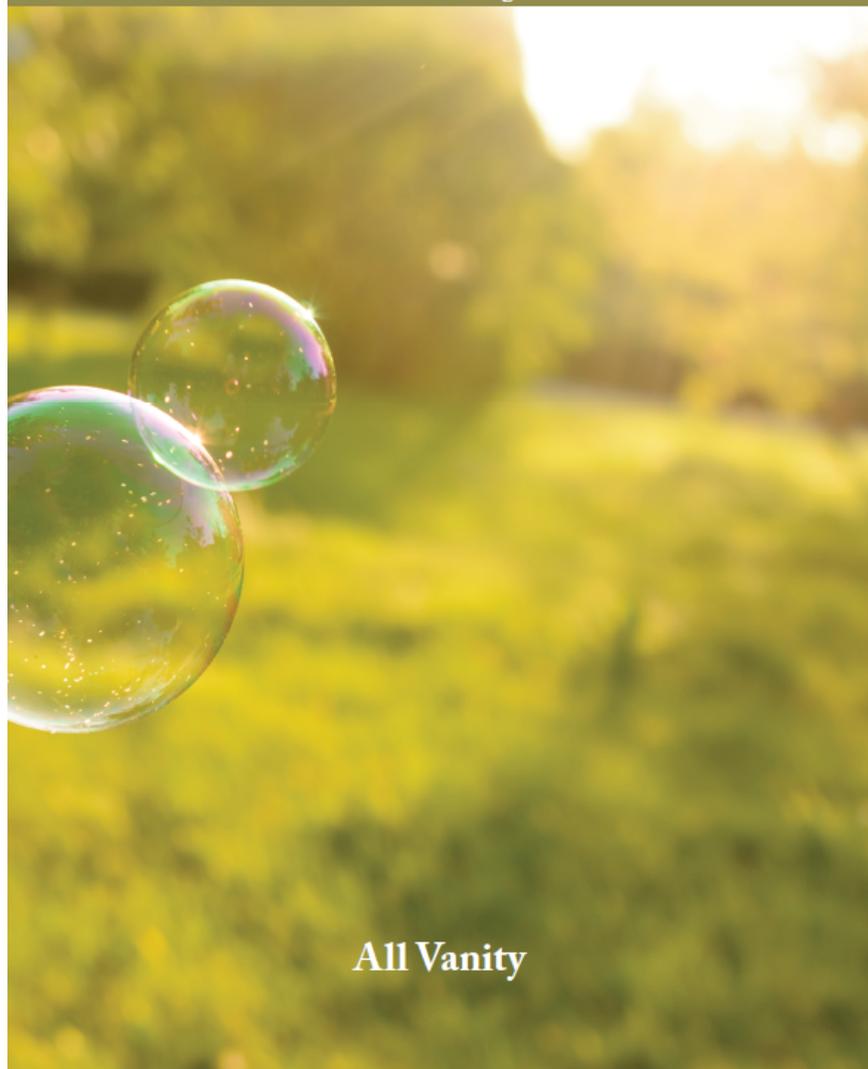


Ecclesiastes Explained & Applied 21

Ger de Koning



All Vanity

The Book of Ecclesiastes

Explained and Applied

**The Book of
Ecclesiastes
Explained and Applied**

All Vanity

Ger de Koning

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Abbreviations of the Names of the Books of the Bible

Old Testament

Gen – Genesis

Exo – Exodus

Lev – Leviticus

Num – Numbers

Deu – Deuteronomy

Jos – Joshua

Jdg – Judges

Rth – Ruth

1Sam – First Samuel

2Sam – Second Samuel

1Kgs – First Kings

2Kgs – Second Kings

1Chr – First Chronicles

2Chr – Second Chronicles

Ezra – Ezra

Neh – Nehemiah

Est – Esther

Job – Job

Psa – Psalms

Pro – Proverbs

Ecc – Ecclesiastes

Song – Song of Songs

Isa – Isaiah

Jer – Jeremiah

Lam – Lamentations

Eze – Ezekiel

Dan – Daniel

Hos – Hosea

Joel – Joel

Amos – Amos

Oba – Obadiah

Jona – Jonah

Mic – Micah
Nah – Nahum
Hab – Habakkuk
Zep – Zephaniah
Hag – Haggai
Zec – Zechariah
Mal – Malachi

New Testament

Mt – Gospel of Matthew
Mk – Gospel of Mark
Lk – Gospel of Luke
Jn – Gospel of John
Acts – Acts of the Apostles
Rom – Letter to the Romans
1Cor – First Letter to the Corinthians
2Cor – Second Letter to the Corinthians
Gal – Letter to the Galatians
Eph – Letter to the Ephesians
Phil – Letter to the Philippians
Col – Letter to the Colossians
1Thes – First Letter to the Thessalonians
2Thes – Second Letter to the Thessalonians
1Tim – First Letter to Timothy
2Tim – Second Letter to Timothy
Tit – Letter to Titus
Phlm – Letter to Philemon
Heb – Letter to the Hebrews
Jam – Letter of James
1Pet – First Letter of Peter
2Pet – Second Letter of Peter
1Jn – First Letter of John
2Jn – Second Letter of John
3Jn – Third Letter of John
Jude – Letter of Jude
Rev – Revelation

Explanation of general format

PERSONAL PRONOUNS are capitalized when pertaining to Deity.

BRACKETS [] are used in this commentary in the Bible text to indicate words which are not found in the original Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek but implied by it.

SHARP BRACKETS < > are used in this commentary in the Bible text to indicate words possibly not in the original writings.

When **ASTERISKS** * are used in New Testament quotations, it is to mark verbs that are historical presents in the Greek which have been translated with an English past tense in order to conform to modern usage. The translators recognized that in some contexts the present tense seems more unexpected and unjustified to the English reader than a past tense would have been. But Greek authors frequently used the present tense for the sake of heightened vividness, thereby transporting their readers in imagination to the actual scene at the time of occurrence. However, the translators felt that it would be wise to change these historical presents to English past tenses.

ALL CAPS in the New Testament quotations are used in the text to indicate Old Testament quotations or obvious references to Old Testament texts.

The Book of Ecclesiastes

Introduction

There are three books in the Bible written by Solomon: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs. The Jewish tradition says that he has written

1. Song of Songs in his youth;
2. Proverbs when he is middle-aged;
3. Ecclesiastes when he is old.

There is something to be said for that when we know the course of Solomon's life:

1. In Song of Songs he describes his feelings for the woman with whom he wants to share his life and how he and she come together.
2. In Proverbs he is married. He speaks to his son and about his son's mother.
3. The book of Ecclesiastes he will have written when he has become old and unfaithful to God, but by grace has also been restored in his fellowship with God.

In Ecclesiastes he writes about his experiences in life without fellowship with God, that is, about the period in which he deviated from God. He lives a life 'under the sun' without a direct, open connection with heaven. This has led him to ask questions of sense: What is the meaning of my life? Is there anything that makes my life valuable? What is real wisdom? How should I give death a place in my existence? What place does God have in my life? In his book, the Preacher invites us to think about these questions.

The philosophers of the world have made it their profession to think about these kinds of questions. Only, in their folly they do so without involving God. Therefore, all their philosophical reflections are of no use to anyone. Learning about their imaginations is only wearying (Ecc 12:12). They would do well to learn from the Preacher.

The Preacher is a philosopher who has not given up faith in God. That makes him a real wise man. God is present in the background in everything he contemplates. It is impossible for every thinking person to ignore Him. The Preacher certainly believes in God and also takes Him into account. After all his investigations, he finally ends up with God.

His intention with this book is to warn us not to fall into the same mistakes as he did. He does this by passing on his experiences to us – and especially to young people.

Ger de Koning

Middelburg, November 2016, translated October 2020

The Preacher is Solomon. After a good start as king, Solomon later in his life makes a deep fall. In his heart he turns away from God, the Source of all grace (1Kgs 11:4). In his good years he pointed out to his son to watch over his heart (Pro 4:23) and to beware of strange woman (Pro 2:16). However, he himself has not guarded his heart and has fallen into the pit of strange women. We see in Solomon what the most wise man on earth can come to when he forgets his constant dependence on God.

It is inevitable that Solomon is restored after his fall. There are some arguments that show that he remained “Jedidiah”, the beloved of Yahweh (2Sam 12:25):

1. Solomon is a picture of the Messiah in His kingdom of peace. Therefore it is unthinkable that he would eventually have been rejected anyway.
2. We also see that the concluding comment on his life is about his wisdom, not about his deviation (1Kgs 11:41).
3. Furthermore he is mentioned in one breath with his father David when it comes to the way both have gone (2Chr 11:17).
4. We also see that the historian of 2 Chronicles ignores the sins of Solomon, which would not have been right if they had not been forgiven.

Another argument is that the origin of the book of Ecclesiastes can only be explained if we hear in Solomon a man speaking who has returned to God. After his striving after wind, he got his wisdom back from God. In what he says in Ecclesiastes 7 (Ecc 7:26), he seems to confess his wrong way. Every-

thing speaks for the fact that the book came into being after the writer has found his only and full satisfaction in God again.

It is conceivable that by his bad example he has led others to go astray. In particular, he also wants to teach them. Now that he has come to repentance, he wants to warn others of this disastrous path. Someone who has returned from a wrong path will desire to warn others of going astray (Psa 51:12-13; Lk 22:32).

The theme of the book is wisdom. The word “wisdom” or “wise” occurs almost fifty times. This is not innate wisdom, but wisdom gained and obtained through experience; we can also say that it is about wisdom gained and obtained through pain and shame. It is wisdom to behave wisely in this life (Ecc 7:12). The elder teaches the young person on the basis of his experience. He shares his acquired experiences with the young people.

The book of Proverbs is also a book of wisdom. That book is about the wisdom we need to be able to go our way safely until the end. The book of Proverbs leads man in the light of the fear of God, so that he may stay in it. Ecclesiastes leads man through the darkness of the world without God, but also shows bright spots, which shine brighter as darkness increases. Perhaps we could say that Ecclesiastes is the introduction to Proverbs, or that Proverbs begin where Ecclesiastes stops.

The book can best be summarized with the words the Lord Jesus addresses to the Samaritan woman who comes to the well of Sychar to draw water: “Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again” (Jn 4:13). The well of Sychar is a picture of a dry, deceptive world where no permanent happiness can be found. In that world we are being guided by the Preacher. Most of the people look like the poor Samaritan woman before she had that memorable encounter with the Lord Jesus. They hew for themselves cisterns that can hold no water (Jer 2:13), meaning that they search for satisfaction in the things of the world that can never give the satisfaction they are looking for.

The book describes all kinds of efforts to become happy, but it is always in vain. In general, five aspects of life are tried out to see if the possession of it gives lasting happiness: wisdom, pleasure, possession, power and Godli-

ness. Solomon examines these things to see if the possession of any of these things gives the heart lasting happiness and constant satisfaction.

They are not sinful things. It is about being busy with things God gives to enjoy and what the result of that pleasure is. However, the heart does not rise above creation and therefore remains unhappy. When it comes to finding the true meaning of life in what creation offers in pleasure, the disappointment is great. It always appears that all things on earth are labelled 'vanity' or 'meaningless' because of their temporariness.

We could say: the heart remains stuck in the blessing and does not end up at the Source of the blessing. A clear example can be found at the beginning of the Bible. God has told man not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In her answer to the serpent, however, Eve does not speak of the tree, but of the fruit of the tree. This indicates that her attention has shifted from the Source of blessing to what is presented to her as a blessing. Then we are in the territory of Ecclesiastes.

Christians may wonder how the emphasis in this book on the use and enjoyment of life can be harmonized with the New Testament commandment not to love the world (1Jn 2:15). The answer is that the teacher – the Preacher – fully agrees with John's statement: "For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. The world is passing away, and also its lusts" (1Jn 2:16-17). There can hardly be a better explanation of the whole theme of this book. The findings that the Preacher puts down in this book confirm that life in the world can only be meaningful if man remembers his Creator (Ecc 12:1).

The Preacher puts the life in which it is all about the own 'I', opposite the life in which it is all about God. Alternately we deal with the two classes of mankind. The one class consists of those who fear God (Ecc 3:14; 5:7; 7:18; 8:12-13; 12:13), the righteous (Ecc 3:17; 7:15-16,20; 8:14; 9:1-2), the good (Ecc 9:2), and the wise (Ecc 2:14; 4:13; 10:2). The other class consists of sinners (Ecc 2:26; 7:26; 8:11; 9:2,18) and the wicked (Ecc 3:17; 7:15; 8:10,12-14; 9:2). Sinners and wicked people are the deliberate villains. There is also mention of the fool, of fools and of folly (Ecc 2:14-16; 10:12-13). The fool is one who is wicked and evil (Psa 14:1; 53:1). It is someone who makes no effort

to discover the will of God because he completely ignores God and pretends as if He does not exist.

The Preacher shows himself to be a master in seeing through all kinds of ideas, such as those concerning the value of knowledge and wisdom, getting lost in amusement and pleasure, the importance of hard work, controlling your own life, and striving for justice and righteousness. He knows what he is talking about: he has been going around among the people and went to farmers and workers, he has been in the homes of the rich, has visited places where justice is spoken, and has been present at funerals and weddings. Wherever he has been, he has listened to what has been said, and he has taken a good look at it.

Therefore his conclusion is not based on a superficial observation. He draws his conclusion after thorough research and deep reflection. If after all his research he has the message that everything is vanity, just like a breath, then he knows what he is saying. He concludes that nothing is permanent, nothing is lasting. Everything has a limited tenability or has only a short-term effect. For example, you can strive for justice, but you will see that justice continues to stumble on the streets. He does not say that hard work is pointless, but that all the toil of man produces nothing lasting. Our ideals are just like our breath in the fresh air in the morning: we see a beautiful little cloud for a moment and then it is gone, dissolved and intangibly disappeared.

Division of the book

---I. The pointlessness of nature, wisdom and wealth (Ecclesiastes 1:1-2:23)

-----1. The theme: Everything is frustration (Ecclesiastes 1:1-3)

-----2. The frustration in nature and history (Ecclesiastes 1:4-11)

-----3. The frustration of wisdom (Ecclesiastes 1:12-18)

-----4. The frustration of unlimited richness (Ecclesiastes 2:1-11)

-----5. The ultimate frustration: death (Ecclesiastes 2:12-23)

---II. The Divine order of life (Ecclesiastes 2:24-3:22)

-----1. Everyday life to enjoy (Ecclesiastes 2:24-26)

-----2. God's plan for life (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8)

- 3. The parts and the whole (Ecclesiastes 3:9-15)
- 4. The consequences of mortality (Ecclesiastes 3:16-22)
- III. The frustration of politics (Ecclesiastes 4:1-16)
- IV. The frustration of life (Ecclesiastes 5:1-7:29)
 - 1. Silent before God (Ecclesiastes 5:1-7)
 - 2. Money and death (Ecclesiastes 5:8-20)
 - 3. The unfulfilled life (Ecclesiastes 6:1-9)
 - 4. What is good? (Ecclesiastes 6:10-12)
 - 5. Practical advices for daily life (Ecclesiastes 7:1-14)
 - 6. Moderation is recommended (Ecclesiastes 7:15-22)
 - 7. Bad relationships (Ecclesiastes 7:23-29)
- V. Life in view of death (Ecclesiastes 8:1-9:18)
 - 1. The inevitability of death (Ecclesiastes 8:1-14)
 - 2. Life to enjoy (Ecclesiastes 8:15-9:10)
 - 3. Insecurity and injustice (Ecclesiastes 9:11-18)
- VI. Proverbs (Ecclesiastes 10:1-20)
 - 1. Wise relationships (Ecclesiastes 10:1-7)
 - 2. Wise management (Ecclesiastes 10:8-11)
 - 3. Wise speech and thoughts (Ecclesiastes 10:12-20)
- VII. Wisdom for the future and present (Ecclesiastes 11:1-10)
 - 1. The insecure future and present behavior (Ecclesiastes 11:1-6)
 - 2. The secure future and present behavior (Ecclesiastes 11:7-10)
- VIII. The frustration of old age (Ecclesiastes 12:1-8)
- IX. Epilogue (Ecclesiastes 12:9-14)
 - 1. The credibility of the author (Ecclesiastes 12:9-12)
 - 2. The conclusion of the matter (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14)

Ecclesiastes 1

Ecc 1:1 | The Author

| 1 *The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.*

The Hebrew word for “Ecclesiastes” is Qohelet, a word that means something like a ‘leader who speaks to a gathering of people’. As such he speaks his “words” with which he teaches the people and preaches to them. He calls himself Preacher several times (Ecc 1:2,12; 7:27; 12:8,9,10). As already mentioned, the Preacher is Solomon. However, he does not mention his name, because it is not about his person, but about his message. He, the Preacher, the wisest among men, takes it upon himself to explore and experience life under the sun, and to share the results of his examination with the gathering of his companions.

“The son of David” shows his special and high descent and thus his great responsibility, to which he unfortunately did not respond for a certain period of time. The fact that he had a God-fearing father in David makes the sinful period in his life all the worse (cf. Jer 22:15-17). He knew of his father’s sin of adultery, but also of his repentance about it. This has also made his own return possible, for he has seen that a return to God after repentance is possible.

“King in Jerusalem” refers to his reign in the city that God has chosen to be His city. A man cannot be given a greater honor. In that area Solomon does his research and there he draws his conclusion. That conclusion is that in the midst of so much wisdom, honor, wealth and power, his heart remains empty.

Ecc 1:2 | The Conclusion of the Research

| 2 *“Vanity of vanities,” says the Preacher,
| “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.”*

The Preacher does not start with a light-hearted story to flavor those whom he addresses to taste and make them desiring to hear more. Against all advices about building up a speech, he gets straight to the point. He starts by

expressing the conclusion of all that he had examined: everything is “vanity of vanities”. He does not say this as an occasional remark, but he makes us face the facts by repeating it three times, so that we cannot ignore it.

In the course of the book he will substantiate his conclusion comprehensively and thoroughly. Then it will appear that it is not an expression of despair – that is how a superficial reader might interpret this conclusion – but the sober observation of the nature of the world and everything in it. Each time he mentions a problem or enigma he has encountered in life, and establishes that everything is “vanity of vanities” or meaningless.

If, according to the Preacher, we look at life honestly and carefully, we see that life is short and empty, deceptive and without result. He says this to draw the heart of the believer away from the world and to direct his desires and expectations toward the unseen, imperishable world that is not subject to vanity (Rom 8:20; 1Cor 7:31; 2Cor 4:16; 2Pet 3:11; 1Jn 2:17).

“Vanity of vanities” is a Hebrew superlative and means “the greatest vanity”. We also find this in expressions like ‘the God of gods’, ‘the holy of holies’, ‘a servant of servants’. It also includes that all is vanity, without exemption, and not just a little or occasionally. It should be kept in mind, however, that these are observations outside of God’s realm in which man is considered as alienated from Him.

With this statement – which is not theory, but has been experienced by him – he shows how pointless and aimless everything is. Vanity has the meaning of emptiness, a breath, a gust of wind, in vain, fast passing, aimless, you have nothing to gain from it; you cannot do anything with it, worthless.

The Preacher is wiser and more serious than all people. But that does not make him happier, but only more confused and sadder than anyone else. Some speak despicably of the world because they are hermits and do not know the world, or because they are beggars who have nothing. This is not the case with Solomon. He knows the world and possesses everything.

We who believe, may view life from heaven, that is, from a place above the sun. By this we know that the world and its lust pass away, but that “he who does the will of God lives forever” (1Jn 2:17).

Ecc 1:3 | What Advantage Does Hard Work Give?

*3 What advantage does man have in all his work
Which he does under the sun?*

The first question the Preacher asks himself and us touches the heart of his research. He will work out this question in all its parts in the course of this book. The answer is that man has no “advantage” or “profit”, in terms of net permanent gain, of all his work “which he does under the sun”. The original word “advantage” is used only in this book (Ecc 1:3; 2:11; 3:9; 5:11,16; 7:11,12). The word comes from the trade and means what is left when all costs have been deducted. The meaning here then is: what is left as a net result of all your hard work? The answer is: nothing. No profit has been made.

The expression “under the sun” – which appears almost thirty times in this book – is important and characteristic of this book. In this book we also encounter the expression “under heaven”. This last expression emphasizes that it applies to the earth, the earthly. The expression “under the sun” also determines us with the earth, but places more emphasis on the temporary, transient character of everything that happens. The Preacher looks at everything horizontally, looks around, perceives and experiences. He does not look upward to the origin of everything he sees and experiences.

What happens, happens on earth; people do not look to a higher purpose. If the view of life does not go beyond ‘under the sun’, everything we strive for will have an undertone of dissatisfaction. It is all connected with the pursuit of sinful man and therefore temporary and imperfect. Never will a person be able to look back with satisfaction at his work and say “behold, it is very good”, because nothing is perfect, nothing is finished. Others follow him and go on with his work. Nobody delivers something that is unchangingly good.

If we look from that point of view at everything man does, the conclusion can only be that everything is for nothing. All activity is work that is wearying; it never results in anything that gives lasting happiness. We see this in business and politics. The next president and the new politician solemnly promise that they will do better than the previous one, but over time they will have to vacate their post because they have failed. The same

will happen to them and to all who come after them. All the work without ever finding satisfaction must bring man to Him Who said: "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest" (Mt 11:28).

The Lord Jesus connects to the Preacher's question when He says: "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? (Mt 16:26; Lk 12:15). You can dedicate yourself and get everything you have worked so hard for, but what is the final result when you die and have to let go of everything and leave it behind?

Paul tells us where the real profit is found: "But godliness [actually] is a means of great gain when accompanied by contentment. For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either" (1Tim 6:6-7). Profit is only where the heart is in connection with the eternal God and eternity. To work for the Lord is not in vain (1Cor 15:58).

An article in the *Reformatorsch Dagblad* (a Dutch newspaper) of May 5, 2003, proves the truth of this verse in a practical way:

Jip Wijngaarden was barely 17 when in 1982 she was chosen from 3000 candidates to play the leading role in the theater play 'Anne Frank'. A turbulent career as an actress and film star followed. Hollywood beckoned. For nine years Jip moved into the world of glitter and glamour.

But gradually, doubt struck. 'As an idol you are a community property, you lose yourself. I didn't know what to do with it and started thinking. Is that all? I had earned honor and fame, but I was not happy. The life I led was superficial and empty. My heart was a big hole through which everything was blowing.'

For Jip, the change to Christendom meant a radical break with the past. 'I felt that the new life would cost me everything. And that is how it went, because the basis was not right. People around me declared me crazy that I let Hollywood and other offers slip by for something you cannot see'.
[End of article]

Ecc 1:4-8 | Illustrations of Meaninglessness

*4 A generation goes and a generation comes,
But the earth remains forever.*

5 Also, the sun rises and the sun sets;
And hastening to its place it rises there [again].

6 Blowing toward the south,
Then turning toward the north,
The wind continues swirling along;
And on its circular courses the wind returns.

7 All the rivers flow into the sea,
Yet the sea is not full.
To the place where the rivers flow,
There they flow again.

8 All things are wearisome;
Man is not able to tell [it].
The eye is not satisfied with seeing,
Nor is the ear filled with hearing.

The Preacher gives some examples in verses 4-11 of the endless cycle of life with all its events. He points to ‘the law of repetition’. He observes an endless circular movement. This circular movement works in the atmosphere of nature and in that of human life. History also repeats itself countless times. Movement, however, is not progress. Everything remains as it was, without all of these movements bringing about any real change in a person’s life, so that he will have full fulfillment, full satisfaction, and a full and uninterrupted happiness.

Generations come and go (verse 4). They enter the stage of life, cross it with a few steps, turn their pirouettes, make their bow and then disappear again from the stage. The stage, the earth, is always the same, as well as the game and the roles, the masks and the clothes. Only the actors change. How futile is all that. Life is a never ending theater play with ever-changing players and a never-changing decor. In that respect, life can also be compared to a home trainer. You cycle, but you do not move one inch forward.

Nobody stays alive on earth all the time. Seen “under the sun”, a person’s life is futile like a vapor (Jam 4:14), goes faster than a weaver’s shuttle (Job 7:6), and is as momentary as the grass (Psa 103:15; Isa 40:6-7; 51:12; 1Pet 1:24). We receive our earthly possessions from others, and a short time

later we have to hand them over to others. These possessions are no more essential than the life lived with them.

Each generation works during the short time of its stay on earth for its existence. Then life is over as far as that generation is concerned and it disappears again. The next generation shows the same picture, as well as the next. And so on and so forth. Life, limited to here and now, can be seen as a 'rat race'. The 'rat race' is a concept that refers to the futile attempts of a rat to escape from a treadmill in which it runs endlessly and keeps it running at the same time. It is a good illustration of a series of endless or useless actions that offer no prospect of result.

The only one who remains is the earth that carries all these generations. That shows the contrast between the brevity of life and the (seemingly) permanent existence of the earth. There is no hope for change: the coming and going of the generations is as unchanging as the fact that the earth is fixed. Thus is the perception of the Preacher and of anyone who looks at life with a sober view, without looking at or thinking about the origin of the generations or of the earth.

In verses 5-7 the Preacher looks at creation. He observes a lot of activities. At the same time he notes that there has been no progress. Just as there is no advantage for man to all his work (verse 3), so there is no advantage for creation to all its work. It is with so many things in nature just like with the changing of the successive generations of verse 4. The Preacher mentions as examples the sun (verse 5), the wind (verse 6) and the water of the rivers and the sea (verse 7).

Look at the sun. The sun is the source of light for the earth. It always remains the same and always does the same work. It always illuminates the same world and always does so at the same time. Every morning the sun rises and every evening it sets. It always rises at the same place and always sets at the same place. So it goes on endlessly, invariably, day in, day out.

The fact that the heavens tell the glory of God, that creation is the work of His hands, and that He has given the sun its place in it (Gen 1:14-19; Psa 8:3), is not taken into consideration by the Preacher. By looking at the sun in this way, the Preacher in fact says that creation does not reflect God's

glory if you do not involve Him, but that creation illustrates all man's senseless work.

After the sun, the Preacher points to the wind (verse 6). The sun goes from east to west, the wind turns from south to north. Life is like the wind, which is constantly turning. The wind is much more unpredictable in its movements than the sun, which follows a fixed, predictable course along the sky. But despite all the twists and turns of the wind and the unpredictability of its course, everything remains the same. The wind is invisible, but we feel it and perceive it by the movement of the clouds and leaves on the tree. But when it has blown and the wind has subsided, what has essentially changed? Nothing, right?

Even if a storm has wreaked havoc, nothing changes. Man calculates the damage and builds up what has been destroyed, or starts a new life somewhere else. Only when a person in the storm recognizes the speaking of God and allows Him into his life, something essentially changes.

The third example in creation with which the Preacher compares life is that of the water that flows through the rivers to the sea (verse 7). The rivers constantly bring water to the sea. You would say that the sea should get full one day, shouldn't it? But no, the sea never gets full. The rivers keep on flowing, without ever finishing their work to fill the sea. Our saying "carrying water to the sea" indicates the same: it is a pointless activity.

In this example we can also think of the endless cycle, for "all the rivers flow into the sea, yet the sea is not full. To the place where the rivers flow, there they flow again." We know that the water that the rivers bring to the sea evaporates. This creates rain which is poured out again at the place where the rivers originate. This water brings the rivers back to the sea, to evaporate again, after which the cycle begins again (cf. Amos 9:6).

The unchanging course of the sun, the restlessness of the wind and the insatiability of the sea fill the lives of every generation. Man is constantly restless and imperfect. He is always hectic in search of more, without ever becoming satiated. His spirit knows no rest. But all his hurry and work does not make any impression on the firmness and movements of nature. Nothing changes in the firmness of the earth and the cycle of nature.

Despite the fact that creation is always in motion, it is not capable of satisfying man, who only has the earth as his horizon. This dissatisfaction is heavy and so wearisome that it cannot be expressed in words (verse 8).

How different it is for him who knows God and involves Him in his life. Such a person also knows difficult situations in his life, for which he lacks the words to describe them, but he has the Holy Spirit Who gives words to his sighs (Rom 8:26).

“The eye” of man is always looking for new things. If you’ve been somewhere once or maybe even a few times, you’ve seen enough of it. At some point it bores you. It is like a movie. If you have seen it once or maybe even twice, then you want to see something else. You are looking for variety.

So it is with “the ear”. At first it absolutely loves a certain song, but if it has heard this song more often, another song must come. Looking for something new is always the same song. The Athenians of ancient times sang it as well. They “used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new” (Acts 17:21). The new was interesting for a while, but then they wanted to hear something new again.

Eye and ear cannot be saturated by earthly things and philosophies. Nothing that belongs to this creation is capable of permanently satisfying the heart and giving it lasting happiness. No matter how much effort someone makes, there is no saturation on earth. It is only with the Lord Jesus. The eye that sees Him and the ear that hears Him is truly happy (Mt 13:16). There is plenty of joy when the eye sees Him (Psa 16:8-11). There is complete joy when there is fellowship with Him (1Jn 1:4).

Ecc 1:9-11 | There Is Nothing New Under the Sun

*9 That which has been is that which will be,
And that which has been done is that which will be done.
So there is nothing new under the sun.
10 Is there anything of which one might say,
“See this, it is new”?
Already it has existed for ages
Which were before us.
11 There is no remembrance of earlier things;*

*And also of the later things which will occur,
There will be for them no remembrance
Among those who will come later [still].*

“That which has been” are the circumstances (verse 9). A man always finds himself in certain circumstances given and directed by God (Gen 8:22) which greatly determine his life. “Which has been done” are the human efforts. Man always tries to create the most favorable circumstances for his life. So he has always been busy in and with his life and so he will always be busy. What he invents to make life more pleasant, is only building on what has already been invented (Gen 4:20-22). There is quite simply “nothing new under the sun”.

Start to involve God in all things and all things will gain their meaning. Everything remains subject to the laws God has laid down in creation. Nothing can break these laws. Therefore, nothing really new can ever come, only variations on what has always been and will always be.

Although there is constant change, there is nothing really new (verse 10). Everything is a repetition of what has been before and what will soon be over, while the heart remains empty and hungry. A new discovery or invention does not change anything essential to man or to creation. It does not make him happier or more satisfied.

We also find out that the progress that has been made also has unforeseen disadvantages. We need to come up with another solution for that too. All efforts for something new proves the emptiness of man at the same time. Man dreams of realizing ‘Utopia’, the ideal society. Although the dream shatters again and again, man still believes in it because he is blind to the fact that he has not made any real progress.

There are new things, but they belong to another world, the world above the sun. So there is the new birth, or the birth from above (Jn 3:5). And he who has repented is “a new creation” (2Cor 5:17). “A new song” will be sung (Rev 5:9; 14:3) and there will also be “a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev 21:1). This all comes from Him Who is unchanging in Himself, but Who makes new things out of Himself over and over again. He will make everything new and create a situation that has never existed before and that will never end (Rev 21:5).

If we say of something that it is new, it is because we do not remember “the things of the past” (verse 11). As the ancient Greeks said: ‘All learning is only remembering’ (*mathesis* is *anamnesis*). Someone can gain ‘eternal fame’ through a particular achievement, but that ‘eternal fame’ is of no use to him who has accomplished it. His achievement survives him, but what use is it to him when others remember him after his death? Can that give him any cooling if he is in the place of torment? Can all of those after whom streets or cities have been named (Psa 49:11-12), draw any comfort from it in hell? If anyone knew anything about it, what satisfaction would it offer in that world where other standards of judgment are applied?

Future generations make the same mistake that all previous generations have made, namely that they learn nothing from past things, from the past. They do not remember the lessons history teaches. It is simply forgotten that all technological progress does not mean progress or improvement of human nature.

Ecc 1:12 | The Preacher Introduces Himself Again

| *12 I, the Preacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem.*

In the previous verses, Solomon already announced the results of his research and his general observations. In the next section, which runs from Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:26, he will tell us what he has tried to do to obtain the full, undisturbed and unceasing happiness of life. He will describe his search for happiness and the methods he has used. Now they are not only observations, but also personal experiences.

Before he does so, he recalls his ‘credentials’. In doing so, he emphasizes once again in what capacity and in what position he carried out his research and what was available to him for that purpose. What such a man has to say deserves full attention. He first points out again, as in verse 1, that he, and no one else, is “I, Preacher”, Qohelet, the man who addresses a gathering of people, in this case to inform them of the results of his research.

He then refers to the position he had during his investigation. He says he “has been” king. By this he does not mean to say that he is no longer king when presenting the results of his research, but that as king he has gained

the experiences he describes in this book. In this way he underlines his abilities, his almost unlimited possibilities and his position. He reigns over an undivided Israel in Jerusalem, the city of God's choice, the center of religion and the location of reception of all the world's dignitaries.

