

UNDER THE SUN, BUT IN GOD'S HANDS: LESSONS FROM ECCLESIASTES

Notes For Week One: The Nature Of This World (Ecclesiastes 1)

The book of Ecclesiastes is unusual in several respects, and it is often misunderstood or even avoided for that reason. But it deals directly with some of the most crucial spiritual questions that believers face. In particular, it examines the consequences and implications of our position as spiritual beings who live in physical, mortal bodies and inhabit a physical, temporary world.

Introduction (Ecclesiastes 1:1-2)

Even in the opening verses, there are some ideas and terms that should be clarified if we hope to get the most out of studying Ecclesiastes. As one of the books of poetry or "wisdom literature", Ecclesiastes deals with many of its topics in a distinctive style that can easily be misunderstood. Before moving further into the text, we shall first briefly discuss the author, the purpose, and the content of Ecclesiastes.

The author of Ecclesiastes refers to himself as the "Teacher" or the "Preacher", depending on the version one is reading (1:1). Both words are rough translations of the Hebrew word "Qohelet", which is also the title of the book in Hebrew. Our title "Ecclesiastes" simply comes from the Greek translation of this Hebrew word. The word more exactly refers to an assembly leader (or to someone who calls or summons an assembly). Either a teacher or a preacher would, of course, fit this description.

The author identifies himself as the son of David, and king in Jerusalem. Other personal details about the author are found in Ecclesiastes 1:12-13, 1:16, 2:1-9, and 12:9-12. These descriptions of the author's position, activities, and knowledge rather obviously fit Solomon and no one else*. Many of the details in these descriptions can be matched with Solomon's life and reign, as described in 1 Kings 1:28-11:43 (and 2 Chronicles 1-9).

* Many present-day commentators deny that Solomon could have written the book himself, because of some rather speculative theories about the vocabulary and other internal features. Such commentators often assume that the book is still supposed to represent Solomon's thought, as written down by a later-day author or editor. Even if an assumption such as this were correct, it would not materially affect the actual message of the book.

Solomon's life and perspective are very instructive. As a young man, Solomon was faithful, humble, and wise, as several passages in Kings and Chronicles tell us. But as he grew older, his own splendor and blessings became a source of pride and complacency to him, and his later years were characterized by self-indulgence and idolatry in numerous forms. It is this perspective that we see in Ecclesiastes. Read all by itself, Ecclesiastes might at first seem like the account of a man searching for meaning in his life. In actuality, there is a subtle but significant difference: Solomon was a man who had found the meaning of life, but who then became distracted by the world and had to try to find it all over again.

Ecclesiastes is known for its recurring phrases, one of which is its author's statement that "everything is meaningless (or vanity)" (1:2). Here is another Hebrew word that is difficult to

translate into English with precision. The word is "Hebel", and it literally means "vapor" or "breath", or in some contexts, "air". It is meant above all to connote insubstantiality and impermanence, which are (from God's perspective) intrinsic characteristics of this world.

This recurring statement of the author is not mere pessimism*, but rather is part of the search for truth that defines the perspective of Ecclesiastes. The book is written to describe life "under the sun" (that is, in this world), and to compare and contrast it with the search for something greater, something with lasting meaning. From a philosophical viewpoint, determining that something is "meaningless" can be a step forward, in that it eliminates one possible source of meaning, so that new possibilities can be examined. This searching causes Solomon much anguish of heart, not because of the truth itself, but because of the author's own inability to cut through worldly influences so that he can grasp it. His struggle simply exemplifies what we all must go through if we wish truly to know and understand the living God who created us.

* Some commentators see only the pessimism in Ecclesiastes, and thus misinterpret the book entirely. Sometimes it is pointed out that Ecclesiastes bears obvious similarities to some other ancient literary works that emphasize the meaningless nature of life. Such works include the Egyptian *The Man Who Was Tired of Life*, *Song of the Harper*, and the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, all of which pre-date Solomon's lifetime. Some skeptical commentators have even gone so far as to suggest that Ecclesiastes was based on those books. There are indeed strong parallels, for the simple reason that these authors all simply realized the same truths about the world. If anything, such works show that the nature of the world is obvious even to unbelievers. The crucial difference in Ecclesiastes, though, is that it points higher, to a spiritual reality that is elusive but still completely real. The other works simply end in pessimism or in something resembling "existentialism".

Questions For Discussion or Study: Why does Solomon refer primarily to himself as a preacher/teacher/assembly leader? How does he want us to receive his thoughts? What general lessons does Solomon's life hold for Christians? How might these come into play in the search that we shall see in Ecclesiastes?

The More Things Change, ... (Ecclesiastes 1:3-11)

One of the significant insights in Ecclesiastes is the author's observation of the sameness of life in this world, both from day to day and from generation to generation. Although the world goes through many outward changes, these are generally superficial, while the spiritual needs of humanity remain the same. These verses put this idea in simple but memorable terms.

The author describes the constancy of nature with a series of suggestive images (1:3-7). In looking around, Solomon questions what human beings gain from their constant striving and toiling, since the essentials of the world change little from generation to generation. Many things and many persons come and go, but the earth remains largely the same from one age to the next. His images of the sun rising and setting, the wind's perpetual turning and shifting, and the endless flow of water to the sea are all intended to emphasize the natural processes that go on as they have for millennia, regardless of human activity. If pondering this small physical world reminds us of how tiny we really are, how much smaller would we appear when compared with God and with spiritual reality.

One of the best-remembered sayings in Ecclesiastes is that there is "nothing new under the sun"

(1:8-11). Once again, this is by no means mere pessimism or boredom, but rather it is an important spiritual insight. Nor is it simply a reflection of its author's own time, because the world saw many changes, upheavals, and innovations during Solomon's lifetime, just as it has during almost any era of recorded history. Seeing all these changes, Solomon has simply come to see them as superficial.

One of the realizations that led to this insight was his recognition that neither earthly activity, nor earthly progress, nor accumulation of earthly possessions can bring lasting satisfaction or peace. No matter how much the eye sees, it always wants to see more. No matter how much fame, wealth, or pleasure our flesh has, it wants more. Another key lesson that the author shares is that there is little or nothing really new in the world. In every era, there are ways of sinning that are particularly popular, new inventions that everyone thinks will change the world, new accomplishments of courage, strength, or skill that seem astounding, and much more. But all that differs are the details. Each generation forgets those that have gone before it, and then in turn is itself either largely forgotten or taken for granted by later generations (verse 11). And so the same processes repeat over and over, always seeming new to humans who see only short-term developments and superficial implications.

Questions For Discussion or Study: What basic aspects of this world does Solomon describe in these verses? How do they contrast with the way that human logic looks at the world? What would the author say about the earthly events, changes, or inventions that our own generation considers new or exceptional?

The Limits of Wisdom (Ecclesiastes 1:12-18)

The "Teacher", or Solomon, now describes his attempt to make sense of the world through study and wisdom. He had devoted himself to careful study, and he accumulated more wisdom and knowledge than anyone before him, only to find that the whole exercise was "a chasing after the wind". While wisdom is never without value, human logic and wisdom are severely limited in what they can tell us about matters of spiritual importance.

Solomon had devoted himself to study, out of a desire to understand the world (1:12-15). In his youth, of course, Solomon prayed for and was granted great wisdom, which he used to govern his people well. But here he seems to be describing a somewhat different, later effort, which brought not joy and inner peace but discouragement and even restlessness. He even describes it as a "burden" from God, an idea that will come up again later in the book. Rather than finding his search for earthly wisdom to be rewarding, it simply re-emphasized the meaningless, insubstantial nature of "all the things that are done under the sun". He describes all of our earthly activities as "chasing after the wind", that is, a completely unproductive and ineffective use of time and energy.

Solomon now considers wisdom and folly (1:16-18), and finds them to be less different than he expected. The more he learned, the more he realized how much he did not know. To attempt to accumulate all knowledge is an endless and impossible pursuit, a form of madness not very much different from outright folly. Solomon's wisdom ended up bringing him sorrow, because it was a constant reminder not only of all the sorrow and trouble in the world, but also of the

impossibility of humanity solving their problems through their own wisdom.

Solomon's wisdom fell far short of his expectations for it. The problem was not that wisdom itself is bad or useless, but that Solomon was seeking the wrong kind of wisdom, and had the wrong expectations of it. Earthly wisdom works only for very limited, short-term needs. True, lasting understanding, spiritual peace, and inner contentment can only come from a different kind of wisdom. As James 3:13-18 describes, worldly wisdom brings worldly fruit, but spiritual wisdom brings spiritual fruit.

Questions For Discussion or Study: What did Solomon seem to hope that he would gain through his attempts to accumulate wisdom? Why weren't his expectations fulfilled? What lessons are there for us? How can we apply it to our own study and learning? How can it help us in the way we view those in the world?

Selected Bibliography

Following are a few of the books on Ecclesiastes that might be of use in doing further study. Each of these has its own strengths and weaknesses. Let me know if you would like some suggestions on references to use in studying Ecclesiastes on your own.

William P. Brown, *Ecclesiastes* (Interpretation Commentary)
Michael Eaton, *Ecclesiastes - An Introduction & Commentary* (Tyndale Commentaries)
Frank Gaebelin (editor), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Volume 5
Derek Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes* (The Bible Speaks Today)
Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (New International Commentary)
Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes* (Anchor Bible)

- Mark W. Garner, *Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, September 2004*

©2004 by Mark Garner - Congregations and individuals may make or print copies of these notes for home, class, or small group study, without further permission, provided that the author and congregation are credited. Any other use requires the permission of the author.

UNDER THE SUN, BUT IN GOD'S HANDS: LESSONS FROM ECCLESIASTES

Notes For Week Two: The Search For Meaning (Ecclesiastes 2)

At the end of the first chapter, Solomon told how he sought to find meaning by accumulating wisdom, only to find that it did not bring him satisfaction and peace. In the second chapter, he tells us about several other things that he pursued in the hope of finding meaning in this life. Though he did not find what he wanted, his experiences provide several valuable lessons for us.

Pleasures & Projects (Ecclesiastes 2:1-11)

Solomon's position gave him the rare opportunity to be able to have anything he wanted, and to do anything he wanted. If pleasures and projects could ever bring lasting joy and peace by themselves, they would have done so for Solomon. In these verses, he describes how everything turned out when he attempted to fulfill himself with these things.

The "Teacher" describes how he indulged himself in pleasure* (2:1-3). He calls this "testing his heart", intending to use his heart or feelings as a signal to tell him what is good. In choosing this course, he is hardly alone. Many persons use short-term feelings to determine their behavior, putting their feelings ahead of morality. Solomon thought he could do better, since he used his wisdom - of the earthly sort - to guide him. Here again, it is far from uncommon for those with high earthly intelligence to think that they can indulge their flesh with fewer risks because they are so "smart". Yet Solomon knew at the time that he was embracing folly, and it should have been no surprise that these activities did not bring him anything of lasting value.

* While the word used here in the Hebrew does not always refer to sinful pleasures, it is clear from the context, and also from the accounts of Solomon in Kings and Chronicles, that he is referring to sensual indulgence.

Solomon also describes the undertaking of great projects (2:4-9). He talks of building houses, gardens, parks, and much more. As king, Solomon indeed initiated not only the building of the lavish temple, but many other projects as well*. Not only that, he acquired large numbers of slaves, servants, and women. He built up vast herds and flocks, as well as large hoards of gold and silver. Indeed, from the outside, Solomon appeared to be a dazzling person, to his own subjects as well as to others. But his brilliance was all on the outside.

* The building of the temple is described in 1 Kings chapters 5-8 and 2 Chronicles chapters 2-7. Some of his other activities are described in 1 Kings 9:10-11:13 and 2 Chronicles 8:1-28. For his later years, see especially the description in 1 Kings, which describes both his splendor and his spiritual decay.

After all this activity, the Teacher stops to survey things (2:10-11). He had taken and done all that he desired, so if he was not content, he could not blame it on lack of opportunity. His heart (feelings) took delight in everything as he was doing it, but when it was all done, he realized that nothing had been gained. Once fleshly pleasure is over, it leaves behind nothing of tangible value, and in fact it usually leaves a renewed desire for more of the same. Likewise, all of Solomon's accomplishments could not bring him enduring peace or satisfaction. In just one verse (verse 11), he uses no fewer than three different expressions to express his disappointment.

