

The man of sin

We are concerned at increasing lawlessness in Britain and much of the western world. As the influence of Christianity has diminished so a harvest of increasing rebellion against God has followed. We must realise, however, that even in Paul's time, there was rebellion against God and his commandments. *For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work* (7). The antichrist (1 John 2:18,22) is a real person who is lawlessness incarnate; he is called '*the lawless one*' (8).

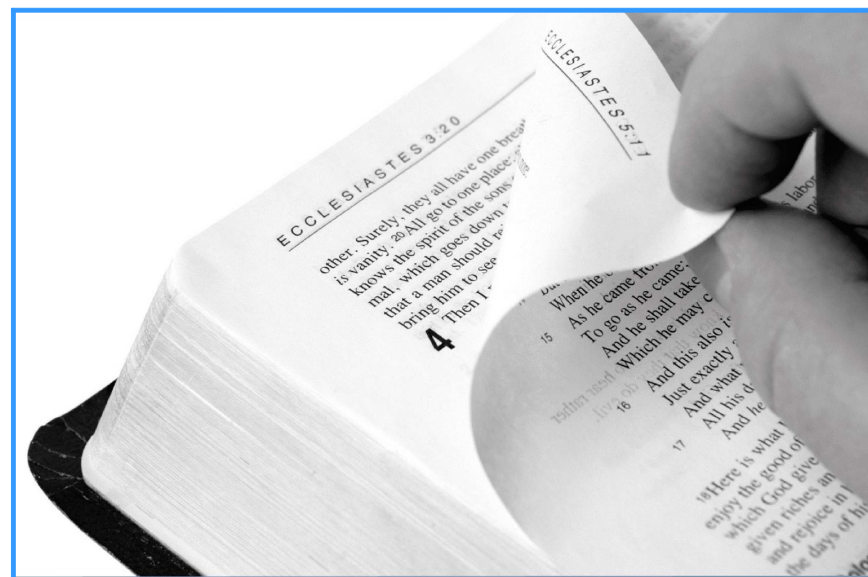
When Paul was in Thessalonica, he had taught the new church about the coming of our Lord Jesus and about *the man of sin* (1–5). *The man of sin* is also called *the son of perdition* (3). The word translated '*perdition*' means 'lostness' or destruction. The Antichrist is doomed! There have been many 'antichrists' who have deceived millions of people (2 John 7) but there will be a leader behind the great deception and lawlessness which shall precede the return of Christ. He will oppose God and his church, claiming to be divine and demanding that men worship him (4). He will have Satanic power which will enable him to work amazing miracles which will deceive many into following him (9). These miracles are *signs and lying wonders*.

Who is this *man of sin*? We just cannot be sure! Early Christians believed that he would be a Jew who would overthrow the Roman Empire. He would then establish a tyrannical and wicked kingdom which would be destroyed at the return of Christ. The Reformers believed that the Pope is the Antichrist (The Westminster Confession of Faith and the 1689 Baptist Confession also take this view). Antichrists have risen up from within the ranks of the church (1 John 2:18–19). It is likely that the final Antichrist will be a religious leader who will deny that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (1 John 2:22–23; 4:1–3).

The return of the Lord Jesus will bring an end to all evil. He will consume the Antichrist *with the breath of his mouth* and destroy him *with the brightness of his coming* (8). **Satan does not have the last word! Let us praise God.**

PILGRIM BIBLE NOTES

God's holy Word simply explained and applied



January 2018

Bible readings from Ecclesiastes
2 Thessalonians chapters 1 to 2

Dear Friends

I have been asked why it is that so many evangelicals no longer begin pronouns referring to God or to the Lord Jesus Christ with a capital (upper case) letter (eg. ‘You’ – ‘His’ – ‘Thee’ – ‘Thou’). You will observe that I am guilty of the same practice.

The Hebrew and Greek carry no such distinctions, neither does the Authorised Version of the Bible.

The practice of using capitals to begin the pronouns of deity was started by the Victorians in the 1840’s or 1850’s. My three volume set of Matthew Henry’s commentary printed in 1836 does not have the upper case for the first letter of these pronouns, nor does my copy of Olney Hymns, printed in 1830. John Angell James in his great book ‘An Earnest Ministry, the Want of the Times’ published in 1847 and reprinted by Banner of Truth does not use the upper case, nor does Spurgeon in his printed sermons. Gadsby’s hymnbook also uses the lower case to begin pronouns referring to deity.

The Victorians who introduced the upper case for deity pronouns may have done so from the honourable motive of reverence for God, but they were misguided. We are not being disrespectful to the Lord by continuing the practice found in the Authorised Version of the Bible or in Christian publications prior to the 1840’s

The New King James Version also uses a capital letter to begin pronouns referring to deity and in most versions prints the words of Christ in red. This practice seems to have originated in the U.S.A. I believe that ALL Scripture is equally inspired by God and that it is not helpful to print the words of Christ in red. It is a great pity that the English version edition of the NKJV is no longer available; it was published by Bagster as the ‘Revised Authorised Version’ and it does not use red letters for the words of Christ or capitals in pronouns of deity.

May God encourage and bless you from his precious word throughout the year.

Yours sincerely in Christ,

Alec Taylor.

30 JANUARY

2 Thessalonians 2:1–10

Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ

Some in the Thessalonian church were teaching that Christ’s coming was already upon them. It would appear that some claimed that Paul was the source of this teaching, having had a revelation from the Spirit of God that this was so (*‘either by spirit’*) or that Paul had communicated this to them by word of mouth or by letter (1–2). There is still much confusion today *concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ* though it is mentioned hundreds of times in the New Testament. What will happen before the return of Christ?

1. There will be a *falling away* from the Christian faith (3; cp. Matthew 24:10–13). Some Christians sincerely believe that there will be a great revival prior to Christ’s return when the nation of Israel will turn to Christ. I cannot see any such teaching in Scripture and it is not supported in the verses in our reading.

2. *The man of sin* will be revealed (3). We will consider the identity of the Antichrist tomorrow.

3. God will send a strong delusion causing the ungodly to believe the lie of the antichrist when he sets himself up as God (4,11)..

4. There will be increasing lawlessness (6–7). Who is *he who now restrains*? Some take this to be a reference to the Holy Spirit, others to the restraining effect of the gospel in society. *The mystery of lawlessness is already at work* but is being restrained. Before Christ comes wickedness will be unleashed on a great scale and men will take *pleasure in unrighteousness* more than ever before (12). Times will be similar to the days of Noah (Genesis 6:5, 12–13; Matthew 24:37–39).