As king, he used all means at his disposal to carry out his research. He has royal power and wisdom of Divine origin. It also indicates the character of the research: it is a royal activity. He wanted to examine and test whether the world has anything of lasting value and meaning to offer to someone who is a brilliant thinker and immeasurably rich.

Ecc 1:13-18 | Wisdom Gives No Satisfaction

13 And I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven. [It] is a grievous task [which] God has given to the sons of men to be afflicted with. 14 I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind. 15 What is crooked cannot be straightened and what is lacking cannot be counted. 16 I said to myself, "Behold, I have magnified and increased wisdom more than all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has observed a wealth of wisdom and knowledge." 17 And I set my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly; I realized that this also is striving after wind. 18 Because in much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge [results in] increasing pain.

Solomon is now going to tell about his personal experiences. He also tells about the method he used for his research into everything under the sun: he has devoted himself with all of his heart to seek and explore everything by wisdom. He has tried a few ways to see if one of them would lead to the fervently desired happiness. He tried the way of "wisdom", but it ended in "much grief" and "pain" (verse 18). He describes this way in Ecclesiastes 1 (Ecc 1:13-18). Then he followed the way of "pleasure," but that way also ended very unsatisfactorily. He had to conclude that "all is vanity and striving after wind". He describes this way in Ecclesiastes 2 (Ecc 2:1-11).

His heart was sincere and serious (verse 13). The heart is opposite the outer appearance. It is the inner life, the center of all intellectual, emotional and spiritual abilities. He has devoted himself with all of his heart to his seek-

ing, making use of the special wisdom given to him by God (1Kgs 4:29). It shows that he was not a cold seeker who rationally explored the different ways of life of his days. On the contrary, he was really interested in man and society and tried to understand “everything that has been done under heaven” and to weigh its value.

What he has done is seeking and exploring. Seeking is focused on the depth of a case, while exploring has more focus on the breadth or size of a case. Both activities together show that it was not a superficial, but a thorough and extensive research. The field of his seeking and exploring was “everything that has been done under heaven”. This shows that he did not exclude anything from his research and that his research was limited to the earth. He did not involve God in his research.

Solomon wanted to know if he was able to understand and explain the world by his wisdom in order to discover a higher meaning of earthly life. To this end, he started several investigations, in which he examined the most diverse aspects of life. He came to the conclusion that this was “a grievous task” because not one of his investigations led to truly satisfactory results.

It has become clear to him that *God* “has given this task to the sons of men to be afflicted with”. People may live on earth without any thought of God, but the problems they encounter are the result of sin. God has not taken away those consequences, but lets them exist. There is a curse on creation through sin that causes us to do a lot of work before we can reap any result, which actually gives no real satisfaction (Gen 3:17).

The heart of man is hungry and thirsty. This drives him to look for something that satisfies his hunger and quenches his thirst. If he cannot get to seek it ‘higher’, he will always seek refuge in the things of the earth that never give satisfaction. This will result in him having an unquenchable thirst forever. He will beg for a drop of water to cool his tongue, but no one will be able to give it to him because he has let the appointed time pass by (Lk 16:24; Jer 46:17). He has rejected the invitation that sounds on the last page of the Bible: “Let he who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes, take the water of life without cost” (Rev 22:17).

Solomon was neither superficial nor did he operate on a random basis (verse 14). He did not take a sample from the big picture, but “he saw all the works which have been done under the sun”. The highest insight which he has reached after all his research and exploring is that “everything is vanity and striving after wind”, and that it always remains so. Striving after wind is a useless undertaking. The ambition to seize the elusive can only result in frustration.

The Preacher observed regularity and order in creation (verses 4-7), but he also observed a disorder caused by sin. There are crooked things and things are lacking (verse 15). That goes for the thinking of man and for his ways and works, and also for nature. Whatever the thinker thinks, he is not able to explain the twists in life, let alone to eliminate them. He simply lacks too much knowledge about life. The Only One Who is able to straighten the crooked man and what has caused him to be crooked, is the Lord Jesus (Isa 42:16; Lk 3:5).

All science about how man should be is incapable of changing man. We never find out the cause of the crookedness of the human race if the most important information is missing. That information has to come from God. If He is kept out of observations, the crooked remains crooked and what is missing can never be counted. He cannot straighten the crookedness, he lacks the ability to do so; and he does not notice what is lacking, because he lacks the insight to do so. Whatever a thinker thinks, he can never think of a system in which life can be fathomed. The philosopher can sometimes give some help with his wisdom, but he can never solve the fundamental problem of life, because he keeps scribbling on the outside.

He who, like the Preacher, has his eyes open, sees that man is crooked, while he should be noble, helpful and good. But nothing can enable him to be so. For he is part of “a crooked and perverse generation” (Phil 2:15). Despite all the teaching to make man right, he remains crooked. All education courses are not able to change the character of man and to ennoble him. The most essential factor lacking to find out the meaning of life is enlightenment through the Spirit of God.

“I said to myself” (verse 16) means ‘I consulted with myself’. That is the level of the book. Only he and his own heart are discussing. This shows

that the source of his research, the level of it, lies in himself, a human being. He draws from his own heart. Therein dwells the most conceivable wisdom (1Kgs 4:29-34) which is also “magnified and increased” by all his research and investigations, but it remains human wisdom. There is no other light shining around him than that of nature, there is no light from above.

With “all who were over Jerusalem before me”, Solomon refers not only to David but probably also to the Canaanite kings who lived in Jerusalem before David captured the city. We can think of Melchizedek (Gen 14:18) and Adoni-zedek (Jos 10:1). We can add that also all philosophers after him – for example Aristotle (384-322 BC), Socrates (469-399 BC) and Plato (428-348 BC), who are considered the greatest philosophers of the ancient world – cannot be compared to him.

After all his investigations and research, he can say that his heart has “observed a wealth of wisdom and knowledge”. He has been deeply engaged in all that is worthwhile to be involved with and has absorbed that into his heart and mind. What he has discovered is not a global impression, but has given him knowledge of the smallest details.

The Preacher says that he set his mind “to know wisdom” (verse 17). All effort is a laudable striving after results, but is the same as trying to strive after wind. He also wanted “to know madness and folly” in order to learn about their deception and deceit and to preserve the knowledge to be kept from it. To see wisdom in those who do not use wisdom and to see folly in those who do not fight against deception and deceit is a torment for the mind.

The only thing wisdom leads to is the discovery that “in much wisdom there is much grief” (verse 18). True wisdom acknowledges that the true satisfaction sought through wisdom is unattainable. The same goes for the knowledge we acquire. The more we know, the more we know that we know nothing. Our knowing is always only partial (1Cor 13:12).

The expression ‘knowledge is power’ is an expression that only short-sighted people use. Real knowledge does not give someone power, but sadness. Real knowledge is more than factual knowledge. It is about under-

standing, about insight, about discovering the connection between certain things or events.

We sense our incapacity and powerlessness better, and become sad as we discover more of the laws of nature and how God in His providence rules the world. Each discovery leads us to the conviction that much more remains hidden than we have never suspected before. Knowledge or science does not guarantee happiness. Attempts to fathom the meaning of life through wisdom and knowledge, and then acquire ultimate happiness, in fact increase the conviction of the meaninglessness of life.

For those who know Christ, this is completely different. He who increases knowledge of Christ increases joy. Thus there is "knowledge of [the] salvation" (Lk 1:77), knowledge "of the love of Christ" (Eph 3:19), "the knowledge of His [God's] will" (Col 1:9) and "the knowledge of God" (Rom 11:33). One day "the earth ... will be full of the knowledge of the LORD" (Isa 11:9). That will be when Christ reigns on earth.

Ecclesiastes 2

Ecc 2:1-3 | Pleasure, Laughter, Wine and Madness

1 I said to myself, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure. So enjoy yourself." And behold, it too was futility. 2 I said of laughter, "It is madness," and of pleasure, "What does it accomplish?" 3 I explored with my mind [how] to stimulate my body with wine while my mind was guiding [me] wisely, and how to take hold of folly, until I could see what good there is for the sons of men to do under heaven the few years of their lives.

Ungrateful activities, fatigue, sorrow, grief, that is the sad conclusion of the wise in the previous chapter (Ecc 1:13,18). Well, he then said, let me only think of the nice things of life, things you can laugh about and that make you feel happy (Ecc 2:1-3).

Solomon has spoken to himself (verse 1). "I said" means that he made a decision. With an encouraging "come now" he has stimulated himself to take action. He has surrendered his heart to "joy", for that might give him satisfaction. He did not test his joy, but himself by surrendering to hedonism – which is the view that pleasure is the most important thing in life.

To stimulate his joy, he only looked at the good things of life ["enjoy yourself" is literally "consider with goodness"]. He said to himself that he should be positive and not pay attention to all the misery around him. He pushed away his worries, ignores his painful experiences, and has made himself to believe: Look happy and feel happy and smile to life.

Solomon has kept this up for a while and put himself to the test to see if this gives him lasting happiness. But after a while he also had to say that it is "futility". The pleasure evaporated and the harsh reality was seen again. Every human joy is spoiled by the awareness that it is not permanent (Pro 14:13). You can watch and listen to comedians and laugh uncontrollably at their jests and jokes. It works like a drug. For a moment you forget all the misery around you. But when the show is over, you are back in the middle of reality. Distraction and entertainment have no lasting effect. You are still as empty as before.

Neither “laughter” nor “pleasure” have been able to take away the terrible awareness of the meaninglessness of all his deeds (verse 2). Laughter sounds loud, but short. The sound disappears and nothing remains (Ecc 7:6). When life consists of laughter, it is “madness”. Someone who always laughs, looks more like a fool than a wise man.

Laughter is madness when people laugh at obscene jokes and sickening humor. Laughter is madness when it is linked to the loss of judgment skills and the boundary between good and evil is lost. The laughter draws the hard facts into a sea of frivolity.

When pleasure is a goal in itself, it achieves nothing. It does not free someone from the tormenting feeling of the meaninglessness of all his activities. He says of pleasure “what does it accomplish?”, by which he means that it does not accomplish anything. There is a temporary effect associated with pleasure. When someone is happy, it is pleasant for him (Pro 15:13; 17:22), but it does not bring about any fundamental change in man and his circumstances.

Pleasure does not provide answers to the questions of life. The answer to the question is clear: all pleasure fails when it comes to meeting the needs of man who lives “under the sun” and has no relationship with God.

There is a joy that goes deeper than temporary pleasure with limited effect, and that also goes far beyond it. This joy lies outside the field of the vision of the Preacher and is connected with the Lord Jesus in glory. He who has a living relationship with Him can rejoice in Him, for He gives His joy to everyone who is connected with Him by faith (Phil 4:4; Jn 15:11).

Solomon also tried wine to discover the influence it has on his mind (verse 3). With wine we can also think of everything that is good to drink and eat, the ‘good life’. Would the enjoyment of everything that caresses the taste buds give his heart the peace he was looking for? If you have some wine or a nice meal, you can feel physically well. You feel comfortable in your own skin. For that you really do not have to eat and drink so much that you get intoxicated.

Solomon was so wise that he made sure he remained sober. He remained master of his mind and enjoyed the good life as a true life artist, who man-

ages to do everything proportionately. That has extended his enjoyment. He also avoided unpleasant consequences.

He also seized upon folly in order to thereby examine his heart. He has not behaved like a fool, for his wisdom has kept the control in his heart. He has held himself in control. Fools stuff themselves with food and drinks. That means brief enjoyment. By his gluttony the fool shortens the enjoyment of the thing, while he also vomits what he has stuffed himself with. Solomon would not have done this, for he has constantly kept himself in control.

He has done everything to find out “what good there is for the sons of men to do under heaven the few years of their lives”. He wanted to know where to get the highest good that gives the highest happiness to man. That is what he has been looking for and that is what all his efforts have gone for. He wanted to enjoy this throughout his life, during his life in this world. In order to know this happiness he has done all these things.

Ecc 2:4-11 | Great Works

4 I enlarged my works: I built houses for myself, I planted vineyards for myself; 5 I made gardens and parks for myself and I planted in them all kinds of fruit trees; 6 I made ponds of water for myself from which to irrigate a forest of growing trees. 7 I bought male and female slaves and I had homeborn slaves. Also I possessed flocks and herds larger than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. 8 Also, I collected for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I provided for myself male and female singers and the pleasures of men—many concubines. 9 Then I became great and increased more than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. My wisdom also stood by me. 10 All that my eyes desired I did not refuse them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart was pleased because of all my labor and this was my reward for all my labor. 11 Thus I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun.

Solomon enjoyed pleasure, joy, the good things and wine for his body, but found no lasting satisfaction. Therefore he started a next investigation in his search for the meaning of life. Would the making of great, impressive things perhaps give him the full happiness his heart was so looking

for? Would an abundance of earthly goods and what he would accomplish with them give him lasting satisfaction?

No one but him was better able to gather and manage riches and to accomplish great things that the human ambition continuously intends to accomplish (2Chr 9:22-28). Thus he set out to work and surrendered himself to building houses and planting all kinds of gardens with all kinds of fruit trees. He has become a master builder, a landowner and a producer of fruit.

In verses 4-10 we see what Solomon was capable of. We see that he combined in himself the qualities of gifted people. He was a great architect, a classy gardener, an employer of a large company with a lot of staff, a landowner, a bank director, a concert owner and an art lover, enjoyer of life. But his conclusion is that it has all been “vanity and striving after wind” (verse 11), by which he means that it has not given a true fulfillment to life.

Solomon gives an overview of the “enlargement of his works” he has accomplished *for himself* – see the recurring “I” and “for myself” – to see if his heart could find undisturbed peace in them (verse 4). He has built “houses” for himself (1Kgs 7:1-2; 9:15-19; 2Chr 8:3-6). Great leaders in the history of the world wanted to express their greatness in impressive buildings, among other things. “Vineyards” are described in Song of Songs (Song 1:14; 8:11). He was able to enjoy the wine. He did everything for himself: “I built ... for myself”, “I planted ... for myself”. In this way he continues in the following verses.

Like houses, also luxurious “gardens” contribute to the glory of kings (verse 5). The beautifully landscaped gardens with a choice of the most beautiful flowers were a delight to the eye. The orchards with “all kinds of fruit trees” provided the most delicious fruit, a delight for the tongue and good for your health. He must have imported the fruit trees and immediately enjoyed the fruit of it. Here the memory of paradise comes to mind (Gen 2:8). Walking in those gardens and orchards and eating the fruits must have been an extraordinarily relaxing experience.

He also provided for the construction of “ponds of water” (Neh 2:14a) so that “a forest of growing trees” could be irrigated (verse 6). The growing trees seem to be trees other than the fruit trees of verse 5. The idea has been

raised that these were trees that could be used for building houses and ships and making musical instruments.

He had also surrounded himself with “male and female slaves” who served him to the full maximum and to whom he had entrusted the management of certain things in his house (verse 7). The children of these male and female slaves belonged to him automatically. In the long run, he always had an abundance of staff.

The “flocks and herds” he possessed surpassed in largeness those of all who preceded him in Jerusalem. It was an unprecedentedly large livestock. Because of this there was always abundant meat present.

He also “collected ... silver and gold” for himself (verse 8) which indicates his great wealth (1Kgs 9:14,28; 10:14,22,27; 2Chr 1:15). The “treasures” came from “kings” of neighboring countries and from “provinces” conquered by him. They were eye-catching treasures. For the caress of the ear he let male and female singers to perform ‘live’ for him whenever he wanted. Beautiful music belongs to “the pleasures of men”.

Everything that is pleasing to a human child, in whatever area, he has enjoyed, so he can say that he has had pleasure in abundance. Solomon is a real bon vivant here. He also enjoyed sexual pleasure. His “many concubines” enabled him to do so. He understood the art of it and had the possibilities to do so.

As he became great (Ecc 1:16), his wealth also increased (verse 9; 2Chr 9:22). He mentions once again that he has surpassed all who preceded him in Jerusalem. But he has not let all his wealth drive him mad either. It did not take control over him in such a way that it made him happy and wealth had led him to a sinful use of it. His wisdom had kept the upper hand. This enabled him to enjoy everything intensely, while at the same time recognizing its relative value.

He did not impose any restrictions on his eyes or his heart at all (verse 10). He has not kept his eyes from seeing anything they have desired to see. He has never said ‘no’ to his eyes. We must remember that it is not about looking at sinful things. He talks about everything he has made and purchased to get to know the meaning of life. His wisdom stood by him.

He did not withhold his heart “from any pleasure”. He has done everything that his heart has been able to rejoice. This joy he has found in everything he has made, for which he had worked. With a certain satisfaction he expresses what his part was in all his labor: it has given him pleasure in his heart. But is that what he was really looking for? Was this pleasure the meaning of existence?

In verse 11 he draws the conclusion. At the end of all his labor he looks back at all these works. He judges all that his hands had made and all that he had made while working. What is his conclusion? It “was all vanity and striving after wind” and “there was no profit under the sun”. It is reminiscent of the Lord Jesus’ question: “For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul?” (Mk 8:36). Solomon’s answer to that question would be: ‘It would profit him nothing, nothing at all.’

After he has done everything he intended, he faces the result. Each and every one of them was an impressive achievement. We can ask ourselves which person is capable of such a thing. But however gifted and impressive his achievements may have been, he has failed to find the answer to the question of the true fulfillment of life. Also in view of eternity it has not brought him anything. Nothing remains of all his thinking and all his labor.

The ‘pleasure in abundance’ has an expiration date. It is only a temporary and immediate pleasure. He has the advantage that everything he has undertaken has succeeded. In that sense he is happy with it. But none of that has lasting value. The only thing it has brought him is that pleasure. If that is all and there is nothing else left, if there is nothing of lasting value, it is miserable. The conclusion of all his efforts is no different from that of all his examination.

The question is always: what is life about? The message is, that we should not mix up the radiance of the glories of the world with true happiness. We may be happy with what we do, but we can never rest in it. Let the earth be the water vessel, not the source.

Only God can look back upon all His works and conclude in truth and with full satisfaction: “And behold, it was very good” (Gen 1:31).

Ecc 2:12-17 | Wisdom Excels Folly, but Is Also Vanity

12 So I turned to consider wisdom, madness and folly; for what [will] the man [do] who will come after the king [except] what has already been done? 13 And I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness. 14 The wise man's eyes are in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I know that one fate befalls them both. 15 Then I said to myself, "As is the fate of the fool, it will also befall me. Why then have I been extremely wise?" So I said to myself, "This too is vanity." 16 For there is no lasting remembrance of the wise man [as] with the fool, inasmuch as [in] the coming days all will be forgotten. And how the wise man and the fool alike die! 17 So I hated life, for the work which had been done under the sun was grievous to me; because everything is futility and striving after wind.

The Preacher then turns his attention again "to consider wisdom" (cf. Ecc 1:16-18), but now to compare it with "madness and folly", the counterparts of wisdom (verse 12). The reason for this comparison is the question that came to him as to what kind of man his successor would be. He has worked his way out to answer the question about the meaning of life. For this he created 'great things' for himself (verse 4). He can point to all these achievements. From this his successor can learn that the meaning of life is not in beautiful buildings and great wealth. When he takes this lesson to heart he shows that he has wisdom.

The big question, however, is how his successor will proceed. He will be confronted with the same question about the meaning of life. Will he then examine everything again and proceed in the same way as he, the Preacher, did? That will not be true, will it? Perhaps his successor will not find the question interesting at all, with which he was so busy. It may even be so bad that 'the man after him' in madness and folly destroys everything the Preacher has built.

The question of what his successor will do with what he has done, does not make him uncertain about the value of wisdom in relation to folly. His successor may be a fool who wants to re-invent the wheel because he does not want to learn anything from the Preacher's wisdom, but it does not change the wisdom he himself has gained.

Wisdom always excels folly. That wisdom has excellence over foolishness is a fact that every wise man will notice and confirm. In the same way, light excels darkness. Wisdom is preferable to folly because wisdom gives a certain amount of light in life on earth, while folly hides a person in darkness, so that he does not know where he is or where he is going.

Some benefits of wisdom are mentioned later in this book, such as: wisdom gives success (Ecc 10:10), protects (Ecc 7:12), gives power (Ecc 7:19) and illumination (Ecc 8:1) and is better than strength (Ecc 9:16). One is really a fool if he ignores that, or even despises it, and prefers to walk in darkness.

Wisdom has light (verse 13) and sight (verse 14). Every person has eyes in his head, but the wise man uses them. Because of this the wise man knows where he is walking and he sees where he is going. The fool “walks in darkness”, he is darkness and loves darkness (Eph 5:8; Jn 3:19). This distinction is useful for life on earth.

Yet this distinction has only a limited meaning. The advantage of the wise man is in the end not great, for he suffers the same fate as the fool. For example, the wise man may as well become ill, have an accident or suffer a loss as the fool. The “fate” is neutral, it has the general meaning of ‘something that happens’. It is an unplanned and unexpected event. This applies especially to death. It ‘befalls’ all people that they die.

The inevitability of death makes wisdom seem meaningless, for death is the great “equalizer” (cf. Psa 49:10). In Ecclesiastes, death is not the transition to the hereafter, but its separation from the present and all the fruits it has sought to reap from its labor.

When the Preacher realizes that the same fate as the fool befalls him, the question arises to him why he has been so extremely wise (verse 15). Why has he made so much effort, why was he so diligently seeking to become wise? After all, it does not matter in the end. It helps you a bit in your life, but worldly wisdom does not prevent you from encountering the same fate that strikes the fool who has lived without sacrificing himself for anything or even taking notice of anything. Then he can only conclude one thing and that is that natural wisdom in earthly life is “vanity”, empty, without any lasting result, too.

In verse 16 the Preacher motivates his remark of verse 15. It is clear that the remembrance of a wise man like that of a fool fades away over time. They do not remain in remembrance forever. Matters that are talked about a lot in one generation are no longer mentioned in the next. They are simply forgotten, it is as if they have never been there. New persons and new things call for attention and suppress the remembrance of the old persons and things. Thus the wise man and the fool disappear from remembrance.

From the point of view of faith, there is a remembrance (Pro 10:7; Psa 112:6; 1Cor 11:24-25). For the faith, there is also a difference in the death of the wise and the fool (cf. Gen 18:23).

Considering all things, he can only hate life and all the work which has been done under the sun because he has not found in it the satisfaction he has expected to find in it. Therefore it seemed to him an evil work. He soon began to get tired of his beautiful houses and courts and waterworks. He has had enough of it. After a while he looks at it like children look at a toy they wanted, but after playing with it for a while they get tired of it and throw it away. The first pleasure is soon gone and then they want something else.

It is a good thing to get to this point. We must first hate life before we find it (Jn 12:25). Life on this side of death is not a beautiful life, it is not something to love at the expense of eternity (1Cor 15:19; Rev 12:11). We must take hold of the true life (1Tim 6:12). Life only acquires meaning when the Lord Jesus appears in it. He gives life in abundance (Jn 10:10).

Ecc 2:18-23 | Labor Too Does Not Give Lasting Happiness

18 Thus I hated all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun, for I must leave it to the man who will come after me. 19 And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the fruit of my labor for which I have labored by acting wisely under the sun. This too is vanity. 20 Therefore I completely despaired of all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun. 21 When there is a man who has labored with wisdom, knowledge and skill, then he gives his legacy to one who has not labored with them. This too is vanity and a great evil. 22 For what does a man get in all his labor and in his striving with which he labors under the sun? 23

Because all his days his task is painful and grievous; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is vanity.

Hating life (verse 17) is followed by hating work. Working is as pointless as life, because you have to leave all your work behind, so what are you working for (verse 18; cf. Lk 12:13-21)? Solomon has created great buildings, such as houses, gardens, orchards. He can enjoy it for some time, but with his death it is over. There comes a moment when man loses control of his work and has to leave everything he has done to others.

Letting go is no fun indeed, but even worse is the tormenting question of who will continue with his legacy and especially how that person will deal with it (verse 19). One would wish to know for sure that he is leaving everything to someone who deals as wisely with it as he has done. Then that knowledge can at least give some satisfaction to his work. But there is no such knowledge.

What the wise man has acquired with his wise labor under the sun, can simply end up in the hands of a fool. Then the latter will have access to it. This thought shows that everything he has done to be “vanity”, which means that there is no guarantee of a good continuation. The Preacher’s fear has become reality. His son Rehoboam was a fool (1Kgs 11:41-43; 12:1-24).

The thought of the possible uselessness of his work caused despair in his heart (verse 20). You cannot protect the results of your work from the abuse that others make of it. That is to become desperate of when you think of everything you have accomplished with hard work.

This (understandable) despair is quite different from the joy of the satisfaction he has sought in it. It is also quite different from the certainty that we may have that our work is not in vain if it is done for the Lord (1Cor 15:58). Our work for the Lord is safe in His hands (2Tim 1:12). The same applies to those who will die in the great tribulation for the Lord’s sake. It is written of them: “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord, from now on. “Yes”, says the Spirit, “so that they may rest from their labors; for their deeds follow with them”” (Rev 14:13).

In verse 21, his heart regains some rest, that is to say, to resign to the inevitable. He becomes aware of the fact that it is the ordinary course of the

life of a wise man under the sun. A wise man, as he is himself, works hard. He does not run like a madman through life, but works with wisdom. He considers every choice he has to make and makes the right choice. And then it turns out that he has expertise. He knows what his choice means. And that is not all. He also has the ability to put his wise choice and his knowledge into practice.

All in all, it has become clear that when you die you have to let go of everything and that someone else will take the advantages of the results of your work. This is a fact that you have to accept, but it is impossible for you to accept it as a righteous case. It makes your own work to be “vanity”, it has been for nothing. There is no lasting result for yourself, and the certainty that someone else will make wise use of it, is not granted to you. You can only call it “a great evil”.

So, “what does a man get in all his labor and in his striving with which he labors under the sun?” (Verse 22). The answer is: nothing, nothing at all. The Preacher can only repeat the conclusion he started with in Ecclesiastes 1 (Ecc 1:3).

In verse 23 follows the reason for his conclusion. We see this in the word “because” with which the verse begins. All the days of his efforts, however successful they may have been, he has felt suffering and sorrow. The uneasy feeling of a ‘mission impossible’ is always present underneath the skin in a hardworking person.

And, says the Preacher, when a man goes to bed tired after a hard day’s work, he cannot sleep well. His activities keep haunting his mind. The uncertainty of whether he will reach the goal he has set, gnaws at him. That is why his heart does not come to rest. The restlessness of life under the sun teases him even at night.

For those who are busy with the things of the Lord and go the way He shows, it is different. First of all, we see it in the Lord Jesus Himself. He has always done the Father’s will and has always gone the way that the Father has shown Him. That is why He was able to sleep, even in the midst of the storm (Mk 4:38). We also see this total rest with Peter when he is in prison, facing death (Acts 12:6).

Ecc 2:24-26 | Enjoy the Life That God Has Given

24 There is nothing better for a man [than] to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good. This also I have seen that it is from the hand of God. 25 For who can eat and who can have enjoyment without Him? 26 For to a person who is good in His sight He has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, while to the sinner He has given the task of gathering and collecting so that he may give to one who is good in God's sight. This too is vanity and striving after wind.

After the acquiescence in the previous verses, the Preacher now even comes to enjoy the good (verse 24). He calls not for the pursuit of worldly pleasures (cf. 1Cor 15:32), or for an attitude of the rich fool (Lk 12:16-21), but for contentment (1Tim 4:4; 6:6-8). The best use that man can make of his labor is to enjoy it himself (Ecc 3:12,22; 8:15). But he does not have that in his own hands either. The Preacher acknowledges that this too “is from the hand of God”.

Enjoying the good in creation is a great gift, the greatest that creation can give under the sun. Not only that the blessing comes from the hand of God, but also the enjoyment of the blessing.

Despite all the disappointment with regard to the desired lasting result of his work, Solomon enjoys its temporary blessing (verse 25). He, who has worked so hard for it, “eats and ... has enjoyment” of what he has achieved. The real enjoyment, though limited to “under the sun”, can still be there if we accept it from the hand of God (cf. 1Tim 6:17-19).

God has a special relationship with “a person who is good to His sight” (verse 26). He has given “wisdom and knowledge and joy” to such a person. This man is “good” in God’s sight because this man has acknowledged to God that there is nothing good in him. Because of this God has given him a new life and thereby the wisdom and knowledge to live to His glory. To such a life He attaches joy.

But God treats the sinner differently. The sinner does not take life from the hand of God. He does not acknowledge that he is a sinner, but lives his own life, without taking into account the will of God. His life consists of gathering and collecting for himself. He is selfish. Although the sinner does not acknowledge this, it is God who enables him to perform these activities (cf. Dan 5:23).

The sinner lives only for himself. However, God has determined it in such a way that what the sinner in his selfish collecting frenzy has destined for himself will end up in the hands of “the one who is good in God’s sight” (Pro 13:22; 28:8; cf. Mt 5:5; Lk 19:24). The sinner does not take this into account at all. The fact that his possessions end up with the righteous is a judgment God brings upon him.

How God will work that out, remains hidden, but it will happen. An example we see when Israel leaves Egypt after years of slavery. God tells His people to ask the Egyptians for all kinds of objects and clothing, by which they rob the Egyptians (Exo 3:21-22; 12:36).

Here Solomon speaks of “God’s sight”, which means that he now speaks of ‘above the sun’. But he speaks of God in no other way than the two times he spoke of ‘God’ (Ecc 1:13; 2:24). Again, there is no living relationship between man and God. It is still, just like everywhere else in this book, about God as the Creator Who controls the whole universe. Solomon views life as a believer and not as an atheist, but as a believer who, in his view of life, considers everything only horizontally.

This is also evident from the conclusion. It may be that what the sinner has gathered may come into the hands of the one who is good in God’s sight, but what’s the benefit of it in a man’s life? Does this arrangement of the government of God have *lasting* consequences for the life of man on earth? No, because he does not look over the edge of his existence on earth. This is why the conclusion is also here: “This too is vanity and striving after wind.”

Ecclesiastes 3

Ecc 3:1 | There Is a Time for Everything

1 There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven —

Whatever we are capable of, whatever initiatives we take, in fact we are slaves to the inevitable, inexorable times mentioned by the Preacher in verses 1-8. Our life is not only determined by the calendar, but also by the tide of events that go back and forth. All kinds of events take us from one choice and action to another. We react to events and thereby determine the next route of our life. The duration or length of that route depends on the next event that enters our life.

We cannot place ourselves outside the events of life. We are part of it, they happen to us and we are in the middle of it. We cannot distance ourselves from it and then oversee things “from beginning to end” (verse 11). This can only be done by God, He, Who declares “the end from the beginning” (Isa 46:10). All this puts man – who pretends to be the master of his destiny and thinks he has his own life in his hands and can map it out – in his place.

An “appointed time” refers to the duration of a period. With “a time for every event” the emphasis is on the content of a period, what happens during that time. Everything people do has an “appointed time”, a certain duration, nothing more. Man does not control that time and his time is not eternal, but measured, limited. Therefore we should not give our actions a greater weight than they have.

The fool weighs the things of time as if they were eternal (Psa 49:12-13). On the other hand, he considers the things of eternity to be of no importance. Everything around us is constantly changing. What folly it is to seek steadfast happiness in such a changing stage. It is the same as seeking rest on a wild ocean.

The whole section of verses 1-8 emphasizes that life is filled with a series of contrasts and that we constantly move from one state to another and

from experience to experience. Some are pleasant and enjoyable, and some are stressful and painful. Just as the cycles of sun, wind, clouds, and rain continue their incessant repetitions, so time moves inexorably from one event to another, even in opposing events. But each event plays its own role in God's purpose.

There is also something compulsive in it; there is no escape. Time is a tyrant ruling over us. Little by little we feel older and start to look older. Time drives us on, until the day we die. Time determines at what time we do anything in our lives. Everything is dictated by the pace of the march of time and by changes, which we have not asked for. No one chooses a time to suffer pain or cry from sorrow.

However, the believer knows that all events are nothing but cogs of the throne wagon or government of God that interlock and make him move (Eze 1:16). When we understand that God arranges and controls everything, everything looks different. Then we are able to trust God to weave His loving intentions for us through the carpet of time. If we want to learn to live life according to God's purpose, we must work together with the time of each purpose of God.

The time on earth is filled with "every event under heaven". Except that "under heaven" determines us that everything takes place on the earth, it also determines us that heaven has to do with it. In heaven is the throne of God, from where all government emanates (Mt 5:34). The believer may rest in this consciousness with respect to all kinds of times that are described. God is the God of all grace, which means that He gives the necessary grace for every kind of time in the believer's life.

