

ECCLESIASTES
and
SONG OF SOLOMON
An Exposition

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by

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DEDICATION

*To my children's children
Keith Robert Clark
and
Diana Michelle Hovater*

*May they always walk in paths
of righteousness for His name's sake.*

Foreword

The writer of Ecclesiastes said, “. . . of making many books there is no end” (Ecclesiastes 12:12). This is certainly applicable to the publishing of books in general; but in regard to the Biblical books of Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon, there are not many books of value which seek to interpret these fascinating but little known portions of God’s Word. I know of but few attempts by members of the Lord’s church to interpret these segments of sacred scripture. Therefore, a commentary by a scholarly preacher of the gospel is a welcome addition to the literature of our brotherhood and fills a real gap in Bible study aids.

The author of this work, John Waddey, is well qualified to give us the assistance we need in applying the teachings of Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon to our lives today. Brother Waddey is an experienced, effective evangelist. He is greatly in demand for lectureships and gospel meetings throughout the nation. He is also a talented teacher who has served the East Tennessee School of Preaching and Missions as an instructor since its beginning in 1971. Currently, he serves as director of the school.

In addition to his other abilities, Brother Waddey is a gifted and prolific writer. He has authored more than a score of books as well as numerous articles for various religious periodicals.

I have long felt that any production of John Waddey’s pen was worthy of my thoughtful reading. I do not believe that this commentary on Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon is an exception to this. Therefore, I am happy to commend it to all diligent students of God’s inspired book.

—*Rod Rutherford*

Preface

Every member of Adam's tribe will spend a large portion of his life searching for meaning, purpose and happiness in life. For some, the answer will forever elude them. Others will happily find it sooner or later in the Book of God. Ecclesiastes, if read and properly understood, could solve the mystery in just a few hours.

The purpose of this exposition is to open and make clear for the reader this remarkable book of ancient wisdom. For the last 15 years, the author has been privileged to teach this book to the students of the East Tennessee School of Preaching and Missions. The repeated study of its inspired pages has without doubt benefitted him personally most of all. The thoughts recorded are those evolved from classroom discussion and 28 years of experience and observation as a minister of Christ.

His teaching duties also include the lovely Song of Solomon. It is a privilege to share one's understanding of this "mystery book" with the reading public. In a day when monogamous, lifetime marriage is an endangered species, it is hoped that the thoughts gleaned from this sacred love song will help folks reaffirm their pure love for their lawful mates.

No production of this magnitude could be completed without assistance. The author expresses his appreciation to the secretarial staff of the Karns Church of Christ and especially his wife, Reba, for long hours of work on the manuscript. A special note of appreciation is in order to Mr. Bennie Whitehead, the publisher, for his patience with the writer as he struggled to complete this task among numerous other demanding obligations.

The author is painfully aware of the limitations of his work and truly regrets that time, circumstances and ability did not allow him to produce a better commentary on these sacred books.

This volume is sent forth with thanksgiving for the opportunity to participate in this writing project, and a prayer that only good will come from its publication. If just one soul learns to fear God and keep His commandments from reading it, every effort will have been well repaid.

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Ecclesiastes

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this commentary is to present a brief exposition of the contents of the book of Ecclesiastes. The author will leave to others the discussion of the Hebrew text and textual difficulties. The thoughts contained herein will be directed to the average reader who seeks for the meat of God's word, that he may live thereby and grow unto salvation.

Ecclesiastes is the story of Solomon's search for life's meaning and true happiness.

The **key verses** are 1:2,3: "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity, what profit hath man of all his labor wherein he laboreth under the sun?"

The **key thought** is that life apart from God is completely void of meaning and purpose and full of disappointment.

The **key word** is "vanity," which is used 37 times and means "futility, uselessness, nothingness."

The **key concept** is "under the sun." It is used 28 times and means "apart from God."

The **key person** is Solomon, king of Israel.

Authorship: Following Jewish and early Christian tradition, we ascribe the book to Solomon, "the son of David, king in Jerusalem" (1:1). Solomon's name, however, appears nowhere in the book. The experiences described in Chapter 2 could only be those of David's illustrious son. The search related in Ecclesiastes evidently occurred while Solomon was alienated from God (see 1 Kings 11:1-10).

Since the time of Luther, a large number of interpreters have questioned the Solomonic authorship. Today many scholars, including numerous conservatives, feel that a later author penned it. Briefly stated, their argument rests on the following points:

- (1) They argue that the historical facts of Solomon's life as seen in 1 Kings 2-11 do not match the state of things reflected in Ecclesiastes.
- (2) They note several words and expressions in the book that they date from the Persian period.

(3) Thus, many would date the book from the days of Malachi. Conservatives holding this view see the book as the product of some unknown, albeit inspired, author who wrote using the common literary device of “impersonation.” They concede that much of what is presented as said and done was actually from Solomon’s experience. H. C. Leupold, in his *Exposition of Ecclesiastes*, takes this view. For a strong case against it, compare Gleason Archer’s *Survey of Old Testament Introduction*.

Other works by Solomon: The great king is credited with a large portion of the book of Proverbs, the Song of Solomon, and Psalms 72 and 127. He gleaned the wisdom of other wise men and utilized it in his writing (Ecclesiastes 12:9).

Solomon’s Life. Solomon, the third and last king of united Israel, was the son of King David and his ill-gotten wife, Bathsheba (2 Samuel 12:24). The date of his birth would have been approximately 1,000-990 B.C.

The name “Solomon” meant “peaceful.” Nathan the prophet called him “Jedidiah,” which meant “beloved of the Lord” (2 Samuel 12:24,25). He assumed the throne of Israel around 972-970 B.C., being some 20 years of age. Solomon ruled in pomp and power for 40 long years (1 Kings 11:42).

The accomplishments of our subject were many and varied. His kingdom stretched from the Mediterranean to the Euphrates and from Mount Lebanon to the border of Egypt (1 Kings 4:21). He developed Israel as a major commercial power (1 Kings 9:66-68; 2 Chronicles 9:10-27). Throughout his administration, Israel enjoyed the only extended period of peace in her history. David’s son accumulated one of the greatest masses of wealth ever known (1 Kings 10:14-23).

As a builder, he built the fabulous Temple of Jehovah at Jerusalem. Building the temple occupied 153,300 laborers for seven years (1 Kings 5,6). Additionally, he built for himself a royal palace that took 13 years to complete (1 Kings 7:1).

Solomon was a great literary man. As a naturalist, he spoke of the flora and fauna of his land. In the field of morality, he penned 3,000 proverbs, of which we have some 800. He composed 1,005 songs, of which we have only Psalms 72 and 127 and the Song of Solomon (1 Kings 4:27-34). As a philosopher, he gave us the Book of Ecclesiastes, which discusses man’s search for meaning and happiness. His great wisdom was a gift from God (1 Kings 3:11,12). He also gleaned wisdom from other wise men (Ecclesiastes 12:9). Few men

have been blessed with his wide versatility of gifts.

With all his greatness, Solomon had glaring failures. Ignoring God's plan for monogamous marriage, he took 700 wives and 300 concubines. Many of these unions were with foreign women. In those days, it was common to seal alliances and treaties with a royal marriage. These foreign women turned his heart aside from the true worship of Jehovah to idolatry (1 Kings 11:1-8).

The lavish luxury of his administration was a burden to his subjects. His successor, Rehoboam, reaped the consequences of that with the rebellion and secession of the 10 northern tribes.

Solomon taught much better than he lived—a weakness common to many mortal men.

About the Book

Title: In the Hebrew Bible, the book is called *Koheleth*, which means “the words of the preacher.” The translators of the Septuagint rendered this *ekklasiastes*, from which we derive our English title. The Hebrew term suggests one who speaks to an assembly.

Date: If we are correct in assigning the book to Solomon, then the date would fall between 945 and 931 B.C. Advocates of the anonymous author offer dates ranging from 800 to 200 B.C.

Purposes: Six purposes are discernible in Ecclesiastes:

- (1) He wishes to convince his readers of the vanity of any world view which does not rise above man and his earthly surroundings.
- (2) He demonstrates the utter insufficiency of all earthly pursuits and material things to bring true happiness. Having done this, he labors to draw us away from that which is only apparently good to that which is real and enduringly good; namely, fearing God and keeping His commandments.
- (3) He argues that one may enjoy every mental, physical and social pleasure along with riches, fame and honor, and still never realize his true purpose for existing. In so doing, he will miss the only genuine and lasting joy.
- (4) The preacher teaches us that the absence of God from one's life allows the entrance of every kind of unhappiness.
- (5) He wants us to see God as the ultimate standard by which every aspect of life must be interpreted.

- (6) The judgment of vanity is pronounced upon every philosophy that makes the material world of human pleasure an end in itself.

The theme is the “vanity” of everything “under the sun.” This is first announced, then proven from the preacher’s personal experience and from his wide-reaching observation. Finally, by appeal and declaration, he shows that the whole of life is found only as there is recognition of things above the sun as well as those under the sun—of things spiritual as well as material (G. Campbell Morgan).

The following observations will prove helpful to the proper interpretation of the book:

- (1) Remember that it is a dramatic autobiography of Solomon’s experience and observations while he was estranged from God. Forsaking the Lord, he sought satisfaction in the things the world has to offer.
- (2) In this short story, God provides us a record of all that human wisdom can discover about the meaning and purpose of life. **The arguments advanced are Solomon’s, not God’s.** We have here an accurate record of what Solomon said and did in his estrangement, given to us by the Holy Spirit.
- (3) With the above point in mind, the meaning of several difficult passages will be clear. Some of the thoughts of the book reflect shrewd common sense. Others contain glimpses of deep spiritual truth. Still others are only partially true, and some are false. For example, consider:
 - (a) “There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink . . .” (2:24).
 - (b) “For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other, yea, they have all one breath; and man hath no preeminence above the beasts . . . all go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again” (3:19,20).
- (4) Solomon was wrestling with the problem of how to find happiness and meaning in life without God (1:3). He tells us of his search in science (1:4-11); philosophy (1:12-18); pleasure, strong drink and mirth (2:1-3); in elaborate houses, possessions and wealth (2:4-8a); in music, entertainment and sexual indulgence (2:8b); in position, prominence and power

(2:5-11); in fatalism (2:12-3:15); in materialism 3:16-27); and in morality (7:1-18). It is noteworthy that he found the answer to be that which he had no doubt heard long ago at his father's knee: "Fear God and keep his commandments" (12:13b).

- (5) It is essential that we remember that Solomon was not privileged to know all that we now know about a future life that would explain the mysteries of this life and reward the just and unjust. Immortality was only a vague hope until it was revealed through the gospel of Jesus (2 Timothy 1:10).

Some Interesting Facts About the Book

Most students agree that Ecclesiastes is one of the most puzzling books in the Old Testament.

It is considered the most melancholy book of the Bible.

Strangely, it has been a favorite book of noted infidels such as Voltaire, Frederick the Great, and Volney. Failing to grasp its message, they identified with Solomon's fruitless search for meaning and happiness. Of course, they ignore the last chapter.

The discussion of the author is from the viewpoint of a philosophical observer of social and political life rather than a king.

The book has some remarkable statements that reflect a scientific knowledge far ahead of the times—for example, the cycle of evaporation and rain pictured in 1:6,7.

The writer does not use the covenant name "Jehovah" when referring to God. It is always "Elohim," the creator.

There is no Messianic message in Ecclesiastes.

The writer seems to direct his lessons especially towards youth. The Hebrews considered one a youth until about age 40.

This is one of the most difficult books to correctly interpret. This is reflected in the many different views expressed by scholars.

It is a favorite of such cultish groups as the Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses who deny the immortality of the soul.

Wisdom Literature

Ecclesiastes is classified as “wisdom literature.” There were three classes of teachers in ancient Israel. Jeremiah mentions them in Chapter 18:18 of his book: “. . . for the law shall not perish from the **priest**, nor counsel from the **wise**, nor the word from the **prophet**.” Prophets presented new revelations from God to the nation. Priests taught the law, and conducted and maintained the traditional temple worship and customs. Wise men gave sage counsel and advice with keen insight derived from observation of life and their years of experience. They also gleaned wisdom from the knowledge passed down from earlier generations. Theirs was a practical wisdom for godly living.

The Hebrews believed the wisdom of their wise men to be a divine gift, not simply the result of human effort or superior intelligence. They recognized the wisdom that men seek in books, schools and museums, and which is acquired through experience and meditation, but they saw also a wisdom that came to some men as a direct gift from God. It was this kind of wisdom that Solomon received (1 Kings 3:10-12). They considered Solomon the foremost of all wise men. His wisdom surpassed that of all the people of Egypt and the East (1 Kings 4:29-34). A wise man was first of all knowledgeable, with special skills for instructing others. Because of his superior understanding of life, its purposes and how it should be lived, he was sought out.

Characteristics of Their Wisdom

Wise men were counselors and advisers to whom people resorted for guidance not found in the Law of Moses or the prophets. Wise men had little to say about the “institutional religion” of the temple, or even the covenant between Israel and Jehovah. Their primary concern was with men as individuals, their personal needs and social relationships. They dealt with proper behavior for daily life and with personal character. Their quest was for a life of coherence, value and meaning.

Practical ethics was their principal field, and the result of their reflections was generally formulated into maxims, parables, proverbs,

or fables. They also used riddles, allegories, exhortations, soliloquies, debates and rhetorical questions to express their points. Wise men stressed rational living which would naturally result in a godly and happy life. It was their thesis that a life controlled by reason would know the fewest sorrows.

In a day when books were rare and costly, and readers scarce as well, the wisdom of the tribe, clan, or nation was preserved and passed on by oral instruction and memorization. Thus, the wise men reduced their lessons to easily remembered proverbs and stories. They expressed lessons we have all recognized in our experience. Their easily recalled proverbs soon became household sayings and a part of daily communication.

A careful student of the wisdom books of the Bible will note the following characteristics common to all:

- (1) Their wisdom was far more than human sagacity—it was a gift from God (Proverbs 3:5-7).
- (2) They said little about life beyond the grave; it was not their primary concern. Additionally, little was known on the subject until revealed in the gospel of Christ (2 Timothy 1:10).
- (3) The individual person was the focal point of their interest.
- (4) The ideal man was depicted as one who believes in God and endeavors to live prudently by observation and by nature. He was intelligent, earnest, industrious, fair, benevolent and truthful.
- (5) Wisdom literature blends philosophy and poetry, and expresses the religious message of God for the daily affairs of life.
- (6) The problems of human conduct, religion and morality were studied by means of keen observation of man and nature.
- (7) The lessons found in these writings deal with generalities rather than with specific situations. Thus, we are told, “When a man’s ways please Jehovah, he maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him” (Proverbs 16:7). While all agree this is generally the case, the Lord and His apostles were notable exceptions.

Types of Wisdom Literature

The Book of Proverbs contains practical advice on how to live a good and successful life. Job and Ecclesiastes are reflective compositions that probe the meaning of life, its sufferings and its sorrows.

In addition to our three inspired books of wisdom, there are several ancient volumes of Hebrew wisdom by uninspired writers. The Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach, called Ecclesiasticus, and the Wisdom of Solomon are two of them.

Wisdom Compared With Other Forms of Revelation

The **law** presented the commandments and claims of God to man; **prophecy** passed judgment on human conduct in light of God's revealed will, and explained the purpose of God's dealing with men; **wisdom** sought by observation, experience and reflection to understand things in their true essence as they relate to God and man (John Davis).

Prophecy and wisdom were notably different methods of instruction. Prophets spoke from the point of divine revelation while wise men spoke from reason's point of view, drawing their lessons from experience and observation. (We hasten to add that God guided the wise men who wrote scripture to give us a true and heavenly approved record of their findings.) Prophets challenged men to hear and obey God's word. Wise men summoned them to understand and learn. Rather than demand, they persuaded and instructed.

Prophets spoke from their direct experience with God while wise men reflected the moral lessons gleaned from the world's broad experience and their accumulated learning.

Prophets dealt with temple worship, the priesthood and Israel's covenant duties; wise men did not. They did not address the nation as such; rather, they spoke to individuals about daily conduct.

Ecclesiastes and the Hebrews

In the Jewish Bible, Ecclesiastes is placed in the *megilloth*, or scrolls, along with the Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations and Esther. Its place in the canon of scriptures was hotly debated by the rabbis at the Council of Jamnia in 90 A.D. Jews still read Ecclesiastes

on the third day of the Feast of Tabernacles.

The New Testament has no quotes from Ecclesiastes although there are several parallel messages to be found.

E. C. Stedman wrote, “Whether prose or verse, I know of nothing grander than Ecclesiastes in its impassioned survey of mortal pain and pleasure; its estimate of failure and success; none of more noble sadness; no poem working more indomitably for spiritual illumination.”

A Simple Summary

- (1) **The Problem:** How to be happy without God (1:1-3).
- (2) **The Search:** Solomon sought happiness and satisfaction in every available way, but to no avail (1:4-12:12).
- (3) **The Conclusion:** The answer he finally found was simple: “Fear God and keep his commandments” (12:13,14).

The Prologue

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

In verse 1, we have the indication of authorship. Since the only son of David to reign as king in Jerusalem was the illustrious Solomon, we accept this as a statement of his authorship. For a more detailed discussion of authorship, see the introductory remarks. He calls himself the “Preacher”; that is, the one who gives wise instructions about life.

² *Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher; vanity of vanities, all is vanity.*

³ *What profit hath man of all his labor wherein he laboreth under the sun?*

“Vanity” means “empty” or “worthless.” “Under the sun” is a key concept of the book and means “apart from God.” So he declares that all of life’s work that leaves God out is empty and worthless. This is the theme of his book, and all that follows is designed to illustrate and confirm this point.

⁴ *One generation goeth, and another generation cometh; but the earth abideth for ever.*

⁵ *The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to its place where it ariseth.*

⁶ *The wind goeth toward the south and turneth about unto the north; it turneth about continually in its course, and the wind returneth again to its circuits.*

⁷ *All the rivers run into the sea, yet the sea is not full; unto the place whither the rivers go, thither they go again.*

⁸ *All things are full of weariness; man cannot utter IT: the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.*

In a despondent note, he describes life as one endless boring cycle that ends in despair. Generations of men are constantly entering and

exiting life on earth. The sun never ceases its apparent routine circuit. Winds forever blow, never reaching a final destination. Rivers flow endlessly, never able to rest. In his alienated mind, his life was like these material things—boring and gloomy—leaving him too discouraged to keep up the struggle.

⁹ That which hath been is that which shall be; and that which hath been done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun.

¹⁰ Is there a thing whereof it may be said, See, this is new? it hath been long ago, in the ages which were before us.

¹¹ There is no remembrance of the former GENERATIONS; neither shall there be any remembrance of the latter GENERATIONS that are to come, among those that shall come after.

Continuing the thought of verses 4 through 8, he asserts that there is “no new thing under the sun.” In a life without God, commonality and boredom are the chief attributes. Excitement and zest for life are soon lost to such a weary soul. We should not, however, press his words too literally. We see inventions in our day which Solomon did not know: airplanes, submarines, missiles, space stations, satellites, computers, and thousands of other things. But taken as a whole, life isn’t much different today than then. We experience the same stages of growth and maturation, the same human weaknesses, the same sins, and the same ambitions now as then.

Without God and eternal life, all would end at physical death. He is pained to consider that he would soon die—and be forgotten as would a tree in the forest. Apart from God, the only immortality would be in the memory of survivors, and observation demonstrates that to be short-lived.

The Vanity of Things Under the Sun Demonstrated

Beginning at 1:12 and continuing through 4:16, we will be considering the experiences of Solomon in his search for happiness without God and the disappointing results he found.

¹² I the Preacher was king over Israel in Jerusalem.

¹³ And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom concerning all that is done under heaven: it is a sore travail that God hath given to the sons of men to be exercised therewith.

¹⁴ I have seen all the works that are done under the sun: and, behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.

Verses 12 through 18 declare the vanity of worldly wisdom. It is a sore or painful travail or search; and without God as its focal point, it produces nothing of lasting value. Few men have been blest with the natural endowments of Solomon or the glorious opportunities for learning he had. Thousands have discovered by their experience, as did he, that the quest for knowledge is never satisfied, nor is the knowledge gained satisfying for the soul, if God is not considered.

To seek happiness in human wisdom is “a striving after the wind.” It is like trying to catch the wind in a sack—an impossible task. If you should succeed in capturing the wind, what would you have? Nothing!

¹⁵ That which is crooked cannot be made straight; and that which is wanting cannot be numbered.

¹⁶ I communed with mine own heart, saying, Lo, I have gotten me great wisdom above all that were before me in Jerusalem; yea, my heart hath had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.

¹⁷ And I applied my heart to know madness and folly: I perceived that this also was a striving after wind.

¹⁸ For in much wisdom is much grief; and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.

Human wisdom cannot correct every crooked or “wrong” event in life. This cannot be interpreted in an absolute sense, for there are some crooked **material** things which we can straighten: crooked teeth or limbs, crooked roads, etc. Even some moral or spiritual “crooked-

ness” can be straightened, or there would be no need to preach repentance. But all the wisdom in the world will not solve all of life’s anomalies.

As have many intellectuals after him, Solomon sought to verify or substantiate his wisdom by trying its opposites—“madness” and “folly” (1:17). He found those intellectual extremes were likewise unrewarding. Millions yet think advanced education, and especially science, to be the great solution to all of earth’s problems. They will sooner or later learn that while it is “a sore travail” to pursue education, its acquisition may actually bring much **grief** and increase **sorrow** rather than producing the expected joy. This is true because the more one learns, the more aware he becomes of the myriads of “crooked” problems that defy fixing. Also, he is doubly frustrated to learn that his coveted prize of knowledge fails to satisfy his soul’s deepest needs, which are spiritual.

We should not conclude from these despondent words that Solomon is recommending against education and the accumulation of knowledge. It is only the secular kind of education which excludes God that he scorns. Throughout the Book of Proverbs, he recommends wisdom of the higher sort.

2:1 I said in my heart, Come now, I will prove thee with mirth; therefore enjoy pleasure: and, behold, this also was vanity.

2 I said of laughter, It is mad; and of mirth, What doeth it?

3 I searched in my heart how to cheer my flesh with wine, my heart yet guiding ME with wisdom, and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what it was good for the sons of men that they should do under heaven all the days of their life.

The king now directs his energies to searching for the meaning and purpose of life in mirth, joy and pleasure. Although some 2900 years have elapsed since Solomon, men still are experimenting with these same basic ingredients in their search for true happiness. The entertainment industry booms in a world of miserable, unhappy people. Like Solomon, the survivors eventually conclude that it also is vanity.

The wise man then sought to “cheer his flesh with wine.” Folks are yet trying to find happiness in strong drink and its modern-day counterpart, mind-altering drugs. Solomon assures us that he did not allow his drinking to get out of control: “My heart yet guiding me with

wisdom . . . till I might see what it was good for the sons of men that they should do . . .” (verse 3). Sadly, many who try to use alcohol with moderation sooner or later find themselves trapped and destroyed by addiction. The truly wise man heeds Solomon’s advice in Proverbs 23:31,32:

*Look not thou upon the wine when it is red,
When it sparkleth in the cup,
When it goeth down smoothly:
At the last it biteth like a serpent,
And stingeth like an adder.*

He “abstain[s] from every form of evil” (1 Thessalonians 5:22), including this liquid plague of mankind. We should profit from Solomon’s experiment. No lasting, meaningful joy is found in intoxicants.

⁴ I made me great works; I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards;

⁵ I made me gardens and parks, and I planted trees in them of all kinds of fruit;

⁶ I made me pools of water to water therefrom the forest where trees were reared;

⁷ I bought men-servants and maid-servants, and had servants born in my house; also I had great possessions of herds and flocks, above all that were before me in Jerusalem;

In 2:4-11, our philosopher relates his search for happiness in materialism. It is a common delusion that the acquisition of and accumulation of property and possessions will satisfy the soul and make one happy. Solomon pronounces his great treasure trove of possessions “vanity and a striving after the wind” and without profit (verse 11).

It was the glory of ancient monarchs to be renowned as great builders. Solomon set the pace for others to follow. In addition to the majestic Temple of Jehovah, he built his own regal palace. It was 13 years in construction, and a masterpiece of architectural beauty (1 Kings 7:1-12). He built fortress cities, storage cities, cities to house his troops, and palaces for his harem (2 Chronicles 8:1-11). His possessions and achievements brought him recognition and glory greater than all that were before or after him in Israel, but the reward and personal satisfaction they gave was ephemeral and soon gone.

⁸ I gathered me also silver and gold, and the treasure of kings and of the provinces; I gat me men-singers and

women-singers, and the delights of the sons of men, musical instruments, and that of all sorts.

“Now the weight of gold that came to Solomon in one year was six hundred threescore and six talents of gold, besides that which the traders brought” and the tribute of his subjects (1 Kings 10:14). In 1962, the ancient talent of gold was thought to be worth some \$30,000. Thus, his annual income of gold alone was some 20 million dollars. “All King Solomon’s drinking vessels were of gold . . .” (1 Kings 10:21). Truly, “King Solomon exceeded all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom” (1 Kings 10:23).

With such wealth at his disposal, he was able to possess all that he wished for. The men-singers and women-singers were for the entertainment of the court. “The delights of the sons of men” were the lovely women of his harem. (Franz Delitzsch agrees with this conclusion in his commentary, pages 238 and 239.)

Solomon “had seven hundred wives, princesses and three hundred concubines; and his wives turned away his heart . . . after other gods . . .” (1 Kings 11:34). The modern playboy still dreams of finding ultimate pleasure in “recreational sex” and free love, but the curse of venereal disease and old age spoils the dream. This, too, is vanity.

⁹ So I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem; also my wisdom remained with me.

¹⁰ And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them; I withheld not my heart from any joy; for my heart rejoiced because of all my labor; and this was my portion from all my labor.

He frankly tells us of his great achievements which surpassed all that had preceded him in Jerusalem. He assures us that he managed to maintain a philosophical perspective through it all. The sad conclusion he reached is seen in verse 11:

¹¹ Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labor that I had labored to do; and, behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was no profit under the sun.

We feel a twinge of sadness for this greatest of all “poor little rich boys” who was miserable in the midst of his luxuries. Materialism was thus tried and found wanting as a source of genuine happiness.

¹² *And I turned myself to behold wisdom, and madness and folly: for what CAN the man DO that cometh after the king? EVEN that which hath been done long ago.*

Beginning at verse 12, our author takes up a new topic for discussion which is indicated by the words, "I turned myself to behold." He submits the question, "Is wisdom really superior to madness and folly?" Through verse 17, he pursues this point.

The latter part of verse 12 has vexed translators and commentators through the ages. Perhaps a comparison of translations will be helpful.

"For what can the man do that cometh after the king? Even that which hath been already done" (KING JAMES VERSION).

"For what can the man do who comes after the king? Only what he has already done" (REVISED STANDARD VERSION).

"For what will the man do who will come after the king except what has already been done?" (NEW AMERICAN STANDARD VERSION).

"And anyone else would come to the same conclusion I did . . ." (THE LIVING BIBLE PARAPHRASE).

The idea seems to be that "a king, especially such a one as Solomon was, has in the means at his disposal and in the extent of his observation so much more than every other that no one who comes after him will reach a different conclusion" (Delitzsch, page 245).

¹³ *Then I saw that wisdom excelleth folly, as far as light excelleth darkness.*

¹⁴ *The wise man's eyes are in his head, and the fool walketh in darkness:*

Even though he had already concluded that seeking happiness through worldly wisdom "was a striving after the wind" and "in much wisdom is much grief" (1:17,18), yet he wants to make clear that wisdom is far better than folly or ignorance. The difference is as great as sight is to blindness. The wise man can see where he is going; the fool cannot.

and yet I perceived that one event happeneth to them all.

