. "Far" can equally well mean 'far away in time', and the Hebrew is translated elsewhere as "long ago" or "of old". He could be saying that it was a long time ago that he had asked to be wise, and now that wisdom was different to the 'wisdom' by which he had 'proved' that morality is meaningless, sin is inevitable and we can just act as we wish (:15-22; see on :19,24).

At the end of his days, he recognized that although he had loved the theory of wisdom, the image of a spiritual life, the wisdom of God had never really impacted his soul: "I said, I will be wise (referring back to his request for wisdom in 1 Kings 3); but it was far from me". His request for wisdom had only been so that he could do the job of leading Israel, living out the parental expectation of his father, whom he admits in Proverbs 4 had taught him to ask for wisdom.

Solomon admits he himself is as the old king who will no longer be admonished (Ecc. 4:13). But he urges others to

be admonished (Ecc. 12:12), and to go to funerals instead of wedding parties [of which Solomon must have had many], so that they might "take to heart" wisdom (Ecc. 7:2), although Solomon says this was "for from me" himself (Ecc. 7:23). He preached God's truth, he accepted it as true, whilst refusing to personalize it himself. He really is a parade example of the dangers inherent in glorying in our mere possession of Divine truth.

Ecc 7:24 That which is, is far off and exceedingly deep-

"Far off" is s.w. :23 "far [from me]". That which is far off and unobtainable therefore refers to the wisdom which Solomon had asked for and been given in his youth; but he now says that true wisdom is unobtainable by man. He downgraded the concept of truth by saying that ultimate truth cannot be found and therefore the search for it is primitive and meaningless. All we are left to do is to exist for this brief life. This is the end result of continually downplaying 'truth'.

Who can find it out?-

David had encouraged Solomon to ask for wisdom and to seek and "find" God (1 Chron. 28:9 s.w.); and so often in Proverbs, Solomon had rejoiced that wisdom *could* be "found" (s.w. Prov. 2:5; 3:13 "happy is the man who finds wisdom"; 4:22; 8:9,12,17,35; 24:14). But now Solomon considers that ultimate wisdom cannot be "found", but rather he feels he has "found" [s.w.] the wisdom of meaninglessness by his own personal reflections (s.w. :26,27,28). Here again we see the two different types of 'wisdom' and 'finding' which Solomon has in view (see on :23).

The context of :24 is the statement in :23 that wisdom was "far from me". Again, the author cannot bring himself to de-

scribe all wisdom as bunk. He retreats to the position that there is "wisdom", but it's too difficult to find. He says the same in Ecc. 8:1 "Who knows the interpretation of a thing?", which appears to continue the theme here despite the chapter break. It's a major theme in Ecclesiastes: "Who knows?" 2:19; 3:21; 6:12; "Who can tell?" 6:12; 8:7; 10:14; "Who can find?" 7:24. The answer of course is God through the Lord Jesus. And so those who once lived active spiritual lives can retreat to a position that they have no idea what truth is, because [they say] it's too complicated to find it. There are too many options, especially in the age of information explosion. But this is an excuse. God's truth is there for the humble to easily find- if they seek it in Christ.

Ecc 7:25 I turned around, and my heart sought to know and to search out, and to seek wisdom and the scheme of things, and to know that wickedness is stupidity, and that foolishness is madness-

This turning around is not any reference to repentance, as some like to imagine. It rather refers to the change of mind within Solomon, rejecting God's wisdom and morality for his own, as explained on the previous verses. "To seek out wisdom" must be understood in the context of the notes on :19,23,24. God had given Solomon wisdom- as a pure gift. But now he has rejected that and is trying to search out 'wisdom' for himself- and coming to wrong conclusions. So many who were given God's wisdom in their youth have made the same error.

Ecc 7:26 I find more bitter than death the woman whose heart is snares and traps, whose hands are chains. Whoever pleas-

es God shall escape from her; but the sinner will be ensnared by her-

Solomon had over 1000 wives, and slept with whom he chose. But he laments in Prov. 30:15,19 how he lives in fear of his wives committing adultery. He mentions a particular woman and her daughters who he describes as blood sucking leaches, who have broken his heart and irritate and anger him because they are so insatiable. Solomon, the apparently powerful over women, becomes ensnared by them, as he laments here. This a clear reference back to Solomon's own entanglement. In his younger days, he had found "the hair of thine head like the purple of a king [i.e. he imagined her to be suited to him, the King of Israel, when she wasn't]; the king is held captive in the tresses thereof" (Song 7:5 RV).

Solomon was evidently fascinated by Samson. His writings contain many allusions to him. Thus he speaks of how he found "more bitter than death the woman, whose heart is snares, and her hands as bands ("fettters", RSV): whoso pleaseth God shall escape her; but the sinner shall be taken by her" (Ecc. 7:26 AV). His constant warnings about the danger of the Gentile (AV "strange") woman are all commands to learn from the example of Samson. All these passages allude to Samson (e.g. Prov. 5:20; 6:26-28; 7:21-27). Often the Proverbs allude to characters in Israel's history. The references to a wise son rejoicing his father and mother (Prov. 23:25) and saddening them by his folly shout for application to Samson. The warnings about not *looking* at a strange woman recall how Samson *saw* the Philistine girl in Timnath and the prostitute in Gaza (Jud. 14:1; 16:1).

Joshua's prophecy that those who married the surrounding women would find them "a snare and a trap for you, a scourge

in your sides, and thorns in your eyes" (Josh. 23:12,13 RSV) was fulfilled in Samson's relationship with Delilah and in Solomon's experience likewise. But the similarity is such that surely Samson must have been aware of it, when he asked Delilah to tie him up with cords. Joshua's words were not too distant history and surely Samson knew them. This is Samson at his darkest. He was mixing up his sex game with Delilah with Joshua's words. Joshua had said that these women would tie up the Israelite man if they married them. Samson didn't marry her; it is possible that she was a renegade Israelite, not a Gentile; and he wanted to show that actually Samson could handle a bit of fun with Delilah without really breaking the spirit of Joshua's words. And so as he broke those bands each time to go out and kill some more Philistine warriors, he doubtless felt he was still in spiritual control.

Solomon made exactly the same mistake; he took foreign wives. And the record comments: "of the nations concerning which the Lord had said unto the children of Israel, Ye shall not go in to them, neither shall they come in unto you: for *surely* they will turn away your heart... and his wives turned away his heart" (1 Kings 11:1-3). The implication is that Solomon took those wives thinking 'Well, I know the law says they will surely turn away my heart, but actually they won't, I can handle it'; and he didn't handle it. Solomon seems to have realized, in the bitterness of Ecclesiastes, that he had made the same mistake as Samson: "I find more bitter than death [i.e. it would be better to be dead than be in this position] the woman, whose heart is snares and nets, and her hands as bands: whoso pleaseth God shall escape from her; but the sinner shall be taken by her" (Ecc. 7:26). These were surely Samson's thoughts in those eye-

less weeks in Gaza: better to have died than to have been snared by Gentile women. He let her snare him, conscious of the allusion to Joshua's words; and thought he could break free from the relationship at will. But in the end, he couldn't. Any form of sin is by nature addictive. The only way of dealing with it is to break completely. The Lord taught this when He spoke of the need to gouge out the eye that offends our spirituality. And He was alluding to how Samson's eyes were 'picked out' (Young), "gouged out" (Jud. 16:21 RSV). We either do it to ourselves, or the Lord will do it to us. He will have the conquest over sin in our existence, ultimately. Either we work with Him in this, and thereby remain with Him eternally; or we foolishly resist Him, and He has His way against our will, and in doing so destroys us. With a logic like this, any sacrifice is logically given. But more than logic. If we *truly love* the Lord God and His Son, the desire to give, to serve for nothing, will render this logical encouragement unnecessary.

Even in the cynicism of Ecclesiastes, written in Solomon's later life, he still uses words and phrases which have their root in his father David- e.g. his description of women as snares in Ecc. 7:26 goes back to how his father dealt with women who were a snare (1 Sam. 18:21). And the whole description of old age in Ecc. 12 is based on his father's experience with Barzillai (2 Sam. 19:35).

Solomon as an old man says that the man who pleases God will free himself from the snare of women, but the sinner will be taken captive by her; yet as an old man, Solomon's heart was turned away by his wives (1 Kings 11:4-7). He saw himself as the sinner, rather than the man who was personally trying to please God. The way he built idol temples for those women

on mock temple mounts near Jerusalem was surely a studied statement that he saw himself as a hopeless apostate (2 Kings 23:13). Like the alcoholic or drug abuser, Solomon could analyze his problem so accurately- and yet do nothing about it. This is the utter tragedy of all spiritual failure.

Ecc 7:27 Behold, I have found this, says the Preacher, one to another, to find out the scheme-

Or as AV "Counting one by one", perhaps going through his wives. The original could imply 'experiencing one thing after another', i.e. the things he lists in chapter 2, following every whim and passion of the flesh to see where it leads. Instead of accepting God's revealed wisdom, he proudly decided to try to work it all out for himself. This is effectively what everyone does who rejects God's revealed word in the Bible.

This is a sad reflection upon his disobedience to the command of his mother in Prov. 31:29 LXX, where she hopes that her son will be the one who will say that "Many women are good wives, but you are the best of them all". This is quite contrary to the spirit of Solomon's experience in Ecc. 7:26,27, where he as it were goes through all his "many women" one by one, and can't say that a single one of them is "good". Bathsheba clearly has in mind that Solomon would have but one wife, whom he would praise as the best of all women. He totally rejected this ideal.

Ecc 7:28 which my soul still seeks; but I have not found. One man among a thousand have I found; but I have not found a woman among all those-

Solomon's anti-women stance is a reflection of his anger with himself for having done what God had warned against-marrying many and Gentile wives. Solomon had all the instruction he could wish for; but he didn't allow it to really sink home one little bit. He hit out on the search for an ultimately satisfying woman, but out of the 1000 he had he never found one, even when he sat down and analyzed each of them. And even politically, his marriages with all those Gentile women didn't seem to achieve him the support he desired from their home countries; Egypt gave refuge to Jeroboam, Solomon's main rival (1 Kings 11:40), even though he always acquiesced to his wives and even in his very old age he still didn't destroy the idol temples he built for them (2 Kings 23:13).

David's influence was extremely strong, but it decreased over the years. Yet even at the end, Solomon's wisdom stayed with him in that some aspects of his upbringing stayed with him- he could never escape from it. When he says that he has never found a truly wise woman, but he did know one wise man he may well have had David in mind.

Ecc 7:29 Behold, this only have I found: that God made man upright; but they search for many schemes-

Solomon may still have gender in view, considering males were upright but women were scheming. The "schemes" are the snares and traps of :26. We see here how the mighty Solomon, who took whatever woman he fancied, was not in fact free. He felt himself trapped by those women, and victims of their schemes. It was hardly surprising. Any woman he slept with automatically entered his harem, being shut off from the world and hardly seeing Solomon ever again. And so there were endless "schemes" by them. This was inevitable and of his own cre-

ation. Solomon's dislike of women was perhaps akin to how the alcoholic hates alcohol.

This is one of many allusions to the curse in Eden, whereby "to dust you shall return" (Gen. 3:19). There are many allusions to the curse in Ecclesiastes, especially in the verses which speak of man's labour being in vain and just to satisfy his appetite / need to eat. Especially Ecc. 5:17 "All his days he also eats in darkness, he is frustrated, and has sickness and wrath". "God made man upright" (Ecc. 7:29), "one sinner destroys much good." (Ecc. 9:18 cp. Rom. 5:18 "for as by one man sin entered the world... so death passed upon all men"). But Genesis 3 held out the great Hope of redemption from the curse through Messiah. But the koheleth doesn't want to factor that in. Although he surely knew Gen. 3:15 as well as he knew Gen. 3:19. But he wallows in the curse rather than the long term blessing of Eden restored in the Kingdom.

ECCLESIASTES CHAPTER 8

Ecc 8:1 Who is like the wise man? And who knows the interpretation of a thing? A man's wisdom makes his face shine, and the hardness of his face is changed-

See on :2. This may be a reflection upon how Solomon as the most famous "wise man" had a face shining with wisdom, and his face was thought to be soft and wise. For Ecclesiastes is Solomon looking back in autobiography. But he several times admits in Ecclesiastes that now as an old man he is a hard oppressor, whipping his people (1 Kings 12:11). Indeed wisdom does make a man's face to shine, for Stephen's face shone because of his wisdom (Acts 6:10,15 clearly allude here). But Solomon's face became hard in his old age; and he realized that. He so well analyzes himself; but refuses to repent and change.

He proudly insisted: "Who is as the wise man?", as if the possession of theoretical truth and wisdom was the ultimate possession; and he then goes on to say that this made him beyond criticism (Ecc. 8:2-4). This surely *must* be a danger for any community or individual who considers they have "the truth" and who considers the possession of it to be of the utmost importance.

"Who knows the interpretation of a thing?" would fit what koheleth elsewhere argues- that God's ways are beyond understanding. We cannot find truth, he concludes, because God has made it too hard to understand. This is wrong on so many counts. He may therefore again be mocking wisdom and the "wise man" as all the same, part of the vanity of life. He has elsewhere lamented "Why was I more wise?", and claimed that wise

and foolish have the same end in eternal death. And that the luck / chance factor is so great in life, that it often trumps the possession of wisdom. What matters in reality, he suggests, is to just keep the king's command (:2), because if you don't, you will get into trouble. And he says explicitly in :17 that a wise man cannot understand God: "I saw all the work of God, that man can't find out the work that is done under the sun, because however much a man labours to seek it out, yet he won't find it. Yes even though a wise man thinks he can comprehend it, he won't be able to find it". Ecclesiastes makes many allusions to the fall of man. The constant lament that man 'cannot know' alludes to the taking of the fruit of the tree of knowledge. But koheleth sarcastically laments that even that didn't give man much knowledge, and he must die as he was forbidden the fruit of the tree of life.

Every reader of Ecclesiastes notices the Hebrew word *hebel*, used thirty-eight times and translated "vapour", "breath", "wind", "meaninglessness", "emptiness", "futility" and "vanity". James alludes to this in saying that "What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes" (James 4:14 ESV). But he goes on to say that therefore, we should live life unlike koheleth but in an awareness of God's involvement and our answerability to Him. *Hebel* has no single translation in English. But some versions prefer the translation "enigma" and that often 'works' in Ecclesiastes. This suggests that the pain of life is that it is an enigma, a riddle that we are unable to solve by our nature, although there may theoretically be some resolution to it. In this case, the idea that there is an answer, but God has hidden it from us so that it is unknowable, becomes a huge theme. And that is a very and persistent-

ly skeptical and incorrect presentation of God. In fact it seems that the enigma is only solved by the appreciation of grace, of the resurrection of the body, future judgment and the eternity of God's Kingdom. All things that Hezekiah and Solomon set their hearts not to accept.

Ecc 8:2 I say, Keep the king's command! because of the oath to God-

Despite having such knowledge and wisdom with which to rule Israel (for this was the primary purpose of the gift of wisdom to him), Solomon oppressed his people (1 Kings 12:11). With evident reference to himself, he commented: "Because the king's word hath power, who may say unto him, What doest thou?" (Ecc. 8:4 RV). It is only God who cannot be questioned in this way. But Solomon felt that because he possessed God's wisdom, he could therefore act as God: "I counsel thee, Keep the King's command, and that in regard of the oath of God" (Ecc. 8:2) could suggest that he thought that his commandments were in fact God's. So the possession of Truth, which we too have, can lead to an incredible arrogance, a lack of openness to others' comments upon us, and a certainty that *we* are right in all that we do and are beyond criticism. The hardness of a man is changed by true wisdom (Ecc. 8:1 RV), but knowing this, Solomon became hard hearted. He had the wisdom- but as he said, it was far from him personally.