We must learn to "understand the times" (1Chr 12:32). Faith sees God's hand in all the changes in life. In this way the believer can confidently say: "My times are in Your hand" (Psa 31:15a). Whether times of prosperity or adversity, the believer finds peace in the thought that every period of time in his life is directed and governed by God. All changes are under His absolute control. All these different times are not coincidental times. Time is an invention of God to bring order to His creation: "He has made everything appropriate in its time" (Ecc 3:11).

The awareness of the time that is available for all things must teach us to be conscious of our time. That awareness should not become a slave-driver, making us workaholics and neglecting our families, not taking time for friendships and being too busy to absorb the scent of flowers and admire a sunset.

Being responsible with our time also means that we take a time of rest. We use our time wisely when we, to say it with a pun, combine the right ‘stop’ with the right ‘step’. It is about being careful how we walk, “not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil” (Eph 5:15-16; Col 4:5). Our motto may be: Spend time wisely, invest in eternity.

The believer may know that there will be a “fullness of the times” (Eph 1:10), a period in which all the times determined by God will find their completion. God has a purpose with all the times there are. He controls everything in such a way that all these times end in and come together in the realm of peace under the government of the Lord Jesus. Faith knows that what may seem for us – and for man in general – sometimes to be a coincidental concurrence of circumstances, appears to fit in God’s plan. All times are a preparation for that time of a thousand years of blessing. Everything that has happened “under heaven”, that is, on earth, has happened “according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will” (Eph 1:11b).

Ecc 3:2 | To Give Birth–to Die; To Plant–to Uproot

| *2 A time to give birth and a time to die;
| A time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted.*

In his description of events in time the Preacher begins with the two greatest events in a human life which are at the same time each other’s extremes: his birth and his death, or his coming into the world and his departure from it (verse 2a). Nobody has any influence on his birth. The “time to give birth” or the “time to be born” is determined by God. That also applies to the “time to die”. It may seem as if by birth control and test tube fertilization on the one hand and euthanasia on the other hand, that

man determines those two times. Here we read that birth and death are not human acts, but acts of God.

Between birth and death, for mankind everything on earth happens in the period of time that there is then. God has given everything its place and time between being born and dying. With our coming into the world, a great miracle takes place. That every human being is born in the very time in which he is born, is determined by God in His infinite wisdom. The duration of a person's stay on earth is also fixed. The days and months of man are known by God and determined by Him (Job 14:5). By worries we cannot add one hour to the length of our life (Job 14:5-6; Mt 6:27). God can add to our days (Isa 38:1-5).

Spiritually, we can apply the time to be born to the new birth, to be born of God (Jn 3:3). For this the gospel is proclaimed, of which it is said: "Behold, now is "the acceptable time," behold, now is "the day of salvation"" (2Cor 6:2b). At the same time that we are born again, we know that our old man has been crucified with Christ. From that moment on we "have died with Christ" (Rom 6:8).

We can see a parallel between the first part of the verse – the beginning and the end of human life – and the planting and the uprooting what is planted in the second part of it. In the time between being born and dying, man "plants" (verse 2b). He starts something with the expectation to harvest fruit from it. There will also come a time to "uproot what is planted". This must also be done at the appointed time. This is the case when our activities, when what we have planted, do not produce good fruits. Then we have to uproot what is planted.

We may apply this to a particular service for the Lord. We start it, but it will also stop at some time. In between, there may also be a change in the way we perform our service, or also a change in the place where we serve. Are we open to these changes, that is to say, to God's time to plant something and also to uproot what is planted?

We must ask ourselves what we, as believers, plant in our life. Are these the good words of God's Word? If we plant them in the 'garden of our life', if we feed ourselves with them, we will bear good fruits. Conversely, we must remove from our life the wrong plants, the works of the flesh (Jn

15:2). God does the same with the nations: He breaks them down, but also plants them (Jer 1:10; 18:7,9).

Ecc 3:3 | To Kill—to Heal; To Tear Down—to Build Up

3 A time to kill and a time to heal;

A time to tear down and a time to build up.

The time to die in verse 2 is an act of God. The “time to kill” (verse 3a) is an act of a man. One person can kill another. One can think of a soldier in the war or an executioner in the execution of a court sentence. There is also “a time to heal” from wounds. Then something can become healthy again and be used. That there is time for it, is because God determines the time for it.

The spiritual application of a time to kill can be the killing of the members of our earthly body (Col 3:5). This means that the threatening manifestations of sin are judged, so that sin has no chance to assert itself. Sin can also cause wounds. If we have sinned, we must confess it. Then sin is forgiven. Sometimes sin also has consequences which cannot simply be taken away. Sometimes time is needed for healing. God gives that time.

There is “a time to tear down” (verse 3b), such as tearing down Jerusalem and God’s house because of the unfaithfulness of God’s people. God also gives restoration, so that for His city and His house “a time to build up” has come. In the – now near – future God Himself will at His time rebuild the fallen booth of David, that is His people Israel, “as in the days of old” (Amos 9:11).

From a spiritual point of view, we must destroy “speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God” (2Cor 10:5a). Here it is about our thinking, about wrong thoughts that impose themselves upon us. After tearing down, we must build ourselves up on our “most holy faith” (Jude 1:20). This means that we should be occupied with God’s Word, reflect on it, and take it in and keep it in our hearts.

Paul says that he “destroyed” the law as a means of being justified by works for himself as a Christian and will not “rebuild” it (Gal 2:18). The law has shown that man cannot keep the law. It is impossible to establish one’s own righteousness by the law (Rom 10:3). On the contrary, man is

condemned by the law. This recognition means the end of the law as a rule of life. His rule of life is now Christ, “for Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes” (Rom 10:4). Everyone who believes is rooted and is “built up in him” (Col 2:7).

Ecc 3:4 | To Weep–to Laugh; To Mourn–to Dance

*4 A time to weep and a time to laugh;
A time to mourn and a time to dance.*

The two pairs of this verse belong together. They are natural and personal emotions that spontaneously manifest themselves in an individual and show that life has its ups and downs. First there is the expression of sorrow, “a time to weep”, and then there is the expression of joy, “a time to laugh”.

The same order we see in the second part of the verse. First there is “a time to mourn”, then there is “a time to dance”. The Jews weep when they are in Babylon (Psa 137:1), but their mouth is filled with laughter when they return to Zion (Psa 126:1-2). To “sow in tears” precedes to “reap with joyful shouting” (Psa 126:5).

We weep when we observe the consequences of sin around us and see the injustice. There will come a time when those who weep now will laugh and rejoice and be comforted (Jn 16:20-22; Mt 5:4; Lk 6:21b). God works this change in the circumstances and in the life of His own (Psa 30:11).

One can mourn over the death of a loved one. It can also happen because of one’s own sins and because of God’s discipline over them (Zec 12:10,12; Jer 51:52; Eze 7:15; Joel 1:8). Dancing is an expression of joy after receiving forgiveness and healing (Acts 3:8). It can also happen after an experience of God’s mercy. David leaped and danced when the ark was brought to Jerusalem (2Sam 6:16).

Ecc 3:5 | To Throw Away–to Gather; To Embrace–to Shun Embracing

*5 A time to throw stones and a time to gather stones;
A time to embrace and a time to shun embracing.*

The “time to throw away stones” has come when we find that we cannot build with the kind of stones we have in our hands, if they are not suitable building material. Once we have thrown away those useless stones, it is “time to gather stones” that we can use to build.

Of throwing away and gathering stones we have an example in the law on leprosy. There is a situation in which leprosy is present in the stones of the wall of a house. These stones must be removed from the wall of the house (Lev 14:39-40) and replaced by healthy stones (Lev 14:42).

We can apply this to believers, who are called living stones (1Pet 2:5), but with whom a sin outbreak has occurred. If such persons persist in this sin, they must be removed from the church, which is God’s house. They can be inserted as stones in the house of God again once they have repented. We see this in the church in Corinth. In his first letter to them, Paul writes that they must remove the evil one from among themselves (1Cor 5:13b). In his second letter to them he says that they must forgive and again accept the one who has been removed because he has repented (2Cor 2:7).

The above-mentioned connects to, but in reverse order, “a time to embrace”. That is a time to let someone feel accepted and secure. We can literally do that to our children. We can do this in a spiritual sense with the repentant sinner (Lk 15:20).

However, there is also “a time to shun embracing”. In a literal sense, we do that to our children when they have misbehaved. In a spiritual sense we do this when someone perseveres in sin. Then we should not give him the feeling of acceptance and security, otherwise we would embrace sin and give him the feeling that his sin is not so bad. Then we confirm him in his sin and he will not break with it. Then the blame will be on us.

Ecc 3:6 | To Search—to Give Up; To Keep—to Throw Away

6 A time to search and a time to give up as lost;

A time to keep and a time to throw away.

If we have lost something and we become aware of it, we will start searching, then it is the “time to search”. It can be about possessions, but it can also be about people whom we see every day, but with whom we no longer have that cordial bond of fellowship. Distance has occurred, we have

lost confidence in each other. When we see that, it is time to search ways to restore it.

It is also still time to search the lost sheep, the sinner, to bring him back to the good Shepherd. It is possible that our efforts to find the lost may not be successful. If we see that it is not in our power to continue our search, we must let it go. Then it is “time to give up as lost”. Further efforts to find the lost would then be a waste of time.

The second part of the verse connects to the first. It looks similar to the first part, but is not equal to it. This is not about something that we have lost, but about something that we own and that we should keep or throw away. What has been entrusted to us, we must keep. We can think of what has been entrusted to us, which is the truth of God’s Word (1Tim 6:20). We must not take anything away from this and we must not add anything to it (Rev 22:18-19).

What is harmful to us we must throw away or reject, such as “worldly fables fit only for old women” (1Tim 4:7), “foolish and ignorant speculations” (2Tim 2:23) and “a factious man after a first and second warning” (Tit 3:10).

Ecc 3:7 | To Tear Apart–to Sew Together; To Be Silent–to Speak

7 A time to tear apart and a time to sew together;

A time to be silent and a time to speak.

In life there may be a situation where “a time to tear apart” has come (verse 7a). God tore the kingdom from Saul. In the time of Solomon, He tore it in two parts. Both times this tearing of the kingdom is symbolically represented in the tearing of a cloak (1Sam 15:27-28; 1Kgs 11:11-12,30-31). There will come a time when the breach in the kingdom in two and ten tribes will be sewn together again. That will happen when the Lord Jesus returns to earth. Then the two houses of Israel will be ‘sewn together’ again and will form a unity (Eze 37:22).

To tear apart, or divisions arise in families when family members accept the Lord Jesus, while other family members do not (Mt 10:34-35). When the other family members also convert, there is unity again and breaches are sewn together. In the church, division sometimes must occur. This is

the case when the truth of God's Word is violated and one does not want to conform to the truth (1Cor 11:19). If there is humility and repentance, the breach can be sewn together again.

We can also apply this to a local church. A time to tear apart has come when in the church, despite repeated insistence, there is no discipline over sin. However, if the wrong thing is acknowledged, it is time to close the breach again, i.e. to seek and experience mutual fellowship with one another again. It is dramatic if time is not recognized for both the one and the other.

In "a time to be silent and a time to speak", "silence" comes first (verse 7b). "The prudent person keeps silent" in "an evil time" (Amos 5:13). "A man of understanding keeps silent" (Pro 11:12b) and does not join mockers who ridicule God and His Word, for he bows to God's Word. We must also remain silent when God speaks through judgment (Lev 10:3). Ezekiel had to remain silent for a while to be a sign for the rebellious people of God (Eze 3:26; 33:22). Silence is the starting point. If we control our tongues now, we will not have to 'eat' our words later, i.e. face the consequences of our words.

We must break the silence if God gives us an indication that we must speak. The time to be silent and the time to speak must be known and distinguished. The wise man knows when to be silent and when to speak. Speaking is about speaking the right word at the right time (Pro 25:11; Isa 50:4). When asked, we will give an account for the hope that is in us (1Pet 3:15). Nor can we remain silent about our faith: "I have believed, therefore I have spoken" (2Cor 4:13).

Ecc 3:8 | To Love–to Hate; War–Peace

| *8 A time to love and a time to hate;
| A time for war and a time for peace.*

The love of Christ controls us to proclaim the gospel to lost people. What is not in accordance with Christ, we must hate. Hating is not only about the things that are plain sinful, but also about the things that are connected to the flesh and that become visible in the outward behavior (Jude 1:23). The

Lord Jesus says to His disciples, and to us, that he who does not hate his own life cannot be His disciple (Lk 14:26).

We live in an atmosphere of war, we're in a war zone. It is a time of spiritual warfare. While the Lord Jesus is still rejected, the enemy is committed to making our life impossible for the Lord. But there will come a time when the God of peace will crush Satan under our feet (Rom 16:20). God will make the time of war come to an end (Psa 46:9) and will let the time of peace come under the reign of the Messiah (Isa 9:6).

Ecc 3:9-11 | God Gives Men a Task

9 What profit is there to the worker from that in which he toils? 10 I have seen the task which God has given the sons of men with which to occupy themselves. 11 He has made everything appropriate in its time. He has also set eternity in their heart, yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end.

Because of the alternation of time periods with their events as described in the previous verses, the profit from the work in which he toils is not visible (verse 9). Everything happens to him, he has no influence on anything. All his efforts do not change the changing nature of things. He thinks that a time to plant has come, but soon it appears that what he has planted has to be uprooted. That is how it goes with all the different times in his life. A person unexpectedly passes from one situation to another situation.

In verse 10, the Preacher includes God in his observations. He looks beyond the sun for a moment. Not that his observations change in any way. He points to God as the origin of all the different times and thus confirms that nothing can influence God's unchanging counsel with regard to times and events. If that has become clear, there is at least some explanation to be given to the existence, although that explanation is not directly something to be happy about. The activity God has given is wearying.

This pessimism is made undone by the Preacher in verse 11. He points out the beauty of all that God has made. The beauty of what God has made has become visible in the time that suits that beauty. It does not happen sooner or later than it should be, because every element is connected to the whole of God's work.

Evidence of this can be found in the report of creation in Genesis 1. Each new day adds something to the previous one, and when creation is complete, it can be said: “And God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good” (Gen 1:31a). God has given meaning and purpose to everything. Everything fits perfectly into the whole of His plan. We realize that, but without seeing even approximately the scope of it.

Man can never see the whole of what God has made. He can never take enough distance to see at a glance “from the beginning even to the end” what God’s purpose is with His creation. This should humble us, it should not make us arrogant, and therefore we should not judge anything before the appointed time. We have to wait patiently for the complete unfolding of what still seems complicated and mysterious to us today.

The fact that He has set “eternity” in our hearts means that we are aware of the length of a certain period of time and of the characteristics of that particular period of time. We have the ability to learn to see that in the light of eternity. We can think about the course of events and look for their meaning. This will allow us to make sure that things should serve us and that we are not to start to serve things.

The Christian knows that all things belong to him, for “all things belong to you” (1Cor 3:22-23). He does not yet have actual control over it, but he is connected to Christ Who has.

Ecc 3:12-15 | What God Does, Remains Forever

12 I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and to do good in one’s lifetime; 13 moreover, that every man who eats and drinks sees good in all his labor — it is the gift of God. 14 I know that everything God does will remain forever; there is nothing to add to it and there is nothing to take from it, for God has [so] worked that men should fear Him. 15 That which is has been already and that which will be has already been, for God seeks what has passed by.

The fact that the Preacher speaks of “in one’s lifetime”, that is in the life of the children of men, at the same time indicates the limit (verse 12). It does not extend further. They can only rejoice and do good during their life. Then it is over. Even what the children of men enjoy is not of lasting value, although it can sometimes survive them. Man, who is bound to the

earth, is a prisoner of a system he cannot break, he cannot even bend it. The best thing to do, then, is to resign oneself joyfully to the will of God and to comply with it.

God is a Giver of both earthly and heavenly blessings (verse 13). It is His gift to every person to eat and drink and to enjoy the good as a result of all his labor.

For many people, every Monday is the beginning of a new work week with a repetition of the monotonous work of the week before. Maybe there is a mountain of laundry for the woman to do and then to iron it, and for the man it may be putting the same part in a machine or working with the same computer program. This monotony can be a breeding ground for dissatisfaction, but also a training ground for developing a character and a life of service. It depends on whether we can see God in the daily duties we have to perform. Anything we do, even ordinary daily eating and drinking, we may do for the glory of God, with gratitude toward Him, for He gives it to us and allows us to enjoy it (Ecc 2:24; 1Cor 10:31).

A woman in Boston did the same cleaning work for 40 years in the same office building. She was interviewed by a reporter who asked her how she could maintain the same monotony day in, day out. The woman said: 'It does not get boring. I use cleaning products made by God. I clean things that belong to people made by God, and I make life easier for them. My mop is the hand of God!' Every routine task is important for God's work in and through us, for time and eternity. Everything that is done out of love for the Lord Jesus, keeps its value and will continue to exist.

There are some aspects in "everything God does" that balance the pressure of the monotony of all things in nature, in history and in the life of man (verse 14). These aspects have to do with God's perfection and the beauty of His order and man's fear of Him as a result:

1. Everything God does is not temporary, but remains "forever", permanent, any failure is strange to Him. 'Forever' means as long as the earth exists.

2. What He does is not imperfect, but complete and effective, for "there is nothing to add to it and there is nothing to take from it". He does not

give up any of His works, nor does anything need to be added in order to improve His work.

3. He does not need any counselor or any protection for whatever He does (Rom 11:34-35). Everything is perfect in design and realization; there is no need for taking away anything from it. Nothing of it is in danger of being attacked by a hostile power, let alone be destroyed.

“For God has [so] worked that men should fear Him.” Everything He does must provoke in us fear and reverence and awe for Him. The fear of God does not cause a paralyzing fear, but on the contrary a trusting of our whole being to Him, precisely because in His works He lets Himself be known as the protective God. The fear of God is the key to understanding this book.

There is a connection between ‘that which is’, ‘has been already’ and ‘that which will be’ (verse 15). All events, both in present time, which is “that which is”, and in the past, of which is said, “has been already”, and the future, “that which will be”, are connected to one another by the righteousness of God Who directs all things. God has determined the course of things, and because He always acts righteously, things continue to go as He has ordained. The immutability of the mutable has existed since the beginning of creation and will continue to exist (Ecc 1:9-11).

It does not testify of wisdom to think or say that the world has never been as bad as it is now and that things were better in the past. The opposite is not true either: it will not all get better because man is more intelligent than he was in the past, or because he starts to behave more exemplary. What we see is no different than it used to be, it is only a variation on it. The same goes for the variations to come.

God maintains the cycle of nature and history. What has disappeared from it for man is also under His constant attention. He “seeks” it (cf. Isa 11:11-12). That He seeks it does not mean that He has lost it and would not know where it is. It means that He is checking things that have disappeared for man. Things that man has lost sight of, He summons to appear. Through this, history repeats itself and the past becomes present.

God also keeps control of the past. He can remind us of the past when He considers it necessary to do so in order to teach us lessons for the present

and the future. Cain thinks he can fool God by saying he does not know where Abel is. But God tells him that He hears the blood of Abel crying to Him (Gen 4:9-10).

In the same way all the blood of all the saints who have been killed through all the centuries for the sake of His Name cry to Him. He will answer the cry and let the crimes that were committed appear. They are recorded in His book that He will open when the unbelievers stand before the great white throne, to remind them of what they have done in the past (Rev 20:12-13).

Ecc 3:16-17 | In the Place of Justice Is Wickedness

16 Furthermore, I have seen under the sun [that] in the place of justice there is wickedness and in the place of righteousness there is wickedness. 17 I said to myself, "God will judge both the righteous man and the wicked man," for a time for every matter and for every deed is there.

The Preacher goes on with his observations and sees something else, a new problem of life. This problem is "wickedness" happening all over the world, especially "in the place of justice" and "in the place of righteousness", which are the places where one might expect the maintenance of law and justice (verse 16).

He has seen concrete examples of the distortion of justice, such as oppressive rulers, unjust judges and religious hypocrisy in courts where justice must be done. He has seen the same in secular or religious council chambers where the law of Divine justice must be applied. In those places people are selfish and ambitious. The greatest injustice in the place of justice is the trial against the Lord Jesus.

The whole world is a place where wickedness occurs instead of justice. You may have thought that you've bought a good item, but you are deceived. Your hard-earned money is gone. Someone had bought an article on a certain website. The address where he could pick up the article, was the address where I live in Middelburg. One Sunday, when we came back from the church meeting, he was in our front yard. He had come from Amsterdam to pick up the article for which he had paid. Of course I could not give him that. [I offered him something else: a cup of coffee and the gospel.

Unfortunately, he didn't desire for either.] Other examples are that you do not get the promotion you deserve because of injustice or that your company is competed out of the market by mafia practices. The whole world is a place of wickedness and injustice.

How we would like to have a world where evil would be punished directly and justly and good would be rewarded directly and justly. However, we must reconcile ourselves with the reality that this – until Christ comes to earth – is a utopia. This leads us to the question of how we should deal with the injustice that is present and how we should react to it. We would like an answer to that question. The Preacher's research helps us to find that answer.

After the injustice he saw "under the sun", again his comment follows in verse 17, beginning with "I said". It is in the form of a consideration, for he says it 'to himself'. In his consideration, which as it were automatically rises into his heart when he sees injustice, he takes refuge in God as the righteous Judge. God will judge injustice in the future. This judgment concerns both the consideration, "every matter", and the actions, "every deed". God's judgment is not confined to *expressing* the judgment, but also means the *execution* of the sentence.

The thought that injustice also has a time limit, and that God sets that limit, is a consolation when we see all injustice in the world (Gen 18:25; Psa 73:17). We cannot change that injustice, but God has set a time for everything (verses 1-8). God has also determined a time, a day, when He will judge (Acts 17:31; Psa 37:13). Any unrighteous trial will be reopened and revised before the judgment seat of Christ. "The Judge is standing right at the door" (Jam 5:9), which is Christ. He will judge perfectly.

Ecc 3:18-21 | Similarity and Difference Between Man and Beast

18 I said to myself concerning the sons of men, "God has surely tested them in order for them to see that they are but beasts." 19 For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same. As one dies so dies the other; indeed, they all have the same breath and there is no advantage for man over beast, for all is vanity. 20 All go to the same place. All came from the dust and all return to

the dust. 21 Who knows that the breath of man ascends upward and the breath of the beast descends downward to the earth?

The judgment of verse 17 is still postponed, although we yearn for it. It may give us an unsatisfactory feeling that evil can do its work unhindered. Yet that too has a purpose: all injustice in time becomes a test that makes it infallibly clear whether we fear God or not. We learn the truth about ourselves and then discover that we are not only judges of the injustice around us, but that the injustice is also within us.

The injustice of man proves at least one aspect of God's purpose: it provides an undeniable demonstration on the scene of the history of our ignorance of our own nature and destiny. There is probably nothing more capable of exposing man as a sinner and a wicked person – and this in all ranks – than cursing the iniquity of the world. Anyone who fears God can endure injustice. Anyone who curses it does not know himself.

Man is no better than beasts as long as he lives without connection to eternity. As long as the children of men do not fear God, they do not know God. And if they do not know God, they get excited about all the injustice in the world. Injustice shows that man is just as cruel and often more cruel than beasts. Furthermore, man has in common with the beasts that he dies just like the beasts. Without involving God or eternity there is no difference between man and a beast. Then man stands on the same level as the beast. We recognize this in the theory of evolution, which reasons in that way because it excludes God in the search for the origin of creation.

Verses 19-21 give an explanation of verse 18. To the eye, humans and beasts go to the same place. They all have the breath of life in them (Gen 7:22; Psa 73:22; Pro 7:22), and a man can be buried “with the burial of a donkey” (Jer 22:19). Verse 19 shows man's mortality as something he has in common with all earthly creatures. It confronts us with the fall into sin and with the irony that while we imagine ourselves to be gods, we humans die like the beasts. Man and beast have the dust of the earth as a common origin (verse 20). Through man's sin, man, and beasts too, return there when they die (Gen 3:19).

The Preacher also notices the difference between man and beast in what happens after death (verse 21). Returning to dust relates to the body of

both man and beast. However, man has something that the beast does not have and that is a spirit. Man has received his breath of life from God, through which he has become a living being (Gen 2:7). This is not how God has done it with beasts. He created them by the power of His word (Gen 1:24-25).

The difference between man and beast that is present at death, is beyond the perception of man. The word “who”, which begins in verse 21, is a cry of despair. Man’s general view is that there is no difference. The Preacher knows that there is a difference (Ecc 12:7). We can only know this through revelation from God. The Preacher talks about people in their splendor (Psa 49:12,20) and not about the believer who is received by God (Psa 49:15).

Ecc 3:22 | Conclusion

22 I have seen that nothing is better than that man should be happy in his activities, for that is his lot. For who will bring him to see what will occur after him?

This verse is the conclusion. God is sovereign in His control of all earthly events (verses 1-15), He has a purpose even in admitting human iniquity (verses 16-20) and He holds our ultimate destiny in His hand (verses 21). The Preacher has therefore understood something, he has come to a certain understanding, namely: “That nothing is better than that man should be happy in his activities, for that is his lot.”

Whoever can look at life in this way can experience life with a certain degree of satisfaction and contentment. You do not walk around in a grumpy way and do not sulk about your work, but you “rejoice” in your “activities”. Be happy that you are healthy and that you have work. You have a meaningful use of time. Accept that as the “lot” you get from God.

The point is, that you enjoy life now. What happens after you is of no use to you at all because you have no part in it. Do realize that a person is not given more in this world than his activities. Awareness of this will make you modest and keep you from pompous ideas. With this you have tapped into a source of great contentment (1Tim 6:6-7).

Ecclesiastes 4

Introduction

From this chapter onward, it is all about the coexistence of people, while the previous chapters focus more on people's personal experiences. The section of Ecclesiastes 4:1-10:20 resembles the book of Proverbs with regular sayings or sections about different aspects of life. Ecclesiastes 4 deals with various relationships in which a person stands, forced or voluntary, or from which a person consciously refrains.

Ecc 4:1-3 | Oppression Without a Comforter

1 Then I looked again at all the acts of oppression which were being done under the sun. And behold [I saw] the tears of the oppressed and [that] they had no one to comfort [them]; and on the side of their oppressors was power, but they had no one to comfort [them]. 2 So I congratulated the dead who are already dead more than the living who are still living. 3 But better [off] than both of them is the one who has never existed, who has never seen the evil activity that is done under the sun.

The subject of verse 1 relates to Ecclesiastes 3:16 (Ecc 3:16). The Preacher looks "again at all the acts of oppression which were being done under the sun", to which he now adds an aspect. Not only is there much injustice, but there is also much sorrow due to that much injustice. In addition, there cannot be made or expected improvement in that situation. This also causes frustration, a feeling of total powerlessness.

If you could congratulate yourself if you managed liberating even one person out of the hand of his oppressors, then there are still countless situations in which this is not possible. The power always lies with the oppressors. Power is a breeding ground of oppression. Power corrupts. This appears to be the case when reformers take over power. They turn into tyrants.

Exploitation also takes place in the business world. All over the world countless poor people, children and helpless people work from early in

the morning until late in the evening in factories for a pittance and under inhumane conditions. They have to, otherwise they have nothing at all. Sometimes a factory is discovered and people are freed, but how many are still where this happens? And what about families where the father rages like a tyrant and nobody has the courage to tell anything about it to others, so that no comfort can be sought? Just think of the refugees who are hunted by terrorist groups. How many tears have been and are being shed in all of those conditions.

That is the world we live in. The Preacher gives an eyewitness report of a kind of injustice that dominates life as a whole. He sees it in his days and anyone who looks with the eyes of the Preacher sees the same thing today. This iniquity is not borne stoically, but makes tears flow (Psa 119:136; Jn 11:35; Acts 8:2). Normally, tears arouse pity and comfort, but this is not the case with oppressors. They lack any sense of humanity and mercy.

The Preacher speaks twice about the lack of comforters. The absence of comforters greatly increases the suffering. You are completely left to yourself and dependent on yourself. There is no one who looks after you, no one who cares about you at all (Psa 142:4). The Lord Jesus complains: "And I looked for sympathy, but there was none, and for comforters, but I found none" (Psa 69:20b).

The dead are better off than the living (verse 2). This is said without thinking about the afterlife, but only from an earthly perspective. The dead have nothing to do with oppressors anymore (Job 3:17-18). The living are the people who are oppressed. For them it looks gloomy. They are without hope and without comfort.

Wicked sorrow, often as a result of disappointment in enjoyment as a life goal (hedonism), leads to the desire to commit suicide. The idea is that it is all over with death. However, man is not a beast. A beast ceases to exist when it dies. Once a human has been born, there will be no situation of 'not being there anymore'. He will exist forever, either in hell or in heaven, depending on faith in the Savior Jesus Christ. He who knows Him can say: "This is my comfort in my affliction, that Your word has revived me" (Psa 119:50).

The stillborn and aborted children are better off than those who have experienced anything of the life under the sun (verse 3). They do not know the evil activity of the oppressors, nor the grief of the oppressed. This kind of desire to be like them, can arise at the sight of the great misery in which men find themselves. In the case of the believer, seeing this misery arouses at the same time the desire to be with God.

The injustice we see will make us abhor the world and that God will draw us to Himself. In this way God can become for us what He really is: the resting place for our heart. With Him we see no injustice, for with Him “there is no unrighteousness, no partiality, and the taking of bribes” (2Chr 19:7), and with Him, in His presence, we are not afraid of the unrighteousness that we perceive everywhere.

Ecc 4:4-6 | Labor, Laziness and One Hand Full of Rest

4 I have seen that every labor and every skill which is done is [the result of] rivalry between a man and his neighbor. This too is vanity and striving after wind. 5 The fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh. 6 One hand full of rest is better than two fists full of labor and striving after wind.

A special form of oppression or unrighteousness which the Preacher has seen in observing people and what they do is rivalry or jealousy (verse 4). The double use of the word “every” indicates that any kind of labor and skill is involved. The point is that labor and skill are often the result of the desire to master others. We constantly live in a state of competition.

It has been said that nine out of ten office workers suffer from ‘professional rivalry’ of colleagues who, in their opinion, shine more or are better paid than they are. This drives many people to climb the ladder of success: they want to surpass others. Many want to be more successful than their colleagues or neighbors or friends. They want to be seen and recognized, to be admired with the admiration others get and what they envy. Rivalry is a strong force in man.

People who are envious are oppressed by their own wrong feelings and motives, because they control them. Hard work and high goals all too often stem from the desire to be the best, not to be inferior to others. Rivalry and competition lead to making great efforts and hating one another. We

see this in sports, in politics, in business, and it also happens in the church of God.

Anyone who feels like a loser will discover in his heart this kind of jealousy of which the Preacher speaks here. He is oppressed by rivalry, rivalry controls him. Instead of liberating himself from it by being content, he allows himself to be dominated by it. This jealousy is a breeding ground for bitterness and resentment. The only result that anyone can reap from his labor and the skill he shows is that others envy him for it.

The tribute he receives for his performance is often disguised jealousy. What use is it to him? For a moment, he is in the spotlight, but people get tired of all his efforts, they are “vanity”. What is the net result of his performance? Nothing more than what the “striving after wind” brings. He does not keep anything of it nor has he got anything left of it what gives inner peace and satisfaction.

Look at the Olympic Games, for example. People are adored for winning a medal. But how long does this admiration last? And the honor that is earned is always at the expense of another person who was one hundredth of a second slower. The people who have trained just as long and just as hard, but are just a little short to win a medal, can go home with a ‘loser flight’. The winners can take a ‘winner’s flight’ home and will be praised on arrival at the airport and later in their hometown. How frustrating!

Verse 5 is the opposite of verse 4, while there is also a clear similarity. The fool does not want to have anything to do with this fanatical competition and is characterized by total indifference. He folds his hands, not to pray, but to make it clear that he does not intend to use his hands (Pro 6:9-10; 24:33). His laziness is as wrong as the rush of the fanatic.

A lazy fool consumes not only what he owns, but also what he is. He commits ‘self-cannibalism’. He loses control over reality and his ability to support himself. The latter is the resemblance with someone who is consumed by rivalry, for such a person has also lost control over reality.

In contrast to the two previous wrong ways – being driven by jealousy and laziness – verse 6 gives the only good alternative: Do not let yourself be rushed. A busy agenda may be impressive, but it also destroys you. You get ahead of yourself, you get a heart attack and you die. Do not be lazy ei-

ther, because then you won't make a living and you will die as well. There has to be balance in a person's life.