Questions For Discussion or Study: What parallels to Solomon's indulgence in pleasure

can we see in human behavior today? How do the results compare with Solomon's results? What parallels can we see to his numerous projects, and his accumulation of wealth? Why did all of this fail to satisfy the Teacher? If this way of finding meaning in life does not work, why do so many persons still believe that it can? Why do Christians even find it tempting at times?

Reconsidering Wisdom (Ecclesiastes 2:12-16)

After his disappointing experiences with pleasures and projects, Solomon turned back to wisdom, sensing that there was something in wisdom that was at least more promising than the other things he had tried. In the thoughts that he shares in these verses, we can see him struggling to make sense of things, and coming so very close to some important realizations.

This passage shows us the Teacher's further thoughts on wisdom and folly, light and darkness (2:12-16). Earthly wisdom is at least superior to folly. It is not difficult to think of numerous aspects of life in this world in which the wise person is at an advantage compared to someone foolish, at least in terms of pursuing earthly goals. But, just as the Teacher starts to think that perhaps wisdom can solve his problems after all, he runs into an insurmountable obstacle.

Regardless of how well things go for us in this world, regardless of how much we know or have, regardless of our successes or failures, everyone's earthly biography ends in the same way: with death. The wise cannot escape this any more than can the foolish. The absolute certainty of death is thus a barrier and a limitation* to the value not only of earthly wisdom, but of anything that has value solely in this world. And so, for the moment, Solomon is stuck in despair. But there is a missing piece in his viewpoint. Earthly wisdom and knowledge are indeed limited by death, but earthly wisdom is not the only kind of wisdom. Godly wisdom - that is, looking at things from God's perspective - puts things in an entirely different light.

* We won't discuss it in class, since it leads into a whole different set of ideas, but Hebrews 2:14-15 makes an excellent comparison study with these verses in Ecclesiastes. See also the discussion questions below.

Questions For Discussion or Study: Why might Solomon have turned back to wisdom, even though it had disappointed him earlier? What parallels might we see in the thinking of ourselves or others? What advantage does Solomon see to wisdom? Is this really an advantage, and if so, how valuable is it? What did the Teacher then see that showed him the limitations of wisdom? What missing ideas might help him out of his frustration? Are there New Testament Scriptures that could help the Teacher with his perspective?

Toiling Under the Sun (Ecclesiastes 2:17-26)

Having tried so many things, the Teacher looks back on all of these efforts that have proved to be so disappointing. Since he has worked so hard and felt so little reward, there seems to him to be no reason to make any efforts at all in this life. In his frustration and despair, he finally arrives at an insight that can also be of great practical value to us.

Solomon is now so frustrated and disappointed that he literally hates life (2:17-23), and hates even all the things that he worked so hard to achieve and acquire. His experience is a striking example, which we should remember whenever we think that our lack of peace is due to a lack of opportunities or blessings. Solomon had more than any of us could even dream of having, and yet he is more unhappy than anyone else. A good part of this unhappiness came from the simple

realization that he would not be able to keep any of his worldly goods when he died.

The flesh hates the familiar expression "you can't take it with you". As the Teacher considers this irrefutable fact, it fills him with pain, grief, and restlessness. All that he has will someday be owned by someone who did not work for it, and who may well squander it or take it for granted. All that he worked so hard to collect will have at best an uncertain future, and he has no firm hope that even he and his personal qualities will mean much to anyone after he is gone.

The reason for his discouragement does not lie in any of his possessions or achievements in themselves, but in his own wrong expectations of these things. He had hoped to find meaning, security, and hope in objects and in accomplishments, but the fruits of the Spirit can only come from God. This leads him at last to an important step forward. He is about to realize something that his flesh will dislike*, but that his soul will welcome.

* Indeed, his conclusions in the next few verses, especially in verse 26, are often misinterpreted even by otherwise careful commentators.

The Teacher at last realizes how to find some form of satisfaction in the things of this world (2:24-26). The Teacher concludes that "a man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work." By no means is he recommending that we give up trying to do anything of significance, but rather he is telling us to have the right expectations and the right perspective on the things of this world. Rather than trying to find an unrealistic level of blessing or meaning in material things, accomplishments, honors, relationships, and all the rest, we should accept them as blessings from God, and should enjoy them for what they are.

We should conscientiously pursue the work God has assigned to us, and should take satisfaction in a job well done for its own sake, not trying to find any deeper significance to it. We should accept our food, our homes, our families, and everything else in this same way - being grateful for what we have, valuing it as a blessing from God, and enjoying it for that reason. Once we stop making idols out of the things of this world, then we can truly enjoy them as God intended.

It is not what we have that determines our contentment. Solomon tells us in verse 26 that the same things can bring different results to different persons if they have different perspectives. This verse by no means teaches that those who please God will get all good things, and those who do evil will lose their good things. Rather, it tells us that those who please and love God will be able to enjoy and understand the blessings God sends them, while sinners who oppose God will never enjoy even the good things they receive from God - it will be as if they are only holding them for a short time before God can give them to someone who will appreciate them.

Questions For Discussion or Study: At the beginning of this passage, how does the Teacher feel? What is so upsetting to him? Is he upset by things that also discourage or frighten us, or others today? What does this reveal about his expectations and perspective? What answer does he find? Can this lesson also be helpful to us? How can we apply it? In your own words, what is he saying in verse 26?

- *Mark W. Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, September 2004*

©2004 by Mark Garner - Congregations and individuals may make or print copies of these notes for home, class, or small group study, without further permission, provided that the author and congregation are credited. Any other use requires the permission of the author.

UNDER THE SUN, BUT IN GOD'S HANDS: LESSONS FROM ECCLESIASTES

Notes For Week Three: What God Has Done (Ecclesiastes 3)

To this point, the Teacher has sought understanding through his own actions and wisdom. He now considers more carefully how things look from God's perspective. He does not yet entirely understand what God has done, but he does find that looking at things from this perspective helps him better to make sense of some of the dilemmas that have been troubling him.

A Time For Everything (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8)

This is probably the best known passage in Ecclesiastes, and it has even been quoted in many secular contexts. We shall try to understand its message within the context of Ecclesiastes and the Teacher's search for understanding. It presents a picture of this world that can help free us from many of the worldly concerns and constraints that make life unhappy for so many persons.

The Teacher tells us that there is a time for everything, and a season for every activity (3:1-8). The general theme in these verses is that, in our daily lives, we should not expect life to reduce itself to a firm list of dos and don'ts. There are few strict rules for our behavior, other than to avoid those things that are sinful. It is a common human longing to have rigid rules and regulations to follow in our lives and relationships, so that we can easily judge when we are right and when we are wrong. But real life does not work this way. We should accept the Teacher's suggestion to free ourselves of such worldly thinking.

Rather than go through the entire list item by item (which is a good topic for group discussion or personal study), we shall survey some of the specific applications that the Teacher makes. If you consider the list as a whole, you will see that most of the things he mentions fit into some general groups. For example, several of his statements refer to the fact that there is a time for every action: tearing down and building, scattering and gathering, searching and giving up. It is part of spiritual growth for us to learn when each action is appropriate, and no rules can make it easier. Judgment and discernment come only through experience, study, and prayer.

There is also a time for every emotion, from weeping and mourning to laughing and dancing. Each of us have certain emotions that come more easily to us than do other emotions, and these are not the same for every person. As a result, we sometimes emphasize those emotions that we understand the best, rather than striving to understand those that are hard for us. Emotions can, of course, easily be misused, but they came from God, and thus God has a purpose for them. It is again part of spiritual growth and maturity that we learn to use our emotions in the way that God intended.

Several of the Teacher's sayings also have to do with relationships. There is a time to embrace and a time to refrain, and even a time for war and a time for peace. In our relationships, there are also no fixed rules for how to handle every possible situation, and again we must learn through experience and spiritual growth how to respond to the many different kinds of needs and situations that arise in our relationships. Human beings are not machines that can be managed by

referring to a manual; they are living souls that require thoughtful, personalized treatment. In saying there is a time for "everything", the Teacher does not mean to be literal to the point of including sin. Even his most unexpected examples, such as war and hate, are appropriate on certain occasions, rare though they may be. But he does not say, for example, that there is a time to have faith and a time to doubt, or that there is a time to worship God and a time to worship idols. He does not mean that we can choose any activity and be guaranteed that there is a time when it is right. Rather, his concern is to establish a general perspective, so that we can relieve ourselves of false expectations and fleshly logic. Then we can see our daily lives as a gift from God, not as a constant struggle to avoid disaster and humiliation.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Consider each of the specific things that the Teacher mentions here. Can you think of times when each is appropriate? For each one, consider why Solomon might have included it. What lessons about daily life do all of these teach us? What general attitudes and perspectives can they teach us?

A Foundation For Understanding (Ecclesiastes 3:9-15)

The Teacher now considers some basic ideas that provide a foundation for understanding many of the questions and struggles that we face as we seek God. Humans are by nature spiritual, eternal creatures, yet we must live for a time in this physical, mortal, imperfect world. If we consider these facts carefully, rather than denying them, we can reach some helpful conclusions.

Solomon is now ready to establish a basic perspective for thinking about many of the questions and dilemmas in our spiritual lives (3:9-13). Because he himself is still working through these things, he considers it a "burden" that God has put on us. Understood properly, we know that God does not burden us with things that we cannot handle. But we also know that God does want each of his people to accept individual responsibility for seeking him, and for responding to his call. This is what the Teacher presently finds to be a "burden", and before we criticize him too strongly, we should remember the times when each of us has become frustrated or even angry because of our struggles to get answers to our spiritual questions.

The Teacher then outlines the most important and most basic facts about what God has done with his creation. He sees that God has made everything beautiful in its time, just as (see above) he has set a time for so many different kinds of emotions and activities. Everything that God created has a purpose, and is therefore beautiful, even though it may not be "beautiful" in worldly terms. But everything is also only beautiful for a time, because this world is by its nature perishable and mortal. At the same time, God has set eternity* in our hearts - that is, every human has an innate awareness that there is something to each of us that goes beyond our physical selves. This awareness is built into us because we were made in God's image. Many humans deny their awareness of eternity, because it frightens them, but it is still there.

* It is a commonly asked question whether the ancient Jews believed in eternity, and if so, what they believed about it. As this passage points out, the awareness of eternity is inside all of us, so it would be strange indeed if God's own people did not believe in it. The ancient Jews believed in a place called Sheol, where human spirits went after the body died. Just as Christians today believe in heaven, but have different and often ill-defined ideas as to what it is like, so also the ancient Jews had different ideas about Sheol, and did not claim to have a good understanding of it. But as this shows, they did believe in eternity, and they believed that the soul survived after the death of the body. In some versions of the Old Testament, the

world "Sheol" is translated "grave". This makes the word more familiar to present-day readers, but it obscures the meaning.

Because of this combination, we will never be able to understand everything that God has done, or everything that we want to know about God, as long as we live in this world. No matter how many questions we can answer, there will always have to be an element of faith in our relationship with God - and this is exactly how God wants it to be. One of the reasons that Solomon is struggling in his relationship with God is that he, like so many learned or intelligent persons, wants desperately to be able to figure it all out for himself, to be able to rely exclusively on the seen and known. But we live by faith, not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7).

If we view these facts from the perspective of faith, we can see what the Teacher now realizes. It is a gift, not a burden, that we do not know everything. Since we are not expected to know everything, we are able to live our lives as God has called us to, and to take satisfaction in the things we do and experience for their own sake, each one as another gift of grace. Even in studying God's Word and in learning more about him, the goal is not someday to know everything, but to enjoy the time we spend with God, as we also allow him to teach us those things that we can understand and that will have some importance at some point in our lives.

