

## PUTTING IT ALL BACK TOGETHER: PART TWO

### *Introduction*

The first six chapters of Ecclesiastes point out the emptiness of man's labors. Neither the labor nor the results of man's labor will entirely satisfy. Both experience and observation lead to the same conclusion: life under the sun is vanity and wind-chasing! The response to this vain life is to fear God and enjoy what He gives. As we move to the second half of the book, Solomon has finished talking about "wind-herding" – our foolish attempts to catch the uncatchable and control the uncontrollable. Now he moves into deeper water – our feeble struggle to comprehend the incomprehensible.

*Because the answers to man's questions are unavailable, you must balance enjoyment with the fear of God (7.1-11.6).*

The next four chapters are divided by the occurrence of two negative phrases: "cannot find" and "cannot know." These phrases recall Solomon's initial statement of purpose: to *seek* and to *know* (1.12-18).

- **The things that \_\_\_\_\_ a man's life are hidden (7.1-8.17)**

As Solomon endeavored "to seek and search out ... all things that are done under heaven" (1.13), he discovered that all that has been or could be done is transitory and \_\_\_\_\_. His search revealed that every accomplishment under the sun is unable to give real fulfillment. But he is not done searching, though! The logical question to ask after realizing the disappointment of the vanity of earthly labors is "Is anything beyond earth worth seeking and exploring?" This question completes the search for life-meaning in 6.12: "For who knoweth what is good for man in this life?" If nothing on earth can give real satisfaction, is there anything \_\_\_\_\_ earth that can meaning to your life? The continued observations in chapters 7-8 are more frequently interrupted with citations from \_\_\_\_\_ literature. In his outreach to philosophers of his day, Solomon guides the readers through familiar territory. These chapters are punctuated with a disconcerting thought, however – Solomon's attempt to seek and explore ends with the realization that there are some things he \_\_\_\_\_. A study of the vocabulary of Ecclesiastes shows that chapter seven has two significant emphases: wise/wisdom and good/better. Solomon wondered about wisdom and folly. It turns out that \_\_\_\_\_ is \_\_\_\_\_, relatively speaking. Wisdom's benefit, however, is not all-encompassing. Man cannot find out what will be after him (7.14) even if he is wise! That is because God is in control and He ordains both prosperity and adversity, expecting us to \_\_\_\_\_ Him. Ecc. 7.1-14 teaches that even wisdom does not allow us to find out what's going on – God is in control and He isn't giving us all the answers!

Next, Solomon laments misdirected retribution (7.15), recommends balance in life (7.16-18) and points out the poetic justice of reaping what one sows (7.21). He notices that it appears that God's dealings with men are capricious and whimsical – sometimes fair and sometimes backwards! Solomon says this is “exceeding deep” – who can *find* it out? Again, meaning in life on earth is inseparably linked to the One who made this earth, but we cannot find out what He's doing. The answer to this enigma is unavailable.

Solomon continues to compare wisdom and folly and he realizes that there is a type of woman who's easy to get involved with, but who has a heart full of \_\_\_\_\_ – it would be folly to be with her! Women are a blessing from God, but yet can be so much trouble – this is a puzzle to Solomon. He cannot *find* the answer (7.27-28)! But then he realizes that men aren't much better! God made mankind upright, but men have quickly gone their own way.

Ecc. 8.1-17 is the last block of material that emphasizes man's inability to find what's good for him. This passage focuses on the problem of \_\_\_\_\_ rulers – their unfairness or slowness in judgment gives sinners the impression that they can get away with wickedness. But Solomon knows that fearing God is better and brings that up again here. At the same time, the apparent \_\_\_\_\_ of the wicked is perplexing – it too is vanity (8.14). Solomon concludes this passage with a triple-repetition of “cannot find” in 8.17. He set out to seek and explore all that is done under the sun (1.15) and here is his conclusion: “man cannot discover [find] the work which has been done under the sun.” Not even wisdom enables a man to discover that. Life is full of \_\_\_\_\_ questions – the question regarding what is good for man to do in his life does have an answer: as we would expect, “a man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry” (8.15). Man cannot find out what's going on around him, so he should enjoy what God has given and fear God. Solomon began by trying to seek and explore what is done under the sun and came up empty – but even if he could have found out what was going on, there is still a reality above the sun (God's dealings with man) and that is even more inscrutable!

- **The things that \_\_\_\_\_ a man's life are unpredictable (9.1-11.6).**

Chapters 7-8 were punctuated with the lament that we cannot \_\_\_\_\_ what we seek; 9.1-11.6 are accented throughout with the cry that we cannot \_\_\_\_\_ what we want to learn. Ecc. 6.12 asks “Who can tell a man what will be after him under the sun?” and the answer is frighteningly simple: *no one on earth knows*. The first concern that Solomon raises has to do with the one thing in life that is chillingly predictable: all will die. All \_\_\_\_\_ alike and at death lose all opportunity to do what living people do. It's better to be a live dog than a dead lion. This thought balances the woe raised in 4.2 and 6.3 that death looks better than oppression and being stillborn seems better than acquisition without enjoyment. In spite of that previous sentiment, Solomon solemnly warns that death is final and you do not know what will happen on earth after you're gone. Yet Solomon still balances even this sobriety with injunctions to \_\_\_\_\_ life: eating and drinking, knowing God's approval, dressing up and smelling good, and loving your wife (9.7-9). After all, there is *no*

*knowledge* in the grave.

You *don't know* your time – specifically, when you will die (9.12).

In a longer paragraph (9.13-10.15), Solomon re-affirms that wisdom is better than folly, remarks that little sins cause big problems, regrets the fact that fools sometimes rule, recommends that people work smarter, not harder, and reminds his readers that fools talk too much. This is all very practical and good for now, but “no man knows what will happen, and ... what will come after him.” The future is unpredictable – even for those who live practical, intelligent, \_\_\_\_\_ lives!

In 10.16-11.2, Solomon compiles a list of nasty little \_\_\_\_\_ that life can deal: an immature king, lazy hedonistic men, getting caught in a stray word, investments going sour. These demonstrate that you *cannot know* what misfortune may happen tomorrow.

A complementary list fills 11.3-8: rain, harvest, a baby's growth, and good crops. The triple-repetition of *not knowing* in 5-6 signals the end of this topic. Solomon's response to our inability to know what will happen tomorrow: \_\_\_\_\_ in all the years God gives you and soberly \_\_\_\_\_ the dark days. Solomon announced his goal to know wisdom and folly and madness (1.17) and in this second half of the book, he makes it clear that even if you lived as wisely as possible, you still do not know what the future holds. This unanswerable question should motivate you to enjoy life while you fear God.

**Conclusion:** “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity!” These words ring loudly and clearly at the opening and closing of this book. On the surface, things look dark, the horizon appears stormy, the outlook is bleak and dismal. But there is light! “Enjoy the life and provisions that God gives you while you fear Him” is not second-rate – it's not the best we can do without God – it is Solomon's way of taking a good, hard look at the oft-repeated, almost simplistic Christian statement: trust and obey! Man's entire good is to enjoy what God gives (8.15); his entire duty is to fear God and keep His commandments (12.13-14). The fruit of your labor will be ultimately unsatisfying; you will run across question after question that simply have no answer! But faith doesn't need the answers now; it doesn't demand immediate gratification – faith is willing to be content with what it has and to fear the Lord.

*“If we could see ... if we could know,” we often say,  
But God, in love, a veil doth throw across our way.  
We cannot see what lies before, and so we cling to Him the more.  
He leads us till this life is o'er: trust and obey.*