This balance is present in people who, just like the Preacher, looks at life soberly. Those who are satisfied with "one hand full of rest" do not take part in the strife to be the best neither in total passivity. Everyone just needs a bit of rest and recreation at the right time. This is of more use than just non-stop hard labor. One hand full of rest expresses two thoughts: that of modest desires and of inner peace.

This attitude is as far away from the fool with his selfish laziness as it is from the perfectionist who always strives for the best and highest. How foolish it is to have "two fists full of labor", for the pursuit of results is the same as the "striving after wind": you cannot hold anything of it.

Ecc 4:7-12 | Two Are Better Than One

7 Then I looked again at vanity under the sun. 8 There was a certain man without a dependent, having neither a son nor a brother, yet there was no end to all his labor. Indeed, his eyes were not satisfied with riches [and he never asked], "And for whom am I laboring and depriving myself of pleasure?" This too is vanity and it is a grievous task. 9 Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. 10 For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up. 11 Furthermore, if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm [alone]? 12 And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three [strands] is not quickly torn apart.

The Preacher saw something else under the sun that is vanity (verse 7). This is that there are so many lonely people on earth who work hard and earn a lot, but have no one to share their lives and possessions with (verse 8). He describes the emptiness of loneliness and therefore the fruitlessness of everything that is obtained through hard work.

The lonely egoist is worse than the striver and the sloth of verses 4-5. We see here a compulsive money-grubber, one whose eye is not satisfied with riches. He walks with the dollar sign in his eyes, he only sees money, and is therefore 'dehumanized'. He has no family, he does not want to have any relationship, and friendships he desires least of all. He is always at work,

without any moment of pleasure and enjoyment of what he has earned. He always wants more, but never will he share anything with anyone else. He has a big company, but no possible followers. He has an abundance of food, but no one to share his meals with. He does not want that either, because it costs time and money. There is no place for a “second person” in his life. There is only one ‘first person’, who is at the same time the ‘only one’, because there is no second one. The first and only one is he himself.

If he had a wife or children, he’d hardly have time for them. Maybe he thinks he is working hard for them, but in reality he lives for his business and therewith he is married. His eye is focused on his wealth. And since his eye is not satisfied with riches, he just plods on. There is no end to his hard toil (Ecc 5:10).

He has more than he can ever spend for himself, but for whom does he do it? He deprives himself of any pleasure, but why? Slogging in solitude is indeed “vanity” and “a grievous task”. Peace and rest are sacrificed for his desires. He labors on and on. He does not think about God. He is rich, but not in God. If his heart stops beating, for whom will everything be for which he has worked so ceaselessly (Lk 12:18-21; 16:25)? Someone has described money as ‘an article that can be used as a universal passport to go everywhere except to heaven, and as a universal provision for everything except for happiness.’

I have read in a commentary a current description of the lonely, hard worker the Preacher presents to us here:

‘This man believes in the value of hard work and finds satisfaction in it. He is probably married and has at least three children whose picture he has in his wallet. He loves his wife and thinks about her more often than she knows. Certainly, he makes long days; he often leaves the house before six o’clock in the morning and only returns home after seven o’clock in the evening. The pressure of his work is so great that it takes him an hour or two to come to rest, so that he cannot spend much time talking. He is so tired that reading the newspaper and watching a bit of television is all he can do, after which he goes to bed tired.

His blood pressure is too high, he knows he needs to move more. His diet is not very good, and sometimes he is irritable and growls at his family,

which he later regrets. It is true that he works seventy hours a week, but he does not think he is a workaholic. He just loves his job, and he is good at it. And luckily, he can take home a nice salary and provide his family with good things.

One day he plans to slow down, because it is not going well ..., but not yet today. He leaves the house before his family knows he is gone.

One evening he comes home and his family is not there. While he was at work, the children grew up, his wife went back to university and started her own career, his children moved, and now the house is empty. He cannot believe it. The Board of Directors has just appointed him director and now there is no one to share the good news with. He has reached the top ... alone.

Even if we do not want to become a director, many people suffer from the 'hurry-syndrome'. There are so many busy people. They are so busy that they forget the people who are closest to them. How many fathers and mothers have failed their children for €10,000 or €20,000 extra per year? [End of description]

After the 'lone money-grubber', the man who does everything alone and lives only for himself, the Preacher describes in verse 9 the advantage of a companion. This companion can be found in all kinds of relationships and especially in the marriage relationship. Individualism, which increasingly governs the world today, creates enormous divisions. The disintegration into groups is already a disaster, the disintegration of a society by individualism is one of an unprecedented size.

Each person is a group for himself, stands alone and fights for his own interests. Just look at the one-man groups in politics or the sectarian leader with only one or two followers. They only make the misery worse, while imagining they are working on lasting solutions to problems.

Fellowship is a gift from the Creator, a benefit, intended to improve the quality of life. Through a sense of community, the burden of life is better distributed and more bearable. Man is also made in such a way that he needs others and that others need him. God said this at the time of man's creation: "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Gen 2:18). Man is a social being. However, many people choose loneliness and many others

suffer from loneliness. Many people, much loneliness. Those who prefer loneliness to friendship feel elevated above human nature or have lowered themselves below human nature.

Collaboration offers all kinds of advantages that the lonely plodder lacks. The obligations of doing something together do not outweigh the benefits. The price is to give up independence. You have to listen to and take into account the arguments of the other person, you have to adapt to his pace and lifestyle and you have to rely on his word. The benefit is also shared. There is no question of one exploiting the other. Certainly not in marriage, because in marriage you want to take account of each other and share everything with each other in absolute loyalty. You are always there for each other and together you are there for the Lord.

There is a reward for working together: being busy together on a common project and the success you achieve together. You go for something together, you commit yourself to it, together with the other. What you achieve, you share together. The satisfaction you find in this cannot be expressed in terms of money.

There is another advantage to having a companion: helping and supporting each other. When one of them falls, the other one can lift the other one up (verse 10). The companion's help and support can be practically experienced in accidents along the way, such as tripping or falling in a ravine or in a well or ditch (Gen 14:10; Lk 6:39). Someone who falls into it and is alone will perish, but if someone else is there, they can help him out.

We can also apply it to having a hard time in a spiritual sense, being desperate. The other person can help him out of his depression by encouraging him and helping him to bear the burden. A companion does not make accusations, but puts his back into it and helps. In a marriage, there is a danger of stumbling and falling by making wrong decisions or even falling into sin. How valuable it is, then, to be lifted up by the other person.

A third advantage of having a companion is the warmth that companions give each other during the cold of the night (verse 11). It is about dealing with each other in love in every day's life. The warmth of love, which does not demand, but gives. The world is cold because there is no love, i.e. no Divine love. In the atmosphere of Divine love, children will grow up spir-

itually healthy. Someone who is alone does not know the fervent warmth of brotherly love (1Pet 1:22). The result is that he becomes lukewarm in his affections and finally he becomes cold and hard.

A fourth advantage of having a companion is that you are stronger together against enemies (verse 12). A companion provides security and protection by majority. A tight marriage is difficult to fight. The same goes for a local church where the ranks are closed. Eve could be deceived because she was alone (Gen 3:1-6). If there is internal division, the power is gone and it is easy for the enemy to penetrate.

Two are already better than one, but when a third one is added, it is all the way a reinforcement. A cord of three strands is stronger than a cord of two strands. If we apply this to marriage, we can see husband, wife and God in the cord of three strands.

Everything shows that one is better off with another person or with two other persons than being alone. In the midst of all vanity, it still gives some satisfaction, help, warmth and strength to life. You are there for someone else and someone else is there for you. In this way you can make something of life together.

Ecc 4:13-16 | Relativity of Popularity

13 A poor yet wise lad is better than an old and foolish king who no longer knows [how] to receive instruction. 14 For he has come out of prison to become king, even though he was born poor in his kingdom. 15 I have seen all the living under the sun throng to the side of the second lad who replaces him. 16 There is no end to all the people, to all who were before them, and even the ones who will come later will not be happy with him, for this too is vanity and striving after wind.

In these verses it is also about the relationship between people, but especially between a ruler and the people, and about the honor that goes with the position of a ruler. By whom do people want to be ruled? The Preacher has also made some observations about this matter. It is better, he says, to be ruled by “a poor yet wise lad” than by “an old and foolish king” (verse 13). The young man is better because he is wise. The foolishness of the

old king is shown by the fact that he “no longer knows [how] to receive instruction”.

In general, wisdom is with the elder people (Job 12:20), but we should not close our eyes to the fact that young people are sometimes wiser than the older people (Psa 119:100; Job 32:4-9). The danger of an old man is that he may become wise in his own eyes (Rom 12:16b), that he may become pedantic and stubborn. A man who has been ruling for too long, is in danger of living in an unreal world because he no longer knows what is really going on. He has forgotten what it is like to be young and energetic and does not listen to reprimands. The crowd will get tired of him and choose the lad. The fact that the lad is poor and wise only makes him more attractive.

The lad had everything against him, he was restricted in his freedom of movement, he had no possibilities to develop himself, but his wisdom helps him to take the throne (verse 14). The new leader is young and dynamic, eloquent and intelligent (verse 15). He has charisma. Everything he was and what he is makes everyone admire him.

The popularity of the new, young, dynamic king is enormous (verse 16). He is welcomed with enthusiasm. An immense crowd follows him. He is the fresh wind that everyone was longing for after being used to the musty smell that was hanging around the old foolish king. The old man has brought no lasting improvement. The next generation has other ideas, is enthusiastic about other proposals, it wants to have new challenges. The lad is the symbol of this. He will bring what the new generation wants. He is authentic and honest, that is what he is praised for.

However, when he is in government for some time, he begins to show the same traits as his predecessor. People have seen enough of him. They are sick of him. A new generation comes, with new desires. That is how it has always been and that is how it will be with this rising star. At a certain point, this – now still – young man, will have to make room and has to go the way of the old king, because the people are finished with him. They are too restless to keep on finding him interesting. They are not any longer happy with him. If he is come to the pinnacle of his fame, it is only to get stranded there. People need a new star.

According to the Preacher, popularity “is vanity”, and those who strive after it are busy with “striving after wind”. As a ruler, it is impossible to always remain in the people’s favor. Once he will surely fall from his pedestal. People who were so fond of him at first, are shouting now that he must leave. Popularity is as changeable as the weather. After the ‘hosanna’ often follows the ‘crucify him’ or as it is said: after ‘hail him’ often follows ‘nail him’.

Ecclesiastes 5

Ecc 5:1 | Draw Near to God to Listen

1 Guard your steps as you go to the house of God and draw near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools; for they do not know they are doing evil.

Up to and including the verse of the last chapter it is about types of fellowship between people, or the absence of such fellowship. From verse 1 of this chapter, our focus is on the need for a larger and better type of fellowship: the fellowship with God. The Preacher does not say that searching for that is ‘vanity’ and ‘striving after wind’. He does say that it should happen in the right way, in the knowledge of Who God is and who man is in comparison to Him. It is about drawing near to God appropriately (cf. Exo 3:5; Jos 5:13-15; Jn 4:23-24).

He who draws near to God in His house must guard his steps (verse 1). Of course such a man should guard his heart, but the condition of the heart becomes visible in the path which those steps go (cf. Pro 1:15; 4:26-27). He who goes to God’s house must be aware that he is not approaching an ordinary house. The house of God is at every place where God reveals Himself (Gen 28:17,22), but it is certainly also the temple, which will be meant here.

The Preacher is focused on the man who is a worshiper. Up to now he has addressed his audience in the first person “I”, from his position as an observer. In the following section he gives exhortations. Just like the prophets he is calling to genuine service of God. He addresses people who have good intentions, but who are guilty of ignorance about God. These are the people who love singing and love to go to church, but who listen with half an ear and hardly ever get around to do what they have intended to do for God.

You’d better come “to listen”, than “to offer a sacrifice” – only for the appearance, without being involved with your heart – as a fool or in a foolish way. ‘To listen’ has the dual meaning of ‘to pay careful attention to’ and

‘to obey’. Those aspects are both more important to God than any sacrifice (1Sam 15:22; Pro 21:3).

The sacrifice is a sacrificial animal that has been killed to sacrifice to God and thereafter to serve as a fellowship meal. That is a peace offering. A sacrifice can devalue to a food feast, where people do not consider God at all. The Preacher might possibly have had this in mind when he made this remark. He does not mean that people should not bring sacrifices anymore, but that it should happen appropriately.

The grace of God, no matter how great it may be, should never be an excuse to make a mockery of Him. People do not take God seriously if they think that they can draw near to Him with pious, though empty words and added to that even dealing with holy things in a careless way (cf. Mt 7:21-23; 23:16-18; 1Kgs 11:27-29). They have no idea that they are doing evil, and play the innocent when the hypocrisy of their attitude is pointed out to them. However, there is no innocent ignorance, but they are guilty of dishonoring God. They should have known better.

Ecc 5:2-3 | Speak Carefully in the Presence of God

2 Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought to bring up a matter in the presence of God. For God is in heaven and you are on the earth; therefore let your words be few. 3 For the dream comes through much effort and the voice of a fool through many words.

James says in his letter in a general sense: “But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak” (Jam 1:19). What generally applies to us men in our dealings with each other, applies in a particular extent to our dealings with God about what we say to Him (verse 2). Hastiness of spirit is always wrong, but especially in prayer. In this context, this is most probably a hasty, ill-considered making of a vow. Words that are spoken thoughtlessly reflect the inner life, because the mouth speaks from the heart. Just as it is not a matter of outward offering services, so it is not a matter of many words in our prayers.

There is nothing against long prayers. The Lord Jesus also prayed all night long once (Lk 6:12). It is said to us that we ought to pray continually (Lk 18:1; 1Thes 5:17). But God is against long prayers that are prayed for the

appearance of religiosity as the Pharisees do (Mk 12:40) and against the use of many words as the Gentiles do (Mt 6:7-8).

We need to realize Who and where God is and who and where we are. God is in heaven, the place of His glory and His government. The contrasts are: God and man, and heaven and earth. God has an overview and control over everything; compared to that, man does not know anything at all. In that light it is purely arrogant to manipulate God by making great vows and promise to fulfill if He gives us what we desire.

Our impatience is in contrast to His greatness. The insignificance of man in contrast to the greatness of God should make a man to be a beggar and warn him not be wanting to be as God. Wanting to be equal to God is the origin of sin.

Verse 3 corresponds to the previously mentioned, which we derive from the word "for". It clarifies that there is cause and effect in our approaching to God. Impatience in prayer is caused by a multitude of activities. Heavy responsibilities in daily life can disturb our concentration in prayer and lead to impatience in prayer. The fool will therefore express a torrent of words, without it having any effect.

Prayer demands rest and confidence, even though the reason to pray is still so urgent. The first gathering of the church for praying gives a nice example (Acts 4:24-31). We read that the church draws near to God to worship Him. Then the Scripture is cited and then the supplication comes, followed by the answer.

The multitude of words that the fool uses in God's presence, is the talk that can be compared to a dream that comes from a lot of activity. The talk of a fool is just as unreal as a dream. An excess of words must lead to foolishness, just as an excess of activity leads to wild dreams.

It is something that any human being can fall into. Just as one can dream at night because of too many activities during the day, so one because he talks too much can start to speak a lot of nonsense. Anyone who is too busy, will have nightmares, anyone who uses too many words is a foolish chatter and chatterbox.

Ecc 5:4-7 | Pay What You Vow and Fear God

4 When you make a vow to God, do not be late in paying it; for [He takes] no delight in fools. Pay what you vow! 5 It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. 6 Do not let your speech cause you to sin and do not say in the presence of the messenger [of God] that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry on account of your voice and destroy the work of your hands? 7 For in many dreams and in many words there is emptiness. Rather, fear God.

In the previous verses it is about the general service to God. In this section it is about a special exercise: making a vow. It is not a warning against making a vow, but against making a vow and not paying it (verse 4; Num 30:2). Only a fool does such a thing. Hannah made a vow and did pay it (1Sam 1:11,26-28; Psa 76:11). It is also important to pay the vow directly and not to postpone the paying of it. Paying the vow directly is the best evidence of the sincerity of the vow made.

People often make vows to God if He rescues them from problems (Gen 28:20-22). They say that they will serve God if He helps them. But if there is no living relationship with Him, they forget their vow as soon as they get the answer to their prayer.

Making a vow was not obligatory, but voluntarily (verse 5; Deu 23:21-23). You'd better be reluctant to make a vow than to pay it. Those who fear God, will:

1. not make a vow to God quickly;
2. be serious about paying the vow when they have made it;
3. confess broken vows as sins and repent of it.

It is always about vows that are in agreement with God's Word. Herod should have gone back on his vow and should have broken it (Mt 14:6-9). He should have confessed that he had grossly overestimated himself in making such a promise with an oath, and had to go back on it before God. However, since he lived before people, he did not want to lose his face in front of them and carried out his ungodly vow.

No one should hold on to a vow that is connected to sin. Someone cannot be obliged by others to keep it, whether it are people or the devil himself.

Such a vow must be broken under confession and in the Name of the Lord Jesus.

The Preacher commands us not to allow our mouth to say anything that would lead us to sin (verse 6). Our words touch our whole being, they pull our whole being in the direction of our speech. Whatever comes out of our mouth brings us closer to God or takes us further away from Him.

“The messenger” is the representative of God. This may be the priest in whose presence the vow was made (Lev 5:4-5; Mal 2:7). It may be the messenger who is sent by the priest to someone to remind him of his vow.

God takes the failing of paying a vow very seriously. He becomes “angry” when we promise something with our mouths, when we say we will do something, and we do not do it. To despise a vow means to despise Him, before Whose face the vow is made. In this context one of the proverbs previously spoken by the Preacher can be applied: “It is a trap for a man to say rashly, “It is holy!” and after the vows to make inquiry” (Pro 20:25).

If we do not pay a vow, God cannot ignore it with impunity. We will experience His judgment because He will destroy the work of our hands. We should have paid our vow first, but we started to work for ourselves. That work is done in disobedience. That is why He is destroying it.

Vows were often made with a view to success in the work. An example of this is the field of which, by making a vow, one hopes to make much profit. If the vow is not kept, the offenders will be punished in that very place, and the blessing they wanted will be turned into a curse, with the result that there will be no profit at all.

The lightly spoken vows of verse 6 are no more than a word game, a day-dream (verse 7). Man tends to carry his illusion when he promises or worships, without being aware that he is in the presence of the Most Holy. It is as if he lives in the land of dreams, without a sense of reality. Man can only escape such a situation by fearing God. This means that he is aware of living in the presence of God, and shows this by acknowledging and honoring Him. Then he will pay attention to his words and will not make lighthearted vows that he does not intend to pay anyway.

He who fears God has nothing and no one else to fear. He can say to satan: 'Because I fear God, I do not need to fear you.' Such a man will keep his promise: "He swears to his own hurt and does not change" (Psa 15:4b).

Ecc 5:8-9 | Oppression Should Not Shock Us

8 If you see oppression of the poor and denial of justice and righteousness in the province, do not be shocked at the sight; for one official watches over another official, and there are higher officials over them. 9 After all, a king who cultivates the field is an advantage to the land.

The Preacher does not follow a certain pattern in this book, a clear progress of a subject. He gives his observations without paying attention to a possible connection between the subjects. It may be that he just goes from one subject to another. We can see that here too. He leaves the subject of drawing near to God and, from verse 8 to Ecclesiastes 6:12, points to situations around the theme of poverty and wealth, with the main idea being: the more wealth, the more corruption. The underlying idea seems to be that wealth is often obtained through corruption or oppression. The denial of justice and righteousness points to a crooked judicial system.

In verse 8, he points to the ancient playing pass-the-parcel system, floating on jealousy, in which always the next higher official is held responsible for. That goes on up to the highest and untouchable leader, who too rejects all responsibility himself. Anyone who has power over someone else is thus shirking his own responsibility. Bureaucracy and civil service send citizens from pillar to post, with endless delays and excuses and without getting what they are entitled to. The culture of self-enrichment is gaining more and more supporters. Everyone's just filling his own pockets.

The Preacher does not speak about a village or a city, but about "a province", with which a greater part of the country is meant (cf. Ezra 5:8). Oppression takes place under almost all governments and on all levels of management. It happens especially by local governments in the provinces that are far from the center of the government.

The Preacher does not call for a revolution to put an end to that culture. Soberly he says that we should not be shocked by it. It is embedded in the system and it is ineradicable.

In many countries there is oppression and injustice. This is because a selfish higher official is exploited and guided by an equally selfish and higher official, who in turn is placed under a higher official, etcetera. Because every higher official exploits the subordinate placed directly under him, the latter will do the same to those who are subordinate to him. The people suffer from this pattern of misrule.

Verse 9 seems to be a counterpart of verse 8. With all bureaucracy it is an advantage when there is a stable point of authority: a king who has an eye for agriculture (2Chr 26:10). Among the inhabitants of a land there is a distinction in social status, but everyone is dependent on the cultivation of the field. Even “a king”, the highest authority, who is placed at the top of the people, has an advantage of the cultivation of the field. If the land is well cultivated and there is a fair distribution, the land will yield enough for everyone.

The king also is dependent on what the field yields for his family’s livelihood. The king that rules well, protects the farmer by a proper law enforcement. He realizes that he is dependent on the farmer for his livelihood. The king is a servant of the field. Such a king, instead of being the higher official oppressing those under him and enriching himself at their expense, will rule in justice and allow everyone to share in the proceeds of the field.

What a blessing it is when a king, the highest authority, seeks the well-being of the land. He is not an exploiter, he does not seek by war to enlarge his territory, but is someone who makes his territory available for arable farming, so that everyone can enjoy the proceeds.

We may think of the Lord Jesus in the light of the New Testament. He is the King Who seeks the well-being of His land, His kingdom, and all His subordinates.

Ecc 5:10-17 | Money Is Vanity and Causes Problems

10 He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves abundance [with its] income. This too is vanity. 11 When good things increase, those who consume them increase. So what is the advantage to their owners except to look on? 12 The sleep of the working man is pleasant, whether he eats little or much; but the full stomach of the rich man does not allow him to sleep.

13 There is a grievous evil [which] I have seen under the sun: riches being hoarded by their owner to his hurt. 14 When those riches were lost through a bad investment and he had fathered a son, then there was nothing to support him. 15 As he had come naked from his mother's womb, so will he return as he came. He will take nothing from the fruit of his labor that he can carry in his hand. 16 This also is a grievous evil—exactly as a man is born, thus will he die. So what is the advantage to him who toils for the wind? 17 Throughout his life [he] also eats in darkness with great vexation, sickness and anger.

If a man sticks to his money with his heart, his thirst for money cannot be quenched (verse 10). For such a person, money is his idol, the mammon, the god of wealth (Mt 6:24). Money is a good slave, but a bad master. Whoever has the money as his master, is hunted by his desire for always more. His love for money controls and destroys him (1Tim 6:9). The same goes for loving abundance. He who sticks to abundance with his heart, always wants to have more income. He wants an increasing bank balance, more and more real estate, an increasing harvest by having more lands.

Solomon points to the vanity of money and income. He is going to explain the vanity, the emptiness of money and income in the following verses. The Lord Jesus lifts this subject to a higher level when He says to a man who is risking to lose his inheritance: "Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions" (Lk 12:15).

He who has a lot of goods, has a lot of friends (verse 11) or as Solomon already said in the book of Proverbs: "Those who love the rich are many" (Pro 14:20b). The more wealth, the more profiteers. Also all kinds of charitable organizations know how to find you and always appeal to your possessions. You have to deal with a lot of nagging of people.

You also have to leave the control of your goods to others. You cannot possibly control that all by yourself. But are you well aware that those whom you've entrusted your possessions to, may clean you out? They control your possessions in such a way that you yourself cannot get a hold of it and they profit from it. You look at it, but in fact you've lost the enjoyment of it. The only profit you have is the thought that it is your property.

Money makes clear that money does not satisfy. It attracts people who want to hitch a ride on your wealth and want to parasitize, quite disrupting the peace in your life. Poverty may cause problems, but do not think that the love for money is a good solution for those problems.

Just look at “the working man”, the hard worker, with a simple profession, a low income with no possession (verse 12). This man does not have any of those problems. He who is without possessions, is without worries, in any case no worries about his properties and therefore also no people who are whining his head off in order to get some of his abundance. He is not worrying about whether he has little or much to eat, for he always has enough. At the end of the day he falls asleep. And his “sleep ... is pleasant”. He has no nightmares; there is also nothing he is fretting and tossing about.

That is quite different from the effect that “the abundance” or multitude of goods has on the rich man. A rich man has a lot to eat and does so too. He stuffs himself so much that it makes him nauseous so that he cannot sleep. Excess harms. Another thought is that he is worried about how to maintain and increase his abundance. He is controlled by it (verse 11) and frets over it, with the result that it “does not allow him to sleep”. The more riches, the less night’s rest. A lot of worries, little sleep. The big bed with the best mattress does not give him the ‘pleasant sleep’ the working man has who is lying down on the sack of straw.

One does not need money to be happy. Just look at the working man. He eats his bread by the sweat of his face. Working hard also ensures a good digestion. He who only organizes dinners in order to get large orders, gets fatter and fatter and more and more restless. The fitness clubs love to welcome such people. One of the reasons of the existence of those clubs is that people become too fat by too much and wrong eating. It is an example of symptom treatment. The life style is not changed, but the results of the wrong life style is being treated. It is trying to empty the ocean with a thimble.

The following story may serve as an illustration:

A rich industrialist met a simple fisherman. The rich man was bothered by the fact that on a sunny afternoon the fisherman leaned backward in his boat, while his feet were dangling overboard. ‘Why aren’t you fishing?’

he asked. 'Because I have caught enough fish for today', the fisherman replied. 'Why do you not go catch more fish?' asked the rich man. 'What should I do with it?' 'You could make more money', said the rich man, who was becoming more impatient, 'and buy a better boat, so that you can go deeper fishing and catch more fish. You can buy nylon nets and catch even more fish and make even more money. Then you can buy more boats and hire others to help you fish. You would soon have a fleet of boats and be as rich as I am!' 'And what should I do then?' 'You could sit down and enjoy life', the industrialist said. 'What do you think I'm doing now?' the fisherman replied and looked out over the sea.

There are more disadvantages connected to riches than just insomnia by exuberance or worries. One of them is that the hoarding of riches is for the owners "to their hurt" (verse 13). The Preacher calls it "a grievous evil". It is an evil that makes one sick, and it is also an evil that comes upon the owner. It makes you sick from the sickness that riches cause.

The owner of riches becomes sick when he eats too much of his riches and gets stomach ache with the result that he cannot sleep (verse 12). But it could also be the other way around, which is that the wealth eats him up. He gets sick with the idea that he could lose his riches just like that, for example by theft, a wrong speculation or a thoughtless investment. He protects his riches anxiously, while he realizes that he has no absolute guarantee that his safety locks, alarm systems, cameras and hired security guards, rule out theft.

Paul states the same warning and deepens it because he connects riches with faith: "But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs" (1Tim 6:9-10).

In verses 14-17 it is about cases in which someone was rich, but who lost his riches. That happened "through a bad investment" (verse 14), whether by others or by himself. Others might have robbed him. He may also try to cheat others in order to enrich himself and therefore got financially wrecked for example by theft or fraud or a sudden change of circumstanc-

es. In this way riches may get wings and just disappear. You are a mere spectator and can do nothing about it or get anything back. This verse contains a lot of frustration. It is about a man who has worked long and hard, and has lost everything in one go. He and his family are destitute.

An extra frustration is that he cannot leave his son anything. During his life, his riches has not done him any good. He has not been able to enjoy it, he has lost everything, and he cannot give anything to the son he has fathered. It delivers him a triple frustration.

This evil cannot happen to us with regard to the treasures that we have gathered in heaven. Evil practices cannot rob us from them. There is no thief that can get there (Mt 6:19-20). Therefore it is a good thing to invest in the heavenly things.

Apart from the loss of riches and health and getting a disease and frustration, one cannot take anything with him at the end of the journey either. What a foolishness it is to work for riches, the striving for it and trying to pocket as much of it as possible. Every man leaves the world as he came into it: naked (verse 15). Even if he had his coffin made of gold and his hands filled with money when he is in the coffin, it would not do him any good. He is lying dead and stiff in his coffin and there is nothing left "that he can carry in his hand".

This awareness must put a stop to a man's pursuit for wealth. What a man had in his hand at birth was the capital he brought into the world: nothing. In the same way he leaves the world again (Job 1:21; Psa 49:16-17; 1Tim 6:7). It is as the saying says: There are no pockets in a shroud. We cannot take anything to heaven. However, we can send our treasures ahead by giving away as much as possible for what promotes God's work on earth.

If the thought pervades that a person will "return as he has come", i.e. with nothing in his hand, it is "also a grievous evil" (verse 16). He has to grudgingly accept that this is reality, but he does not get around to it to agree that all the riches a person possesses under the sun, will end up being nothing at all. He must be aware that making an effort to become rich is equal to toiling for wind that cannot be held either. It takes more than that to agree that it is so and that is the understanding that any increase in money and goods during life will not bring anyone anything for eternity.

Verse 17 strengthens the conclusion of verse 16 by recalling all the efforts and hardships that man has made to acquire his possessions, which he has now lost again. Concentrating on his wealth – both on its growth and its loss – has led him to a sad, shady life, “in darkness”, without any prospect of joy. He can sit in full daylight and yet in darkness because his heart is darkness. He has not been able to enjoy the full light.

Physically, he didn't fare well either. His mind and heart have been torn apart by his wealth. He was also upset about the lack of results or losses on the stock market, about the sometimes low return on his money. What annoyance he felt when he saw his wealth evaporate.

Ecc 5:18-20 | Enjoying the Good Things Is a Gift From God

18 Here is what I have seen to be good and fitting: to eat, to drink and enjoy oneself in all one's labor in which he toils under the sun [during] the few years of his life which God has given him; for this is his reward. 19 Furthermore, as for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, He has also empowered him to eat from them and to receive his reward and rejoice in his labor; this is the gift of God. 20 For he will not often consider the years of his life, because God keeps him occupied with the gladness of his heart.

After the sketch of the bitterness of life it is the right time for the Preacher to recall the remedy (verse 18). In the previous verses God is not mentioned. He now points out an aspect of life that should not be forgotten, an aspect which he introduces with a call “here is what I have seen”. There is actually a different life, just as exterior, real and perceptible. The Preacher has “seen” that it is possible for one “to enjoy” in all one's labor, not at the absence of it. That is a provision of God in this short life. “To eat” and “to drink” are an expression of fellowship, joy, satisfaction (1Kgs 4:20). This is the portion of the wise.

General abuse of riches does not exclude the right use of it. When God gives it, we are allowed to enjoy it (verse 19). Both the means of eating and drinking as the possibility to enjoy it, come as a gift from God. Enjoying food and drinks as a result of hard labor, is possible in the awareness that He gives it in His power over it, to a man who is allowed to do it in His

power. That it is a gift from God, means that it is not in man's own power to enjoy it. That is shown clearly in the previous section.

When God gives it, you can make the best of it under the sun and enjoy the things on earth intensely. At the same time, these things have no meaning in themselves because they are as futile as the wind. Nor is there any advantage in them in relation to eternity. There is nothing left that you could save up to take any of that after you are dead. Wealth gives worries and restlessness and fear of losing it. Seen in that light, the advice of the Preacher: Do not hoard riches, but enjoy it. You do not know how long it will be available to you because it is futile. You also do not know how long you can enjoy it because your life can suddenly be over.

Whoever is granted the gift of God to enjoy food and drink, does not worry about the years of his life (verse 20). The idea is not that life will be so quiet that nothing memorable happens, but that life will be so filled with joy that the vanity of life is almost forgotten. Those who have enough do not concern themselves with the question of whether there is a benefit in wealth. It is not completely forgotten, but it does not predominate. The thought of brevity remains, but it will not cause sleepless nights.

Ecclesiastes 6

Ecc 6:1-2 | Having Wealth, but Not Able to Enjoy It

1 There is an evil which I have seen under the sun and it is prevalent among men — 2 a man to whom God has given riches and wealth and honor so that his soul lacks nothing of all that he desires; yet God has not empowered him to eat from them, for a foreigner enjoys them. This is vanity and a severe affliction.

The Preacher again points out that he has seen something “under the sun” (verse 1). As a result, he once again makes clear his point of view, in order to look at and think through the things around him from there. He has observed “an evil” that anyone can see anywhere. It is actually an evil that “is prevalent among men” or, as it also can be translated “heavily presses on men”.