¹⁵ *Then said I in my heart, As it happeneth to the fool,*

so will it happen even to me; and why was I then more wise? Then said I in my heart, that this also is vanity.

¹⁶ For of the wise man, even as of the fool, there is no remembrance for ever; seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. And how doth the wise man die even as the fool!

The one event that happens to both the wise and foolish is death. Since a common end awaits both, he reasons, what was the advantage of wisdom? Ultimately all will die, whether wise men or fools; but a wise man may well live longer than the fool because he is smart enough to avoid those things and situations that could result in sudden death. No wise man will die playing Russian roulette, from nicotine poisoning or acute alcohol poisoning, or a hundred other things that daily claim the lives of fools.

Depressed at the fact that wisdom could not help him escape death, he pronounces it vanity (verse 15).

Verse 16 is a favorite verse of those who deny that man's spirit lives beyond the grave, such as Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses. They overlook two facts:

- (1) Solomon lived in a day when little was known about the future life. Paul tells us that life and immortality were brought to light by Christ through the gospel (2 Timothy 1:10). The story of the rich man and Lazarus gives us a clear picture of the status of the dead, both righteous and wicked (Luke 16:19-31).
- (2) Solomon reached this conclusion while alienated from God and seeking answers through his worldly wisdom. The Holy Spirit has given us a true record of what he said and did, but does not guarantee the correctness of his conclusion.

What, then, does it mean that "there is no remembrance forever"? The next line helps us by saying, "In the days to come, all will have been forgotten." That is, whether you are a wise man or a fool, you will soon die, and eventually men will forget that you ever lived. To one with no hope of immortality, "this also is vanity" (verse 15).

¹⁷ So I hated life, because the work that is wrought under the sun was grievous unto me; for all is vanity and a striving after wind.

Finally, he reaches the dreary destiny of every man who tries to live without God—despair! "I hated life." How many infidels and

hedonists there have been who have wished they had never been born. A life lived without God (under the sun) is grievous, painful, empty and profitless!

With verse 18, the king declares the vanity of **human labor** apart from God.

¹⁸ And I hated all my labor wherein I labored under the sun, seeing that I must leave it unto the man that shall be after me.

¹⁹ And who knoweth whether he will be a wise man or a fool yet will he have rule over all my labor wherein I have labored, and wherein I have showed myself wise under the sun. This also is vanity.

Thinking of the great empire and immense fortune he had built, he despaired when he considered the fact that soon he would die and leave it to an heir whose course was, as yet, unpredictable. He no doubt had observed, as have we, the worthless heir who in months squanders an inheritance his father spent a lifetime in earning. Perhaps Solomon had some misgivings about his son, Rehoboam, who would inherit the throne. History paints a sad picture of this young man's folly and the consequential rending of the Hebrew nation (1 Kings 12:1-20).

²⁰ Therefore I turned about to cause my heart to despair concerning all the labor wherein I had labored under the sun.

²¹ For there is a man whose labor is with wisdom, and with knowledge, and with skillfulness: yet to a man that hath not labored therein shall he leave it for his portion. This also is vanity and a great evil.

²² For what hath a man of all his labor, and of the striving of his heart, wherein he laboreth under the sun?

²³ For all his days are BUT sorrows, and his travail is grief; yea, even in the night his heart taketh no rest. This also is vanity.

The more the rich man pondered this matter of his heir, the more discouraged he grew. He had worked with wisdom, knowledge and skill to gather his wealth. A son who had invested nothing in gaining it would inherit it all, and only God knew what he would do with it. Apart from God, wealth brings sorrow and grief. It causes one to lose sleep, fretting about the security of his possessions. "This also is

vanity”; it cannot bring true, lasting happiness.

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

²⁵ For who can eat, or who can have enjoyment, more than I?

In view of the uncertain future, he concludes, as do most sinners, “There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink,” and enjoy the fruit of his labors. Another rich man drew the same faulty conclusion. Not factoring God into his plans, the latter found himself snatched into eternity, totally unprepared for the event (Luke 12:16-21).

The word “soul” used in verse 24 means “himself.” This is seen by observing the parallel lines:

	<i>He</i>	<i>should eat and drink</i>
<i>and make</i>	<i>his soul</i>	<i>enjoy good in his labor</i>

The reader should always remember that the Hebrews, in their literature, commonly said a thing not once but twice or more. Each line complements the other and clarifies the thought, usually by amplification or by antithesis.

The word “soul” in the Old Testament is most often from the Hebrew word *nephesh*, which primarily means “life” or, in this verse, “one’s own person.” For an excellent discussion on “soul and spirit,” see the article on “Spirit” in *The Imperial Standard Bible Encyclopedia* by Patrick Fairbairn, Volume 6, pages 217 and 218.

That which “is from the hand of God” (verse 24) is happiness and joy. If material things brought happiness, surely Solomon would have had it in abundance in view of his great wealth and power. He is grasping for the truth expressed clearly by Jesus: “For a man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth” (Luke 12:15).

²⁶ For to the man that pleaseth him GOD giveth wisdom, and knowledge, and joy; but to the sinner he giveth travail, to gather and to heap up, that he may give to him that pleaseth God. This also is vanity and a striving after the wind.

Joy and happiness are gifts from God. He gives them to the man that pleases Him; that is, the righteous man who lives his life in view

of God and eternity. But to the sinner, God gives the opposite; that is, travail. The Moral Governor of the universe sees that the wicked reap what they sow. In Proverbs 13:22, Solomon observes that:

A good man leaveth an inheritance to his children's children: and [but] the wealth of the sinner is laid up for the righteous.

In His providence, God can take the riches accumulated by the wicked and give them to the righteous. He did just this when the Egyptians gave their treasures to the Hebrews (Exodus 12:33-36).

In view of this righteous providence, to work for riches apart from God is as foolish as trying to catch the wind in a sack!

Coming To Terms With the Laws of Life

In the section before us (3:1-6:12), Solomon faces and analyzes many of the harsh realities of life. These further demonstrate the vanity of life apart from God.

In 3:1-15, he reminds us that while all of man's works and deeds are temporary and transient, **God's works** shall be forever: “. . . nothing can be put to it, nor anything taken from it . . .” (3:14).

^{3:1} For every thing there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven:

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

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

⁴ a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

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

⁶ a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away;

⁷ a time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

⁸ a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.

⁹ What profit hath he that worketh in that wherein he laboreth?

The words of 3:1-9, often quoted by poets and songwriters, must be interpreted in light of the conclusion in verse 9: “What profit hath he that worketh in that wherein he laboreth?” The answer is **none of a permanent nature**. The constantly changing cycles of life are illustrated by 14 common examples from daily life. In this passage, he neither recommends or condemns any of the practices. Rather, he only stresses the one fact—that today's positive act will eventually be balanced by tomorrow's negative. As surely as we are born, we must one day die. In view of this unyielding law which weighs heavy on us,

what profit is there in a life lived or work done only for this life, with no consideration for eternity?

¹⁰ I have seen the travail which God hath given to the sons of men to be exercised therewith.

¹¹ He hath made every thing beautiful in its time: also he hath set eternity in their heart, yet so that man cannot find out the work that God hath done from the beginning even to the end.

The cycle of change and decay described in verses 1-9 is “the travail which God hath given to the sons of men . . .” (verse 10).

God hath made everything beautiful in its time (see Genesis 1:31), but then decay sets in; death and destruction follow (verse 10). Observation of and experience of this decay is a painful travail for all. Consider the parent who sees his beautiful child attacked and consumed by cancer and finally laid in the grave.

God hath set eternity in (man’s) heart, yet so that man cannot find out the work that God hath done (verse 11b). This frustrates a man and often makes his proud heart despair.

Verse 11 has troubled both translators and commentators. The following may be helpful:

“He also has planted eternity in men’s heart and mind [a divinely implanted sense of a purpose working through the ages which nothing under the sun, but only God, can satisfy]. Yet so that man cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end” (THE AMPLIFIED BIBLE).

“Moreover, he has given men a sense of time, past and future, but no comprehension of God’s work from beginning to end” (THE NEW ENGLISH BIBLE).

“But though God has planted eternity in the hearts of men, even so, man cannot see the whole scope of God’s work from beginning to end” (LIVING BIBLE PARAPHRASE).

We know the eternal God, we know of eternal life, and we know that He works all things for good; but we cannot always see the “big picture.” We are confused by the chaos of the moment. We are overwhelmed and discouraged. The faithful servant of God can console himself in the recognition that somehow God is working all things

together for his good (Romans 8:28). The man trying to live life apart from God has no such consolation; thus, he despairs.

¹² I know that there is nothing better for them, than to rejoice, and to do good so long as they live.

¹³ And also that every man should eat and drink, and enjoy good in all his labor, is the gift of God.

¹⁴ I know that, whatsoever God doeth, it shall be forever: nothing can be put to it, nor any thing taken from it; and God hath done it, that men should fear before him.

In view of the constant change and decay of all things material, and in view of man's inability to fathom life's mysteries and God's purpose, Solomon concludes with these observations:

- (1) "I know that there is nothing better for [men] than to rejoice and to do good as long as they live." Really, we have no other option. It is this or dash ourselves against the rocks of life.
- (2) Further, it is a gift of God that all men should eat and drink and enjoy good in all their labor. A happy life is a gift from God, not of our own achievements.
- (3) I know that whatsoever God doeth, it shall be forever, nothing can be put to it, nor anything taken from it. Only God and His work is permanent. To be happy, men must recognize and respect these facts.

¹⁵ That which is hath been long ago; and that which is to be hath long ago been: and God seeketh again that which is passed away.

This reaffirms his statement that there is nothing new under the sun, to which we may add, "History repeats itself." This cyclical nature of history he attributes to God's control.

In 3:16-22, he considers the vanity that is caused by wickedness and death in the world.

¹⁶ And moreover I saw under the sun, in the place of justice, that wickedness was there; and in the place of righteousness, that wickedness was there.

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

“Moreover” suggests that he now turns to consider yet another cause of frustration: wickedness “in the place of justice” or, as we would say, corruption in the courts and law system. Noting the parallels helps us to understand the verse, “I saw . . . **in the place of justice** that wickedness was there and **in the place of righteousness**, that wickedness was there.” Thus, the place of righteousness is the courts.

Under the sun, or in a world without God, there was no hope or cure for this social curse. The one hope for a just resolution of things was “above the sun” with God, who “will judge the righteous and the wicked” (verse 17). And God has appointed a time to judge all men according to their works (cf. Hebrews 9:27 and Revelation 20:11,12).

¹⁸ I said in my heart, IT IS because of the sons of men, that God may prove them, and that they may see that they themselves are BUT AS beasts.

While pondering in his heart the question, “Why does God allow such inequities to exist?” he concluded that it was for two purposes: (a) that God may prove men; that is, test or try their character by allowing such painful disorders to prevail in the world; and (b) that men may see that they “are but **as** beasts.” The last of these is a favorite “proof-text” of those who deny that man has an immortal spirit that survives physical death. Jehovah’s Witnesses teach, “A human is a soul. He does not possess a soul separate and distinct from the body” “The creative soul [including human soul] is mortal, destructible, corruptible” (*Make Sure of All Things*, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1953, pages 349-352). They are using the word “soul” as the equivalent of “spirit” in the general Christian vocabulary.

How shall we interpret the words of Scripture which seem to say that man is no different than the beast?

- (1) We must remember who is speaking—Solomon in a state of estrangement from God. Apart from God and His revelation, one could not know that his essence was different than the beasts.
- (2) Inspiration guarantees that we have a true and correct record of Solomon’s experiments and conclusions, however faulty they may be. It does not necessarily endorse the correctness of his statements.
- (3) Some are confused that such should be included in the Bible. The human race needed to see how badly the greatest human

mind could be deluded and in error without the light of divine revelation. If one such as Solomon concluded he was no different from a beast (when he shut God out of his life), we are thus warned to always trust God and diligently study His word for our instruction.

- (4) We moderns are able to see this absurd conclusion manifested daily in 10,000 classrooms and lecture talks as learned professors teach their gullible students that man is only a highly evolved animal with no immortal spirit. Most of these learned evolutionists have long since denied the existence of the God of the Bible.
- (5) Solomon (not the Holy Spirit) said in his heart that the frustrations of life lived without consideration of God and His divine purpose leads to the morbid and absurd conclusion that man is only a beast. This in itself is a powerful reason for us to hold to our faith in God. The option is not very desirable.

¹⁹ For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; and man hath no preeminence above the beast: for all is vanity. All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again.

The fact which drove him to his unhappy conclusion about the nature and value of man is seen in verses 19 and 20. Both a man and his dog will drown together in a raging stream or succumb to fatal blows. The breath of life ceases from the bodies of both man and beast when shot through with arrows. Both go into the ground to be consumed and reduced to dust. Without God and Scripture, who would know the grand truths about the immortal spirit and life after death?

Jesus brought life and immortality to light through the gospel (2 Timothy 1:10). That the spirit survives the body is illustrated in the story of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:18-31). Jesus refuted the Sadducees, who held a similar view, with a powerful syllogism in Matthew 22:31-33: God said, “I **am** (present tense) the God of Abraham . . . Isaac, and . . . Jacob. God is not the God of the dead, but of the living.” Therefore, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are living even though their bodies rest in the dust of the earth.

²¹ Who knoweth the spirit of man, whether it goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast, whether it goeth downward to the earth?

This verse contains the thought of verses 15 and 20. Without God, one cannot even know the nature of himself. The secular man cannot show that he has more permanent or eternal value than a beast. He is not sure that he has a spirit, or whither such a spirit might go at death. It may go up to a higher realm; it might end in a moldy grave with the body.

It is worthwhile to look ahead to the author's conclusion when he had found his way back to God. Solomon wrote of death: "And the dust [the physical body] returneth to the earth as it was, and the spirit returneth unto God who gave it" (Ecclesiastes 12:7).

²² Wherefore I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his works; for that is his portion: for who shall bring him BACK to see what shall be after him?

"Wherefore" tells us that he drew a conclusion from his ponderings about the nature of man. Being unable to find certain knowledge apart from God, he concluded that he should enjoy his **present** activities and successes. He appears to have lost all hope of a future existence at this point, for he pessimistically asks, "For who shall bring him back to see what has happened after he is gone?" (*The Amplified Bible*). Thank God that we Christians know and are assured that when we depart this life, we shall be with the Lord (Philippians 1:23); that we shall be comforted along with righteous Lazarus (Luke 16:25); that we will be raised when Jesus returns (1 Thessalonians 4:16-18) and ever be with the Lord!

In Chapter 4, our searching philosopher writes of the vanity and disappointments of earthly life lived without God. He covers a wide variety of frustrating problems common to humanity.

^{4:1} Then I returned and saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun: and, behold, the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power; but they had no comforter.

First, he notes the **evil of oppression** common to human society and the vanity it reflected. Without God, the poor and downtrodden had no comforter. The oppressors had power and advantage, but no com-

forter when their hour of reckoning came. Christians can be thankful for “the God of all comfort; who comforteth us in all our affliction” (2 Corinthians 1:3,4).

² Wherefore I praised the dead that have been long dead more than the living that are yet alive;

³ yea, better than them both DID I ESTEEM him that hath not yet been, who hath not seen the evil work that is done under the sun.

In verses 2 and 3, we witness the tragic conclusion of a heart adrift from God. To such miserable souls, death seems preferable to life. Better to never have been born than to face the bitter world without God and without hope. Because we know the Lord, we “rejoice in the Lord always” (Philippians 4:4). With Paul, we “take pleasure in weaknesses, in injuries, in necessities, in persecutions . . . for Christ’s sake,” for when we are weak, then are we strong (2 Corinthians 12:10).

⁴ Then I saw all labor and every skillful work, that for this a man is envied of his neighbor. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.

⁵ The fool foldeth his hands together, and eateth his own flesh.

⁶ Better is a handful, with quietness, than two handfuls with labor and striving after wind.

In verse 4, he addresses the problem of envy. He sees the skillful worker producing high-quality products. In a godless world, sinners envy and resent his success rather than rejoice in it. In contrast to the diligent worker, he sees the lazy fool who, rather than work, “foldeth his hands together” in rest “and eateth his own flesh”; that is, he consumes his inheritance or reserves and destroys his hope of a prosperous future by his slothfulness. Solomon concludes that a simple but adequate existence is preferable to an elusive prosperity that is as slippery as the wind.

⁷ Then I returned and saw vanity under the sun.

⁸ There is one that is alone, and he hath not a second; yea, he hath neither son nor brother; yet is there no end of all his labor, neither are his eyes satisfied with riches. For whom then, SAITH HE, do I labor, and deprive my soul of good? This also is vanity, yea, it is a sore travail.

In this passage, he comments on the prosperous man who has no heirs. He has been blessed with prosperity; yet, rather than enjoy it himself, he continues to drive himself to earn more and more. To the wise man, this was the ultimate folly. It is still a common phenomenon in our modern world. Money is made to be spent. A prudent man saves a portion for future needs, but he also takes time to enjoy the fruit of his labor. A wise Christian remembers the Lord's work in his will. Thus, even if he has no earthly heirs, he lays up treasures in heaven (Matthew 6:19-21).

⁹ Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor.

¹⁰ For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth, and hath not another to lift him up.

¹¹ Again, if two lie together, then they have warmth; but how can one be warm ALONE?

¹² And if a man prevail against him that is alone, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

Verses 9 through 12 affirm that the struggles of life are better faced by partners than alone. Three examples are given:

- (1) When two are traveling together, if one falls, the other will lift him up;
- (2) In the cold of winter, a partner can help a person stay warm; and
- (3) An individual is more easily prevailed against by attackers than are two.

God observed that it was not good for man to be alone, so He ordained the institutions of marriage and family (Genesis 2:18). Knowing it would be hard to be a Christian all alone, He gave us the church for a spiritual family (1 Timothy 3:15). Christ sent out His missionaries by twos (Mark 6:7).

¹³ Better is a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king, who knoweth not how to receive admonition any more.

¹⁴ For out of prison he came forth to be king; yea, even in his kingdom he was born poor.

¹⁵ I saw all the living that walk under the sun, that they

were with the youth, the second, that stood up in his stead.

¹⁶ There was no end of all the people, even of all them over whom he was: yet they that come after shall not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and a striving after wind.

To further demonstrate the vanity and uncertainty in life, he now draws an example from the world of politics. Likely, he has in mind some historical case in 4:13-16. Numerous examples have been cited by scholars, but nothing definite can be concluded. The characters are: (a) an old and **foolish** king, too stubborn to take advice; and (b) a poor but **wise** youth who took the throne from the former.

He then notes the painful truth that the populace of any land is politically fickle and vacillating. At first, the multitudes rush to the side of the youthful usurper. Then, with time, his popularity fails. The same crowd now turns against him and rallies to the next contender. Those who think that political power is a satisfactory goal and end in life always live to see this fickle fate—unless they die in office while in their apex. This is as modern as today's news in our American politics. Solomon says such is vanity and disappointing. There must be something better.

Chapter 5:1-6:12 is yet another collection of miscellaneous observations and recommendations about life. Verses 1 through 7 contain advice about the practice of religion.

^{5:1} Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God; for to draw nigh to hear is better than to give the sacrifice of fools: for they know not that they do evil.

His first advice is to “keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God.” The house of God in Solomon's day was the temple where sacrifices were offered. “Foot” is a metonymy of the adjunct, and stands for the entire person of which the foot is part. Other translations help us understand the thought.

*“Guard your steps as you go to the house of God”
(NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE).*

“Go carefully when you visit the house of God” (NEW ENGLISH BIBLE).

The main point is in the second line—“for to draw nigh to hear is better than to give the sacrifice of fools.” Kenneth Taylor paraphrases it thusly: “As you enter the Temple, keep your ears open and your

mouth shut” (*Living Bible*).

Solomon then explains “the sacrifice of fools.” Some offer worship to God, but they know not that they do evil. In another place, Solomon notes that “the sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to Jehovah” (Proverbs 15:8). But a sacrifice offered **without proper understanding and intent** is likewise unacceptable. Jesus told us that God seeks true worshipers who do so “in spirit and truth” (John 4:24). Paul teaches us to pray with the spirit and “with the understanding also” (1 Corinthians 14:15). The grand lesson is that acceptable worship is more than correct acts of ritual. It must also involve understanding, intent and sincerity.

² Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thy heart be hasty to utter any thing before God; for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few.

³ For a dream cometh with a multitude of business, and a fool’s voice with a multitude of words.

Continuing his admonitions concerning worship, he warns against hasty promises to God. Man must keep ever in mind God’s superiority and his own place as a creature. Verse 3 is a proverb. A busy, hectic day will reflect itself in one’s dreams, and a fool will be recognized easily by his excessive talk. In another place, Solomon says, “In the multitude of words there wanteth not transgression: but he that refraineth his lips doeth wisely” (Proverbs 10:19). This being true in general matters, it is all the more so in religion. The following verses illustrate this point.

⁴ When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for he hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou vowest.

⁵ Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay.

Among the Hebrews, vows to God were common. Many made Nazarite vows (Numbers 6:1-21). Others, like Hannah, made solemn promises or commitments to God (1 Samuel 1:19-28). It is a common weakness of the human race to promise God anything when in trouble yet, when prosperity returns, fail to honor the commitment. God has no pleasure in rash, hasty vows made by foolish hearts. Better not to make a vow than to make one and break it. This principle is applicable to numerous situations we face as Christians. God expects us to keep our promises, whether to Him or man. Not to

do so is a form of dishonesty.

⁶ Suffer not thy mouth to cause thy flesh to sin; neither say thou before the angel, that it was an error: wherefore should God be angry at thy voice, and destroy the work of thy hands?

⁷ For in the multitude of dreams there are vanities, and in many words: but fear thou God.

By not making rash vows which will likely be broken, we avoid sin.

We take the word “angel” by its definition as a “messenger of God” (Revelation 1:20). We see the Jewish worshiper who makes a rash vow and has broken it. He attempts to justify himself before God’s messenger, the priest, by saying the vow was an error or mistake. For genuine mistakes of judgment and conduct, a ritual of sacrifice was prescribed (Leviticus 5:4-6). Solomon then asks the vow-breaker, “Wherefore should God be angry at thy voice [the excuse offered] and destroy the work of thy hands?” For similar use of the interrogative after the charge, see Ezra 4:22 and 7:23. Destruction rather than blessings came because the man had broken his vows to God.

He concludes with the wise observation that a man who speaks and promises too much is as likely to produce as would be a multitude of dreams. “Fear thou God”—don’t make rash vows. Jephthah is the classic example of a man who paid dearly for a rash vow (Judges 11:29-40).

⁸ If thou seest the oppression of the poor, and the violent taking away of justice and righteousness in a province, marvel not at the matter: for one higher than the high regardeth; and there are higher than they.

⁹ Moreover the profit of the earth is for all: the king HIMSELF is served by the field.

The author now moves to new topics that have always been a burden to sensitive hearts: **oppression of the poor and injustice**. While sometimes seen in modern America, they were common in ancient society and still prevail in much of the world.

He exhorts the observer of oppression to “marvel not.” The meaning seems to be, “Do not be dismayed at this abuse.” The *New American Standard Bible* renders it, “Do not be shocked at the sight.” One might be tempted to despair of ever seeing a change for good, but Solomon reminds us that superiors will soon discover the abuse of the offender and call him to account. Then, of course, there

is one higher than all earthly authority—namely God. “Each one of us shall give account of himself to God” (Romans 14:12). Thus, in judgment, all such wrongs will be righted!

The profit of the earth is intended to bless all, not just a few powerful oppressors (verse 9).

“The king himself is served by the field” poses a problem for most commentators. Several modern translations follow the *Revised Standard Version*—“But in all, a king is an advantage to a land with cultivated fields”—the idea being that even though there is abuse in monarchical government, it was the best known in that age. The alternative was anarchy.

He might possibly be suggesting that the king who is tempted to abuse his subjects should remember that he benefits best when his subjects are prosperous, happy and fairly treated. Their prosperity brings more revenues to his coffers and loyalty to his administration.

Solomon now turns to a lengthy discussion of “the vanity of riches.” It extends from 5:10-6:9.

¹⁰ He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance, with increase: this also is vanity.

¹¹ When goods increase, they are increased that eat them: and what advantage is there to the owner thereof, save the beholding OF THEM with his eyes?

¹² The sleep of a laboring man is sweet, whether he eat little or much; but the fulness of the rich will not suffer him to sleep.

First, he affirms that money and material things will not satisfy. Rather, they tend to create an insatiable desire for more, which is frustrating. He observes that the more we get, the more we spend. The man who barely survives on \$200 per week gets a raise and now makes \$300, yet he nearly always raises his standard of living and allows his needs and wants to expand, and he soon is barely surviving on the \$300. For most, the cycle never ends.

He reasons there is little advantage in purchasing additional houses, cars, livestock, or furnishings except for the satisfaction of looking at them. We must not press his comment too literally lest we reach an absurdity of having no material possessions at all. A man like Solomon could well express this thought since he had indulged every desire of his heart (2:10).

He concludes the paragraph with the wistful observation that a “laboring man” can sleep sweetly even though he doesn’t have enough of life’s provisions. This is true because he hasn’t overeaten, and thus incurred indigestion. Also, he doesn’t worry about thieves or embezzlers since he has nothing worth stealing. In contrast, the rich man has trouble sleeping because of his overindulgence, or for concern that his wealth and possessions may be stolen while he sleeps.

Beginning in verse 13, he addresses the sad case of a wealthy man who loses his fortune.

¹³ There is a grievous evil which I have seen under the sun, NAMELY, riches kept by the owner thereof to his hurt:

¹⁴ and those riches perish by evil adventure; and if he hath begotten a son, there is nothing in his hand.

¹⁵ As he came forth from his mother’s womb, naked shall he go again as he came, and shall take nothing for his labor, which he may carry away in his hand.

¹⁶ And this also is a grievous evil, that in all points as he came, so shall he go: and what profit hath he that he laboreth for the wind?

¹⁷ All his days also he eateth in darkness, and he is sore vexed, and hath sickness and wrath.

He contemplates a man who has prospered and carefully saved his wealth only to see his fortune swept away “by evil adventure.” This could be a depression, a bank failure, robbery, war, or some natural disaster such as fire, flood, or storm, or some adverse turn in the economic market. Such has happened to thousands of people in our lifetime. The poor man’s children will have no inheritance because he is now penniless (verses 14 and 15). Verse 15 reflects the words and thought of Job 1:21. “He laboreth for the wind” means that he had nothing to show for his life’s work. His bag was empty as the air. The poor fellow spends his last days “in darkness”; that is, bitterness and sorrow. Perhaps he goes to an early grave grieving for his losses.

¹⁸ Behold, that which I have seen to be good and to be comely is for one to eat and to drink, and to enjoy good in all his labor, wherein he laboreth under the sun, all the days of his life which God hath given him: for this is his portion.

¹⁹ Every man also to whom God hath given riches and wealth, and hath given him power to eat thereof, and to

take his portion, and to rejoice in his labor; this is the gift of God.

²⁰ For he shall not much remember the days of his life; because God answereth him in the joy of his heart.

Now he reaches yet another conclusion regarding life and material possessions: Some allow their possessions to dominate their lives and determine their happiness or sorrow. He recommends the simple life as a more “comely” or desirable path. Work hard; enjoy the fruit of your labor as a gift from God. Be thankful to God for the ability to enjoy life. Such a man will not dwell on or long remember the unhappy days of life. Neither will he be fretting about the uncertain future (Matthew 6:25-34). God will bless him with joy in his heart. Most folks waste a lifetime before they learn that genuine happiness is not contingent upon wealth, position, or power. In fact, this trio of material masters will often rob one of happiness rather than bestowing it.

^{6:1} There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, and it is heavy upon men:

² a man to whom God giveth riches, wealth, and honor, so that he lacketh nothing for his soul of all that he desireth, yet God giveth him not power to eat thereof, but an alien eateth it; this is vanity, and it is an evil disease.