We must not be shaken in mind or troubled (ie. full of nervous excitement, 2). All these events and *the man of sin* himself are under the control of God who loves us and will keep us. We must not believe those who claim to have new revelations about the end-time, or who claim to be Christ (3; Matthew 24:4–5). **We must, however, be ready for Christ’s second coming (Matthew 24:44). Are you?**

That our God would count you worthy of this calling

Paul thanked God *always* for the Thessalonians (3) and he prayed *always* for them (11). He had referred to their patience and faith in persecution and tribulation and of the revealing of the Lord Jesus from heaven, that is, his coming again (3–10). The thought of these things encouraged Paul to bring certain requests to God in his prayers for the Thessalonians. Notice the word ‘*therefore*’ which links verse 11 to the preceding verses. Here in verse 11 it gives us the reason for Paul’s prayer. He prayed:

- *That our God would count you worthy of this calling* (11; cp. ‘*that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God*’, 5). Every Christian is called by God into his own kingdom and glory (1 Thessalonians 2:12). What an amazing privilege to be called by God into his wonderful, eternal kingdom! The Lord Jesus will be glorified in his saints when he comes again and we will be with him for ever (10; cp. 1 Thessalonians 4:17). This great truth encouraged the apostle Paul to pray always for the Thessalonian Christians, *that our God would count you worthy of this calling* (11). The need to lead a life worthy of our Christian calling is often urged in Paul’s letters (cp. 1 Thessalonians 2:12; Ephesians 4:1; Colossians 1:9–10)

- That God would *fulfil all the good pleasure of his goodness and the work of faith with power*. Hendriksen translates it this way: ‘that he by (his) power may bring to fulfilment (your) every resolve prompted by goodness and (your every) work resulting from faith’ (COMMENTARY ON 1 & 2 THESSALONIANS). This young church had a great evangelistic vision and despite persecution they had remained faithful and tireless in their efforts to spread the gospel. Paul prayed that God would grant their resolve and that he would fulfil their work of faith (cp. 1 Thessalonians 1:3). **What kind of resolve do you have in the Lord’s work? Are you concerned that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you (12)?**

- All Scripture quotations are taken from the New King James Version unless stated otherwise; they are printed in italics. **If you have a different translation of the Bible, you will still be able to use these notes.**

- The number in brackets eg. (6) refers to the verse number in the passage that we are reading; (23:16) refers us to another chapter and verse in the book of the Bible from which we are reading. When we read from Matthew, this would be Matthew chapter 23, verse 16.

- Where verses from other books of the Bible are brought to our attention, the name of the book is also indicated in the brackets eg. (Psalm 19:1).

- Where I ask you to compare another verse of Scripture, I prefix the reference with cp. (eg. cp. Psalm 1:1). I prefer this to the more common abbreviation cf. which relates to the obsolete word ‘confer’.

The word ‘Lord’ in the Old Testament

The Hebrew words translated ‘*Lord*’ are:

- ‘Adon’ which is used with reference to men (Genesis 42:33; 45:8–9), and with reference to God (Joshua 3:11,13; Psalm 8:1).
- ‘Adonai’ literally ‘my Lord’ (Exodus 4:10; Psalm 68:19).
- ‘Yahweh’ (‘Jehovah’), the sacred name for God, considered by many Jews as too sacred to utter. They regularly used ‘Adonai’ in its place. ‘Yah’ is a contracted form of ‘Yahweh’ (Isaiah 12:2; 26:4). The word ‘Alleluia’ or ‘Hallelujah’ (Revelation 19:1–6) means ‘Praise Yah’.

Dale Ralph Davis writes with reference to Exodus 3:12,14: ‘In light of verse 12, God does not here stress his being or existence so much as his presence and “Yahweh” captures and summarizes that thought – **he is the God who will be present to be all that his people need him to be.** “Yahweh” means the God who is present to help ... “Yahweh” is a personal name, while “the LORD” is a title ... there’s a devotional warmth in a personal name that a title can’t convey’ (THE WAY OF THE RIGHTEOUS IN THE MUCK OF LIFE – PSALMS 1–12, page 8).

NB. Our Bible translators have made it possible for us to recognise when ‘Yahweh’ is used in the Old Testament. ‘Yahweh’ is printed ‘*LORD*’, whereas ‘Adon’ or ‘Adonai’ are printed ‘*Lord*’.

ECCLESIASTES

28 JANUARY

2 Thessalonians 1:1–12

The Hebrew title of Ecclesiastes, ‘Qoheleth’, means one who addresses an assembly and is translated *‘the Preacher’*. The authorship of the book is disputed. Many (eg. Charles Bridges, Stuart Olyott, John Currid) believe that there are strong reasons to indicate that Solomon is the author (cp. 1:1,12; 2:7,9; 12:9). Those who would disagree (eg. Derek Kidner) point out that Solomon’s name is absent from the book, whereas he is named in Proverbs and in the Song of Solomon. Ecclesiastes is often misunderstood because it appears to be very pessimistic. The word *‘vanity’* (‘meaningless’ NIV) appears more than 30 times throughout the book.

Purpose of Ecclesiastes. The Preacher looks at life *‘under the sun’* (1:3,9,14; 2:11,17–22), etc) and demonstrates that life without God is utterly futile and meaningless. Human wisdom, science, achievements, possessions and pleasures do not satisfy man’s deepest needs. *‘All is vanity and grasping for the wind’* (1:14; 2:11,17,26; 4:4,16; 6:9). Many years after Ecclesiastes was written, Augustine prayed, ‘You have made us for yourself, and our hearts cannot find their rest until they find their rest in you’ (Confessions of Augustine). Having demonstrated that man in his sin is lost, *having no hope and without God in the world* (Ephesians 2:12), the preacher directs our attention to our Creator (12:1). Our duty is to *fear God and keep his commandments* (12:13). This alone brings meaning to life and leads to lasting joy.

For further reading, I recommend:

A Life Worth Living and A Lord Worth Loving by Stuart Olyott, published by Evangelical Press

Commentary on Ecclesiastes by Charles Bridges, published by Banner of Truth

A Time to Mourn and a Time to Dance by Derek Kidner, published by IVP
Ecclesiastes – A Quest for Meaning by John Currid, published by Evangelical Press.

When the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven

When the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, it will be a terrifying day for those who do not know God and for those who refuse to obey the gospel of Christ (7–8). They will *be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord* (9). The word *‘destruction’* means ruin rather than annihilation. Eternal ruin involves banishment from the presence of God and from the glory of his power; it means an eternity of conscious existence in hell (cp. Matthew 7:23; 25:41; Revelation 14:11). The most important thing in the world is that we know God and obey the gospel. If you are not a Christian, you are in a perilous state. Have you responded positively to the gospel, repenting of your sin and trusting in the Lord Jesus?

The coming of the Lord Jesus will be a glorious day for Christians (*‘saints’* – verse 10) however! We will be given eternal rest from trouble, suffering and sin (7). The Lord Jesus will be glorified in us at his coming as our bodies are transformed and we are made perfect. **We will not be so much concerned with our own glorified state as with the surpassing beauty, radiance and majesty of our Saviour.** We will gaze and gaze upon him with great admiration (10). We will worship and adore him, and we will praise him for ever for his great grace in saving poor sinners such as us!

Phil Arthur writes, ‘The prospect before us is of a world without pain. Human bodies will not sicken or decay. No funerals will take place. There will be no crime and therefore none of the debilitating fear of crime which saps the morale of modern society. Environmental damage will be no more; sadness will have been abolished. When tears are shed they will be tears of joy and laughter. God himself will be at home in that world, content to live among a people who bask in his glorious presence. He and they will be suffused in joy too rich for human language. Nothing can spoil that future, for all that was evil has been consigned to the furnace’ (PATIENCE OF HOPE – 1 and 2 Thessalonians simply explained, page 106).

The kingdom of God, for which you also suffer

We are reminded in 1 Thessalonians 3:3 that Christians should expect to suffer for their faith in Christ. Paul was able to point to the endurance and perseverance of the Thessalonians in suffering, and to encourage other churches by their example. The apostle encourages those who are persecuted by showing that this is an evidence of true discipleship. They can be *counted worthy of the kingdom of God*, for which they also suffer (5). When we suffer for the sake of Christ, it does not mean that something has gone wrong or that God has forsaken us. We should always remember that persecution for the sake of Christ brings blessing (Matthew 5:10–12; Acts 5:41; Romans 5:3–4).