It concerns a man who has everything he desires and lacks nothing (verse 2). It has all been given to him by God and God also gives him the chance to enjoy it, as the Preacher noted earlier (Ecc 5:17-19). Whatever a man could possibly possess, he owes it all to God, whether he is aware of it or not. God satisfies the “hearts with food and gladness” (Acts 14:17).

Now the Preacher notes the downside of wealth, possessions and honor: God does not empower man to “eat from them”. This observation is as true as the previous one. We just have to see the context of both observations. There is “a foreigner” here and he “enjoys them”. We can see a reference to satan here. As long as a person does not stand in a living relationship with God by repentance and faith, he is under the control of satan with everything that he has. The real enjoyment can only be there when someone comes to repentance and starts to live according to it.

When man shuts God out, God surrenders him to his own way and actions. A man cannot really enjoy anything without Him. The fact that God does not allow man to use any of it is down to man himself. Man chooses to attribute his wealth, possessions and honor to his own merits. Such an attitude of man has made God to automatically attach the consequence that man cannot enjoy it either.

From what the Preacher sees, he concludes that the possession of wealth and properties and honor is “vanity”. What good is it to a man if someone else, even if he is not aware of it, runs off with it? Solomon does not conclude this soberly, but it touches him deeply. He undergoes the perception he makes as “a severe affliction”. Possibly this comes from the realization that man himself cannot change anything about the evil, in whatever form.

It is about cause and effect, both of which are anchored by God in His creation, also in man’s actions. Man has surrendered himself to ‘the foreigner’, satan. Satan consumes what people possess as long as they shut God out of their minds. The word ‘consume’ contains the thought of wasting or squandering valuable things as if they were without any value.

Satan can do this by encouraging people to rob or destroy the property. He can also do it by a personal plague, a physical or mental illness, or a sinful lifestyle, so that there is no opportunity to enjoy what God gives (cf. Rom 1:21). The sowing of turmoil and hatred is also a tried and tested means by which he makes pleasure impossible (cf. Pro 15:16-17).

Ecc 6:3-6 | A Miscarriage Is Better Off

3 If a man fathers a hundred [children] and lives many years, however many they be, but his soul is not satisfied with good things and he does not even have a [proper] burial, [then] I say, “Better the miscarriage than he, 4 for it comes in futility and goes into obscurity; and its name is covered in obscurity. 5 It never sees the sun and it never knows [anything]; it is better off than he. 6 Even if the [other] man lives a thousand years twice and does not enjoy good things—do not all go to one place?”

A person can have a very great offspring and grow very old, things that are presented in the Old Testament as a special blessing, and yet leave life empty and unnoticed, without others mourning him (verse 3; cf. Jer 22:18-19). That is really tragic. Moreover, it is a great torment to experience and see beautiful things and not to find joy and satisfaction in them.

If the life of such a man is over, there is no one to shed a tear for him. His life is worth nothing and neither is his dead body. They do not even bother to dig a grave for him and bury him. His end is, as his life was: empty.

Such torments do not bother “a miscarriage” and that is why it is better off. The stillborn child is not confronted with the restlessness of an unfulfilled existence. He also has no guilt toward God. If a life is lived in sin and is ended in unbelief, it would have been better never to have lived it (cf. Mk 14:21).

A miscarriage is the first to die (verse 4). That happens already before it has seen life (Psa 58:8b). Everything remains hidden in darkness. Although the miscarriage has not seen the life and the light, it is better off than he who has seen it all (verse 5). The miscarriage has rest and has not experienced all afflictions under the sun, while the living one has always had unrest. Job and Jeremiah have desired to be like that when they were desperate (Job 3:1-19; Jer 20:14-16).

The rich man and the poor man who both die in unbelief will both go to the place where all temporal differences have disappeared. This is the realm of the dead. Everyone will end up there, however long he lives. Even if someone gets twice as old as Methuselah (Gen 5:27), it will be of no use to him when he dies. After his long, unpleasant life he goes to the realm of the dead, the place where there is also the miscarriage that has not seen life.

The New Testament teaches that there is a difference between the place where a miscarriage goes and where the unbeliever goes after death. A miscarriage has not sinned and is therefore saved by the work of Christ. The unbeliever is in the place of pain because he has refused to repent. He will be judged according to his deeds (Rev 20:12-13). However, there is a difference in the gravity of the punishment that the unbelievers receive after their death (Lk 12:48).

We learn from the New Testament that there is also a distinction in reward for those who die in faith. They will be rewarded according to the faithfulness with which they have served the Lord in their lives (Mt 25:14-30).

Ecc 6:7-9 | Food Does Not Fill Spiritual Emptiness

7 All a man's labor is for his mouth and yet the appetite is not satisfied. 8 For what advantage does the wise man have over the fool? What [advantage] does the poor man have, knowing [how] to walk before the living? 9 What the eyes

see is better than what the soul desires. This too is futility and a striving after wind.

The very first and great goal of all man's labor is that his mouth gets something to eat, because only then he stays alive (verse 7). Over and over again, man has to eat. He never reaches the point of final fullness, so that he has eaten enough once and for all. He gets hungry again and again, so he has to eat again and again. That is what he works for. This applies to the rich industrialist and the prime minister as well as to the worker.

It is working to eat and eating to be able to work: "A worker's appetite works for him, for his hunger urges him [on]" (Pro 16:26). His stomach is in control of him. At the same time, there is a deeper hunger, a spiritual hunger. The desire for what is truly satisfying is not fulfilled by filling the stomach. This is the deeper lesson of this verse.

When a person realizes that healthy food for his soul is more important than it is for his body, he has learned the lesson. To say it with the words of the Lord Jesus the lesson is that "man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God" (Mt 4:4).

In filling the stomach the wise has no advantage over the fool; there is no distinction between them in this (verse 8). They both have the same need to eat and drink in order to stay alive. Both of them also experience the brevity of the satisfaction of needs.

In the New Testament we learn that the relationship between the stomach and the food is a temporary one. God will at some point destroy both the stomach and the food (1Cor 6:13). This happens as soon as a person dies. In the afterlife, there is no need to eat in order to stay alive. It makes it clear that for whom filling the stomach is the highest goal, is a very poor person and that his soul is in a disastrous state.

The same principle applies to the poor who understands the art of cautiously maneuvering through life. He may know how to deal with "the living", but with all his skills to be befriended with everyone, he cannot fill his stomach. The living may be the rich, or the prominent people, who look down on the poor. If the poor man is able to deal with them dexterously, he will not gain any additional advantage over those rich or prominent people. They, like him, have the same necessities of life.

The restless desiring of things one does not possess causes torment, while there is so much to enjoy at the moment because of what the eyes see (verse 9). Desire stirs up to a restless pursuit of something that never becomes a possession. The first – what the eyes see – is better than the second – what the soul desires – because the first one you have. The enjoyment of today's good, makes you content and happy. Life is full of little surprises, if we want to see them. However, even this does not give any final rest and does not fill the deepest desires for inner satisfaction.

Only seeing God's great gift in Christ gives the greatest joy and rest. This also applies to the pursuit of getting to know Him. These activities are neither futile nor striving after wind, but they prove the reality of a faith which is in a living relationship with Christ.

Ecc 6:10-12 | Man Is Only a Man

10 Whatever exists has already been named, and it is known what man is; for he cannot dispute with him who is stronger than he is. 11 For there are many words which increase futility. What [then] is the advantage to a man? 12 For who knows what is good for a man during [his] lifetime, [during] the few years of his futile life? He will spend them like a shadow. For who can tell a man what will be after him under the sun?

God knows the beginning of every man (Isa 46:9-10), also his name and character (verse 10). His name, his identity, is given to him by God (cf. Isa 40:26). Giving a name to someone or something means that someone has the authority to do so. Thus God called "light day and darkness night" (Gen 1:5). A name expresses the nature of something (Gen 2:19).

Concerning man "it is known what man is". Man must know that he is a weak creature (cf. Psa 9:20b) and not the strong God (Isa 31:3). He must know that it is impossible to dispute with God or call Him to account. It is foolishness to begin with this, for he will always be defeated "by him who is stronger than he" (Job 23:13; 33:12). It is also possible that with 'him who is stronger than he' death is meant.

He cannot change what God has made of him, the character He has given him (Jer 1:5). To accept that is the most essential thing to function as God has purposed it to be. That also gives full meaning to life. It makes no sense

to argue about this with God, although God allows us to do so when we do, as with Job, in order to teach us even richer lessons.

However, man is not inclined to accept what God has made of him. He dares to rage against God, the Almighty, for the slightest thing, and to challenge His right to the government of all things. Like a nitwit, he grumbles at God and curses at Him, even though he himself is to blame for the misery, his decay and his mortality in which he finds himself, due to his own sins. Even though a man is well known and rich, it is generally known that he is only a man, made of dust, and therefore weak and fragile.

He is, because he is human, subject to numerous disasters. His ability to prevent them is completely beyond his control, despite all his fearful efforts and worries. He cannot use his power and wealth to carry out his will in order to make the disasters disappear from him when they have struck him. Although a man may become famous, it is known that he is only a man who cannot dispute with Him Who is stronger, which means that he cannot control events, for only He Who is stronger, namely God, can.

There are so many things in the life of man that are futile, transitory (verse 11). What is the real benefit of such things to him? They do not benefit him, they do not benefit him at all. Words of people do not change the world, they only make the emptiness bigger. Just listen to the countless empty words of many politicians. The firm language used to suppress evil in any form is becoming more and more pitiful.

It is reminiscent of the saying that a proverb in the mouth of fools is like the legs to the lame, which are useless (Pro 26:7). You can see it happen before you: the firm words seeping like powerless saliva out of the speaker's mouth, trickling down along his chin and making his neat jacket dirty. Only the living and powerful Word of God is able to bring about a change for the better.

No one knows what is good in this life for mankind, only God knows, but He is off side in this book, because the Preacher sees everything only under the sun (verse 12). Will there be days of prosperity or adversity, of profit or loss, of abundance or of lack? Man does not know it because he spends his days as a shadow, which means as if he has no real existence.

He cannot control the course of his life and cannot make it to his own will. His life is counted in a number of “years”, which are seen as “futile” and spent like “a shadow”. This description shows how small man is. This is the reality of life when it is lived apart from God, because life only has meaning and sense in connection with Him.

A man who does not consider God, knows nothing of the value of life, and has no knowledge of what will be after him, let alone any certainty about it. The life after him cannot be described in a plan. Without God, he can make predictions, which at best have no other basis than previous experiences. At the same time it will be experienced how worthless those forecasts have often proved to be. With the change of people the view on life also changes.

God knows from the beginning what is going to happen and He knows what will happen to him after the life of a man on earth. Only God knows what will happen after this life, and so does anyone to whom God reveals it.

Ecclesiastes 7

Introduction

With Ecclesiastes 7, a new section begins in this book. We can see this when we look at the form in which the Preacher in the first part of this chapter, verses 1-14, expresses his observations. He does so in a form of so-called “better ... than” proverbs, a form we also find in the book of Proverbs (Pro 12:9; 15:16-17; 17:1).

We have to learn what really matters in life. This means that we know how to distinguish the better or the more excellent things from what may be good, but is still of inferior quality to the better (Phil 1:10). This distinction is best seen when we look at the end of a case. Therefore, it is wise to keep an eye on the end of everything we do, both with ourselves and with others (Heb 13:7).

Look for example at the end of the rich man and the poor Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31). In the same way, today’s beautiful Babylon, which is the roman catholic church, does not show its true nature. We see its true nature at its end, when judgment comes on it (Rev 17:1-18; 18:1-24). In view of this, and also of ourselves, this may be our prayer: “LORD, make me to know my end, and what is the measure of my days; let me know how transient I am” (Psa 39:4).

Ecc 7:1-6 | ‘Better ... Than’ Observations

- 1 A good name is better than a good ointment,
And the day of [one’s] death is better than the day of one’s birth.*
- 2 It is better to go to a house of mourning
Than to go to a house of feasting,
Because that is the end of every man,
And the living takes [it] to heart.*
- 3 Sorrow is better than laughter,
For when a face is sad a heart may be happy.*
- 4 The mind of the wise is in the house of mourning,*

*While the mind of fools is in the house of pleasure.
5 It is better to listen to the rebuke of a wise man
Than for one to listen to the song of fools.
6 For as the crackling of thorn bushes under a pot,
So is the laughter of the fool;
And this too is futility.*

In Israel, a name means a lot more than a name tag or a label. A name expresses how a person is, his personality and character. "A good name" (verse 1) is given after a period of time and based on a certain behavior. That good name remains even after death. The smell of "good oil" is only temporary, although the smell is pleasant for the time it lingers. It is not about good versus bad, but about better versus good. Better here has the meaning of more useful, of having more benefit.

The Name of the Lord Jesus is "an ointment poured forth" of which the fragrance remains forever (Song 1:3, Darby Translation). The good name of Mary remains in connection with her act of anointing the Savior (Mt 26:13).

That the day of a person's death is better than the day of his birth is only true if Christ is not involved. For those who know Christ, to be with Christ, or to depart, is "very much better" (Phil 1:23), but life with and for Him is also of great significance. The Preacher speaks of this perception as being done under the sun, without looking behind the horizon. He looks at life on earth without considering the truth that "it is appointed for men to die once and after this [comes] judgment" of God on the committed sins (Heb 9:27).

The confrontation with death, which a funeral always brings, is useful because it is precisely then that the reality of man's fragile and transitory existence becomes manifest (verse 2). Death leads us to think about life. A funeral also makes us think about that of our own. We can learn more from the day of a person's death than from the day of his birth.

A feast at a birth and the feasting in life are not necessarily wrong, but they do not make us serious. Festive occasions are not the most suitable occasions to reflect on the seriousness of life. The excitement prevails. At sad events the mood is thoughtful and one is more inclined to think about the

meaning of life. Then we will get to pray with Moses: "So teach us to number our days; that we may present to You a heart of wisdom" (Psa 90:12).

At a funeral we are determined by the inescapable reality that death is "the end of every man" in his existence on earth. Sooner or later every man will have to deal with it irrevocably. It is extremely stupid to close the eyes to it. The Preacher points out that the living must take it to heart. Do something with that reality that will affect you too one day. Man should not live thoughtlessly as if his life on earth will never end. As long as he lives, he should focus his thoughts on that.

To the house of mourning and death belongs sorrow and not laughter (verse 3). Here it is about the right state of mind at the thought of the fragility of existence. People do not want to be sad. Life should be joyful. People do not want to be confronted with pessimism. Everything must be wonderful. It is the masquerade of man who does not want to offer any space for grief because that puts a damper on the cherished feeling of happiness.

What really is going on in the heart is seen more clearly with a sad face as a result of inner sorrow than with the mask of the smile that often hides a lot of misery. That it goes well with the heart, means that grief makes the inner life better suited in order to arrive at the right judgment about life. That is the result when death is looked in the eye.

Outward sadness and inner joy can go hand in hand in the life of the believer. Paul says: "As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing" (2Cor 6:10a). He is sad because of the outward circumstances, but always rejoicing because the Lord is always present. That means God is not an enemy of joy. He calls His own to rejoice, but in Him (Phil 4:4) and before Him (Deu 12:12).

Without Him there is no real joy under the sun, but only a surrogate of it. People get the giggles with a comedian's play on words or also because of his biting satire about the most sacred things. How wicked is the heart of those men.

The wise understands that grief has a blessing in it (verse 4). Therefore his mind (literally: heart) is "in the house of mourning". He does not have to be there physically, but he lives in the awareness of the finite nature of the existence of man on earth. The heart is the center of one's existence, the place where considerations are taking place. The wise man will think

about death. He allows those thoughts and worries about it; he is not running from it.

The fool seeks only pleasure; that is what his heart is after, that is what he is looking for. You can find him in all kind of places where there is something to celebrate, where it is fun to be, where there is no pessimism, but where you can have a good laugh about the jokes that are told. He is blind to spiritual matters. The pleasure of the world results in God being forgotten or even rejected.

The previous observations about grief because of death and about joy that denies grief in fact mean the “rebuke of a wise man” (verse 5). The Preacher who has grown wise, has passed on what really matters in life and that is death. If we listen to his words and take them to heart, it will be of great benefit to us. It is better that we humiliate ourselves now and go into the ‘house of mourning’ so that our hearts can be exalted in the long run, than the other way around.

If we want to be serious about God’s plan in our lives, we have to deal with wise people who want to help us live our life in the most valuable way possible. They cannot take away all our grief or solve all our questions and problems, but they can give us clues on how to deal with them.

Listening to the song of the fools is done to override grief and death. The fool does not talk about such sad things, and if he does, it is to make fun of them. The comedians can offer entertainment and laughter for a moment to forget the sorrow for a moment, but their talk does not make any sense and does not give any support for life.

What fools have to offer is like thorn bushes that burn: you hear a momentary crackling noise, you see fire for a moment and you feel a gust of heat, but it is all extremely short-lived (verse 6). The fire flares up for a few seconds and is out again. The crackling of the thorn bushes has no effect on the cooking pot hanging above it. It is foolish to think that the pot will come to the boil, because that takes a good and long burning fire. Thorns do not even make the pot warm.

So it is with the laughter of the fool. It is vehement and short and disappears quickly, without leaving any impression. Whoever thinks he can

keep death at a distance with laughter is really foolish. The Preacher concludes that the fool's laughter is "futility", empty, without effect.

How many people there are who should be called fools because they mainly pursue things that only bring some outward laughter, while being blind to the essentials of life. Man is a poor judge of what has real and lasting value.

Ecc 7:7-10 | Consider the End of a Matter

7 For oppression makes a wise man mad,

And a bribe corrupts the heart.

8 The end of a matter is better than its beginning;

Patience of spirit is better than haughtiness of spirit.

9 Do not be eager in your heart to be angry,

For anger resides in the bosom of fools.

10 Do not say, "Why is it that the former days were better than these?"

For it is not from wisdom that you ask about this.

In verse 7 the teaching about judging what really gives meaning to life continues. The word "for" seems to indicate that. The aspect of misuse of power is added to the previously mentioned. A wise man who exercises power by oppressing someone else for personal gain becomes a fool or a madman. He loses sight of reality and is only concerned with life here and now. He does not think about the future and certainly not about death.

Besides oppression, accepting or giving a bribe is also a tried and tested means of favoring oneself. The heart of the wise who lowers himself to such a practice is corrupt. His heart is not in the house of mourning, but in the house of feasting. The wise who misuses his power or allows himself to be bribed, or bribes others, acts like a wicked man (Pro 17:23). He judges the present value of material goods in a way that leads him to use even injustice to gain possession of them. For that he sacrifices his good name as a wise man.

At the "beginning" of a matter it is not clear how it will develop (verse 8). Only at "the end of a matter" it can be determined what its usefulness and value have been. It is therefore important to wait with the judgment of a matter until the end is known, because then the value can be determined.

“Patience of spirit” will wait and see how a matter develops, while “haughtiness of spirit” full of swagger claims to know its exact course. The haughty one forgets the end and claims to know everything. The one is characterized by patience, the other by impatience. Patience is an aspect of humility; impatience indicates the proud anger about the ways of God with man.

In connection with verse 7 we can say that those who are patient will wait patiently for the end or outcome of a trial. He will not seize forward by oppression or by using a bribe.

The end of life only provides reliable information about the value of life. If the end of life is good, the whole life is good, even if it was not a ‘beautiful’ life. If the end is bad, even the most successful life has become bad.

Verse 9 connects directly to verse 8. The Preacher warns against anger about the course of a matter. Patience can be tested and then there is the danger of anger in the heart. This happens when we blame human factors for the delay in the development of a matter. If we are oppressed unjustly or feel that we are being tried unjustly, anger can arise in our minds. Maybe we do not even express it, but in our inner being we are eaten away by anger.

The Preacher says that the bosom of fools is the residence of anger. He who allows anger to take residence in his inner man, making it to be part of his personality, becomes a fool. Anger can also arise when we receive undeserved treatment or are victims of misplaced behavior. In this context it is about unjust oppression or a test.

In verse 9 a person is angry because he is not patient and also not satisfied with his circumstances. The question that he asks in verse 10, does not arise out of curiosity, but out of frustration. With him it is about making a comparison of his days, the circumstances in which he finds himself, with those of the former days, wondering why the former days were better. In fact he is calling God to account, he is demanding an explanation of His dealings with him. Such people are the “grumblers, finding fault, following after their own lusts” (Jude 1:16).

It does not testify of wisdom to ask such questions; it shows ignorance about the past and about man, who was as sinful then as he is now. The Preacher already said in the beginning of this book that which has been

is that which will be, so there is nothing new under the sun (Ecc 1:9). The days have always been evil because of sin by man (Eph 5:16). Therefore it is pointless to go deeper into it also. The Israelites desired to go back to Egypt out of dissatisfaction with their stay in the wilderness. They preferred their stay in slavery in Egypt above their stay in the wilderness with God. This was because they assumed that God wanted them to perish.

Whoever asks the question “why is it that” overlooks the fact that evil used to be there too, albeit in other manifestations. The glorification of the past is foolishness, for then it is also overlooked that God does not change (Mal 3:6), and that the support of the Lord remains available to the believer at all times (Heb 13:8). Paul forgot what lay behind him and reached forward to what lay ahead because Christ filled his field of vision (Phil 3:13). It is about the present and listening to the voice of the Lord.

Ecc 7:11-12 | The Advantage of Wisdom

11 Wisdom along with an inheritance is good

And an advantage to those who see the sun.

12 For wisdom is protection [just as] money is protection,

But the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the lives of its possessors.

In verse 11 the Preacher speaks about the proper use of wisdom opposite the lack of wisdom in verse 10. “Wisdom” must prove itself, it must be reflected. The Preacher therefore, relates “an inheritance” to wisdom, for wisdom especially does justice in the way an inheritance is managed.

To the combination “wisdom” and “money” another aspect is added in verse 12: they both give “protection” (Psa 91:2; Isa 30:2). Yet the possession of knowledge inherent in wisdom is beyond the possession of money. Money brings no man into the favor of God and gives no man life. Therefore knowledge surpasses the possession of money, for knowledge is related to a “wisdom that preserves the lives of its possessors”.

There is no other knowledge that gives us life than the knowledge of the Father and the Son. (Jn 17:3). The wisdom, which is the Lord Jesus, preserves life. He who finds Him, finds life; he who has Him, has life (Pro 8:35; 1Jn 5:12a).

Ecc 7:13-14 | Consider the Work of God

*13 Consider the work of God,
For who is able to straighten what He has bent?
14 In the day of prosperity be happy,
But in the day of adversity consider —
God has made the one as well as the other
So that man will not discover anything [that will be] after him.*

He who is wise under the sun, will “consider the work of God” (verse 13). He will notice that it is impossible to change anything that He has determined. In former days (verse 10) He acted according to the same principles as He does today. The Preacher specifically points out that nobody can straighten what God “has bent”. Everything is submitted to God’s will, even the things that He has bent.

This section deals with the fact that He in His sovereignty has connected consequences to sin, which He does not undo. It is important to receive everything out of God’s hand the way it is given to us, for we cannot change anything about it (Ecc 1:15). Thus He “thwarts the way of the wicked” (Psa 146:9). A wicked person is not able to go the right way. A way of sin is always a crooked way. That is how God ordained it and we shall see that when we accurately consider God’s work.

He who considers the work of God, will understand that God gives both the good and evil (verse 14; Job 2:10; Isa 45:7). In a “day of prosperity” we can enjoy the good of that day. But when we are confronted with a “day of adversity”, we do well by considering this day to be given to us by God as well.

In the verses previous to this we have seen that we should not be upset when things do not go the way we may have desired. We can find rest in the thought that everything comes out of the same Fatherly hand of God and that He has a purpose for it. Both prosperity and adversity has its usefulness. Keeping that in mind will prevent us from grumbling and criticizing God.

The continuous change of days of prosperity and of adversity keeps us in dependence on Him. We do not know what kind of days are to come in the future. God has determined it like that, “so that man will not discover

anything [that will be] after him”, for man is just man and not God. We do not know the future events and therefore have no power over them.

It is good that we do not know what will happen tomorrow. The awareness and acceptance of that relates to our trust in God. If we trust Him, we shall trust in the word of the Lord Jesus, Who says that we should “not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own” (Mt 6:34).

It is not useful at all to worry about what can happen tomorrow. We have enough trouble in the day we experience now. We need not to worry now already about what could possibly happen to us tomorrow. When tomorrow comes, the trouble might have already disappeared. And if the trouble is still there, then God will be there too.

Ecc 7:15-18 | Righteous and Wicked

15 I have seen everything during my lifetime of futility; there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness and there is a wicked man who prolongs [his life] in his wickedness. 16 Do not be excessively righteous and do not be overly wise. Why should you ruin yourself? 17 Do not be excessively wicked and do not be a fool. Why should you die before your time? 18 It is good that you grasp one thing and also not let go of the other; for the one who fears God comes forth with both of them.

With verse 15 a new section begins about righteousness and wickedness, which both are observed by the Preacher about which he shares his testimony with us. What he has seen, brings him to the statement “during my lifetime of futility” (verse 15). It makes him aware once again how fragile his existence is.

He speaks about “a righteous man” to whom something happens that one would not expect at all. One would expect that he lives long, but the opposite happens: he perishes “in his righteousness”. He also speaks about a wicked man to whom something happens that one would not expect at all. One would expect that he perishes in his wickedness, but the opposite happens: he prolongs his life “in his wickedness”. This is the thing that you call ‘bent’ (verse 13).

What the Preacher says is representative of a series of similar cases. It is about perishing in spite of righteousness and staying alive in spite of wickedness. The standard is that righteousness corresponds to the promise of a long life and that wickedness leads to a short life. However, there are exceptions. This has to do with the way that God reigns. In His government it is possible that on the earth, the evil wins and the good is punished. But in the end the good will win and the evil will be punished. These are exercises for having patience of spirit (verse 8).

The righteous man may wrestle with this 'bentness (crookedness)' (Job 21:7; Psa 73:3-12; Hab 1:4,13). It is also something that can make one get upset when wicked people often manage to protect themselves against the sword of righteousness by fraud and violence. Sometimes they even get protection from their own government when there is no extradition agreement with the country where the crimes have been committed. Many war criminals stayed out of jail in this way and have therefore reached an advanced age.

Naboth was a righteous man who was killed, while a wicked woman like Jezebel stayed alive. We see the same with Abel and Cain. And what about the many who in the course of church history were murdered because of their faithfulness to God and His Word. Above all, we see it with the Lord Jesus, the Righteous One above all. He was murdered in the midst of His days, while He had done nothing but righteousness.

The believer wants to learn to take life out of God's hand just as it is. He tries not to solve the mystery of life himself. He finds rest in considering the work of God. In that way he learns that the disasters that happen to him, will shape him for the future kingdom, while the wicked man's prosperity makes him ripe for the coming judgment.

The observation of verse 15 leads us to the conclusion of verse 16 which comes as an advice. With that we have to keep in mind that God is not thought of. It is the conclusion of the down-to-earth thinking of man in this world who wants to live from his own conviction. From that point of view, it is smart not to pretend to be too righteous and not to become a moralist, because then people will only hate you and it is your own fault if you lose all pleasure in life.

Also with the delusion to be wise, you have to be careful. That is what it is about, which appears from the word “overly”. Do not claim to have all wisdom. The people that you are dealing with on a daily basis will not accept that. You will be out in no time. The people around you will see right through your imagined wisdom and will be finished with you completely. It is devastating to your functioning and you will be banned, you will put on a dead end.

In verse 16 it is about how a person sees himself, how he is in his own eyes and how he presents himself. The Pharisees are a model of this kind of people. They presented themselves like that. They were very righteous in their own eyes and they also wanted to look like that to other people. Because they pretended to be so righteous, destruction came upon them, which the Lord spoke about them (Mt 23:28; 5:20).

Although verse 16 is not an advice for the righteous one – he desires to be just and wise, but only as God wants him to be – it includes a general warning for him that he has to be careful not to fall into extremes. We can be so convinced that we are right and let ourselves be carried away by our sense of righteousness that we overestimate ourselves in our judgment and thereby ruin ourselves. That could imply that we will be all alone, outside of the community. It can also imply that due to our conceptions, we call destruction upon ourselves, which others bring upon us because they are tormented by our arrogance (cf. Rev 17:15-18).

In this verse it is about taking a place that is inappropriate. It is arrogance, a pretension (cf. Num 16:18; 2Sam 13:5). It is playing the righteous one, it is about somebody boasting to be someone he is not (Mt 23:7). We can pretend to be holier than we are, for example by fasting and chastising ourselves or go on a pilgrimage. If our outward behavior is to convince others of our piety and if that is our focus, we destroy ourselves. It is an excessive effort to prove we are right in judging things.

Modesty is appropriate for us in our attitude. We should not think more highly than what is written (Rom 12:3,16; 1Cor 4:6). We should not take this warning as a relativization of what is righteous and wise. It is a warning for our practice in connection to an attitude which radiates that we

are the standard of what is righteous and wise. We can and ought to be convinced of what is right, but must act on it with caution.

It does not mean that we should become slack in our practice and compromise at the expense of truth and justice. We do not need to chase every evil and have an opinion about everything. We should not present ourselves as critics to disapprove of everything that is said and done and not interfere in other people's affairs as if we know everything and can do everything. If we do that we make a caricature of righteousness and wisdom.

Verse 17 is the opposite of verse 16. Verse 16 is warning for self-exaltation, verse 17 warns us not to lower ourselves to the level of the world. The Preacher does not say that a little bit of wickedness or foolishness is not a problem, but he points to the capitulation to evil. It is the acceptance of some wickedness and foolishness, as long as it is within the borders that are acceptable for most people. If both parties agree, it should be accepted.

That what is wicked and foolish, becomes more and more the standard in society. One should not exaggerate too much and not behave too wickedly and too foolishly. That is how you get the most out of it. This attitude of life is reflected in the mixing of a little bit of good with a little bit of evil and in making compromises. This is how one is able to keep it up for a long time and stay good friends with everyone. This is eating from both sides of the buffet, living two lifestyles.

If one chooses the side of wickedness and foolishness, then there is a great chance that he will die before his time, meaning that he will not die of old age, but at an age you would not expect. If we allow God to be involved, we know that the time to die is determined by Him (Job 14:5). We cannot prolong our lives (Mt 6:27).

At the same time God knows how to give the foolish actions of man a place in His purpose. He can bring ruin over us soon and shorten our lifespan if we live wickedly and foolishly (Psa 55:23). That can happen for example, by living a lifestyle that affects our health, such as drugs, and sex outside marriage, or by committing a murder resulting in the death penalty.

The advice of verse 18 corresponds to the advices of the two previous verses. It is a kind of summary advice to do what is "good". It is good to grasp "one thing", that is to stick to the warning not to fall into extremes. It is

also good not to let go of “the other”, that is what the last line of verse 18 says: fear God.

To fear God means living in reverence and awe of Him. Whoever follows this ‘good’ advice, “comes forth with both of them”. This means that we are only saved from falling into extremes if we fear God. As a result, we are also kept from the related consequences mentioned in the two previous verses: ruining ourselves and dying before our time.

The wise walks on the middle road between the two extremes: not in his own righteousness and not in wickedness. He knows how to walk between legalism and indifference. This can only be accomplished if God is feared. The fear of God keeps us from the extremes of own righteousness on the one hand and wickedness on the other hand (Pro 3:7). The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. The fear of God results in humility and mistrusting our own wisdom. He who fears God fears sin and shuns foolishness.

Ecc 7:19-22 | Wisdom Strengthens and Leads to Self-Knowledge

19 Wisdom strengthens a wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city. 20 Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who [continually] does good and who never sins. 21 Also, do not take seriously all words which are spoken, so that you will not hear your servant cursing you. 22 For you also have realized that you likewise have many times cursed others.

After his warning for wanting to be ‘excessively righteous’ (verse 16), the Preacher points out the value of true wisdom in verse 19. Wisdom strengthens to live in the city despite all the problems and dangers to which living in a city can be exposed. Wisdom strengthens more than the collective power of ten rulers. These men may have the power, but when there is no wisdom they lead the city to destruction, for they are sinful men and only seek their own advantage.

The value of wisdom lies in the consciousness that God directs everything. The wise man is not led by the circumstances. Of course he has to deal with the circumstances, but he knows that they are in God’s hand. Rulers trust in their own wisdom and power, in order to protect the city against evil – which can come from both the inside and the outside – with their own interest as a motivation. Therefore they will not be successful and they will

lose the fight. A man with wisdom has more advantage for the defense of a city than ten rulers without wisdom (Pro 21:22; 24:5).