Solomon then points out some of the implications in terms of God's nature and God's purpose (3:14-15). All that God does will endure as long as he wills it to endure. There is no comparison between the works of God and the works of men. Nor can our finite minds hope to comprehend something that lasts forever; we can only approach it in terms of analogies and illustrations. God's hope for his people is not that we try to figure out things that we cannot understand, but rather that we should see his transcendent nature and his unimaginable wisdom and power, so that we shall revere, trust, and love him.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Describe in your own words the basic facts that Solomon acknowledges in verses 10 and 11. Why does he call this a "burden"? What conclusions does he draw from these ideas? Why is this actually a gift from God? In your own words, what is God's purpose for arranging things like this?

The Nature of Humanity (Ecclesiastes 3:16-22)

Although humans were created in God's image, they also live in a fleshly body that is subject to weakness, sin, and death. In these verses, Solomon ponders some of the issues raised by the nature and behavior of human beings. Some of his concerns are surprisingly similar to those that are often raised by atheists - but the Teacher knows enough to realize that these questions do have answers, if looked at from a more spiritual perspective.

The Teacher knows that God created the world, but it is all too obvious to him that the world is filled with wickedness and injustice, and that the world stands in need of justice and judgment (3:16-17). Again using his expression "under the sun", he laments the rampant sin and pain that characterizes so much of human life. This is in fact a common claim of atheists, who frequently assert that the horrors of the world "prove" that there is no God. But instead, it simply tells us something about God. As we are assured in other Scriptures (for example, 1 Timothy 1:15-16, 2 Peter 2:9), God is patient towards sinners because he prefers repentance and grace to

condemnation and punishment.

Solomon realizes that there will indeed be a day when God brings everything to judgment, at a proper time that he himself shall designate. So many human objections to God really come down to their insistence that God accept their standards, rather than the other way around. It simply bothers many persons to realize that God is not obligated to consult them or to do things their way. They deny God in order to avoid submitting to him.

Solomon also echoes his statement from verse 1 that there is "a time for every activity". Here it takes on a different meaning, and this meaning also clarifies what he meant in the earlier part of the chapter. Here he refers to God's absolute knowledge of all that we do and think, so that no deed or thought will escape judgment. Nor will God's judgment be limited by any time constraints. He will have all of eternity to bring everything to account.

Next, the Teacher addresses another common spiritual question: are we made of spirit or made of dust (3:18-22)? Since neither soul nor spirit is tangible in an earthly sense, those who demand literal proof of everything choose to deny their existence. Solomon instead sees this as a test from God. While there is no tangible evidence for the soul, there is great intangible evidence, and it only takes a little faith to believe that our essential personal nature will still exist after our body dies. On a purely physical level, we are no different from animals*, in that our earthly bodies will eventually die and decay. But we have a spiritual hope that is also confirmed for Christians by God's many promises to us. In fact, we anticipate that the next life will be far better than this one.

* Note that, in context, some of Solomon's statements in these verses are simply rhetorical. He knows that there is a difference between humans and animals, since humans were made in God's image. Any doubt in his expressions here reflects his state of mind and his struggles to return to God, not any theological doubts about whether there is an afterlife.

The Teacher also sees that these ideas re-affirm a previous conclusion. As long as we live in this world, we should simply take satisfaction in our daily blessings and our daily work. For those who think that this world is everything, each aspect of earthly life becomes crucial, and a cause for worry, rivalry, or unquenchable desire. But those who realize that something better awaits them can take the things of this world as they come, enjoying the good things as gifts from God, and patiently enduring the bad things that they know will not last forever.

Questions for Discussion or Study: How is it possible for a world that God created to be filled with sin and injustice? What, if anything, does this prove about God? Can we learn anything from this about how to respond to the sin and injustice around us? What reasons do we have for believing that our souls will survive after our bodies die? What implications to this does the Teacher see? Why would this realization affect our daily lives in the way that Solomon indicates?

- *Mark W. Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, September 2004*

©2004 by Mark Garner - Congregations and individuals may make or print copies of these notes for home, class, or small group study, without further permission, provided that the author and congregation are credited. Any other use requires the permission of the author.

UNDER THE SUN, BUT IN GOD'S HANDS: LESSONS FROM ECCLESIASTES

Notes For Week Four: Living Under the Sun (Ecclesiastes 4)

The Teacher now turns his thoughts back to our daily lives in this world. This time, he specifically considers our interactions with each other. Whether in Solomon's day or in our own, we see many disorders in human relationships, yet we can also see that the way God designed them holds great potential for mutual strengthening and support.

Evil Under the Sun (Ecclesiastes 4:1-3)

This passage paints a bleak picture of humanity and of life in this world. Neither Christians nor unbelievers can deny the ways that humans mistreat, oppress, and hurt each other. Without God, life in this world is hopeless and frightening. In these verses, the Teacher looks closely at this depressing picture, in order to dissuade us from putting our hope in things of this world.

The Teacher first describes the tears of the oppressed (4:1), a feature of the world in every era. There have always been a few humans that held disproportionate power over others, and all too often those with power use it to exploit others rather than to serve them. It is an unfortunate part of human nature that within so many of us is a desire to hold authority over others. And all too often, the oppressed have no comforter, no one to speak for them or deliver them. Solomon offers no solution to this, and indeed at the moment he is paralyzed by his discouragement over how rampant this is.

Because of all the evil and injustice "under the sun", the teacher tells himself that it is better to be dead than alive (4:2-3)*. This pessimistic evaluation comes as a shock at first, but it is simply a reflection of the Teacher's discouragement with the world. Having become so engrossed in the things of this world, and having put so much hope in them, he now sees one more very obvious reason why they cannot give him the security and peace that he wants. It is the nature of the world for human governments and human organizations to grab power for themselves at the expense of others. All this simply demonstrates once more why this world cannot satisfy our deepest needs, nor can it provide lasting security.

* The Teacher will return to this idea soon, and we shall discuss it later at more length. See, for example, Ecclesiastes 6:3-6 and 7:1-4.

Questions For Discussion or Study: What kinds of examples might Solomon have seen that moved him to make the observations in these verses? Would there be any similarities to the injustices and oppression in the world now? How should we apply verses 1-3? What is missing from the Teacher's perspective in these verses?

The Variety of Human Relationships (Ecclesiastes 4:4-12)

Our daily relationships with those we know can follow several different paths. In these verses, Solomon eloquently and succinctly describes some of these paths, both the negative and the positive. One of the most common of all discouragements, even for Christians, is a lack of good

relationships with others. The Teacher has seen and felt this keenly, and he now shares his experiences with us.

The competitive instinct is another nearly universal part of human nature (4:4-6). Solomon has observed that so many accomplishments that might otherwise be worthwhile have come about primarily because of the motivations of envy and selfish ambition. While the direct results may even be good, those who are motivated by these things will never feel the security and lasting joy that they hoped to attain with their toil. (James 3:13-18 shares similar thoughts.)

The Teacher also points out the opposite extreme: a fool who folds up his hands and does no work at all, leading to his own ruin. Solomon's point is that, as in so many other things, humans go to one extreme or the other, without finding the right balance. Here, that balance is described in verse 6, which echoes some of the Teacher's earlier conclusions. We need to work diligently at whatever task God has given us, and then should be content with the things we have. To desire two handfuls when we need only one is simply to set ourselves up for a lifetime of frustration and pointless toil.

The Teacher next considers one of the most common and most hurtful of human misfortunes, the misery of loneliness (4:7-8). The man that he sees, left alone with no one close to him, living only to work and accumulate, is not simply one individual. Solomon here describes with wisdom and efficiency the lives of a great many persons in this world. Even those who know many others, and who have frequent social interactions with others, are often isolated in the ways that matter most. Being made in God's image, we cannot be content or joyful for long without some strong, genuine relationships, yet that is exactly what most humans lack.

In this case, this man has devoted himself to amassing wealth by his hard work, and in so doing, has sacrificed opportunities for closeness with others. The Teacher sees clearly how miserable this man is, because he himself had fallen into the same trap. Building strong relationships takes time, communication, and understanding. Those who want them must be prepared to lower their standards and expectations in areas such as the accumulation of wealth, power, or possessions.

Following these discouraging examples, Solomon now provides an uplifting and motivating description of those who stand together (4:9-12). In just a few sentences, he points out the many benefits that come from keeping close to one another. We can give each other mutual support when we fall or struggle, whether spiritually or in secular terms. We can encourage and motivate one another, simply by being together and letting one another know. There is also a mutual security, especially in a spiritual sense, from knowing that others with the same beliefs and the same needs are standing close by. The cord of three strands is an interesting illustration, because one interpretation of it is that it represents two persons together with God. Making God the foundation of our relationships is, of course, the most important and most fundamental step in building better and stronger relationships with each other.

Questions For Discussion or Study: What illustrations or examples can you find of the various kinds of relationships that Solomon describes? Why do so many persons have relationships based on envy and competition? What can we do to reduce the role that these play in our relationships? How does materialism produce loneliness? What other

things cause loneliness? What might the Teacher say about these other things? How do we start building the kind of strong relationships that he describes in verses 9-12?

Another Warning (Ecclesiastes 4:13-16)

Because the Teacher knows how easy it is to fall into the trap of allowing our relationships to become characterized by competition, ambition, and people-pleasing, he now adds another, very specific warning. Solomon again speaks from experience as he cautions us against the temptations of advancement, status, and authority.

The trap of advancement has a number of aspects that the Teacher describes (4:13-16). He contrasts a poor but wise youth with an old, foolish king. This ruler may not always have been foolish, but he has long since ceased to grow in genuine wisdom, and so his position no longer means very much. Solomon may well have seen himself in this example. He had once been the wise youth, a spiritual king, and loved by the people. Years later, he was the older, more weary and worldly ruler, of whom the people had grown tired.

The youth*, though, is still on his way up. His ascent to the top may take any number of forms, but the end result is that he replaces the older king both on the throne and in the hearts of the people. For a time, he enjoys the position that the old king once had. But there comes a time when a new generation arises, with their own opinions and their own heroes. Thus the successor, who is no longer young by this time, begins to travel down the same road of gradual deterioration that the old king had followed. The Teacher realizes that this pattern is just one more reason why it is meaningless and futile to put our hope in ambition or advancement.

* There is again a partial parallel with Solomon, who was so wise even as a youth. But he was never poor, of course. So this side of the illustration is probably not meant to correspond exactly with any one person.

Questions For Discussion or Study: What is the Teacher's point in giving the illustration of the old king and the wise youth? Where might he have seen himself in this illustration? What kinds of examples of this pattern might we see today? What does this illustrate? What other reasons could we find to demonstrate that ambition and advancement do not provide lasting hope?

- *Mark W. Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, October 2004*

©2004 by Mark Garner - Congregations and individuals may make or print copies of these notes for home, class, or small group study, without further permission, provided that the author and congregation are credited. Any other use requires the permission of the author.

UNDER THE SUN, BUT IN GOD'S HANDS: LESSONS FROM ECCLESIASTES

Notes For Week Five: Towards A More Godly Perspective (Ecclesiastes 5)

The Teacher now tries to put together some of the lessons he has learned, in order to build a more godly perspective. To do this, he first emphasizes the importance of keeping our commitments to God. He then follows this with some general observations and perspectives on our daily lives in this world.

Honesty & Respect Before God (Ecclesiastes 5:1-7)

To have a strong relationship with God, we must have an awareness and an understanding of his spiritual, divine qualities. The Teacher describes in these verses some of the most indispensable aspects of a good relationship with God. If God means anything to us, we must be honest with him, and we must honor him. We must fulfill the promises we make to him, out of appreciation and respect for God's nature and God's being.

When we approach God, we should remember that when we go near to him, we should first of all listen to him (5:1-3). The Teacher cautions us to avoid what he calls "the sacrifice of fools", that is, talking without listening. When we are more eager to tell God what we think than to listen to what he says, this is a lack of respect. God knows more, sees more, and understands more than we can even imagine, so we should always be quicker to listen than to speak, and we should learn to let our words be few. Even in prayer, Jesus warns us (for example, in Matthew 6:5-13) not to think that an excess of words or an outward display will win us favor with God.

The Teacher follows this with an exhortation to fulfill our commitments to God (5:4-7). This also is a demonstration of our respect for him. He has extraordinary patience, and he has already forgiven us for our many broken promises and unfulfilled commitments. But that is no reason not to strive to be more true to our words in the future. Whenever we make a promise, a vow, or a commitment to God, we should waste no time in fulfilling it. Nor is it an excuse if we find it harder to fulfill than we expected. Should we get any praise or credit for doing something easy? And if we only intended to fulfill the promise if it turned out to be easy, why did we make it in the first place?