Those who seek to harm a child of God touch *‘the apple of his eye’* (Zechariah 2:8) and they will surely be punished on the day of judgment following the return of the Lord Jesus, *since it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you* (6–7). Many refuse to believe that God will punish sinners and have the mistaken notion that such an action would deny his love. This idea fails to take into account the justice of God. *It is a righteous thing with God to punish sinners*. Ungodly men do not like the Biblical teaching that wrong-doers must be punished. This is seen in their attitude to crime and punishment. Their priority is the ‘rehabilitation’ of criminals rather than the administration of just punishment for their evil deeds. This is a topsy-turvy situation that has led to disastrous consequences with soaring crime rates. Punishment must always have the priority over rehabilitation!

God is righteous and to allow us to go free without punishment for sin would deny his justice. How wonderful that he gave his only begotten Son to die on the cross to be punished for sinners (John 3:16; 1 Peter 3:18)! **If your heart is not right with God, you have no hope of heaven unless you come to Christ, repenting of your sin and trusting in him to save you.**

Vanity of vanities, all is vanity

The Preacher begins by considering life on earth (*‘under the sun’*, 9) without God and he paints a bleak but realistic picture. He cries out, *‘Vanity of vanities, all is vanity’* (2). The Hebrew word ‘hebel’ translated *‘vanity’* means ‘vapour’. It is something worthless that will vanish like a puff of smoke. It has been translated ‘meaningless’ – ‘futile’ – ‘absurd’ but ‘hebel’ rather emphasises something that is fleeting or transitory. Without God *all is vanity* (2). Life without God is meaningless because God made us for himself, to glorify him in our lives and to enjoy him. The lyrics of many ‘pop’ songs often portray the dilemma of life without God. One rock star of an earlier generation (Alice Cooper) once said, ‘Alice Cooper isn’t trying to say anything. No message. No nothing. We are putting on a show. Absurdity is a big part of it. We are all absurd in one way or another.’ What a dreadful and dismal outlook! That is life without God!

The Bible is quite clear in showing the reason for this unhappy state of affairs. God’s creation was *very good* (Genesis 1:31), but Adam, the first man, rebelled against God and brought ruin and death to a beautiful world. Man is miserable and frustrated because of his sin (Genesis 3:17–19). *The creation was subjected to futility* (Romans 8:20). Our sin separates us from our Creator (Isaiah 59:2). If we shut God out of our lives, we will experience frustration and eternal loss.

Let us praise God that we have a message of hope! In Christ there is peace, satisfaction and lasting joy such as this world can never give (cp. John 14:27; Philippians 4:6–7,11). **If you are restless within and dissatisfied with life, could it be that your heart is not right with God?** Do not continue to grope in uncertainty and unhappiness. Seek the Lord; repent of your sin and trust in him!

*Now none but Christ can satisfy,
None other name for me:
There’s love and life and lasting joy,
Lord Jesus, found in thee!* (Emma F.S. Bevan)

What profit has a man for all his labour?

The world of business assesses its affairs in terms of profit and loss. The Preacher poses the question, ‘*What profit has a man from all his labour?*’ (3). What can we gain that we will not ultimately lose through death? The Lord Jesus gives a stark reminder of this in his parable of the rich man to whom God said, ‘*You fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?*’ (Luke 12:20). The sad story is repeated as one generation passes and another comes (4).

Despite living in a world where there is constant activity, we do not get anywhere. Stuart Olyott comments, ‘Everything goes on as it has always done, but there is no advance. The sun rises and sets, only to rise again. The wind blows and blows, only to come back where it started. The rivers run into the sea, but never fill it, because the water evaporates and returns to its source. This is the way of the world. The activity never ends, but no destination is ever reached’ (A LIFE WORTH LIVING AND A LORD WORTH LOVING, page 19). Life appears to be one endless, boring treadmill, which fails to bring deep and lasting satisfaction (5–8). Charles Bridges observes, ‘Men cry for more and more of the world. But when it comes, it does not satisfy’ (COMMENTARY ON ECCLESIASTES, page 12).

The world is rapidly changing, though not for the better. The things that are now new soon become history. The Preacher points out, ‘*There is nothing new under the sun*’ (9). Many in the world seek fame and honour; they want to make a name for themselves, have some significance in the world, but they will die and return to dust. Their achievements mean nothing to them when they die and pass from this world (10–11). People continue to agonise with the question as they did when Ecclesiastes was written.: ‘If our destiny is to return to dust, how can life be meaningful?’ The Lord Jesus challenges us with a question, ‘*What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?*’ (Mark 8:36). **The only lasting gain is to be found by those who love Christ and obey God’s precious word.**

We are bound to thank God always for you

The opening greetings are very similar to those in the first letter (1–2; cp. 1 Thessalonians 1:1). Silvanus is the Latin name for Silas. Paul had been so encouraged by this young church that he wrote, *We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is fitting* (3). Paul, Silas and Timothy gave thanks for:

- Their growing faith (3). They were not disheartened or dismayed by the pressure of persecution and they grew stronger in faith. How can we have a faith that ‘*grows exceedingly*’? Faith comes through the word of God (Romans 10:17); it is fed by hearing God’s word preached, and through reading and obeying the Bible. Faith is exercised and strengthened through a regular life of prayer. It is helped by fellowship with God’s people. How is your faith growing?
- Their abounding love for each other (3). An evidence of genuine faith is love for our fellow-believers, whatever the cost to ourselves (1 John 4:7–11, 20–21). Thoreau described a city as a place where many people are ‘lonely together.’ (quoted by Warren W. Wiersbe in his book on 1 & 2 Thessalonians, ‘BE READY’). This may also be true of some churches where people are ‘lonely together.’ Never let it be said of ours! An abounding love and care for our fellow-believers is such a blessing to the lonely person!
- Their perseverance (‘*patience*’) in persecution (4). They were steadfast in their ‘*tribulations*’ (‘afflictions’) and their faith remained firm. Paul was able to encourage other churches by pointing them to the example of the Thessalonians.

Paul had prayed that he would be able to visit them to *perfect what was lacking* in their faith and that the Lord would make them *increase and abound in love* to each other (1 Thessalonians 3:10–12). God had answered these prayers without the necessity of a visit from Paul (3)! **The Lord does not always answer our prayers in the precise way that we may expect, but he is wise and good in all his ways. Let us praise his name.**

2 THESSALONIANS

Paul wrote his second letter to the Thessalonians soon after the first. They had not resolved their problems concerning the return of Christ. Some of them had understood the teaching that Christ would return suddenly (1 Thessalonians 5:2–3) to mean that he was to come back immediately. They had given up work and had become idle busybodies, living on the generosity of others (3:6, 11–12). Paul urged the Thessalonians to stand fast and to hold the traditions (2:15) taught them by word and letter (there is nothing wrong with tradition firmly based upon God’s word). He pointed out that certain events must precede the second coming of Christ (2:1–12) and he exhorted them to deal with those who were disorderly (3:6–15).

Outline of 2 Thessalonians

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|---|---|-------------|
| 1. Opening greetings | – | 1:1–2 |
| 2. Thanksgiving and encouragement | – | 1:3–12 |
| 3. Events preceding the Day of the Lord | – | 2:1–12 |
| 4. Thanksgiving, prayer and encouragement | – | 2:13 to 3:5 |
| 5. Discipline and work | – | 3:6–15 |
| 6. Closing greetings and prayer | – | 3:16–18 |

Recommended commentaries on 1 & 2 Thessalonians

Readers of these notes will be aware that I often quote from William Hendriksen, whose New Testament commentaries I find most helpful.