The Hebrew could be translated to mean that "I counsel" to keep the command of a King if you can do so without breaking your oath with God. This was what Hezekiah did when he made a covenant with Assyria and Egypt, being assured by his courtiers that he was not thereby comprising the oath /

covenant with Yahweh. Isaiah of course criticizes him over this, on Yahweh's behalf.

Ecc 8:3 Don't be hasty to go out of his presence. Don't persist in an evil thing, for he does whatever pleases him-

Here Solomon demands absolute respect, and speaks of himself as God, doing his will, judging evil and demanding the utmost respect in his presence. This was Solomon's problem, as it is of many today; he considered that his very possession of Divine truth enabled him to play God, and he ended up acting as if he were God. Remember that he wrote all this at a time when he had turned away from Yahweh. One psychological, subconscious reason why he did so was because he was playing God himself.

Ecc 8:4 for the king's word is supreme. Who can say to him, What are you doing?-

See on :2,3. This is a sad contrast to how his father David had throughout Ps. 119 considered Yahweh's word as supreme. Only Yahweh is beyond question, and cannot be asked "What are you doing?" (Job 9:12). Solomon surely knew that scripture in Job, for the book was in existence by his time, and David often alludes to it. But he willfully appropriates it to himself. He wrote all this at a time when he had turned away from Yahweh. One psychological, subconscious reason why he did so was because he was playing God himself.

Isaiah later labours the point that God does what He wishes (:3) and none can argue with Him about what He is doing. But the author here states that the king has those attributes. Hezekiah was contemporary with Isaiah and we suspect that here he is blasphemously appropriating to himself Isaiah's words about Yahweh. He was playing God.

Ecc 8:5 Whoever keeps the commandment shall not come to harm, and his wise heart will know the time and procedure-

This appears to refer to the commandment of the king of the previous verses, not of God. GNB: "As long as you obey his commands, you are safe, and a wise person knows how and when to do it". Solomon has himself in view as the king, and he defines wisdom as unquestioning obedience to himself. His Divine wisdom remained with him, but he hijacks it to bolster his own power and authority- as many do today.

It could be argued that this is yet another example of sarcasm by koheleth, because he states plainly in :7 "he doesn't know that which will be; for who can tell him how it will be?". And he says explicitly in :17 that a wise man cannot understand God: "I saw all the work of God, that man can't find out the work that is done under the sun, because however much a man labours to seek it out, yet he won't find it. Yes even though a wise man thinks he can comprehend it, he won't be able to find it". He has often stated that wisdom and folly produce no real difference in ultimate outcome, and chance happens to both wise and foolish. If we read :5-7 as a single statement, the idea may be that the "wise heart" will accept that he cannot know what will happen in the future. It's all too hard and beyond man (as stated on :1).

This must be balanced against the earlier statement that sin is inevitable and perfect obedience will not be achieved, so seeking it is pointless (Ecc. 7:20 "there is not a righteous man on earth, who does good and doesn't sin"). So we could read this as tongue in cheek sarcasm against the idea of obedience to commandments. Because the author argues that no man knows "the time", i.e. can attach meaning to event (:7).

Ecc 8:6 For there is a time and procedure for every purpose-

"Purpose" is "delight". David's "delight" was in God's law (Ps. 1:2 s.w.) and also in the things of the future Kingdom of God (s.w. 2 Sam. 23:5); our "delight" in those things is reflected in our attitudes to God's word. And we shall be finally judged according to our 'delights', our dominant desires (s.w. Ecc. 3:17; 8:6). The Lord Jesus was devoted to sharing Yahweh's "delight" (Is. 53:10). We shall be judged according to what are our dominant desires. But Solomon seems to be playing God here by assuming that coming before *him* as the judge of Israel was coming before God's judgment. See on :2-4.

Despite the way that Solomon as it were hijacked God's role as judge, what he says about judgment is true enough. There is indeed a present aspect to judgment. "The day of the Lord is coming, but it is even now" (Mic. 7:4 Heb.). God isn't passive to human behaviour- right now "To every matter there is a time and a judgment (LXX *krisis*)" (Ecc. 8:6 RVmg.). He perceives our actions right now as critically important. And this should highlight to us the crucial importance of life and right living today.

Each action and thought and word is *now* judged by God [even though Solomon had tried to hijack that role by playing God]; and the result will be communicated to us on the last day. There is a *krisis* (judgment) *now* for every work (Ecc. 8:5,6 LXX). Every action and moment is a crisis. In this thought alone we see the crucial importance of life and living, every moment. As cotton wool clouds drift across the sky, we can lose this sense of urgency and vitality which there ought to be about every moment we live here. But we *know* His judgments; we *know* how He judges behaviour; and therefore we should live as

men and women under judgment. Each act and thought is our judgment. It has been truly observed by John Robinson: "'To every matter there is a time (*kairos*) and a judgment (*krisis*)' (Ecc. 8:6 RV margin). And each particular moment of judgment makes its contribution towards the supreme consummation towards which it is all working- the final *kairos* which is also the final *krisis*" *In The End God* (London: James Clark, 1950), p. 57.. The judgment is the final crisis. That sense of crisis must not be lost on us. And yet we have a tendency to act and speak and think as if judgment day is not going to come: "Although thou sayest thou shalt not see him [in judgment], yet judgment *is* before him", right now (Job 35:14).

Although the misery of man is heavy on him-

This misery is because Solomon considers that man doesn't know his future, and death appears final (:7).

Ecc 8:7 For he doesn't know that which will be; for who can tell him how it will be?-

This is a frequent lament by Solomon, that he doesn't know the future. He wrote this at the end of his life, and the future in view was death. And yet the promises to David and Abraham clearly offered the resurrection of the body and future eternal inheritance of the earth. Even throughout Proverbs, Solomon sees wisdom as largely just good for this life. He has no eternal, Kingdom perspective, nor does he strongly factor in the final day of judgment. He considered himself the Messianic king, and his kingdom to be God's promised Kingdom. And now he was himself facing death, he realizes that the future is a fearful unknown.

"Who can tell him...?" of course begs the answer- God through the Lord Jesus.

Ecc 8:8 There is no man who has power over the spirit to contain the spirit; neither does he have power over the day of death. There is no discharge in war; neither shall wickedness deliver those who practice it-

The idea may be as in GNB, that death "is a battle we cannot escape; we cannot cheat our way out". Effectively this is what Solomon had been trying to do by acting as if he was somehow immortal in his playing of God (:2-4). But as he approached death, he realized how wrong he had been, and yet doesn't repent. In the context of :14, "no man" implies that no man, not even the righteous, can retain his spirit when he dies. The implication is as in Ecc. 3:21,22 that the spirit is the life force of creation which returns to God on death. And in Solomon's view, wisdom and righteousness couldn't change that. Clearly Solomon sees this life as all there is. He has no acceptance that the spirit is in fact more than the life force, for the Bible often uses the "spirit" in the sense of the character of a person, which is retained in God's memory and will be the basis of our eternal judgment (e.g. Heb. 12:23). Solomon in this sense was not a spiritual person, he failed to recognize that the spirit in the sense of our personality is of the essence, and determines our hope of eternal life in a bodily form.

We see the relevance to Hezekiah most clearly. "No man has power over the wind to retain the wind". Hezekiah sees life as the wind. He says no man has power to control the day of his death- even though he had prayed for the day of his death to be delayed, and it was. Again we see him rationalizing the wonder of Divine response to his prayer. And reasoning that the extra life he was given was actually what God intended anyway, so there was no particular grace shown him nor was the extension

of life a result of his prayer being answered. The Biblical record says that it was in response to Hezekiah's prayer that the Divine word came extending his life by 15 years. "There is no discharge in that war"- even though at the time of his illness, Hezekiah was in the midst of the Assyrian war, and there was a miraculous discharge from it. Again by grace.

Ecc 8:9 All this have I seen, and applied my mind to every work that is done under the sun. There is a time in which one man has power over another to his hurt-

GNB "to suffer under him", LXX "to afflict". But Solomon was the one who afflicted the people under him (1 Kings 12:11). But he sees it as not too significant because there will be no future judgment, and death happens to all (see on :8).

"My mind" is literally "my whole heart". David spoke of seeking and praising God's grace with his "whole heart" (Ps. 9:1; 119:58; 138:1). Solomon uses the phrase, but speaks of being obedient with the "whole heart" (1 Kings 8:23; 2 Chron. 6:14) and applying the "whole heart" to the intellectual search for God (Ecc. 1:13; 8:9). There is a difference. The idea of whole hearted devotion to God was picked up by Solomon, but instead of giving the whole heart to the praise of God's grace, he instead advocated giving the whole heart to ritualistic obedience and intellectual search for God. This has been the trap fallen into by many Protestant groups whose obsession with "truth" has obscured the wonder of God's grace.

That Solomon abused his power to hurt is recognized by him elsewhere in Ecclesiastes. "Surely oppression maketh a wise man foolish" (Ecc. 7:7 RV), he commented at the end of his life- even though *right then* he was chastising the people with whips, oppressing them (1 Kings 12:11). He knew the true wis-

dom, he saw his reflection so accurately in the mirror, but resigned from its personal implications. He could even write that "I returned and considered all the oppression that are done under the sun [by himself!]: and behold the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power [Solomon was king and had set up the tax system in a clever and biased way]; but they had no comforter" (Ecc. 4:1; 5:8). It was a real case of spiritual schizophrenia- he sorrowed for the people he oppressed. He even seems to say that there is nothing to be surprised at in the poor being oppressed, because the whole hierarchy of officialdom above them do the same, and that chain of control ends in himself (see on Ecc. 5:2). He saw his sin as inevitable, as part of his participation in humanity- he didn't own up to his own desperate need for grace. Yet he also knew that "man lords it over man [cp. Solomon's oppression of the people] to his own hurt" (Ecc. 8:9 RSV). He realized that he had only hurt himself by abusing people. And yet he continued, despite his accurate and incisive self analysis.

Ecc 8:10 So I saw the wicked buried. Indeed they came also from holiness. They went and were forgotten in the city where they did this. This also is vanity-

It was all vanity to Solomon because of his observation in :14 that the righteous also die the same death as the wicked. He therefore considers that the moral teaching of righteousness has no lasting effect, and in :16 laments he had built Yahweh's temple, which he now in his old age wasn't using as instead he worshipped in the idol temples he had built nearby to it (1 Kings 3:4-8).

The Hebrew is difficult here, but AV may be closest: "I saw the wicked buried, who had come and gone from the place of the holy". The idea may be that the wicked desecrated the temple regularly by going in and out of the holy space with impunity. But still they died the same death as anyone else who lived a far less blasphemous life. So he seems to conclude that even blasphemy means nothing in the bigger picture, because death is the finality for us all.

Solomon uses the same words as his father David in Ps. 37:10: "Yes, though you look for his place, he isn't there". Solomon in his collapse of faith considers that not finding the place of the deceased is just an example of life's vanity. David his father saw it is a triumph of good over evil and a foretaste of how things shall be eternally put right at the last day. But Solomon lost the kingdom perspective, using the words of David his father simply in a secular sense.

The reference to "holiness" could mean that even the holy were in due course forgotten in their own town, which is the theme of :14. Solomon concludes that holiness is therefore vanity because no lasting reputation is left. He clearly saw wisdom as only good for this life, and many of his Proverbs see the advantage of wisdom as getting a good name and image for ourselves in this life.

However GNB and LXX give a different slant: "And then I saw the ungodly carried into the tombs, and that out of the holy place: and they departed, and were praised in the city, because they had done thus: this also is vanity" (LXX); "Yes, I have seen the wicked buried and in their graves, but on the way back from the cemetery people praise them in the very city where they did their evil. It is useless" (GNB). Solomon's un-

derstanding was that the greatest reward was to have a good name and reputation after death, and he laments that this is attained even by the wicked. So he sees no point in being righteous.

Often Koheleth says that good and bad will come to nothing and be forgotten as though they had never existed. But this is Hezekiah mocking Isaiah's words of Is. 23:13, that this is only the judgment of the wicked. But now Hezekiah applies to all men, because He has decided that final judgment will not come as God said it would.

Ecc 8:11 Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil-

I will suggest on :12 that :12-14 are Solomon quoting common wisdom of the time and showing it to be wrong. The GNB sees it this way. But I think the quotation may include :11. Because in :10,14 Solomon is arguing that the wicked and righteous all die the same death, and often in secular life the wicked have a better life and reputation left behind them than the righteous. Therefore, the idea that evil must be judged immediately lest people become evil is wrong and unhelpful. That seems to be Solomon's position. "Sentence" is a Persian word, found elsewhere only in Esther 1:20, which would confirm the idea that this is a quotation from another source which Solomon is disagreeing with. But the sentence against evil may refer to death; for in Ecc. 9:3 Solomon repeats the phrase "the heart of the sons of men is full of evil", blaming this on the fact they are alive and not dead. This is nihilism at its worst. Solomon blames the evil heart of man on the fact he doesn't

die from the womb. This is quite wrong reasoning, and reflects how Solomon indeed "hated life".

This again could sound like the argument that sin is inevitable, and therefore all spiritual endeavour is pointless. Peter argues that God delays judgment by His grace, because He wants to bring men to repentance. But Hezekiah liked to conclude that judgment had to be now, not in the future. Because he had no real faith in God's future activities. And because he didn't see immediate judgment from God, he concluded that human sin was therefore God's fault.

Ecc 8:12 Though a sinner commits crimes a hundred times, and lives long, yet surely I know that it will be better with those who fear God, who are reverent before him-

This and :13 are not necessarily an appeal to fear God. It would contradict the general tenor of Solomon's position. And as noted on Ecc. 1:1, I suggest this is not part of any dialectical argument, whereby arguments are being given for and against faith. I think GNB is right to read :12-14 as Solomon quoting the generally accepted position that faith in God makes things work out well in the end; after all, Solomon was writing this at the end of his life, when his heart had turned away from God. So it would be surprising if at that time he professed personal faith in God. So the quotation from the accepted position goes something as in GNB: "A sinner may commit a hundred crimes and still live. Oh yes, I know what they say: "If you obey God, everything will be all right,

but it will not go well for the wicked. Their life is like a shadow and they will die young, because they do not obey God."

But this is nonsense. Look at what happens in the world: sometimes the righteous get the punishment of the wicked, and the wicked get the reward of the righteous. I say it is useless". Where Solomon really personally stands is explained in :14; he considers the righteous and wicked have the same end in death, and therefore there is no great advantage in fearing God. But, he admits, that sinning over much might result in a bad life experience, so the way of wisdom would avoid such extremes.

Ecc 8:13 But it shall not be well with the wicked, neither shall he lengthen days like a shadow; because he doesn't fear God-

See on :12. I suggest this is a quotation from generally accepted wisdom, which Solomon denied in his old age. The next verse goes on to state that in Solomon's view, the wicked do sometimes have long lives. As discussed on Ecc. 1:1, this is not a dialectical argument, for the definition of "vanity" continues throughout this section with no clear break between the supposedly opposing sides of the argument. These verses are perhaps the strongest case for the idea that Solomon is in fact arguing for faith in God, through using dialectic or contrary arguments. But the argument doesn't hold water, for Solomon is writing this in old age when his heart has already turned away from God. And these verses are best understood as noted on :12, as a quotation of popular views about God, which Solomon is rejecting.

Ecc. 8:10-14 are an example of where on one hand the writer "knows" truth, but he says that he "sees" or observes something different. This is typical of his problem- he knows Divine truth, but sees the world through worldly eyes. That truth which he knows has not affected his worldview. Thus

he "knows" that those who fear God will be blessed and the wicked punished (:12,13), but he sees / observes that the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer; or, the same thing happens to them. His comment that "This is vanity" may have Divine truth as the referent; "this", Divine truth, is vain and divorced from reality. If he had a Kingdom perspective, appreciating and giving full weight to the idea of final judgment, then this observation would not have been any burden to him.

Hezekiah did lengthen his days, and the shadow confirmed it- by 15 years. But this was by grace. The Divine judgment against him was delayed- but not because he deserved it. But now he reasons as if this was because of his righteousness. Just as he accepts the praise and congratulations for 'his' defeat of the Assyrian army, when that was achieved solely by God's grace.