The Teacher describes both dreaming and talking as meaningless. Even Christians spend too much of their time talking about what they want to "do for God", and too little time drawing close to God so that he can tell them what he really wants from them. God already knows what is in our hearts, and he cannot be deceived. We should stand in genuine awe of him, and remember that he has the answers, he has the power, and his will is the one that matters. And when we are ready to do what he wants from us, we should do it, not talk about doing it.

Questions For Discussion or Study: What does the Teacher mean by the "sacrifice of fools"? Why is it foolish? In what ways might we be tempted to make this mistake? What kinds of vows or commitments might we make to God? What excuses or obstacles might stand in the way of us fulfilling them? What does it truly mean to respect God? What does it mean to stand in awe of God?

The Rich & The Poor (Ecclesiastes 5:8-12)

The Teacher comes back to the ways that the rich and powerful exploit and oppress the poor and the weak. But here he also points out an aspect of the situation that is often overlooked. Although those who harm and oppress others may often seem to avoid punishment in this world, their possessions do not profit them nearly as much as they or we might think.

Having learned so much about the world, Solomon tells us not to be surprised whenever we see oppression or injustice in the world around us (5:8-9)*. He has come to realize, as should we, that the world will never be a perfect place, nor will human nature ever be free from flaws. It is the nature of power and authority to have a corrupting effect on many of the persons who possess them, and in every era of history there have been many ways in which justice and rights were denied to large portions of humanity. Not only that, but as the Teacher observes, even the oppressors are themselves usually oppressed by someone higher and/or stronger.

* The subject of oppression and injustice appears frequently in the prophetic books, as it is one of the common offenses for which God rebukes or disciplines his people. This passage is interesting in that it looks at these social ills from a different perspective. Whereas the prophets denounce these sins and call for change, the Teacher is trying to understand why these things exist in a world that God created. Both the Teacher and the prophets have things to say on the subject that remain quite relevant, even in very different eras of history.

This situation is further aggravated by the fact that the flesh is never satisfied (5:10-12). The love of money, wealth, and power is all the more meaningless for this reason. When those who love money or power get what they want, it only makes them want more. The more they own, the more they use and consume. Those who fall into this trap (see also 1 Timothy 6:6-10) can never be contented, peaceful, or restful. We see countless examples of this every day, in the self-important rushing around of humans who are slaves to the clock, to their bank accounts, and to their machines. As soon as they accomplish one goal, they race off to work on the next.

On the other hand, the sleep of the contented is sweet. When the Teacher uses the example of a laborer to represent contentment, he is not suggesting that only the poor are contented, or that only the rich are miserable. On the contrary, there are some poor persons who crave money and are even more miserable because of it, and there are some who have comfortable lives who do appreciate their blessings and who are content with what they have. It is not what we have or how much we have that brings contentment, but rather our attitude, both towards what we have and towards what we do not have.

Questions For Discussion or Study: Why does the Teacher return so many times to the subject of wealth and contentment? When he tells us not to be surprised at oppression or injustice, does this mean that we should excuse or condone them? How should we respond? Compare 1 Timothy 6:9-10 and Philippians 4:11-13 with these verses. In what practical ways can we put all of these principles into practice?

The Path To Contentment (Ecclesiastes 5:13-20)

The Teacher comes back once again to some previous conclusions about contentment, and he adds to them some new lessons. Once again he remarks upon how frustrating it is to live for our desires, and once again he emphasizes how important it is to be content with what we have. To

these basic teachings, Solomon now adds some additional thoughts.

The Teacher describes two different ways in which human nature wastes the very wealth that it so often covets (5:13-14). The folly of hoarding is one to which Solomon can testify personally. The hoarder or miser loses all perspective, even losing sight of why he or she initially sought so much wealth, and becomes obsessed not only with acquiring as much as possible, but with clinging to as much as possible. Such folly does indeed do great harm to those who practice it; the damage to their own soul is even greater than the damage that their greed does to others.

The other way that wealth can be wasted is through loss (compare also what Jesus said in Matthew 6:19-21). Many have done exactly what the Teacher describes, counting on their wealth to be there, either for them or for their descendants, only to lose it through some misfortune. Even if such a misfortune does not actually happen, the worry over such possibilities can be equally debilitating.

Contrast this with the wisdom of the simple, familiar saying that "you can't take it with you" (5:15-17). No matter how much we might deny it or argue against it or try to block it out of our minds, it is indisputable that we shall leave this world just as we came into it: with nothing. Those who fight against this truth thereby sentence themselves to a lifetime of toil and frustration. Even irresponsible hedonists may be better off and less miserable than those who zealously hoard and covet their wealth, thinking vainly that it can save them from death.

The Teacher once more comes back to the fact that accepting one's lot is an essential prerequisite to contentment and peace (5:18-20). Taking satisfaction in daily living helps us to appreciate God, to accept ourselves, and to have healthier relationships with others. The Teacher says that this is good and proper. As we learn to live this way, we soon find that simple daily living holds many joys and satisfactions for those who refuse to let the world make them jaded or cynical. Many are afraid to adopt this perspective, because they think that if they become content with what they have, God will never give them more - a subtle but silly mental trap. Those who learn to be content receive many more blessings, in the sense that they enjoy and appreciate many simple pleasures that the covetous and greedy neither notice nor value.

Besides all this, when we accept everything good as a gift from God, it most of all it prepares us to leave this world someday. Those who know how to recognize real value and real treasure will be the ones best prepared for that day.

Questions For Discussion or Study: What examples can we see of the two ways of wasting wealth that the Teacher describes in verses 13-14? Are there ways in which we also can fall into these temptations? Why are we so resistant to accept that "you can't take it with you"? How should this affect our lives and attitudes? How can we help each other to take more satisfaction in the blessings we already have in our daily lives?

- *Mark W. Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, October 2004*

©2004 by Mark Garner - Congregations and individuals may make or print copies of these notes for home, class, or small group study, without further permission, provided that the author and congregation are credited. Any other use requires the permission of the author.

UNDER THE SUN, BUT IN GOD'S HANDS: LESSONS FROM ECCLESIASTES

Notes For Week Six: Humanity, Mortality, & Uncertainty (Ecclesiastes 6)

The sixth chapter of Ecclesiastes closes out the first part of the book. It re-emphasizes several of the main themes discussed so far, and then poses some questions that arise from the Teacher's observations to this point. The perspective in this chapter still reflects the Teacher's struggle to find something more substantial in this world, despite his awareness that no such thing exists.

Still Meaningless (Ecclesiastes 6:1-6)

In these verses, the teacher re-iterates several of his earlier perspectives about the meaningless, vaporous, or insubstantial nature of this world. As in some previous passages, we see the despair and the pessimism that come from looking at this from a worldly perspective. It is as if the Teacher, still drawn to things of this world despite his wisdom, has to check back once again to see whether the nature of this world is still the same.

He describes what he calls another evil under the sun (6:1-2), although it is really just a problem with his perspective. In considering the things we have in this world, the Teacher realizes that they all come from God, and that they are all gifts from God. Yet he realizes how hard it is for us to enjoy the many blessings we receive from God. Indeed, in our own time we can see many who have much more than they can ever need, who nevertheless feel empty and frustrated. Like Solomon, they lack nothing material, but lack the ability to enjoy everything else that they have.

When the Teacher says that "a stranger enjoys them instead", he could either mean through inheritance (as he has mentioned earlier in, for example, 2:18-19), or this could also refer to the way that the same things can be enjoyable to one person and unappreciated by another. In either case, he is referring in large part to himself, having worked so hard to accumulate so much, and finding no satisfaction in it. From a worldly perspective, this is indeed a sad thing.

This leads the Teacher into some thoughts on mortality (6:3-6). His perspective in these verses is quite distorted and excessively morbid. The things he says seem to him to be true, from the negative, worldly viewpoint into which he has fallen, but they certainly do not reflect a godly view of things. Yet his honest thoughts are recorded in the Scriptures because they are quite instructive, if viewed in context*.

* This is one of several such examples in Ecclesiastes. The Teacher is honestly sharing his thoughts and feelings in these verses, but they are his own, not God's. It seems rather likely that he himself realizes how far off-track he is, because of his exaggerations (for example, his reference to living for 2000 years in verse 6). There are similar examples in the Psalms, where one of the psalmists expresses perceptions that are not true, and which he knows God does not agree with, in order to allow God to help him see things more clearly.

Solomon's thoughts in these verses - the pre-occupation with a "decent burial", the strange envy of a stillborn child, and the overall lack of peace and contentment - reflect most of all his yearning for rest. He is so frustrated by the world that he can even envy someone who has never lived in it. His struggle is, again, caused by his perspective. He is a challenging example to us,

because we can easily find ourselves in a similar mode. He has lacked the humility to trust completely in God, and as a result has searched desperately for something in this world that can do for him what God does. Yet at the same time, he just knows too much of the truth to be able to deny it in his heart. He could have been so much better off if he had never wandered off after worldly pleasures and possessions. Even now, if he only turns back whole-heartedly to God, he can find what he wants.

Questions For Discussion or Study: How does a worldly perspective create the kinds of negative perceptions that we see in these verses? What can the Teacher do to deal with these things that discourage him? Is there any truth at all to any of his statements here? What lessons should we draw from this passage?

The Longing For Fulfillment (Ecclesiastes 6:7-11)

The thoughts in these verses all reflect the Teacher's longing for fulfillment, satisfaction, and contentment. He once again comes back to the realization that the things of this world cannot bring him those things. Although he does not want this to be true, he cannot deny it. He knows that he must look beyond the things of this world to find fulfillment.

The insatiable appetite of the flesh is responsible for a great many human problems (6:7-9). Neither the rich of this world nor the wise of this world draw any real spiritual benefits from their worldly advantages, and even the earthly benefits that they gain often prove to be disappointing. Solomon realizes, better than anyone else, that when we indulge our desires and appetites they are not satisfied, but enlarged. He has come to realize that peace and contentment can only come to those who tame their desires, in order to ward off what he calls the roving of the appetite, and instead to be satisfied with what God gives to us (in his words, "what the eye sees", that is, what we have now).

The Teacher also shares some thoughts on the uncertainty of things in this world (6:10-11). He returns to one of the first themes in Ecclesiastes, saying once more that there is nothing truly new. Human nature is the same as it has always been. The things around us, while they often change on the outside, are really just superficially different forms of things that past generations have known. We are at the mercy of forces stronger than us, and we cannot fight effectually against the basic nature of this world. For all that we want to feel in control of things, in reality our lives are filled with uncertainty and anxiety - that is, from an earthly perspective.

Even those who are wisest in earthly terms cannot change this. "The more the words, the less the meaning." The world's best minds have battled basic problems like poverty, oppression, hatred, crime, and the like for millennia, with only limited, short-term successes to show for it. Human wisdom and effort and goodness cannot make much of an impact on this world, because Satan is stronger. Only through God can we make enduring, spiritual, meaningful changes.

Questions For Discussion or Study: How has the Teacher become convinced of the futility of trying to satisfy all of our fleshly desires? What other reasons might we have for believing and accepting this principle? How can we apply what he tells us in verse 9? Name some of the ways in which our existence in this world is uncertain.

Accepting the Uncertain (Ecclesiastes 6:12)

To close out this portion of the book, the Teacher reaches and accepts some conclusions that he has been very reluctant to receive. For all his wisdom, wealth, and power, he really has very little understanding of what is most important in life. He can neither predict nor control the future, and he even has very little influence over his own happiness in the present. While in one sense these are negative conclusions, in a more important sense this is a spiritual breakthrough.

The Teacher now sees that, no matter how hard he tries, neither he nor anyone else really knows what is good, or knows what will take place in the future (6:12). Many humans like to think that they can at least be certain of what would be good for them, or for others, and yet we see many ways in which this is disproved. So many times God uses negative or hurtful things to teach us or bless us, and so many times Satan is able to use earthly blessings to lead humans away from God. Human opinion is so weak and unreliable that, from a spiritual perspective, it is practically irrelevant.