If my notes whet your appetite for further study on 1 & 2 Thessalonians, do purchase and read Phil Arthur’s commentary (PATIENCE OF HOPE – 1 AND 2 THESSALONIANS SIMPLY EXPLAINED. — Published by Evangelical Press, Welwyn Commentary Series). I have found Phil’s work helpful and very practical.

The Bible readings are repeated on some days in order to cover more of the teaching of the passage.

3 JANUARY

Ecclesiastes 1:12–18

Vanity and grasping for the wind

John Currid observes, ‘This section (1:12 to 3:13) is autobiographical. The Preacher tells us of his own quest to find answers to the eternal questions: what is life and what advantage is there to man? ... The king’s quest is quite admirable. Many humans never give a second thought to the eternal questions, and they certainly do not go on to a fervent search to find answers. Mankind busies itself with the fleeting things of the earth rather than giving consideration to the deep matters of existence’ (ECCLESIASTES), page 27 and 28).

The Preacher admits that his search to answer eternal questions from wisdom and knowledge is *a grievous task* (13) or *an unhappy business* (ESV). These questions can only be answered from the word of God and not from the philosophical research. He looked at the world around him with its quest for answers and satisfaction and he concluded, ‘*All is vanity and grasping for the wind*’ (14).

Two facts are brought to our attention in verse 15. We cannot straighten the crookedness that is in human nature the world or make up what is lacking in our fallen world. Someone observed, ‘Nothing but the cross of Christ makes other crosses straight’ (quoted by Charles Bridges, (COMMENTARY ON ECCLESIASTES, page 22).

Solomon was king in Jerusalem, the holy city and he was famous for his great wisdom and knowledge. He sought also to understand madness and folly but he again found that *in much wisdom is much grief and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow* (18). It is *vanity and grasping for the wind*’ (17). **There can be no lasting satisfaction without the knowledge of God or enjoyment of peace without him.**

*Knowledge of all terrestrial things
Ne’er to my soul true pleasure brings;
No peace, but in the Son of God;
No joy, but through his pardoning blood.*

(Richard Burnham)

There was no profit under the sun

In his quest to find satisfaction Solomon had built beautiful houses, and gardens and had immense wealth and possessions. Notice the words ‘*I made myself*’ (verses 4, 5, 6 and 8). Where can we find lasting satisfaction? Fun, laughter and wine (1–3), building fine houses and beautiful gardens with pools and orchards (4–6), acquiring many servants, having great herds and flocks (7) cannot satisfy our greatest need, which is spiritual. We may hoard great treasures and be entertained by the finest singers and musicians, but these will not satisfy the deepest yearning of the heart. He writes, ‘*Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I did not withhold from my heart ... Then I looked on all the works that my hands had done and on the labour in which I had toiled And indeed all was vanity and grasping for the wind. There was no profit under the sun*’ (11). The answer to the first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism tells us we were made ‘to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever’. **Life without God can prove to be very frustrating.**

Christina Onassis inherited such great wealth from her father Aristotle, that she could afford to indulge herself with the greatest extravagance, and she did! She was, however, desperately unhappy throughout her life. She had four failed marriages and though one of the richest women in the world she was miserable. Tragic Christina was found dead in a hotel bedroom in Argentina in 1988. She was just 37 years old. One obituary described her as ‘Spectacularly unhappy.’

People throughout Europe spend millions of pounds and Euros every week seeking a large lottery win in the belief that wealth will bring them lasting satisfaction. That is a delusion! Life is like a vapour (‘hebel’) and all these things soon vanish (cp. Luke 12:15). Materialism can never satisfy the soul!

*Fading is the worldling's pleasure,
All his boasted pomp and show;
Solid joys and lasting treasure
None but Zion's children know.* (John Newton)

Remember now your Creator

We must remember God now. The book of Ecclesiastes shows that it is folly to forget God. The sooner we follow Christ and love and obey God, the better. *Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth, before the difficult days come* (1). The difficult days of old age are vividly described in picture language (2–7). Remember God while your mind is clear and receptive to light (*while the sun and the light, the moon and the stars, are not darkened*). Remember God before you have weak arms and trembling hands (*the keepers of the house*). Remember God before your legs (*the strong men*) become weak and before your teeth (*the grinders*) drop out. Remember God before your eyes (*windows*) grow dim, and before your ears (*doors*) shut with deafness. Remember God before the restless nights come, before the fear of *terrors in the way* come upon you. Remember God before you return to your eternal home when your body (*the dust*) will return to the earth and your soul meets God (7).

One of the heartaches of preaching regularly in an old people’s home is to encounter those who have been hardened by years of living without God. They are on the brink of eternity but their minds are closed to, or unable to take in the message of the gospel. Remember God now, before it is too late, or you will not be prepared for the day of judgement (14; cp. 11:9). How should we remember our Creator? *Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man* (13). **Remember now your Creator ... before the difficult days come.** *For what is your life? It is even a vapour that appears for a little time and then vanishes away* (James 4:14).

*When as a child I laughed and wept, Time crept.
When as a youth I waxed more bold, Time rolled.
When I became a full-grown man, Time ran.
When older still I daily grew, Time flew.
Soon I shall find in passing on, Time gone.
Will Christ have saved my soul by then? Amen.*

(Verse on the old clock in Chester Cathedral)

Cast your bread upon the waters

Derek Kidner divides the last two chapters of Ecclesiastes under these headings: Be bold (11:1–6); Be Joyful (11:7–10); Be godly (12:1–8); Conclusion (12:9–14).

Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days (1). John Currid refers to a practice in ancient Egypt where farmers scattered seed on top of the Nile River when it was in its latest stage of inundation. When the water receded, the seed would be deeply deposited in the rich soil on the banks of the river. In due time it would germinate and produce a rich harvest (COMMENTARY, page 135).

The same principle applies to the work of God. We must not give up because of disappointment or the seeming lack of success in our work for God. We must cast our 'bread upon the waters'. Our work depends on God and not on chance for its success and we know that his wise purposes can never be thwarted. There are no ideal conditions for God's work; if we wait until things improve, we will never do anything for the Lord and we will never reap a harvest (4). We must not be put off by the difficulties we face, but rather trust in God. Let us be determined to sow the seed of God's precious word by our witness and in the distribution of copies of it and of its message. *We do not know which will prosper* (5–6), but God does.

We must also be bold and give generously to those in need, especially to Christians in need (2; cp. Galatians 6:9–10). We must work for the Lord and do good now because a time will come when we will be unable to do so (7–10).

If you are young, make the best use of your youth and energy and enjoy yourself. Remember, however, that your pleasures should never be found in sinful pursuits because you will have to give an account to God on the day of judgement for the ways you have used your best years (9–10). **What is the secret of a happy Christian life, for young and old alike? It is to put God first and to serve him as our Lord.**

God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy

In his quest for meaning, the Preacher concludes that wisdom is to be preferred to folly but he finds that the harsh facts of life are very depressing – the wise man is not kept from dying any more than the fool; death reduces them to the same level (13–17). In his frustration he says, *'Therefore I hated life ... for all is vanity and grasping for the wind'* (17).

The Preacher then thinks about work from the standpoint of a godless man and he exclaims, *'Then I hated all my labour'* (18). A man may accumulate wealth by hard toil but he cannot take it with him. Who knows whether he may leave all to a son who is lazy and foolish or to someone who has not had to work to inherit his wealth (18–21)? This drove him to despair (20). There is no satisfaction or rest in being a workaholic (22–23). Derek Kidner writes that death 'robs every man of his dignity and every project of its point' (A TIME TO MOURN, AND A TIME TO DANCE, page 34). The French philosopher Voltaire said. 'I hate life, yet I am afraid to die' (quoted by John Currid, page 39).