Beginning at 6:1, he discusses still another vanity he has observed concerning material possessions. He pictures a man of wealth and honor who lacks nothing; and then, an **alien** takes it away and consumes it. The alien could be an invading army, a thief, or a dishonest businessman who steals his wealth. He calls it “vanity” and “an evil disease” or a “plague of life.”

³ If a man beget a hundred children, and live many years, so that the days of his years are many, but his soul be not filled with good, and moreover he have no burial; I say, that an untimely birth is better than he:

⁴ for it cometh in vanity, and departeth in darkness, and the name thereof is covered with darkness;

⁵ moreover it hath not seen the sun nor known it: this hath rest rather than the other:

⁶ yea, though he live a thousand years twice told, and yet enjoy no good, do not all go to one place?

Still another misfortune of life is introduced in 6:3-5. He sees a man

who had lived long and had many children, but his years were marred by circumstances that robbed him of happiness. Perhaps bad health, an unhappy marriage, or an inordinate amount of sorrow had stolen happiness away from him; or, after such a long and fruitful life, the man had no proper burial at death. To Solomon, this would be a terrible conclusion. To the ancients who knew but little about life beyond the grave, a proper burial was extremely important. The great burial monuments of Egypt and the East reflect this concern with the body at death. It is yet that way for most people. The Christian, whose knowledge of the state of the dead and a coming resurrection puts the events of this life in proper perspective, is not so concerned with what happens to the physical body at death (cf. Luke 16:19-31 and 2 Timothy 1:10).

In those days of polygamy, a wealthy man with many wives could easily father a hundred or more children. Solomon himself had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines (1 Kings 11:37).

To the despondent philosopher, “an untimely birth” or to be born dead was preferable to an unhappy life or an improper burial. Of course, we Christians would not subscribe to such a view. We see life as worth living even though the quality thereof may be less than desirable. Verses 5 and 6 describe the victim of stillbirth. “It cometh in vanity”; i.e., dead rather than alive. It “departeth in darkness”—it is not shown to family and friends as a live-born child would be, but is immediately disposed of. It “hath not seen the sun”—it never knew a day to suffer misfortune. But at least the child born dead “hath rest rather than the other” man who lived long but had no joy or proper burial.

He concludes the section by noting that the stillborn child and the long-lived man both end up in the same place—the grave. This invincible enemy of man called “death” drives him to the morbid conclusion that since one is going to die anyway, why bother with living? Thank God that Christ has “abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Timothy 1:10). He has brought “to nought him that had the power of death, that is the devil” and delivered “all them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage” (Hebrews 2:14,15). When the trumpet sounds, we know that “the dead shall be raised incorruptible” (1 Corinthians 15:52). That is good news for all men.

⁷ *All the labor of man is for his mouth, and yet the appetite is not filled.*

⁸ *For what advantage hath the wise more than the fool?*

OR what hath the poor man, that knoweth how to walk before the living?

⁹ Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the desire: this also is vanity and a striving after wind.

Verses 7 through 9 discuss the problem of man's insatiable desire for food. Men labor for food for their mouths or bellies. He then compares three classes of men, all of whom are faced with their never-ending problem of feeding self. "What advantage hath the **wise** more than the **fool**? Or what [advantage] hath the **poor man** [over either of the above] even though he 'knoweth how to walk before the living'?" The wise man who has learned to master his appetites and live an ordered life still has to eat just as does the undisciplined fool. The poor man who knows how to conduct himself rightly among his contemporaries still must eat like all others. This unending tyranny of the mouth he sees as a great frustration in life. If he had thought of the only other option, it would not have seemed so bad—dead men don't have to eat!

Verse 9 is in the form of a proverb. It says it is better to enjoy what you have in hand rather than to spend your time dreaming about that which you do not have. A modern proverb says, "A bird in the hand is better than two in the bush."

¹⁰ Whatsoever hath been, the name thereof was given long ago; and it is known what man is; neither can he contend with him that is mightier than he.

¹¹ Seeing there are many things that increase vanity, what is man the better?

¹² For who knoweth what is good for man in HIS life, all the days of his vain life which he spendeth as a shadow? for who can tell a man what shall be after him under the sun?

The concluding paragraph of Chapter 6 is a summation of his search thus far. In it, we see the sad fate of a man who is seeking meaning, purpose and happiness without God. Such always ends in pessimistic failure. The passages before us are obscure and difficult. Two possible interpretations have been suggested by competent scholars.

- (1) The first is one of absolute fatalism in regard to man's life. *The Living Bible* reflects this view: "All things are decided by fate; it was known long ago what each man would be. So

there's no use arguing with God about your destiny.”

- (2) The second is reflected in the footnote of the *American Standard Version*: “Whatsoever he be, his name was given him long ago, and it is known that he is man.” The emphasis is on the word **man** which, in the Hebrew, is Adam. The *Amplified Bible* offers this rendering: “Whatever **man** is, he has been named that long ago; and it is known that it is Adam [Adam means “man of the ground”; the very name witnesses to his frailty”]; nor can he contend with him who is mightier than he [whether God or death].” So, the student must choose between “fatalism” or “frailty.” Either fits the general idea of the argument, as both lead to the conclusion that life is vanity.

Regarding verse 11—“Seeing that there are many things that increase vanity . . .”—the footnote is likely correct in saying “many words” that increase vanity. “What is man the better?” means “What does a lot of talk profit a man?”

Verse 12 reflects the classic “Who knows?”—the answer of many philosophers who seek answers to life’s questions while rejecting God’s answers. “Who knows what is good for man? Who knows the future?” he asks. Fortunately, humble Christians know the answers that the brilliant and mighty Solomon was unable to discover. The good life is found in following Jesus. And while we don’t know what the future holds, we do know who holds the future.

His observation that man spends the days of his life “as a shadow” is also seen in Job 8:7. What a sad and dreary existence it is for those who live without God. Even though they have all of earth’s comforts and treasures, the void in their souls leaves them like a man overboard in a raging sea—without God and without hope.

Deductions From His Research, With Rules and Warnings For Life

Chapters 7-12:8 contain suggestions and warnings for life based upon his previous research and experience. The seventh chapter, in general, offers advice for living in a sin-cursed world. Verses 1-4 of Chapter 7 show us certain benefits of adversity in life.

7:1 A good name is better than precious oil; and the day of death, than the day of one's birth.

The following lessons are couched in the form of proverbs; that is, wise sayings, easily remembered, that contain some profound truth. It is also valuable to remember that the usual form of the proverb is to place two thoughts in parallel lines, each of which complements the other and further explains its mate. We see this illustrated in verse 1, where two sets of things are compared that we may see and choose the better.

“A good name is better than precious oil [wealth]; and the day of one's death [is better] than the day of one's birth.” While no one disputes the first thought, the second may be viewed from two distinct angles.

Yes, death is better than birth if life has been filled with misery and sorrow; or if to have longer days, one must shame and dishonor himself; or if we think of the righteous dead going home to be with God (Philippians 1:21-23). It is also true that one escapes Satan's temptations and snares in death.

But if we take Solomon too literally, we would surely err. Why have children at all if life is so bad? Why not do them a favor by killing them at birth or leaving them to die of neglect? The ancient Spartans and Romans often did this. It would be a disservice to be a doctor or nurse dedicated to saving lives. Those who do take it literally hold life of little value. Suicide is considered by such people as an acceptable way to deal with problems.

It is interesting that some ancients did mourn the birth and celebrate the death of a person.

² It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting: for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to his heart.

³ Sorrow is better than laughter; for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made glad.

⁴ The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.

Verses 2-4 are related to the single theme that one learns more in sorrowful and sad situations than in the environment of a party. All of these verses relate to his statement in 7:16 that the day of death is better than the day of birth. The house of mourning is the house where death has occurred. When death strikes those near to us, we are sobered and forced to re-examine our lives and goals. Every minister has seen changed lives that were prompted by the death of a friend or loved one. The ancient Greeks had a maxim that said, "Pain is gain."

We should not take Solomon's words absolutely or literally. It is the nature of proverbial literature to speak in poetic style with heavy use of the metonymy, metaphor, simile and hyperbole. It speaks of generalities. When one treats proverbial statements as laws or absolute promises, he will usually err in his application.

There is a proper time and place for social fellowship and its accompanying pleasure. Jesus participated in the marriage feast at Cana (John 2:1-11). The warning is to those who want only the parties and good times. They studiously avoid the sad and sorrowful occasions of life. One could err in the other direction and be a morose lover of the funeral parlor. The wise man partakes of both, but appreciates the serious and sobering experience more than the frivolous fun of a party. This lesson is surely needed in our American society today.

In verses 5-10, he warns us of certain pitfalls of life which should be avoided.

⁵ It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise, than for a man to hear the song of fools.

⁶ For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fool: this also is vanity.

Here, we are reminded that an unpleasant thing may be more valuable than a pleasant one. No one enjoys being rebuked; pride usually rebels. Most folks prefer entertainment to a lecture. Yet experience verifies the wise man's observations. Few of us are so smart that we need no corrective advice. The wise soul will swallow his pride and accept the advice offered.

Jews often used thorn wood to heat their food or water. It popped and cracked as it hotly burned. Of course, the sounds produced were

meaningless to the ear and of no value; so is the laughter of a fool's jokes and silly stories valueless.

⁷ Surely extortion maketh a wise man foolish; and a bribe destroyeth the understanding.

He now deals with two common crimes of the race—extortion and bribery. A great deal of confusion surrounds this line in the various commentaries. W. T. Bullock explains it “that if a wise man, being in a high position, exercises oppression . . . or practices extortion, he becomes a fool in so doing” (*Cook's Bible Commentary*). The two lines considered together tell us that whether one is extorting something from his neighbor or whether he is giving or receiving a bribe, either or both are foolish deeds. This is the case because, sooner or later, the wrong is discovered and the perpetrator receives his just reward for his corrupt dealing. Isaiah tells us that to dwell with God, man must shake “his hand from taking a bribe” (Isaiah 33:15).

⁸ Better is the end of a thing than the beginning thereof: and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit.

The conclusion of a big job is more satisfying than the first steps of endeavor. The successful end of a surgery is more desirable than the beginning. As is true of most proverbs, this is a general truth to which you might find exceptions. Is the last bite of ice cream better than the first, or the end of the visit with a loved one better than the beginning? His main point, however, is that a patient spirit is better than a proud spirit. The man whose spirit is patient avoids a thousand troubles in life into which the proud man falls. A patient, long-suffering spirit is a fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22). The pride of life “is not of the Father, but is of the world” (1 John 2:16).

Verse 9 deals with yet another flaw of the human spirit to be avoided.

⁹ Be not hasty in thy spirit to be angry; for anger resteth in the bosom of fools.

To be “hasty in spirit” means to be volatile or short-tempered. In every society, the impulsive man and the hothead have been set forth as poor examples, to be avoided. To qualify as an elder in God's church, a man must be “not soon angry” (Titus 1:7). To allow one's temper to run unchecked is the mark of a fool. How many violent crimes of passion have been provoked by a hasty spirit? Parents, do

your children a lifelong favor by teaching them to restrain their spirit.

¹⁰ Say not thou, What is the cause that the former days were better than these? for thou dost not inquire wisely concerning this.

His next word of advice is to avoid living in the past. It is a universal weakness of man to glorify and idealize the past. We conveniently forget all the flaws and problems, remembering only the good things and often exaggerating them. While so doing, we may neglect the duty of the present or overlook great opportunities that stand before us. Even in the church, we tend to lionize the preachers and events of the last century while having only criticism for those of the present. The past had its problems, and we have our heroes though not yet appreciated. Paul forgot the things behind him and concentrated on the present and future; so should we (Philippians 3:13).

¹¹ Wisdom is as good as an inheritance; yea, more excellent is it for them that see the sun.

¹² For wisdom is a defence, even as money is a defence; but the excellency of knowledge is, that wisdom preserveth the life of him that hath it.

He now turns his attention to a favorite theme—**wisdom**. Wisdom, says he, is more valuable than an inheritance of material wealth. If a young adult has wisdom, he will find a good job and make adequate money for his needs. Being wise, he will carefully administer his funds, and his wealth will grow. If he inherits a large estate but has no wisdom, he will soon squander it, or someone will trick him out of it. There is a dimension of wisdom passed on by genetic inheritance over which we have no control. However, the greater part of our wisdom is acquired by education and training. Parents owe their children this nurture and admonition of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4).

In verse 12, he observes that “wisdom is a defence, even as money is” Both can help a man avoid many problems of life. Yet, with wisdom and good common sense, a man can save himself from situations where money would not help. Money would not buy off an angry bear; a wise man would never have bothered her cub.

¹³ Consider the work of God: for who can make that straight, which he hath made crooked?

¹⁴ In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider; yea, God hath made the one side by

side with the other, to the end that man should not find out anything that shall be after him.

Solomon challenges us to consider God's work of governing the world's events and every man's life. God does that which pleases Him, and we must learn to accept it or be miserable. The terms **straight** and **crooked** are not to be applied literally to the physical creation. Modern man can straighten the course of a crooked stream of water. Even the crooked spine can be straightened. But we cannot alter the events of life which God sends our way. This is made clear in verse 14. God sends days of prosperity (straight days) and days of adversity (crooked, twisted days). His advice is that we remind ourselves when hard times come that God is ruling His world and working all things for good to those who love Him (Romans 8:28). Rather than be bitter and resentful, rather than give up, remember God is on the side of His children; so make the best you can of it. God's reason for sending both prosperity and adversity is "that man should not find out anything that shall be after him" (14b). Delitzsch explains this thusly: "God causes man to experience good and evil that he may pass through the whole school of life, and when he departs hence that nothing may be outstanding [in arrears] which he has not experienced" (commentary, page 323).

¹⁵ All this have I seen in my days of vanity: there is a righteous man that perisheth in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man that prolongeth his life in his evil doing.

Verse 15 introduces another topic—one that has occupied the mind of men from ancient times: "Why do the righteous suffer and wicked prosper?" This is a major point of discussion in Job 21 and 24, and it troubled the writer of Psalm 73. The psalmist found the answer when he "went into the sanctuary of God, and considered, their [the wicked's] latter end" (73:17). Looking only at the present moment, one might conclude that there is advantage in being wicked; but viewed from the standpoint of judgment and eternity, he sees the doom of sinners. As the poet put it, though the wheels of God's justice move ever so slowly, they grind exceedingly small.

¹⁶ Be not righteous overmuch; neither make thyself overwise: why shouldest thou destroy thyself?

¹⁷ Be not overmuch wicked, neither be thou foolish; why shouldest thou die before thy time?

¹⁸ It is good that thou shouldest take hold of this; yea, also from that withdraw not thy hand: for he that feareth God shall come forth from them all.

Having introduced the subjects of righteousness and wickedness, the philosopher advises that we should avoid excesses in our lives. The ancient Greeks championed this doctrine. “Nothing in excess,” they said. Virtue is “the fine art of holding the middle between extremes,” taught Aristotle. Solomon then gives four examples of extremes to avoid: that of being overmuch righteous and overmuch wicked and overmuch wise and foolish. Nothing is more disgusting than a man who exaggerates his attempts to be holy. Most always, such is done to be seen of men as did the Pharisees. They were scathingly rebuked by the Master (Matthew 6:1-18). No one takes seriously the man who stands so straight that he falls over backward, or the person so pious he cannot function in the real world. God does not expect that, and one destroys his influence who does so. He may well destroy his soul by growing weary of his excessive efforts and turn away from God altogether.

The advice to “be not overmuch wicked” has puzzled all students. If the recommended path is righteousness, then he is recommending that we avoid excessive righteousness on the one hand and sin on the other. Since man is prone to extremes, such advice is needful. It is true that all sin (Romans 3:23), but we need not sin willfully (Hebrews 10:26). Willful sin brings in its train “a certain fearful expectation of fire . . .” (Hebrews 10:27).

Verse 18 admonishes the reader to heed the given advice. By so doing, one shall escape all of life’s snares. Stay in the middle road of truth and avoid the ditches of extremism!

¹⁹ Wisdom is a strength to the wise man more than ten rulers that are in a city.

Again, he praises the value of wisdom. It is valuable for defending and preserving a city. How much so? He says one man of wisdom is worth more than “ten mighty men” (KJV) or mighty warriors. The experience of humanity agrees with Solomon’s judgment.

²⁰ Surely there is not a righteous man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not.

A righteous man is defined by the author as one “that doeth good, and sinneth not.” “Noah was a righteous man” (Genesis 6:9), but he

was not sinless. Only Jesus has traveled life's road without transgression (1 Peter 2:22). Paul uses similar words in Romans 3:10-12 as he indicts the world of sin and shows the need of a Savior. The man who says he has not sinned makes God a liar, and God's word is not in him (1 John 1:10).

²¹ Also take not heed unto all words that are spoken, lest thou hear thy servant curse thee;

²² for oftentimes also thine own heart knoweth that thou thyself likewise hast cursed others.

These words are practical advice for getting along in the home, the shop, and the marketplace. Don't be too curious about what others may be saying. You may not like what you hear—especially if it is critical of you. He then reminds the reader that most everyone has “fussed” about someone along the way. For peace of mind, let such trivial fussing pass; it is unworthy of attention.

Verses 23-29 form one unit of thought. The writer tells us of his consternation for things he had sought but not found, such as wisdom and things he had learned about human beings. For the reader's convenience, we break it into two shorter sections.

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

²⁴ That which is, is far off and exceeding deep; who can find it out?

²⁵ I turned about, and my heart was set to know and to search out, and to seek wisdom and the reason of things, and to know that wickedness is folly, and that foolishness is madness:

We must remind ourselves from time to time that Ecclesiastes records Solomon's search for meaning, purpose, and happiness in life while alienated from God. His words in the bulk of this book reflect the conclusions of unaided human wisdom. God had given him “wisdom and understanding exceeding much” (1 Kings 4:29). Leaving God behind, he set out to gain wisdom from worldly founts. With a sigh he admits, “But it was far from me.” The solution to the problems of life is “far off and exceeding deep; who can find it out?” he asks.

He had learned a few things by life's experience. These findings he relates in verses 26-29.

²⁶ And I find more bitter than death the woman whose

heart is snares and nets, and whose hands are bands: who-so pleaseth God shall escape from her; but the sinner shall be taken by her.

²⁷ *Behold, this have I found, saith the Preacher, laying one thing to another, to find out the account;*

²⁸ *which my soul still seeketh, but I have not found: one man among a thousand have I found; but a woman among all those have I not found.*

His experience with women had left a bitter taste in his mouth. Remember his seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines (1 Kings 11:3); he saw women as traps and snares to capture the foolish man. He warned his sons of the adulterous woman with similar words in Proverbs 5 and 7. Only God can deliver a man from this evil snare, and only then a righteous man. We could well label these verses “the vanity of romance.”

He acknowledges that maybe one man in a thousand was honorable and would do no harm, but of women he found none to be trustworthy. We hasten to say that here is clearly a case of man speaking purely from his own distorted, sinful reason and experience. It would be a perversion to quote this as God’s assessment of women. To do so would be grossly unfair to those millions of godly women who have served God to this day. It is interesting to note that King Lemuel, not Solomon, wrote the poem praising the worthy woman in Proverbs 31:10-31. The ancients generally held a low view of women. A great poet wrote, “Where women are, all evils there are found.” Even the Jewish rabbis thanked God daily that they were not women. Only in Christ was woman’s true dignity recognized and honored (1 Peter 3:7).

H. C. Leupold, following Hengstenberg, interprets the bitter and painful woman to be human wisdom that would seduce man away from God’s divine wisdom. Those wishing to pursue this line of reasoning may wish to consult his *Exposition of Ecclesiastes*.

²⁹ *Behold, this only have I found: that God made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions.*

His last discovery is a sound one—that God made man originally pure and good (Genesis 1:31); but man has corrupted himself by seeking out evil things and doing them. Modern man is still busily engaged in a frenzied attempt to out-sin his progenitors. Righteous folks in every age look at the sinful world and ask, “What will they think of next?”

In 8:1-9:1, the wise king advises his readers to accept the realities of an imperfect world. In this, we see two extremes: (1) the man who destroys himself by throwing himself against the system he abhors but is powerless to change; and (2) the man who meekly accepts every evil with no attempt to right the wrongs. Someone prayed, “Lord, give me the strength to right all the wrongs I can, the humility to accept the inevitable, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

Chapter 8:1-9 discusses the vanities caused by tyrannous kings. The first five verses admonish us to be submissive to governmental authority.

8:1 Who is as the wise man? and who knoweth the interpretation of a thing? A man's wisdom maketh his face to shine, and the hardness of his face is changed.

2 I counsel thee, Keep the king's command, and that in regard of the oath of God.

3 Be not hasty to go out of his presence; persist not in an evil thing: for he doeth whatsoever pleaseth him.

4 For the king's word hath power; and who may say unto him, What doest thou?

5 Whoso keepeth the commandment shall know no evil thing; and a wise man's heart discerneth time and judgment:

Verse 1 is preliminary to the main thought of the chapter. While obscure in the ASV text, it is captured by NASV:

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.

Kenneth Taylor's paraphrase presents the thought vividly:

How wonderful to be wise, to understand things, to be able to analyze them and interpret them. Wisdom lights up a man's face, softening its hardness.

Who has not seen the scowl on the face of a person who is stumped by a problem he does not understand, and then the smile that breaks over his face when he perceives the answer?

His advice in verse 2 is to obey the king with loyalty. Perhaps he contemplates those who were civil servants.

“In regard to the oath of God” refers to the **oath of allegiance** sworn at the time of induction into office. Paul instructs Christians to

“be in subjection to the higher powers” and “render to all their dues” (Romans 13:1,7).

“Be not hasty to go out of his presence” could mean:

- (1) Do not desert the king in time of danger;
- (2) Don’t resign your office in haste should things go wrong;
- (3) Don’t storm out of his presence in anger if you are not pleased; or
- (4) Do not seek to flee the country as a defector.

In any of these circumstances, the hearer would take his life in his hands, since the kings of those days had absolute life-and-death power over their subjects.

“Persist not in any evil thing” simply means do not involve yourself in any malfeasance of office. This great bane of public officials has destroyed thousands over the ages.

“For he doeth whatsoever pleaseth him” refers to the total power of the monarch in dealing with his subjects.

Verse 4 reiterates the unlimited power of the king and the fact that no one can question his decisions.

Verse 5 says obey the king as a faithful servant and all will go well with you; disobey, and expect penalties.

“A wise man’s heart discerneth time and judgment” means that he will not grow impatient and act rashly; rather, he will know how, when and where to express himself and to be patient in waiting for approval and acceptance of his plan or request. Taylor renders it, “The wise man will find a time and a way to do what he [the king] says.”

⁶ for to every purpose there is a time and judgment; because the misery of man is great upon him:

⁷ for he knoweth not that which shall be; for who can tell him how it shall be?

⁸ There is no man that hath power over the spirit to retain the spirit; neither hath he power over the day of death; and there is no discharge in war: neither shall wickedness deliver him that is given to it.

⁹ All this have I seen, and applied my heart unto every work that is done under the sun: there is a time wherein one man hath power over another to his hurt.

The keys to understanding this section are two:

- (1) “Because the misery of man is great upon him” (8:6b), which

refers to the misery of those living under tyranny. This is clearly seen in 8:9b: “There is a time wherein one man hath power over another to his hurt.” This refers to the cruel ruler who abuses his subjects.

- (2) The oppressed soul can gain some consolation from the fact that a wicked ruler will one day collect his dues. That he will not escape his judgment is expressed in four points:
- (a) “For he [the tyrant] knoweth not that which shall be” (verse 7a); that is, he doesn’t know when, how, or by whom his stroke of death will come.
 - (b) “For who can tell him how it shall be?” No one can foresee such judgments.
 - (c) “There is no man [not even an absolute monarch] that hath power over the spirit to retain the spirit,” which is explained by the parallel line, “Neither hath he power over the day of death” to avoid it (verse 8).
 - (d) As “there is no discharge in war”—that is, no exceptions are made—“neither shall wickedness deliver him that is given to it”—that is, the wicked tyrant will not escape his doom.

In summary he says, “There is a time wherein one man hath power over another to his hurt” (verse 9), but there is also a time when God will reward him in kind for his cruelty.

Verses 10-13 remind us that the wicked shall not escape the justice due them.

¹⁰ So I saw the wicked buried, and they came TO THE GRAVE; and they that had done right went away from the holy place, and were forgotten in the city: this also is vanity.

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

¹² Though a sinne: do evil a hundred times, and prolong his DAYS, yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, that fear before him:

¹³ but it shall not be well with the wicked, neither shall he prolong his days, WHICH ARE as a shadow; because he feareth not before God.

The ASV stands virtually alone in rendering 8:10, “They that had

done right went away . . . and were forgotten.” The RSV gives the following rendering:

Then I saw the wicked buried; they used to go in and out of the holy place, and were praised in the city where they had done such things.

His observation is how quickly **men** forget the wickedness of their peers. How often does the villain become the hero with the passing of time? Yet Solomon wisely notes that God does not thus forget, and will call the wicked to account in judgment.

In verse 11, he notes that sinners tend to think that if judgment does not come immediately upon them, surely they have eluded it and will not have to pay their due.

Verse 12 notes that even though an evil man may live a hundred years in apparent prosperity, his day of doom will come. So also will the righteous be ultimately rewarded. These words should comfort us when we see the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper (2 Corinthians 5:10).

Although a man may live a longer-than-average life on earth, to God man’s 70-100 years are as transitory as a fleeting shadow (verse 13). To James, our lives “are a vapor that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away” (4:14). To Peter, we are “as grass” that “withereth” and “falleth” (1 Peter 1:24).

Yet another vanity of life is set forth in 8:14-9:1. Unable to resolve it in his mind, he proposes two modes of response.

¹⁴ There is a vanity which is done upon the earth, that there are righteous men unto whom it happeneth according to the work of the wicked; again, there are wicked men to whom it happeneth according to the work of the righteous: I said that this also is vanity.

¹⁵ Then I commended mirth, because a man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be joyful: for that shall abide with him in his labor all the days of his life which God hath given him under the sun.

It seemed to the wise man that providence was not always correct in its rewards and punishments. He saw a case where the unrighteous got the reward of the righteous—that is, health, happiness, prosperity and longevity—and the righteous got the painful reward of the wicked—disaster, pain and death. To his worldly mind, this was confusing and frustrating. Where was justice? The student is reminded that Solomon

had walked away from God and was trying to understand the meaning and purpose of life with his **human** wisdom. He overlooked the coming judgment and the vast eternity wherein God could right all such wrongs.

Stymied in his search for an explanation, he recommends two alternatives:

- (1) Eat, drink and be joyful (verse 15). Make the best of life that you can; enjoy all those innocent pleasures, for who knows what miscarriage of justice might befall you. Similar conclusions had been reached earlier (2:24, 3:12,22).
- (2) Reviewing the matter, he reached the conclusion that man cannot understand the work of God that is done on the earth.

¹⁶ When I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done upon the earth, [for also there is that neither day nor night seeth sleep with his eyes,]

¹⁷ then I beheld all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun: because however much a man labor to seek it out, yet he shall not find it; yea moreover, though a wise man think to know it, yet shall he not be able to find it.

^{9:1} For all this I laid to my heart, even to explore all this: that the righteous, and the wise, and their works, are in the hand of God; whether it be love or hatred, man knoweth it not; all is before them.

He had thoroughly researched the question of divine justice on the earth (verse 16b).