As the Teacher says, we pass through this earth like a shadow, and we really know very little about anything in it at all. While it can be constructive, in itself, to learn more about the things of this world, we should make sure that our knowledge is of the kind that humbles us, rather than the kind that puffs us up. Knowledge that makes us think that we ourselves, or humans in general, know all the answers is not knowledge from God. Everything in the future of this world is prone to uncertainty, and once we are able to accept this with humility, we have made a big step in getting closer to God.

From an earthly viewpoint, it may seem negative or even ignorant to accept the world's uncertainties. But spiritually, this is an important conclusion. There are indeed certainties, and there are indeed guarantees, but the only ones of real value come from God, not from the world. Only when we accept the inadequacy of the world to meet our spiritual needs can we really understand and appreciate the ways that God wants to lead us.

Questions For Discussion or Study: How can we help ourselves better to accept the uncertainty of life in this world? If we do accept it, how does it help us spiritually? What certainties does God offer us? How do they differ from the certainties that the world tries to promote?

- *Mark W. Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, October 2004*

©2004 by Mark Garner - Congregations and individuals may make or print copies of these notes for home, class, or small group study, without further permission, provided that the author and congregation are credited. Any other use requires the permission of the author.

UNDER THE SUN, BUT IN GOD'S HANDS: LESSONS FROM ECCLESIASTES

Notes For Week Seven: The Search For Wisdom (Ecclesiastes 7)

In the seventh chapter of Ecclesiastes, there is something of a shift of emphasis. The Teacher steps back, to some degree, from his persistent search for meaning and purpose. Using some of the conclusions he has drawn so far, he now looks for practical wisdom in several areas of life. In doing so, he combines some of his previous conclusions with some new thoughts.

Wisdom & Daily Life (Ecclesiastes 7:1-12)

The Teacher continues with thoughts on the ways that godly wisdom can influence our daily lives. Some of the thoughts here will recall earlier statements in Ecclesiastes, and some of these will show us the Teacher's continuing struggle to develop a godly perspective. These verses also contain several new ideas, which connect with the general themes of the book.

Before looking at the text of Ecclesiastes 7, there are some significant preliminary thoughts that are illustrated in James 3:13-18. In studying passages that discuss "wisdom", it is usually important to make a distinction between godly wisdom and earthly wisdom. This is a topic that could itself be fruitfully studied at length, but there is one point in particular that relates closely with the Teacher's statements and experiences in Ecclesiastes.

One of the key ideas that the passage in James brings out is the fruit of wisdom. Earthly wisdom is valued for its earthly benefits, and therefore, like all other means of seeking worldly profits, its end results are often envy, rivalry, selfish ambition, and competition. Godly wisdom, on the other hand, does not bring these bad fruits, but rather produces positive, spiritual fruit. James's statements provide us with one possible way of distinguishing between the two types of wisdom, and that passage is worth careful consideration.

Returning to Ecclesiastes, we find that the seventh chapter opens with some thoughts on wisdom, folly, mourning, and laughter (7:1-6). After a brief statement that a good name is more valuable than tangible riches, the Teacher makes some of the seemingly negative kinds of statements that he has made before. This time, though, when he makes statements like "the day of death is better than the day of birth", he is primarily emphasizing the virtues of the sober heart.

In the right context, there is of course nothing wrong with joy or even laughter. But we live in a world with serious needs, and none are more serious than the spiritual needs. Those who follow Jesus must learn to discern when it is time to laugh, and when it is time to mourn (recall Ecclesiastes 3:4). We should not be like fools who laugh at inappropriate times. Solomon compares such persons to the crackling of thorns under a pot* - making incoherent sounds, quickly burned up, and no longer useful.

* In the Hebrew, there is also a play on words, in that the word for "thorns" is very similar to the word for "pot" or "kettle".

The Teacher goes on to tell us how godly wisdom protects us (7:7-12). Honesty and patience,

two of the virtues that godly wisdom teaches us to nurture, protect us from doing harm to ourselves. The dishonest person exposes himself to needless risks of shame and punishment, and even worse, he corrupts his heart, making it vulnerable to even worse temptations. Honesty, on the other hand, is rarely rewarded immediately, but in the long run its fruit becomes clear to others. The proud are quick to take offense or to allow themselves to be provoked into rash acts that will cause regret, but the patient and humble are able to act consistently with what they really believe to be right.

Wisdom also teaches us not constantly to look regretfully at the past. Paul said something similar in Philippians 3, stating that he forgets what is behind and strains towards what is ahead. There is often some truth to our feeling that there was good in the past that we cannot bring back, but dwelling on it will not make the present or the future any better.

In all of these ways, wisdom is a shelter that protects our hearts and minds from much of the damage that the world can do to the unwary. The teacher says that wisdom is better than money, because wisdom can protect us spiritually, not just physically.

Questions For Discussion or Study: Study James 3. Give practical examples that illustrate James's main points about the fruits of wisdom. How do these ideas fit in with Ecclesiastes? Why does the teacher emphasize so strongly the virtues of a sober heart? How can we learn to distinguish when laughter is appropriate, and when seriousness is appropriate? Give practical examples of the ways that godly wisdom protects us, both spiritually and in daily life.

Wisdom & Perspective (Ecclesiastes 7:13-22)

The Teacher also tries to use godly wisdom in his efforts to build a better perspective on his life, on others, and on the world. He has already learned the limits of earthly wisdom, but now he sees that godly wisdom can have a great effect on our lives. In particular, it can help us to abandon fruitless pursuits and to focus our energies on more productive matters.

One of the most basic lessons of godly wisdom is the realization that the world and everything in it comes from God (7:13-15). While every Christian believes this, even we often fail to consider even the most obvious of its implications. Knowing that the world comes from an all-powerful and all-knowing God, of a nature much greater than ours, first of all implies that there are definite limits to our understanding. We can only dimly grasp the answers to some important questions, such as God's reasons for creating the world, or God's willingness to allow both good and bad in the world. The Scriptures provide us with basic assurances about matters such as these, and we must be content with them. We must nurture our faith in God so that we do not demand answers to questions that we can never fully understand in this life.

God's design for humanity is that, as long as they live in this world, they should seek to know him and to serve him. This is more important than any other concern that he may have about us. For believers, this means that they often must endure disappointment or even persecution, either for the sake of their own spiritual growth, or so that others can learn about God. For unbelievers, this means that God may give them blessings that they do not deserve, in order to show his love

for them, in the hope that they will someday see his hand at work. From a worldly perspective, it seems meaningless or unfair when our blessings do not match our behavior, but to God this can be a means of accomplishing important spiritual goals.

Just as there are limits to our understanding, there are also limits to our own righteousness (7:16-22). When the Teacher advises us not to be "overrighteous", this is what he means. We must not fall into the trap of thinking that we can defeat our flesh solely by our own efforts and goodness, by using our own strength and ingenuity to subdue the flesh and its desires. This leads only to a self-righteous pride or to a desperate sense of failure. We must learn that it is only God who is truly righteous, and that it is through his grace and his love for us that we can be declared righteous, in spite of ourselves. On the other hand, we must not go to the other extreme, by taking God's grace and love for granted, and becoming "overwicked". As the Teacher tells us, avoiding these kinds of extremes is an important part of spiritual maturity.

Just as the New Testament writers often tell us, the Teacher here proclaims that no one on this earth is righteous in God's eyes. It is part of our human nature that we so often seek to define righteousness on our own terms, and then begin to evaluate ourselves and others with them. The Teacher warns us against this, too. Paying undue attention to the opinions of others - even their opinions of us - can quickly lead to trouble of many kinds.

Questions For Discussion or Study: If we accept that God created the world and everything in it according to his own designs, what are some of the implications of this in our daily lives? Which aspects of this are the hardest for us to accept? How can we learn better to accept them? What does the Teacher mean by "overrighteous" and "overwicked"? How can we avoid them? When we realize that no one on earth is truly righteous, how can this affect our lives and our thoughts?

Wisdom & Righteousness (Ecclesiastes 7:23-8:1)

Once before, the Teacher hoped to find meaning and purpose through the accumulation of wisdom and knowledge. But now he tries to do something different and more promising, as he looks at the connection between godly wisdom and righteousness. When we understand more fully the difference between the teachings of God and the temptations of the world, we then find it much easier to live as God calls us to live.

Within every human being is the desire to understand (7:23-25): the desire to understand who we are, where we came from, and what else is out there. We can try to satisfy this desire either through a worldly approach, or through a spiritual approach. The worldly, fleshly approach is to try to discover things we cannot fully understand, and to try to demonstrate our own brilliance through our studies and theories. Thus - just to give one of many possible examples - the world comes up with the theory of random evolution, which is a laughable attempt to exalt human thinking in explaining something (the process of creation) that is far beyond our grasp.

There are, though, things that we can understand. We can understand that the world was created at God's command. We can understand the difference between right and wrong, good and evil, wisdom and folly. We can understand that we are saved by grace, through faith. We can

understand that God sent his Son to die on a cross in order to make atonement for the sins that we have committed. We can and should seek to understand these and other spiritual things.

Choosing wisdom over folly is not only the right thing to do, it is also the best thing for us in the long run (7:26-8:1). The snare of the seductive woman, which the Teacher describes here, is only one of many such traps that await the ungodly and those who stray spiritually. To fall into such a snare may be momentarily pleasurable, but it soon leads to harmful consequences, both in this life and in our relationship with God.

Although humanity was made in God's image, we all have a tendency to follow our own wills instead of accepting ourselves as God's creations. Solomon here describes with regret how hard it is to find anyone who lives an upright and godly life*. How sadly true is his statement that human beings "have gone in search of many schemes". Yet those who do apply themselves to seeking what is truly of value will find that their hearts, minds, and personalities will benefit greatly from the true wisdom that God reveals to those who desire it.

* When the Teacher says that he found one upright man among a thousand, and no upright women, this is simply a literary device, stressing how rare it is to see someone who truly devotes his or her life to God. It makes no sense to interpret this as some kind of comparison between the righteousness of males and the righteousness of females. Some commentators go way off track on this verse because they misinterpret it, and they then accuse the writer of being "misogynistic", which is just silly. As a literary technique, it is very similar to, for example, the common construction in the Proverbs, "Under three things the earth trembles, under four it cannot bear up (30:21, see also verses such as 30:15, 30:18, 30:29). Yet another similar figure of speech is used in Amos - for example, see Amos 1:3, 1:6, 1:9, 1:13, &c.

Questions For Discussion or Study: What signs can we see that within us is a desire for understanding? Where does this desire come from? What is its true purpose? How do humans misuse this desire? What benefits do we get from choosing godly wisdom over worldly folly? Do any of these benefits help us in this life? Why are those who live godly lives so rare?

- *Mark W. Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, October 2004*

©2004 by Mark Garner - Congregations and individuals may make or print copies of these notes for home, class, or small group study, without further permission, provided that the author and congregation are credited. Any other use requires the permission of the author.

UNDER THE SUN, BUT IN GOD'S HANDS: LESSONS FROM ECCLESIASTES

Notes For Week Eight: Justice & Injustice (Ecclesiastes 8)

As he did in the previous chapter, here the Teacher continues to reflect on some important subjects, using the perspectives that he has tried to develop. In this chapter, he turns to a number of examples that involve questions of justice and injustice. This is yet another topic on which God's perspectives and human perspectives sometimes differ greatly.

Justice & Common Sense (Ecclesiastes 8:2-6)

Dealing with earthly authorities is an inherent and unavoidable part of our lives in this world. We know that we are spiritual beings, and we know that the rulers and authorities of this age are often wrong, sometimes even deliberately so. Solomon probably realized that he himself had engaged in misrule during the later years of his reign, and here he offers some general suggestions for God's people in dealing with authorities in their lives.

The concept of justice, like so many other topics in Christianity, can be viewed either from an earthly perspective or from an eternal perspective. In this world, there will never be, and can never be, perfect justice. Further, even the limited ways in which we can attain justice in this world are only possible because of God's grace. But from an eternal perspective, God is the administrator of justice, and we do not have to make the decisions; we just need to have faith that God will judge justly. Of course, even as Christians we are often concerned for matters involving justice in this world.