Life without God is *vanity and grasping for the wind* (26). He *gives wisdom, and knowledge and joy to a man who is good in his sight* (26; 'who pleases him' – ESV). Kidner points out that the real issue for the Preacher 'was not between work and rest but, had he known it, between meaningless and meaningful activity' (A TIME TO MOURN, AND A TIME TO DANCE, page 35). How different things are for the person seeking to please God! The Christian does take the fruit of his work beyond the grave. *Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord ... their works follow them* (Revelation 14:13). The Lord Jesus will give priceless, eternal rewards for faithful service (cp. Matthew 25:20–21, 34–40; 1 Corinthians 3:12–14). Christian work is meaningful (1 Corinthians 15:58). **Are you serving God with your time, your abilities, your money? Are you laying up treasure in heaven (Matthew 6:20)?**

*How blest is life if lived for thee, my loving Saviour and my Lord;
No pleasures that the world can give Such perfect gladness can afford.*
(Anonymous, Prusts' Supplementary Hymn Book, 1869)

He has put eternity in their hearts

The word ‘time’ appears again and again in our reading today. An apt title would be, ‘Time and Eternity’. Some of the verses in this passage are the best known in Ecclesiastes. They are found in folk songs though most people do not realise the origin or significance of the words. There are fourteen couplets in verses 2 to 8 beginning with ‘*a time to be born, and a time to die*’. The contrasting situations that come upon us between life and death are described in the couplets that follow.

We are aware of the change that the passing of time brings to our lives – weeping or laughter, mourning or dancing, gaining or losing, war or peace, etc. (1–8). We have no control over the past and we cannot put back the clock to undo those things that we regret doing. Time’s changes can bring a sense of helplessness, frustration and anger. There is more to man’s existence than this life and the Preacher reminds us that God *has put eternity in their hearts* (11). We will have to give an account to God of what we have done (15; cp. Romans 14:10–12).

The Preacher directs our thoughts to God who is sovereign, and whose purposes cannot be thwarted or frustrated. *Whatever God does, it shall be forever*. This should cause us to *fear before him* (14). The Christian has a totally different perspective on life from the unbeliever. He knows that God *has made everything beautiful in its time* (11) and that the almighty, sovereign God is working all things together for good (Romans 8:28). **Here is life with purpose and with meaning. Let us be glad and rejoice in the Lord.**

*Sovereign Ruler of the skies,
Ever gracious, ever wise;
All my times are in thy hand,
All events at thy command.*

*He that formed me in the womb,
He shall guide me to the tomb;
All my times shall ever be
Ordered by his wise decree.* (George W. Robinson)

The words of a wise man’s mouth are gracious

We can easily recognise a fool by the way he speaks (13–14). He is unable to control his tongue, he does not think before opening his mouth. No man can tame the tongue; *it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison* (James 3:8). Though we may loathe the filthy talk of the wicked we can be careless and thoughtless in the things we say. Many a church has been torn apart, many a fellowship has been destroyed by unruly tongues. Satan is always ready to use ‘fools’ in the church. The Lord Jesus said that ‘*for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgement*’ (Matthew 12:36). Let us always pause to think before we open our mouths (James 1:19).

People rightly judge us by our speech. Those who heard the Lord Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth *bore witness to him, and marvelled at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth* (Luke 4:22). **The Lord has saved us by grace and he expects us to be gracious in our speech.** *Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one* (Colossians 4:6). An encouraging word to a battle-weary Christian, to someone going through a time of distress, or struggling in severe trial is very precious. Let us be wise, for *the words of a wise man’s mouth are gracious* (12).

*Take my lips, and let them be
Filled with messages from thee.*

(Frances R. Havergal)

The Preacher now turns our minds to the government of a nation. The country which is ruled by fools is heading for disaster (5–7) and so is the land whose ruler is immature, inept and lazy. Rulers who indulge in feasting and drunkenness will ruin their country (16–17). *Money answers everything* as far as the ungodly are concerned but the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil (1 Timothy 6:9–10) and it has ruined many professing Christians. Laziness is sin: *Because of laziness the building decays* (18). The chapter ends with another warning to be careful concerning what we say about others (20).

He who digs a pit will fall into it

Wisdom is better than weapons of war (9:18) and chapter 10 of Ecclesiastes has a number of contrasts between a wise man and a fool. The fool is one who says in his heart, *'There is no God.'* He rebels against God's commandments (Psalm 14:1). The putrid odour coming from dead flies ruins an expensive perfume in which it is trapped and *a little folly* can ruin a wise man (1). If the perfumer had not been careless he would have made sure that he had sealed the container in which he had put his perfume. Just *a little folly*, a little carelessness spoils the life of many a Christian. Satan waits to take advantage of the unguarded moment. A word spoken in haste, a rude remark, an outburst of temper, an irritating habit, spoil the fragrance of a Christlike life. We are right to avoid gross sins but let us be sure to pay attention to those 'small things' which harm our souls.

You may be puzzled by the statement in verse 2: *'A wise man's heart is at his right hand, but a fool's heart is at his left.'* In Bible times the right hand was considered to be good and the left hand bad (the word 'sinister' comes from the Latin word for 'left hand'). The fool inclines to evil rather than good. On the day of judgement our Lord *will set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left* (Matthew 25:33).

A fool is easily recognised; he is incapable of hiding his folly (3). The wise man is discreet in his behaviour (4); he thinks through the consequences of his words and actions whereas the fool speaks and acts without thinking. Woe betide the nation where fools rule and where those with wisdom are downtrodden (5–7).

The need to think before we act is again stressed in verse 8: *He who digs a pit will fall into it.* Wicked Haman died on his own gallows (Esther 7:10). *Whatever a man sows, that he will also reap* (Galatians 6:7). The greatest folly is to sow to the flesh (Galatians 6:8). The man whom God called a 'fool' worked hard to provide for his body but he neglected his soul (Luke 12:19–21). **Have you got your priorities right?**

God shall judge the righteous and the wicked

The truth of the absolute sovereignty of God raises many questions and some are dealt with in these verses:

- If God is sovereign why does he allow injustice to flourish? We expect that the law courts will uphold justice and righteousness. The Preacher found however, *that wickedness was there; in the place of righteousness, iniquity was there* (16). For all man's advances in science and learning, the world has not improved but has rather become the worse. Man is now more sophisticated in his cruelty and wickedness. The fact of wickedness and the oppression of the weak can be very depressing indeed. Many ask in despair, 'Whatever is the world coming to?'

Christians are persecuted and often suffer more than the ungodly. Why does God allow this? God answers this: he will put matters right on the day of judgment; *God shall judge the righteous and the wicked* verse (17). *It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment* (Hebrews 9:27). The Lord will not allow the wicked person to escape justice. John Currid comments: 'Truly, we need to see things with the eyes of eternity and not with eyes that are focussed on fleeting things. Thomas Watson rightly said, "Eternity to the godly is a day that has no sunset; eternity to the wicked is a night that has no sunrise" ' (COMMENTARY ON ECCLESIASTES, page 63)

- On the face of things it would appear that men are like beasts and are different from animals in death. Both die and their bodies go to the same place; they *all return to dust* (18–21). Many people believe this and they see life as meaningless and without purpose. Men and women are different, however. *God has put eternity in their hearts* (11); death is the end for an animal, but not for a man. **We rejoice in |God who is sovereign and wise in his dealings with us. He loves us and tenderly watches over us.** *We know that all things together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to his purpose* (Romans 8:28).