Many are the translations and applications of 8:16b—“(for also there is that neither day nor night seeth sleep with his eyes,).” It could be any one of the following:

- (1) God’s eyes do not see sleep (being omniscient and omnipotent) as He governs His earth.
- (2) Man’s ceaseless activity of living, working and dying on the earth goes on day and night (so the RSV).
- (3) Man’s ceaseless search for an understanding of God’s government on the earth (this may be the meaning of the *New English Bible*).
- (4) It could refer to Solomon’s wearisome search for answers to such perplexing problems. If so, it would be understood hy-

perbolically, not literally. He spent long hard hours trying to find a rational explanation, but could not! Verse 17 seems to validate this last view. Not even a wise man such as himself can fathom the ways of God's providence (verse 17).

He did reach the point of saying that all things are in the hands of God; and even though we cannot understand the moves He makes, we believe Him to be a just judge. As Abraham affirmed, "Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?" (Genesis 19:6).

In 9:2-18 the philosopher says, "Since death is inevitable, make the best use of life that you can."

² All things come alike to all: there is one event to the righteous and to the wicked; to the good and to the clean and to the unclean; to him that sacrificeth and to him that sacrificeth not; as is the good, so is the sinner; and he that sweareth, as he that feareth an oath.

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

The "all things" and the "one event" of verse 2 are death. It strikes the righteous and the wicked; the morally clean and the unclean; the worshipper and the non-worshipper; the one who swears and the one who does not. Being righteous will not save one from dying. To his worldly mind, this is not just.

On reflection, he does see one advantage to life over death.

⁴ For to him that is joined with all the living there is hope; for a living dog is better than a dead lion.

⁵ For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not any thing, neither have they any more a reward; for the memory of them is forgotten.

⁶ As well their love, as their hatred and their envy, is perished long ago; neither have they any more a portion for ever in any thing that is done under the sun.

He reasons that any life is better than death. A cowardly dog that is alive has the advantage over a dead lion, no matter how courageous he was. We should not push this point too far, for the experience of the race tells us of noble souls who chose death rather than to deny God or to corrupt their souls (Hebrews 11:35).

In a day when "the sanctity of life ethic" is being replaced with

“the quality of life ethic,” Christians must speak up to affirm the sacredness and value of life made in the image of God. God imposed capital punishment on the man slayer in His charge to Noah following the flood (Genesis 9:6). Abortion, infanticide, euthanasia and suicide are not acceptable alternatives for the person who fears God. The sacred command, “Thou shalt not kill [literally, do no murder],” still stands (Romans 13:8).

The one advantage he sees in living is that one knows he must soon die and can thus make preparation for the dread event. A dead corpse knows nothing about life “under the sun.”

These verses have suffered great abuse at the hands of those teachers who hold that man has no immortal spirit that survives death of the body. This false teaching is set forth in the following quotes:

“That the condition of man in death is one of unconsciousness . . .” [Ecclesiastes 9:5,6; Psalm 146:3,4; John 5:28,29]; SEVENTH DAY ADVENTISTS ANSWER QUESTIONS ON DOCTRINE, Washington, D.C. Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1957, page 13.

“Resurrection is a restoration to life of the non-existent dead.” “No soul is conscious after death . . .”; MAKE SURE OF ALL THINGS, Brooklyn, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, Inc., 1957, pages 311 and 287.

To correctly understand Solomon’s words, we must remember two important facts:

- (1) He was grappling with the profound theological issues alone with human wisdom; he had abandoned God for the time being. Without divine revelation, man would not know that there was a fundamental difference in man and beast. This is yet evident in the cultured unbeliever who views man as only a highly evolved animal.
- (2) He lived in a day when full knowledge of the future state of man had not been revealed.

Paul clearly affirms that Christ “abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Timothy 1:10). This is what scholars call “progressive revelation.” Not all of God’s truth was revealed at once. We know more about the nature of man and his situation after death than did the wise Solomon. Jesus lifted the heavy curtain of death and showed us the situation of righteous Lazarus and the evil rich man (Luke 16:19-31). Those who were beheaded for living

and teaching the word of God were alive and interested in the administration of divine justice (Revelation 6:9-11).

At the resurrection, the bodies in the tombs will be reunited with their spirits that wait in the Hadean realm, and thus will be restored to wholeness again (John 5:28,29; 1 Corinthians 15:35-54). Notice that Paul promised that those who have “fallen asleep [died] in Jesus will God bring with him” at the second coming (1 Thessalonians 4:14). Even in the final chapter of Ecclesiastes, when the wise man has completed his journey and found his way back to God, he affirms that at death “the dust returneth to the earth as it was, and the spirit returneth to God who gave it” (Ecclesiastes 12:7).

To the man of this world who lives his whole life “under the sun” (verse 6), death appears to be the end of all hopes and dreams, or even sin.

Since death is the great equalizer, and since none escape his grasp, what then shall we humans do? He gives the best advice his wisdom can furnish:

⁷ Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart; for God hath already accepted thy works.

⁸ Let thy garments be always white: and let not thy head lack oil.

⁹ Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of thy life of vanity, which he hath given thee under the sun, all thy days of vanity: for that is thy portion in life, and in thy labor wherein thou laborest under the sun.

¹⁰ Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in Sheol, whither thou goest.

His advice is the same as before: eat, drink, and be merry. Since there is only one life (remember, he knew little of immortality), make the best use of life that you can; enjoy it as much as possible.

“For God hath already accepted [or approved] thy works” (ASV). Franz Delitzsch notes that some ancient scholars left this phrase untranslated since they could not understand it. He then cites Aben Ezra: “For God wills that thou shouldst thus do [indulge in these enjoyments].” Hitzig renders it, “Long ago God has beforehand permitted this thy conduct, so that thou hast no room for scruples about it” (commentary, page 363).

“Let thy garments be always white” refers to festive clothing for

happy occasions. Oil for the head refers to balms and lotions to soften dry hair and skin and make the person fragrant.

Enjoy life with your lawful mate. “Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might . . .” (verse 10). All of these innocent recommendations are our “portion” from God in this life. Don’t waste them by brooding over dilemmas of life that you cannot fathom, much less solve!

The reason he advises his readers so is seen in verse 10: “For there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in Sheol, whither thou goest.” **Sheol** is the place of “departed spirits” and “the state of the dead” (McClintock and Strong, Volume 9, page 662). It is the primary subject under discussion from verse 2 onward. To men in Solomon’s day, Sheol was primarily the grave where the dead body was placed and where it returned to dust (Ecclesiastes 12:7). Solomon affirms that since all earthly activities end at death, we should be busy making the most of life while we can. Again, we remind our readers that full information about the state of the dead came with Christ (2 Timothy 1:10), and that Solomon was viewing life from a purely secular vantage point “under the sun.” We err if we use this text to deny the immortality of the spirit of man.

In 9:11,12, the author reminds us that human abilities are no guarantee of success:

¹¹ I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favor to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.

¹² For man also knoweth not his time: as the fishes that are taken in an evil net, and as the birds that are caught in the snare, even so are the sons of men snared in an evil time, when it falleth suddenly upon them.

One might be the fastest, strongest runner, who by every law of prediction should win, and yet lose by some misadventure; for example, there could be a bad start, a loosened shoestring, a pulled muscle, a stumble along the way.

The main point of discussion is the meaning of “time and chance” that determines the outcome of such events. Some commentators are certain that God’s providence is meant since the only other option is fatalism which denies the divine governance of the world. If Solomon were speaking as an inspired man revealing heavenly truth, we would

have to agree; but since he is still away from God and looking at things “under the sun,” it seems reasonable that he might drift to such an **erroneous conclusion** as fatalism. In reality, God “ruleth in the kingdom of men” (Daniel 4:25). He feeds the sparrows and clothes the lilies of the field (Matthew 6:26-30).

In verse 12, he notes that no man knows the day or hour of his death. It can come upon him as unexpectedly as the fisherman’s net upon a fish. This illustrates just one of many reasons why no person can be assured of success in his life’s endeavors. He may die before he can reach his goal, and a lesser soul win the victory. Neither do we know the day or hour when the Son of Man cometh (Matthew 24:44).

With all the problems and vanities Solomon encountered, he was still convinced that wisdom was a greater force than weapons or physical strength.

¹³ I have also seen wisdom under the sun on this wise, and it seemed great unto me:

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

¹⁵ now there was found in it a poor wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city: yet no man remembered that same poor man.

¹⁶ Then said I, Wisdom is better than strength: nevertheless the poor man’s wisdom is despised, and his words are not heard.

We need not look for a specific event in history to confirm this observation; all would grant the truthfulness of his observation about wisdom saving a city from a strong enemy.

The thing that disturbed the wise teacher was the fact that the city’s leaders and residents would soon forget what the “poor man” did for them with mere wisdom. It is the nature of man to honor the victorious warrior who slew his thousands rather than the wise statesman who negotiated peace. How warped are our human values? Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the sons of God” (Matthew 5:9).

¹⁷ The words of the wise heard in quiet are better than the cry of him that ruleth among fools.

¹⁸ Wisdom is better than weapons of war; but one sinner destroyeth much good.

Having made his point about the superiority of wisdom to force, he cites two proverbs to reinforce his case.

A wise man need not get heated and excited to the point of shouting to make his point. Almost always, true wisdom is packaged in a subdued container. Clamoring fools think they will be heard or accepted by virtue of their loudness. In Proverbs, our author wrote of the fool who beareth himself insolently, and is confident (14:16). Peter says, “A meek and quiet spirit . . . is in the sight of God of great price” (1 Peter 3:4).

In verse 18, he ruefully notes that as wisdom can overcome superior weapons, so one sinner can destroy much good. We think of foolish Achan whose sin cost Israel a humiliating defeat in the battle of Ai (Joshua 7:1-26).

In Chapter 10, the king reflects on the disruptions of life caused by man’s folly or foolishness.

10:1 Dead flies cause the oil of the perfumer to send forth an evil odor; so doth a little folly outweigh wisdom and honor.

2 A wise man’s heart is at his right hand; but a fool’s heart at his left.

3 Yea also, when the fool walketh by the way, his understanding faileth him, and he saith to every one that he is a fool.

Verse 1 is a vivid simile on the destructiveness of folly. As one small dead fly would cause a whole bowl of perfume to spoil and sour, so does a **little** folly spoil a man’s reputation for wisdom and honor. How many notable leaders have been disgraced and driven from office because of one stupid deed? Little flaws such as laziness, procrastination, lack of self-control in appetites and passion, wordiness, oversensitiveness to criticism, or too much levity can spoil the good name of a man in the sight of other people.

Regarding verse 2, in scripture “the right hand suggests that which is honorable, mighty, associated . . . with God and His work . . . Of necessity, the left hand becomes associated with that which is evil, perverse, sinister, morally repellent [cf. Matthew 25:41]” (H. C. Leupold, exposition, page 232). This idea is captured by Taylor: “A wise man’s heart leads him to do right, and a fool’s heart leads him to do evil.”

4 If the spirit of the ruler rise up against thee, leave not thy place; for gentleness allayeth great offences.

In contrast to the foolish behavior of verses 1-3, he contrasts a wise man's action in verse 4. The picture is that of a government minister or advisor who is confronted by an angry, hostile king. Solomon's wise advice is do not walk out in anger; do not resign your post; better to respond with gentleness which will allay or calm the sovereign's wrath. A similar thought is expressed in Proverbs 15:1: "A soft answer turneth away wrath, but a grievous word stirreth up anger." Considered in context, a fool would storm out in anger if the king criticized his work, while a wise man would control his spirit and wait for the king's spirit to cool.

⁵ There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, as it were an error which proceedeth from the ruler:

⁶ folly is set in great dignity, and the rich sit in a low place.

⁷ I have seen servants upon horses, and princes walking like servants upon the earth.

Having introduced the subject of kings, he passes to yet another observation—that of unqualified men in seats of power. Two examples are given. A foolish incompetent gains the throne of power while the rich man, who would have the advantage of education and training, is excluded from government. This has been the theme of a hundred books and movies where, by force of arms, the crude ruffian usurps the government. The teacher then cites another example he had seen: "servants upon horses, and princes walking as servants." In ancient times, only those in authority were privileged to ride on horses and mules. Thus, we see Mordecai the Jew was allowed to ride through the city on horseback as a special honor from the king (Esther 6:9). Perhaps Solomon thinks back to the day when his rebellious brother Absalom rode in a horse-drawn chariot, and his father David walked barefooted (2 Samuel 15:1,30). The tragedy that impressed Solomon was that the servant (untrained for government) enjoyed the position and honor while the qualified princes filled servant roles.

The expression "an error which proceedeth from the ruler" is taken to mean that "the Almighty was guilty of an 'oversight' " in allowing such to happen (Leupold). Again, we must remind ourselves that this is a conclusion reached by Solomon "under the sun," or strictly from this world's point of view. Daniel tells us "that the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will, and setteth up over it the lowest of men" (Daniel 4:17). In His providence, God can use such base rulers. Isaiah shows us that God sends

“foolish” rulers on a nation as a punishment for their sin against Him (Isaiah 19:1,11-14).

⁸ He that diggeth a pit shall fall into it; and whoso breaketh through a wall a serpent shall bite him.

⁹ Whoso heweth out stones shall be hurt therewith; and he that cleaveth wood is endangered thereby.

Verses 8 and 9 are proverbs which teach “men to be wise and cautious, lest by their conduct they bring mischief upon themselves” (John Gill). Dangerous work carries certain risks. In context, he probably is saying that he who undertakes a dangerous task exposes himself to certain risks and, if wise, will use wisdom to anticipate and avoid hurt. While this is a general truth with a hundred applications, he likely has in mind those who would challenge kings or reform government.

History is full of stories of men who dug a pit to trap a man or beast and then fell into that very trap, thus injuring or destroying themselves. As this was being written, the newspaper told of a terrorist bomber who was injured when his bomb exploded in his car. Haman the Persian was hung on the very gallows he had built for Mordecai the Jew (Esther 9:24,25).

He pictures a thief breaking through a neighbor’s stone wall, and a lurking snake bites him. The man hewing out stones is the quarryman who is injured by the very rock he has cut and is removing for his use. Perhaps it slips, or the cables break, and the master workman is wounded by the lifeless stone. A man is seen cutting wood and is injured by a flying piece, or by an axhead that leaves its handle. “The primary thought in the saying is that retribution comes on the evil doer out of the very deed of evil” (E. H. Plumptre). To attack “sacred and time-honored institutions” carries serious risks to the aggressor. “Plots and conspiracies are as often fatal to the conspirators as to the intended victims” (*Ibid.*).

¹⁰ If the iron be blunt, and one do not whet the edge, then must he put to more strength: but wisdom is profitable to direct.

¹¹ If the serpent bite before it is charmed, then is there no advantage in the charmer.

In these two proverbs, he sets forth two examples of the need to use wisdom before commencing a task. If one is going to chop wood, it pays him to first take the time to sharpen his ax. Wisdom teaches a

man the best and easiest way to do a job. A fool relies on brute force and makes his task tenfold more difficult.

Next, he observes that if the serpent has already bitten its victim, it is too late to call for a snake charmer. Thus, that which is thought of or which comes too late is of no advantage. The mark of true wisdom is to plan ahead. Our old maxim says, “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”

¹² The words of a wise man’s mouth are gracious; but the lips of a fool will swallow up himself.

¹³ The beginning of the words of his mouth is foolishness; and the end of his talk is mischievous madness.

¹⁴ A fool also multiplieth words: YET man knoweth not what shall be; and that which shall be after him, who can tell him?

¹⁵ The labor of fools wearieth every one of them; for he knoweth not how to go to the city.

Verses 12-15 remind us that a fool can be spotted by his speech. It is self-destructive (verse 12). From beginning to end, he speaks folly (verse 13). He talks too much and about things of which he is ignorant (verse 14). Those who have to deal with fools feel bored and imposed upon by their ignorance. Some who talk the most could not follow the highway and road signs to the city (verse 15).

In context, he seems to speak of men in government whose wisdom or foolishness is reflected in their words.

The words of a wise man are gracious; that is, they win favor. They know what to say, how to say it, and when. Thus, Paul urges, “Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer each one” (Colossians 4:6).

A fool’s intemperate, thoughtless words will cause him much pain and trouble. Similarly, Solomon writes in Proverbs 12:13, “In the transgression of the lips is a snare to the evil man, but the righteous shall come out of trouble.”

Our President Lincoln gave us a kindred proverb: “Better to remain silent and be thought a fool, than to speak up and remove all doubt.”

¹⁶ Woe to thee, O land, when thy king is a child, and thy princes eat in the morning!

¹⁷ Happy art thou, O land, when thy king is the son of nobles, and thy princes eat in due season, for strength, and not for drunkenness!

These last verses of the chapter draw a series of concluding observations and recommendations regarding rulers. First, he cites antithetic woes and blessings (verse 16 and 17). Woe to the land when the king is a child; that is, immature and foolish as an irresponsible youth. Woe to the land when the princes (lesser rulers) eat in the morning. The thought here is not that of a normal breakfast to begin the day's business activities; rather, he condemns those who waste the better part of their day in a lazy, gluttonous way, lingering about the table when they should be at work tending the affairs of state. Isaiah faced a similar problem: "Woe unto them that rise up early in the morning, that they may follow strong drink; that tarry late into the night, till wine inflames them" (Isaiah 5:11). Simply said, there is a time and place for eating and relaxing; likewise, a time and place for work and business. Happy is the nation whose rulers know that appropriate time and place. The ancient Athenians had a law given by Solon that a prince found drunk was punished by death.

A land is blest when it has a ruler that has been properly trained to accept the responsibilities of office (verse 17).

He speaks of those who "eat for strength and not for drunkenness." We have a similar saying contrasting "those who eat to live" and "those who live to eat."

¹⁸ By slothfulness the roof sinketh in; and through idleness of the hands the house leaketh.

¹⁹ A feast is made for laughter, and wine maketh glad the life; and money answereth all things.

When a nation has sorry leaders who neglect the responsibilities of government by their slothfulness, the roof of the house of state falls in.

Such indulgent leaders are likely to defend their conduct by saying "a feast is made [intended for] laughter; and wine maketh glad the heart; and money answereth all things." The thought is vividly paraphrased by the following:

"[Instead of repairing the breaches, the officials] make a feast for laughter, serve wine to cheer life, and depend on [tax] money to answer for it all" (Amplified Bible).

We do not conclude that God teaches us that "money answereth all things." Both observation and Scripture teach otherwise: "For what should a man give in exchange for his life?" asked Jesus (Mark 8:37).

²⁰ Revile not the king, no, not in thy thought; and revile not the rich in thy bed-chamber: for a bird of the heavens shall carry the voice, and that which hath wings shall tell the matter.

Solomon closes the chapter with a final word of warning: “Revile not the king.” This must be understood in light of the autocratic rule of ancient kings. With unlimited power and “divine rights,” whatever the king said or thought was judged to be right. Whoever spoke against the king was judged guilty, no matter how true his charge. By reviling the king, one risked punishment or even death. “The rich” are those like the king who have great power and influence. In our modern democracies, with laws guaranteeing freedom of speech, such words as these seem obsolete and inappropriate. Daily we are treated to newspapers and broadcasts that continually revile our highest rulers. Yet the principle is still true and the advice good, as many an employee, student, or child has discovered.

The advice is, do not speak evil of your superiors; do not even think unkind things about them, because sooner or later, they will find out and call you to account. Not even “in thy bed-chamber” means in the intimacy of your home with wife and children. The reason given for this strong warning is that kings and authorities have ways of detecting those who are disloyal. In ancient times, as today, espionage and informers were a way of life in government. Many a man has been betrayed by his own servants or family members who had heard his private complaints or plottings. The spies of the Persian kings were called “the eyes and ears of the king.”

“For a bird of the heavens shall carry the voice” is a poetic way of saying that those least expected may report your criticisms to the king. Even today, parents will tell their children, “A little bird told me.”

In 11:1-12:8, Solomon proceeds to give recommendations for a happy life. Verses 1-6 teach us that benevolence pays rich dividends.

^{11:1} Cast thy bread upon the waters; for thou shalt find it after many days.

² Give a portion to seven, yea, even unto eight; for thou knowest not what evil shall be upon the earth.

“Cast thy bread upon the waters” has been the occasion of many varied interpretations. If we remember that the Hebrews expressed their thoughts in parallel lines, it will help us solve the mystery.

“Cast thy bread upon the waters” is parallel in meaning to “give a

portion to seven, yea, even unto eight.” The thought is an exhortation to benevolence which is done without expectation of reward. If one casts literal bread upon the water, he would not expect to ever see it again. So, in our charity, we should not calculate whether the person could repay us at some future date. If he is needy, assist him. Thus Jesus taught, “Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away” (Matthew 5:42). Again, He said, “For if you love them that love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same?” (Matthew 5:46).

Although we do not help the poor just that we may be rewarded, it is the case that God does reward the generous soul. “He that hath pity upon the poor lendeth unto Jehovah, and his good deed will be paid him again” (Proverbs 19:17). The Psalmist writes, “Well is it with the man that dealeth graciously and lendeth; He shall maintain his cause in judgment” (Psalm 112:5). So also taught the Master: “Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over shall they give into your bosom. For with what measure ye mete it shall be measured to you again” (Luke 6:38). This is the meaning of the beatitude, “Blessed are the merciful; for they shall obtain mercy” (Matthew 5:7).

“Give a portion to seven” needy souls, “even unto eight” who ask. “Seven” meant a full or complete number to the Hebrews. Adding an eighth means even after you have done your fair share, if another needy soul appears, do not refuse him.

He then gives his reason for his advice that we be charitable: “For thou knowest not what evil shall be upon the earth.” Since the future is unpredictable, and thus we ourselves might fall upon hard times, we should generously help others, that they may be inclined to assist us in our distress.

³ If the clouds be full of rain, they empty themselves upon the earth; and if a tree fall toward the south, or toward the north, in the place where the tree falleth, there shall it be.

Verse 3 further illustrates the importance of being charitable: “If the clouds be full of rain, they empty themselves upon the earth” Clouds are given their moisture by the Creator, that they might bless the earth therewith. We are given our material blessings that we might share them with the unfortunate.

“In the place where the tree falleth, there shall it be” continues the same line of thought regarding charity. All of a tree’s fruitfulness

must be produced before it falls, whether by ax or by storm. Death ends a tree's productivity, and death ends man's opportunity to do good. We are reminded of the rich man of Luke 16; he died a selfish, stingy miser. He will spend his eternity collecting his dues.

The fallen tree's pointing to north or south suggests that if it had been fruitful, it would be remembered that way; if not, that would be known as well.

⁴ He that observeth the wind shall not sow; and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap.

This verse extends the thought about being charitable. If one waits until every excuse is erased and all things are in perfect order, he will never get around to doing God's will in this matter. Furthermore, such procrastination will rob a man of the blessings that always accrue from generosity. "If nothing good is done till all difficulties are removed, no good thing will ever be done" (John Gill). His illustration is that of a farmer who is so concerned about having perfect conditions for sowing or reaping that he never gets his crop planted; or if he does, he fails to get it harvested. In the end, he has nothing for his solicitous care.

⁵ As thou knowest not what is the way of the wind, NOR how the bones DO GROW in the womb of her that is with child; even so thou knowest not the work of God who doeth all.

⁶ In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thy hand; for thou knowest not which shall prosper, whether this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good.

He continues his exhortation to benevolence and the avoidance of excuses thereto. Solomon notes that there are many things we do not fully grasp or understand, yet we act in spite of our lack of certain knowledge. We do not understand what causes the wind to blow, or from what direction it might next come. Neither do we understand how the baby forms in the mother's womb. Our inability to fully explain these mysteries does not keep us from the normal duties and activities of life. Even so, we do not know or understand the providential workings of God. Why are some folks born rich while others are born poor? Why do some seem to prosper in every activity while others experience only failure? We do not know what God has in store for our earthly future—whether riches or poverty. We only know that

He “doeth all” or controls all things and that He expects us to “remember the poor” (Galatians 2:10).

In view of all of the foregoing, he charges us to sow our seed in both morning and evening. He speaks not of literal seed such as corn or wheat, but of the acts of kindness and benevolence that we have opportunity to do.

As we do not know which corn seed will germinate and produce a stalk with one or more ears of grain, so we have no way of knowing the ultimate outcome of any one benevolent act (11:6b). Not knowing which seed will produce, we sow in abundance to be certain of a crop. So we do good unto all men (Galatians 6:10), knowing that God will “increase the fruits of our righteousness” (2 Corinthians 9:10).

⁷ Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun.

⁸ Yea, if a man live many years, let him rejoice in them all; but let him remember the days of darkness, for they shall be many. All that cometh is vanity.

The writer now turns to a different subject. Verses 7 and 8 praise the value of life on earth while soberly reminding us of the vastness of time that will be spent in the darkness of the grave. Taylor beautifully paraphrases the thought:

It is a wonderful thing to be alive! If a person lives to be very old, let him rejoice in every day of life, but let him also remember that eternity is far longer, and that everything down here is futile in comparison.

The “light” which is sweet is the sun which the living behold. Beholding the light of the sun is explained as a man **living many years** (verse 8a). The Greek poet Euripides expresses an identical thought:

“Destroy me not before my youth is ripe: For pleasant sure it is to see the sun; compel me not to see what lies below” (CAMBRIDGE BIBLE, ECCLESIASTES, page 208).

Even as you are enjoying life, remember death and prepare for it. Job describes his concept of death as “the land of darkness and the shadow of death: the land dark as midnight . . .” (Job 10:21,22).

Men in Solomon’s day had not the benefit of Christ’s revelation of a paradise beyond death for the righteous (Luke 23:42,43), or of Abraham’s bosom where the righteous dead experience conscious joy

and rest (Luke 16:22-24). To them, death was the end of life and the grave our destiny. Granted, there were glimmers of light seen now and again as in Ecclesiastes 12:7, and expressions of pious hope for immortality; but life and immortality were made known by Christ in the gospel (2 Timothy 1:10).

Epilogue

In Conclusion

From 11:9-12:8, the great philosopher presents the concluding advice of his discourse on where to find meaning, purpose and happiness in life. In vain, he has tried to find the answer in worldly education and human wisdom. Riches and material possessions were profitless. Sensual indulgence in pleasure with wine, women and song were no better. Power and authority were not sufficient. Each of these proved empty and vain in providing the inner peace and satisfaction he sought. Finally, after his long and fruitless search, he finds himself drawn back to that moral and spiritual training received at his father's (David's) knee. Thus, he advises:

⁹ Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth, and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thy heart, and in the sight of thine eyes; but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment.

Since the long night of death lays squarely before every soul, Solomon urges young folks to enjoy the life they have. Even with all the vanities he had encountered, life was still worth living. Life was better than death.

He hastens to qualify his recommendation lest he be misunderstood: Enjoy life, but remember that you will answer to God for how you enjoy it!

What or when this judgment is, Solomon does not define. There are judgments for sin that come in this life. For some, it is disease or physical suffering; for others, it is poverty or shame. Again, it may be fines or imprisonment. The ultimate temporal judgment is death. Some sinners seem to escape any serious judgment in this life. For these, there is a judgment yet to come (Hebrews 9:27). We don't know how much Solomon knew about this coming day of judgment. We can detect that his faith in God was reviving since human reason had failed him. Youth is the dawn of life. To misuse it in sin is vanity.

¹⁰ Therefore remove sorrow from thy heart, and put away evil from thy flesh; for youth and the dawn of life are vanity.

“Therefore” draws a conclusion from the previous words. “Remove sorrow from thy heart” is explained by “put away evil from thy flesh.” “Sorrow” by metonymy stands for those sins and vices that cause sorrow. Thus, he says enjoy your youth, but make no provision for sin which will ultimately bring you grief.

Again, we offer Kenneth Taylor’s helpful paraphrase:

It’s wonderful to be young! Enjoy every minute of it! Do all you want to; take in everything, but realize that you must account to God for everything you do. So banish grief and pain, but remember that youth, with a whole life before it, can make serious mistakes.

^{12:1} Remember also thy Creator in the days of thy youth, before the evil days come, and the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them;

Continuing his advice to the young begun in 11:9, he urges that while enjoying youth, one must not forget to honor God who made him. This should be done in early years before the infirmities of old age render us incapable of serving God with our minds and bodies.