The Teacher applies the idea of justice first to the king's authority (8:2-4). He advises his hearers to be obedient to the king, linking this obedience to our relationship with God. His ideas here bear some similarities with Paul's points in Romans 13:1-7. Paul tells the Romans to obey the governing authorities both because of possible punishment for disobedience, and also because our consciences tell us to obey out of respect for the order that God has established*.

* See also Peter's comments in 1 Peter 2:13-17.

There will, of course, be times when rulers make decisions that oppose God's word or will, and that we therefore will be forced to oppose. But, as the Teacher says here, we should not stand up for a bad, or purely selfish, cause, since such a stand not only risks punishment, but spiritual damage as well. When we do resist authority, we should consider whether it really does involve a spiritual principle of importance to God, or something that is important only to the flesh.

The Teacher then offers further practical wisdom, telling us that there is a proper time and procedure for everything (8:5-6). When we are obedient to authority, we gain at least an earthly sense of security in return, a point Paul also raises in Romans 13. When the time does come for us to stand in opposition to an authority or a ruler, God will provide the proper time and place, and he will make it clear in our hearts. Solomon says that the wise heart will be able to discern the time and place. It may take patience and waiting, and there may be times when we must suffer under injustice for a time, until the proper occasion to deal with it arises.

Questions For Discussion or Study: Since we do not live under a king, in what kinds of situations would these verses apply to us? What would they tell us about these situations? How might we be able to discern when to resist or oppose an earthly authority? What kinds of issues might this involve? How might God make clear to us the proper time and place? When, on the other hand, might we simply have to endure something displeasing for a time?

Justice & Uncertainty (Ecclesiastes 8:7-13)

A common stumbling block to faith is the perception that there is no justice in this world, and that indeed, often the wicked almost seem to be rewarded. The Teacher here considers this problem in view of some of the lessons that he has previously learned. The uncertainty of justice, like uncertainty in the other areas of life that he has considered, can be either a stumbling block to faith or a building block to faith, depending on our perspective.

As spiritual beings, we should always remember that things in this world may not be what they seem (8:7-10). For all that human beings so frequently become arrogant and think that they can do anything that they wish to do, we really have an astonishing lack of wisdom and power. The humanist myth of ever-advancing human progress is hollow and false. We usually do not know what will happen even a very short time into the future. Humanity is powerless to control all but the smallest forces around them. Most of all, no amount of wisdom, money, or power can exempt any of us from death.

For this reason, those who seem to be powerful or rich in the world's eyes are invariably disappointed by their wealth and power, if that is where they have placed their faith. Because the world fears death above all, their view of oppressors exaggerates the oppressors' power, and fails to see the deep insecurity and fear in the hearts of those who exploit or persecute their fellow beings. No one truly strong, truly confident, or truly secure has any need to harm others in order to feel strong or confident or secure. The most notorious villains of history are also the most pathetic, hopeless, miserable souls in history.

The Teacher also considers various incentives to sin or not to sin (8:11-13). Again, this can be looked at from either of two perspectives. From the worldly perspective, we can easily see that in this world there are often incentives to sin. When we see so many sinners and evil-doers who "get away with" their misdeeds, it can easily arouse in ourselves the desire to commit evil acts. This is why so much of popular culture glorifies and romanticizes sin, because there is a part of our flesh that is thrilled by the possibility of committing sin and getting away with it. It is quite easy for the purveyors of mass-distributed trash to exploit this by creating motion pictures, songs, and stories that cater to this objectionable and ungodly part of our nature.

The godly should learn to see through all this, and to place their hope in something better. As the Teacher says, a person can commit evil acts and yet flourish by this world's standards, but all the same such an individual pays a high price inside. Once again, popular culture loves to portray evil-doers as dashing, romantic heroes, but this is a lie that Christians should see through. Those who live by constantly sinning can indeed easily cause great damage in the lives of others, but they themselves are not genuinely interesting persons. They are shallow, insecure, desperate losers. We should model ourselves on Jesus, who "for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of God" (Hebrews 12:2). The lasting reward

for godliness is incalculably greater than the tiny, temporary pleasures of sin.

Questions For Discussion or Study: Give examples of things that demonstrate how little wisdom and power humans really have. What implications does this have? Why do the worldly not want to admit their lack of wisdom and power? What kinds of apparent incentives does this world offer to induce us to sin? Can Christians fall into this kind of temptation? In what ways does the Teacher imply here that we could make ourselves less vulnerable to temptation?

Justice & Joy (Ecclesiastes 8:14-17)

Our earthly human nature intuitively feels that doing good should be rewarded, not just by material things, but by happiness. Likewise, human nature feels that doing evil should lead to unhappiness. Yet again, it does not seem to happen this way from an earthly point of view. Here the Teacher carefully considers the possible ways of looking at this question.

The Teacher starts by acknowledging that often there does not seem to be any relation between our actions and the rewards we earn for them, calling this meaningless (8:14-15). The righteous often seem to get what the wicked deserve, and vice versa. Rather than denying this, or trying to change things that we cannot change, we should once again return to the Teacher's recurring advice that nothing is better than to enjoy and appreciate what we have. As so often before, he returns to this not out of despair and frustration, but out of relief and humility. He tells us that those who learn to be content will find their lives accompanied by the kind of joy that so many lack. The godly do not receive more or better things than others, but they have the rare opportunity to enjoy what they do have.

The chapter closes with some thoughts on justice and wisdom (8:16-17). Because our human perspectives will always be incomplete and imperfect, we can never really know what is best for us or for others, and therefore we can never know for certain what justice really is. God knows more and sees more than we ever can, and it is simply unwise for us to critique his ways of judging and acting. The final verse of the chapter recalls Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 8:2, "the man who thinks that he knows something does not yet know it as he ought to know." If we remember to be humble, and remember how little we really understand, it can help us to build our faith and to live the kind of godly lives that can attract others to God.

Questions For Discussion or Study: What kinds of examples make it seem as if humans often do not get what they deserve? In a worldly sense, will this ever change? Does God want it to change? What unseen penalties do the wicked pay? What rewards do those who live godly lives receive? Is there any reward in this world for godly living? Why is it important to our concept of justice to realize that there is much we don't know? Is there anything about which we can be certain? Give practical examples of all this.

- Mark W. Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, October 2004

©2004 by Mark Garner - Congregations and individuals may make or print copies of these notes for home, class, or small group study, without further permission, provided that the author and congregation are credited. Any other use requires the permission of the author.

UNDER THE SUN, BUT IN GOD'S HANDS: LESSONS FROM ECCLESIASTES

Notes For Week Nine: Discarding Our Illusions (Ecclesiastes 9)

Having learned and experienced so much, the Teacher has come to accept some difficult lessons about living under the sun. Time and again, his assumptions have been proven false, and his illusions have been shattered. In this chapter, he calls us to discard our own illusions about life in this world, and to accept the realities that God has revealed to us.

The Implications of Mortality (Ecclesiastes 9:1-10)

Several times in Ecclesiastes, the Teacher comes back to the concept of human mortality, and the limitations that it imposes on our lives under the sun. The awareness of our mortality can also affect our ability to enjoy the things of this world. In once again dwelling on the sometimes frightening thought of death, he is by no means being morbid, but rather is making an honest and courageous attempt to understand the way God that has made things.

As the Teacher has already noted, from an earthly viewpoint all of humanity shares a common destiny (9:1-4). Our lives are in God's hands from the moment we are born, whether we choose to acknowledge it or not. Moreover, from an earthly perspective, we have no sure way of determining what comes next. Earthly science and philosophy are powerless to tell us about the afterlife. It is for that reason that so many persons who consider themselves to be wise by the world's standards choose to deny or ignore the existence of eternity, because it is so frightening and humbling to them.

Yet all rational and honest humans know that we face an inevitable fate. Since our flesh rebels against the idea that it will someday cease to be, it influences our hearts to deny death, and to turn to sin or selfishness in the hope of running from the truth. A great many of the fancy-sounding rationalizations for sin, the pretentious philosophical fallacies of atheists, and the numerous forms of rampant indulgence in sensual pleasures, all really come down to the simple wish to deny the truth about the fleeting nature of our lives.

The Teacher says (in verse 4) that the living have a hope that the dead do not. The worldly have a false hope, in that as long as they are alive, they can continue to delude themselves about spiritual realities. But the godly have a true hope. And even those who have not yet turned to God can have the hope of salvation if they do turn to him, no matter how many sins and mistakes they have previously committed.

The Teacher thus exhorts us to make the best use of the time that we do spend in this world (9:5-10), or as Paul says in Colossians 4:5 (KJV), to redeem the time. The worldly spend so much of their time on pleasures that will not last, or on attainments that will soon be forgotten. That does not mean, of course, that we should never do anything that does not have an obvious eternal significance. Rather, as the Teacher has so often said, it means that we should learn to appreciate what we have while we have it, rather than coveting, envying, or desperately striving for more. Whatever we do in our days under the sun, the Teacher tells us to do it with all our might.

Once again, we can compare this with the New Testament teaching to work at everything we do with all our heart, as if we were doing it for Jesus (Colossians 3:23). To be able to do this consistently calls for a deeper faith in God. When we trust God to guide us, and trust him to place us where he wants us to be, this can keep us from becoming restless or dissatisfied. It enables us to make use of opportunities we already have. Then we do not become unduly upset about the way things work out in this world, because we already know our final destination.

Questions For Discussion or Study: Why does the Teacher so often think about death? Are there any positive implications to death? How does this fit in with the Teacher's constant encouragement to enjoy what we have? What is the difference between his advice and the attitudes of the worldly who indulge themselves in sin? What can we do to make ourselves more content with our daily lives?

Time & Chance (Ecclesiastes 9:11-12)

In these verses, the Teacher returns to another topic that has interested him throughout the book, the concept of uncertainty. His thoughts here are timeless, in that they confront the kinds of assumptions that are made - perhaps in slightly different forms - in every era. Most of what happens in this world is not subject to mathematical calculation or logical proof. We must therefore accept the role of time and chance in our own lives and in the lives of others.

In saying that the race is not to the swift (9:11), Solomon is simply reminding us that there are no guarantees. Sometimes the slower or weaker side wins, for many possible reasons. There are countless examples in which speed, strength, talent, or wisdom do not prevail, either because they were taken for granted, or because they were misused, or because God intervened, or because some less-appreciated factor proved more important.

Nor should we underestimate the role of time and chance, especially in worldly affairs. There are many things in our lives that have spiritual importance that we barely recognize, and we know that God often works in ways that we barely notice. Yet we also should remember that much of what goes on in life has little or no spiritual significance, and in such matters, God will often simply allow time and chance, along with the human wills of those involved, to determine the outcome. Our responsibility is not so much always to try to deduce or calculate when this has occurred, versus when God has acted, so much as to accept that everything is in God's hands, and that he will always care for us and will use everything for the good, no matter what the people of this world may do with their own earthly power and wisdom.

This also implies that we should expect the unexpected (9:12), both good and bad. Because of our limited foreknowledge and our earthly perspective, most of the time we have only a dim idea of what will happen in even the very near future. Once again, we should not try desperately to get more control over things, but rather should strengthen our faith in God, knowing that he will guide us through uncertain times, as long as we allow him to do so. The sudden and the unexpected will come, but they do not need to damage our relationship with God.

Questions For Discussion or Study: Why is there so much uncertainty in this world? Why does chance play such a large role in human affairs? Is there a way for us to tell

when God has acted, versus when something has happened by chance? What kinds of sudden or unexpected things may happen to us (or have happened to you)? Are there some general ways we can keep ourselves prepared for such things?

Human Inconstancy (Ecclesiastes 9:13-18)

Yet another common illusion is the notion that our good and helpful deeds will always be remembered by those we have benefitted. Or, in a more general way, we might simply assume that others have our best interests at heart. Solomon now exposes this misconception, as he has done with the others, not in order to discourage us, but rather to try to keep us from being hurt unnecessarily by human ingratitude and inconstancy.