Ecc 8:14 There is a vanity which is done on the earth, that there are righteous men to whom it happens according to the work of the wicked. Again, there are wicked men to whom it happens according to the work of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity-

See on :12. This is Solomon's take on the popular ideas he has just quoted in :11-13, whereby righteousness has a reward and wickedness brings punishment. He now considers it nonsense. But this arose from his refusal to see any eternal perspective. The eternal outcomes of this life are not immediate, they are articulated at the last day of judgment, and will be experienced eternally in God's future Kingdom. But Solomon didn't believe this, and so he was left with being the miserable man of 1 Cor. 15:19 who has hope only in this life. See on :15.

Ecc 8:15 Then I commended mirth, because a man has no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be joyful: for that will accompany him in his labour all the days of his life which God has given him under the sun-

This is quoted in 1 Cor. 15:32 as the position of those who deny faith in the resurrection of the body. And indeed this was exactly Solomon's problem; see on :14; Ecc. 9:7. Solomon earlier taught that going to a funeral and sorrowing is better than the laughter of a wedding feast (Ecc. 7:2,3). Yet despite realizing this on an intellectual level, Solomon personally commended mirth / laughter to himself (Ecc. 8:15), and advises removing sorrow from the heart (Ecc. 11:10). Again we see Solomon's amazing ability, indeed the ability of human nature, to comprehend truth on one level, and yet reason and live exactly and precisely and consciously the opposite.

On one hand Solomon condemns mirth (Ecc. 7:4; Prov. 20:32 LXX "If thou abandon thyself to mirth, and stretch forth thine hand in a quarrel, thou shalt be disgraced"). But this is exactly what Solomon did in Ecc. 2:1,2; 8:15. He refused to accept his own wisdom. It was merely a teaching position, and he felt the need to empirically find its truth. he failed to personalize the wisdom he taught, and therefore turned away in the end.

"Mirth" is the word also translated "pleasure". Don't love "pleasure" (Prov. 21:17) and Prov. 14:13 "even in mirth there is sorrow" are both s.w. "mirth" in Ecc. 2:1,2; 8:15. Solomon had to re-learn this for himself rather than accept direct Divine teaching about it. He recognized that fools love mirth (Prov. 7:4) but still he wanted it. He rejected this wisdom and only

came to agree with it through doing just what Prov.14:13 condemns (Ecc. 2:2).

Ecc 8:16 When I applied my heart to know wisdom-

Solomon was given wisdom by God, he didn't reach it by any personal intellectual process. But now he has rejected that and seeks to know wisdom from his own observations and intellectual process. And that wisdom was associated with his heart turning away from God and to the nihilism of idolatry.

And to see the business that is done on the earth (for also there is that neither day nor night sees sleep with his eyes)-

In Ps. 127, instead of building the temple / house for Yahweh, Solomon is advised to let Yahweh build up his house / family as the seed of David (Ps. 127:3-5). God would give sleep to the beloved, "Jedidiah", Solomon (Ps. 127:2), and he would awake and find his house / seed built for him by God- rather than Solomon frantically building a house for God. The same phrase is only used of Solomon *not* giving sleep to his eyes in his mad addiction to works (Prov. 6:4; Ecc 8:16). Ps. 127 was "for Solomon" rather than necessarily "by" him. And it seems he refused the offer of having his house / seed built up for him, but rather chose to try to build God a house in his addiction to achieving blessing by works. But now, as in Ecc. 5:1-6, Solomon is lamenting the way he had built the temple; for he now believes that the righteous go to the same end as the wicked (:14), and so what he had once believed and upheld was vain. See on :17.

Ecc 8:17 then I saw all the work of God, that man can't find out the work that is done under the sun, because however much a man labours to seek it out, yet he won't find it. Yes even though a wise man thinks he can comprehend it, he won't be able to find it-

GNB translates :16,17: "Whenever I tried to become wise and learn what goes on in the world, I realized that you could stay awake night and day and never be able to understand what God is doing. However hard you try, you will never find out. The wise may claim to know, but they don't". As suggested on :16, this continues Solomon's abrogation of the Divine wisdom given him in his youth. Seeing that Solomon has so often called himself "the wise man", he is here effectively denying the personal truth of all the wisdom he has. He also sees that wisdom as not particularly deep, seeing it cannot save from immediate death in this life. He sees the reality of death as the trump card against wisdom. And yet as noted on :14,15, this is because he refuses to accept the doctrine of the resurrection of the body.

But it seems Solomon or Hezekiah liked to think that finding God was a far too difficult intellectual exercise to be achievable, and God had in fact made it so (Ecc. 3:11; 8:17). Because, presumably, He wants to hide Himself from His own creations. Indeed there is the implication that God is cruel to have placed a desire for eternity in man's structure, and yet make it unattainable for him. It's the same idea as the comment that what is crooked cannot be made straight (Ecc. 1:15; 7:13), especially when God has made it crooked. The argument seems to be that nobody can get totally right with God because He doesn't let them have the chance to change. But this was just a convenient excuse to not pursue relationship with God. It is also a studied denial of the possibility of future eternity, at the resurrection. And we hear it today. Isaiah, as so often, comments on this verse by saying that God does declare [Heb. 'explain'] the end from the beginning- it can be found out through His word (Is. 46:10).

Paul may allude here, when he exclaims about the unsearchable wonder of God's grace: "Oh, the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" (Rom. 11:33). Koheleth lamented that life is vanity because you can't understand God's work. But for Paul, what is not understandable is the depth of God's saving grace. But future salvation and grace were foreign to koheleth, and so he is left just with the 'problem' that God's ways are beyond full human understanding.

ECCLESIASTES CHAPTER 9

Ecc 9:1 For all this I laid to my heart, even to explore all this-

This continues the theme of the preceding verses, where we saw Solomon abrogating the wisdom given him by God, which he didn't reach by any personal intellectual process. But now he has rejected that, and seeks to know wisdom from his own observations explorations and intellectual process ["laid to my heart"]. And that wisdom was associated with his heart turning away from God and to the nihilism of idolatry.

Hezekiah was 'left' by God so that he would know what was really in his heart, and here we have it written down.

That the righteous, and the wise, and their works, are in the hand of God-

This must be associated with Solomon's conclusion in Ecc. 8:14 that there is no real advantage of the righteous over the wicked and foolish because they all die the same death. Here Solomon seems to say that righteousness is only anyway part of some predetermined behaviour and is not therefore morally culpable. The idea may be as in GNB "that God controls the actions of wise and righteous people, even their love and their hate". Secular people at the end of their lives often come to the conclusion that everything is somehow overruled by God, to the point that human behaviour is pretty much all Divinely determined and enforced. Solomon at this point had turned away from Yahweh, so he may refer to "God" in a more general sense of some higher power. But he fails to accept the basic thesis of the book of Proverbs; that human actions can be controlled, we have election, and love and hatred are choices. And thereby we

are accountable for our actions and to Divine judgment. But Solomon didn't believe in this, and so it led him to conclude that human behaviour isn't that significant and is somehow all orchestrated by some higher hand than our own. See on Ecc. 11:3.

Whether it is love or hatred, man doesn't know it; all is before them-

The idea may be, as discussed above, that love or hatred, righteousness or sin, has no eternal consequence seeing that all die the same death. GNB "No one knows anything about what lies ahead". This is a frequent lament by Solomon, that he doesn't know the future. He wrote this at the end of his life, and the future in view was death. And yet the promises to David and Abraham clearly offered the resurrection of the body and future eternal inheritance of the earth. Even throughout Proverbs, Solomon sees wisdom as largely just good for this life. He has no eternal, Kingdom perspective, nor does he strongly factor in the final day of judgment. He considered himself the Messianic king, and his kingdom to be God's promised Kingdom. And now he was himself facing death, he realizes that the future is a fearful unknown.

Ecc 9:2 All things come alike to all. There is one event to the righteous and to the wicked; to the good, to the clean, to the unclean, to him who sacrifices, and to him who doesn't sacrifice-

Solomon is again writing autobiography. He had built the temple of Yahweh, but now at this point in old age his heart had turned away from Yahweh to idols, and he was no longer sacrificing to Yahweh but to the idols, whose temples he had built near Yahweh's (1 Kings 3:4-8). He sees no problem in his choice because he has convinced himself that sacrificers to

Yahweh die the same death as those who worship idols. *Both Solomon and Hezekiah are noted for offering many sacrifices. But they conclude it was all meaningless because death is so final.*

The man who didn't offer sacrifice was Abel, and things did indeed go differently for him. It is perhaps no coincidence that the Hebrew word for "Abel" is of the same consonants as that translated "vanity" [*hebel*] so often in Ecclesiastes. There could be the implication that the outcomes for both Cain and Abel was death and therefore whether or not they sacrificed acceptably was irrelevant. This would then be another of those points in Ecclesiastes where koheleth verges upon the blasphemous.

As is the good, so is the sinner; he who takes an oath, as he who fears an oath-

GNB "one who takes an oath is no better off than one who does not". I suggested above that the first half of this verse refers to Solomon's building of Yahweh's temple but not now sacrificing in it. I noted on Ecc. 5:1-3 that Solomon there comments upon how he had built Yahweh's temple simply because David had made an oath to build it, and that oath became binding on Solomon to fulfil it. He sees the temple which he had forsaken as irrelevant because the builders and users of it would meet the same death as the idolaters. *Hezekiah had vowed to serve God quietly the rest of his days- and he now sees that oath as meaningless.*

Solomon cynically concludes that the wicked and the righteous all die the same death, and so, he concludes, there is no great advantage in righteousness (Ecc. 9:2). This contrasts with Solomon's huge emphasis in Proverbs upon the difference between the wicked and the righteous (e.g. Prov. 11:18). But it seems he got to that wrong conclusion because he assumes

that the blessing for righteousness is in this life, and likewise the curses for wickedness. He totally fails to think in terms of the future judgment and eternal life of God's future kingdom. And so as he himself got older and approached death, he concluded that death means that all effort towards righteousness is therefore vain. He made the same mistake as the false teachers of 1 Cor. 15:19, who likewise considered that "hope in Christ" was only helpful for "this life", because they rejected the resurrection of the body and future judgment and reward.

In the end, Solomon felt that for himself, it was as well to be righteous as to be wicked, for in death there was no further difference (Ecc. 9:2,5,9). He knows judgment will come (Ecc. 11:9), at least for the young people, but he reasons as if it won't—at least not for him. He knows, but he doesn't know on the personal, experiential level. This is why there are apparently contradictory statements in Ecclesiastes. For example, the wise dies as the fool, with no more eternal remembrance than the fool (Ecc. 2:15,16). This, Solomon, says, is what he himself believes in his own heart. But in Ecc. 7:12 he says that wisdom gives life to those who have it. But then again in Prov. 9:16-18 he observes that although wisdom can help, it's benefits are easily undone, so easily as to make it useless. I don't see these different perspectives as being the difference between life in the world and life in the spiritual realm. They are all spoken *with conviction* by Solomon, which, to my mind, ruins the idea that he himself believed the Truth but was simply outlining what life is like without God. He advocates both ways. My resolution of this is that he knew and preached God's Truth, but for him personally, it meant nothing at all. And therefore in prac-

tice he advocated the life of self-enjoyment, acting *as if* all the other truth of wisdom was not operative in practice.

Ecc 9:3 This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that there is one event to all: yes also, the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live, and after that they go to the dead-

Solomon sees death as a great evil; GNB "is as wrong as anything that happens in this world". Yet according to Genesis, death was created by God as a punishment for human sin, and the consequence of sin. Had Solomon accepted the message of resurrection of the body and future judgment, he would not have portrayed death so harshly; nor effectively charged God with abusing man by allowing death to happen. What a contrast with Paul, who earnestly desired to "depart" (Phil. 1:23), and the generally hopeful approach to death found in the faithful of the Biblical record.

This verse is to be connected with Ecc. 8:11: "Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil". The sentence against evil may refer to death; for in Ecc. 9:3 Solomon repeats the phrase "the heart of the sons of men is full of evil", blaming this on the fact they are alive and not dead. This is nihilism at its worst. Solomon blames the evil heart of man on the fact he doesn't die from the womb. This is quite wrong reasoning, and reflects how Solomon indeed "hated life".

Ecc 9:4 For to him who is joined with all the living there is hope; for a living dog is better than a dead lion-

A "dog" is a term repeatedly used in the Bible for the immoral. And this is the context in this chapter, arguing that righteousness or wickedness has no eternal consequence. An

immoral man yet still alive is "better" than a dead lion of a man, morally and politically king of all. For Solomon refuses to accept any conception of resurrection.

In passing, it needs to be noted that the LXX uses the word *koinonio* here. We are in a sense in fellowship with the world in that we are human- we are "joined (LXX *koinonio* -fellowshipped) to all the living" (Ecc. 9:4); we are guilty in some way for the rejection of God's Son- *we* turned away from Him, and esteemed Him rejected of God (Is. 53:3,4). *But we can do nothing about being members of the human race.* We cannot exit from humanity, as we cannot exit from the body of Christ. Guilt by association, if we must use that phrase, is something we can do nothing about.

Ecc 9:5 For the living know that they will die, but the dead don't know anything, neither do they have any more a reward; for their memory is forgotten-

Solomon may mean that their memory is forgotten by men. Throughout Proverbs and Ecclesiastes he seems to think that leaving a good memory is the best outcome that can be hoped for from living by "wisdom". But he now accepts that over the passage of time, even that will fade. He fails to accept that the memory of the righteous remains with God, and is the basis for their eternal judgment. Again we see how having a permanent, positive memorial in society was so important for Solomon. Even in his book of Proverbs, he sees the advantage of wisdom as being in that men will think well of the wise, and they progress in society. But now Solomon is struck by the reality of the fact that ultimately, memory of all the living will be forgotten as the generations pass. He fails to factor in that it is the wicked whose memory is forgotten (Ps. 49:11), but

the memory of the righteous will be preserved (Ps. 112:6; Mal. 3:16). Solomon refused to accept his father's teaching on this, even though he claims to glorify him.

Hezekiah of all men knew he would die. After 15 years. *He reasons here as if because death is unconsciousness, therefore they have no more reward and will just disappear in memory. That is a studied rejection of the possibility of resurrection, even though resurrection of the body was clearly implicit in the promises in Eden, to Abraham, David etc. and was believed in by Job. Resurrection changes everything- and the Lord's resurrection enables it. Hence the huge significance of His resurrection.*

Ecc 9:6 Also their love, their hatred, and their envy has perished long ago; neither have they any more a portion forever in anything that is done under the sun-

Solomon has much to say about the evil of envy (e.g. Prov. 14:30; 23:17; 24:1,19; 27:4). But true as his condemnations of envy are, he surely has in mind the way that Ephraim envied Judah, and envied his throne (s.w. Is. 11:13). This all came to full term after his death, when Ephraim departed from Judah under Jeroboam. Again, Solomon is harnessing Divine truth to his own agenda of self justification. And we who claim to hold His truths must take warning. But as he faced death, he came to realize that all such envy is as nothing before the reality of death, which he understood as the end of life, as he had assumed this life was the time for reward and expresses no personal hope in a resurrection of the body (Ecc. 4:4; 9:6).

He considers that all the love and hatred, the good and the bad done by the righteous and wicked, is meaningless because they die the same death. Again he refuses to accept his father's understanding, that it is the wicked who only have a portion in

this life (Ps. 17:14). But the righteous have an eternal portion, which God's true Israel can look forward to receiving at the last day.