“Creator” is plural in the Hebrew, reminding us of Genesis 1:1 when God (*Elohim*, plural) created the heaven and the earth. Father, Word and Holy Spirit all played a part in our creation (John 1:4; Genesis 1:2).

“The evil days” are not days of moral or spiritual evil; rather, they are the painful days, afflictions and troubles that accompany old age. The parallel lines explain “evil days” by the years that “have no pleasure in them.”

Verses 2-8 contain one of the most striking and beautiful allegories in the literature of the race. Each phrase describes with a vivid metaphor, a symptom of the infirmities of old age.

² before the sun, and the light, and the moon, and the stars, are darkened, and the clouds return after the rain;

³ in the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble, and the strong men shall bow themselves, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look out of the windows shall be darkened,

⁴ and the doors shall be shut in the street; when the

sound of the grinding is low, and one shall rise up at the voice of a bird, and all the daughters of music shall be brought low;

⁵ yea, they shall be afraid of that which is high, and terrors shall be in the way; and the almond tree shall blossom, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail; because man goeth to his everlasting home and the mourners go about the streets:

⁶ before the silver cord is loosed, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern,

⁷ and the dust returneth to the earth as it was, and the spirit returneth unto God who gave it.

⁸ Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher; all is vanity.

“The sun, the light, the moon and the stars darkened” are likely “the faculties of the soul, the understanding, mind, judgment, will and affections” (John Gill). Some would interpret these as the failing of eyesight. Since the eyes are described in verse 3, we reject that. The Hebrew prophets commonly use sun, moon and stars to describe dignitaries and rulers of government, so by metonymy the same symbols could describe the ruling powers of man’s constitution (compare Genesis 37:9,10; Isaiah 13:10; Joel 2:31).

“The clouds return after the rain”—Usually, one expects sunshine after a rainstorm. In youth, pain and sorrow pass quickly, and joy returns. But in old age, affliction is followed by affliction; little physical joy is found.

“The keepers of the house” that tremble signifies the palsied, shaky hands of the elderly. Hands that once earned a living and did the person’s bidding are now disabled. Often, the aged person who once was a skilled artisan with great dexterity must be fed and cared for by others. He compares the hands to the servants that care for the household needs.

“The strong men” which bow are the legs which weaken and bend under the weight of years. Joints become stiff, muscles atrophied and bones shrink. The once strong and powerful man must now be assisted as he moves from place to place with his weakened legs. The legs are likened to those strong servants who bore the king’s sedan chair on their shoulders.

“The grinders” that cease because they are few refers to the teeth which have been lost by disease or breakage. The toothless old person has trouble eating. This is not such a problem today with our modern

dentistry, artificial teeth and partial dental bridges. To the ancients, it was a major problem of old age, and still is in third-world societies. The teeth which chew the food in preparation for digestion are compared to maidens who grind corn in their mortars.

“Those that look out of the windows shall be darkened” refers to the eyes that have grown dim with advanced age. Cataracts, glaucoma and failing strength of vision were a curse to the ancients. With modern medicine and corrective lenses, we do not suffer as much as they. Of course, some moderns can fully appreciate this problem. His metaphor is that of women eagerly looking out of the windows of their houses to observe activities in the streets. With old age, they lose interest in such.

“The doors . . . shut in the street” seems to refer to the loss of hearing. With the door shut, sounds are muffled and hard to hear. Most older folks struggle with loss of hearing. With modern hearing aids, many of our aged are helped considerably.

“The sound of the grinding is low”—Three possibilities have been suggested for this:

- (1) Since the hearing has failed, the old man cannot even hear the sound of the women grinding corn in his house;
- (2) Since the teeth are gone, he cannot masticate or grind his food; or
- (3) Old age has taken its toll on his digestive system, and thus his stomach has trouble in doing its job of grinding his food.

Since it is not likely that he would mention grinders twice in his allegory, we take it to be the stomach he refers to.

“One shall rise up at the voice of a bird” describes the common problem of the old person who has trouble sleeping. They easily awaken at the crack of dawn as do the birds. He is left weary from inadequate rest.

“All the daughters of music shall be brought low”—All the bodily parts which contribute to one’s involvement in music tend to fail in advanced years. The ears fail, and we cannot hear sweet music or find the pitch to join the singing. Our lungs begin to fail, and we have not breath enough to sing. Our throat and vocal apparatus deteriorate, and a once-lovely voice is then cracked and broken.

“They shall be afraid of that which is high”—As older folks tend to lose their sense of balance and surefootedness, they shun high and dangerous places. A fall will shatter their fragile bones and disable them.

“Terrors shall be in the way”—Because of dimmed eyesight, wobbly legs and slowed reflexes, what was once an easy walk is now a journey of terrors. A snappy dog that darts at one’s heels and a gravel that throws one to the ground terrorize the aged. Both hot and cold weather overpower the weakened body. Little by little, the aged withdraw from the active life to one of isolation.

“The almond tree shall blossom”—This speaks of the white hair of the aged. “The almond tree is the type of old age whose hair is white. The white blossoms completely cover the whole tree” (William M. Thompson). “The almond tree . . . strews the ground with its blossoms, which have gradually become white like snowflakes, is an emblem of the winter of old age with its falling silvery hair” (Dachsel as quoted in Delitzsch).

“The grasshopper shall be a burden”—A number of suggestions have been proposed to explain this:

- (1) Even a tiny grasshopper is too heavy for the old man to lift. This is a hyperbolic or exaggerated use of the small insect that illustrates the old man’s physical weakness.
- (2) Some see the aged creeping along like the ungainly grasshopper that walks. They note the swollen body and the stiff, spindly legs of both man and insect.
- (3) Others suppose that the elderly would resent the agility of the grasshopper, or the noise it makes, or the fact that it can molt its old shell and grow a new one.
- (4) Since the Eastern people ate grasshoppers, some suggest that the old man’s stomach can’t enjoy a good salted grasshopper.

It appears to the writer that (1) is most likely correct in the context.

“Desire shall fail”—The Septuagint renders “desire” as “caperberry,” which was considered an aphrodisiac or sexual stimulant. If this be correct, then he speaks of the old man whose sexual desire has failed, and not even an aphrodisiac will stimulate him. Some would broaden the application to all physical desires which weaken and fail in old age.

All of these infirmities of aging came “because man goeth to his everlasting home” (verse 5). This, of course, speaks of his impending death. It is seen as a departure from his earthly house to a new one. Probably to Solomon, that “long home” (KJV) or everlasting home was the grave where the body would rest till time was no more. Most

of the commentators see it thusly. Christians know of an “eternal life” (Matthew 25:46) which will be spent in God’s house (John 14:2,3). “We know that if our earthly house be dissolved, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal, in the heavens” (2 Corinthians 5:1).

“And the mourners go about the street”—These were the professional mourners who would publicly wail and bemoan his passing. Among the Hebrews, such mourners were an accepted part of the funeral experience (see Jeremiah 9:17 and Matthew 9:23). Even today, one can see these funeral performers in Asia.

“Before the silver cord is loosed” connects the verse and thought with the opening thought of 12:1: “Remember also thy Creator in the days of thy youth, before the silver cord is loosed.”

Verses 1-5 have described the infirmities of old age; verses 6 and 7 poetically describe the experience of death.

The first picture compares man’s life to a golden lamp bowl which is suspended by a silver cord or chain. The chain snaps (see footnote) and the bowl crashes to the floor and is ruined. The second illustration is an earthen pitcher used to fetch water from the fountain; it is dropped and shatters. So life suddenly ends. Life is like the windlass which lowered the bucket into the deep cistern. The wheel or windlass grows old and rots and finally collapses beyond repair, never to be used again.

“And the dust returneth to the earth”—When the silver cord of life is snapped, the bowl broken, the pitcher shattered and the wheel collapsed, then the body is laid in the grave. The writer reflects the words of Moses: “And Jehovah God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life” (Genesis 2:7). The words of Adam’s curse especially come to mind: “. . . till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return” (Genesis 3:19). The Psalmist speaks of death in similar terms: “Thou takest away their breath, they die, and return to their dust” (Psalm 104:29). Since the grave is the destiny of all men, this becomes a powerful incentive to remember God when we are young and able to do so.

“And the spirit returneth unto God who gave it”—God is “the Father of spirits” (Hebrews 12:9). He “formeth the spirit of man within him” (Zechariah 12:1). He is the “God of the spirits of all flesh” (Numbers 16:22). There was no life in Adam’s newly-formed body until God “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.” Then “man became a living soul” (Genesis 2:7). The spirit that God gives

all at the beginning of life leaves at the moment of death. “The body apart from the spirit is dead” (James 2:26).

These words reflect the fact that Solomon had now found his spiritual footing. Estranged from God and dependent on human wisdom, he asked, “Who knoweth the spirit of man, whether it goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast, whether it goeth downward?” (Ecclesiastes 3:21). Now he confidently affirmed that man’s spirit returns to God. Faith had won over doubt.

This truth shows that man’s spirit is immortal. It does not die with the body or sleep in the grave. We are provided details of the circumstances of the spirit after death in Luke 16:19-31. There, we see the righteous comforted and resting in Abraham’s bosom (called “Paradise” in Luke 23:42,43). The wicked suffer in torment. A great gulf separates the saved and the lost and is impassable. Those in both realms are conscious and aware of their circumstances and have memory of their earthly life. There in the Hadean realm, the spirits wait for the resurrection of the body (John 5:28,29). When the Lord returns, the dead shall be raised (1 Thessalonians 5:16), and those yet living will be changed so they may be suited for their eternal destiny (1 Corinthians 15:51-53). When the spirit is reunited with its resurrected body, each one will stand before the judgment seat of Christ and receive His eternal reward or punishment (2 Corinthians 5:10). The following is a good summary of the above teaching:

“The spirit of every man after death, good or bad, in some sense goes to God either as a Father or as a Judge, to be kept somewhere under the custody of His Almighty power, in order to the receiving of His final sentence at the last judgment either of happiness or misery” (Bishop Bull, as quoted in THE BIBLE COMMENTARY by Cook).

The fullness of this grand doctrine was not known in Solomon’s day, but it is now revealed through the gospel (2 Timothy 1:10).

“Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher”—Looking back over his fruitless search for meaning, purpose and happiness without God, and seeing the destiny of all men to be the grave, he pronounces a final assessment of vanity on the godless life.

Verses 9-13 form an epilogue. He speaks of his credentials as a teacher; his method of research and instruction; the usefulness and authority of his instruction; and issues a warning against extended study of valueless material. Finally, he gives his final recommendation:

⁹ And further, because the Preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yea, he pondered and sought out, and set in order many proverbs.

¹⁰ The Preacher sought to find out acceptable words, and that which was written uprightly, even words of truth.

“The Preacher was wise”—He could have set himself forth as King, but he wants men to hear him as a teacher rather than fear him as a ruler. He was wise in two senses:

- (1) He was a wise man—one of those public teachers to whom men looked for guidance (Matthew 2:7); and
- (2) He was wise in intelligence beyond all his contemporaries (1 Kings 3:9-12).

Even after his period of prodigality when he abandoned God and sought to guide himself (1 Kings 11:3-9), the king righted himself and “still taught the people knowledge.” The Book of Ecclesiastes itself, which has blest the race across the centuries, is a sample of that fruit from the salvaged tree.

“He pondered and sought out and set in order many proverbs”—This tells us something of the wise man’s methodology in gaining wisdom. Even though Solomon was inspired by the Holy Spirit, it did not relieve him of the need to research his work prior to writing. The same truth is expressed by Luke in the foreword to his gospel (Luke 1:1-4). The fruit of Solomon’s study, observation and writing was 3,000 proverbs and 1,005 songs (1 Kings 4:32). Of his proverbs, we have some 600 preserved in the book by that name. Of his songs, we have Psalms 72 and 127 and the Song of Solomon.

Teaching by the use of proverbs was a favorite method among the Eastern peoples. These short witty sayings that expressed some profound truth were easily memorized. This was especially valuable in a day when many did not read and only the wealthy could afford books.

“The Preacher sought to find out acceptable words”—He strove to make his words delightful or pleasurable. This is a valuable lesson for those who teach others. Make your lessons as appealing as possible without compromising truth. Some preachers and teachers know much truth, but their presentation is either dull and boring or harsh and hateful, and no one pays them serious attention. Thus, their efforts are often in vain. The people marvelled “at the words of grace that proceeded out of [Jesus’] mouth” (Luke 4:12).

“Even words of truth”—Guided by the Holy Spirit, he wrote words of truth (John 17:17). The Book of Ecclesiastes illustrates the prin-

principle that inspiration guarantees that we have a true record of what was said and done. It does not always guarantee that every word written was a true or recommended word. Much of this book reflects Solomon's mistaken thinking and conclusions as he wandered without God. When reading Scripture, always determine, "Who is speaking; and was he an inspired man?" Job's wife said, "Curse God and die" (Job 2:9). Inspiration gives us an accurate record of her words, but does not endorse her advice.

¹¹ The words of the wise are as goads; and as nails well fastened are the words of the masters of assemblies, which are given from one shepherd.

¹² And furthermore, my son, be admonished: of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh.

"The words of the wise are as goads"—A goad was a sharpened stick or a stick with nails protruding from it to stir a lazy or rebellious beast to proper action. The teachings of God's wise men serve a similar purpose for us. It was said that the words of Pericles "left a sting in the minds of his hearers" in Athens. Peter's words pricked his hearers in their hearts and prompted them to seek God's mercy (Acts 2:37). The words of Solomon in this book were designed to bring us unto obedience to God.

"As nails well fastened are the words of the masters"—There are two possibilities for these words:

- (1) The wise sayings of the master teachers were like nails that hold things together and in proper relation. Their words lodge in our minds and stick firm as nails; or
- (2) It could be parallel to goads. Since some goads had nail points exposed to prod the lazy animal or to block his heels from kicking, so the words of the wise men could be like nails well fastened in the goad.

"Which are given from one shepherd"—Virtually all scholars agree that the one shepherd is Jehovah. Inspired writers often present God under this metaphor (Psalms 23:1, 80:1).

"Of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh"—To be admonished is **to be warned**. He warns that there is no end to the writings of men; that one could study them indefinitely and yet never find the concrete and reliable answers that are needed to answer life's most pressing questions. Certainly he is not

discouraging the study of God's word. A blessing is pronounced on the man who meditates on that book day and night (Psalm 1:1,2). Those are commended who "search the scriptures" (Acts 17:11). His point is abundantly clear when we see the students in our secular schools who diligently read and study the books of men, but never find the truth that makes them free from sin, ignorance, error and superstition (John 8:32). It staggers the mind to contemplate the large number of books written across the ages. Our university in Knoxville, Tennessee, has over one million volumes in its library. It is said that Epicurus wrote 300 volumes, and Apollodorus 400 (E. H. Plumptre in the *Cambridge Bible Commentary on Ecclesiastes*). Like bodily exercise, the books of men profit a little (1 Timothy 4:8), but the book of God is profitable for all things. It is more to be desired "than much fine gold" (Psalm 19:9). Solomon's point to his son is that the answers to life's questions are found in God's book, not in men's productions. Do not waste valuable time and energy in fruitless fields. Go to the place where meaningful answers are found.

His Final Words

¹³ This is the end of the matter; all hath been heard: fear God and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man.

¹⁴ For God will bring every work into judgment, with every hidden thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.

“This is the end of the matter”—This is the conclusion Solomon had finally reached after his long, painful and disappointing search for meaning, purpose and happiness without God. Not finding it “under the sun,” he was driven back to that godly teaching he had received from his father, David—the man after God’s own heart.

“Fear God and keep his commandments”—This is a reverent fear that wants to please God, not a quaking fear such as one might have of a vicious dog. The Psalmist writes, “Ye that fear Jehovah, trust in Jehovah” (Psalm 115:11). One does not trust someone of whom he is terrified.

The demonstration or proof of our fear of God is the keeping of His commandments. Anything less is faith without works and is useless (James 2:20-26). Jesus taught, “If you love me, ye will keep my commandments” (John 14:15).

This exhortation was not new to the Hebrews. They had heard it from both Moses (Deuteronomy 10:12) and Samuel the prophet (1 Samuel 12:24).

“The fear of Jehovah is the beginning of knowledge” (Proverbs 1:7).

“The reward of . . . the fear of Jehovah is riches, honor, and life” (Proverbs 22:4).

“The fear of Jehovah prolongeth days” (Proverbs 10:27). He that hath the fear of Jehovah “shall abide satisfied” (Proverbs 19:23).

“So great is his lovingkindness [mercy] toward them that fear him” (Psalm 103:11).

Solomon’s advice to keep God’s commandments is sorely needed by a world in rebellion to God’s will and of preachers who teach men that

believing in God alone is sufficient. We remind our readers that Jesus is the author of eternal salvation to “all them that obey him” (Hebrews 5:9).

“For this is the whole duty of man”—The word “duty” is not in the Hebrew text. The Hebrew reads, “For this, all men” (Leupold). Clearly it is elliptical, and something must be supplied to clarify the thought. Among the suggestions offered are: “the whole end”; “the whole work”; “This is for every man”; “This concerns all mankind”; “This makes a man a whole man.” Actually, none of these are more expressive of the truth than the words of the American Standard Version. The whole duty or responsibility of man is to fear God and keep His commandments.

“For God will bring every work into judgment”—This provides the **reason** why men should fear God and keep His commandments. Every man will face the omniscient God in judgment. This judgment day is already **appointed** (Hebrews 9:27). **All** will be judged (2 Corinthians 5:10). Christ will be the **judge** (Matthew 25:31-41). His word will be the **standard** of judgment (John 12:48). The deeds done in this life will be weighed (Revelation 20:12). The consequences will be eternal life or eternal death (Matthew 25:46). The decision will be irreversible. What a sobering thought this is! Surely no soul who thinks soundly would gamble his eternal destiny for the passing pleasures of this life.

“With every hidden thing”—This speaks of God’s omniscience. “There is no creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and laid open before the eyes of him with whom we have to do” (Hebrews 4:13). In this life, one might succeed in hiding his crime, or at least hiding the convicting evidence from the judge and jury; not so in the day of judgment. Our judge can “discern the thoughts and intents of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).

Thus comes to a close our discussion of this remarkable book. If we learn two basic lessons, we shall be forever profitted:

- (1) No satisfying and lasting joy can be found in this life apart from God and submission to His will; and
- (2) There is a world to come and a judgment wherein God will determine if we live in joy or misery. Our eternal destiny will depend on our choices and conduct in this life.

If we understand these great lessons from Solomon’s book, surely we will fear God and keep His commandments.

Multitudes of young people set out, as did our illustrious king, to find happiness and fulfillment without God. They seek their goal in

the same basic areas as did he. Invariably, they fail to find what their soul desires. So dangerous is this pursuit that many are wounded and forever scarred, and not a few perish in the endeavor. Jehovah recorded for us Solomon's fruitless search just so we would not have to try it ourselves. Wise young men and women will learn from his painful experience and choose rather to remember their Creator in the days of their youth.

Lessons To Remember

Many marvellous lessons for life are found in Ecclesiastes. Among them are the following:

- (1) Any philosophy of life that excludes God is worthless.
- (2) God is the ultimate standard and point of reference by which every aspect of life must be interpreted.
- (3) Wisdom, money, pleasure and power, singly or combined, cannot provide happiness apart from God.
- (4) The greatest degree of human wisdom cannot by itself protect us from the most foolish mistakes about the purpose and meaning of life.
- (5) Life apart from God is a vicious cycle.
- (6) Worldly wisdom without God increases grief and sorrow.
- (7) It is vanity to lay up great treasure for heirs who may well squander it.
- (8) There is a proper time and place for everything.
- (9) God has set eternity in the heart of every man, and only the things of eternity can satisfy the heart.
- (10) There are many advantages in companionship.
- (11) Do not utter hasty vows unto God.
- (12) The material desires of man can never be fully satisfied; therefore, they must be controlled.
- (13) A good name is better than riches.
- (14) Do not waste time dreaming about “the good old days.” Make the best you can of today.
- (15) True wisdom accepts what providence sends our way.
- (16) Failure to swiftly punish the wicked encourages others in evil doing.
- (17) The race is not always to the swift or the victory to the strong.

- (18) Remember to serve God in your youth while you have something useful to offer in His cause.**
- (19) Fear God and keep His commandments; this is the whole duty of man.**
- (20) God will judge every work, whether good or evil.**

Ecclesiastes
APPENDIX I
Man's Search for Happiness
(An Expository Sermon on the
Message of Ecclesiastes)

Each man's life is a quest, a lifetime search for happiness. Along the path of life lie the bleached bones of thousands who died having never found the answer to the question, "Wherein can I be happy?"

God, knowing this insatiable desire of the human heart, recorded for us the pilgrimage of the great Hebrew king, Solomon. Evidently, at the zenith of his career, he grew weary of serving God as his father, David, had instructed him and launched out on a vain and painful search for happiness "under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:2,3,14). This expression, found throughout his book, means "in this world without God." The title "Ecclesiastes" means "the preacher or teacher." If we study Solomon's experiment and profit thereby, we will save ourselves a thousand heartaches and disappointments in life. He wants us to learn that true happiness and satisfaction can be found only as we honor God and adjust our lives to things above the sun; that is, things spiritual. In the words of Jesus, it is by seeking first His kingdom and His righteousness that we find the joyful life (Matthew 6:33).

When we read Solomon's observations about his quest, we are shocked that he would say such things as "man hath no preeminence over the beasts" (3:19). Remember, these observations were made when he was far from God, trusting in human wisdom. Thus, we are reminded that it is fatal for even the wisest of men to substitute human wisdom for God's.

It will help your understanding of Ecclesiastes if you can imagine Solomon on a stage presenting a monologue of his search for meaning, purpose and happiness. In succeeding scenes, he tells us of the avenues he explored and the futility of his search, till at last he returned to God.

SCENE ONE:
**Is Happiness To Be Found
In Worldly Wisdom?**

As the curtain rises, we see the august sage standing before us in the midst of his library of scrolls. He says:

“I the Preacher was king over Israel in Jerusalem, and applied my heart to seek and to search out by WISDOM concerning all that is done under heaven: it is a sore travail that God hath given to the Sons of men to be exercised therewith” (1:12,13).

“Lo I have gotten me great wisdom above all that were before me . . . yea my heart hath had great experience of wisdom and knowledge . . .” (1:16).

Solomon’s wisdom excelled anything we could hope to achieve. At his coronation, God granted his request and gave him a “wise and an understanding heart: so that there hath been none like thee before thee, neither after thee shall any arise like unto thee” (1 Kings 3:12). He excelled as a poet, songwriter, scientist and philosopher.

“He spake three thousand proverbs; and his songs were a thousand and five. And he spake of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon even unto the hyssop that springeth out of the wall: he spake also of beasts, and of birds, and of creeping things, and of fishes. And there came of all peoples to hear the wisdom of Solomon . . .” (1 Kings 4:32-34).

Did all that wisdom make him happy? He tells us, “I perceived that this also was a striving after wind. For in much wisdom is much grief, and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow” (1:17,18). “Thus I said in my heart, as it happeneth to the fool, so will it happen even to me [i.e., both will soon die]; and why was I then more wise? Then said I in my heart, that this also is vanity” (verse 15). To seek happiness in worldly education and wisdom is like “striving after the wind.” How do you catch an invisible, non-corporeal thing? If you should succeed in catching it, what do you have?

Millions of people think that they will be happy if they can just get a college education. Multitudes who have gotten it without God know the emptiness and despair of which Solomon spoke. Young folks need education that is God-centered; i.e., that presents spiritual as well as

temporal values. Parents, send your kids to a Christian school. It will be the best investment you can make in their future success and happiness. In a Christian school, they will learn not only how to make a living, but how to make a life. Christian teachers will strengthen their faith; a Christian environment will make it easier for them to maintain their Christian standards.

As this scene ends, we see a disappointed, disenchanted man; wise, but not happy; his goal unreachd.

SCENE TWO:

Can Material Wealth Make One Happy?

It is a common illusion of mankind that given great wealth, one will be happy. History is full of stories of that search for silver and gold. Perhaps no society has ever dedicated itself so completely to materialism as has twentieth century America. Solomon had wealth beyond our comprehension.

“Now the weight of gold that came to Solomon in one year was six hundred threescore and six talents . . . besides that which the traders brought, and the traffic of the merchants, and of all the kings of the mingled people. Moreover the king made a great throne of ivory and overlaid it with gold . . . and all King Solomon’s drinking vessels were of gold . . . So King Solomon exceeded all the kings of the earth in riches . . .” (1 Kings 10:14-23).

Yet with all his vast wealth, Solomon found that happiness still eluded him. He tells us, “He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance, with increase: this also is vanity” (5:10,11). He learned that the more wealth he accumulated, more demands were made for it. It is a true saying that the more we earn, the more we spend. Wealth can become a tyrannical master. Solomon tells us of the man with no heirs, yet he is driven to gain more and more wealth that he can never use (4:7,8). He pictures the poor fellow who drives himself to accumulate wealth, but breaks his health in so doing.

“There is an evil which I have seen under the sun . . . a man to whom God giveth riches, wealth and honor, so that he lacketh nothing . . . of all that he desireth, yet God

giveth him not power to eat thereof, but an alien eateth it, this is vanity . . .” (6:1,2).

Pity the fellow who works three jobs so he can one day afford steak—but then his stomach is ulcerated so he cannot digest it; or he that punished himself to buy that mountain home, but now his heart is damaged, and he cannot stand the altitude. Worse still is the hard-working, thrifty soul who leaves his estate to a foolish heir who squanders it. “. . . Seeing I must leave it unto the man that shall be after me. And who knoweth whether he will be a wise man or a fool?” (2:18-20). This realization drove him to the point of **despair**. Only a breath separates the millionaire and the beggar. Death cuts down both without respect of persons. Scene two ends with this sad note. Happiness is not a direct corollary of wealth, nor is happiness purchased with gold. How many broken lives and broken hearts could have been averted if people had learned from Solomon’s vain search.

SCENE THREE:

Can Worldly Pleasure Satisfy?

Multitudes in every age have thought that happiness was to be found in “wine, women and song.” Houses, cars, vacations, and a thousand other things are eagerly pursued as the ultimate solution for unhappiness. Solomon tried this avenue as well, in a fashion more extravagant than most could ever do.

“I said in my heart . . . I will prove thee with mirth, therefore enjoy pleasure . . . I searched . . . how to cheer my flesh with wine . . . I made me great works; I builded me houses; I bought man-servants and maid-servants . . . also I had possessions of herds and flocks . . . I gat me men-singers and women-singers, and the delights of the sons of men [women], musical instruments, and that of all sorts . . . I withheld not my heart from any joy . . .” (2:1-11).

Yet with all of that and the sensual pleasure it brought, our king wrote, “Behold all was vanity and striving after the wind, and there was no profit under the sun.”

We are part of a generation that has been on a 25-year pleasure binge. Never were so many people so unhappy. Witness the vast addiction to booze and drugs as men try to drown their sorrow. Witness the

thousands struggling with emotional problems resulting from their fruitless search. Witness the 10,000 or more annual suicides as frustrated pleasure seekers give up in despair. Finding happiness in sensual pleasure is like chasing a phantom—"striving after the wind." The curtain falls on an unhappy king.

SCENE FOUR:

Can Position and Power Make One Happy?

Solomon "ruled over all the kings from the River [Euphrates] even unto the land of the Philistines and to the border of Egypt" (2 Chronicles 9:26). We see him upon his ivory throne surrounded by his guard in dazzling uniforms and golden shields (1 Kings 10:16-18). See his army, his cavalry, his royal navy. See monarchs like the queen of Sheba bowing, honoring him (2 Chronicles 9:1-9). Multitudes are convinced that happiness is in a "management job" or owning their own business. For others, it is holding public office or military rank. Any price is paid, any sacrifice is made to get to the top of the ladder. But all learn what our ancient subject learned—it, too, is vanity and striving after the wind. Remember, if you succeed in capturing the wind in a bag, what do you have? The scene closes with an embittered, frustrated, unhappy man. Every promising road to earthly happiness had led to a dead end.