For the believer, Christ is both the power of God and the wisdom of God (1Cor 1:24). He who lives with Him, learns how to be “content in whatever circumstances” he is, as Paul has learned it (Phil 4:11-12). As a result of that he can say: “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me” (Phil 4:13).

In verse 20 he says the same as what Solomon said in his prayer at the dedication of the temple (1Kgs 8:46; Pro 20:9). Now that he is a bitter experience richer, he comes to the same conclusion. He emphasizes here, in connection to the previous verse, the sinful state of the rulers, but at the same time he makes it a general matter by speaking about “there is not a righteous man on earth”.

No one is so righteous in the practice of his life that he does only good without having any sin attached to what he does. The only exception is the Lord Jesus. He has done good without sinning. Peter, Paul and John testify in their letters of the absolute absence of sin in Him: “who committed no sin”, “who knew no sin”, “in Him there is no sin” (1Pet 2:22; 2Cor 5:21; 1Jn 3:5).

By this remark the Preacher reminds us of not to overstate our achievements and not to be disparaging about those of others. We need to consider that we do not live perfectly righteous and are not completely selfless. It is impossible for a man to do anything without taking some credit for himself. Only when the believer is led by the Spirit he is able to do good without sinning.

The sinfulness of man, which is stated in the previous verse, is manifested primarily in what he says (verse 21; Jam 3:2). The Preacher points out that we should not take seriously “all the words which are spoken” by man in general. He means to say, that we should not want to know everything what people say about us (Psa 38:13-14; 1Sam 24:10). When people speak good of us, we become arrogant; when one speaks evil of us, we become angry and possibly vengeful.

We should not believe everything we hear, either. If we hear it, it is wise not to always take what someone else says seriously. Those who always

take everything that people say seriously, are asking for disappointment and disillusionment. We see clear examples of this in politics. In election time, people want to distinguish themselves from others and say that it is unthinkable to govern with a certain political party. When it really comes to governing, a twist is given to those words and it turns out that it is still possible to govern with a party that people did not like at first.

By not being too curious about what one thinks of us, we can protect ourselves from people's remarks about us that are not flattering. The boss does not have to place microphones all over the place to know how his staff thinks about him. He has to be aware that he is not without sin and that there will be something wrong with him. The sickly urge of 'wanting to know everything', even the things you do not need to know, is in fact pride and lack of self-knowledge. Let's make sure we have the approval of God and our conscience, then we do not have to worry about what people say about us.

If others curse us, rightly or wrongly, wisdom will remind us of our own mistakes and flaws (verse 22). What would happen to us if we were given the punishment we had deserved for every wrongful word about someone else? We have to realize that we ourselves have hurt others because of what we said. I have committed the same sins or similar sins that I condemn in others (Rom 2:1; Tit 3:2-3; Mt 7:1-3; Jam 3:1-2).

If something comes to our mind in this context that we have cursed someone, that is to say we wished him evil, and have not yet confessed it, we must confess it. That does not have to be to the person about whom we have spoken evil to someone else, but we have to do it before the Lord and the other person to whom we said that evil.

When people talk about us, we do not have to get angry or sad about it. It is better that we humble ourselves about it and become small, because we have often done it ourselves, in our hearts, in our minds or with our tongues. As noted above, we will, if all is well, have judged it and removed it (1Pet 2:1; Col 3:8).

Ecc 7:23-25 | True Wisdom Remains at Distance

23 I tested all this with wisdom, [and] I said, "I will be wise," but it was far from me. 24 What has been is remote and exceedingly mysterious. Who can

discover it? 25 I directed my mind to know, to investigate and to seek wisdom and an explanation, and to know the evil of folly and the foolishness of madness.

The Preacher admits that his wisdom has failed him to become wise. He honestly acknowledges it: the search for true wisdom has yielded nothing. With all his wisdom – he is the wisest man on earth – he “tested all this” (verse 23; Ecc 1:13). “All this” is all that he has shared with us in the previous section (Ecclesiastes 2:1-7:22). His research was aimed at gaining insight into the true meaning and determining the permanent value of all mankind’s labor on earth.

He has only been able to discover in his wisdom that the world is full of vanity and that this knowledge does not give his heart peace and joy. He has not come any further. True wisdom, he realizes, has remained far beyond his reach. Many people do not look for wisdom because they are not wise. That is why they never become wise. Solomon is wise and has searched for it, profound and broad, but he has not found it either. Wisdom lies far beyond the knowledge of man.

“What has been” (verse 24), is not only what exists, but also the way something has been formed by God. Who was present at the creation? Who can comprehend what God has caused to exist and who can understand how He sustains all things that He has created? Man cannot gain insight in this by human research, for the wisdom that lies in all things that God has created, is “exceedingly mysterious”, or in other words unfathomably deep. Every honest philosopher and scientist will admit that no one can “discover it”.

The Preacher could not reach wisdom. He comes to the conclusion that he knows nothing and that the more he knows what there is to know, the more aware he is of how little he knows. He is confronted with the mysteries of God. They are unfathomable (Job 11:7-8; 28:12-22).

God tells us what “has been remote”, in a distant past, when He created heaven and earth. He tells us that in His Word. There we can “find it” (Gen 1:1; Heb 11:3) and not with the scientists who want to make us believe that they have found the solution in the evolution theory. For us it is true that the Word is near (Deu 30:14) and that the Spirit explains it to us (1Cor

2:13). Yet, at the same time a lot of things remain inconceivable to us, for who can fully verify God (Rom 11:33)?

The Preacher has not only desired to become wise (verse 23), but he has not denied himself any effort for it either (verse 25). He has tried everything and searched everywhere. He was already wiser than any man. However, that did not make him lazy, but all the more zealous to learn true wisdom. Not only did he want to know the essence of the things on the surface, but he also wanted to find out what lies beyond the perceptivity, the motives. His dedication is described in different ways, which indicates how much he has been busy with it.

The only conclusion to which all his intensive research has brought him is that everything is permeated with “evil” and “foolishness” with the ultimate result of “madness”. As a result, man is kept away from God’s plan and produces nothing of real and lasting value.

Our ‘research work’ ought to be focused on Christ. Our life should be about looking at Him from all sides and investigating Him in all His actions and ways. Then we also see man’s wickedness and folly, for Christ sheds His light on every man, wherefore we are then also preserved. We come to an entirely different conclusion and that is that in Christ “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden” (Col 2:3).

Ecc 7:26-29 | Found and Not Found

26 And I discovered more bitter than death the woman whose heart is snares and nets, whose hands are chains. One who is pleasing to God will escape from her, but the sinner will be captured by her. 27 “Behold, I have discovered this,” says the Preacher, “[adding] one thing to another to find an explanation, 28 which I am still seeking but have not found. I have found one man among a thousand, but I have not found a woman among all these. 29 Behold, I have found only this, that God made men upright, but they have sought out many devices.”

The Preacher has discovered that wickedness is foolish and that foolishness is madness (verse 25). He not only observed this, but also experienced it himself by making wrong relationships with his many wives. He speaks about it with a deep awareness of its bitterness. Death as the wages of sin

is bitter (1Sam 15:32), but the sin of fornication is even “more bitter than death” (verse 26; Pro 5:9,11).

The Preacher does not speak of all women – women in general – but about “the woman whose heart is snares” and who seeks to tempt to unfaithfulness (cf. Ecc 9:9; Pro 18:22). From his own example, it appears that not only women can mislead men, but that also men can be captured by their lusts through the woman setting snares and nets for him. He is chained by his lusts (Pro 5:22-23) and captured by her, because he is no longer pleasing in the sight of God; in other words no longer walking with Him.

Solomon uses many words to describe the wicked nature of such a woman. He compares the heart of the woman with “snares and nets”; “her hands are chains”, which indicates that she handcuffs those whom she grasps with her hands, out of which there is no way of escape.

The temptation of illicit sexual intercourse is the greatest temptation ever for numerous men, great in extent and great in depth. Whoever is captured by it, is the most deplorable man. “Flee immorality. Every [other] sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body” (1Cor 6:18).

“Who is pleasing to God”, is the man seen by God in Christ and who walks with Him. Such a man pleases God as Enoch did (Heb 11:5), and escapes the temptations of such a woman. That is the only way to escape from her. The danger to fall prey to this woman is so enormous that a person is only kept from her by God’s grace and mercy. Whoever goes outside God’s mercy will inevitably fall into her hands.

This clearly shows that no man should cherish the foolish thought that it will not happen to him. The judgment about the futility of man is again confirmed here. He who is kept, must confess that God is the One Who kept him. At the same time, God only keeps those who with an intention of the heart keep the evil at a distance. Joseph was such a man (Gen 39:2-3). He walked in fellowship with God and refused to sin against Him (Gen 39:9).

The beginning of verse 27 corresponds to the previous verse, but is also applicable to everything that the Preacher has searched. Through all his research work for wisdom, whereby he combined things – adding “one

thing to another” –, Solomon arrived at the corruptness of human nature, both of man and woman. He made that discovery, “I have discovered this”. He says this as the “Preacher”, with which he underlines the truth of what he says.

He has done everything “to find an explanation”, to come to a final conclusion containing the secret of a meaningful life. In verse 28 he says that he has not found that conclusion yet. It is not about what he has found, but what he has not found and what he is still seeking.

Yet, there is something he found among men: “one man among a thousand”. In the light of the corrupted nature of man, which he stated in verse 26, the interpretation should be that a righteous man is a rarity (cf. Psa 12:1). In the light of the New Testament we see that the one Man Who is different, Who is the exception among a thousand, is no one else than Christ (Job 33:23).

The presence of women among a thousand is altogether miserable: he could not find a single one. Solomon could not find a single woman among his thousand wives, who could satisfy his heart.

After this judgment that the Preacher expressed about mankind in verse 28, where he did not find what he was looking for, he adds something he did find (verse 29). By the word ‘behold’, the attention is drawn to what he has found and invites everyone to take part in it. Solomon arrives at the cause of the original corruption: sin comes forth from the fall of man and not from God, for God has “made men upright”.

The blame of the general corruption does not lie with God, but with man. God has “made men upright”, but man went the wrong way. ‘Upright’ is not sinful or neutral, but describes the condition of the heart that is faithful and obedient. Man is created after God’s image and likeness, but fell into sin (Gen 3:1-7; Rom 5:12).

Man does not want to know about that and has been searching out many devices for excuses for his sin since Adam and Eve. Seeking has the meaning of fabricating. Admitting is not to be found, but looking for excuses, blaming others, which has already started right after the fall (Gen 3:12-13). The problems are acknowledged sometimes, but the solution is sought in the improvement of behavior by courses and trainings and such. In that

way the problem will never be solved and God's solution for this problem is ignored, which is: the gift of His Son.

Ecclesiastes 8

Introduction

In this chapter we are confronted again and again with our incapability to arrange and control our own existence. The wise man will see that and will be modest and distance himself from arrogant opinions.

Ecc 8:1 | Who Is Wise?

1 Who is like the wise man and who knows the interpretation of a matter? A man's wisdom illumines him and causes his stern face to beam.

“The wise man” about whom the Preacher is talking here, of whom he wonders who is such, is one who has insight into the meaning of man’s toil on earth. Such a wise man “knows the interpretation of a matter”. However, such man is not to be found. Even the Preacher, who is the wisest man on earth, is not that wise, for he could not find any explanation, despite a deep and broad research.

Yet, there is a form of wisdom that can be present and that is the acceptance of the fact that the interpretation of a matter lies outside the understanding of man. This is not resignation, but the recognition of one’s own limitations and powerlessness. As a result, man is released from a burden and he is “illuminated”, the sadness disappears. It causes “his stern face” because he has no control over life, to beam. His facial features become soft because he sees that God controls everything and that he can trust that He will fulfill His plan, both with the world and with him personally.

The wise adjusts himself to what comes over him, because he realizes that he cannot and does not have to explain everything. The wise is modest and does not boast that he knows or will be able to find an explanation for everything that can happen in a person’s life. This is why he has a happy face and also light so that he can behave himself in an appropriate manner in those circumstances.

The wise knows what to do because he judges the circumstances according to God’s Word (Hos 14:9; Psa 107:43; Jam 3:13). Only fellowship with God

gives wisdom and understanding which makes a person to know “the interpretation of a matter”. Joseph and Daniel could interpret matters, like the dreams of Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar, the rulers to whom they were submitted. They were wise because of their fellowship with God.

Ecc 8:2-8 | Respect For the Authority Given by God

2 I say, “Keep the command of the king because of the oath before God. 3 Do not be in a hurry to leave him. Do not join in an evil matter, for he will do whatever he pleases.” 4 Since the word of the king is authoritative, who will say to him, “What are you doing?” 5 He who keeps a [royal] command experiences no trouble, for a wise heart knows the proper time and procedure. 6 For there is a proper time and procedure for every delight, though a man’s trouble is heavy upon him. 7 If no one knows what will happen, who can tell him when it will happen? 8 No man has authority to restrain the wind with the wind, or authority over the day of death; and there is no discharge in the time of war, and evil will not deliver those who practice it.

Wisdom is first and foremost seen in the submission to the government that God has established (verse 2; Rom 13:1-7). The Preacher points to that with emphasis when he speaks out: “I say.” Taking into account the authority established by God is wisdom. We should not influence governments. Even when a government is unrighteous and randomly makes laws, it is wise to submit to it and not to revolt against it. An example of that attitude is seen in Daniel and his friends (Dan 1:1-20).

The Preacher assumes that the king has absolute authority (Pro 24:21-22). Therefore, resistance against the king is folly, for by his authority he is stronger than we are. In addition, it is disobedience to God, for God has given him that power. Only in a case where the king or the government demands something from us that goes against God’s Word, “we must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). Therefore the friends of Daniel did not bow to the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up, despite his command that everyone had to fall down and worship it. They could not obey that command, whatever the consequences (Dan 3:14-18).

Our obedience to the king as the highest authority in a kingdom lies in the basis of “the oath before God” (cf. 2Sam 5:1-3; 2Kgs 11:17; 1Chr 29:24). That

oath may refer to ourselves. We do not take an oath in the usual sense of the word; however, if we claim to submit to God's Word, it includes the obligation of submitting ourselves to the king. We therefore do not resist against the king and we will even less rebel against him, but submit to him (1Pet 2:13-16).

It is wrong to withdraw ourselves from the obligations that we have toward the king and to turn against him on a whim of anger (verse 3). If we leave the king in a hurry, we indicate that we do not accept him any longer. We may think that we have reasons for that, for example that he does not meet our wishes and expectations.

It is "an evil matter" to behave in such a way and hold on to it, for the king is an authority given by God. God has given the sword of power to him and he exercises that power as it pleases him. This may be in a good way, but also in a bad way. Therefore, the way he rules should not determine our attitude, but the position he has received from God should.

This is also important for other areas of our life. You may become so disappointed in your spouse that you decide to move away from him thinking that you will be happier with a new spouse. You can be disappointed in the leaders in the church because of a small thing. Some people leave the church because of that, assuming they will not experience this kind of frustration in another church. This principle also goes for the job we may have. The 'grass is greener syndrome' – the idea that the grass with the neighbors is always greener – is very deceptive. With our attempts to escape our problems we can cause a lot of sorrow and pain to ourselves and also to others.

There is no way to escape the king, for 'he has many eyes, many ears and many long arms'. The power of the king is unlimited. We see that with a good king as Solomon (1Kgs 2:29-46) and with a bad king as Herod (Mt 14:9-10). It is about the power as such, not about the way it is exercised.

The Lord Jesus never called us to overthrow the evil power. He also submitted Himself to the ruling power of the Romans, no matter how corrupt that power was. He says to the wicked Pilate: "You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above" (Jn 19:11). The Lord recognizes Pilate's position. Later, Pilate will have to account for the way

he dealt with the power that was given to him. That was not an issue at the time.

The reason why it is wise to do what the king says, is because “the word of the king is authoritative” (verse 4). There is power in his word. His word has authority and it must be obeyed. We are obliged to comply what he imposes on us (cf. 1Sam 8:10-18). He has received power to rule, we have not.

The king is above his people. We cannot call him to account. His power is a reflection of the ruling power of God, Whom we cannot call to account either (Job 9:12; Isa 45:9; Rom 9:20).

If we obey the command that the king has enacted, we will not have to fear any trouble from him (verse 5). This is the direct reward from God for a good behavior (Rom 13:3-4). No matter how bad some governments are, without a government there will be anarchy. It is better to have a bad government than no government.

He who knows the will of the king and takes that into consideration, shows that he has a wise heart. A wise man does at the right time and at the right moment or in the right way what the king expects him to do. The highest wisdom for people is to submit to the commandment that the highest authority has enacted. An additional result is that life becomes much easier. In general people will not get into trouble with the king when they do what he said. If you keep up the speed, you do not run the risk of being fined.

Considering the commandment applies in the highest degree for the commandments of God. All the commandments of God are commandments for life. Whoever obeys them will experience the good and not the evil. Commandments are to make us safe and happy on the path of obedience. It is the path of self-preservation and of harmony within our environment. The great commandment for us is the commandment that we love one another. “Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law” (Rom 13:10). Love will never lead anyone to violate any commandment of the law, but on the contrary will fulfill every commandment of the law.

The heart of the wise considers the time in which he lives and the opportunity he has to live. He can see through the decisions of the government in the light of the circumstances and knows how to behave. The wise knows

the time of God and sees the opportunity or procedure to act. Examples of such wise men are Jonathan toward David (1Sam 19:4-6), Nathan toward David (2Sam 12:1-14) and Esther toward Ahasuerus (Est 7:2-4).

When a man violates the commandments, the result is that “a man’s trouble is heavy upon him” (verse 6). This happens according to the law of sowing and reaping that is related to each act (Gal 6:7). When the proper time and opportunity are ripe, the harvest comes, in whatever form.

“Every delight” or “every purpose”, also the decision of a government, takes place at a certain point in time which also offers the opportunity for that delight. Because the world lies in sin, everything that happens, also the delightful things, do not benefit man, but causes trouble that is heavy upon him. At the beginning it may look as if it is getting better, because man has more to spend. But the delight of prosperity becomes his death. “Trouble” may also consist of frustration, stress, chaos and disorientation. Those are things that make life very unpleasant instead of delightful.

Everything that man possesses and invents without God, leads him to destruction. Some inventions may lengthen the duration of his life, but not its quality. However, with the duration often sorrow increases. In order to make ‘a way of escape’ from that, people invented ‘voluntary euthanasia’, so that a human being is able (to allow) to put an end to his life. However, who thinks about coming in such trouble from which he will never ever be able to be freed thereafter and that the trouble will be heavy upon him?

The trouble of verse 6 is mainly caused by the fact that man has no control over the future, for “no one knows what will happen” (verse 7). Man without God does not know anything about the future. No one can tell him, certainly not the fortune tellers. Only God knows the future and knows what will happen (Isa 46:10-11). He also makes that future known and tells us when certain things happen. In view of the future He warns man.

For the man who does not trust in God, the insecurity of the future becomes an oppressive burden that leads him to madness (Lk 21:25-26). He wants to know how politics will develop and how the world economy will run, so that he can make the right decisions and make a profit. This goes for speculations, but also for an education and purchases.

Four things are mentioned here that place a limit to any authority (verse 8). Those are things that prove that man is not able to control circumstances:

1. "No man has authority to restrain the wind with the wind." The word for 'wind' is also 'spirit' or 'breath'. Over all these things man has no authority. The breath or spirit of man is in God's hand (Dan 5:23), which means that God has power over life and death. God gives spirit or breath and He also restrains it or takes it back.

Another thought is that a man has no power over another man's spirit, just as he has no power over his own. We see that for example with Nebuchadnezzar who wants his wise men to tell him which dream he has had (Dan 2:1-12). That is of course an impossible and foolish question. It also appears that he too, with all his power, is not able to influence their spirit in such a way that they can tell him his dream.

2. Man also has "no authority over the day of death". Only God has that authority (Deu 32:39). Our times are in His hand (Psa 31:15; 39:4-5; Job 14:5). If man puts an end to his life by himself and even determines the day and the means for it, it seems as if he is mocking this word of God. However, he does not realize that he is induced to commit this deed by the murderer of men from the beginning, satan, the great adversary of God. The life of a human is determined by God or under the permission of God by satan and not by himself.

3. "There is no discharge in the time of war", which is the war against death. The word "discharge" alludes to the obligation of military service of all Israelite men over the age of twenty years (Num 1:3). Certain categories of those were discharged (Deu 20:5-8). From the war that the Preacher means, the war against death, not one is exempt. For no one there is "discharge of this war", nobody escapes from this war against death, a war he will always lose. Everyone is a sinner and has to deal with the consequences of his sin: the inevitable death (Rom 6:23).

4. Also "evil will not deliver those who practice it" from death. Whatever tricks the evil man invents to escape from it, it is meaningless. In obituaries you may read that someone has 'lost the unequal fight'. It is about for example the fight against an incurable disease that a person died from. The famous soccer player Johan Cruyff said at a certain moment that he, in his

fight against the cancer in his body, was leading with 2-0 in a match which was not over yet. He added: 'But I know for sure that I will be the winner of this fight.' What an arrogant narrow-mindedness. He has lost the fight and did not escape death. His death was announced with the words that he died 'after a fierce fight against cancer'.

Ecc 8:9-13 | The Mystery of God's Government

9 All this I have seen and applied my mind to every deed that has been done under the sun wherein a man has exercised authority over [another] man to his hurt. 10 So then, I have seen the wicked buried, those who used to go in and out from the holy place, and they are [soon] forgotten in the city where they did thus. This too is futility. 11 Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed quickly, therefore the hearts of the sons of men among them are given fully to do evil. 12 Although a sinner does evil a hundred [times] and may lengthen his [life], still I know that it will be well for those who fear God, who fear Him openly. 13 But it will not be well for the evil man and he will not lengthen his days like a shadow, because he does not fear God.

The Preacher not only sees, not only observes with his eyes, but he also applied "his mind to every deed that has been done under the sun" (verse 9). The words "[another] man to his hurt" refer to those over whom authority is exercised. Power corrupts. A man with power, but without God, always uses his authority wrongly.

The Preacher has seen another thing and that is the treatment that "the wicked" received when they were "buried and going away" (Darby Translation) into the grave and what happened to those who "used to go in and out from the holy place" (verse 10). There are few things as appalling as the sight of wicked people that are prosperous. What makes you even sicker is when wicked people die and people honor them with the blessing of religion. They are given a solemn funeral and are buried with splendor. The wonderful words that are spoken about them, come from the mouths of their admirers who are just like them or would like to be like those wicked people.

What really makes you sick, is the destiny of the ones who acted rightly, "those who used to go in and out from the holy place" against the back-

ground of the honor that those wicked people are given. They are forced to go “out from the holy place”, Jerusalem. Jerusalem is so called because the temple is there. These troublemakers, those pious men who did not participate in the admiration of the wicked people, must be forgotten. In their behavior and words they remind people of the righteous God. Therefore: Away with them! That also means that there is no funeral for them in the holy city, which is a horrible thing for a God fearing Jew.

The corrupt man thinks that there is no judgment at all and that God is absent, because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed quickly (verse 11). And if there is any thought of God, then heaven’s patience is interpreted as proof of approval. That is an extra stimulus to continue doing evil. The “hearts of the sons of men among them are given fully to do evil”, which means that the heart is wicked; the heart is the source and it remains wicked.

Man is not interested in the patience of God Who wants him to repent. Instead man continues to sin and in that way he is “storing up wrath for himself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who will render to each person according to his deeds” (Rom 2:5-6).

The first part of verse 12 is directly connected to the observation of verse 11. On earth we see that a sinner can sin “a hundred times” without having any obstacle on the way. He experiences – of course unconsciously – the truth of verse 11, that the sentence against his evil deed is not quickly executed. That is why he continues tirelessly to sin, a hundred times, without even noticing the slightest hint of a judgment.

Then we see in the second part of verse 12 something of the faith of the Preacher. He cannot reconcile with the thought that the wicked can always go on and that they will also prevail. It is not like that either. He knows there is coming a moment that God will judge. The Preacher has knowledge of God.

He knows that God is not with the sinner, but with those who “fear” Him, which is reverence Him and take His will into consideration. He adds a confirmation to it that such men “fear Him openly”, meaning that they live in fellowship with Him, with their hearts and eye focused on Him. It will be well for them.

But for the evil man, who apparently can go his own way undisturbed, it will not be well. He will not lengthen his days, for he does not fear God. He has lived his life outside fellowship with God and end up in eternal death after his life, outside of fellowship with God. His life now is like a shadow: empty and worthless (cf. Ecc 6:12). It is not real life, the shadow of death lies over it.

In verse 13 the Preacher adds what the fate of the wicked man is. When we read it, it seems that there is a contradiction between verse 12 and verse 13. In verse 12 it says that the sinner may lengthen his life and in verse 13 it says that the evil man will not lengthen his days. The false contradiction disappears when we see verse 12 in the light of life on earth and verse 13 in the light of eternity.

To see that the one verse does not conflict with the other, we need to look beyond this earthly life. That is what the Preacher does here, without explicitly mentioning that aspect. His words contain faith in resurrection. The days of the sinner can be lengthened on earth, but after his death he will rise to a resurrection of judgment because he has committed evil deeds (Jn 5:29b). It will be well at the resurrection for those who fear God. They will take part in a resurrection of life because they did the good deeds (Jn 5:29a). They will live forever in God's presence.

Ecc 8:14-17 | Which Is Done on the Earth and God's Work

14 There is futility which is done on the earth, that is, there are righteous men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked. On the other hand, there are evil men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I say that this too is futility. 15 So I commended pleasure, for there is nothing good for a man under the sun except to eat and to drink and to be merry, and this will stand by him in his toils [throughout] the days of his life which God has given him under the sun. 16 When I gave my heart to know wisdom and to see the task which has been done on the earth (even though one should never sleep day or night), 17 and I saw every work of God, [I concluded] that man cannot discover the work which has been done under the sun. Even though man should seek laboriously, he will not discover; and though the wise man should say, "I know," he cannot discover.

In verse 14 the Preacher is back to his observations under the sun. He makes that clear by speaking about “what is done on the earth”. He has come to the conclusion that things are upside down, that things happen that are contrarian, that fill every sincere human being with disgust. It is about the situation that there are righteous men to whom it goes according to the deeds of the wicked and conversely that there are evil men to whom it goes according to the deeds of the righteous.

If things happen like that on earth, it is pointless for one to make effort to make something out of life. When the existence of man would be limited to his life on earth, then it would indeed be “futility”, something like a vapor, which is seen for a short time and then disappeared. Only in the light of eternity the volatile transits into permanency.

The observation of verse 14 makes the Preacher lament that man is better off with simple forms of pleasure (verse 15). It does not change anything about the labor, but it makes it more bearable (Ecc 2:24). Everything is better than getting no gratitude or small gratitude or no appreciation because the wicked runs off with the honor you deserve. Pleasure is the most beautiful thing that a man, who is only focused on his earthly career, can achieve. He does not bother one single moment about the unsolvable mysteries of Providence, but he carelessly enjoys the good gifts of the Creator daily, even though it is without thanking Him for it.

The joy of the new testament believer is not related to the things that the earth offers, but to heaven, where he can enjoy the fellowship with the Father and the Son (1Jn 1:4). That fellowship gives a full joy. Christ is the Source of our joy (Jn 15:11; 16:22). We can help one another to know joy and be a support to make others become joyful (2Cor 1:24), so that they can go their way with joy (Acts 8:39).

The research that the Preacher has done wholeheartedly, in order to find out the deeper meaning of life, has yielded only the awareness that all deeds done on earth produce no lasting results, even if someone would do things day and night without a moment's sleep (verse 16). All effort, when seen horizontally, makes no sense.

There is something else that the Preacher has discovered, and that is that God works (verse 17). It is not about His creation work, but about His

hand in history. In the light of eternity, God's work takes place in world history and also in our own lives, whereby God goes straight to His goal. There is where the deeper sense of life lies.

The conclusion that God works, does not however, give the Preacher the answer to the question why God works as He does. To see that God works does not mean that we know how He works and what He is up to. Not a single person can discover that, no matter how hard he labors to discover it (Ecc 3:11; Job 11:7-9). And if there is a wise man who claims that he knows it, it is arrogance, for no mortal man can discover the depths of God's work.

Still, the conclusion that God works, can give peace. We do not have to wear ourselves out to search the work of God. We simply cannot. With all the mysteries we can encounter in life, the distortion of good and bad, we can trust that right through everything God does His work and accomplishes His purpose. That we only have questions and no answers, does not have to make us desperate.

Let's realize that God is God and that He is not obliged to account to us for His actions. He can keep things to Himself because He does not find it useful that we know them. Job has experienced it in his search for the meaning of the suffering that came upon him. With all his why-questions he could only rely on God. God let Job rage till he was finished and then asked him more than 70 questions. Those questions make it clear that He directs everything in His creation, that He is at work and that nothing is out of His control. He Himself is the answer to Job's questions.

Ecclesiastes 9

Ecc 9:1-6 | One Fate for All Men: Death

1 For I have taken all this to my heart and explain it that righteous men, wise men, and their deeds are in the hand of God. Man does not know whether [it will be] love or hatred; anything awaits him. 2 It is the same for all. There is one fate for the righteous and for the wicked; for the good, for the clean and for the unclean; for the man who offers a sacrifice and for the one who does not sacrifice. As the good man is, so is the sinner; as the swearer is, so is the one who is afraid to swear. 3 This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that there is one fate for all men. Furthermore, the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil and insanity is in their hearts throughout their lives. Afterwards they [go] to the dead. 4 For whoever is joined with all the living, there is hope; surely a live dog is better than a dead lion. 5 For the living know they will die; but the dead do not know anything, nor have they any longer a reward, for their memory is forgotten. 6 Indeed their love, their hate and their zeal have already perished, and they will no longer have a share in all that is done under the sun.

After many observations the Preacher comes with a declaration about something he is certain of (verse 1). He begins the declaration of that certainty with “for”. It is not only an intellectual certainty, but also something he has taken to his heart, it is an inner conviction. He declares it to his audience, among whom we are, what he has taken to heart, that they may profit from it.

He has seen “that righteous men, wise men, and their deeds are in the hand of God”. “Are in the hand of God” means that God disposes of it, that everything is under His control, that everything is under His authority and care (Job 12:10; Psa 31:15; Pro 21:1). That includes both the persons and their acts. It does not only apply to the unrighteous and fools, but also to the righteous and the wise. Also the latter ones must be very aware of the fact that they cannot direct their lives by themselves, but that they are totally dependent on God.

For believers it is encouraging to know that they and their works are in the hand of God (Deu 33:3; Isa 62:3; Jn 10:28). It means that they are His property and that no one can rob them from Him. The works that they are allowed to do are also in His hand. He prepared them beforehand, so that they would walk in them (Eph 2:10).

David, the father of the Preacher, has also talked about the hand of God. He does that when he is confronted with God's irrevocable judgment on the people of Israel, due to his sin of the census of the people. He could choose out of three punishments and he chooses to fall into the hand of God: "Let us now fall into the hand of the LORD for his mercies are great, but do not let me fall into the hand of man" (2Sam 24:14).

The first verse that speaks about enjoying in this book, speaks about "the hand of God" as the source for man to enjoy eating, drinking and laboring (Ecc 2:24). Men cannot exercise total control over their circumstances, for they are not sovereign. Only God is. The righteous or the wise ought to acknowledge His government as servants of God and just as David they must rest in His mercy, even when they are confronted with the end of life 'under the sun', which is death.

Also for "love" and "hatred" it applies that man has no control over them. These human emotions are the two extremes of man's feelings. Love and hatred are not the result of the human will, for man has no right of self-determination on his emotional life. He can intend to love, but still suddenly hatred can arise. Or emotions of love can diminish and after a course of time turn to hatred, as the circumstances change. He does not know in advance whether he will love or hate.

While verse 1 says that man does not know anything of what awaits him, there is something in the future of which he does know that will happen to him. The Preacher says: "It is the same for all" (verse 2). The following verse makes clear that he means death.

The series of five contrasts he then lists, strongly expresses that it is something that strikes all men, without distinction, no matter what they are and how they behave; all will, without exception, die once. In the series, the righteous men are first mentioned and then the wicked.

A. "The righteous" is the man who takes into account what is due to God and men;

B. "the wicked" does not take anyone into account.

These two are the main groups in which mankind can be divided. In the following contrast we see the characteristics of both groups, by which they can be identified.

1a. "The good, ... the clean" lives in purity in the sight of God, apart from the world and its lusts;

1b. "the unclean" lives according to the corruption of his sinful nature and lives in sin.

Here it is about *the nature of the life* that one lives, its appearance.