Koheleth seven times repeats the idea of having your "portion" now, in the small blessings of human existence such as a happy marriage (Ecc. 9:9; 2:10,21; 3:22; 5:18; 9:6,9; 11:2). The totality [seven times] of our "portion" is petty blessing now in this brief life. Koheleth's argument is that man may as well enjoy these petty blessings, because this life is all you get and there's nothing further to come after death. But under the old covenant, the "portion" of the faithful was an inheritance of land, for eternity (Gen. 31:14; Num. 18:20). But koheleth never mentions "Yahweh". He had left covenant relationship with Him and had no hope for the future. So all he saw was kingdom now- and as he observes, it isn't much, and is dwarfed for him by the eternal finality of death. He is sure that there is no "portion" in the future for all who are dead (Ecc. 9:6). If we have the Kingdom Hope surely held in our minds, that that is our "portion", then we will not focus upon the presence nor absence of any "portion" now in life under the sun.

Ecc 9:7 Go your way- eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has already accepted your works-

We must remember that this was written at a time when Solomon had turned away from God. He has just been arguing that whether a man lives in righteousness or sin, in love or hatred, it makes no difference because he dies the same death. He considers God incapable of resurrecting and judging a man after death (Ecc. 3:22). So I would take this as Solomon saying sarcastically: 'Get on and enjoy your life, make your heart mer-

ry with wine, and don't worry, 'God' accepts you whatever you do'.

So the idea is as GNB: "It's all right with God". Solomon at this point had turned away from God, so we can read this as sarcasm. He has advocated eating and drinking in Ecc. 8:14,15 because he thinks that there is no ultimate judgment nor difference in outcome for the wicked and the righteous. And so now he sarcastically quips that it's OK to eat and drink, because God is good with that- He's good with anything. So Solomon liked to think. The idea of a last day of judgment and eternal consequence is clearly in the Bible as he then had it available to him. And it is engrained even in the conscience of secular man. To deny this so strenuously was therefore willful and very consciously done. And the use of sarcasm reflects that.

But the Hebrew translated "accepts" means literally to satisfy a debt, and is elsewhere translated 'to reconcile self'. It could be that he saw works as reconciling man's debt to God, rather than perceiving that grace is paramount. He keeps on about David his father; and yet there was a crucial difference. David perceived the need for grace as the basis of man's reconciliation with God; whereas Solomon thought it was works. David wrote that God wants a broken heart and not thousands of sacrifices; yet Solomon offered the thousands of sacrifices, but didn't have the contrite heart of his father.

As discussed on :18, Ecclesiastes is full of allusion to the curse in Eden. To 'eat bread' was part of the curse. Koheleth is perhaps saying that because eating bread was part of the curse, it is therefore approved by God to enjoy eating and drinking. And he wrongly implies that because of the determinism he perceives in life, all human action is somehow pre-approved by

God; everything is "fine in its time" (Ecc. 3:11, AV "beautiful"). Hence the force of the final correction to all this by the inspired editor at the end of the book.

There are many allusions to Ecclesiastes in 1 Cor. 15, the classic chapter about resurrection. Because it is resurrection, and the prospect of eternity because of the Lord's resurrection, which is the ultimate answer to the nihilism of human life as so well observed in Ecclesiastes. Paul surely alludes to this verse by saying that without the prospect of resurrection, indeed we may as well take koheleth's advice and "eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die". Even worse, koheleth argues that God gets that and has in some way pre-approved that attitude.

Ecc 9:8 Let your garments be always white, and don't let your head lack oil-

The idea is as discussed on :7, to get on and enjoy life and not to let ourselves "lack" any pleasure, because this life is all we have, and there will be no judgment from God; so Solomon thought. White garments and oil were worn to festivities, so the idea is that man may as well party every day.

Ecc 9:9 Live joyfully with the wife whom you love all the days of your life of vanity, which He has given you under the sun, all your days of vanity: for that is your portion in life, and in your labour in which you labour under the sun-

Elsewhere Solomon concludes that life is vain and pointless, and one may as well have been a stillborn child or never have existed. He "hated life" (Ecc. 2:17). But he concludes that one may as well live joyfully with one wife, not be righteous over much and not be overly wicked, in order to have a reasonable experience. His idea is that our "portion" is only in this life. He disregarded his father David's sense that Yahweh was

his portion (Ps. 16:5 s.w.), and the huge emphasis that the eternal inheritance of the earth in the future Kingdom of God was the "portion" of the true Israel, as promised to Abraham and repeated in the Biblical record. But Solomon blacked out, as it were, all that. He saw this life as our portion and nothing more.

He exhorted to live joyfully with "the wife" (singular) of youth, knowing full well that he in his old age was a polygamist whose many wives had led him astray. This is typical of how Ecclesiastes is so packed with reflections of the contradictions within Solomon's mind. They arise because Solomon knew and perceived God's truth, and yet felt it meant nothing to him personally. Thus he teaches truth in Ecclesiastes, but intersperses it with his own personal depression and sense that none of it really has any meaning for him personally. The themes of labour, vanity, sleep and children which are found in Ecclesiastes all occur in Psalm 127, a Psalm of or for Solomon- where the message is clearly given that unless the Lord builds the temple, all this labour is in vain. And yet knowing this Solomon *did* labour for it so hard, and then came to the conclusion that it was indeed in vain. If only he had believed the words he earlier composed and sung in Ps. 127, he needn't have had to come to that sad conclusion.

The allusion is clearly to the curse in Eden- labouring under the sun, "until you die" being the implication. the author doesn't go on to the hope of release from that curse offered through Messiah (Gen. 3:15). Instead he appears to wallow in it, advising only to try to endure it as cheerfully as possible, not least through a good marriage.

Ecc 9:10 Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in Sheol, where you are going-

Koheleth believes that the work of a man's hands is enjoyable in this life, but will not survive death. By contrast, Is. 65:22 argues that God's people will "long [eternally] enjoy the work of their hands" - *the work they did in this life for God will have eternal fruit and enjoyment*. But koheleth has no Kingdom perspective.

This comment that there is no wisdom in the grave suggests that he saw wisdom as only helpful for this life. And this is implied a number of times even in the book of Proverbs. We note that Solomon understood *sheol* as the grave, a state of unconsciousness. There is no Biblical support for the idea of "hell" as a place of conscious punishment or existence.

Much of the Preacher's message is built on the tragic finality of death being an imperative to present action. And this is true, even though Solomon meant it in the context of his wrong belief that there is no future judgment nor Kingdom of God. He has some fine images of this finality; the silver cord breaks in just one link, and the beautiful bowl of life, of this body, crashes to the dusty floor and smashes; the rope holding the bucket breaks and it plunges irretrievably into the well; and as David observed, in death we are as water spilt on the ground on a hot day, which cannot be gathered up. We are as children who have dropped their precious sweets in the dust, fraught with the realization they are spoilt for good and there are no more. They may look up to us for more, and with as much pain in our eyes as is in theirs, we turn out our pockets to show there are no more. And so the tragedy of the human experience

teaches us to live life in the Lord's service to the full, not frittering it away on the time-wasters of this world. Moses pleaded with God to make time-frittering Israel see the implications of their mortality; having eloquently spoken of the tragedy of our mortality, he concludes: "So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom" (Ps. 90:12).

Perhaps the Lord was speaking in a kind of soliloquy when He mused that "the night comes, when no man can work", and therefore man should walk and work while he has the light (Jn. 9:4, quoting Ecc. 9:10). He was speaking, in the context, not only of His own zeal to 'work' while He had life, but also applying this to His followers.

It's only when faced with death that we realize the crucial and wonderful importance of every hour which we've been given to live. Facing death as he thought, Job reflected upon the tragic brevity and speed of passing of human life, and the true meaning of the Hebrew word *nephesh*: "My days sprint past me like runners; I will never see them again. They glide by me like sailboats..." (Job 9:25). Life is indeed racing by; time management, and freeing our real selves from all the myriad things which compete to take up our time, becomes of vital importance once we realize this. There is only one ultimate thing worth studying, striving after, labouring for, reading about, working towards... and grasping the mortality of man inspires us in living out this understanding. TV, novels, endless surfing of the internet, engagement in pointless communication and discussion in this communication-crazy world... all this beguiles us of life itself.

Ecc 9:11 I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to

the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happen to them all-

This continues Solomon's impression that wisdom and righteousness is of no ultimate value because the wise and foolish all die the same death. "Time and chance" may be an idiom for death. Whether wise (spiritually) or strong or swift, the same thing, "time and chance", happens to all; i. e. death. Ecc. 9:12 backs this up: "For man also knoweth not his time (i.e. of death)... as the birds that are caught in the snare (i.e. killed); so are the sons of men snared in an evil time, when it falleth suddenly upon them". The context back in :4,5 is clearly talking about the universality of death. "Chance" does not mean 'random' or uncontrolled events. The Hebrew root by contrast implies something specifically ordained- often by God. In this case, death.

Or it could continue the sense Solomon has that there are factors in life which control our behaviour and experiences, well beyond the effect of living a righteous or foolish life. "All men" in Ecc. 9:11 in the context seems to mean "all men" literally- it does in Ecc. 3:20 and other 'mortality of man' passages. But if we take "time and chance" on face value as a translation, Paul appears to deconstruct this negative take on life by noting that for the believer, "all things work together for good". "All things" therefore delivers us from any fear that we are at the whim of random "time and chance". Whereas Solomon seems to here reject his earlier wisdom of Prov. 13:15, concluding life is just a random sequence of events.

The race not being to the swift is perhaps Solomon's take on his father's swift enemy Asahel being slain due to his speed.

"Time and chance happens..." seems to be saying that success or otherwise in life is all a question of 'luck at the right moment'. He is totally devaluing moral choice, obedience, spirituality. Without God and future judgment in the equation, luck and random chance become dominant deciders in human destiny. And this leads to a totally depressive, anemic outlook on life.

Ecc 9:12 For man also doesn't know his time-

As noted on :11, the "time" in view is the time of death. This is a far cry from the Hezekiah who did know his time of death, but by grace was given extra time- so that in fact he did know the time of his death, 15 years after his terminal illness.

As the fish that are taken in an evil net, and as the birds that are caught in the snare, even so are the sons of men snared in an evil time, when it falls suddenly on them-

This language of snares and entrapment was often used by Solomon's father David, asking to be saved from such snares (Ps. 141:9) and rejoicing that he and God's people had been (Ps. 124:7). But Solomon seems to be cynically commenting that all men are finally snared in death. In Proverbs, Solomon is continually alluding positively to his father's words. But now he alludes to those words cynically. He was no longer living out parental expectation, although it took him until older life to individuate. And when he did, he is revealed as having no real personal faith at all. Earlier Solomon had warned about avoiding spiritual snares (Prov. 7:23; 22:5), but finally in Ecc. 9:12 he concludes that death is the unavoidable snare; and therefore all attempts to avoid being morally snared into sin are ultimately vain. He came to this perspective because he failed to fully grasp the hope of the resurrection of the body at the last day.

He thought he would have the Kingdom now, and this led to his rejection of the Gospel of the Kingdom and its moral implications.

Here he says that he suffered the fate of all men in that soon he would die, he would suddenly be caught like a bird in a snare, although he knew not his time. These are the very ideas of Prov. 7:23 concerning the snaring of the simple young man by the Gentile woman: "As a bird hastes to the snare, and knows not that it is for his life". And yet he seems to rationalize this by claiming that death is a snare brought about by time and chance; he minimalized the sin of marriage out of the faith.

Ecc 9:13 I have also seen wisdom under the sun in this way, and it seemed great to me-

After the terrible statements of the previous verses, which I have shown were a negation of his father's wisdom and spiritual positions, Solomon seems to feel the need to say something positive about wisdom. But as ever, his idea is that wisdom is indeed helpful in this life, it has some advantages, but it still fails to give any lasting memorial. Because over the passage of time, the totality of death destroys all such hope of having a lasting memorial.

Ecc 9:14 There was a little city, and few men within it; and a great king came against it, besieged it, and built great bulwarks against it-

LXX "Suppose there was a little city" makes this hypothetical. And surely it was a hypothetical example at the time. But I have pointed out on Prov. 25:1 that Hezekiah was particularly interested in Solomon and his words. And it turned out to be a kind of morbid fascination, because he in his later life followed the same path to spiritual destruction as Solomon. The exam-

ple which Solomon cites of wisdom being advantageous in this life is so relevant to the salvation of Jerusalem from the Assyrians. So relevant that we could therefore conclude that just as Hezekiah's scribes rewrote some of Solomon's Proverbs under inspiration (Prov. 25:1), so they edited this part of Ecclesiastes to make it relevant to Hezekiah's time. And the references to life as a "shadow" would be relevant to the reversal of the shadow on the sundial as the sign given to Hezekiah (Is. 38:8). Or perhaps this is an uncanny prophecy put in the mouth of the apostate Solomon, as in Jn. 11:51. The language is all clearly relevant to this: the few men within Jerusalem (Is. 24:6; 36:8) compared to the size of the "great king" of Assyria (Is. 36:13) with his "great host" (2 Kings 18:17), who besieged Jerusalem (Is. 1:8; 37:25) with siege engines (according to the depictions on Sennacherib's prism). It seems unlikely Solomon ever experienced anything like this. But Hezekiah did.

Ecc 9:15 Now a poor wise man was found in it, and he by his wisdom delivered the city; yet no man remembered that same poor man-

The poor wise man of the Assyrian siege was presumably Isaiah. But he was not remembered with gratitude, and Jewish sources record that Hezekiah and Manasseh persecuted and murdered Isaiah; see on :16. Solomon shared the common view of his time that being a wise man was only ultimately valuable and worthy if he therefore had a memorial after his death. Hence the uninspired Book of Wisdom speaks of how "I for the sake of wisdom shall have estimation among the multitude, and honor with the elders, though I be young... By the means of her I shall obtain immortality, and leave behind me an everlasting memorial" (Wisdom 8:10-13). But Solomon is lament-

ing that the memory of the wise ultimately fades. And therefore wisdom is of no ultimate value because wise and foolish die the same death. So many of Solomon's Proverbs seem to stress the advantage of wisdom as being in this life.

Ecc 9:16 Then I said, Wisdom is better than strength. Nevertheless the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are not heard-

GNB "I have always said that wisdom is better than strength, but no one thinks of the poor as wise or pays any attention to what they say". As explained on :15, Solomon admits wisdom has some advantage, but not in any ultimate terms. For he says that the poor wise man earned no lasting respect for how he saved the city. Indeed, he was despised afterwards and his further words of wisdom were disregarded, just as happened to Isaiah (see on :14).

Ecc 9:17 The words of the wise heard in quiet are better than the cry of him who rules among fools-

As noted on previous verses, Solomon's point in all this is that the wise man has no lasting memorial, and is only heard in quiet and obscurity. And for Solomon, wisdom is only worth anything if it leaves you with fame and a lasting memorial to yourself in the eyes of men. The problem of death, the same death for the wise and the foolish, as Solomon things, means that there is little advantage in being a "wise man". And Solomon was the preeminently wise man, thanks to the wisdom God gave him; but he now abrogates all that and sees no lasting point in it.

But he may be making historical allusions. The book of Proverbs has in view a bad ruler (s.w. Prov. 28:15; 29:2,12,26; Ecc. 9:17). And this bad ruler offers deceitful food (Prov.

23:3), which Solomon in Prov. 23 advises against eating. We need to recall that eating together was seen as a sign of fellowship and acceptance of each other within the same cause. Solomon may have in view Jeroboam, who clearly sought to usurp Solomon as king. Or he may be alluding back to the various people like Absalom and Adonijah who had feasted to celebrate their apparent usurping of David's throne. The LXX in Prov. 23:1-8 reads rather differently to the Masoretic Text, and speaks much of the evil of the ruler in view.