The Teacher shares with us a memorable example* of what can happen (9:13-16). He tells us of a city that was in a desperate plight, besieged by a much more powerful army. A poor but wise man in the city devised a means of saving the city, but the man was soon forgotten in the joy of victory. Such situations are quite common on a less dramatic level. One implication of this story is that we should not count on being rewarded or even thanked for services we give to others. From the worldly viewpoint, this seems terribly unfair, but from a spiritual viewpoint, this is a helpful reminder. We are always freer, and we always serve more joyfully, when we do so out of a desire to serve God and to give to his people, rather than being motivated by a hope of reward or recognition for ourselves.

* It seems most likely that this is an incident that happened elsewhere, and that Solomon heard about it, rather than something he experienced first-hand. It is also possible that it was merely a story, similar to the parables.

Next, the Teacher considers the impact of wisdom (9:17-18). He contrasts the quiet words of the wise with the loud shouts of the foolish. Wisdom does not always jump out and aggressively call itself to our attention, but it is always worth heeding. Foolish thoughts, on the other hand, are often stated boldly and loudly, and they often promise quick satisfaction if we heed them. The ability to distinguish between the constructive power of godly wisdom and the destructive power of worldly wisdom is an important aspect of spiritual growth and maturity.

Questions For Discussion or Study: Why does the Teacher share the example in verses 9:13-16? Can you think of other similar examples? If humans are often ungrateful, should we then not serve them as much? Or is there a better way to apply the lessons of this example? Why does Solomon describe the words of the wise as quiet, and the words of fools as being shouted? What parallels to this can we see? How can we learn better to distinguish wisdom from folly?

- *Mark W. Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, November 2004*

©2004 by Mark Garner - Congregations and individuals may make or print copies of these notes for home, class, or small group study, without further permission, provided that the author and congregation are credited. Any other use requires the permission of the author.

UNDER THE SUN, BUT IN GOD'S HANDS: LESSONS FROM ECCLESIASTES

Notes For Week Ten: Wisdom in Practice (Ecclesiastes 10)

In this chapter, the Teacher follows up on his thoughts from the end of the previous chapter, in which he considered the real value of wisdom. Wisdom does not always bring earthly rewards, due to the uncertain nature of this world. But godly wisdom is always of value in keeping our hearts pure, and in nurturing spiritual fruit in our lives.

Folly Cannot be Hidden (Ecclesiastes 10:1-7)

Towards the end of the previous chapter of Ecclesiastes, the Teacher compared the quiet words of the wise with the loud shouts of the foolish. While godly wisdom is often subtle, and must be sought after, worldly folly is generally not hard to find. In these verses, Solomon takes this idea further, discussing how hard it is to hide most forms of folly for very long.

He shares an analogy relating flies and folly (10:1). Dead flies ruin everything from perfume to soup to coffee to almost anything else they fall into. Folly is the same way. When we indulge ourselves in even a little folly, it can undo a lot of good and wise things. How many dead flies would have to be in your drink before you would decline to drink it?

The next illustration describes two hearts going in different directions (10:2-3). There is no particular significance to right and left*. Rather, the point is that the wise heart and the foolish heart are going in exactly opposite directions. Just as Jesus spoke of the sheep and the goats, as Paul talked about those led by the Spirit and those led by the flesh, so Solomon says there are two basic directions in which our hearts can go. And those who choose folly cannot hide it. Even as they go about their normal daily business, their way of life soon becomes clear.

* In particular, there is no political significance to "left" and "right". The use of those terms to describe political positions came into being many centuries after Ecclesiastes was written.

Nor should we be surprised to find folly in high places (10:4-7). No matter how powerful, famous, or popular someone is, he or she is still a human, and still fallible. We should remain calm even when leaders or authorities seem to be failing us, or when they take actions that work against us. The Teacher reminds us that "calmness can lay great errors to rest". By our peace and contentment, we can often convict the insecure or selfish of the emptiness of their way of life, and by our calmness we can also save ourselves additional trouble.

We live in a confused world. While some of the sin and hurt in the world come from someone's deliberate desire to do evil, much more comes from the confusion, insecurity, anxiety, and desperation of humans in the face of a world that is so large and so uncertain. That the foolish often have influential positions, while the wise and capable are often ignored, is simply a consequence of the nature of this world. Humans all too often look for conspiracies or plots to explain things that simply reflect the uncertain nature of the world in which we live, and in which people make a lot of mistakes and try a lot of things that do not work out. As Christians, we can be a source of calm, peace, and light in a world filled with turmoil, conflict, and darkness.

Questions For Discussion or Study: What is the point of the Teacher's analogies in verses 1-2? What should we learn from them? How does the Teacher advise us to deal with folly in those who have authority or influence over us? Why is this such a common problem under the sun? What specific problems might the Teacher have in mind?

Wisdom & Reality (Ecclesiastes 10:8-15)

One of the benefits of godly wisdom is that it helps us to accept things the way they are, without denying or rebelling against the ways that God has made things. These verses suggest just a few of the many possible ways in which the godly can benefit from having a realistic view of the world around them, compared to the ways in which the foolish will harm themselves by failing to accept the world as it really is.

First come some ideas involving wisdom, planning, and risk (10:8-11). It is not possible to do anything worthwhile in this world without risk, and those who live their lives seeking only to avoid risks will soon find themselves incapable of doing anything rewarding. Solomon emphasizes this with several everyday examples. First, he points out that the digging of a pit, essential in many kinds of projects, involves the risk that the digger himself may fall in. The second one referred to a familiar problem of the era: it was a common hazard for those who tore down or renovated old buildings to find snakes that had made their homes inside the walls. The snakes would naturally disapprove of having their homes torn down, and they were likely to lash out at the nearest target*. Two more examples follow in verse 9, regarding the risks inherent in quarrying stones or splitting logs, jobs that again are essential in many kinds of undertakings.

* Some commentators interpret verse 8 differently, thinking that it refers to someone digging a pit as a trap or knocking down a wall as an act of vandalism. In that case, verse 9 still refers to constructive, necessary acts, so that under this interpretation the Teacher is making a slightly different point: that constructive and destructive acts both involve a similar degree of risk. It is more likely, though, that all of the examples in verses 8-9 refer to the risks involved in honest, constructive actions, as described above.

Then come two illustrations of another point. A dull axe requires the user to expend more of his own strength, suggesting that time and effort used to sharpen it beforehand would be well spent. This practical piece of wisdom again applies in many types of situations. The Teacher follows this with a similar example about a snake charmer who finishes the job too slowly.

Following these examples, the Teacher shares some thoughts on wisdom, speech, and work (10:12-15). As James also wrote centuries later, the Teacher reminds us of the power of words, particularly foolish ones. It is an unfortunate fact that the same mouth that God gave us to praise him and to build up one another can also be used to hurt and to destroy. Since it is much easier to say foolish, pointless things than it is to say wise, helpful things, an important part of spiritual maturity is learning to use our words more wisely.

We must also learn to live with uncertainty, as the Teacher has pointed out before. The wise live responsibly, knowing that God is in control, but the foolish respond to the world's uncertainty in the wrong way. Verse 15 is similar to the proverbs about sluggards. Here, Solomon describes a fool whose desire to avoid work leads him to make weak excuses - he claims that he does not know the way to town, just as the sluggard in Proverbs 26:13 claimed that he could not go out because there was a dangerous lion roaming the streets.

Questions For Discussion or Study: Why can our words have such a great effect, either for good or for bad? Compare verses 12-14a with James 3:1-12. What lessons do they have in common? What does James add to what Solomon says? See if you can find other Scriptures that deal with these same ideas. Give examples of the kind of excuse that the Teacher describes in verse 15. Find the verses in Proverbs that talk about "the sluggard", and compare those verses with this one.

Wisdom & Leadership (Ecclesiastes 10:16-20)

Solomon next considers wisdom, or the lack thereof, in leaders and authorities. While many of the illustrations in Ecclesiastes refer to kings, the principles are still useful as regards many forms of leadership, whether in the community, the church, or the family. Most of us will actually find ourselves both as leaders and as followers at various times in our lives. He compares two kings and their lands (10:16-17). Woe to the land, he says, that has an unfit, unprepared king*. The princes and other leaders of that land will begin to indulge themselves as soon as they wake up. A bad example from the king will often be imitated by those just below him - to the detriment of the nation as a whole. But blessed is the land, says the Teacher, with a worthy king* who is ready for the position. The princes of that land will follow his example, and will serve others ahead of themselves. These principles apply at all levels of leadership, and anyone who is a parent, a teacher, a supervisor, a deacon or elder, or a leader in any other capacity should take note of the effect that his or her example will have.

* This is what the passage implies by referring to one king as a servant or child, and the other as being of noble birth. The Teacher refers to their character and preparedness more than to their literal social status.

Some general applications then follow (10:18-20). The Teacher particularly warns against laziness. Those who will not attend to small problems will soon have bigger problems. Solomon uses the example of a lazy man whose house falls gradually into disrepair, as a parallel for the way that our lives can fall apart if we do not take responsibility for them. Verse 19 describes the mind of a lazy ruler or rich man, who indulges himself at every opportunity, and who tries to solve all of his problems with money. The powerful or privileged are no lazier by nature than anyone else, but they have more opportunities to pursue a life of slothfulness.

The Teacher finishes his thoughts with another exhortation to accept those in authority, even to the point of holding off on unnecessary or unconstructive criticism. This does not at all imply that those in authority do not deserve to be criticized - rather, the Teacher advises us to be cautious not to do so without proper reflection first.

Questions For Discussion or Study: In what contexts, other than actual kingdoms, could verses 16-17 apply? What specific lessons can we get from them? In what ways should we apply the Teacher's warnings about laziness in verses 18-19? How does 10:20 compare with 8:2-6? In what kinds of situations should we apply 10:20?

- *Mark W. Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, November 2004*

©2004 by Mark Garner - Congregations and individuals may make or print copies of these notes for home, class, or small group study, without further permission, provided that the author and congregation are credited. Any other use requires the permission of the author.

UNDER THE SUN, BUT IN GOD'S HANDS: LESSONS FROM ECCLESIASTES

Notes For Week Eleven: Life As It Was Meant To Be (Ecclesiastes 11)

As the Teacher nears the end of his book, he begins to share some broad advice on how to live our lives. In the last two chapters, he describes how the godly can live their lives in this world without many of the fears and internal struggles that plague the worldly. Here, he discusses some basic perspectives that will help us to be more at peace during our lives under the sun.

Living With An Uncertain Future (Ecclesiastes 11:1-6)

Our lives under the sun are made more complicated and stressful both by things that are uncertain and by things that are certain. In these verses, the Teacher advises us how to live in a world in which so much is uncertain. His advice is meant to be general, so the examples and analogies he gives are meant to provide perspectives that can be applied in many areas besides those specifically mentioned.

In one of the more memorable verses of Ecclesiastes, the teacher tells us to "cast your bread upon the waters" (11:1-2), in the expectation of seeing it again after many days. This somewhat obscure but evocative image is primarily meant to encourage us to be unafraid in pursuing the opportunities that God gives us under the sun. We shall often see little immediate return on our efforts, because spiritual fruit often takes a long time to ripen. But the lasting satisfaction that spiritual fruit gives us makes it worth the wait.

The Teacher's next exhortation (in verse 2), is similar. He calls us to distribute or to make use of what we have, not holding back*, for we never know how long we shall retain what we have now. As simple as this advice is, it hits at the root of many instances of human indecision and fear. So often, it is difficult for us to act when we do not know what the future holds. The Teacher's message is that even if we thought we knew the future, we could very well be wrong anyway - so we should simply do what we know to be right and good in God's eyes. We should sow seed whenever we have the chance.

* The expression "to seven, yes to eight" is another example of a common construction in Hebrew. The numbers are not meant to be taken literally. It simply means, "to as many as possible". That is, the verse is simply telling us, in a general sense, to make use of the things and opportunities that God gives us, rather than waiting until we feel assured of success.

The Teacher also reminds us that, most of the time, what will be, will be, and most of the time we will have at best limited control over it (11:3-4). When the clouds are dark, it's going to rain, and we can do nothing to stop it. If a tree falls, we have no control over where it lands. The Teacher goes on to give an illustration of a fearful farmer, who is afraid to plant because the wind might blow away his seed, and who later is afraid to reap because it might rain. If we live our lives trying to avoid everything bad or dangerous, it quickly becomes a form of paralysis. There will be times when we will get hurt or disappointed, even if we have taken wise precautions. As believers, we should most of all make sure that this does not prevent us from making use of the opportunities that God gives us to serve him.