SCENE FIVE:

The Conclusion of the Matter

As the curtain ascends, we see a sober scene. He is now an older man. The hair is white; the face lined. He calls us close to hear his final words. With a voice now cracked with age, he says:

"This is the end of the matter: all hath been heard: Fear God and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every work unto judgment, with every hidden thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil" (12:13).

Having tried every category of things that the human mind thinks will bring happiness and finding all of them false, Solomon found the truth just where his father David had told him it would be. Like the

man searching for acres of diamonds who, after a long and painful search, found them in his own backyard, so did the king. All the things of this world—“under the sun”—are vanity (useless and worthless) and a vexation of spirit. Happiness is but a dream or an illusion without God and heavenly values. We must lay up our treasures in heaven if we want them to be permanent and satisfying (Matthew 6:19-21). He reminds us that our service to God should begin in our youth (12:1). It is both tragic and foolish to waste our lives in sin. Don't wait until you are worn out in sin to serve God. He gave us life, and He has provided for us the path of happiness that leads to eternal bliss. Though millions have vainly sought meaning, purpose and happiness without God, we need not repeat their foolish mistake. Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole of man. Solomon learned this lesson the hard way. May we profit from his experience.

* The author is indebted to T. B. Larimore for the heart of this lesson.

Ecclesiastes
APPENDIX II
Spirit, Soul and Body

(A Study of The Nature of Man)

*“And the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved entire, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ”
(1 Thessalonians 5:23).*

In this concluding prayer, the apostle implores the Lord to sanctify and consecrate every part of the entire being of each disciple. They had been set apart for God upon their initial obedience to the gospel, and were thus sanctified (1 Corinthians 1:2, 6:11). This passage makes it evident, however, that sanctification is not a one-time completed action; it is a process. As the child of God grows to higher levels of maturity, he becomes more thoroughly dedicated and consecrated to God’s service. As Paul prayed, so our goal would be that we might be sanctified wholly. There should be no nook or corner of our lives into which the Lord’s influence does not reach.

(1) **Materialists deny that man has an immortal spirit that survives death.** To express his wish that their sanctification and preservation be completed, Paul prays for their body, soul and spirit. It is this expression which is the key point of our discussion. The question has to do with the nature of man. Three possibilities are before us:

- (a) That of the materialist; that is, that man is wholly mortal with no immortal spirit that can be distinguished from the body. There is both a religious version of this; that is, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and the secular version of the atheistic humanists. In their book *Let God Be True*, the Witnesses write, “Also we see that the claim of religionists that man has an immortal soul, and therefore differs from the beast, is not scriptural.”¹

(b) Some teach that man is a dual being of body and spirit; the terms soul and spirit being used interchangeably and synonymously in scripture. Those who hold this view are styled dichotomists.

(c) Trichotomists teach that man is constituted of body, soul and spirit.

As Christians who view the Bible as our standard and authority, we flatly reject the view of the materialists. Scripture throughout speaks of the immaterial, spiritual nature of man. Solomon says, “. . . and the dust returneth to the earth as it was, and the spirit returneth unto God who gave it” (Ecclesiastes 12:7). Paul writes, “. . . though our outward man is decaying yet our inward man is renewed day by day (2 Corinthians 4:16). Again he says, “We are . . . willing to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8). These scriptures and dozens more easily refute the materialistic view.

(2) **Dichotomists and trichotomists.** The second and third categories are more difficult to decide between, with Bible-believing scholars in both camps. Those of the Calvinistic school are unanimous in defending the **dichotomistic** view, while Anglican scholars generally hold the **trichotomistic** view of man. Our commitment to the authority of scripture demands that we have more than the opinion of a given school. What saith the Scripture? This is the answer for which we seek.

While some verses speak only of “soul and body,” such as Matthew 10:28, we must deal with those that suggest the threefold nature of man.

In addition to our text, the Hebrew writer speaks of the word of God dividing soul and spirit (Hebrews 4:12). If it is impossible to consider the two separately, then the Holy Spirit must have been mistaken here.

Genesis 2:7 seems to distinguish three aspects of man: “. . . God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.” Here we see the clay, the physical frame; the breath of life, the spirit; and the living being, the soul.

(3) **Definition of pertinent terms.**

(a) **Body (soma).** The body is referred to as a temple (1 Corinthians 6:19), a home (2 Corinthians 5:6-9) and the outward man (2 Corinthians 4:16). Scripture speaks of the body as being weak (Matthew 26:41). It comes from a human father

(Hebrews 12:9). It decays (2 Corinthians 4:16), dies (James 2:26) and returns to earth (Ecclesiastes 12:7). The body will be raised in the resurrection; incorruptible, glorious and in power, suited to live with God in immortality (1 Corinthians 15:42,43,54).

- (b) **Spirit (pneuma)**. W. E. Vine gives 17 connotations for **pneuma**. Concerning its nature, Jesus said, “. . . a spirit hath not flesh and bones” (Luke 24:39). The spirit is eternal (2 Corinthians 4:16) and invisible (John 3:8). It is that part of man which is made in God’s image (Genesis 1:26,27). It resides within the body in this realm of life. Daniel’s spirit was grieved in the midst of his body (7:15). God is the father of our spirit (Hebrews 12:9). He forms the spirit within us (Zechariah 12:1), and at death the spirit returns unto him (Ecclesiastes 12:7). In death, the spirit retains consciousness (Luke 16:23,24). It is immortal, being eternal in existence (2 Corinthians 4:26, 5:12; 2 Peter 2:9).
- (c) **Soul (psuche)** is assigned 10 various meanings in the lexicons. It differs from the spirit and generally means “life,” “the natural life of the body.”²

(4) **Soul and spirit distinguished**. P. J. Gloag in the *Pulpit Commentary* says,

*Each of the two words is sometimes used for our whole invisible nature, but, when distinguished from the spirit, the soul is the lower part of our immaterial being, which belongs in common to the whole animal creation, the seat of the appetites, desires, affections.*³

Again he says:

*The spirit is the highest part of man, that which assimilates him to God; renders him capable of religion, and susceptible of being acted upon by the Spirit of God. The “soul” is the inferior part of his mental nature, the seat of his passions and desires, of the natural propensities. The “body” is the corporeal frame.*⁴

Henry Alford writes:

The spirit is the highest and distinctive part of man, the immortal and responsible SOUL in our common parlance.

The soul [here] is the lower or animal soul, containing the passions and desires which we have in common with the brutes, but which in us is ennobled and drawn up by the spirit. ⁵

W. E. Vine observes:

The spirit may be recognized as the life principle bestowed on man by God, the soul as the resulting life constituted in the individual. ⁶

According to James 2:26, “the body apart from the spirit is dead.” Conversely, the spirit’s presence in the body equals life. This is demonstrated in Genesis 2:7; when Jehovah breathed into the lifeless body of Adam the breath (spirit) of life, he became a living soul, or alive. Thus, the soul in the more technical sense is the biological life which we share in common with all other creatures. The spirit is that which makes us distinctly God’s offspring (Acts 17:29).

T. P. Brown illustrates this with an analogy of an electrical light. The bulb represents our **body**; the electrical energy represents the human spirit. When the **spirit** enters the body, the resulting light and heat represent our **soul**. Applying the analogy to Genesis 2:7, God formed a light bulb of the elements of the earth and channeled into it electricity, and it became a shining light. ⁷

In death, the spirit leaves the body (James 2:26) and returns to God (Ecclesiastes 12:7). It awaits the resurrection in the Hadean realm (Luke 16:22-26). This results in death, the end of physical life (soul), and disintegration of the physical body.

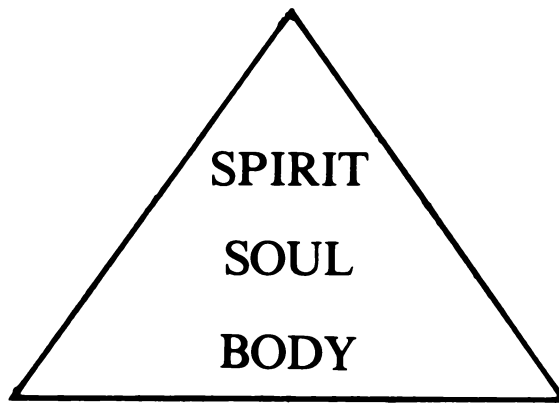
In heaven, our inward man or spirit will receive a glorious body (1 Corinthians 15:42-44), and the resulting life will go on eternally (1 Corinthians 15:54).

Concerning the role of the soul, Vincent says:

The soul is the principle of individuality, the seat of personal impressions, having a side in contact with the MATERIAL ELEMENT of humanity as well as with the SPIRITUAL ELEMENT. It is thus the mediating organ between the spirit and the BODY, receiving impressions from within and without . . . SPIRIT is the highest, deepest, noblest part of our humanity, the point of contact between God and man. ⁸

This could well be illustrated in the form of a pyramid with the body

as the foundation, the spirit the apex, and the soul in an intermediary position.



Lenski comments:

The spirit of man ought to rule supreme, wholly controlled by God's spirit, man ought to be PNEUMATIKOS. Sin enabled the PSUCHE to control so that man became PSUCHIKOS (sensual), his bodily appetites having sway.⁹ The Christian's "soul is thus controlled by the spirit and is not like the soul of pagans which runs away with the spirit and gives reign to the body."¹⁰

The fact that the terms soul and spirit are often used interchangeably, and each with a wide variety of meanings, makes this topic surely one of the most difficult in scripture.

We conclude this with a summary by Guy N. Woods:

The soul as it relates to man, is a generic term, the spirit, a specific one. In such a frame of reference it is easy to define spirit; it is the immortal nature infused directly from God (Hebrews 12:8,9). The soul being generic, relies on the context to indicate its meaning and is used in the following four ways in the scriptures: (a) the whole person (Acts 2:41; 1 Peter 3:20), (b) the physical life which man possesses in common with the lower creation (Psalm 78:50), (c) the intellectual nature and higher spiritual nature (1 Corinthians 2:14), the "natural man" here is literally the soulish man, see ASV margin, (d) synonymously with spirit.¹¹

Awareness of these facts and careful attention to the context are the keys to a proper exegesis of a given text.

Footnotes

¹ Committee, *Let God Be True*, Brooklyn, Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, 1952, p. 68.

² Clyde P. Findlay, *Body, Soul and Spirit*, Knoxville, Tennessee, privately printed class notes, no date.

³ H. D. Spence, and J. S. Exell, *The Pulpit Commentary*, Grand Rapids, W. B. Eerdmans' Pub. Co., 1962, Vol. 21, pp. 119-120.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁵ Henry Alford, *New Testament for English Readers*, Chicago, Moody Press, no date, p. 1335.

⁶ W. E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, Westwood, N.J., Fleming Revell Co., 1965, Vol. 4, p. 54.

⁷ T. P. Brown, (Soul and Spirit) *Gospel Advocate*, Vol. 121, No. 24, June 14, 1979, pp. 371, 376.

⁸ M. R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans' Pub. Co., 1973, Vol. 1, p. 262.

⁹ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, etc.*, Minneapolis, Augsburg Pub. House, 1761, p. 367.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 368.

Song of Solomon

INTRODUCTION

This brief commentary does not pretend to exhaust the potential of Solomon's matchless song. Rather, it proposes to give the reader a brief introduction and overview of the contents and then a summary exposition of the chapters. Nor is this material prepared for the advanced scholar who desires to probe the mysteries of the Hebrew text and the myriads of ancient interpretations. Rather, we write for the common man who hungers and thirsts after righteousness; who searches the Scriptures to learn God's will for his own life, wishing to grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ.

Keys for Finding the Meaning

The Song of Solomon is a **celebration of married love**.

The **key verse** is 8:7: "Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it: if a man would give all the substance of his house for love, he would utterly be contemned."

The **key word** is "love."

The **key concept** is the beauty of married love of one man and one woman.

The **key persons** are Solomon, King of Israel and Shulammith, a lovely country maiden from northern Israel.

Authorship: It is "The Song of songs," which is Solomon's (1:1). Some argue that it is a song **about** Solomon rather than by him. We would accept this as one of Solomon's 1005 songs mentioned in 1 Kings 4:32. The Hebrews judged it to be his best production. For more information on Solomon's life and achievements, see the introductory remarks on Ecclesiastes.

Name: In the Hebrew Bible, it is called the Song of Songs, which

means it is superior to all other songs. Jerome gave it the title “Canticles” in his Latin Vulgate translation.

Date: Accepting the Song as from Solomon, we would assign it to the earlier days of his reign (970-950 B.C.). There were only sixty queens and eighty concubines at the time of writing (6:8); later, there were seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines (1 Kings 11:3). Liberal scholars, denying the Solomonic authorship, date it sometime after the 10th century B.C. for mainly subjective reasons.

Purposes: No specific purpose is stated in the book, but it clearly celebrates the beauties of monogamous, married love. God placed it in the canon to teach the purity and sanctity of marriage as He ordained it in Eden. Thus, it is a veiled protest against polygamy.

The Theme is the mutual love of Solomon and his Shulammitte bride.

How Do We Interpret the Book?

Theories of Interpretation: Bullock rightly observes that “we stand at the end of a long chain of interpreters who have agonized over the complexities of the Song” (page 224). The majority of interpreters through the centuries have viewed the Song as an **allegory**. Historically, the Jews from the time of Josephus have seen it as depicting God and Israel. Christian interpreters saw Jesus and the church in its words. The allegorical view is discredited by the absurdities it has produced. For example, “I am black but comely” (1:5) means black with sin but comely through conversion according to some. “A bundle of myrrh that lieth between my breasts” (1:13) is interpreted as Christ between the Old and New Testaments, or the Shekinah between the two cherubim. The “fourscore concubines” (6:8) were said to be heresies that have plagued the church. Athanasius of Alexandria (296-373 A.D.) “found in the Song the doctrine of the deity of Christ.” Bullock, commenting on 1:2—“Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth”—says that it was the pleas of ancient Israel to the Word that he become flesh (Bullock, page 225). It is not that the contents of the Song suggest such exotic explanations; but to justify its place in the canon, scribes felt obliged to allegorize it to deal with the frank expressions of love. It is impressive that not one single word in the song suggests or needs an allegorical interpretation. In the words of Richard Moulton, “Solomon’s Song has been the happy hunting ground of those who seek to discover mystic senses in isolated phrases,

and a literary distortion has been the result which is perhaps without a parallel elsewhere (*Modern Reader's Bible*, page 1450).

The **typical view** sees the literal story of Solomon and Shulamith's romance as an illustration of God's love for His people. They note that elsewhere, Solomon is depicted as a type of Christ (2 Samuel 7:12-17; Matthew 12:42). God and Israel are often described as husband and wife (Isaiah 54:4,5; Jeremiah 3:14; Ezekiel 16:8-14). The church is depicted as Christ's bride in Ephesians 5:22,23).

The **literal view** sees it as a lyrical drama which portrays Solomon's love for the Shulammitic girl. The value is in its exalted view of married love. Christian Ginsburg observes, "In its literal sense, the Song of Songs teaches a great moral lesson, worthy of Divine inspiration. It gives us 'an example of virtue, which is still more worthy of a place in the sacred canon.' " Some propose a different dramatic setting. They claim to find a third party, a shepherd lover to whom Shulamith remains faithful despite Solomon's romantic appeals. The present author finds no merit in that approach.

Still another view is that we have a collection of **nuptial songs** to be sung at a wedding festival. They note that to this day, the Syrians consider the newlywed couple king and queen of the week of their wedding festival. This has been styled the **sociological view**. They see no spiritual value in the song.

We shall follow the literal approach in our study. For "if we accept the view that the book is didactic, teaching fidelity and the virtues of pure love between a man and a woman, the Song deserves a place in the canon on those merits alone" (Bullock, page 241). The exhortation of T. C. Kingsbury is especially valuable: "Any conclusions, therefore, at which the student may arrive on such points should be expressed with moderation and . . . humility."

Some Helpful Hints for Interpreting the Song

Remember that it is written as poetry, not prose. We grant to poets a broad license of expression. Furthermore, it is Oriental poetry. Easterners revel in bold figures of speech we Westerners are shocked at. There is nothing in the Song to offend the most modest Oriental. It is a poem about romantic love such as could be sung at a wedding festival. As in most ancient poems, there are no indications of change

of scenes or speakers. Careful attention must be paid, therefore, to the context to avoid confusion. It is a “pastoral poem with characters presenting quasi-dramatic action. The addresses, instead of being dialogues, are frequently sustained monologues, soliloquies or apostrophes” (Samuel Yoder). It is best understood when viewed as an operetta with dramatic scenes, speeches and songs. “It is not a drama in the theatrical sense, since the theater was not a Semitic institution, but a development somewhere between lyrical poetry and drama” (Bullock, page 232).

The Cast of Characters Includes:

Solomon: The great king who woos and wins the lovely lady.

Shulammith: The rustic maiden of northern Israel, who by her beauty and purity filled Solomon with love for her. She helped him to see the beauty of the original monogamous love in marriage which was ordained in Eden.

The daughters of Jerusalem: Maiden court attendants who played the part of a chorus of singers.

John Raven says, “The book is a wedding song containing recollections of the ante-nuptial experiences of Solomon and Shulammith. The events mentioned are not recorded as having occurred in the order stated, but depict the emotions of the lovers in times of union and separation.”

Some Interesting Facts About the Song

Franz Delitzsch calls it “the most obscure book of the Old Testament.” Aglen says, “The Song of Songs . . . holds . . . first place among the puzzles of literature.”

The history of interpretation of this book from the earliest times has been a series of apologies for its place in the canon. On the surface, there is no apparent connection with religion in the book. God’s name is mentioned but once, and that indirectly (8:6). Thus, no book has provoked more controversy than this. Not grasping its meaning, many students have challenged its right to be in the sacred canon. Yet from ancient times, it holds the highest credentials for its authenticity.

The Song is one of the shortest books of the Old Testament, with

only 117 verses. It is not mentioned in the New Testament. There is no Messianic message within its pages. It is the only book of the Bible with love as its sole theme. Twenty-one varieties of plants and 15 species of animals are mentioned by Solomon. He was renowned for such scientific knowledge (1 Kings 4:33).

During the persecutions of the Reformation period, this small book provided great comfort to the suffering victims. “It is said that there are more quotations from the Song of Songs on the tombstones of the Covenanters in Scotland than from any other book of the Bible.”

Allegorists have relished its romantic lines. John Gill preached 122 sermons on this Song in the early 1700s. Bernard of Clairvaux wrote 86 sermons on the first two chapters, his work being interrupted by death. Origen of Alexandria wrote 12 volumes on it.

The Song of Solomon and the Hebrews

The ancient Hebrews placed the Song among the holiest of all their books. They compared Solomon’s writings to their Temple: Ecclesiastes being the outer court, Proverbs being the holy place, and the Song of Solomon being the holy of holies. It was sung annually on the eighth day of the Passover feast. They grouped it in the Megilloth along with Ruth, Esther and Ecclesiastes. Jerome tells us that the Jews of his day discouraged their young folks from reading the Song until age 30. The Chaldee Targum, an ancient Jewish commentary, said, “Far be it that the Song of Solomon should treat of any earthly love; for had it not been pure allegory and had not its excellence been great, it would not have been numbered with the holy books” Rabbi Akiba wrote, “No man in Israel ever disputed about the Song of Songs [that he should say] that it does not render the hands unclean, for all the ages are not worthy the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel. For all the writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies.”

Opinions About the Song

Herder called it “Solomon’s Song of love, the oldest and sweetest of the East.”

Bunsen wrote, “There would be something wanting in the Bible, if

there was not found there an expression of the deepest and strongest of human feelings.”

Burroughs writes, “It lies in the casket of revelation one exquisite gem engraved with emblematical character with nothing literal thereon to break the consistency of their beauty.”

Franz Delitzsch, “The Song is written as if in Paradise.”

Richard Moulton, “The Song of Songs is the great honeymoon poem of universal literature.”

“Blessed is he who sings holy songs, but more blessed is he who sings the Song of Songs” (Origen).

“It is not extravagant to say that no other composition in world literature can surpass it as an expression of the exuberance of pure, conjugal love” (B. B. Trawick).

“We cannot understand the Song of Songs unless we perceive that it presents before us not only Shulamith’s external attractions, but also all the virtues which made her the ideal of all that is gentlest and noblest in woman” (Franz Delitzsch).

The Song of Songs, Which Is Solomon's

Verse one introduces the book and entitles it. Not only is the Song by Solomon, it is about his romance and marriage to the Shulamith girl.

For our exposition, we shall follow the format of a lyrical drama.

To properly understand the book, it will be essential to notice who is speaking; who is addressed; the location; the situation and the subject being discussed. These facts, of course, constitute the immediate and general context.

ACT ONE portrays the mutual love of Solomon and Shulamith (1:2-2:7).

Scene One is in the women's chamber of the royal palace (1:2-8).

The young bride sings of her love for Solomon (1:2-4a):

² *Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth;
For thy love is better than wine.*

³ *Thine oils have a goodly fragrance;
Thy name is AS oil poured forth;
Therefore do the virgins love thee.*

⁴ *Draw me; we will run after thee:
The king hath brought me into his chambers;*

In passionate, romantic terms, she praises the man she loves. The "oils" with "a goodly fragrance" are those with which the king anointed himself. His name was as refreshing and soothing as oil poured upon the dry, wind-burnt skin.

In verse 4b, the chorus of female attendants respond to the bride's words:

*We will be glad and rejoice in thee;
We will make mention of thy love more than of wine;
Rightly do they love thee.*

They shared her joy for her new found love, and they loved her as well.

In 1:5,6, the Shulammith continues by apologizing for her rustic appearance among the ladies of the court.

*⁵ I am black, but comely,
O ye daughters of Jerusalem,
As the tents of Kedar,
As the curtains of Solomon.*

*⁶ Look not upon me, because I am swarthy,
Because the sun hath scorched me.
My mother's sons were incensed against me;
They made me keeper of the vineyards;
BUT mine own vineyard have I not kept.*

“Black, but comely” has spurred speculation that she was Negro, but the parallel lines tell us plainly the true meaning:

*“I am black, but comely . . .
As the tents of Kedar [black tents]
As the [tent] curtains of Solomon.
Look not upon me, BECAUSE I AM SWARTHY
Because the sun hath scorched me.”*

Therefore, she was apologizing for her dark suntan. It is a trait of all cultures that beauty is the opposite of the norm. Thus, light-skinned people seek to tan themselves, and the darker nations admire the lighter skin. She explained that her brothers had forced her to work outside in the vineyards, exposed to the sun, and in so doing she had not been able to protect her skin and keep it fair.

*⁷ Tell me, O thou whom my soul loveth,
Where thou feedest THY FLOCK, where thou makest
IT to rest at noon:
For why should I be as one that is veiled
Beside the flocks of thy companions?*

The one her soul loved was Solomon. She desired to be with him. Perhaps he was away inspecting his flock of sheep, and she wished to join him. To be “as one that is veiled” reflects the custom of a lady covering her face in public or in the presence of strangers. Alone with him, she could be relaxed and unveiled.

***8 If thou know not, O thou fairest among women,
Go thy way forth by the footsteps of the flock,
And feed thy kids beside the shepherds' tents.***

In verse 8, the chorus of maidens responded, urging Shulammoth to go forth and find her lover in the fields where he was visiting.

Scene Two is set in the royal banquet room (1:9-2:7). Solomon and his fiancée share the intimate conversation of lovers. In verses 9-11, the king praises her beauty:

***9 I have compared thee, O my love,
To a steed in Pharaoh's chariots.***

***10 Thy cheeks are comely with plaits OF HAIR,
Thy neck with strings of jewels.***

***11 We will make thee plaits of gold
With studs of silver.***

While to us it sounds sarcastic or coarse, to an Easterner in that age, to be compared to a graceful horse of the King of Egypt's chariot was a genuine compliment. While admiring her plaits of hair, he promised to adorn her hair with finery becoming his queen, such as gold and silver ornaments.

In verses 12-14, the young lady speaks:

***12 While the king sat at his table,
My spikenard sent forth its fragrance.***

***13 My beloved is unto me AS a bundle of myrrh,
That lieth betwixt my breasts.***

***14 My beloved is unto me AS a cluster of hennaflowers
In the vineyards of Engedi.***

Perhaps they were sitting at a table for a meal or refreshments. Her spikenard was her perfume. She likens Solomon to the pendant filled with sweet-smelling myrrh that hung about her neck—close to her heart. Solomon was fragrant and appealing like the sweet henna, a flowering shrub. The vineyards of Engedi were those of Solomon she had likely seen in his company.

In verse 15, Solomon with deep emotion says:

***15 Behold, thou art fair, my love;
behold thou art fair;
Thine eyes are AS doves.***

Turtle doves are a symbol of love. When he looks into her eyes, he sees

love. The bride responds sincerely in 1:16-2:1:

- ¹⁶ *Behold, thou art fair, my beloved, yea, pleasant:
Also our couch is green.*
- ¹⁷ *The beams of our house are cedars,
AND our rafters are firs.*
- ^{2:1} *I am a rose of Sharon,
A lily of the valleys.*

Perhaps they have moved from the banquet room to a garden area: thus the mention of the “green couch” (i.e., the grass) and the “beams of the house of cedars,” referring to the evergreens towering above.

Her expression, “I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys,” suggests, “I am a country girl.” Palace life was strange and difficult for her. It might also suggest the smallness of the flower compared to the trees; thus, she felt insignificant in the king’s presence. Several notable hymns following the allegorical approach have applied these descriptions to Jesus. For example, “The Lily of the Valley” and “Jesus, Rose of Sharon.” We are unable to identify the exact species of flowers to which she referred.

Grasping her likeness to the lily, the King adds:

- ² *As a lily among thorns,
So is my love among the daughters.*

Other women could not compare with her beauty, personality and character. For him to choose between her and another would be like choosing a beautiful flower or a ragged thorn. The language of love is always passionate and exaggerated, and thus his words should not be taken literally.

Verses 3-7 are spoken by Shulammith to the chorus of maidens about her lover.

- ³ *As the apple-tree among the trees of the wood,
So is my beloved among the sons.
I sat down under his shadow with great delight,
And his fruit was sweet to my taste.*
- ⁴ *He brought me to the banqueting-house,
And his banner over me was love.*
- ⁵ *Stay ye me with raisins, refresh me with apples;
For I am sick from love.*
- ⁶ *His left hand IS under my head,*

And his right hand doth embrace me.

⁷ *I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
By the roes, or by the hinds of the field,
That ye stir not up, nor awake MY love,
Until he please.*

The blossoming apple tree is more fragrant and beautiful than most trees, and to her so was Solomon, compared to other men. Following the simile, she found joy and peace being near him as one finds rest and refuge from the sun in the shade of a tree. His romance was sweet like the fruit of the apple tree.

She relates how he took her to his banquet house (house of wine, footnote). She thrills at her royal reception. Other dignitaries would be accompanied by a banner or flag of state, but her banner was the king's love.

So overpowered with love was she that she requested food for strength: raisins and apples. The footnote suggests cakes of raisins. Perhaps there is the thought of apples and raisin cakes being romantic types of food such as champagne is in the modern world. She recounts their tender embrace.

Verse 7 is a refrain that she often repeats throughout the song. She begged the maiden attendants not to disturb their private moments of love. The roes and hinds are graceful creatures of the antelope family that are frequently seen in pairs. She compares herself and Solomon to them. With this, the first act closes.

ACT TWO tells of the mutual seeking and finding of the two lovers (2:8-3:5).