Ecc 9:18 Wisdom is better than weapons of war; but one sinner destroys much good-

In the end, Solomon felt that for himself, it was as well to be righteous as to be wicked, for in death there was no further difference (Ecc. 9:2,5,9). He knows judgment will come in some form, perhaps just in this life (Ecc. 11:9), at least for the young people; but he reasons as if it won't- at least not for him. He knows, but he doesn't know on the personal, experiential level. This is why there are apparently contradictory statements in Ecclesiastes. For example, the wise dies as the fool, with no more eternal remembrance than the fool (Ecc. 2:15,16). This, Solomon, says, is what he himself believes in his own heart. Here in Ecc. 9:16-18 he observes that although wisdom can help, its benefits are easily undone, so easily as to make it useless. I don't see these different perspectives as being the difference between life in the world and life in the spiritual realm. They are all spoken *with conviction* by Solomon, which, to my mind, ruins the idea that he himself believed the Truth but was simply outlining what life is like without God. My resolution of this is that he had known and preached God's Truth, but for him personally, it meant nothing at all. And faced with

the problem of eternal death for all, as he thought, therefore in practice he advocated the life of self-enjoyment, acting *as if* all the other truth of wisdom was not operative in practice.

He may even have himself in view, consciously or unconsciously, in saying that "one sinner destroys much good". All the good established by his father David, and the potentials he had had, were all undone by his sin. He knows that, perceives it, but will not repent.

The rabbis perhaps correctly interpret this verse as meaning that "when a wise man becomes a sinner, many people will abandon their pursuit of wisdom by concluding that this person's wisdom was wrong" (Rashi). This would then have particular relevance to Solomon and Hezekiah, whose collapse of faith lead to their people turning away from God.

The Hebrew can stand the translation "one sin destroys much good". This would be in line with Ecc. 10:1 "so does a little folly outweigh wisdom". The idea seems to be that wisdom isn't that great at all, because just one sin, or one sinner, can take away all the benefits of righteousness. This is a position arrived at by someone who knows nothing of the wonder of human repentance and Divine forgiveness. And even when facing terminal illness, Hezekiah doesn't show any penitence but rather just pleads what a good man he has supposedly been.

This is one of many allusions to the curse in Eden, whereby "to dust you shall return" (Gen. 3:19). There are many allusions to the curse in Ecclesiastes, especially in the verses which speak of man's labour being in vain and just to satisfy his appetite / need to eat. Especially Ecc. 5:17 "All his days he also eats in darkness, he is frustrated, and has sickness and wrath". "God made man upright" (Ecc. 7:29), "one sinner destroys much

good." (Ecc. 9:18 cp. Rom. 5:18 "for as by one man sin entered the world... so death passed upon all men"). But Genesis 3 held out the great Hope of redemption from the curse through Messiah. But the koheleth doesn't want to factor that in. Although he surely knew Gen. 3:15 as well as he knew Gen. 3:19. But he wallows in the curse rather than the long term blessing of Eden restored in the Kingdom.

ECCLESIASTES CHAPTER 10

Ecc 10:1 Dead flies cause the oil of the perfumer to send forth an evil odour; so does a little folly outweigh wisdom and honour-

Solomon knew and warned that a little folly can destroy the man who is in reputation for wisdom and honour (Ecc. 10:1 AV). Solomon had "honour" [s.w.] to an unprecedented extent (1 Kings 3:13). But in the same book he admits that he, the man famed world-wide for wisdom, gave himself to folly (Ecc. 2:3). He knew so well the error and folly of his ways, but he could only preach the lesson but not heed it. He "saw that wisdom exceedeth folly" (2:13)- but so what... He therefore has himself in view here; just as in the preceding verse he seems to understand himself as the sinner who had undone so much good.

Ecclesiastes contains many allusions to Solomon's personal state; it is largely autobiographical. Yet in those passages, he seems to express no personal regret or desire for repentance. Instead he is quite content to just lament his own sad spiritual collapse, and rest content behind the excuse that nothing really matters. To describe his apostacy as only a "little folly" indicates the death of Solomon's conscience, and his fantastic ability to minimize his own errors.

In the Hezekiah context, we recall that he was given valuable perfumes and these were part of his huge wealth. But he so well perceives that this has been spoilt by his "folly" in not repenting before Isaiah, and accepting the deal of 15 years peace now in return for Judah going into captivity. He self-analyzes so well, as Solomon

did, seeing in himself the old and wise king who would not be admonished.

Ecc 10:2 A wise man's heart is at his right hand, but a fool's heart at his left-

I have suggested on :1 and :3 that Solomon has himself in view, dissecting his own spiritual collapse as he does in the preceding verses of Ecc. 9. So I suggest this too is him stating that he was not really the true "wise man" but the fool, because wisdom had been "far from me" (Ecc. 7:23). Here he puts it another way, in saying that a truly wise man has his heart at his right hand, under his control, with his wisdom in his heart. Whereas Solomon sees himself as the fool whose heart was not under his control, spiritual mindedness and psychological self discipline had not been practiced by him at all. And despite realizing that, he still doesn't repent.

The Old Testament frequently speaks of man as having two "sides" to his character; one that wished to serve God, and the other which was rebellious. Ecc. 10:2 shows how that the spiritual man is not only aware of this, but he consciously acts to control these two sides: "A wise man's heart is at his right hand; but a fool's heart at his left". This kind of self-knowledge is sadly lacking in most human beings, and Solomon is admitting it had been lacking in himself. Proverbs 7,8 likewise has the picture of two women, personifying the flesh and spirit (Prov. 7:12 cp. 8:2,3). Against this Old Testament background, there developed a strong Jewish tradition that the right hand side of a man was his spiritual side, and the left hand side was the equivalent of the New Testament 'devil'. The Lord Jesus referred to this understanding when He warned: "Let not your left hand know what your right hand does" (Mt. 6:3)- implying that the good

deeds of the spiritual man would be misused by the 'devil', e.g. in using them as grounds for spiritual pride.

"The heart of the wise inclines to the right, but the heart of the fool to the left" (Ecc. 10:2 NIV) has been understood as referring not so much to right and wrong, good and evil, as to the highest good and lesser good (cp. how the left hand can stand for simply lesser blessing rather than outright evil, e.g. Gen. 48:13-20). The fool inclines to lower commitment. The wise will always incline to the maximum, wholehearted level. And Solomon realizes that this is how he has been.

Ecc 10:3 Yes also, when the fool walks by the way, his understanding fails him, and he says to everyone that he is a fool-

See on :1,5. The fool whose wisdom fails him in practice [when he "walks by the way"] clearly refers to Solomon. He is proclaiming through this writing we now know as the book of Ecclesiastes that he is a fool. For he has abrogated his previous Divine wisdom, and turned from Yahweh to idols. His self analysis is profoundly accurate, but it is a feature of human nature that we can self analyze correctly, but still do nothing about it. Repentance can be hid from our eyes. Solomon is such a powerful lesson to us all who have known God's wisdom.

Ecc 10:4 If the spirit of the ruler rises up against you, don't leave your place; for gentleness lays great offenses to rest-

The reference may be to David soothing Saul, and Solomon seems to twist this to mean that he as the ruler should be placated by any he happens to be angry with: "If the spirit of the ruler rise up against thee, leave not thy place; for soothing will put an end to great offences" (LXX). He is recognizing [as explained on :1-3] that he is as foolish as Saul whom God re-

jected, although he had himself turned away from God at this time.

Ecc 10:5 There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, the sort of error which proceeds from the ruler-

Again, Solomon's self analysis is spot on. He is the ruler from whom error proceeds. He knew that a little folly outweighs all the wisdom a man may have (Ecc. 10:1), and yet he gave himself to folly, whilst holding on to wisdom (Ecc. 1:17). A true fool is one whose wisdom fails him in practice ("when he walks by the way", 10:3); and especially is this acute when this "error... proceeds from the ruler" (10:5). It's all about Solomon himself. The same word for "error" is used by Solomon in Ecc. 5:6, where I suggested he has in view his "error" [as he now sees it] of building a temple for Yahweh, the God from whom he had now turned away. The word is usually translated "ignorance"; but even for sins of ignorance there were sacrifices prescribed. But he has no interest in repentance or putting things right. And he is blasphemously considering all his previous Divinely granted wisdom as ignorance.

Ecc 10:6 Folly is set in great dignity, and the rich sit in a low place-

This again demonstrates to Solomon the pointless nature of wisdom, because fools get great dignity and respect whereas the wise don't. And for Solomon, it was all about image and externalities. He had experienced "great dignity" such as no ruler had experienced. But he realized that he had been a fool at the same time. He had not allowed wisdom to have any place in his life or personal walk (see on :1-3). And so he considered himself the parade example of how folly got great dignity, and not wisdom.

Ecc 10:7 I have seen servants on horses, and princes walking like servants on the earth-

This indicates Solomon didn't think Prov. 19:10 was true in practice: "Delight is not seemly for a fool; much less for a servant to have rule over princes". He was abrogating his former wisdom. He thought that in reality, servants do rule over princes. And he likely has in view the rebellion and future success which he foresaw of his servant Jeroboam. *In the Hezekiah context, this looks back to Hezekiah's experience at the time of the Assyrian defeat.*

Ecc 10:8 He who digs a pit may fall into it; and whoever breaks through a wall may be bitten by a snake-

It is a common theme that the wicked snare themselves, falling into their own pit, judged by their own words, rather than God specifically snaring them (e.g. Ps. 7:15; 9:15; 57:6; Prov. 26:27; 28:10; Ecc. 10:8). But Solomon appears to be using this global truth to the specific end of demonstrating that "time and chance", random bad luck, happen to people no matter how hard they work. Throughout Proverbs he had glorified hard work. But he now abrogates that wisdom by saying that even the wise, hard working citizen can hit unexpected calamity. And so, he is reasoning, wisdom and hard work are not at all what he had made them out to be; see on :10.

Ecc 10:9 Whoever carves out stones may be injured by them. Whoever splits wood may be endangered thereby-

These are more examples of the theme explained on :8; that even the wise, hard working citizen can hit unexpected calamity. And so, he is reasoning, wisdom and hard work are not at all what he had made them out to be; see on :10. The reference to the man who is endangered by splitting wood may be to how

the same phrase is used of the men of Bethshemesh in 1 Sam. 6:14. They split wood and sacrificed with joy that the ark had returned to them; but then they looked inside the ark and were slain. And so, Solomon reasons, wisdom and Yahweh worship are pointless. But of course the point was that they were disobedient. The ark was indeed a blessing, but they abused it through harnessing its return to their own self interest and love of wealth, just as Solomon did.

Ecc 10:10 If the axe is blunt, and one doesn't sharpen the edge, then he must use more strength; but skill brings success-

See on :8. LXX "If the axe-head should fall off, then the man troubles his countenance, and he must put forth more strength: and in that case skill is of no advantage to a man". This argues that wisdom or skill is all the same limited if there isn't the right material to apply the wisdom to. And that was so true with Solomon. This theme of the limitation of wisdom continues in :11,12. AV "wisdom is profitable to direct". "Direct" is the word translated "prosper" in Ecc. 11:6, where Solomon concludes that finally we have no way to "prosper", so the advantage of wisdom is minimal.

Ecc 10:11 If the snake bites before it is charmed, then is there no profit for the charmer's tongue-

As noted on :9,10, Solomon is saying this to prove that the words of the wise, like those of the charmer's tongue, are not really that effective. Because a snake can bite you before it hears the charmer, and so there is no profit in the charmer. Just as Solomon now saw no "profit" in wisdom. The snake bite of death will come to all men, he reasoned, whether wise or foolish, and whether or not they hear the words of wisdom.

But we can note the AV: "Surely the serpent will bite without enchantment; and a *babbler* [same word translated 'tongue'] is no better" (Ecc. 10:11). A man's words are counted as who he is; for this is the significance of our words:

"You are taken up in the lips of *talkers* [s.w. tongue]" (Is. 59:3)

"Let not an evil *speaker* [s.w. tongue] be established" (Ps. 140:11)

"You are taken up in the lips of *talkers* [s.w. tongues]" (Ez. 36:3).

The idea of Ecc. 10:11 and so often in Ecclesiastes is that no matter how wise you are, random chance event trumps all wisdom you may have. This is the idea that "there is a time for" everything. This reflects a studied refusal by Hezekiah / Solomon to accept the higher hand of providence leading to an ultimate end- future salvation in God's Kingdom.

Ecc 10:12 The words of a wise man's mouth are gracious; but a fool is swallowed by his own lips-

The LXX would continue the theme of the limited power of wisdom: "The words of a wise mouth are gracious: but the lips of a fool will swallow him up", referring to the wise being swallowed by the foolish. Solomon presses this to prove to himself that there is no advantage of wisdom over folly in this life. And he may well have himself in view, as he so often does- swallowed up, a figure of condemnation, by his own lips. Perhaps the Lord is alluding here when He taught that by our words we are condemned (Mt. 12:37).

Ecc 10:13 The beginning of the words of his mouth is foolishness; and the end of his talk is mischievous madness-

And yet Solomon the wise man had himself turned to "folly", despite knowing it ended up with sin and mischief. And it is still true that "They start out with silly talk and end up with pure madness" (GNB). But Solomon has himself in view. He considers that the words of Divine wisdom he had taught at "the beginning" were foolishness, and now he feels that they had ended up as madness. His blasphemy is extreme. See on :14.

Ecc 10:14 A fool also multiplies words-

See on :13. The criticism of "many words" in Ecc. 5:7 seems a reference to his own writing down of the wisdom God had given him, codifying it into books such as the compilation we have in the book of Proverbs (Ecc. 12:10,12). He associates the "many words" with "dreams", perhaps an intensive plural for "a great dream". It was as a result of the dream of 1 Kings 3:5 that he was given the "many words" of wisdom which he now considered unhelpful and irrelevant because death meant that there was no particular ultimate advantage of wisdom over folly; wisdom was at best profitable in this life in some short term sense. And he therefore associates "many words" with folly (Ecc. 10:14). He considers he had been foolish by preaching and believing those many words of Divine wisdom. Now, for him, the true wisdom was in idolatry and not Yahweh worship in His temple.

Man doesn't know what will be; and that which will be after him, who can tell him?-

This is a frequent lament by Solomon, that he doesn't know the future. He wrote this at the end of his life, and the future in view was death. And yet the promises to David and Abraham clearly offered the resurrection of the body and future eternal

inheritance of the earth. Even throughout Proverbs, Solomon sees wisdom as largely just good for this life. He has no eternal, Kingdom perspective, nor does he strongly factor in the final day of judgment. He considered himself the Messianic king, and his kingdom to be God's promised Kingdom. And now he was himself facing death, he realizes that the future is a fearful unknown. See on :15. Even at Solomon's time, the hope of resurrection from the dead and final judgment and reward in God's Kingdom upon the earth was well established. David so clearly believed it. But Solomon willfully refuses to.

Ecc 10:15 The labour of fools wearies every one of them; for he doesn't know how to go to the city-

Here and in :14, Solomon may have himself in view, as the one who had laboured to find wisdom (Ecc. 2:2) and had written down many words of wisdom in his Proverbs. He is considering himself to have been foolish in his love of wisdom. Perhaps GNB describes his anger with himself: "Only someone too stupid to find his way home would wear himself out with work".

Ecc 10:16 Woe to you, land, when your king is a servant, and your princes eat in the morning!-

GNB and LXX "Woe to thee, O city, whose king is young, and thy princes eat in the morning!". Ecclesiastes begins with mention of the city of Jerusalem. *This may be Hezekiah foreseeing that if was to die at 15 years after his terminal illness, then his son Manasseh would only be 12 when he became king, and this would not be a good thing.* Perhaps Solomon thinks he had been too young when he became king, and had therefore foolishly followed Divine wisdom. Or perhaps he saw clearly that his young son Rehoboam would not be a wise king, and his

princely advisors would be unwise; just as indeed happened (1 Kings 12:11). Solomon saw precisely the nature of his own failures, and the fruit this would bear in the reign of his son. And his bitter references to his servant would suggest he likewise foresaw Jeroboam's rebellion. His sensitivity and understanding were impressive; but he utterly failed to personalize any of it.