Better is a handful with quietness than both hands full

Chapter 4 opens by reminding us of *all the oppression that is done under the sun* (on earth). If we have just an ounce of compassion, we cannot help but be moved *by the tears of the oppressed* as they are without a comforter. The oppressors have the power and it appears that it is better to be dead than alive, or better still, never to have been born (4:2–3). The person who does not believe in God, who sees us as helpless victims of fate, will logically be driven to such a conclusion. When the bad times come, bringing heartache, trouble and loss, is it any wonder that he may see life as being futile? **Thank God that we have a wonderful message for our sad world.** The Lord Jesus has died and he rose from the dead to save sinners, to give a glorious future to all who will repent of their sin and trust in him. *We look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells* (2 Peter 3:13).

The Preacher considers the skilled worker who has achieved a good standard of living through his toil but is envied by those around him. Those who are driven by envy will never be satisfied. *This also is vanity and grasping for the wind* (4). Christians are not immune from being envious of others and this sin has torn apart many churches (cp. 1 Corinthians 3:3–4; 2 Corinthians 12:20; James 3:16). Others, disgusted with ‘the rat-race’ drop out of the world of work to a life of laziness which leads to poverty. *The fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh* (5). He feeds off himself and is impoverished.

Many a Christian has dropped out of the life, work and witness of the local church to become spiritually impoverished. **Christian, do not become a spiritual drop-out!** *Better is a handful with quietness than both hands full, together with toil and grasping for the wind* (6). Stuart Olyott points out, ‘It is better to have modest earnings and a restful mind than to make large gains, with their accompanying anxiety’ (A LIFE WORTH LIVING AND A LORD WORTH LOVING, page 34) Let us learn to be content and get on with our work and witness because *godliness with contentment is great gain* (1 Timothy 6:6–8).

Yet no one remembered that same poor man

These verses show the value of wisdom. We should listen to the *words of the wise, spoken quietly*, rather than the shouting or ranting of a fool (17). The statement, ‘*Wisdom is better than weapons of war*’ (18) follows the story of a little city which had few men to defend it when it was besieged by a powerful king who with his army surrounded the city. It seemed that there was little prospect of averting disaster (14). There was in that city *a poor wise man* who with a masterstroke of brilliant strategy or diplomacy saved the city. Wisdom is better than might and this has often been proved in military history.

What was the poor man’s reward? He was forgotten and despised (15–16). *Yet no one remembered that same poor man.* When Britain was in real danger of defeat by the Hitler and his Nazis in the second world war, national days of prayer were called and God was acknowledged. Following the war, God was forgotten and the message of the gospel became despised and things are now far worse in the 21st century. May God have mercy on us!

There is another challenge in the story of the poor wise man who no one remembered. Ingratitude is sin (2 Timothy 3:2). Do you take the kindness of others for granted without expressing any word of appreciation? We must be thankful people if we are to honour God (Philippians 4:6; Colossians 4:2).

God in his great wisdom gave his beloved Son to die for sinners. But for his grace we would be lost and without hope. What glorious love that the Lord Jesus should be willing to suffer shame, sorrow, agony, torture and death to save us from our sins! **Do you show your gratitude to him by joyful obedience to his will, and love for him and his people?**

Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might

Whatever we do, we must do well: *Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might* (10). The Christian must aim to be the best and most conscientious worker in the factory, office, college or school where God has placed him. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul has a word for slaves: *‘Whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ (3:23–24)*. We dishonour God if we are half-hearted in our work.

We must be diligent in our work because we will surely die and go to the grave. It will then be too late to do the things that were left undone. (10b). Let us persevere in prayer and be diligent in our work for the Lord! **Christian service demands excellence. Only the best is good enough for God! Are you giving God your best?**

*I would not with swift-wingèd zeal
On the world’s errands go,
And labour up the heavenly hill
With weary feet and slow.*

*O not for thee my weak desires,
My poorer, baser part!
O not for thee my fading fires,
The ashes of my heart!*

(Thomas Hornblower Gill)

Time and chance make life very uncertain (11). Agility, strength, wisdom, understanding and skill are desirable things to possess but they cannot save us from the ravages of time and chance (11). Death may come suddenly and unexpectedly so that we are as helpless as fish in the sea of life; some are snatched away by a cruel net while others are left (12). Let us be thankful that we can say, *My times are in your hand* (Psalm 31:15).

*My times are in thy hand:
My God, I wish them there;
My life, my friends, my soul I leave
Entirely to thy care*

(Henry F. Lyte)

There is one alone, without companion

Verses 8 to 12 describe the problem of loneliness; this is a huge problem today, especially among the elderly. *There is one alone, without companion* (8). Verses 9 to 12 describe the value of a companion. The first thing that God saw that was not good after he created the universe was Adam’s loneliness. He said, *‘It is not good that man should be alone’* (Genesis 2:18). Though Adam had priceless fellowship and friendship with God, he needed a human companion. Facebook friends are no substitute for friends who will visit us and invite us into their homes. Some may be lonely because they are self-centred and do not want to give as well as to take but most lonely people are not like that.

Loneliness, especially among the elderly, is a huge and troubling problem. We have a precious Friend in the Lord Jesus who will never forsake us nor fail us but we may still be very lonely. There are many lonely Christians who go home to empty houses and who lack companionship. Those who are widowed feel an aching void over the loss of their loved-one. There are single Christians who long to be married, and some Christians know the loneliness of persecution. We must be sensitive to their needs. Our homes and churches should be places of warm fellowship where the lonely person is blessed and enriched.

*Lord, speak to me, that I may speak
In living echoes of thy tone;
As thou hast sought, so let me seek
Thy erring children, lost and lone.*

(Frances R. Havergal)

Popularity does not always last. A poor but wise youth may take the throne from an old and foolish king but his wisdom and worth are soon forgotten after he has gone (13–16). **Never compromise your faith to gain the popularity or applause of men. Aim always to please God; he will never cast you off or forget you.**

When you go to the house of God

We sometimes give as little thought to our worship as picking on the telephone. The verses that we have just read warn us that we sin if we are careless in our worship (6). Kidner comments, ‘This writer’s target is the well-meaning person who likes a good sing and turns up cheerfully enough to church; but who listens with half an ear, and never quite gets round to what he has volunteered to do for God. Such a man has forgotten where and who he is; above all, who God is’ (A TIME TO MOURN, AND A TIME TO DANCE, pages 52-53).