Scene One is set in the bride's private chamber. She relates to her maidens how Solomon came to visit her with joyful, romantic enthusiasm:

⁸ *The voice of my beloved! behold, he cometh,
Leaping upon the mountains, skipping upon the hills.*

⁹ *My beloved is like a roe or a young hart:
Behold, he standeth behind our wall;
He looketh in at the windows;
He glanceth through the lattice.*

The voice of her beloved likely means she heard him singing as one in love is want to do. Leaping and skipping like a roe or hart probably describes his coming on horseback.

She describes his anxious search to find her at home (2:9b).

Then she relates the tender words of romance he had spoken unto her:

- ¹⁰ *My beloved spake, and said unto me,
Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away.*
- ¹¹ *For, lo, the winter is past;
The rain is over and gone;*
- ¹² *The flowers appear on the earth;
The time of the singing OF BIRDS is come,
And the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land;*
- ¹³ *The fig-tree ripeneth her green figs,
And the vines are in blossom;
They give forth their fragrance.
Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.*
- ¹⁴ *O my dove, that art in the clefts of the rock,
In the covert of the steep place,
Let me see thy countenance,
Let me hear thy voice;
For sweet is thy voice, and thy countenance is comely.*

The time is now spring, and he invites her to go with him for an outing, where alone together they can view the beauties of nature.

“The voice of the turtle” of the *King James Version* (2:12) is correctly rendered “turtledove” by the *American Standard Version*.

Evidently, he was pressing her to join him. Thus, we read twice, “Arise, my love . . . and come away” (2:10,13b). Perhaps she was playing “hard to get,” for he pleads, “Let me see thy countenance”; that is, her face.

Shulammith responds to Solomon in verses 15-17:

- ¹⁵ *Take us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the
vineyards;
For our vineyards are in blossom.*
- ¹⁶ *My beloved is mine, and I am his:
He feedeth HIS FLOCK among the lilies.*
- ¹⁷ *Until the day be cool, and the shadows flee away,
Turn, my beloved, and be thou like a roe or a young
hart
Upon the mountains of Bether.*

The *New American Standard Version* correctly renders verse 15, “Catch the foxes for us, The little foxes that are ruining the vineyards.” The thought is their romance was as a beautiful, fruitful vine-

yard. In actual vineyards, the wild jackals would often dig among or break the tender plants or kill them by urinating on them. Therefore, it was necessary to trap the pesky varmints to protect the vineyard. She feared those people, circumstances and events that might spoil her relationship with Solomon. It is thought by some that this expression about the foxes was a line from a common folk song of that day.

As the shepherd returns his flock to the sheep cote by night and was then free to go home, so she wanted her beloved to turn and come home to her.

“Mountains of Bether”: There was (a) a literal mountainous district called Bethron, east of the Jordan (1 Samuel 2:29). (b) The footnote renders the word “mountains of separation,” which Delitzsch understands to be obstacles that kept them apart that would be overcome. (c) Another possibility is that the mountains of separation refer to her breasts and that, by metonymy, to her whole person. Comparing 1:13 and 4:6, we see a similar usage. Shulammith says, “My beloved is unto me as a bundle of myrrh betwixt my breasts.” Solomon sings, “I will get me to the mountains of myrrh, and to the hill of frankincense.” In fact, in 4:6, Solomon is referring to her invitation for him to come to her in the evening hour. Chapter 2:17 and 4:6 use identical words: “Until the day be cool, and the shadows flee away.” The mountains of Bether are likely the mountains of myrrh and the hill of frankincense. Such language is repeated in 4:5 and 7:6-8. While we blush at such public depiction of her feminine beauty and their sensual feelings, such was not the case among Orientals.

Scene Two begins at 3:1. To her court attendants, the love-struck maiden relates a bad dream she had experienced:

¹ *By night on my bed I sought him whom my soul loveth:
I sought him, but I found him not.*

² *I SAID, I will rise now, and go about the city;
In the streets and in the broad ways
I will seek him whom my soul loveth:
I sought him, but I found him not.*

³ *The watchmen that go about the city found me;
TO WHOM I SAID, Saw ye him whom my soul loveth?*

⁴ *It was but a little that I passed from them,
When I found him whom my soul loveth:
I held him, and would not let him go,
Until I had brought him into my mother's house,
And into the chamber of her that conceived me.*

“By night on her bed” places the event as a **dream** of the sleeping lover. She missed Solomon and set out on a search of the city to find him in her dream. She inquired of the watchmen if they had seen him. Finally, finding him, she clung tightly to him. That she could bring him into her mother’s house, indicated that the relationship was one of propriety and without shame.

Having thus found her lover and taken him home with her, she sings her refrain to her attendants, asking for privacy that they be not disturbed:

⁵ *I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
By the roes, or by the hinds of the field,
That ye stir not up, nor awake MY love,
Until he please.*

ACT THREE 3:6-5:1 commencing at 3:6. Here we see the wedding and the nuptial celebration.

Scene One is sung by the chorus of maidens as they stand at a window or on a balcony and watch the royal cortege bringing the king for the wedding celebration:

⁶ *Who is this that cometh up from the wilderness like
pillars of smoke,
Perfumed with myrrh and frankincense,
With all powders of the merchant?*

⁷ *Behold, it is the litter of Solomon;
Threescore mighty men are about it,
Of the mighty men of Israel.*

⁸ *They all handle the sword, AND are expert in war:
Every man hath his sword upon his thigh,
Because of fear in the night.*

⁹ *King Solomon made himself a palanquin
Of the wood of Lebanon.*

¹⁰ *He made the pillars thereof of silver,
The bottom thereof of gold, the seat of it of purple,
The midst thereof being paved with love,
From the daughters of Jerusalem.*

The answer to their question “Who is this that cometh . . .” is seen in verse 9: “King Solomon” was on his way. The pillars of smoke would most likely be the cloud of dust stirred up by the horses of his guard upon the dirt road. They speak of the King, perfumed with costly fragrances; myrrh, frankincense and powder.

The King's litter is called a palanquin in verse 9. This was the car of state or the sedan chair of the King, borne on the backs of strong attendants. His body guard consisted of sixty mighty men, all expert warriors. The King had personally overseen the preparation of his honeymoon coach. The frame was made of cedar, the corner posts of silver, the canopy (not the bottom) of gold, probably of golden-colored cloth, the interior decor was with purple, the color of royalty. The midst of his palanquin "being paved with love, from the daughters of Jerusalem" likely refers to cushions or a woven spread made by the ladies of the court for the wedding trip as a gift to the bride and groom.

In 3:11, the bride exhorts her attendants to see the glorious spectacle:

*¹¹ Go forth, O ye daughters of Zion, and behold king
Solomon,
With the crown wherewith his mother hath crowned him
in the day of his espousals,
And in the day of the gladness of his heart.*

The crown was the wedding garland, not the regal crown of office. With the garland, he had received his mother's blessing. This is the last mention of Bathsheba, his mother, which scripture gives us.

Scene Two begins with 4:1. The bridegroom, intoxicated by the beauty of his new bride, sings her praises in words of passionate love, suited for the bridal chamber.

*¹ Behold, thou art fair, my love; behold, thou art fair;
Thine eyes are AS doves behind thy veil.
Thy hair is as a flock of goats.
That lie along the side of mount Gilead.*

Oriental women wore the veil in public. Many yet do in some Moslem and Hindu societies. Her hair was black and glossy like that of the goats of the fields. To Westerners, such would be an insult, the goat being held in low esteem. But to the pastoral Hebrews, such a sight was beautiful to behold, and so was she.

*² Thy teeth are like a flock OF EWES that are NEWLY
shorn,
Which are come up from the washing,
Whereof every one hath twins,
And none is bereaved among them.*

Ewes freshly shorn and washed would be clean and white, and so were her teeth. That every ewe had twin lambs and none was bereaved meant each of her teeth had its complement, and thus she was not snaggletoothed as we would say.

*³ Thy lips are like a thread of scarlet,
And thy mouth is comely.
Thy temples are like a piece of a pomegranate
Behind thy veil.*

Her lips were a lovely color of red. Her temples actually refers to her cheeks, which were nicely colored like the inside of a pomegranate fruit. Make-up was used by women of wealth even in those ancient times. Pictures from the Egyptian tombs make this evident.

*⁴ Thy neck is like the tower of David builded for an
armory,
Whereon there hang a thousand bucklers,
All the shields of the mighty men.*

That her neck was like the tower of David, suggests that it was slender and graceful, stately in appearance. In 7:4, he likens her neck to “the tower of ivory.” Perhaps this tower was of white stone, and her lovely neck was like that. Her jewelry about her neck reminded him of the polished shields and bucklers of the guards which hung on the walls of the armory.

*⁵ Thy two breasts are like two fawns
That are twins of a roe,
Which feed among the lilies.*

*⁶ Until the day be cool, and the shadows flee away,
I will get me to the mountain of myrrh,
And to the hill of frankincense.*

In verse 6, he picks up on her words in 2:17. At the end of the busy day, he wanted to be with his beloved. The mountain of myrrh is referring back to the bundle of myrrh worn between her breasts as a pendant suspended from a necklace (1:13).

*⁷ Thou art all fair, my love;
And there is no spot in thee.*

Her beauty was without blemish; hence, there was “no spot” in her, either in body or soul.

In verse 8, he invites her to come away with him for their honeymoon trip:

*⁸ Come with me from Lebanon, MY bride,
With me from Lebanon:
Look from the top of Amana,
From the top of Senir and Hermon,
From the lions' dens,
From the mountains of the leopards.*

Her home was in Northern Israel in the foothills of Mount Lebanon. He would take her to distant places where she would see beauties of nature such as she had never known. All of these peaks are part of the chain of mountains called Lebanon, and anti-Lebanon. "The white mountain," averages some 5,000 feet in height, but at its highest reaches 10,200 feet. Amana (sometimes called Abana) overlooks Damascus and the Coele-Syrian Valley. Hermon towers to 9,200 feet. Its three peaks are snow-covered throughout the year and forms the northwestern boundary of Palestine. Senir is one of Hermon's peaks. From the heights of these mountains where lions and leopards prowled, she would see nature's beauty with her beloved.

Beginning at verse 9, he turns again to behold and praise her personal beauty:

*⁹ Thou hast ravished my heart, my sister, MY bride;
Thou hast ravished my heart with one of thine eyes,
With one chain of thy neck.
¹⁰ How fair is thy love, my sister, MY bride!
How much better is thy love than wine!
And the fragrance of thine oils than all manner of
spices!*

She had captured his heart with one look of her eyes to explain the ellipsis in verse 9. In 6:5, he begs her to "Turn away thine eyes from me, for they have overcome me." Everyone who has been in love can identify with the thought expressed. One of the delicate strands of her necklace could bind him and make him her slave. Obviously, this is a hyperbole of love, but easily understood.

He praises her kisses for their sweetness in verse 11:

*¹¹ Thy lips, O MY bride, drop AS the honeycomb:
Honey and milk are under thy tongue;
And the smell of thy garments is like the smell of
Lebanon.*

Her garments were fresh and clean like the cedars and flowers of Lebanon. Verse 12 speaks of her virginity:

*¹² A garden shut up is my sister, MY bride;
A spring shut up, a fountain sealed.*

A garden shut up by a fence and gate keeps strangers out. A water fountain shut up is preserved only for the owner's use. She was pure and virtuous, and her love would be his alone. In 4:16, she invites her husband into her garden to partake of the fruits.

Developing the thought of his bride's likeness to a garden, he relates all the fragrant things she reminds him of, which are to be found in her garden:

*¹³ Thy shoots are an orchard of pomegranates, with
precious fruits;
Henna with spikenard plants,
¹⁴ Spikenard and saffron,
Calamus and cinnamon, with all trees of frankincense;
Myrrh and aloes, with all the chief spices.*

In her garden grows rows of lovely **pomegranate** shrubs bearing sweet fruit. **Henna** is a small shrub bearing fragrant flowers. Its flowers are sought out to adorn women's hair, and its juices are used for a red stain for the fingernails.

Spikenard is the fragrant oil of a plant which produces a spike. Its perfume is very valuable and is often called "nard" (John 12:3).

Saffron is a variety of crocus which are used for their yellow dye and for food flavoring.

Calamus is a sweet cane used for incense.

Cinnamon is a favorite perfume and flavoring substance among the Eastern people. It is derived from the inner bark of the cinnamon tree.

Frankincense is a sweet-smelling gum exuded from the Frankincense (*Boswellia*) tree and used as incense.

Myrrh is the dried gum of a variety of balsam tree. It had a pleasant smell and was often used in medicine and embalming as well, as for its sweet odor.

Aloes is a lofty tree called eaglewood which yielded an appealing fragrance.

In addition to all the sweet and exotic plants, her garden had lovely springs of pure water, cool and refreshing like the snow-fed streams of Lebanon:

¹⁵ *THOU ART a fountain of gardens,
A well of living waters,
And flowing streams from Lebanon.*

Breathtaken by his words of adoration, she responds in kind:

¹⁶ *Awake, O north wind; and come, thou south;
Blow upon my garden, that the spices thereof may flow
out.
Let my beloved come into his garden,
And eat his precious fruits.*

She entreats the breeze to waft the perfume of her garden to her beloved, that he may be enticed to come and share her love, to eat the fruit of her garden that was now his.

The king responds:

⁵ *I am come into my garden, my sister, MY bride:
I have gathered my myrrh with my spice;
I have eaten my honeycomb with my honey;
I have drunk my wine with my milk.*

The garden, the myrrh, the honeycomb and wine all refer to the charms of his beautiful mate, now his wife. The marriage is now consummated.

The last words of 5:1 are the bridegroom's call to his guests to share the wedding feast:

¹ *Eat, O friends;
Drink, yea, drink abundantly. O beloved.*

ACT FOUR extends from 5:2-6:9. It treats of love separated but reconciled at last.

In **Scene One**, the bride relates another sorrowful dream to her maidens. The scene is set in the women's quarters:

² *I was asleep, but my heart waked:
It is the voice of my beloved that knocketh, SAYING,
Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my undefiled;
For my head is filled with dew,
My locks with the drops of the night.*

She was asleep when this occurred, hence a dream. She dreamed that Solomon had arrived from some trip late in the night and knocked at her door. Remember that in a polygamous society, the

master had his private quarters as did each wife; thus, she slept alone. He requested entrance from the cool dampness of the night air. She responded:

*³ I have put off my garment; how shall I put it on?
I have washed my feet; how shall I defile them?
⁴ My beloved put in his hand by the hole OF THE
DOOR,
And my heart was moved for him.*

In the dream, she was slow in granting him entrance. Perhaps in a tantalizing way, she offered excuses such as “I am already undressed” or “I will get my feet dirty walking to the door.”

For a moment he persisted, putting his hand by the hole of the door—that is, the bolt or latch (5:5c)—seeking to free the lock. Seeing his anxiousness to be with her, she ceased her games and proceeded to open the door, stopping momentarily to perfume herself with liquid myrrh. She continues:

*⁵ I rose up to open to my beloved;
And my hands dropped with myrrh,
And my fingers with liquid myrrh,
Upon the handles of the bolt.*

By the time she reached the door and opened it, the king had given up and gone away:

*⁶ I opened to my beloved;
But my beloved had withdrawn himself,
AND was gone.*

With sixty queens and eighty concubines awaiting his call, she imagined that he had been slighted by her dalliance.

Fearing that she had offended her beloved, she panicked and rushed out into the night to find him.

*My soul had failed me when he spake:
I sought him, but I could not find him;
I called him, but he gave me no answer.*

Not only did she fail to find her husband in the darkened streets of the city, some ruffian watchmen abused her when they found her out alone in the night, further terrorizing her troubled mind:

⁷ The watchmen that go about the city found me,

*They smote me, they wounded me;
The keepers of the walls took away my mantle from me.*

Returning, she pleads with her attendants for help in finding her beloved and that they tell him how sorry and upset she is:

*⁸ I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
If ye find my beloved,
That ye tell him, that I am sick from love.*

It is essential to keep in mind that all of this was a bad dream that she was relating.

The chorus ladies ask the grief-stricken maiden:

*⁹ What is thy beloved more than ANOTHER beloved,
O thou fairest among women?
What is thy beloved more than ANOTHER beloved,
That thou dost so adjure us?*

Perhaps the attendants were gently provoking her with their light-hearted questions about why her beloved was so special?

In 5:10-16, she paints a beautiful poetic word picture of young Solomon. It is the only detailed description we have of any Bible character. We marvel at the poet's ability to paint so vivid a portrait with only words.

*¹⁰ My beloved is white and ruddy,
The chiefest among ten thousand.
¹¹ His head is AS the most fine gold;
His locks are bushy, AND black as a raven.*

His skin color was white, his cheeks ruddy, always a handsome combination of health and youth. He stood out in a vast crowd because of his striking appearance. Upon his head sat the regal crown of gold. It might mean the appearance of his head was beautiful as fine gold. The locks of his hair were jet black and curly.

*¹² His eyes are like doves beside the water brooks,
Washed with milk, AND fitly set.
¹³ His cheeks are as a bed of spices,
AS banks of sweet herbs:
His lips are AS lilies, dropping liquid myrrh.*

His eyes were like a pair of loving doves beside a glistening stream of water. "Washed with milk" suggests the white of his eyes was not yellowed or red from sickness or abuse. "Fitly set" suggests that he

was not cross-eyed. She reveled in the fragrance of his “after shave” lotion and the sweetness of his kisses.

*¹⁴ His hands are AS rings of gold set with beryl:
His body is AS ivory work overlaid WITH sapphires.*

*¹⁵ His legs are AS pillars of marble, set upon sockets of
fine gold:*

His aspect is like Lebanon, excellent as the cedars.

In another vein, as she describes her beloved, she compares him to exquisite works of art such as would be seen in the royal palace. His hands are like those of a finely wrought golden statue. *The Amplified Bible* renders it “his hands are as rods of gold with nails of beryl or topaz.” That would be his hands with outstretched fingers. This may refer to the costly rings of gold worn by her royal mate: golden rings with beryl or golden topaz settings.

She likens his body to a lovely ivory statue encrusted or decorated with sapphires. His legs are like foundation pillars or perhaps a pedestal of polished marble supporting the glorious creation. She even notes his golden sandals which are likened to a golden border or decorative trim for a work of art.

Exhausting those artist’s figures, she tells us he is majestic as towering Mount Lebanon, excellent as the prize cedars that covered its slopes. He excelled all other men, even as did Lebanon and its trees all others.

*¹⁶ His mouth is most sweet; yea, he is altogether lovely.
This is my beloved, and this is my friend,
O daughters of Jerusalem.*

She ends her poem of praise by telling her maiden friends that his mouth is most sweet. This could refer to the sweet words that flowed from his mouth. *The Revised Standard Version* renders it thus. More likely, it is the sweetness of his kisses. Solomon praised her sweet kisses in 4:11.

Only one whose heart overflowed with romantic love would paint such a portrait of words. The maidens had asked her, “What is your beloved more than another beloved?” (5:9), and she told them in these poetic lines.

Continuing the conversation, the court maidens ask Shulamith where Solomon might be (6:1).

⁶ Whither is thy beloved gone,

*O thou fairest among women?
Whither hath thy beloved turned him,
That we may seek him with thee?*

She responds that he has gone to visit his country estate to see his gardens and sheep.

² *My beloved is gone down to his garden, to the beds of
spices,
To feed in the gardens, and to gather lilies.*
³ *I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine
He feedeth HIS FLOCK among the lilies.*

That Solomon relished his vineyards, gardens and parks is mentioned in Ecclesiastes 2:5,6. With 6:3, we leave the first scene of Act Four.

Scene Two: In 6:4 the curtain rises, revealing Solomon and his bride together, reconciled. In verses 4-9, he praises her beauty with poetic effusion.

⁴ *Thou art fair, O my love, as Tirzah,
Comely as Jerusalem,
Terrible as an army with banners.*

We can visualize the lovers alone together in some secluded spot. Quietly the king expresses his romantic feelings about her. To his eyes, she is fair as Tirzah and comely as Jerusalem. Tirzah was an ancient Canaanite city (Joshua 12:24). At one time, it was the capital of the breakaway northern kingdom of Israel (1 Kings 15:33). From Solomon's usage, it must have been an especially lovely place. It was situated in the northern hill country from whence she came. Jerusalem was always admired for its beauty. The psalmist Asaph described Zion as "the perfection of beauty" (Psalm 50:2).

"Terrible as an army with banners" does not communicate well with us. The *New American Standard Version* renders the word "awesome." Her beauty was as imposing as an army on parade with troops decked out in ceremonial colors. All have seen such strikingly beautiful people and understand the impression they make.

Looking into her glistening eyes, he breathlessly says:

⁵ *Turn away thine eyes from me,
For they have overcome me.
Thy hair is as a flock of goats,
That lie along the side of Gilead.*

When one is deeply in love, more is often said by the eyes than with

words. Her loving gaze left him breathless and weak.

We have already discussed her hair being as a flock of goats in 4:1. The sheen of her dark hair drew his admiration.

*⁶ Thy teeth are like a flock of ewes,
Which are come up from the washing;
Whereof every one hath twins,
And none is bereaved among them.*

She had beautiful, white teeth with none missing. It is common in Asian society to see people with teeth deeply stained from chewing the betel nut.

Looking at her face, he notes the rosy color of her cheeks.

*⁷ Thy temples are like a piece of a pomegranate
Behind thy veil.*

He likens them to the heart of the halved pomegranate. For further comment, see 4:3.

In verses 8 and 9, he compares her with the other women of his harem. She excels them all in beauty and grace.

*⁸ There are threescore queens,
and fourscore concubines,
And virgins without number.*

*⁹ My dove, my undefiled, is BUT one;
She is the only one of her mother;
She is the choice one of her that bare her.
The daughters saw her, and called her blessed;
YEA, the queens and the concubines,
and they praised her.*

The sixty queens and eighty concubines indicates that these words were spoken in the earlier years of Solomon's reign. At the height of his glory, "he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines . . ." (1 Kings 11:3). A concubine was a lawful wife "of a second rank, who enjoyed no other conjugal right but that of cohabitation" (McClintock and Strong). Their children were legitimate but did not automatically inherit with the children of a primary wife.

The "virgins without number" would have been the unmarried maidens of his court. Solomon's many women must be understood in light of the practice of kings of those days. It was considered a sign of wealth, greatness and power to possess a large number of lovely women. Also, marriage was commonly used to cement a newly

formed political alliance. Thus, we read that “Solomon made affinity with Pharaoh, king of Egypt and took Pharaoh’s daughter, and brought her unto the city of David . . .” (1 Kings 3:1). The wives of Solomon “turned away his heart after other gods . . .” (1 Kings 11:4). The Old Testament scriptures do not forbid polygamy. They do, however, present repeated instances of its harmful effects in order to discourage the practice.

In verse 9, he tells Shulammith that she is “undefiled”; that is, “perfect” according to the footnote. Also, he says that she is unique; the only daughter of her family, and even more, to be desired above **all** women. Why, even the other ladies of the court (queens and concubines) were praising her beauty. This would be highly unusual, for in a polygamous family, great jealousy is generally expressed toward a favorite of the husband. Shulammith’s qualities made even her competitors praise her. Thus, we leave the loving couple.

ACT FIVE begins at 6:10 and continues through 8:4. Here again we see the beauty of Shulammith praised.

Scene One opens with the chorus of maidens praising her loveliness:

*¹⁰ Who is she that looketh forth as the morning,
Fair as the moon,
Clear as the sun,
Terrible as an army with banners?*

To them, she is as refreshing and welcome as the rising sun after the long dark night. She is fair as the moon in its fullest splendor on a cloudless night. They repeat Solomon’s description of her imposing appearance like an army on parade. The next verse indicates they are seeking for her company.

In verses 11 and 12, the bride responds:

*¹¹ I went down into the garden of nuts,
To see the green plants of the valley,
To see whether the vine budded,
AND the pomegranates were in flower,
¹² Before I was aware, my soul set me
AMONG the chariots of my princely people.*

She had been for a stroll in the royal park. Among the nut trees, vines and flowers, she had been reminded of the folks back home in the country. Her heart was longing to leave the life of the palace and journey back to see her family. Another possible meaning is that while strolling in the garden, she had been pondering the question; why she,

a lowly farm maiden, had been chosen by Solomon to sit by his side in the royal chariot. A time of year is suggested by the budding vines and flowering pomegranate trees.

Her maidens urge her to stay with them and grace them with her pleasant company.

*¹³ Return, return, O Shulammite;
Return, return, that we may look upon thee.*

With humble modesty, she asks them:

*Why will ye look upon the Shulammite,
As upon the dance of Mahanaim?*

Likely they were asking her to dance for their entertainment. Mahanaim was a town beyond Jordan. This particular dance was named after it such as our Virginia Reel. Franz Delitzsch notes that “Mahanaim became in the post-biblical dialect a name directly for angels.” Thus, they perhaps were saying that she danced like an angel. Joy and dancing are natural in every culture. The happy folk-dancing here spoken of should not be equated with the sensuous modern dancing of the nightclub and ballroom. Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes 3:1,2, “For every thing there is a season, and a time . . . a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance.” David danced before Jehovah with all his might . . .” (1 Samuel 6:14).

In 7:1-5, the maidens describe her physical beauty as she does for them her dance of angels:

*⁷ How beautiful are thy feet in sandals,
O prince’s daughter!
Thy rounded thighs are like jewels,
The work of the hands of a skillful workman.*

They see her feet gliding lightly and gracefully to the beat of the music. She is in every way suited to her royal estate no matter her origin. She is a princess. (Notice the progression from her feet to her head.) Next, they praise her legs that move eloquently to the music. They are well-formed, shapened and without blemish. They are like beautiful jewelry made by a skilled artisan.

*² Thy body is LIKE a round goblet,
WHEREIN no mingled wine is wanting:
Thy waist is LIKE a heap of wheat
Set about with lilies.*

Her maidens then praise her body as she dances before them. She is well proportioned like a dainty goblet on the king's table. This could refer to her comely feminine curves. The *New English Bible* renders the figure, "Your navel is a rounded goblet that never wants for special wine." Remember that she is dancing for her female attendants. It is likely that her midriff is bare, prompting their comment on her attractive body. Her waist was trim and small like a shock of wheat tied around the middle. Probably a garland of flowers was about her waist. Perhaps the girl's complexion was golden like the ripened wheat.

³ *Thy two breasts are like two fawns
That are twins of a roe.*

We are reminded again of the frank nature of Oriental poetry. While such expressions cause us to blush, they would be considered quite appropriate in that culture. Her companions considered her breasts an important part of her beauty.

⁴ *Thy neck is like the tower of ivory;*

They praised her lovely neck as an ivory tower. It was slender and properly shaped like some well-known tower that folks admired.

*Thine eyes AS the pools in Heshbon,
By the gate of Bath-rabbim;*

The ancient city of Heshbon was renowned for its lovely pools of water by the gate of Bath-rabbim. While we take abundant and wholesome water for granted, the ancient people in semi-arid land especially cherished the presence of life-sustaining water. Her dark eyes glistened with a beauty comparable to that of those pools at Heshbon.

*Thy nose is like the tower of Lebanon
which looketh toward Damascus.*

Nothing spoils facial beauty like a misshapen nose. Hers was not broken, flattened or grotesque. Rather, it was straight and properly fitted to beautify the lady. Some unknown town is referred to with its imposing battle tower. As that tower added to the esthetic beauty of that city, so did her nose to her beauty.

⁵ *Thy head upon thee is like Carmel,
And the hair of thy head like purple;
The king is held captive in the tresses THEREOF.*

Her head atop her body was as majestic and comely as Mount Carmel that towers over the Palestinian coast with the Mediterranean at its feet.

Her long and lovely hair was like the royal purple garments worn by kings. The love-smitten Solomon was bound to her like a slave in fetters. So ends the first scene.