2a. "The man who offers a sacrifice" acknowledges that he can only be in relation with God through a sacrifice, the sacrifice of Christ, and he worships Him; he brings Him spiritual sacrifices;

2b. "the one who does not sacrifice", lives in his own righteousness.

Here it is about *the basis of life*, on which it is based.

3a. "The good man" responds to God's goal with his life;

3b. "the sinner" is missing the goal that God has with his life.

Here it is about *the goal of life*, what it focuses on.

4a. "The swearer" has nothing to hide and can declare that he is innocent;

4b. "the one who is afraid to swear" has something on his conscience.

Here it is about *the words*, whether they are true. That is most evident in a testimony, in a statement to be made under oath. This is the formal oath for the government, that represents God.

This equation of people who fear God with those who do not, seems to be in conflict with what the Preacher has said in Ecclesiastes 8 (Ecc 8:10,14). Of course that is not the case. There he pointed to the disparity and disproportion in the fate of the righteous compared to that of the wicked in the light of their existence on earth. This time he points to death, which is equally inescapable for all. Job came to the same conclusion: "It is [all] one; therefore I say, 'He destroys the blameless and the wicked'" (Job 9:22).

In many cases, the same happens to both the righteous and the wicked, and we see things that apply to both of them. They both know hardships and sorrow, sickness and old age. The righteous Abraham was rich, as was also the wicked Haman (Gen 13:2; Est 5:11). The wicked Ahab was killed in the fight, as was also the God fearing Josiah (1Kgs 22:34; 2Kgs 23:29). People can speak well of a righteous man (Mt 5:16), but that can also be done of a wicked man (Lk 6:26). In their lives on earth, the righteous are not extra favored and the wicked are not extra punished.

The conclusion of verse 2 that “it is the same for all”, is repeated in verse 3. Only, the Preacher adds to it that “this is an evil in all that is done under the sun”. He calls death ‘an evil’. What he then says, makes clear that he does not express an accusation to the existence of death. He directly connects to it that “the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil”.

There is a direct relation between the evil of death and the evil which the hearts of the sons of men are full of. The heart represents that what characterized the whole inner man. The entire life of the sons of men is directed by and “is full of evil and insanity in their hearts throughout their lives”. A heart that is full of evil and insanity, cannot but result in a life full of sin.

The inevitable result is that the sons of men “afterwards ... [go] to the dead”, for “the wages of sin is death” (Rom 6:23a). This announcement is an abrupt end of the verse. That strengthens the thought that what the Preacher wants to represent, is the suddenness of death which can abruptly take its toll right in the middle of the life of man.

The tragedy of this observation is that the awareness of death does not lead the sinner to repent, but to enjoy life as much as he possibly can. He lives according to the principle: “If the dead are not raised, let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die” (1Cor 15:32b). Anyone who looks at everything only under the sun, claims that with death everything ends, both for the righteous and the unrighteous.

Death may be the same for all, however, it is not so with the place where one opens his eyes: “Now the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to Abraham’s bosom; and the rich man also died and was buried. In Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away and Lazarus in his bosom” (Lk 16:22-23). One person enters the joy of the

Lord, the other is bound by his hands and feet and thrown into the outer darkness (Mt 25:21,30).

The word “for” which verse 4 begins with, indicates that this verse directly connects to the previous one. With death, all hope for repentance is gone. However, “for whoever is joined with all the living, there is hope”. Such a person can still learn to know the meaning and purpose of life by the confession of sin and repentance to God. This is another observation of Solomon than in Ecclesiastes 4 (Ecc 4:2), without there being any contradiction. It is a supplement to that observation.

The living is compared to a dog, an animal that is very much despised in the East. Yet, that living dog is better off than the admired king of animals which is dead. The point of this picture is that a human being who is still alive, though so despised and small, is better off than the most powerful and significant human being who is dead.

It has been remarked that this is one of the best verses in the Bible that we can present to someone who is considering suicide. Life can be a terrible rut; relationships can be soured; there can be financial distress and one may feel that God is very far away. But as long as you breathe, there is hope that matters can turn around for the better. Relationships can be restored, illness can be cured and the work situation can improve. It never makes sense to rob yourself of life, and this verse gives an argument for that.

Verse 5 gives the motive of what is said in verse 4, which we see from the word “for” wherewith the verse begins. That “the living know they will die” means that they are alive, for only the living “know” anything. As long as men *know* that they will die, there is still time to repent.

“The dead” do not know this, they “do not know anything”. There is no reward for their lives and people do not think about them anymore. God does not interfere with them anymore, He does not think about them anymore. He forgets them forever. What a terrible fate!

It is nonsensical to use this statement of the Preacher for the false doctrine of the so-called ‘soul sleep’, which teaches that the dead are in a kind of unconscious state. According to that doctrine, men do not have any awareness of feelings, of joy and of pain in the hereafter. However, God’s Word

speaks clear language about this, as shown in the verses in Luke 16 which are already quoted above (Lk 16:22-23).

The dead are not out of consciousness. If they have died in faith, they enjoy Christ; if they die without faith, they suffer unbearable pains in the place of pain. What they no longer know about, is the possibility to get eternal life.

Except from not knowing anything, they neither have feelings of love, hate and envy anymore, which characterized their lives on earth (verse 6). These feelings are not in them anymore, but “have already perished”. Their bodies are dead, stiff and numb in the graves, awaiting their resurrection to receive their eternal judgment, which is the only thing they will get (Heb 10:27). The acceptable time (2Cor 6:2) with the possibility to repent and receive eternal life, has passed for them forever.

Ecc 9:7-10 | Enjoy the Good and Work As Long as You Live

7 Go [then], eat your bread in happiness and drink your wine with a cheerful heart; for God has already approved your works. 8 Let your clothes be white all the time, and let not oil be lacking on your head. 9 Enjoy life with the woman whom you love all the days of your fleeting life which He has given to you under the sun; for this is your reward in life and in your toil in which you have labored under the sun. 10 Whatever your hand finds to do, do [it] with [all] your might; for there is no activity or planning or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol where you are going.

These verses contain advice. Life has only death as a perspective. Well, that is why the advice is to make of life what you can make of it. Do not despair and gloom, but go on your way and enjoy life. Be happy if you have bread to eat and enjoy your wine.

Bread and wine give strength (Gen 14:18; Lam 2:12a). You might as well remember that God grants it to you. He gives you the opportunity to enjoy it. It is all according to His plan, for He had already ordained it as a regulation for His creation. Therefore it is perfectly lawful for man to enjoy it.

As new testament believers, we know that God “has created food to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received

with gratitude; for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer" (1Tim 4:3-5). Moreover, we can rejoice in a living hope, even in the midst of trouble, because our hope is Christ in Whom we rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory (1Pet 1:3-8).

The Preacher advises us to make sure that our "clothes are white all the time" (verse 8). White clothes seem especially to refer to purity (Rev 3:4-5,18). A life in purity also helps to ensure us that the joy in eating the bread and drinking the wine will not be disturbed. The first characteristic of wisdom from above, is purity (Jam 3:17). Impurity corrupts the real joy.

In addition, "let not oil be lacking" on our head. Oil is an ointment, which prevents dehydration, it keeps the skin smooth and spreads a sweet odor. Isaiah speaks about "the oil of gladness instead of mourning" (Isa 61:3). He who sees life as a gift from God and enjoys it as such, will radiate that. The wearing of white clothes and oil on the head are the contrary of black clothes and ashes on the head, which are an expression of mourning.

In a spiritual sense it means that the believer leads a life in which there is no room for the defilement of sin (2Cor 7:1). In addition to that, our life will spread a pleasant smell, as oil does. Oil is a picture of the Holy Spirit (1Jn 2:20,27). If He can work in our lives, it will be noticed by our environment. People will find it pleasant to get in touch with us.

The third advice refers to the marital relationship (verse 9). Also marriage is a matter that makes life pleasant and gives strength in a life that is full of frustration. Marriage is a gift from God and may be enjoyed as such, but exclusively "with the woman you love". Never should life be enjoyed with a woman other than one's own wife. Only toward her there can be talk of love. Love which is cherished toward another woman is not enjoying love, but satisfying one's sinful lusts.

Of all advices that are given in verses 7-9 to enjoy life, it must be said that its enjoyment is limited to the "fleeting days" of life on earth. "This is your reward" indicates that it is a gift from God and that it is the best part of all earthly pleasures that makes one's "toil" in which he has "labored under the sun" somewhat bearable.

The addition "in life" implies the suggestion that man should look further than the earthly life and seek a better part in a future life. Marriage is an

earthly pleasure that makes the labor with which one labors “under the sun” at least somewhat meaningful, no matter how temporary this pleasure may be.

After eating and drinking (verse 7), purity and joy (verse 8) and a good marriage (verse 9), the exhortation comes in verse 10 that we do our daily activities with all our might. “Whatever your hand finds to do”, not only means ‘do whatever you by accident find to do’, but also ‘do whatever is possible to work, and seize every chance you get to use all your might’. This must happen “with all your might”, means ‘with everything that lies within your power’, with the use of all capacities (cf. Jdg 9:33; 1Sam 10:7).

Death makes an end to all searching and all labor with all our might on earth. When death enters in a person’s life, “no activity or planning or knowledge or wisdom” can be expected from him anymore. Every form of labor, whether it is handiwork or thinking, has ceased, forever. In the grave, where man goes, he lies motionless, lifeless.

For us, the exhortation is that we always will be abounding in the work of the Lord, just because we know that there will be a resurrection where He will reward the results of the work that we have done for Him. Therefore it says that our “toil is not [in] vain in the Lord” (1Cor 15:58). ‘In vain’ has the meaning of ‘empty’, which means without result. That is exactly contrary to the conclusion of the Preacher, which in itself is right, because he only makes observations under the sun and passes on the results

Because we know that there will be a resurrection, we shall work as long as it is day (Jn 9:4). There comes a time that it will not be possible anymore, namely when we lie in the grave. Therefore we need to make the most of our time (Eph 5:16; Col 4:5) and not grow weary in doing good (Gal 6:9-10).

Ecc 9:11-12 | Time and Chance Overtake All Men

11 I again saw under the sun that the race is not to the swift and the battle is not to the warriors, and neither is bread to the wise nor wealth to the discerning nor favor to men of ability; for time and chance overtake them all. 12 Moreover, man does not know his time: like fish caught in a treacherous net and birds trapped in a snare, so the sons of men are ensnared at an evil time when it suddenly falls on them.

Whoever, like the Preacher, is a good observer of all that happens “under the sun” (verse 11), notices that not all things meet the expectations of man. It is often so indeed, that “the race is to the swift”, however, it can just happen that they lose the race, for example due to an obstacle on the road or a sudden muscle cramp. Speed is not always the guarantee that one escapes danger. Water can rise so fast that the fastest runner loses the race and drowns.

The same goes for “the battle warriors”. They too cannot claim the victory in advance, for they can suddenly be defeated. The young David who defeats Goliath, the giant who was considered undefeatable, is a clear example of this (1Sam 17:47; Psa 33:16-17; Jer 46:6). “The wise”, who always know how to find “bread” may sometimes lack bread. They may be smart in doing business, but sometimes there is someone smarter and then they suffer loss and cannot buy bread.

“The discerning” are not always the wealthiest ones. He who knows about money matters and has therefore acquired wealth, may see his wealth disappear due to a miscalculation. “The men of ability” are the ones who have knowledge and the ability of how to make good use of it. Others look up to them because of their ability. They are in favor of them or in high regard. But when they make a major mistake, they lose all favor.

All these examples, which every sober minded man recognizes, should make clear to the same sober minded man that he has no control over his own life. We see that the fate of man is not dependent on his own capabilities and effort, but also on unexpected circumstances of prosperity and misfortune.

God reigns over what people do and do not do. In His wise counsel He gives victory to the slow, the weak, the simple, the less gifted and the ignorant. He works exactly the opposite way from man. With Him it is so, that whoever believes shall not make haste (Isa 28:16b, Darby Translation) and that His power is perfected in weakness (2Cor 12:9). He exalts the lowly and brings low the powerful (1Sam 2:7-8).

“Time and chance” determine the success of the swift, the warriors, the wise, the discerning and the men of ability. We do not have ‘time’ in our hand and it puts a limit to what we do and what we do not do. That should

take away our self-confidence. ‘Chance’ is the unexpected event which puts an abrupt end to all plans, despite all the preparations that have been done in detail and an assessment of all conceivable risks. That the considered unsinkable Titanic did sink, is irrefutable proof of that. All these events are the observation under the sun. The believer, however, knows that everything that happens to him, is governed by God.

The word “moreover” with which verse 12 begins, indicates that now the motives follow from the statement made in the preceding verse. The expectations that man has in certain cases, can suddenly go to shreds, because he is completely in the dark about the future. He knows nothing about it. The times in a man’s life are unpredictable, unavoidable and sudden. An unexpected and unavoidable setback destroys all expectations and makes a set goal impossible to achieve.

Here, Solomon compares man again with the beasts (Ecc 3:19). He is as mortal and unfamiliar with the day of his death, the fate that strikes him, as the beasts. Man also mocks this word by taking his end in his own hand to determine the time of his death himself by taking a pill or receiving a shot. It proves his total alienation from God.

Ecc 9:13-18 | The Wisdom of the Poor Man Is Despised

13 Also this I came to see as wisdom under the sun, and it impressed me. 14 There was a small city with few men in it and a great king came to it, surrounded it and constructed large siegeworks against it. 15 But there was found in it a poor wise man and he delivered the city by his wisdom. Yet no one remembered that poor man. 16 So I said, “Wisdom is better than strength.” But the wisdom of the poor man is despised and his words are not heeded. 17 The words of the wise heard in quietness are [better] than the shouting of a ruler among fools. 18 Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.

The verses 13-15 give an illustration of what Solomon says in verse 11, that it is not the warrior who wins the battle. It is also a proof of the fact that man does not want the wisdom of God, for he considers it as something pitiful. Solomon has seen that wisdom and it impressed him (verse 13). It

is about the wisdom of God. That wisdom can both be not heeded (verses 14-16) and destroyed (verses 17-18).

We can apply this illustration as follows. "A great king" represents satan. In the "small city" we can see a picture of the world, which is just a small dot in the universe and the number of people living there compared to the countless angels is very small. The "poor, wise man" is a picture of the Lord Jesus (2Cor 8:9; 1Cor 1:30).

The salvation of the world is accomplished by Him. He will claim His right at a time appointed by God. The salvation has been accomplished, but anyone who wants to participate in it, must repent. He refuses to do that, for he does not want to have anything to do with a salvation by an insignificant Person, Someone without titles and without prestige (Isa 53:1-3; Jn 7:14-15). They do not think about Him at all anymore. When we talk with people about the gospel, we notice that fewer and fewer people are interested in Him.

In verse 16 the Preacher draws the lesson from the example of the previous verses. He does not mention something that happens just once in a while, he points to something that is the order of the day. People *refuse* wisdom if it is not attached to prestige. That is why these words are not heard and not heeded. They have covered their ears for them (cf. Acts 7:54-57).

We see this most clearly when it comes to the cross of Christ. The word of the cross is despised, while it is the wisdom of God and also the power of God (1Cor 1:18,21). People despise God's wisdom because they do not want it, for it takes away all of their own importance.

The verses 17-18 show that wisdom is precious and at the same time also vulnerable. The "words of the wise" (verse 17; Pro 1:6) are words that can make us wise and lead us to salvation. There is a condition attached to accepting the words of the wise. Quietness is needed to hear them and to meditate on them. We have those words in the Scripture. These are the words of the poor, wise Man, which is Christ. He is "the foolishness of God" which is wiser than men and "the weakness of God" which is stronger than men (1Cor 1:25).

In contrast to the words of the wise is "the shouting of a ruler among fools". The shouter impresses the fools. Fools do not listen, they lack the

quietness for it. They go for rhetoric, they bow to the one who can say it well. We see that in politics.

Wisdom is better and stronger than any other weapon. Literal weapons do not help in the battle against death, the devil and demons. Also great scholarship does not offer prospect of victory. We see that in creation. The sinner that destroys much good is man who makes mistakes and in that way hinders wise measures. One stubborn act by one person can destroy an excellent plan. One man, Adam, has destroyed all the good of creation by one sin.

By the sin of one man, Achan, the whole people of Israel had sinned. This made it impossible to take further possession of the land of blessing. First the sin had to be removed. Then the people could continue to conquer the land (Jos 7:11-12). One sin, which has not been judged in the church, leavens the whole (1Cor 5:6).

Ecclesiastes 10

Ecc 10:1-3 | Characteristics of the Fool

1 Dead flies make a perfumer's oil stink, so a little foolishness is weightier than wisdom [and] honor. 2 A wise man's heart [directs him] toward the right, but the foolish man's heart [directs him] toward the left. 3 Even when the fool walks along the road, his sense is lacking and he demonstrates to everyone [that] he is a fool.

The resemblance between verse 1 and the second part of the last verse of the previous chapter (Ecc 9:18b) is clear. Verse 1 says that as “dead flies” spoils a supply of “oil” that has been carefully composed, so a little foolishness causes so much harm, that all “wisdom [and] honor” are powerless in the face of that. The meaning is that it only takes a small thing to render unusable or even destroy a large quantity of valuable goods. It does happen that a human being just gives in to a foolish impulse with the result that much and a long-term good work is undone.

We recognize this in daily life in society, in politics, in the sports world and also in the church. During the Olympic Games in Brazil in 2016 a gymnast was sent home because he broke the rules by having a night out. Gone are the years of exercise and chances to win the medal. A competent captain or pilot can lose his entire built-up reputation, including his boat or airplane with passengers, by a careless act. We see that also in the Bible. Esau sells his birthright with all the attached blessings in a moment of craving for a dish (Gen 25:31-34). Moses loses his entrance into the land by one single act of temper (Num 20:12).

Wisdom and foolishness are connected to the heart in verse 2. The heart is the source where wisdom and foolishness come from. Wisdom and foolishness are shown in their origin: they are in the inside, in the inner being of man, and they are expressed in his deeds, of which the hand speaks. “The right” has a favorable and “the left” an unfavorable meaning. The right speaks of power, of exaltation and giving honor (Psa 110:1,5). The left speaks of what is hidden, ominous and sinister.

He who is wise will watch over his heart and will do that with all diligence (Pro 4:23). His heart seeks honorable things, things that are above a degenerate, sinful way of life. It seeks the things of God, from Whom he receives the strength to do what is honorable. The fool has a life without God. His heart seeks to satisfy his sinful lusts. He tries to achieve his goal with hidden, sinister means, without even thinking about others.

In the political speech the term ‘right(-wing)’ is used to indicate ‘the conservative’ and ‘left(-wing)’ to indicate the ‘progressive’. In the Bible those ideas are not related to it. ‘Right’ has to do with what is honored by God. ‘Left’ stands for a life without God, a life for oneself, materialistic and selfish. We see that in the judgment of the Lord Jesus on the sheep and the goats (Mt 25:31-46).

It can happen that “the fool walks along the road”, meaning that he lives properly by the rules, without misbehaving (verse 3). But as proper as he may behave himself, still “his sense is lacking”. That appears from what he demonstrates. He leaves no room for being misunderstood that he is a fool, by all that he says and does.

We can apply this to someone who lives properly by the rules, but to whom it is just an empty matter to be a Christian. He calls himself ‘a Christian’ because of the profit he gains from it. However, in all his doings his sense is lacking. He has no real insight in the things of God.

Ecc 10:4-7 | The Attitude Toward a Foolish Ruler

4 If the ruler's temper rises against you, do not abandon your position, because composure allays great offenses. 5 There is an evil I have seen under the sun, like an error which goes forth from the ruler — 6 folly is set in many exalted places while rich men sit in humble places. 7 I have seen slaves [riding] on horses and princes walking like slaves on the land.

In verse 4 man is advised not to rise up against a ruler if his temper rises against him. It is wiser to remain submissive. One should not answer foolishness with foolishness. The best thing to do is to remain calm, for that has a calming effect on the temper, it “allays”.

A positive ‘side-effect’ of this “allayment” is that it prevents a wrong reaction, which could make the case even worse. An attitude of submission

and calmness will calm down the anger (Jdg 8:3; Pro 15:1a). By a submissive attitude he will prevent committing a greater sin (Pro 15:1b).

The Preacher has “seen an evil under the sun”, of which he says that it is “like an error” (verse 5). This error goes forth from a ruler who is a fool. This foolish ruler shows his foolishness in two ways (verse 6):

1. He promotes a person who has never achieved anything and gives him a leading position in his government.
2. He degrades people who generally are respectable, and he gives them a low position.

We often see these kind of errors in government circles. Important posts in the government are given to family members and friends who have no idea about how to rule.

In society we see that generally respected scholars proclaim the greatest follies, for example the foolish evolution theory, and are therefore set in exalted places. People in exalted places are people with influence, but they lack spiritual sources to take up their position with dignity. Rich men are people with material sources, but because of the foolish ruler they are not given the opportunity to make good use of it. Foolish men bring no order, but cause disorder. They turn all things upside down. The picture of “slaves [riding] on horses and princes walking like slaves on the land”, enlivens the teaching of the Preacher (verse 7; Pro 30:22a; 2Sam 15:1,16-17).

The Lord Jesus, the Prince, was walking on the land as Slave. He will soon come back on a white horse and will execute judgment on all unrighteousness (Rev 19:11).

Ecc 10:8-11 | Operate With Wisdom

8 He who digs a pit may fall into it, and a serpent may bite him who breaks through a wall. 9 He who quarries stones may be hurt by them, and he who splits logs may be endangered by them. 10 If the axe is dull and he does not sharpen [its] edge, then he must exert more strength. Wisdom has the advantage of giving success. 11 If the serpent bites before being charmed, there is no profit for the charmer.

Verses 8-9 contain the warning for a wrong reaction to the follies of the ruler that we saw in the previous verses. A general application can be made with regard to all kinds of matters or persons we do not like. Then plans can come up to eliminate those matters or persons. In the direct context it is about overthrowing a foolish ruler.

The Preacher mentions four possibilities, to which he directly connects the consequence for the inventor of the coup. The evil we do will come upon ourselves like a boomerang:

1. We dig a pit and fall into it ourselves (verse 8a).
2. We break through a wall and do not consider the serpent hidden in it, which we wake-up and it gets angry so it bites us (verse 8b).
3. We quarry stones and get hurt, because other stones fall on us (verse 9a).
4. We split logs and we do not consider the danger of circling splinters around us (verse 9b).

It happens all too often that we trip over our own feet.

The four examples have in common that they destroy something: the ground to walk on, the wall that should protect, stones that form a building, wood that grows. We can draw the following lessons from these situations:

1. He who digs a pit to catch the foolish ruler, will fall into it himself. The trick that he invents to capture the ruler, will turn out that he will be captured himself and carried away.
2. The wall is to be considered a picture of the guards that surround the ruler as a protection. He who wants to break through it, will be bitten by a serpent, meaning that it will cost his life.
3. Quarrying stones from the house of a ruler happens for example when people try to find associates for the coup, among the supporters of the foolish ruler. It will not succeed, but it will turn out to suffering.
4. The splitting of logs gives the picture of sowing division between the supporters of the ruler. He who wants to cause division to cause the fall of the ruler, will fall himself by the result of it.

Living in a world fallen into sin involves dangers. Therefore we need to estimate the risks of a certain action carefully, especially in our dealings with a foolish ruler or government. We should watch out, should not take too many risks and also work carefully with good material. The use of a dull axe (verse 10) takes a lot of energy, while the desired result is delayed and may possibly never be acquired.

“Wisdom has the advantage of giving success” (verse 10b), not one’s own clever ideas (verses 8-9) or brute force (verse 10a). That means that we must consider before we start something. Then we will be successful in what we intend to do. God gives us the right material in ‘wisdom’. Wisdom makes one do the right thing in the right way, at the right time, with the right means – amongst others the use of other people’s wisdom – and the right motives. This is good for himself and for others.

If we forget to be wise, the serpent will bite us (verse 11). Then the evil has been done and it is too late to prevent the biting. The saying ‘what’s done is done’ applies to this. The “charmer” cannot do anything anymore when the evil is done. He can only prevent it, but not undo it.

The tongue is as a serpent, “full of deadly poison” (Jam 3:8). The Holy Spirit is the ‘charmer’ and can prevent the evil of the wrong use of the tongue. If the serpent has bitten, if the wrong, hurtful word has been spoken, the evil has been done and it cannot be swallowed anymore and not to be undone anymore. For the believer, fortunately, there is the possibility to confess the wrong. Then the sin will be forgiven, although the consequences cannot always be taken away.

Ecc 10:12-15 | The Words and the Toil of a Fool

12 Words from the mouth of a wise man are gracious, while the lips of a fool consume him; 13 the beginning of his talking is folly and the end of it is wicked madness. 14 Yet the fool multiplies words. No man knows what will happen, and who can tell him what will come after him? 15 The toil of a fool [so] wears him that he does not [even] know how to go to a city.

The distinction between “a wise” and “a fool” appears from the words that come from the mouth of each of them (verse 12). Their words show what is in their heart (Mt 12:34). Here it is mainly about what the result of their

words is, their effect. The words of the wise win hearts, the words of the fool cause destruction.

The words that come from the mouth of a wise man “are gracious” in its content, in its form and its speech. Those are good words about good things that benefit everyone that hears them. The fool speaks in a way that consumes him. Whatever he says does not edify anyone, but breaks everyone down and most of all himself. The fool speaks without being aware of running in a circle around himself.

As soon as the fool begins to speak, it becomes clear that he speaks nothing else than foolishness (verse 13). His entire verbiage is foolishness and results in “wicked madness”. From beginning to end he speaks foolishness, from which it also appears that he is not only stupid, but also wicked in nature.

“The fool multiplies words”, but he talks like a headless chicken (verse 14). He claims to know exactly how the future looks like. In his arrogance he pretends to determine the future, while nobody knows “what will happen”. The meaning of the question: “Who can tell him what will come after him?” is that there is no one who can tell him, because he is not open for it. That means that he closes himself off for God, Who only knows the future.

A fool can slaving off as hard as he can and be worn out by it, but he has no idea what he has done it for (verse 15). The cause of it is “that he does not [even] know how to go to a city”. He who wants to go to a city will find a way. The fool has no energy to go to a city because he lacks the will to learn how to get there.

He does not even have any sense of direction because the city is not a point of orientation for him. He does not recognize the way to it, for he is blind for things that everybody knows (cf. 2Kgs 6:18). In the city you have to do with other people and he does not want that. He wants to lead his own life. In all his activities he is running aimlessly in his own circles like a zombie. He lives his life without purpose and without direction.

In a spiritual sense he is not interested in the city of God. We can think of the literal Jerusalem, the city of the great King. The city to which God’s heart goes out day and night, is meaningless to him. We can also think of the heavenly Jerusalem, the church of God in this time (Rev 21:24-26).

Ecc 10:16-20 | Rulers Are a Blessing or a Curse

16 Woe to you, O land, whose king is a lad and whose princes feast in the morning. 17 Blessed are you, O land, whose king is of nobility and whose princes eat at the appropriate time—for strength and not for drunkenness. 18 Through indolence the rafters sag, and through slackness the house leaks. 19 [Men] prepare a meal for enjoyment, and wine makes life merry, and money is the answer to everything. 20 Furthermore, in your bedchamber do not curse a king, and in your sleeping rooms do not curse a rich man, for a bird of the heavens will carry the sound and the winged creature will make the matter known.

When God gives a lad to a land as king, it is because in that way He wants to chastise an ungrateful and wicked people (verse 16; Isa 3:4,12). ‘Lad’ does not necessarily refer to the age, but to slackness and much more to inability and inexperience (cf. 1Kgs 3:7). A child does not have any awareness of its own incompetence, but on the contrary thinks to be able to do anything. Such a leader of the nation is surrounded by “princes” who “feast in the morning” (cf. Isa 5:11) instead of obeying God’s command: “Administer justice every morning” (Jer 21:12). The Preacher pronounces the “woe” over a land with such rulers.

A land with a king who is worthy to be king and to eat food at an appropriate time with princes to be able to function properly and not for the satisfaction of their needs, is a “blessed” land (verse 17). With them there is self-control with a view to a good leadership. A blessed land is certainly also the heavenly land, where the believer is allowed to be, for it is ruled by a perfect King.

When officials do not do their work properly, the government system will collapse (verse 18). There is no interrelationship. They do not stick together. If there is no maintenance on a house, there will be holes in that house, so that the world can enter in. It starts with little cracks, which, however, get bigger and bigger if nothing is done about it.

The big indolence and slackness of hands that cause the people to fragment are the result of a life in enjoyment (verse 19). The feast in the morning is intended for their own pleasure. The wine flows richly. They withdraw the money for paying these binges from the taxes that the people pay or by the bribes they gladly accept, to turn a blind eye to unfair practices. Also by

falsely submitted declarations they make some money to cover the costs of their excessive lifestyle.

Verse 20 exhorts us to calm down and not become angry when the government does something that does not please us. The connection with the previous verse may be that we criticize the wastefulness of the rulers. The wise man should not fall into foolish comments of displeasure. Despite all misbehaviors we must honor the government as an institution of God (Rom 13:1-7). Other people's sin does not give anyone the right to sin as well. On the contrary, we are called to pray for the government (1Tim 2:1-4).

The rulers are hypersensitive to murmur and rumors. They have their spies everywhere who tell them what is said about them among the people. Even for this reason it is wise not to express our displeasure loudly about the rulers of the land. We will not run that risk if even in our thoughts we do not criticize them. God also knows our thoughts about the governments that have been appointed by Him. Let us watch out that we remain to consider them in agreement with what He says to us about that in His Word.

Ecclesiastes 11

Ecc 11:1-6 | Continue to Work Diligently and Persistently

1 Cast your bread on the surface of the waters, for you will find it after many days. 2 Divide your portion to seven, or even to eight, for you do not know what misfortune may occur on the earth. 3 If the clouds are full, they pour out rain upon the earth; and whether a tree falls toward the south or toward the north, wherever the tree falls, there it lies. 4 He who watches the wind will not sow and he who looks at the clouds will not reap. 5 Just as you do not know the path of the wind and how bones [are formed] in the womb of the pregnant woman, so you do not know the activity of God who makes all things. 6 Sow your seed in the morning and do not be idle in the evening, for you do not know whether morning or evening sowing will succeed, or whether both of them alike will be good.

With Ecclesiastes 11 the Preacher begins his final discourse. He has completed his theme that human toil on earth has no lasting value and he is now ready for some practical conclusions. One of them is, that despite the absence of permanent value there is certainly a reward attached to hard labor and satisfaction to be found in it. Therefore he exhorts to work hard and persistently.

In verse 1 the Preacher appeals to an action that at first sight is not logical, and even looks like a waste. The purpose is that we have to use our resources, “bread”, vigorously, “cast”, without seeing immediate results, but with the expectation that it will come, “you will find it after many days”. We can also link this verse to the following saying: You have to spend money to make money. One should first invest in order to be able to hope for result. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

The result of an action or deed can be unsure, but it is certainly not a gamble. In this way capital can be used in trade, but it should be done in consideration. We must use our capabilities and rely on future rewards. The element of patience is also emphatically present, “after many days”, and

necessary to take into account. In all cases it is important that God holds us accountable for our deeds.

He who is wise, trusts in the Creator and Ruler of all things and considers the future and the hereafter. Therefore Solomon uses the picture of the sower who is not busy with the here and now, but with the future. In faith the sower sows the grains and expects them to grow into a crop with the final result of having bread. He does not keep the grains to himself.

The fool sees how unsure everything is and tries as much as he possibly can to secure and safeguard his property. The wise sees the same thing and it leads him to act in the opposite way. He does not put his trust in the uncertainty of wealth. He gives away of it (1Tim 6:17) instead of hoarding what he cannot keep anyway.

Spiritually applied, we can say that we have food for this world, namely the Lord Jesus as the bread of life (Jn 6:22-59). Just spread it. Cast your bread on the surface of the waters as freely available (Isa 55:1). Sow the seed of the gospel. The waters represents the nations (Rev 17:15). We can feed hungry people without thinking about whether there will be a result. We will find it after many days. We sow in faith.

The bread that is cast, is the wheat (Job 28:5; Isa 28:28). When the fields are wet from the rain, the wheat is sown in it. The bread can also represent everything that man needs to live of. What the Lord has entrusted to us, He has entrusted to us first of all to sow it (2Cor 9:10). We first have to sow, then we will get what we need. What we have we can distribute among the poor (Deu 15:10-11). Everything that we do to others in the Name of the Lord, will be rewarded at the resurrection of the righteous (Lk 14:14; Mt 10:42; Gal 6:9).