Ecc 10:17 Blessed are you, land, when your king is the son of nobles, and your princes eat in due season, for strength, and not for drunkenness!-

Perhaps Solomon continues his lament that he had not been the great king he might have been (see on :16). Maybe he considers that a true king must be the son of nobles; whereas he had been the son of a mere shepherd boy. He had indulged in over eating and alcohol, as he admits in Ecc. 2. Having been so obsessed with "my father David", using the phrase hundreds of times and always throughout Proverbs alluding to historical incidents which glorified David... now he was no longer living out parental expectation. I explained on Ecc. 5:1-4 that he considered his father's vow to build the temple to have been foolish. So perhaps now he is again digging back at his once beloved father David.

Or we can read this another way. Solomon was so confident that he was or would be the Messiah that he seems to have felt that he was beyond the possibility of sinning; real self-examination and the sense of the possibility of failure just didn't exist for him. He says that the land of Israel is "blessed" because her king is the son of a noble, and she will be cursed if her ruler

is a servant (Ecc. 10:16,17 RVmg.). Solomon proudly presented himself as the son of King David- and he makes a clear swipe at Jeroboam, the pretender to the throne who was a servant (1 Kings 11:26). By reasoning like this, Solomon sets himself in direct opposition to the spirit of Jesus, who declared that the servant is to be the King of all. Thus Solomon's self-justification, his self-defensiveness, his lack of focus on the future Messiah, led him to miss totally the spirit of Christ. And further, it made him into some kind of anti-Christ. The record in 1 Kings 11:31-40 brings this out clearly- God assures Solomon that he and his line will reign on the throne for ever *if* he is obedient. But he then straight away seeks to kill Jeroboam who was pretending to the throne- because he didn't pay attention to the import of God's conditional promise to him. And we too can so focus on present realities that we forget the sure promise of the Kingdom, and think that the conditional hope which we too have can only be ensured by our own politics, rather than faith and obedience.

Ecc 10:18 By slothfulness the roof sinks in; and through idleness of the hands the house leaks-

As noted on :16, it appears Solomon foresees the breakdown of his kingdom after his death; and he implies his son will be lazy, even though :15 GNB concludes that hard work is vain. Solomon may even have in view the decline of the temple, his major building project. For he had forsaken it and instead worshipped the idols in the temples he had built for them nearby to it.

Ecc 10:19 A feast is made for laughter, and wine makes the life glad; and money is the answer for all things-

According to Ecc. 2, these were the things Solomon had enjoyed to the ultimate degree; laughter ["mirth"], feasts, wine and money. But even wealth was not the answer for all things, as he is regretting throughout Ecclesiastes. So we can take this as him quoting secular wisdom and showing that his own miserable life proves it untrue.

Solomon had seen wisdom as the way to wealth and "pleasure" in this life [s.w. "laughter" here] , and that is the basis for his appeal to men to be wise and accept his wisdom (Prov. 10:23). But David uses the word only of the "pleasure" of the future, restored Kingdom of God on earth (Ps. 126:2); whereas Solomon wanted it all now, just as the 'prosperity gospel' likewise does. And yet as he got older, Solomon realized that such "pleasure" from material things is not in fact pleasure, and he uses the word several times in Ecclesiastes of how pleasure in this life is vain (Ecc. 2:2; 7:3; 10:19). This approach is in fact a contradiction of his seeking after "pleasure" in Proverbs. He came to this nihilistic position because he failed to perceive that the true "pleasure" is not now, but in the future Kingdom.

Ecc 10:20 Don't curse the king, no, not in your thoughts; and don't curse the rich in your bedroom: for a bird of the sky may carry your voice, and that which has wings may tell the matter-

Having here publically advertised his own folly and bad rulership of his people, he now warns solemnly against cursing him or even thinking bad of him in the heart. Even in old age, he was desperate to cling on to his power.

ECCLESIASTES CHAPTER 11

Ecc 11:1 Cast your bread on the waters; for you shall find it after many days-

On the basis of the idea that "casting seed upon the waters is a metaphorical expression for sending merchandise across the sea to distant lands", the GNB suggests that what is in view here and in :2 appears to be justification of Solomon's involvement with Gentile nations, for he became a middleman in the horse trade: "Invest your money in foreign trade, and one of these days you will make a profit. Put your investments in several places—many places even—because you never know what kind of bad luck you are going to have in this world" (GNB). But this is also a reference to the practice in Egypt of sowing seed during the flooding of the Nile, casting seed on the water so that it would grow into wheat on the floodplains. This distinctly Egyptian allusion reflects how Solomon has rejected Divine wisdom when his wives turned away his heart from Yahweh, and now instead he alludes to the Egyptian ideas of his wives.

I suggest however that Solomon is saying this in order to justify his view of "wisdom" as having limited advantage in this life; but only in a secular sense, and having no promise of any life that is to come.

Ecc 11:2 Give a portion to seven, yes, even to eight; for you don't know what evil will be on the earth-

The idea of being generous spirited in prosperity because it will help in the evil day is alluded to by the Lord in Lk. 16:9. But this, He says, is the wisdom of the children of this world.

He clearly understood Solomon at this point as being one of them. And as mentioned on :1, Solomon is saying this in order to justify his view of "wisdom" as having limited advantage in this life; but only in a secular sense, and having no promise of any life that is to come. And the Lord's allusion to Solomon's words confirms that.

"You don't know..." confirms koheleth's view that whether you are righteous or foolish, there's good or bad luck which operates in your life regardless of your morality. He observes in :3 the [apparent] randomness in nature. Again we see a devaluing of personal spirituality, and the fact was that neither Hezekiah nor Solomon had valued this as they should've done even when they professed faith in Yahweh. His view of how to cope with the "evil" which might some day "be on the earth" was that you may as well be generous to others, because then they might come and bale you out in hard times. Trust in God is not on his agenda.

Ecc 11:3 If the clouds are full of rain, they empty themselves on the earth; and if a tree falls toward the south, or toward the north, in the place where the tree falls, there shall it be-

This is the kind of fatalism we observed on Ecc. 9:1. See on :6. Secular people at the end of their lives often come to the conclusion that everything is somehow overruled by God, to the point that human behaviour is pretty much all Divinely determined and enforced. Solomon fails to accept the basic thesis of the book of Proverbs; that human actions can be controlled, we have election, and love and hatred are choices. And thereby we are accountable for our actions and to Divine judgment. But Solomon didn't believe in this, and so it led him to con-

clude that human behaviour isn't that significant and is somehow all orchestrated by some higher hand than our own.

A tree falls in the calamity of a storm. To say it is laying to the north or toward the south is rather meaningless, because it depends from what perspective you are looking at it. We would rather expect "toward the north / south, or toward the east / west". But "toward the south, or toward the north" is an intended statement that the tree falls in the storm, and it depends how *you* look at it as the observer as to whether you see it as facing northward or southward. And this is the postmodern spirit of our age. Death, the storm, shall come; and after that, it's all just a matter of how you want to perceive things. And this was the spirit of Solomon after he cast off faith in God and a future resurrection to judgment.

Ecc 11:4 He who observes the wind won't sow; and he who regards the clouds won't reap-

This fact is being harnessed by Solomon to support his new view that the over analytical life isn't profitable; wisdom has its limits and shouldn't be taken too far. Which is, apparently, what he felt he had done. "Get on with life and enjoy it" is his message after he had personally rejected Divine wisdom. "Don't worry be happy" is the spirit of a world which has rejected the true God, and they thus replicate that of Solomon in his apostasy. This is the power of this fascinating book of Ecclesiastes; we see the spirit of our age to be that of Solomon.

The picture is of a farmer lifting his eyes to the skies, looking up to God, looking for signs in the clouds or wind as to what he should do. And, the implication is, he doesn't get any signs. God doesn't communicate. So he may as well just take a chance, and mitigate against bad luck as far as he can by harder

work. This is a common conclusion by koheleth. Two are better than one on a journey or when sleeping rough at night. Likewise "a threefold cord is not easily broken" may simply mean that if three are carrying a load, and one cord snaps, then the other two cords will hopefully still bear the load. Sharpen your axe blade to save unnecessary labour and to preserve the axe (Ecc. 10:10).

Ecc 11:5 As you don't know what is the way of the wind, nor how the bones grow in the womb of her who is with child; even so you don't know the work of God who does all-

Lamenting that we "don't know" is common in Proverbs. It contrasts sharply with the definite spirit and sense of clear direction which Solomon had in his book of Proverbs. As noted on :4, we see the spirit of our postmodern age in Solomon, not knowing anything much at all, scared to get too close to God and His ways lest they appear dogmatic.

This is not to say, of course, that we "know everything" in the primitive, simplistic way that some think they "know the truth" about all things. The humility of the Lord Jesus is a reflection of the humility of God His Father. He spoke of Himself as the sower, who sleeps (in His death) and then works night and day (His present Heavenly labour for us) so that the seed should bring forth fruit- "he knows not how" (Mk. 4:27, with allusion to Ecc. 11:1,5,6). Despite all things having been revealed unto Him, and the Spirit immeasurably given to Him, He had the spiritual and intellectual humility to openly recognize that our spiritual growth and ultimate salvation is a mystery to Him. It was the Father alone who gave the increase.

These words are also alluded to in the Lord's discourse with Nicodemus in Jn. 3:3-5. But the Lord's comment that Nicode-

mus didn't understand these things was a rebuke to him. In Jn. 3:10, He expected Nicodemus to have figured out the Old Testament's teaching about the new birth (presumably from Ps. 51:10; Is. 44:3; Ez. 11:19; 18:31; 36:26; 37:14; 39:29; Ecc. 11:5). But instead, Nicodemus for all his theoretical knowledge as "the teacher / master of Israel", just as Solomon was, didn't know them. The Lord's point is that secular man indeed "doesn't know" because these things are the way of God's Spirit. But Paul urges us towards the possibility of living "in the Spirit" and "walking in step with the Spirit". Isaiah also seems to dialogue back with the claims that a man comes from the womb (Ecc. 5:15), clueless as to what went on there (Ecc. 11:5), and then dies and shall be forgotten. He several times states that it is Yahweh who formed His people in the womb, and because He is eternal, He will eternally have a parental bond and concern for them and will lead them through to life eternal, just as He brought them to physical life from the womb (Is. 44:2,24; 46:3; 49:1,5,15).

Solomon again is making the point that whatever wisdom he had didn't really explain God's ways. He doesn't become an atheist, but his wives turned away his heart from Yahweh to idols. And he likes to justify that by saying that Yahweh cannot be understood anyway. Such excuses for walking out of relationship with God are often heard.

Ecc 11:6 In the morning sow your seed, and in the evening don't withhold your hand; for you don't know which will prosper, whether this or that, or whether they both will be equally good-

This continues the complaint of :5, that God is beyond understanding, and we are victims of some higher hand of fate or good luck; "you don't know..." anything, seems to be Solomon's

point. This is the fatalism discussed on :3,5. So Solomon advises to sow in the morning and evening, as you don't know which will be more successful; but, by implication, take a break in the heat of midday. Don't work too hard, don't take life too seriously. That is his sad conclusion. Wisdom can assist a little bit, allowing us to "prosper" (Ecc. 10:10), but here Solomon concludes that finally we have no way to "prosper", so the advantage of wisdom is minimal.

Sowing when you know only some seed will end up in the "good" category recalls the Lord's parable of the sower. But His point was that we should eagerly sow in this way because the "good" category will reap life eternal in the future. But koheleth doesn't have that perspective, and so he is left wallowing in the feeling that luck and the winds of fortune are so strong that , faced with eternal death, one may as well sow without great enthusiasm.

Ecc 11:7 Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to see the sun-

Solomon qualifies his nihilism by admitting that life "under the sun" can be sweet and pleasant. But he will go in :8 to say that this sweetness of life is immediately disrupted when one thinks of the reality of death, which justifies his conclusion that he "hated life" (Ecc. 2:17) and it was better to have never been born nor experienced life (Ecc. 6:3-6). The words for "sweet" and "pleasant / good" occur together in Is. 5:20, where an apostate Judah are condemned for calling the sweet bitter and the good evil. This is alluding to what Solomon was doing, by saying that life in the end is bitter, evil and a vanity.

Ecc 11:8 Yes, if a man lives many years, let him rejoice in them all; but let him remember the days of darkness, for they shall be many. All that comes is vanity-

As discussed on :7, the reality of death meant that any apparent sweetness to life ends because of the problem of eternal death. Solomon refuses any idea of resurrection or victory over death. The essence of the purpose and achievement of God through His Son was understood by Abraham, Job, David and many others. But Solomon steadfastly refused it. And he seems to now be kicking over the traces of his earlier glorification of his father David. For David has used the same words in glorying in that fact the darkness shines as the day to Yahweh (Ps. 139:12). Solomon has used the term for how men live their lives in "days of darkness" (Ecc. 5:17), and in Ecc. 11:8 he uses this term of death. He sees life as being lived in the same unconscious spirit of death; he has no conception of God's light and life breaking in to human life right now as taught so often in the Bible (e.g. Is. 29:18). *Isaiah in Is. 29:18 was arguing back with Hezekiah's position here- "and the eyes of the blind will see out of obscurity and out of darkness"; in His light we see light (Ps. 36:9).*

Ecc 11:9 Rejoice, young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth, and walk in the ways of your heart, and in the sight of your eyes; but know that for all these things there is a God who will bring you into judgment for them-

This continues the theme of :7,8; that life indeed can be pleasant, but it is tinged by the consideration of death, and the belief that many held in Israel that God would judge man for his actions and use of life. Solomon had refused that concep-

tion. I say this because elsewhere Solomon speaks so clearly as if God will not raise a man to judgment (Ecc. 3:22), and the preceding verse 8 is clear that he considers death to be eternal darkness. He has argued that man should just get on and enjoy life; but he alludes to the way that God says He will judge those who walk in the ways of their own heart and after their own eyes (Dt. 12:8; 28:34,67; Num. 15:39; Jer. 9:14; 18:12 cp. Is. 11:3). He is specifically abrogating his earlier published wisdom that man is not to live after his own eyes and heart (Prov. 3:7; 12:15; 16:2; 21:2; 28:26; 30:12). Now, he tells people to live like this. But he acknowledges that many in Israel still believe in Israel's God Yahweh, and so he is reasoning with them on their level. He at this point had turned away from Yahweh completely, but he reminds them of their own religious position. He contrasts it with his own wisdom, which was to enjoy life but remember that eternal death comes. He contrasts this with the Israelite idea that if one lives as they wish, then they must remember God is going to judge them in the end.

It is worth noting that walking after ones own heart and eyes is often used as a kind of metaphor for idol worship (Jer. 9:14; 18:12; 23:16,17,26; Ez. 11:21; 13:17; 14:5). Solomon may be inviting the young people of Israel to join him in idolatry, and the "God" who would judge them is the god they chose to worship. Note the grammar: "*a* God" will judge them. He is again apparently having a swipe at the way his father David was famed as a man who walked not after his own heart but after the heart of Yahweh (1 Sam. 13:14).

The rich fool like Solomon effectively disbelieved the resurrection, and his words also allude to those of Solomon (Lk. 12:19 = Ecc. 2:24; 11:9). Paul also quotes Solomon's words in

Ecc. 2:24 as the words of those who have no faith that there will be a resurrection (1 Cor. 15:32). So I do not think that he here has in view any belief in a resurrection to judgment at the end.

Solomon felt that for himself, it was as well to be righteous as to be wicked, for in death there was no further difference (Ecc. 9:2,5,9). We could read him here as saying that he knows judgment will come (Ecc. 11:9), at least for the young people, but he reasons as if it won't- at least not for him. He knows, but he doesn't know on the personal, experiential level. This is why there are apparently contradictory statements in Ecclesiastes. For example, the wise dies as the fool, with no more eternal remembrance than the fool (Ecc. 2:15,16). This, Solomon, says, is what he himself believes in his own heart. But in Ecc. 7:12 he says that wisdom gives life to those who have it. But then again in Prov. 9:16-18 he observes that although wisdom can help, it's benefits are easily undone, so easily as to make it useless. I don't see these different perspectives as being the difference between life in the world and life in the spiritual realm. They are all spoken *with conviction* by Solomon, which, to my mind, ruins the idea that he himself believed the Truth but was simply outlining what life is like without God. He advocates both ways. My resolution of this is that he knew and preached God's Truth, but for him personally, it meant nothing at all. And therefore in practice he advocated the life of self-enjoyment, acting *as if* all the other truth of wisdom was not operative in practice.