We should be prudent when we go to the house of God (1). If we are in the habit of being late for worship we are sinning. How often is the football fan late for his beloved match? Pop-music lovers crowd into the hall well before the concert begins. They put many of us to shame. We should be in church at least five minutes before the start of the service – not for a chat to those around us, but to be quiet in the presence of God before we begin our worship. Noisy ‘worship’ is not an indication of spiritual worship but is often *‘the sacrifice of fools’* (1). Let us always worship with Samuel’s attitude, *‘Speak, LORD, for your servant hears’* (1 Samuel 3:9). This leads us to our next point:

We must watch our mouths (2–7). We worship the almighty and holy God who is in heaven (2). The Lord Jesus warns us against using vain repetitions (Matthew 6:7). We must think carefully about the prayers we pray and the words we sing. Do we know the meaning of the words we sing? Do we mean what we sing? It is possible to repeat thoughtlessly solemn vows to God in the words of our hymns. If we are rash with our mouths when we worship God, we sin when we do not keep the promises we make to him (4–6). We must also watch our thoughts (*‘dreams’*, 3,7). It is so easy to drift into day-dreaming in the house of God. **We must give our minds to the worship of God. Careless worship is ‘vanity’ (7); it is meaningless. We need a healthy reverence (‘fear’) for the Lord. This will make all the difference in our worship. How do you worship God?**

Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might

John Currid points out in his comments on verse 1, that ‘the only real, substantive solution to the eternal questions of life is the sovereignty of God. ... It is clear that the answer to the meaning of life is not within mankind himself. Man is not the centre of reality and meaning. Only God sits enthroned over the universe.. Our knowledge is severely limited. We do not know what awaits us in the future. ... For the unbeliever, not knowing what will come tomorrow can easily cause despair, but for the believer it is comforting that all things are in the hands of the providence of God’ (COMMENTARY, page 113).

The Preacher now faces the difficulty that in the outworking of God’s providence there appears to be little difference between the righteous and the wicked. One event happens to both; we all die (2-3). The fact of death must not drive us to despair; there is hope for the living (4–6).

How should the Christian react to these solemn facts? We should enjoy life while we have it (7–10) for life is better than death (4). We should eat and drink with thanksgiving to God (7). We do have sorrows, trials and difficulties but we have so many things for which to thank God. We have been saved and have peace with God through the Lord Jesus Christ, God is our heavenly Father, the Lord Jesus is our dearest friend, the Holy Spirit is our great Helper. God is with us and for us. What more can we want? The Christian is to be serious in his thinking, but he should not be miserable. *God gives us richly all things to enjoy* (1 Timothy 6:17). Verse 8 describes the external symbols of our inwards joy. *Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!* (Philippians 4:4)

We should live joyfully with our marriage partner (9). The widespread breakdown of marriage has brought much misery, insecurity and social problems to society around us. Christians are not immune from unhappiness in marriage. **Let those of us who are married be determined to work at our marriages so that our homes will be places of joy, laughter and love, where the peace of God is evident.**

It will be well with those who fear God

We saw yesterday that we are to respect civil authorities, but how about tyrants who rule over others to their own hurt (9)? Such people may hurt those they oppress but they also store up judgement against themselves. They may have been frequent visitors to *the place of holiness* having an outward show of religion. They die, are buried and forgotten in the city which has witnessed their crimes (10). The wicked are often complacent in their sin because God does not punish them immediately (11). They may commit a hundred evil deeds and enjoy a long life, but they are not better off than the godly. The days of a wicked person will pass like a shadow and he is unable to extend them. *But it will not be well with the wicked ... because he does not fear before God* (12–13). We must remember these truths when justice is not upheld, when the righteous person gets what the wicked deserve, and the wicked have what should be the portion of the righteous (14).

If we consider the injustices of life from the viewpoint of the unbeliever, we will conclude that life on earth is futile and vain (14). This was the view of the French writer, Albert Camus, who died in 1960. His philosophy of the absurd is the logical outcome of any belief system that excludes the eternal, almighty God who created heaven and earth. Life without God has no meaning. The only thing for the ungodly person is to enjoy himself while he is able, to eat, drink, and be merry (15).

How wonderful it is to be a Christian; what a different outlook we have on life! We must never be envious of the wicked; it is folly. Let us remember *that it will be well with those who fear God ... but it will not be well with the wicked* (12–13).

*When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,
And sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul.*

(Horatio G. Spafford)

God keeps him busy with the joy of his heart

Stuart Olyott divides verses 8 to 16 under three headings (page 38–39):

- No justice (8–9). We live in a fallen, sinful world and we should not be surprised when we see men exploiting their fellow men in order to preserve their own status and to feed their own greed. *If you see the oppression of the poor, and the violent perversion of justice and righteousness in a province, do not marvel at the matter* (8). God has given the profit of the land (its crops, minerals and natural resources) for the benefit of all right up to the king (9) but all do not benefit to the same degree. Those on the higher rungs of the ladder in society use those beneath them to their own advantage. *High official watches over high official, and higher officials are over them* (8).
- No satisfaction (10–12). We are warned against the love of money. We will never be satisfied if we love silver and set our hearts on increasing our possessions (10). An increase in goods brings an increase in liabilities as well as sleepless nights brought on by the worries that wealth can bring.
- No permanence (15–17). Wealth does not bring lasting security. A man may acquire a fortune and lose it all through a business transaction that goes wrong so that he has nothing to pass on to his son and heir (13–14). It is foolish to live for material things (15–16)! We know that we cannot take our possessions with us when we die.

What is the answer to restlessness and discontent? We should always remember the sovereignty of God in our lives. He gives us our food and drink to enjoy; to some he gives riches and wealth (18–19). Let us be thankful and honour him with our possessions (19; cp. Proverbs 3:9). **When a man follows these principles, he is content.** *God keeps him busy with the joy of his heart* (20).

*Father, I wait thy daily will;
Thou shalt divide my portion still;
Grant me on earth what seems thee best,
Till death and heaven reveal the rest.*

(Isaac Watts)

But his soul is not satisfied

The Preacher again looks at life from the standpoint of the person who does not know God. I have borrowed the headings below from Stuart Olyott's commentary on Ecclesiastes (A LIFE WORTH LIVING AND A LORD WORTH LOVING, pages 44-46). He points out that there are three things which are a waste of time:

- Hoping wealth will last (1–2). A man may possess all the wealth that he desires, but it can be snatched from him by calamity or death. If he has no heir, a stranger inherits everything. What a waste of time to build up a fortune and not to enjoy its benefits! We should remember that it is God who gives riches, wealth and honour and the power to enjoy them (2; cp. 5:19).
- Hoping wealth will satisfy (3–9). We are now presented with the opposite position to the man who has no heir. A man may live long enough to father a hundred children but be unable to enjoy life. He may die unlamented (the meaning behind the expression *'he has no burial'*; cp. Jeremiah 22:18–19). He is then worse than a stillborn child (3–5). A man may live a thousand years twice over, but if he does not know how to enjoy his prosperity, his life is futile (6). We will never find lasting happiness in money and possessions. Notice the expression *'But his soul is not satisfied'* (3,7). Many Christians have known great poverty or have denied themselves material things in their service for the Lord but how blessed they have been! Jesus said to the persecuted church at Smyrna, *'I know your ... poverty (but you are rich)'* – Revelation 2:9
- Hoping things will change (10–12). Some things do not change and death remains man's greatest enemy which he cannot overcome (10). In this uncertain world the unbeliever has many unanswered questions (11–12). **The message that Ecclesiastes drives home is that our deepest needs are spiritual.** Worldly wealth, honour and pleasures fail to meet these needs. There is a better way: *Godliness with contentment is great gain* (1 Timothy 6:6).

No one has power in the day of death

This chapter begins with a rhetorical question: 'Who is like a wise man?' Wisdom is more than knowledge alone. The wise man *knows the interpretation of a thing*. He is able to use his knowledge to guide himself or others into making correct decisions (cp. 1 Chronicles 12:32). John Currid comments, 'Thus Solomon has discovered one practical truth: wisdom is better than folly. It make one's face shine. The face is no longer hardened in despair and misunderstanding' (COMMENTARY, page 106)

Wisdom teaches us that we should obey kings or those in authority whom God, in his providence, has chosen to rule over us (2). Those who have taken an oath of allegiance to their king must not break it (2). We must be especially discreet in our behaviour and not take a *stand for an evil thing* (3–4). We do not live under a monarchy like that of which these verses speak but there is a vital principle here for all Christians; we are to be law-abiding citizens. Christians cannot be anarchists (Romans 13:1–7). We must always remember, however, that our first allegiance is to God and that we must not obey laws that are contrary to God's word. *'We ought to obey God rather than men'* (Acts 5:27–29).