It also implies that we sow generously on many places, meaning in many hearts and lives. We must open our hearts and properties to those who are needy in a material or a spiritual sense. We should not sow sparingly, for the harvest is equal to the quantity of the seed that has been sown (2Cor 9:6).

Verse 2 tells us that we need to get to work carefully. The Preacher advises us not to put all your eggs in one basket or hang all on one nail. He suggests to keep more irons in the fire, or divide what you have to invest

between different projects. Spread your risks, for you never know “what misfortune may occur on the earth”, which means that you never know what setbacks may befall you.

Seven is the number of completeness. Maybe a certain job or a group of people stands clearly for your attention. You can fully commit yourself to it. But do not be afraid to start a new group or a new job. That is what the number eight refers to. Eight refers to a new beginning after a complete period has been closed. A week has seven days. When the week is completed a new week begins, but you might also say that the eighth day follows.

The Preacher did not know “what misfortune might occur on the earth”, but we do. We know that judgment is at the door. Judgment will come on the world, for “the whole world lies in [the power of] the evil one” (1Jn 5:19). Therefore Christ will come soon to judge the world “the Judge is standing right at the door” (Jam 5:9b).

In this verse there is an aspect of enthusiasm. Dividing the “portion to seven” or even “to eight” does not happen in fear but with good courage and exciting expectation of the harvest. It is about investing as widely as possible, as resources allow. This case is pressing, “the time has been shortened” (1Cor 7:29) because we do not know what may occur in the future and whether these possibilities to take action on earth will still be there tomorrow.

Verse 3 connects to the last words of verse 2. The Preacher states that, with the examples of the natural laws given by God, we ought to consider that the evil will come once. As sure as the clouds that are full of water will pour out rain upon the earth, it is sure that God’s judgment will come when the measure of injustice is full.

We also do not know when the life of someone will be cut off. But we do know that at the moment that it is being cut off, there is no more possibility to bring a change in the situation that then has arisen. It is as with a tree that has been cut down and fallen. The tree has been cut off from the source of life, from its roots that extract juices from the soil. Wherever the tree falls, there it lies. Life has ended and change is not possible anymore.

In verse 4 the Preacher points out that we should also not exaggerate his advice about caution in taking risks (verse 2). We should not sit and wait

with our arms folded and endlessly ponder on and reflect on the possibilities and impossibilities. The ideal circumstances that, in our opinion are necessary to take action, will most probably never come. The farmer who waits on the ideal weather conditions will never sow and therefore never reap.

We can apply this spiritually to what Paul says to Timothy when it comes down to the preaching of the Word: "Be ready in season [and] out of season" (2Tim 4:2). That also applies to us. Whether it suits us or not, or whether it suits the other person or not, let us continue to preach the Word. We often have to work without knowing what result it will have in the future. This uncertainty should not prevent us from being busy.

A Christian who is not focused on winning souls for Christ, whether those of unbelievers or those of believers, neglects his task. So a local church neglects its task if it is not focused on winning souls for Christ and the connecting of souls to Christ. In both cases self-examination in the light of God's Word will be useful. We should also examine how in personal and collective prayer we can make room for the preaching of the gospel in the broadest sense of the word.

It is one of the tasks that we have been left on earth to do. Let's not make ourselves too comfortable on earth. We are surrounded by luxury and feel comfortable in the midst of all benefits with our arms folded, while so many people around us are on the way to a place of eternal pain.

By the examples that the Preacher uses in verse 5, he wants to make us realize that we cannot measure and certainly not influence God in His work. If it is about "the activity of God who makes all things" we only can see its results, but cannot verify how He did it. That realization must exhort us to work hard and diligently with the confidence that God will take care of the result. It will also keep us from taking the wait-and-see passive attitude as in verse 4.

The Preacher connects the wind and the growth of a child in the womb with each other. The wind in its movements cannot be controlled by us. Neither do we know how a birth happens. The Lord Jesus uses this picture in connection with the new birth. He says to Nicodemus: "The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it

comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit" (Jn 3:8). The Lord connects the work of the Spirit to it in the creating of a new birth in an unbeliever (Jn 3:7,9).

We see only the result. We do not know how God will use what we are doing, we do not know in which way He works in the souls of the people we talk with about Christ. "God who makes all things" establishes that new creation. All things are from God. The seed of the Word of God creates the new birth (1Pet 1:23).

The life of a baby begins in hiddenness with the conception, then the prenatal growth, and continues with the mystery of the working of the whole plan of God in the womb of the mother. This is exactly the application of the Teacher in John 3 of the plan of God. It also illustrates the whole theme of this book of Ecclesiastes. We cannot understand all the ways in which God carries out His plan, but we can apply God's rules to daily life and in this way help to fulfill His purpose with the new birth.

Verse 6 states as a conclusion that we must do our work diligently and persistently, from the early morning until late in the evening. Just because we are completely unsure about the future, we must commit ourselves to our tasks with all the energy we have. We just do not know whether the one work or on the contrary the other work will succeed. Maybe both works are successful. We can work and leave the result to God.

With "sow your seed in the morning and do not be idle in the evening" we can think, in the spiritual application, of being engaged as an evangelist from early in the morning until late in the evening, the whole day. Whether we are at school or at our work or at home, our whole attitude ought to be: to live out Christ in everything we do. What a testimony, often without words, will come out from that.

We can also apply "in the morning" and "in the evening" to our years of lifetime. The morning of life refers to the period of our youth and the evening refers to the time when we have become old. This work must go on, regardless our age. There is no retirement for the servant of God. His or her work may probably change as the years go by, but "do not be idle". Sowing, continue, is the assignment. Paul was deeply aware of that and stated: "For woe is me if I do not preach the gospel" (1Cor 9:16b).

In the latter part of the verse “for you do not know whether it will succeed, or whether both of them alike will be good”, there is a great encouragement. It does not say that something is *not* good. On the contrary, it is: or this will be good, or that will be good, or both of them alike will be good. It is considered this way, that each of us can do this ‘sowing work’ in our own way in our life. Herein lies an encouragement for us. If we do it this way, we are working well. Its result is in God’s hand and He will show it to us in His time.

Ecc 11:7-10 | Young People Also Will Be Judged

7 The light is pleasant, and [it is] good for the eyes to see the sun. 8 Indeed, if a man should live many years, let him rejoice in them all, and let him remember the days of darkness, for they will be many. Everything that is to come [will be] futility. 9 Rejoice, young man, during your childhood, and let your heart be pleasant during the days of young manhood. And follow the impulses of your heart and the desires of your eyes. Yet know that God will bring you to judgment for all these things. 10 So, remove grief and anger from your heart and put away pain from your body, because childhood and the prime of life are fleeting.

The Preacher said in verses 1-6 that we must work diligently and persistently, even if we realize that all our earthly labor has no *permanent* value. We must take advantage of the opportunities, while we carry out our plans in such a way that we do not get out of balance if something unexpected happens. At the same time we must realize that our labor still has temporal value anyhow. This is what he will argue about in the following verses.

On top of that, even though the earthly labor has no permanent value, this does not mean that there are no things at all that do have a permanent value. For there are things that indeed have permanent value, which the Preacher will bring forward at the end of his book. That is where he, with all his observations in which he lets us participate, wants us to end up.

The observation of the futility of life if we only see it *under* the sun, must lead us to the question whether there is also something *above* the sun. In other words: in the above-mentioned he addressed us about the present

life in itself, but now he is going to consider the present life as a preparation for the life *after* this life.

Before he arrives there, he first wants to share a number of observations with us, which we can accept as certainty in this life and which we can also enjoy to a certain extent. Therefore, from verse 7 he will speak about the certainty of growing up and becoming older.

“The light” and “to see the sun” are characterizing life here (verse 7; cf. Job 3:16,20; Psa 49:19). Living in the light is not just living, but living with joy, the opposite of living in bitterness. Life is “pleasant”. ‘Pleasant’ indicates that life is tasted and enjoyed with enthusiasm and enjoyed in the same way as honey is tasted and enjoyed.

We should be glad about it if we are given a long life, “many years” (verse 8). We are allowed to rejoice in the joy of life as intense as possible, “all” those years. Certainly at the beginning, when we are young, life is pleasant. It is a time in our life that there is much enjoyment of life and energy, so that all things seem possible and the sun is shining all the time (verse 7; cf. Ecc 12:2).

Nevertheless, we must also pay attention to the inevitable limitations associated with old age. The Preacher describes those days as “the days of darkness”, of absence of the sun. It is not that he mitigates the joy of seeing the light and the good, but he puts it in the right perspective. He will describe the limitations of old age in the next chapter in visual language. The life of the older human being is like the sun that we see going down in the direction of the evening, then finally disappears, through which the night falls.

What he now already wants to point out, is that we must continue to realize that life is being lived in a world of emptiness and futility. A part of that futility is the aging process. This process was set in motion on the day that Adam and Eve disobeyed God. That is when their bodies started to die (Gen 2:17; 3:19).

With “days of darkness” we should not think of death, but of the consequences of old age (Ecc 12:2-3). The enjoyment of life and vitality given by God are good and intended to be used and enjoyed. However, any age has to acknowledge that the consecutive changes in the rhythm of a day –

sunrise, noon, afternoon, evening and night – are reflected in the rhythm of life.

At the old age the days can be “many” and at the same time they are experienced as “futility”. This final remark underlines that with the many days and “everything that is to come” not death is meant, for death is not futility, but an endless situation.

The Preacher has orientated himself. He comes to the conclusion of verse 9. The young man is called to pursue real joy and to do so during his “young manhood”, during his childhood. Rejoicing is not only allowed, but commanded.

He is allowed to follow “the impulses” of his heart. They are good impulses if in his heart “the highways” are found (Psa 84:5), meaning that he finds his strength in God. The heart is the center of life, the source of thoughts, feelings, decisions and character. The eyes are the instrument of the heart (Job 31:7). Orientation happens by what we see. What we are looking at and the way we look at something, is determined by our faith (Gen 3:6; 2Sam 11:2; Jos 7:21). What we see may make us rejoice.

Joy is a purpose in life. The question is only about what kind of joy the Preacher is talking about. In order to have the good joy, we have to verify it by the awareness of the judgment of God. That puts the emphasis on God’s involvement, in His sovereignty over and His might in the life of man.

The warning “yet know” connects to the act of man and to his joy directly the awareness that there is Someone above him. ‘Yet know’ goes further than intellectually agreeing with what he has learnt. It is the understanding of a truth that corrects and shapes life, it is modeling. It has to do with knowledge, but also with setting the will into motion.

For older people it may seem risky to advise a young man to follow the impulses of his heart and the desires of his eyes. But, as it has already been noticed, the advice is connected to a reminder of the responsibility toward God. Enjoying does not mean just ‘having a great time’, lawlessly enjoying, a temporal pleasure of sin (Heb 11:25b). There are boundaries set by God to enjoy really and meaningfully what He has given.

The Preacher does not say this to take away with the one hand what he has given with the other hand, but to make clear that the awareness of responsibility belongs to childhood just as well as lust for life. Besides, he has already spoken about it earlier in his teaching (Ecc 3:17; 8:12-13). This awareness of responsibility must be there, no matter how it has been broken down or distorted in society or all mankind. It is something that we all have at some point or another, as soon as we say something or do or do not say or not do something.

Young people are addressed personally. They are a part of it. Just the fact that he points out their responsibility, proves that he takes them seriously. The old and wise Preacher knows how to appreciate being young. It is God's will that old and young together honor and serve Him.

In several new testament letters the children and young people are also addressed separately (Eph 6:1-3; Col 3:20; 1Jn 2:13-14). Being young does not always only have to do with age. Someone can also be young at heart. This is certainly true for those who wait for the Lord (Psa 103:5; Isa 40:31).

The Preacher points out to the young man that there are robbers who want to take his joy away from him (verse 10). These are problems that can attack the heart and body and prevent them from living life with joy, but which can be repelled or removed. The heart is the inner man, the body is the outer man. Our human life consist of these two aspects.

The first problem is "grief and anger", or irritability, displeasure, in the "heart". This grief and anger can be caused by fear or sorrow as a result of sin in us or around us. The cause can also come from stress at school, at work or in a friendship. Game addiction can also be a cause. The danger is that grief and anger due to the mysteries and annoyances of life, get a hold on our heart, which leads to disillusionment and cynicism. Beware of a root of bitterness, for whatever reason. The call of the Preacher is to remove grief and anger from our heart, to deny them the access to our heart. Gratitude must come instead.

The second problem is "the pain" of our "body". Anything that blocks our physical joy, must be put away as something evil. We can abuse our bodies for example to commit fornication with it. Fornication is a sin whereby our body is directly involved in an extremely inappropriate way (1Cor 6:18). If

that is the case with us, then it is out and done with the joy. It is all about a life in purity, not a life of excesses of any kind (Rom 13:13-14).

It is clear that a young person is confronted with strong temptations. If he does not resist these temptations, it will make him realize that emptiness and frustration are just as much a part of youthfulness as lust for life and power of life. Every young person has to learn to say both yes and no and has to remove what damages the mind or body (cf. Col 3:8-14). Then he will be able to optimally enjoy "his childhood and the prime of life", the glow of the dawn of life.

After all, the prime of life is "fleeting", the time of young manhood flies (cf. Psa 90:10). One of the signs that the years of young manhood are over is the appearance of the first grey hairs. This cannot be stopped, also not by dyeing the hair.

Anyone who spoils that wonderful time of youth through 'grief and anger' and 'pain' has nothing to be happy about. Therefore: enjoy life now, and live for Christ. This is what the Preacher will talk about in the next chapter.

Ecclesiastes 12

Ecc 12:1-7 | Man Goes to His Eternal Home

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 delight in them"; 2 before the sun and the light, the moon and the stars are darkened, and clouds return after the rain; 3 in the day that the watchmen of the house tremble, and mighty men stoop, the grinding ones stand idle because they are few, and those who look through windows grow dim; 4 and the doors on the street are shut as the sound of the grinding mill is low, and one will arise at the sound of the bird, and all the daughters of song will sing softly. 5 Furthermore, men are afraid of a high place and of terrors on the road; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags himself along, and the caperberry is ineffective. For man goes to his eternal home while mourners go about in the street. 6 [Remember Him] before the silver cord is broken and the golden bowl is crushed, the pitcher by the well is shattered and the wheel at the cistern is crushed; 7 then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it.

Verse 1 directly connects to the foregoing. Because the young years are over before he knows it (Ecc 11:10), the Preacher confronts the young man with the following: "Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth." The young man should not only think of his well-being, but above all also of his Creator, his Maker. "Remember" is not just a reminder not to forget, but a commandment that implies a total dedication to God: to love, serve, and fear Him. God wants to see this 'remember' translated into the practice of life. It is about living as stewards who will be accountable to our Creator for what we have done with our life.

The insight that youthfulness in itself is an empty thing, teaches young people to look for something higher and something permanent, namely their Creator. If we owe life to the Creator, it is only right that we thank Him for it and dedicate our lives to Him. Forgetting Him leads to bad choices being made, the consequences of which can remain for the rest of our life.

The call to the young man to remember his Creator in the days of his youth is made by the Preacher because the days of his youth are pre-eminent to become familiar with Him and His Word. Only fellowship with Him and the knowledge of His will about life give foundation to life. Those days are quickly past. And not only that, “evil days” come and also “the years” are approaching when the young man will say he has “no delight” in them.

“Before” that happens, he must have become accustomed to thinking of his Creator. The word “before” marks a change in living conditions, a change you must be prepared for (verses 2,6). That change – from being young to growing old and dying – comes irrevocably.

The verses that follow show how quickly the days of youth go by. The Preacher now shows that where God is ignored, the possibility for joy will be lost. In the years to come, the inattentive reader will be led to the desperate confession – that is the meaning of “when you will say” – that for him there is no more prospect.

The fact that the sun and the light, the moon and the stars are darkened by the clouds (verse 2) points to the general idea that as the years go by, the capacity to be happy disappears. Likewise, recurring clouds point to a recurring sequence of sadness. It is like a storm that has raged, while another storm is already showing up.

In verses 3-7 the Preacher describes the decay of man as a result of old age. Here we see the truth of the saying: old age is accompanied by ailments. The loneliness as a result of old age also plays a role which makes it clear that the role has been played out. Children have their own busy activities, and peers are scarcely there anymore, and when they are, they have to deal with the same problems.

The body is comparable to a prominent residence with guards, vital residents, willing and industrious staff and people who provide entertainment, the entertainers. The young person must be thoroughly aware that as such a house can fall into dilapidation, it also happens to the human body, which now looks so sound and powerful.

1. Verse 3. “The watchmen of the house” represent the hands and arms. The once powerful hands and arms are trembling now. You can see that when they drink a cup of tea or bring their fork with food to their mouths.

2. The “mighty men” represent the legs (cf. Psa 147:10). The legs that once were standing like pillars (cf. Song 5:15), are bent. The proud, upright, has disappeared from it.
3. “The grinding ones”, the women that grind the grain into fine flour, represent the teeth and molars, the dentition. More and more teeth are falling out of the dentition. Chewing the food easily, especially the harder, tastier pieces, is no longer possible. The food has to be more and more liquid because it has to be taken in with a spoon or a straw.
4. “Those who look through windows” represent the eyes. The sharp vision declines. It often starts with the fact that your arms are no longer long enough to read a book. Reading glasses have to be used.
5. Verse 4. “The doors on the street” represent the ears or the lips. Concerning the ears, the hearing also declines. One becomes hard of hearing more and more, you have to ask more and more often: ‘What did you say?’ Concerning the lips, it is becoming more and more difficult to express yourself with words, perhaps because of dementia. Ears and lips are necessary for good communication and that becomes more and more difficult in old age.
6. “The sound of the grinding mill is low” can be applied to the declining interest in what’s going on in daily life.
7. That “one will arise at the sound of the bird”, may refer to getting up early in the morning, that there is no longer mention of a healthy, long sleep which one can have after a long work day.
8. That “all the daughters of song will sing softly”, refers to the vocal cords. The singing with a full, powerful voice has changed into a trembling, creaking sound, which causes that others can hardly hear us.
9. Verse 5. We also see that an elder can “be afraid of a high place”. He becomes insecure on the stairs or the ladder and no longer dares to climb it.
10. “The terrors on the road” refer to the street with all its traffic. The elder is afraid to cross the road. Jumping away quickly from an imminent danger is out of the question.
11. “The almond tree blossoms” is a reference to the hair that grows grey and white.

12. Also his movement becomes slow, laborious and dragging like that of an old “grasshopper” that can no longer jump, but drags himself along. The low weight of his old body becomes a heavy burden.

13. The “caperberry”, which serves as an appetite stimulant, no longer helps to stimulate the appetite. He has no appetite anymore, there is nothing left that makes him salivate.

14. The description of the deterioration and decline of the body and physical abilities end up in death, “his eternal home”. Here this is not the hope of the believer (2Cor 5:1), but the terminal of man, his eternal destination. “For man goes to” his eternal home, he is on the way. The process that ends up in death can sometimes take many years. It is the way of “the body of our humble state” (Phil 3:21).

15. With death also mourning and sorrow are connected. The “mourners” go about and make the announcement of the inevitable end that has come. Everybody hears it, it is announced everywhere.

16. Verse 6. The word “before” connects to the “before” of verse 2. There the purpose is to initiate the stage of old age, here it is about the closing of it, which is death. The fact that ‘silver’ and ‘gold’ are mentioned, indicates the high value of the life of man. The last actions that lead to death are described visually in four expressions, divided in two pairs. The four verbs – “broken”, “crushed”, “shattered”, “crushed” – underline the finiteness of earthly life.

In the first pair the body is represented in its high value in the picture of the “the golden bowl” to which “the silver cord” is attached. The silver cord represents the connection with above, which is heaven. Our life is connected to God even though we want nothing to do with Him. He has given us the breath of life. However, when the silver cord is broken, the golden bowl will fall to the earth and be shattered beyond repair. The light of life has been completely extinguished. Breaking has also the meaning of disconnecting.

In the second pair the body is represented in its weakness and fragility in the picture of the “the pitcher”. We imagine someone who is drawing water with a pitcher which he lowers in the well on a rope by a wheel. Death is the crushing of the pitcher. Also that what makes the pitcher go down,

“the wheel”, is crushed. The fact that it happens “by the well” and “at the cistern”, which are both symbols of life, makes the matter more dramatic. There is no longer the possibility to drink from the living well.

There is an old myth about a man who made a remarkable deal with Death. He said to the Grim Reaper that he would love to accompany him when it is time to die, but on one condition: Death had to send him a messenger to warn him about it well in advance. Weeks went by and the weeks became months and months became years.

Then, on a bitter winter evening, while the man was thinking of all his possessions, Death suddenly entered the room and tapped him on the shoulder. Frightened, the man exclaimed: ‘You are here so quickly and without warning! I thought we had agreed on something.’ Death answered: ‘I have done more than keeping my part of the bargain. I have sent you many messengers. Look into the mirror and you will see some of them.’

While the man was doing so, Death whispered: ‘Just look at your hair. It used to be full and black, now it is thin and white. Look at the way you hold your head to listen to me because your hearing is no longer good. See how close you have to stand to the mirror to see yourself clearly. Yes, I have sent many messengers over the years. I’m sorry you’re not ready, but the time has come to leave.’

The lesson is clear: We must learn to pay attention to ‘the messengers’ who show us that we are getting older, and we should prepare ourselves for our death.

17. Verse 7. Here death is definitively determined. The two aspects of being a human come to the fore. As for his body, which is made from the “dust” of the earth, it will return to the earth from which it is also made (Gen 2:7; 3:19; Job 10:9; Psa 90:3; 103:14). As for his spirit, he will return to God Who also has given him (Job 34:14-15). The separation between body and spirit shows that the body is dead, for the body without the spirit is dead (Jam 2:26a).

We see here the contrast between the body and the spirit (cf. Ecc 3:20). This shows a continual existence of man, something that was a mystery for the Preacher. The fact that there is a continual existence, becomes only clear in the light of the New Testament (cf. 2Tim 1:10).

We all will face the above-mentioned realities of old age, unless we die young or when Christ returns for us to pick us up. The point of the Preacher in his metaphor is crystal clear: at the old age the time for strenuous service for the Lord has passed. Does this mean that the old age cannot be wonderful? Certainly not. An elder or old believer in Jesus Christ who is on the way to his 'eternal home', can still live a great life being busy for Christ.

We can live 'young at heart' for the rest of our lives. We are only old when we do not see our purpose and assignment in life anymore. A wonderful example is Caleb (Jos 14:10-11). Let us, just as he did, ask God for a mountain. We are not ready to live before we are ready to die. Arrange the eternal matters and cast yourself in the true life.

Ecc 12:8-12 | The Power of the Word of God

8 "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher, "all is vanity!" 9 In addition to being a wise man, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge; and he pondered, searched out and arranged many proverbs. 10 The Preacher sought to find delightful words and to write words of truth correctly. 11 The words of wise men are like goads, and masters of [these] collections are like well-driven nails; they are given by one Shepherd. 12 But beyond this, my son, be warned: the writing of many books is endless, and excessive devotion [to books] is wearying to the body.

Decay, decline and death bring the Preacher back to the beginning of his book, where he already formulated the conclusion of his research (verse 8; Ecc 1:2). All the researches that he is reporting in this book, have shown its truth. Everyone that stands in the reality of life, shall fully agree with his conclusion.

The Preacher was "a wise man" (verse 9). A wise man is someone who fears God. He who fears God will always seek to teach God's people "knowledge" of His will. This is the first activity that characterizes a wise man. It is about teaching knowledge to the next generation. It is knowledge that is gained by experience.

A young preacher preached about Psalm 23. He did his very best to explain the psalm, but his message did not get across. Then an old man preached.

He bowed his head, his hands were trembling and his body was marked by many years of hard work. He started to recite: "The LORD is my Shepherd." When he was finished, there was dead silence, his audience was very impressed. When the young preacher asked the old man why his words made such a difference, the old man replied simply: 'You know the psalm, I know the Shepherd.' The truth is that some things are only learned by experience.

The purpose of the teaching of the Preacher is to keep the next generation from making mistakes. Therefore it is necessary to be alert and to examine. In the transferring of knowledge, the situation in which the people find themselves must be taken into consideration. It should be noted and examined what knowledge is needed.

The Preacher has transferred his teaching by arranging "many proverbs" (1Kgs 4:32). He did not transfer things impulsively as soon as something arose in him. He first studied carefully and searched out before he transferred his teaching. He pondered first before he said something. He did just as what was later stated of Ezra: "For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel" (Ezra 7:10). So the order is: firstly study, then practice it and afterward teach it in Israel.

Also the method of teaching is important (verse 10). He transfers his teaching in words, but he chooses those words with care. He wants to 'communicate effectively'. Words cause that thoughts can be passed on. The Preacher has consciously used "delightful words". He is aware that he is passing on God's Word to others. Therefore he does not use offensive or rude language, but language that can be simply understood and is also attractive to keep on listening to. What he says is pleasant of content. It is delightful to listen to him. You do not need to use a vocabulary or be suspicious about anything when listening.

That does not mean that his words went 'smoothly' in the ears, words that 'tickle' the ear (2Tim 4:3). He who speaks like that, is not sincere. The words of the Preacher are "with grace", but at the same time "seasoned with salt", which means that corruption is repelled (Col 4:6). Those words are "full of grace and truth" (Jn 1:14).

What he wrote, “is correctly” and are “words of truth”. Those are reliable words, which you can rely on, as it is also stated of certain things that Paul said that it is “a trustworthy statement” (1Tim 4:9). We live in a time when God’s Word is relativized. It should no longer be said that something is ‘the truth’, at most that it is ‘my truth’ and that in this way everyone has his own truth. The Preacher does not take part in this relativization and no one that acknowledges that he has announced “words of truth”, meaning God’s truth, will take part in it. The fact that he has *written* his words, means that they keep their value for the next generations.

Attention to the form is not at the expense of the content. He does not falsify the Word of God (cf. 2Cor 4:2). He never distorts the truth or violates it. He does not add to it or take anything away from it. More and more people see the Word of God as an open buffet, from which you can take whatever you like, while you simply leave what you do not like. Another person is allowed to eat it, someone who loves it.

“The words of wise men” work “like goads and nails” (verse 11). The ‘wise men’ here are instruments given by God through whom He transmits His words. Therefore it is important to listen to their words. These people know about the practical life, they have experienced things, which deepened and clarified their knowledge. They do not teach theory, but truths that they themselves learned in practice.

Words of wise men have a twofold effect, comparable to the effect of the benefit of “goads” and “nails”. Goads are used to keep plowing animals in the right track so that the plough draws straight furrows (cf. Jdg 3:31; Acts 26:14). The effect of goads is that they intend to trigger the will and stimulate to cause movement. Goads may hurt sometimes, but they exhort you to activity and also keep you in the right track, the track of righteousness, for the sake of the Name of God (Psa 23:3).

The words of wise men can also be compared to “well-driven nails”. Well-driven nails remain immovable and hold something immovable in place (cf. Jer 10:4). This is how words of wise men are engraved in the memory, they are stuck there and never disappear out of memory.

“Masters of [these] collections” are people who have collected those proverbs, or have gathered them together in a collection, in order to teach oth-

ers. Such a collection is the book of Proverbs (Pro 1:1; 10:1; 25:1; 22:17; 24:23; 30:1). We can – as an application – also become ‘masters of collections’ by learning Bible verses by heart as many as possible.

With “one Shepherd” no one else but God is meant (Gen 49:24; Psa 23:1; 80:1). It also means the Lord Jesus (Jn 10:11). He has *given* those words. Although the words of the Preacher are the result of his meditation, he should not think, and this goes for every wise person, that he owes wisdom to himself. That wisdom has been given to him by Christ.

Here we have an example of the teachings of the inspiration in the practice of the Preacher. The Preacher is aware of his own activity (verse 10), both with regard to the form of his words (verse 9) and its content (verse 10). Yet he concludes that the ultimate result comes from God (verse 11). Inspiration is the work of the Spirit in the personality and in the personal meditation of the author (2Pet 1:21).

“But beyond this” (verse 12) means ‘that what is beyond the things given by the one Shepherd’ (verse 11) and refers to the wisdom literature he then warns us about. He does not address his warning in general, but to someone specific. It is someone he has a special bond with and whom he calls “my son”. The Preacher addresses a congregation, but makes it personal here.

He does not see the congregation as a mass, but as individuals. His concern goes out to every single person. In this way we also hear Solomon often say “my son” in the book of Proverbs. It emphasizes the personal bond and that he gives his special attention to the son. In that way he expresses that the son is important to him. If we want our message to get across, then the individual listener or reader must notice that he is important to us.

The reason of the warning is, as Paul says “not to exceed what is written” (1Cor 4:6), meaning that in our thinking we should not go beyond what is written in the Word of God. The many books that were written are compared to the Word of God. “Excessive devotion” to such books “is wearying to the body” and is not profitable. It is foolish to seek and impossible to find answers to questions of life in worldly wisdom literature. Answers to questions of life are only to be found in the Word of God; therefore we should seek them there.

Since the existence of the art of writing, there has been an endless series of publications, first on clay, then on leather or paper. Here it is especially about wisdom literature. Countless books have been published on the existence and the meaning of life. Authors have given their opinion about it, without taking God into consideration. The reading of those books is exceedingly wearying and exhausting for the body. You will keep studying until you drop, but it is a waste of effort because you will never get an answer to your questions.

The words given by one Shepherd are not always welcome. That is the case for people who have become addicted to the searching in such a way and have fallen in love with the difficult questions, that an answer would only spoil everything. For them there is no such thing as a definite answer. The free world of research should always blow through your mind, in their opinion. Someone who in his arrogance thinks that he is wise, makes his study a prison and his books a guard of his prison. Therefore the question is whether people *do want* answers. Those are people who are always learning, but are never able to come to the knowledge of the truth (2Tim 3:7).

Other books have been written to give us ‘information’, the Bible is written for our ‘transformation’. If we become aware of that, the reading of the Bible will exceed the reading of all kinds of other books. What do we read first when we wake up: the messages on social media and the news or the Word of God?

Ecc 12:13-14 | The Conclusion

13 The conclusion, when all has been heard, [is]: fear God and keep His commandments, because this [applies to] every person. 14 For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.

The Preacher concludes with a summary or “the conclusion” of his teaching, “when all has been heard” and has been written down by him in this book (verse 13). He summarizes his teaching in two points: fear God and show that by living out what He says in His Word. Everything is summarized in what cannot be separated: God and His Word. This conclusion not only applies to this book of Ecclesiastes, but to the whole Word of God.

In Hebrew the words *God* and *commandments* get emphasis. Fearing God and keeping His commandments are not options, but commands. It comes down to taking God seriously and doing what He says. He is the God to fear: "It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb 10:31). If we take that into account, if that awareness has penetrated deeply into us, it frees us from evil and self-righteousness and leads us to hate sin. Fearing God is the beginning of wisdom and also the end or conclusion of it.

This conclusion applies to "every person" and not only to Israel. Nor is "His commandments" here limited to the law of Moses, but refers to everything about which God's will must be known, that is the whole life and the whole creation. Obedience goes hand in hand with the fear of God. "Every person" includes both persecutors and persecuted and both rich and poor.

Why it is advisable to listen to the command of verse 13 – fear God and obey Him – the Preacher says in verse 14: "For God will bring every act to judgment." The conclusion is underscored by the Preacher by referring to God's ultimate judgment of all that man has done, whether in public or in secret (1Cor 4:5 ; 2Cor 5:10).

God is to be feared because He judges everything (Acts 17:31). There is no escaping of this. There is no act or thought that will escape Him. Every person will have to account for what he has done, said and thought, in which God determines what has been good and what has been evil.

The yardstick for this is the life of Christ. Whoever has shown Christ in his life will enter eternal life. Whoever has not done so, will enter eternal death. Whoever has shown Christ, has been able to do so because he has turned to God with confession of his sins and in faith has accepted Christ as the propitiation for his sins. Because of this Christ has become his life. Whoever has not judged himself as a sinner in God's light, has not shown Christ in his life. He has rejected Christ and will be judged by God according to his works (Rev 20:11-15).

God will do justice to the righteous who has so often suffered injustice on earth. The wicked who so often had power on earth, He will repay accord-

ing to his deeds. Justice will prevail completely and evil will be judged forever.

The final message of the book is that the fear of God corrects our lives. This fear leads to life. He who fears God leads a life in the world that is to His glory and culminates in life in the world to come where everything is to God's glory. Whoever now enjoys life without fearing God, should think carefully once more about the observations of this book.

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