"For God shall bring every work into judgment" in the epilogue is commentary upon "But know thou that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment" (Ecc. 11:9). Ko-

heleth repeatedly states that death is the final end, and respecting God is only helpful in this life in order to preserve man from needless extra suffering. *So he sees judgment from God as only coming in this life.* If a young person does just whatever their senses tell them, this would be the equivalent of his earlier warning not to be excessively sinful or foolish- because you'll land up in trouble, And likewise, he has reasoned "And be not righteous over much". The epilogue now puts things in their proper place. All things will be brought into judgment by God- but not necessarily now. But surely at the judgment of the last day.

Ecc. 11:9 alludes to Num 15:39: "Rejoice, young man, while you are young, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Follow the inclination of your heart and the desire of your eyes. But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment". The way of the world is to just do whatever our heart tells us, to follow our heart. But the Biblical view of the heart radically clashes with this. We are to control our heart, not do what is intuitive, and allow the heart to be regenerated. But the context of Num. 15 is that we have in that chapter a set of laws relevant to Israel's belief of the ten spies and their rejection of entering the promised land. The spies had judged after the sight of their eyes and followed their heart rather than God's leading. They had "seen" giants and they seemed in their own eyes as grasshoppers compared to them (Num. 13:32,33; 14:33).

Ecc 11:10 Therefore remove anger from your heart, and put away evil from your flesh; for youth and the dawn of life are vanity-

Perhaps the idea is as in GNB "Don't let anything worry you or cause you pain. You aren't going to be young very long". "Anger" is AV "sorrow". Solomon earlier taught that going to a funeral and sorrowing is better than the laughter of a wedding feast (Ecc. 7:2,3). Yet despite realizing this on an intellectual level, Solomon personally commended mirth / laughter to himself (Ecc. 8:15), and advises removing sorrow from the heart (Ecc. 11:10). Again we see Solomon's amazing ability, indeed the ability of human nature, to comprehend truth on one level, and yet reason and live exactly and precisely and consciously the opposite.

The tragic brevity of life means that "childhood and youth are vanity", we should quit the time wasting follies of youth or overgrown childhood (and the modern world is full of this), as well as the anger which is native to us all, and therefore "remove anger from your heart and put away evil from your flesh". The brevity of life alone is reason to stop harbouring anger and resentment. In contrast, Paul uses the mortality of man not only as an appeal to work for our creator, but to simply have faith in His existence and salvation: "We had the sentence of death in ourselves ["in our hearts we felt the sentence of death", NIV], *that* we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead" (2 Cor. 1:9). The fact we are going to die, relatively soon, and lie unconscious... drives the man who seriously believes it to faith in the God of resurrection. It seems that at a time of great physical distress, Paul was made to realize that in fact he had "the sentence of death" within him, he was under the curse of mortality, and this led him to a hopeful faith that God would preserve him from the ultimate "so great a death" as well as from the immediate problems.

ECCLESIASTES CHAPTER 12

Ecc 12:1 Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come, and the years draw near, when you will say, I have no pleasure in them-

This repeats what he has just said in Ecc. 11:7-9. The young can enjoy life, but that enjoyment won't continue because they will get older and face death, and come like Solomon to "hate life" (Ecc. 2:17). That enjoyment of life Solomon sees as remembering their creator. "You can do the God stuff when you're young, but it won't help you when you're older. The reality of death will mean that you will go my way, to hate life". This is the context of this verse, and whilst isolated from the context it indeed reads as a worthy appeal to youth to remember their creator, the second half of the verse, and its entire context, precludes this from being the meaning Solomon intended. See on :3. *Indeed this seems another example of kobelet's sarcasm about God. As if to say 'If you remember your creator when you're young, well, you'll soon give up all that God stuff when you get to old age'.* Solomon sees the grave as man's "everlasting home" (:5). He sees no possibility of resurrection to judgment or salvation (Ecc. 3:22 "there is nothing better, than that a man should rejoice in his works; for that is his portion: for who can bring him to see what will be after him?"), all is vanity (see on :8). This therefore means that his apparent appeal to youth to believe in a creator is skeptical; he is saying that even if you believe in a creator in youth, and enjoy it, that will not save you from an eternal grave.

Or we can read this as indeed an appeal to youth to believe in a creator; although I prefer the explanation given above. But for Solomon himself, it was far from him (Ecc. 7:23). He refers to himself when he writes at the end of his life of the man whose labour is in wisdom [cp. his labouring to write out so many Proverbs], and yet it is all pointless in that he will leave it all to a fool after him- he had already seen the unspirituality of his children (Ecc. 2:21). This thinking reflects a perception that his wisdom was totally irrelevant to himself- he wrote it all down for others, but not for himself. It's as if here at the end of Ecclesiastes he chuffles that he still preaches his wisdom to the youth, although he himself has the attitude that it is all meaningless (Ecc. 12:1). This is one explanation of the paradox within Ecclesiastes- the teaching of Divine truth, whilst lamenting the pointlessness of it.

He seems to have contented himself with establishing himself as "the preacher" and his final appeal in Ecc. 12 is to youth- like so many, his view was that it was not for him personally, but the youngsters would benefit more from it. There are several passages in Ecclesiastes where Solomon is evidently half glancing at himself. He sees the error of his ways, as Achan could coolly recount his sin, but to personally do something about it is far, far from him.

We see here Solomon's personal depression: "So remember your Creator while you are still young, before those dismal days and years come when you will say, "I don't enjoy life"" (GNB). Attitudes in old age are the litmus indicator of faith. The true Christian will look forward to the day of change and resurrection. We can contrast Solomon's end with that of the Lord. Whereas those like Solomon whose kingdom was only in this

life, seeing secular experience as the ultimate outcome and reward, will be deeply frustrated that their brief game is over.

Ecc 12:2 Before the sun, the light, the moon, and the stars are darkened, and the clouds return after the rain-

GNB "And the rain clouds will never pass away". This continues the impression of life under deep depression in old age (see on :1) for the man who only has this life. The hope of the resurrection of the body to eternal life in the Kingdom is indeed transforming. Especially for those brought face to face with the cessation of life as they know it. But as noted on :1, Solomon assumes that his path to depression in old age is going to be the pattern for all the young people he addresses.

What follows is a poetic description of old age, *alluding at every point to his opening statements in Ecclesiastes that he indulged all his senses and faculties*; indeed, a funeral possession, with the doors shut in the streets as man passes to his last end. "The clouds return after the rain" is so relevant to Hezekiah. The rain had come in his terminal illness, 15 years previously. But now rain clouds had returned, and he had to die. "The sun" is now "darkened"- and koheleth has been describing life "under the sun". That sun is now darkened, life under the sun is over. The idea of clouds returning after the rain [meaning, it is going to rain again a second time] is relevant to Hezekiah. He was brought to the "rain" of death and judgment, but this was delayed 15 years. But now the clouds are full of rain, and returning. The description of Hezekiah in old age in this chapter includes many connections with the descriptions of Jerusalem's fall to the Babylonians. Just as Hezekiah's first illness made him the embodiment of Judah's spiritual illness, and the delay in his death matched the delay of their judgment.

Ecc 12:3 in the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble, and the strong men shall bow themselves, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those who look out of the windows are darkened-

GNB interprets this for us as a picture of old age, indeed Solomon in his old age: "Then your arms, that have protected you, will tremble, and your legs, now strong, will grow weak. Your teeth will be too few to chew your food, and your eyes too dim to see clearly". As explained on :1, Solomon seems to be saying that even believing in a Divine creator in your youth won't save you from declining faculties and death. And so we could read :1 as a skeptical comment rather than an appeal to belief.

Ecc 12:4 and the doors shall be shut in the street; when the sound of the grinding is low, and one shall rise up at the voice of a bird, and all the daughters of music shall be brought low- Again, this all describes the insomnia of Solomon's old age: "Your ears will be deaf to the noise of the street. You will barely be able to hear the mill as it grinds or music as it plays, but even the song of a bird will wake you from sleep" (GNB).

Even in the cynicism of Ecclesiastes, written in Solomon's later life, he still uses words and phrases which have their root in his father David- e.g. his description of women as snares in Ecc. 7:26 goes back to how his father dealt with women who were a snare (1 Sam. 18:21). And the whole description of old age in Ecc. 12 is based on his father's experience with Barzillai (2 Sam. 19:35).

Ecc 12:5 yes, they shall be afraid of heights, and terrors will be in the way; and the almond tree shall blossom, and the grasshop-

per shall be a burden, and desire shall fail; because man goes to his everlasting home, and the mourners go about the streets-

The description of old age continues: "You will be afraid of high places, and walking will be dangerous. Your hair will turn white; you will hardly be able to drag yourself along, and all desire will be gone. We are going to our final resting place, and then there will be mourning in the streets" (GNB). "Desire" is clearly sexual desire; and Solomon with his 1000 wives / women had indulged sexual desire as few others. But that too must come to an end, and a man is left just with his failing body. Solomon sees the grave as man's "everlasting home". He sees no possibility of resurrection to judgment or salvation (Ecc. 3:22). This therefore means that his apparent appeal to youth to believe in a creator (:1) is skeptical; he is saying that even if you believe in a creator in youth, and enjoy it, that will not save you from an eternal grave.

But if we insist on reading Eccl. 12:1 as an appeal for the young to believe in God, he is asking the young to turn to God as in old age one has no pleasure in life and, by implication, no possibility of remembering their creator. This, presumably, was how Solomon felt about himself, that he had gotten to a point where spiritual change was impossible. And there are many elderly people who will reject the preaching of the Gospel with this kind of comment. The description of old age in Ecc. 12 seems to be alluding to how Solomon initially had a large and thriving household, with him enjoying the pleasures of women and singing maidens ("the daughters of music"), but now he realizes he doesn't have the faculties to enjoy it any more- all has gone quiet in the once bustling palace. *In the Hezekiah context, we recall his desire for his psalms to be played on stringed instru-*

ments in the temple. But now he laments that he is deaf and can't hear that.

Ecc 12:6 before the silver cord is severed, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is broken at the spring, or the wheel broken at the cistern-

GNB "the rope at the well will break, and the water jar will be shattered". The rope at the well breaks just as does a silver cord; Solomon sees himself as an earthenware jar, as well as a golden bowl. All his opulence could not finally disguise his weak humanity. No cosmetic fix of his humanity was possible, despite having tried so hard for it. And every man must come to realize this. Possibly the idea is that the slender connection between the spirit and the body is broken at death. Likewise the golden bowl contained olive oil, perhaps a symbol of the spirit of man, which flows out and is lost once the body is broken. No matter how beautiful that bowl / body once was. The spring or well was the symbol of life, but the bucket / pitcher could no longer access it.

The force of "before", which the LXX repeats in :7, is that before the finality of death there must come the depressive situation of the previous verses, the failing strength which is designed by God to try to elicit humility before Him. And yet Solomon refused even that appeal.

Ecc 12:7 and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it-

Solomon had turned away from Yahweh at this point, but he was not an atheist. Even in his nihilism he alludes to some kind of higher hand in life, and he sees the spirit as returning to God. But he believes that death is unconsciousness (Ecc. 11:8), and that therefore all is vanity (:8). But he had no personal re-

lationship with "God", and saw Him as powerless to save from death or eternally judge human behaviour with eternal outcomes. He may here be alluding to the basic truth of Gen. 2:7. But he fails to extrapolate from it what his father David did. The fact that God "holds our soul in life", a reference to Gen. 2:7, meant that David wanted to "make the voice of his praise to be heard" (Ps. 66:8,9). This was the meaning of the basic facts of creation for David. We too must realize that the spirit / life is given by God to our bodies; it doesn't come from anywhere else. There is no reincarnation. And this is no painless Bible fact; it demands that we live lives that are *His*, and not lived out as if our spirit / life / soul is *ours*.

Ecc 12:8 Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher. All is vanity!-

This must be remembered when we come to form an interpretation of :1. The appeal to "Remember now your Creator" in youth is in that same verse balanced against the fact that once youth is over, there will a hating of life as faculties decline and the reality of eternal death dawns upon the previously young person. It could be argued that this is the final say from the "Preacher". The epilogue to the book refers to "the Preacher" in the third person. It is therefore the inspired compiler of the book who makes the final appeal to fear God because judgment is coming. That message is quite contrary to what "the Preacher" himself says in the book- he sees any Divine judgment as being in this life, and has no particular perspective on living now for the future.

Ecc 12:9 Further, because the Preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge. Yes, he pondered, sought out, and set in order many proverbs-

I consider that :9-14 is the inspired commentary of the editor / compiler of Ecclesiastes. It is an appeal to faith, and a reflection upon the life of Solomon and the lessons to be learned from his apostacy. The compiler accepts that Solomon had been wise, and had set in order the book of Proverbs, which was Divine truth, even if Solomon in Ecclesiastes denied the truth of it.

Many interpreters and translators of Ecclesiastes clearly don't like the idea that we can have 12 chapters in the Bible which simply argue that death is final, just enjoy yourself but use wisdom even in doing that. I have no problem in reading the book like that. I fail to be impressed by the arguments that parts of it refer to life under the sun, and other parts argue for responsibility to God. A superficial case can be made for this, and the reader of an article or listener to a lecture may go away convinced. But when you then actually read the book with that view in mind, there are too many difficulties. The author repeatedly argues personally for the nihilistic view- that death is the final, eternal frontier. It is the epilogue, therefore, which provides the answer. These 12 chapters give us an insight into the mind of the man who accepts God's existence but is not in covenant relationship with Him, and we find in it the exact same mindset as in our postmodern world today. But all is changed by the epilogue, and also by the engagement with it of later scripture [the Lord, Isaiah and Paul especially]. This "end stress" is quite common in the Bible. A case is built up, a position argued- and then it is dashed by the final comment. We see this in the Lord's parables, and in the structure of the book of Job. Where many chapters are spent recording the wrong reasoning of the friends, to be crushed by Yahweh's final revela-

tion at the end. We learn here the difference between inspiration and direct Divine revelation. Job's friends say things that aren't true, as God Himself shows at the end and as Job tries to point out in his responses, but the record of their words is inspired. Ecclesiastes is indeed unusual because the case for nihilism is built up without break and without any footnoted, corrective commentary- until the epilogue. This is why agnostic author Herman Melville called it the "truest of all books" in his novel *Moby Dick*. And in a sense it is true, this is how life is without covenant relationship with Yahweh; and so the editor rightly notes in :10 that what was written is indeed "words of truth" in this sense. Martin Luther encouraged that "this noble little book" should be read every day because it "firmly rejected a sentimental religiosity". No wonder it is in the canon of scripture. It is a strong argument against postmodernism, and forces us to the conclusion that in fact everything matters, life is significant, man's search for meaning is met in Yahweh and in His Son, their final judgment and the Hope of their Kingdom.

However a case can also be made that this is still Solomon speaking and writing; finally appealing for others to believe, even if he personally didn't. Several times in Ecclesiastes, Solomon considers that he was no longer wise, and many of his statements are an effective abrogation of his earlier Divine wisdom. As this had been openly published in the anthology known as the book of Proverbs, he seems concerned to explain and justify this. "Was wise" could be read as meaning that he had once been wise, in the context of Yahweh religion; but he wasn't now.

The idea of several of Solomon's proverbs is that "the righteous" are those with "understanding", and it is this understand-

ing which feeds and gives life to others. This is true enough; our sharing with others and influence upon them can indeed lead them to life and not to die eternally. But Solomon appears to again have his own self justification in view; for he considered that he was the preeminently righteous because he was the teacher of Israel, giving them the wisdom given him. But Solomon fell away from Yahweh, even though he says his wisdom remained with him (Ecc. 2:9), and he continued to teach others that wisdom to the end of his life (Ecc. 12:9). And so it was simply not true that teaching others makes a person righteous, as Solomon supposed often in Proverbs (e.g. Prov. 10:21).