Further, we must also accept many things that we cannot understand (11:5-6). Christianity was never meant to be based on logic and study alone. Faith will always be an essential part of any genuine relationship with God. The skeptics who claim not to accept anything that cannot be proven are simply deceiving themselves. No one could live for more than a few moments without taking many important things on faith. There is no one who understands everything about how our bodies work, yet we believe that they do work in certain ways. No one understands every piece of machinery and technology that we use in our daily lives. Many more examples could be given along the same lines. Relentless skepticism is not sophisticated; it is foolish and pretentious. Furthermore, skeptics are not consistent - they merely reject those truths that make them uncomfortable, and accept the ones that they like.

It is interesting that, in connection with this, the Teacher exhorts us not to be idle. When he says that we should sow seed in the morning when we have the chance, and that we should find something constructive to do in the evening (when sowing cannot be done), what he means is that we should not do only those things that bring guaranteed results. We never know for certain which of our actions will really have an effect, so we should simply do any and all of those things that we know are right and constructive, and let God work to produce spiritual fruit. The world is full of excuses for idleness, selfishness, and self-indulgence. Many of these excuses have a phony philosophical tone to them, but they are still just excuses.

Questions For Discussion or Study: In what practical ways could we apply the Teacher's advice to "cast our bread upon the waters"? What are some of the uncertainties of life that we must accept every day? How can we make them easier to accept? What are some of the things that most persons accept on faith every day, even if they are not believers? What spiritual lessons can we draw from these examples?

Living With A Certain Future (Ecclesiastes 11:7-10)

In other respects, our lives under the sun have a certain future. It is the nature of everything in this world to be beautiful in its time, and then to pass from the face of the earth. It is also the nature of most living things to be young and full of energy, then to become mature, and then to weaken and grow old. The Teacher advises us not to fight against this destiny. This is even easier to accept when we remember that as Christians we also have a certain future in eternity.

In thinking of our lives under the sun, the Teacher tells us that light is sweet (11:7-8). There is no reason not to find enjoyment and contentment in the blessings that God gives us under the sun. God gives us many things in this world to show us that he cares. We simply have to remain conscious of the much longer time that we shall live in eternity. The Teacher calls this "many days of darkness" because of the uncertainty involved. For those who are separated from God, of course, eternity will be dark indeed. For us, those days are dark, or obscured, in that we cannot know exactly what heaven* will be like, but we can be assured of being with God, so that we know it will be much better than any situation we could have in this world.

* For the beliefs that the Jews in Solomon's time would have had of eternity, see the notes to chapter 3, the footnote at the bottom of page 2.

The Teacher then tells us how to live in the present (11:9-10). Those who are in the days of their youth should take joy in what they have, being careful only to do nothing that displeases God. As long as we live in the consciousness of God, there is no reason not to enjoy his blessings. Nor is it all that difficult to enjoy his blessings responsibly. There are many blessings given to us that we simply have to look for in order to appreciate.

As we grow older, we tend to become more weighted down with troubles, responsibilities, and anxieties. The Teacher gives us advice similar to Peter's: "cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares about you" (1 Peter 4:7). In both cases, these inspired authors do not believe that you can quickly and easily relieve your anxieties just by deciding to do so. Rather, they are telling us not to let these things dwell in our hearts unchallenged, but instead through prayer, study, and sharing them with others, to allow God the chance to heal and comfort our troubled hearts.

When the Teacher next says that "youth and vigor are meaningless", he is not telling us not to appreciate them when we have them (since he has just told us to be grateful for them), but rather he is reminding us that, like everything else in this world, they simply do not last. We should thus accept the future when it comes, instead of fighting against it. So many unbelievers make an idol out of youth, and in our society whole industries are built around catering to the desperate desire that so many persons have to look and feel young. It is God who put in us the tendency to grow old, and we should accept it just as we do everything else that he has done.

Questions For Discussion or Study: How would the Teacher advise young persons to live their lives? What cautions does he give them? How should we deal with growing older? Give some examples of things that provide particular challenges at each of these stages of life. How might the Teacher have learned from his own experience?

- *Mark W. Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, November 2004*

©2004 by Mark Garner - Congregations and individuals may make or print copies of these notes for home, class, or small group study, without further permission, provided that the author and congregation are credited. Any other use requires the permission of the author.

UNDER THE SUN, BUT IN GOD'S HANDS: LESSONS FROM ECCLESIASTES

Notes For Week Twelve: Remember Your Creator (Ecclesiastes 12)

As the book of Ecclesiastes comes to its end, the Teacher focuses his concluding thoughts on God. He exhorts his readers to remember God, to remember the nature of their lives under the sun, and to be aware of God's control over everything. He himself has returned to some vital lessons that he once knew and then forgot, and he wants us to learn from his past mistakes.

Learn It While You Can (Ecclesiastes 12:1-8)

The Teacher realizes that if, when he was younger, he had held more closely to the truths about God that he knew, then he could have saved himself many misfortunes. He wants us to learn from this. There is never a better time than the present to strengthen our relationship with God and our devotion to God. But the world also wants our attention, and if we become too engrossed in this world, we can easily miss better and more important spiritual opportunities.

In calling us to remember God our Creator, the Teacher particularly urges us to remember him while there is time (12:1-5). He appeals first of all to those who are still young. Youth is the best time, but in some respects the hardest time, to develop a strong relationship with God. Those who devote themselves to God while still young will experience the blessings of God's wisdom as they make the crucial choices in their lives, and faithful young persons will spare themselves many griefs. Yet youth is also the hardest time to persuade someone to live for God, because the world worships youth, and it dangles an enormous variety of temptations in front of the young. Those young persons who do choose God should receive our constant encouragement and appreciation.

After his exhortation, Solomon then describes at length the process of growing old, using numerous images of decline and decay. He is rather graphic and melancholy in describing what it is like to see one's years under the sun slipping away, and from a worldly viewpoint this is a depressing topic indeed. His purpose, though, is not to discourage, but to persuade. We cannot avoid aging, just as we cannot avoid passing away. Yet what a different prospect it is to know that we can face our declining years with God close by us, rather than facing the possible discouragements of old age all on our own.

For the day will come for all of us when we go to our eternal home. When it does come, our time under the sun will seem to have slipped away too quickly, and we may never get the "last chance" to turn to God that so many in the world are counting on. It is so common for humans to think that they are too busy to turn to God, or that they have too many worries to be able to improve their relationship with God, or that they are just not ready yet to take God seriously. All of the things that make us busy, all of the things that worry us, and all of the things that distract us or demand our attention come from the world and Satan, who do not want to let go of our souls. We'll never stop being busy or worried or pre-occupied until and unless Satan and the world decide that they are ready for us to turn to God. When do you think that will happen?

Continuing with similar thoughts, the Teacher reminds us that the spirit eventually returns to God (12:6-8). He is talking here not about the Holy Spirit, but about the personal spirit that God put in each one of us. In pointing this out, he is adding another dimension to what he has frequently said about our mortality, and about the inevitability of each of us passing away. The difference here is that while our bodies will pass away forever, the Teacher reminds us that there is a part of us - the spiritual part - that does not at all cease to exist when the body dies. But for us to benefit from this, we must nourish and nurture our spirits before physical life ends.

The Teacher gives several evocative images of the end of our physical existence. The most familiar is his expression that the "dust" of which our bodies are made will itself return to the ground and the dust. But the spirit in each of us will live, and will - if we have prepared it properly - seek to return to the God who created us and our spirits. Therefore he says one more time that everything in this world is "meaningless", or insubstantial, or temporary*.

* See the notes to Lesson One for more details on the meaning of the word that is translated "meaningless" or "vanity" in most English-language Bible versions.

Questions For Discussion or Study: Why is it so much better for us to remember God and turn to him while we are still young? Why doesn't every young person then turn to God? What about those who are no longer young, and who have never sought God? Is it too late? Is it harder? Why does the Teacher give such graphic descriptions of aging and death? What lessons are we meant to get from them? Of what significance is his statement that "the spirit returns to God"?

The Conclusion of the Matter (Ecclesiastes 12:9-14)

These verses are in the nature of a closing exhortation, rather than a continuation of the book's main line of thought*. The Teacher returns briefly to his own experience, exhorting us to consider what he has said, and to weigh carefully all that we hear or read. How right he is in referring to the vast number of books and experts in this world, and how wise he is to call us to hold all of them up to God's truth, for ultimately God alone determines truth.

* In fact, some commentators believe that 12:9-14 is an epilogue that was written and added to the book by a different, later author. They base this conclusion on the wording and style of the verses, as compared with the rest of the book - so this theory is really just a speculation, but you may find it in commentaries on Ecclesiastes.

These closing verses describe the Teacher and his diligent efforts to search for the right words to explain what he wanted to pass on to us (12:9-12a). Indeed, Ecclesiastes uses many vivid phrases to express some deep and sometimes difficult concepts. The Teacher also collected and wrote numerous proverbs* in the course of his many studies. Between his studies and his personal experience, he has many upright and true lessons for us. Yet the mere fact that a teaching is wise and important is in itself not enough to convince everyone to heed it. Therefore the book concludes with another strong exhortation to heed the Teacher's message.

* Many of Solomon's proverbs are, of course, collected in the book of Proverbs. The reference to proverbs here in verse 9 probably refers both to these and to many other proverbs that are not included in the inspired writings of the Old Testament.

In fact, the words of the spiritually wise can be rather unsettling to the flesh, and they can seem like goads, as verse 11 implies. Such sayings can also feel like "firmly imbedded nails". By this, he means that when we know in our hearts that a teaching is true, it can be hard or impossible to put it out of our minds, even if we don't want to believe it or think about it. Except for those who have completely hardened their hearts and seared their consciences, spiritual teachings ring true somewhere inside, even for those who do not want to accept them. Note also that we are cautioned not only against rejecting spiritual wisdom, but also against adding to it. The desire to add our own opinions to those of God can be just as much of a danger as the desire simply to ignore God's Word.

For God is the source of truth (12:12b-14). How true verse 12 is in describing the world's capacity for making many books, yet only a fraction of them have real spiritual value, and none matches the wisdom and authority of the Scriptures. Other books can indeed be quite helpful, even spiritually, if used properly, but they are not substitutes for God's own Word.

In conclusion, we are told that "the whole duty of man" is to fear God and keep his commandments. Indeed, we were created to seek, know, and serve God. What we have seen throughout the book of Ecclesiastes is that those who live like this will find the kind of security and peace that eludes those who choose to live instead for themselves. This does not mean that our lives will be free from trial - far from it. Instead, it means that the faithful will find spiritual fruit in their lives that will sustain them even through the worst of times under the sun. God does not make up arbitrary rules. Rather, since God made us, he knows what is truly good for us. In his great patience, he allows us to choose whether or not to seek him.

Yet it is certain that one day we shall go before God for judgment, along with everyone else who has ever lived. God knows all things, and so everything will be brought into the light. We can deceive the rest of the world, and even ourselves, but not God. Nor should we want to deceive him. While he does not always give us what we ask for, he always gives us what we need, and he always loves us. After years of hard experience, and much careful consideration, the Teacher has returned to the conclusion that he really knew in his heart to be true all along. He has shared his honest, wise thoughts with us in the book of Ecclesiastes, in the hope that we will take his message to heart and benefit from it spiritually.

Questions For Discussion or Study: Why do verses 9-11 emphasize the effort to which the Teacher went to share his thoughts with us? How are we meant to respond to this? In what ways are the words of the spiritually wise like goads or nails? Does this mean that they can harm us? Is there a way to make them less "painful"? What does it mean to "fear God and keep his commandments"? When we are aware of the reality and certainty of God's judgment, how will it influence our thoughts and actions?

- *Mark W. Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, November 2004*

©2004 by Mark Garner - Congregations and individuals may make or print copies of these notes for home, class, or small group study, without further permission, provided that the author and congregation are credited. Any other use requires the permission of the author.