Man knows misery because he does not know what the future holds for him (6–7). A desire to know the future explains the popularity of fortune-tellers and other occult practitioners. How foolish to rebel against the teaching of Scripture and go to these people for advice (Isaiah 8:19–22). We do know, however, that we all have to die, unless we are alive when Christ returns. *No one has power in the day of death* (8). We are powerless to keep our spirit from departing in that day. Jesus in his work on the cross conquered Satan who had the power of death (Hebrews 2:14). **Our great Saviour has the keys of Hades and of death (Revelation 1:18). He will carry us through death to glory.** *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me* (Psalm 23:4). Hallelujah!

God made man upright

You will recall that the man known in the Hebrew as ‘Qoheleth’ or ‘the Preacher’ looks at life from the standpoint of someone who does not know God. He often reveals his true self, however, when he points us to God. His quest *to know wisdom and the reason of things* is very thorough (23–25). He wants to know why there is so much folly and madness in the world. He discovers that there is no one so dangerous as a wicked and lewd woman. Those who seek to please God will escape from her but not those who love to sin (26).

John Currid comments on verses 27–28: ‘We need to be careful with Qoheleth’s statement here because of our sensitivities to gender issues in the 21st century. Solomon, however, is not making a sexist remark by censure of the female gender. He is employing hyperbole ... Has he found a righteous man? He answers, “one man among a thousand I found, but a woman among all these I have not found.” ... The context of the passage is clear: there are none who are righteous in and of themselves’ (COMMENTARY, page 101).

Qoheleth states: *Truly, this only I have found: that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes* (29). Psychologists who do not know God fail to understand this most important and basic truth about man. They refuse to accept that God is our Creator, that he made us upright (in his own image) and that we have fallen into sin. We are not evolving to perfection. The evidence of the wickedness of the human heart is obvious to all who have eyes to see. Better education and getting rid of poverty does not deal with the problem of sin. Only the power of God revealed in the gospel of Christ has the answer to our desperate need.

God made man upright. Let us praise him that he did not leave us to our own schemes, to perish in our sin. He sent his beloved Son into the world to save sinners and to reconcile us to God. **The gospel message brings hope to the hopeless and shows those who find life to be ‘vanity’ that they can have purpose and joy in living.**

Sorrow is better than laughter

A question is asked in the last verse of chapter 6: ‘*For who knows what is good for man in life ... ?*’ and chapter 7 gives us the answer. Notice the number of times that the word ‘*better*’ is used; it is the same Hebrew word translated ‘*good*’ in chapter 6, verse 12. ‘*A good name (reputation) is better than precious ointment*’ (1). The fragrance of a godly Christian life is a great blessing to others. When such a Christian was born, no one knew what kind of person he would be. When he dies, we can look back on all that he has done and praise God for such a life. He has gone to his eternal reward, to be with his blessed Lord and Saviour. The *day of death* is better than the day of one’s birth (1). What a change in attitude to the pessimism in chapter 4, verses 1 to 3!

Some of these verses may appear to be pessimistic but the message that they convey is not. They show that difficult and sorrowful experiences can be valuable. There is *a time to weep and a time to laugh* (3:4) but we learn far more when we visit a house of mourning than at a party. We are reminded of the uncertainty of life and this may bring us to consider our standing with God (2). *Sorrow is better than laughter* (3). The Lord Jesus is described as ‘*a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief*’ (Isaiah 53:3). **We learn more of Christ in the dark valley of sorrow and suffering than we will ever learn on the mountain-top of laughter.** It is wonderful to know that the Lord uses our bitter circumstances for our own good and for his glory (Romans 8:28). If you want to grow in the Christian life, learn that *it is better to listen to the rebuke of the wise than ... the song of fools* (5–6).

*I walked a mile with Pleasure,
She chatted all the way;
But left me none the wiser
For all she had to say.*

*I walked a mile with Sorrow,
And ne’er a word said she,
But, oh, the things I learned from her
When Sorrow walked with me.* (Robert Browning Hamilton)

The patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit

We face all kinds of pressures in life and we must resist yielding to sinful practices. Those who oppress the poor and needy are foolish because they destroy their own reasoning. In some countries bribery is a way of life, but it is sinful and it corrupts the heart (7). We must never resort to oppression nor should we give or take bribes.

The patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit (8). The proud man may have self-confidence, but the patient man is more able to cope with the difficult experiences of life. ‘Patient’ here means ‘slow’ in the sense of avoiding a hasty response to pressures that come upon us. Stuart Olyott writes, ‘It is sensible to be cautious in your speech, since it is only after you have spoken that you will be in a position to work out what the full effect of your words has been (8). Do not, therefore, be in a hurry to give expression to your anger, lest you end up by saying something that you will regret. Only fools are quick-tempered (9)’ A LIFE WORTH LIVING AND A LORD WORTH LOVING, page 48.

Let us beware of nostalgia. If we spend our time dreaming of ‘the good old days’ we are not wise (10). We tend to glamorise the good times of the past while forgetting the bad times. **If we live in the past, we will not cope with the present.** Nostalgia can drain us of spiritual energy and expectation. I am not suggesting that we ignore history. We must know history, both Christian and secular, learn from it, be warned and encouraged by it. We must, however, get on with our present work and be forward-looking.

Wisdom is far more valuable than money (11–12; cp. Proverbs 3:13–15). Our thoughts are again turned to the sovereignty of God. *In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of adversity consider: Surely God has appointed the one as well as the other* (13–14). We have already seen that we must accept the good times with joy and trust in God during hard times. **He orders our lives and it is a great comfort to know that he is in control of all our circumstances.**

Do not be overly righteous

Life often appears to be very unfair. The wicked may prosper while those who are good suffer (see Psalm 73). We may lead a righteous life, but that does not guarantee that we live longer or enjoy a happier life than the wicked. *There is a just man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his wickedness* (15). We may reason that if the good die young, we should follow the advice of verses 16 and 17. *Do not be overly righteous, nor be overly wise ... Do not be overly wicked, nor be foolish: why should you die before your time?*

Verse 16 and 17 are not a criticism of spiritual zeal and holiness. The most important thing for every Christian is to *seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness* (Matthew 6:33). If we have no interest in being holy, we should question whether we are saved (Hebrews 12:14; 1 John 2:3–6). The attitude of some unbelievers is, ‘Don’t be too good nor too bad,’ but this is not based on the teaching of the Bible. Verse 18 points us to the good way. Stuart Olyott comments, ‘So much for the advice of his unconverted days! Now his tune has changed, and he invites us to get hold of something, and to get hold of it properly (18a). Instead of walking a tightrope of trying to avoid too much righteousness on one side and too much wickedness on the other, give yourself to the fear of God. The person who does this comes off best of all (18b)’ A LIFE WORTH LIVING AND A LORD WORTH LOVING, page 50. It is this wisdom that strengthens us (19).

Even the godliest person is not immune from sinning (20). If we are painfully aware of our own failures, we will not have a judgemental attitude toward others. We will be criticised because we are not perfect and we should not take criticism to heart (21). If the criticism is justified, we must put our own lives right, and apologise if we have caused offence by careless talk or behaviour.