This would mean that even in his spiritual collapse at the time of Ecclesiastes, Solomon still taught Israel true wisdom, and organized his wisdom into more accessible books (Ecc. 12:9-12), giving himself the title *kobeleth* ('the preacher'). And yet he himself tried alcohol, wealth, women, indeed every addiction, in order to "see what was that good for the sons of men, which they should do under the heaven" (Ecc. 2:3). And yet he knew from childhood the conclusion of the matter- man's duty is to fear God and be obedient (Ecc. 12:13). He who had been given wisdom started out in a search for it... showing clearly enough that what he knew was so much theory, but never touched his own heart. Solomon taught wisdom to the youngsters, but he gave himself over to search for some kind of vague philosophical truth outside of God.

Ecc 12:10 The Preacher sought to find out acceptable words, and that which was written blamelessly, words of truth-

I suggested on :9 that these are the inspired words of the editor of the book. He wishes to assure us that what was written in Proverbs was indeed Divine truth. Solomon's apostasy

as recorded in Ecclesiastes should not lead us to question the book of Proverbs.

If we insist that this is still Solomon writing, then the idea may be that Solomon tried hard in the book of Proverbs and here in Ecclesiastes to write things well; hence LXX "a correct writing". Although the truths he received were indeed given by Divine inspiration, he gives God no credit for that, arguing that all was written down by his own careful device. He failed to recognize the Spirit of God working through him.

Ecc 12:11 The words of the wise are like goads; and like nails well fastened are words from the masters of assemblies, which are given from one shepherd-

The inspired editor is assuring us that the words of the wise, Solomon as the inspired wise man, are to goad us to action. Those words were given from the one shepherd, Yahweh (Gen. 49:24; Ps. 80:1; Jer. 31:10). The book of Proverbs was indeed from the master of assemblies, Solomon, *kohleth*, but they were the words of God, the shepherd of Israel.

If we take these words as Solomon's, then we can reflect that throughout Proverbs, Solomon held God's truths in his mind and preached them; but his heart was far from them, he never personalized them, and his behaviour with women and in whipping his people was all a stellar denial of the truths which he knew and taught. It was beyond hypocrisy, beyond even narcissism, but rather a mindset which arose from assuming himself to be the Messianic son of David, and his kingdom to be the promised Kingdom of God on earth. As he came closer to death and his faculties failed, he ought to have realized his mistake, and looked forward instead to David's greater son, the Lord Jesus. But instead he simply preferred to conclude that for

him, all these great ideas were bunk. He made the mistake so many make; that "truth" is truth 'for you', 'for me'; rather than accepting that Divine truth is indeed absolute and global truth for all hearts at all times.

But his wisdom remained with him, and he still taught those truths, although they were far from his own heart. In this he is a valuable warning to all who hold God's truths; his apostasy, recorded for us in such detail with a unique insight into the psychology of those who turn away. This is the value of Ecclesiastes. Just as I will discuss on the Song of Solomon how we have in those songs a unique insight into the mentality of the man who flirts with those outside the faith. And Solomon may even have been self aware of all this on some level, for he concludes Ecclesiastes by saying that his words are intended as goads; the very observation that "all is vanity" is in fact a goad to action, not lethargy or nihilism. .

Ecc 12:12 Furthermore, my son, be admonished: of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh-

Solomon admits he himself is as the old king who will no longer be admonished (Ecc. 4:13). But the inspired commentator urges *us* to be admonished, not to go his path. and he warns against the overly abstract, phlegmatic and philosophical path Solomon had taken. For he will conclude by appealing for simple obedience to God's ways, rather than doing as Solomon has done in Ecclesiastes; trying to work around them through philosophy. There is "no end" of such philosophical study, just as there is "no end" of labour (Ecc. 4:8 s.w.). But for the righteous, there is an end- relationship with God, and eternity in His Kingdom.

If these are Solomon's words, then he is urging others to be admonished when he would not be himself. Just as he had urged others to go to funerals instead of wedding parties [of which Solomon must have had many], so that they might "take to heart" wisdom (Ecc. 7:2), although Solomon says this was "for from me" himself (Ecc. 7:23). He preached God's truth, he accepted it as true, whilst refusing to personalize it himself. He really is a parade example of the dangers inherent in glorying in our mere possession of Divine truth.

Solomon has so much to say about "correction" or instruction coming from the possession of wisdom (Prov. 8:10,33; 10:17; 12:1; 13:1,24; 15:5,10,32; 16:22; 19:20,27; 22:15; 23:12,13). But in the end he chastised or corrected his people by whipping them (s.w. 1 Kings 12:11,14). Solomon initially asked for wisdom in order to guide his people, but he ended up whipping / physically chastising them into conformity with his wishes rather than allowing wisdom to correct. Again, he was playing God; for it is God through His wisdom who chastises, and not man. But Solomon thought he was effectively God to his people. This is why Solomon argues that servants cannot be corrected by words (Prov. 29:19 s.w.), and a child must be physically chastised (s.w. Prov. 19:18; 29:17 cp. Prov. 13:24; 23:13), regardless of his screams of pain. This kind of thing is a denial of his claims elsewhere that it is Divine wisdom which chastises / corrects, and such correction is from God and not man. Solomon's final description of himself as an old and foolish king who refuses to be admonished says it all (Ecc. 4:13); he admonishes others (s.w. Ecc. 12:12), but refuses to be admonished or corrected by his own wisdom. He failed to personalize it.

His complaint that there is no end of writing books could be read as another effective retraction of his book of Proverbs; for he has lamented that he had laboured so much in wisdom. The criticism of "many words" in Ecc. 5:7 seems a reference to his own writing down of the wisdom God had given him, codifying it into books such as the compilation we have in the book of Proverbs (Ecc. 12:10,12). He associates the "many words" with "dreams", perhaps an intensive plural for "a great dream". It was as a result of the dream of 1 Kings 3:5 that he was given the "many words" of wisdom which he now considered unhelpful and irrelevant because death meant that there was no particular ultimate advantage of wisdom over folly; wisdom was at best profitable in this life in some short term sense. And he therefore associates "many words" with folly (Ecc. 10:14). He considers he had been foolish by preaching and believing those many words of Divine wisdom. Now, for him, the true wisdom was in idolatry and not Yahweh worship in His temple.

Ecc 12:13 This is the end of the matter. All has been heard. Fear God, and keep His commandments; for this is the whole duty of man-

I suggested on :9 that :9-14 are the inspired commentary of the editor of Ecclesiastes. He concludes with an appeal to fear God, whereas Solomon had concluded that the righteous who sacrifice to God have no advantage over those who don't, because death comes to them all (Ecc. 9:2). The implication here therefore is that there is indeed a difference; there will be a resurrection and granting of eternal outcomes to human behaviour.

"The whole duty of man" is "the whole man". What the world hungers for today is the discovery of what it means to be

truly human. They admire those they see as “real”. It is through the person of Jesus Christ alone that true humanity, or realness, can be found. Ecc. 12:13 Heb. speaks of “the whole man” as the one who is totally obedient to God; and here we have a prophecy of the wholeness, the realness, of the Lord Jesus.

One of the most beautiful things to behold is a newly baptized brother or sister coming to make the things of God’s Truth their *way of life*. The daily reading of the Bible becomes a habit, firmly embedded in the daily routine of life; contact with other believers by letter or meeting means that slowly, the convert’s social network becomes focused on other Christians rather than on the world. As a result, worldly friendships and habits slowly fade away; prayer becomes a regular part of life, before meals, morning and evening; slowly, there is the courage to preach the Gospel to others. In particular, a way of thinking develops that is centered upon the Father and His Son, which subconsciously gives priority to their things rather than those of this life. The life of keeping the commandments of God becomes “the whole man” (Ecc. 12:13). These changes are the natural outcome of the new focus.

If this verse is read as the words of Solomon, then it is a major *volte face* to the spirit of the entire book of Ecclesiastes. Perhaps indeed his final conclusion is that faith, wisdom and obedience is better than unbelief and folly, indeed it is the whole duty of man- although he himself has declined it. To argue one way throughout a book and then present a startlingly different conclusion at the end is not unknown. It is a fairly common rhetorical and philosophical device.

Perhaps we should read with emphasis upon the word “This...”. Koheleth claims that the end of the matter is that man

ages and is buried, and death is his "eternal home" (:5). But the epilogue challenges this by interjecting that in fact, no, there is judgment to come. And everything will be judged. That is "the end of the matter". Not simply death in this life.

Koheleth has spoken of fearing God (Ecc. 3:14; 5:7; 7:18; 8:12,13; 12:13), but in the context of his argument that to get the best out of life, you must live knowing that there's a God up there keeping an eye on things and He may lash out and punish you if you go too far (Ecc. 5:6,7 "Don't protest before the messenger that this was a mistake. Why should God be angry at your voice, and destroy the work of your hands?... you must fear God"). And going His way does have a few benefits in this life- and the name of the game is to get through this vain life with the optimal experience despite it being a bad deal because of the eternity of death. The epilogue deconstructs this by warning that we are to fear God exactly because death is not the end- there will be resurrection to judgment by Him. And we are to "fear God" in the sense of keeping His ways, and not just being so frightened of Him that we seek to hold Him at arm's length and just avoid getting into trouble with Him, as wrongly taught in Ecc. 5:6,7. For those in covenant with God [and we note koheleth avoids using the Yahweh Name], "to fear God and keep His commands" was so that "your days may be prolonged" (Dt. 6:1,2), a veiled reference to eternity. Likewise Dt. 5:29 "that they would fear Me, and keep all My commandments... that it might be well with them for ever". Dt. 8:1 likewise has a hint of eternity in this context: "All the commandments which I command you this day shall you observe to do, that you may live...". Even the disobedient continuing living, so the hint of "that you may live" is 'live eternally'. To truly fear

God in this context is to be in covenant relationship with Him: "The secret of the Lord (personal relationship) is with those who fear Him,

And He will show them His covenant" (Ps. 25:14).

"The whole duty of man" is literally 'the whole man', and is a phrase that occurs only in Ecclesiastes. The epilogue is deconstructing them. Koheleth has argued that it's better to go to a funeral than a wedding party, because the funeral is "the end of all men", 'the whole man' (Ecc. 7:2). But the epilogue says that 'the whole man' is to *live* in obedience to God's commands. And the only time we shall fully do that, seeing that humans sin in this life, is in the eternal Kingdom to come. Koheleth concludes that "The whole man" is to achieve some pleasure in labour to eat and drink, i.e. to live out the experience of the curse with at least some pleasure (Ecc. 3:13 "every [s.w. 'the whole'] man should eat and drink, and enjoy good in all his labour"; 5:19 Heb.). That is as far as man can advance, given the finality of death and the experience of life in a fallen world, at the whim of fortune and misfortune. But the epilogue is replying that 'the whole man' is to live eternally in obedience to God's commandments, despite in this life ageing, dying and being carried in a funeral procession [the context of the epilogue in Ecc. 12].

Ecc 12:14 For God will bring every work into judgment, with every hidden thing, whether it is good, or whether it is evil-

I prefer to consider as noted on :9 that this is the inspired conclusion of the narrator. He tackles the fundamental problem in Solomon's reasoning, which has arisen out of the book—that there would be no future judgment. And so the narrator

baldly states the fundamental truth which Solomon has denied at such length.

"For God shall bring every work into judgment" in the epilogue is commentary upon "But know thou that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment" (Ecc. 11:9). But the epilogue is addressing the man we have just read of earlier in chapter 12- man at his last end, whose funeral procession is proceeding through streets with window shutters at the street market kiosk closed in mourning (:4) and mourners accompanying his coffin through the streets. This man will have every work brought into judgment- at a resurrection to judgment. By contrast, Koheleth repeatedly states that death is the final end, and respecting God is only helpful in this life in order to preserve man from needless extra suffering. If a young person does just whatever their senses tell them, this would be the equivalent of his earlier warning not to be excessively sinful or foolish- because you'll land up in trouble, And likewise, he has reasoned "And be not righteous over much". The epilogue now puts things in their proper place. All things will be brought into judgment by God- but not necessarily now. But surely at the judgment of the last day. *"Every hidden thing" AV "secret thing" is surely alluded to by Paul when he writes of how the secrets of men will be judged at the Lord's return. That is what is in view here. Koheleth has no thought for the idea that hidden things will be judged eternally- but that is the essence of Divine and eternal judgment. Our secret sins will be set in the light of God's countenance (Ps. 90:8 s.w.); the same word is used about a man sinning through ignorance by touching an unclean thing, although it was "hid" from him (Lev. 5:2-4). And that is only possible because the*

Lord Jesus was "son of man" and can therefore judge literally all things of a man.

If these are Solomon's words, then this is a radical denial of all he has said so far in the book. Solomon's whole basis for reasoning in Ecclesiastes is that death is man's eternal home (:5), there will be no further judgment (Ecc. 3:22 and often), and therefore one may as well live a life as happily as possible. This could be his very last minute repentance or recognition of truth, arrived at as a result of all his wayward reasoning throughout the book (see on :13). Sudden realization of truth after reasoning in error for so long is completely realistic and true to observed experience.

Or we can again conclude that Solomon comes to the right conclusion and teaches it, but it was still far from him personally. Hence there is no record of his repentance in the historical records, only that he died with his own heart turned away from Yahweh. He himself had an incredibly utilitarian view of life, wanting to see the tangible effect or "profit" of works in this life (Ecc. 3:9). I noted on Ecc. 2:17,18 that he ends up hating his life because he hates his works. The parallel between works and life meant that he was a human doing rather than a human being. He saw no ultimate profit in his works and life because he was now going to die. He had no sense at all that the works of the righteous "follow them" (Rev. 14:13), and we shall be given the eternal consequence of our works (Rev. 22:12).

But if these are indeed his words and not those of a narrator, he here concludes Ecclesiastes by admitting that this is the final truth (Ecc. 12:14), but this was not his personal belief nor how he had lived his life. He finally comes to the right conclusion, and had known it all along on some level, occasionally al-

luding to in his book of Proverbs; but he did not personalize it. He looked for the result of works in this life and didn't find it, and so he hated life, hated his works, and his heart turned away from God to idols. This is the kind of realization which men facing death often come to, but still they refuse to personalize it. We have all surely encountered this kind of thing. And this is our challenge; to personalize it, and live right now as if we are in God's judgment presence, for things great and small, things public and hidden. Even what we have spoken in the ear will be shouted out (Lk. 12:3) -implying others will somehow observe our judgment, cp. Mt. 12:41. If the judgment is merely a yes/no statement which has been worked out taking our whole life into consideration, then this emphasis on every work having a time for consideration and judgment "there" is pointless. However, these verses must be considered in conjunction with those which speak of God's 'forgetting' of bad deeds on account of how people later chose to live. However, this need not mean that they are erased from God's infinite knowledge; all too often we perceive God's memory as a vast memory bank which can have our sins erased from it. But His knowledge knows no such bounds of human perception; yet He is willing not to hold those things against us, and to therefore count us as having never committed them.

I have suggested on Ecc. 3:1,17,24 that Solomon is there accusing God of being unable to resurrect and judge, and therefore his previous understanding that everything will be brought to judgment was misplaced. Solomon concludes Ecclesiastes however with an admission that this is in fact the case; all in human life will be judged finally, there will be a time of judgment for every small and great action of daily life

(Ecc. 8:5,6 cp. 3:1,17,18; 12:14). In this we can take chapter 3 [and much of Ecclesiastes] as bravado, which in the face of his final death he has to admit was wrong, although he still fails to repent and accept the personal implications of this. Because all things will in some ways be judged, and are even now, *therefore* we must fear God and keep His commands (Ecc. 3:1; 12:13,14). But this is what Solomon preaches to others, especially youth (:1); but it was tragically far from him personally.



About the Author

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