In 7:6, we find the royal couple together again. The amorous king revels in the beauty of his bride. He whispers:

*⁶ How fair and how pleasant art thou,
O love, for delights!*

He then likens his beloved to the stately date palm, clusters of grapes, apples and wine. Such endearing terms are common in our English language: “pretty as a peach,” “sweet as honey,” etc. He tells her:

*⁷ This thy stature is like to a palm-tree,
And thy breasts to its clusters.*

*⁸ I said, I will climb up into the palm-tree,
I will take hold of the branches thereof:
Let thy breasts be as clusters of the vine,
And the smell of thy breath like apples,*

*⁹ And thy mouth like the best wine,
That goeth down smoothly for my beloved,
Gliding through the lips of those that are asleep.*

The near Eastern people often likened a lovely lady to a palm tree with its tall, slender form. The sweet fruit of the date palm adds to the poetic picture. As Solomon surveyed his gorgeous bride, his mind was filled with romantic thoughts of love. The attraction of her body, the sweetness of her breath, the joy of her kisses are described. Her kisses are like wine, so sweet that it would not even wake a sleeping man. Cheaper wines would have a biting, bitter taste that would burn the throat, so might another woman’s kisses; but not his dear Shulamith’s.

In 7:10-8:4, the queen gently requests that her husband take her for a visit to her old home place.

¹⁰ I am my beloved’s;

And his desire is toward me.

*¹¹ Come, my beloved, let us go forth into the field;
Let us lodge in the villages.*

*¹² Let us get up early to the vineyards;
Let us see whether the vine hath budded,
AND its blossom is open,
AND the pomegranates are in flower:
There will I give thee my love.*

Having reaffirmed her love for him, she makes her request to go back to the village. She is anxious to see again the fields and vineyards of home. It is spring. The countryside is lovely, she says. She promises to reward him well with her affections.

*¹³ The mandrakes give forth fragrance;
And at our doors are all manner of precious fruits,
new and old,
Which I have laid up for thee,
O my beloved.*

She further hints at this romantic enticement by reminding him of the “mandrakes” which grew abundantly in the wilds of the north. Among the ancient folks, this plant with its whitish green flowers and small yellow fruit was prized as an aphrodisiac or love potion. Leah used mandrakes to gain the attention of Jacob (Genesis 30:14-17). We remind ourselves that these are loving words of a wife to her husband.

Having the thought of going home in her heart, she muses out loud to her husband:

*⁸ Oh that thou wert as my brother,
That sucked the breasts of my mother!
WHEN I should find thee without, I would kiss thee;
Yea, and none would despise me.*

In their society, a proper lady did not show outward romantic affection to a man—even her husband. Such restraint still prevails in much of Asian society. The social regulations were very restrictive. But a respectable lady could greet her brother with a kiss without shame. She feels confined when in public with her husband because of protocol. If only he were her brother, she could cling to him and greet him with a kiss like she so much wanted to do. In Proverbs 7:13, Solomon wrote of the harlot who openly kissed her man.

In verses 2 and 3, she expressed her wish to take him to her mother’s house where they could be refreshed with wine and fruit and have privacy for romance.

² *I would lead thee, AND bring thee
into my mother's house,
Who would instruct me;
I would cause thee to drink of spiced wine,
Of the juice of my pomegranate.*
³ *His left hand SHOULD BE under my head,
And his right hand should embrace me.*

The scene closes with a lover's embrace and the bride singing her refrain—asking the maidens to grant them privacy for a while.

⁴ *I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
That ye stir not up, nor awake MY love,
Until he please.*

We must be continually reminded that the Song celebrates the beauties of married love, a monogamous love in an age of polygamy and moral decay. The Holy Spirit charges us, “Let marriage be had in honor among all, and let the bed be undefiled . . .” (Hebrews 13:4). In married love, a couple glorifies the Creator of love and marriage.

ACT SIX, Scene One: The final act commences at 8:5. The scene is set at Shulammith's rural home. The royal couple have been strolling about the home place. The chorus of virgins opens the scene as the couple approaches:

⁵ *Who is this that cometh up from the wilderness,
Leaning upon her beloved?*

Solomon appears with his bride on his arm. As the loving couple approaches, we can hear their conversation. Solomon says:

*Under the apple-tree I awakened thee:
There thy mother was in travail with thee,
There was she in travail that brought thee forth.*

We see him pointing to the spot where first they met, or perhaps where their romance first blossomed. They view the very house where she was born.

Now we can imagine them seated in some quiet spot neath the shade of a tree. The bride says to her royal husband:

⁶ *Set me as a seal upon thy heart,
as a seal upon thine arm;*

In those days, every king had his personal seal of state with which

every official document was stamped. It stood in place of his signature to authenticate a written instrument. Security of the seal was very important lest it fall into dishonest hands that would use it fraudulently. Thus, the seal was usually worn on a chain about the king's neck or set in a ring upon his finger. Shulammith is likely toying with the king's seal suspended from his neck as she says, "Let me be as precious and as close to you as this signet." In a polygamous household as vast as Solomon's, it might be weeks between their visits alone together. She naturally longed to spend more time with him.

She then speaks the most significant lines of her part:

*For love is strong as death;
Jealousy is cruel as Sheol;
The flashes thereof are flashes of fire,
A very flame of Jehovah.*

Her love for Solomon was as strong as death. Death never relents in his pursuit of his victim. Death knows no discouragement. So her affection for her mate would never fail, and every obstacle would be overcome.

She continued, saying that "Jealousy is cruel as Sheol." Jealousy is the bane of every polygamous family. In Africa, the author was told that it often resulted in acts of violence between jealous wives. It is possible that she had begun to experience some of this jealousy from others from the harem. The Hebrew word "Sheol" is best defined as death in this context. Death's cruel work is evident on every hand. The **flashes of jealousy** are as destructive as lightning from heaven. Such hate-filled flashes can be seen in glaring looks of the eyes, hostile words or aggressive actions. Jealousy is never a pretty thing to behold. Like envy, jealousy is as rottenness of the bones (Proverbs 14:30), eating away at the core of life. It poisons and destroys every relationship affected.

To her request, Solomon tenderly responds:

*⁷ Many waters cannot quench love,
Neither can floods drown it:
If a man would give all the substance
of his house for love,
He would utterly be contemned.*

Love, too, is like an eternal flame. Nothing, not even floods of water, can extinguish true love. He most likely refers to the problems of his great household that she had alluded to. He continues his

thought by adding that love cannot be purchased. To try to do so would gain one only contempt rather than love desired. “Contemned” means to despise. Even his immense wealth could not purchase so rare a treasure as love. Experience teaches us that love comes in numerous degrees, quantities and kinds. Here he speaks of the love of a man and woman. For some, romantic love is a happening, something one falls into. Biblically, love is a sharing, a growing process where the twain become one in every way (Ephesians 5:22,23). It is like the love Christ has for His church.

So impressive are the truths of 8:6,7 that some have argued that they alone are sufficient to warrant the Song a place in the sacred Canon. Many couples have heard them recited in their marriage ceremonies. Surely we would agree that here, the theme of the Song reaches its climax; here is its greatest moral, social and spiritual contribution.

Scene Two: With 8:8, we have the final scene of our operetta. The contents suggest that the couple are now visiting with the bride’s family at the home place. She reminisces about things her brothers used to say when she was a young lass. Perhaps she did not comprehend the meaning then, but now she does.

The brothers had said:

*⁸ We have a little sister,
And she hath no breasts:
What shall we do for our sister.
In the day when she shall be spoken for?*

*⁹ If she be a wall,
We will build upon her a turret of silver:
And if she be a door,
We will inclose her with boards of cedar.*

Before her days of adolescence, they were concerned to protect her innocence and purity for the day of her marriage when she would “be spoken for.” “If she be a wall” meant that if she were strong and virtuous, no man would be able to seduce her. They would then reward her with appropriate gifts honoring her on the day of her wedding. The gifts are symbolized by the building of a turret of silver on her strong wall.

If on the other hand she be like a door that is easily entered, they would have to board up her door to keep intruders out. This suggests a young lady of easy virtue and no strong moral convictions. They had said that they would take appropriate steps to keep away from her

men with immoral purposes.

Shulammith's thought now returns to the present, and with her brother's past words in mind she says:

*¹⁰ I am a wall, and my breasts
like the towers THEREOF:
Then was I in his eyes as one
that found peace.*

Thus, she affirms that she had kept herself chaste and pure for the man she married. She had been like that strong wall, resisting every temptation. Her moral purity had been an important attraction to Solomon when he chose her for his bride. It is interesting to note that both the names, Solomon and Shulammith, mean "peace." Thus, together they found peace.

In verses 11 and 12, the bride compares herself allegorically to Solomon's vineyard for the purpose of making a personal request:

*¹¹ Solomon had a vineyard at Baal-hamon;
He let out the vineyard unto keepers;
Every one for the fruit thereof was to bring a
thousand PIECES of silver.*

*¹² My vineyard, which is mine, is before me:
Thou, O Solomon, shalt have the thousand,
And those that keep the fruit thereof two hundred.*

She reminds the king of his vineyard at Baal-hamon which he rented to certain keepers. The rent was a thousand pieces of silver annually. The rest of the profit they kept as their reward for tending and maintaining his vineyard. Shifting the figure, she then presents herself to Solomon under the figure of a vineyard. This, of course, refers to her whole being, which the king dearly loved. She then lovingly tells him that she is his without "the renter's fee"; that is, a gift of love. However, since those who keep the king's vineyards at Baal-hamon are rewarded, should not the king reward her brothers who had carefully raised her and kept her purity for him in days past? Thus, the bride's brothers would be "those that keep the fruit" who should have two hundred pieces of silver. We are not told the king's response, but would hazard the guess that he gladly granted his beloved's request. It is not uncommon for a member of a poor family, who marries wealth, to want to benefit their loved ones.

At this point, voices are heard from without, urging Shulammith to come forth and sing for them. These likely would be old friends and

companions from her neighborhood. Solomon takes her by the hand and encourages her to grant their wish, adding that he too wants to hear her song.

*¹³ Thou that dwellest in the gardens,
The companions hearken for thy voice:
Cause me to hear it.*

Thus, the production closes with the lovely maiden of the hills singing the song that reflected her love for her husband:

*¹⁴ Make haste, my beloved,
And be thou like to a roe
or to a young hart
Upon the mountains of spices.*

Similar thoughts are expressed in 2:9 and 17.

Concluding Thoughts

As we see the author celebrating the beauty of married love, let us remember the love that God has for His people. We Christians are the bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:22,23). From this, we learn to hold marriage in the highest honor as a gift from heaven and an institution of God. In marriage, the bed is undefiled, but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge (Hebrews 13:4). We are reminded of the strength of love and its indestructibility (8:6). True love has no price tag; it cannot be purchased. Jealousy is as cruel and destructive as death and the grave; may we give it no place in our hearts (8:6).

Song of Solomon
APPENDIX I
Solomon, the Magnificent
(A Character Study)

In the course of human history, few men have been the equal of Solomon, king of Israel. Few have risen so high, excelled in so many areas, or fallen to such depths as this mighty king. It has well been said that “the shipwreck of Solomon was the most terrible tragedy in the world.”

His Early Life

Solomon was the second child of David, king of Israel, and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 12:24). He was the 10th son born to David. He was born in Jerusalem about 1,000 B.C. His parents gave him the lovely name Solomon, which meant “peaceful.” The prophet Nathan bestowed a second name upon the babe, calling him Jedidiah, which meant “beloved of the Lord” (2 Samuel 12:24,25). Growing up, the young prince enjoyed all the advantages of a king’s son. He was blest to have as his father a man after God’s own heart (Acts 13:22).

A poetic description of Solomon in his prime is placed in the mouth of one of his brides in The Song of Solomon 5:10-16:

*My beloved is white and ruddy,
The chiefest among ten thousand.
His head is as the most fine gold;
His locks are bushy, and black as a raven.
His eyes are like doves beside the water-brooks,
Washed with milk, and fitly set.
His cheeks are as a bed of spices,*

*As banks of sweet herbs:
His lips are as lilies,
Dropping liquid myrrh.
His hands are as rings of gold set with beryl:
His body is as ivory work overlaid with sapphires.
His legs are as pillars of marble, set upon sockets of
fine gold:
His aspect is like Lebanon, excellent as the cedars.
His mouth is most sweet;
Yea, he is altogether lovely.*

Allowing for the intoxication of romance, we can still see a handsome man with ruddy cheeks and wavy black hair; physically strong, with all the features of a born leader.

His Coronation As King

By God's decree, Solomon was anointed king in the place of David his father (1 Chronicles 28:4,5). While David was yet alive, another son, Adonijah, the son of Haggith (another wife) sought to usurp the throne, but the aged king thwarted it. He had Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet to publicly anoint Solomon and bring him to sit upon the royal throne (1 Kings 1:30-35). "They blew the trumpet; and all the people said, Long live king Solomon . . . and rejoiced with great joy . . ." (1 Kings 1:39,40). The new king was some 20 years of age when he began to reign in about 970 B.C.

His Accomplishments

Solomon excelled in many areas, one of which was as a builder. His chief architectural accomplishment was the great Temple of Jehovah at Jerusalem (1 Kings 6:37,38). Thirty-three hundred supervisors and 150,000 laborers took seven years in constructing the temple. "And the house . . . was built of stone made ready at the quarry; and there was neither hammer nor axe nor any tool of iron head in the house, while it was in building" (1 Kings 6:7). The splendor and beauty of the temple made it one of the attractions of the ancient world.

In addition, “Solomon was building his own house thirteen years” (1 Kings 7:1). The record reveals that it was truly a king’s palace. Along with these feats, he built numerous store cities and fortified cities (2 Chronicles 8:3-6). He built the Millo which is thought to have been a kind of city hall or civic center, and even a heathen shrine for his pagan wives (1 Kings 11:7,8). Truly Solomon was one of the great builders of antiquity.

Economically, he developed Israel as a commercial power. He built a merchant fleet that brought him treasures from afar (1 Chronicles 8:17,18). Israel’s national treasury burgeoned with six hundred and sixty-six talents of gold flowing in annually, plus all the other sources of wealth (2 Chronicles 9:13,14).

Solomon’s personal wealth was immense. He “made a great throne of ivory, and overlaid it with pure gold.” “All King Solomon’s drinking vessels were of gold.” “Silver was nothing accounted of” in his days. “Solomon exceeded all the kings of the earth in riches . . .” (2 Chronicles 9:13-21).

The borders of Solomon’s kingdom stretched from the Mediterranean to the Euphrates and from Mount Lebanon on the north to the border of Egypt (1 Kings 4:21). For forty years, he ruled in pomp and power (1 Kings 4:21). Israel reached its pinnacle under his leadership. His was a peaceful reign. For 40 years, Israel hardly saw a battle—a situation unique in their history.

The wisdom of Solomon was fabulous. “God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding, exceeding much” His wisdom excelled that “of all the children of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt.” He was an authority on plant and animal life. “And he spake of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon even unto the hyssop that springeth out of the wall: he spake also of beasts, and of birds, and of creeping things, and of fishes.” He spake 3,000 proverbs, of which we have some 800 preserved. Solomon gleaned the wisdom of other wise men (Ecclesiastes 12:9). Of his 1,005 songs, we have only three (1 Kings 4:29-34).

Three of the books of our Bible were authored by Solomon. **Proverbs**, a guide book for practical godliness; **Ecclesiastes**, a book on moral philosophy, describing the author’s search for meaning and happiness in life; **Song of Solomon**, which celebrates the beauties of married love; and Psalms 72 and 127.

Solomon's Religious Life

“Solomon loved Jehovah, walking in the statutes of David his father . . .” (1 Kings 3:3). He worshipped the Lord and sought to please him (1 Kings 3:4-9). He built the beautiful temple for the public worship of God and wrote important chapters in the sacred Book of God.

His Failures

“King Solomon loved many foreign women . . . and he had seven hundred wives . . . and three hundred concubines: and his wives turned away his heart” (1 Kings 11:1-3). Such marriages were usually designed to cement political alliances. But God had forbidden such alliances (Deuteronomy 7:2-5). He built a strong military machine which God also forbade (Deuteronomy 17:16). He dedicated himself to a life of materialism and indulgence which God specifically condemned (Ecclesiastes 2:1-10). The God whose law he broke judged him (Deuteronomy 17:14-17). His idolatrous wives turned his heart away from the Lord. He built a shrine for their gods; he worshipped their idols, and God was angry with him (1 Kings 11:4-9).

In Ecclesiastes, we have recorded Solomon's fruitless search for happiness without God. He sought it in worldly wisdom, materialism, sensual pleasure, wealth, possessions and power. Each of them he found to be vanity and striving after the wind; i.e., seeking to capture the wind (Ecclesiastes 1:14). Only in fearing God and keeping His commandments did he find the prize he sought (Ecclesiastes 12:13).

His lavish programs were a burden to his subjects and brought the nation to the brink of disaster (1 Kings 12:4). This was the spark that caused civil strife and division in his son Rehoboam's day.

His End

Solomon died after a long and prosperous reign of 40 years. He was an old man worn out from excessive indulgence. He left behind an impoverished treasury, a bitter people, a tottering throne and an incompetent heir. From Ecclesiastes, we can hope he found his way back to God when he died (Ecclesiastes 12:13,14).

Lessons to Remember

Solomon has been called the most disappointing man in the Old Testament. Jesus said, “To whomsoever much is given, of him shall much be required” (Luke 12:48). From him, we can learn where happiness is not to be found. It is not where most folks are yet looking; i.e., in worldly wisdom, wealth, pleasure or power. Only by fearing God and keeping His commandments can we find true happiness. Solomon grasped at the attractiveness of power and missed its substance. Many like him, in their pursuit of luxury and pleasure, have betrayed the best interests of their families and caused great harm.

We see the importance of marrying a mate that shares our faith in God, lest we be turned away from God (2 Corinthians 6:14-16).

Solomon taught much better than he lived. May our family and friends be safe in following our example (Philippians 4:9). Even from his tragic mistakes, we can learn much from Solomon that will help us in finding the happy life.

Song of Solomon
APPENDIX II
The Shulammitte Bride
(A Character Study)

King Solomon penned 1,005 songs during his illustrious career (1 Kings 4:32). The Hebrews judged his song about the Shulammitte bride to be his best. They called it "The Song of Songs." Our translations label it the Song of Solomon. Jewish rabbis compared Solomon's writings to their temple: Ecclesiastes they likened to the outer court, Proverbs to the holy place, and the Song of Solomon to the holy of holies.

This is one of the least studied, and therefore least understood, books of our Bible. Aglen wrote, "The Song of Songs . . . holds . . . first place among the puzzles of literature. Franz Delitzsch called it "the most obscure book of the Old Testament."

No book of scripture has provoked more controversy than this one. God's name is mentioned only once, and that indirectly. Not grasping its meaning, some have questioned its right to be in the canon of sacred Scripture. Jerome tells us that the ancient Jews discouraged their young folks from reading the Song until age 30.

Some Hints for Understanding the Song

One cannot understand this lovely song unless he treats it as poetry rather than prose. Remember that we grant the poet a broad license for flowery expression. Furthermore, it is Oriental poetry. Orientals revel in figures of speech at which we Westerners are shocked. Nothing in the song would offend the most modest Oriental. "The book is a wedding song containing collections of the antenuptial experience of Solomon and Shulammithe. The events mentioned . . . depict the emotions of the lovers in times of union and separation"

(John Raven). The Song celebrates the beauties of married, monogamous love.

The book is best understood as an operetta with dramatic scenes, dialogs and songs. The cast of characters includes Solomon, King of Israel, Shulamith, the bride from northern Israel, and the daughters of Jerusalem, her maiden court attendants who served as the chorus.

About the Bride

Chapter 6:13 calls her the Shulammitte. Her name is a feminine form of Solomon. Hence, we have both the prince and the princess of peace, for that is the meaning of "Solomon." She was a farm girl from northern Israel, who by her beauty and purity captured the king's heart (7:10-12). She was darkly tanned from working in the vineyards of her family (1:5,6). Solomon evidently met her while travelling in her region and courted her with the hope of making her his bride.

Intoxicated with her love and beauty, Solomon painted a poetic picture of her:

*1:9-11 I have compared thee, O my love,
To a steed in Pharaoh's chariots (proud and
majestic).
Thy cheeks are comely with plaits OF HAIR,
Thy neck with strings of jewels.
We will make thee plaits of gold
With studs of silver.*

After their marriage, he wrote:

*6:4-7 Thou art fair, O my love, as Tirzah (a scenic city of
Palestine).
Comely as Jerusalem,
Terrible as an army with banners (majestic and
awesome).
Turn away thine eyes from me
For they have overcome me.
Thy hair is as a flock of goats (shiny black),
That lie along the side of Gilead.
Thy teeth are like a flock of ewes,
Which are come up from the washing (clean and
white);*

*Whereof everyone hath twins,
And none is bereaved among them (no teeth were
missing)
Thy temples are like a piece of pomegranate (rosy
cheeks).
Behind thy veil.*

Her beauty excelled that of all the other 60 queens and 80 concubines of Solomon's harem (6:8,9).

In 5:10-16, she describes Solomon as seen through her eyes of love:

*5:10-16 My beloved is white and ruddy (A light complexion
was cherished in a land of dark-skinned people.
He had ruddy cheeks).*

The chiefest among ten thousand.

His head is as the most fine gold;

*His locks are bushy and black as a raven (black curly
hair).*

*His eyes are like doves beside the water brooks,
Washed with milk, and fitly set (not bloodshot or
crossed)*

*His cheeks are as a bed of spices (he used a nice
cologne).*

As banks of sweet herbs:

*His lips are as lilies, dripping liquid myrrh (sweet
kisses).*

*His hands are as rings of gold set with beryl (fine
rings).*

His body is as ivory work overlaid with sapphires.

*His legs as pillars of marble set upon sockets of fine
gold (strong and attractive);*

His aspect is like Lebanon, excellent as the cedars.

His mouth is most sweet;

Yea, he is altogether lovely.

In 3:6-11, we are given a glimpse of the royal groom coming to claim his bride. The chorus of attendants ask:

*Who is this that cometh up from the wilderness
like pillars of smoke (perhaps the dust of his
entourage on the road),*

Perfumed with myrrh and frankincense

With all powders of the merchant?

*Behold it is the litter of Solomon:
Threescore mighty men are about it (his bodyguards),
Of the mighty men of Israel.
They all handle the sword, and are expert in war:
Every man hath his sword upon his thigh.
Because of fear in the night.
King Solomon made himself a palanquin (his
sedan-chair),
Of the wood of Lebanon (made of cedar of
Lebanon).
He made the pillars thereof of silver,
The bottom thereof of gold, the seat of it of purple,
The midst thereof being paved with love,
From the daughters of Jerusalem (probably pillows
made as wedding gifts from her court
attendants).*

The bride says, “Go forth, O ye daughters of Zion, and behold King Solomon,”

*With the crown wherewith his mother had crowned
him (a garland worn as a token of her approval
and blessing).
In the day of his espousals (his wedding day),
And in the day of the gladness of his heart.*

We are granted a brief view of their wedding feast in 5:1. The groom toasts his bride as they drink the cup of blessing. Solomon says:

*I am come into my garden, my sister, my bride:
I have gathered my myrrh with my spice;
I have eaten my honeycomb with my honey;
I have drunk my wine with milk.*

He then charges his guests:

*Eat, O friends:
Drink, yea, drink abundantly, O beloved.*

The climax of this lovely book is seen in 8:6,7, where the couple sing the praises of true romantic love.

First, we see the **demands of love**. Shulamith says, “Set me as a seal upon thy heart.” The king evidently wore his royal seal of office on a chain about his neck. It was always with him, next to his heart.

It was a precious and cherished object to him. The bride wanted always to have that kind of relationship with her husband, as does every true lover.

We see the **strength of love**. She reminds him that “love is strong as death.” Death never lets go of those it embraces. Death cannot be bribed or deceived; it never gets discouraged in its pursuit. The same is true of genuine love. It spans oceans and years and will endure a world of pain. Love is not easily turned aside. In a house with many wives, one would not automatically enjoy the husband’s daily company.

She speaks of the **cruelty of jealousy**. It is “cruel as Sheol.” Nothing is more destructive and devastating to a relationship than jealousy. This deadly emotion will poison and kill the very love it seeks to preserve for itself. It is deadly as a bolt of lightning, which is “the flame of Jehovah.” In a polygamous family, jealousy is a constant problem between wives. Jacob’s wives had the problem (Genesis 30:1-24). Perhaps Shulamith had already tasted the bitter cup from other of Solomon’s wives.

We are reminded of the **design of love**. “Love is of God” (1 John 4:7). Made in His image, we are capable of loving. He made us male and female so we could know such love. Marriage was ordained to provide a holy realm for that love (Hebrews 13:4).

Love is unquenchable, responds Solomon. “Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it.” Like an eternal flame fed from some unseen source, love burns in the human bosom.

Love has no price tag. “If a man would give all the substance of his house for love, he would utterly be contemned.” To attempt to buy love is to insult it. Love can endure poverty, but not insult.

Lessons to Remember

Bunsen writes, “There would be something wanting in the Bible, if there was not found there an expression of the deepest and strongest of human feelings.”

Someone said, “If you would be holy, read the Psalms; if you would be wise, read Proverbs; but if you would learn love’s language and understand the action of love to establish real and lasting communion, read the Song of Songs.”

Surely God placed the Song in the canon to teach us the purity and sanctity of monogamous love in marriage, which he ordained in Eden.

Thus, this is a veiled protest against polygamy.

As we reflect on their beautiful celebration of love, let us remember the divine relationship of Christ and His church (Ephesians 5:22,23).

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Biographical Sketch

John Waddey was born in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1938. He was baptized by George Prosser in 1955. Parker French encouraged him to become a preacher. One year after his conversion, he preached his first sermon at the Blackmon congregation near Murfreesboro, Tennessee. He is married to the former Reba Duncan and is the father of four daughters: Lourene, Lesia, Becky and Rachel.

His schooling was received at the College of Evangelists, Itawamba Junior College, and Alabama Christian School of Religion. Most of his education was gained from his own study and experience. In his 28 years of preaching, Waddey has served churches in Mississippi, Colorado and Tennessee. Evangelistic work has carried him into 28 other states. He has made 9 overseas trips visiting mission works in 19 foreign nations. Over the years, he has spoken at a number of special lectureships at Christian colleges, schools of preaching, and congregations.

Since 1968, Waddey has worked with the Karns congregation of Knoxville, Tennessee. Annually, that church hosts a World Mission Workshop. He has planned and directed that program since moving to Karns.

Each year, he conducts several revival meetings. He is an officer of the Teenage Christian Camp. He has engaged in four public debates and a number of radio and television talk shows where controversial subjects were discussed.

For 11 years, Brother Waddey conducted a weekly radio broadcast. For several years, he wrote a weekly newspaper column. Through the *Rocky Mountain News* of Denver, Colorado, over 50 million copies of his lessons were circulated. His articles are carried in the "World Evangelist," "Gospel Advocate," "Gospel Light," "Words of Truth," "Christian Bible Teacher," and seven other brotherhood papers. For several years, he edited the "Star" mass-mail evangelical magazine.

In 1970, he assisted the Karns elders in establishing the East Tennessee School of Preaching and Missions, and continues to serve as a

teacher in it. In 1982, the Karns elders selected Brother Waddey to direct the school program.

In addition to his evangelistic duties, Waddey has been a leader of the Tennessee Volunteers for Life, a pro-life group fighting the abortion evil. Five years were spent as state president. He also served on the Board of Directors of the National Right to Life Committee (seven years) and as trustee of the NRLC Educational Trust Fund. He writes and speaks extensively on the related issues of abortion and euthanasia.

Brother Waddey has authored 24 books. In addition, he has written chapters for 20 other published volumes and 13 pamphlets.

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