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Ecclesiastes 5- 7



Ecclesiastes - Steve Gregg

In his teachings on Ecclesiastes 5-7, Steve Gregg emphasizes the importance of making reliable and honest commitments, rather than vague or unrealistic ones. He warns against the love of money, which can never fully satisfy and lead to ruin, and encourages giving generously and enjoying life's blessings in the present. Gregg offers a sobering reminder of the brevity of life and the need for humility and accountability, including following God's laws and avoiding the destructive influence of seductive temptation.

Transcript

We're going to take up our study in Ecclesiastes again, this time at chapter five. In the opening portion of Ecclesiastes 5, we actually have some advice that is reliable and good. From time to time, Solomon gives good advice in Ecclesiastes, other times he's just being pessimistic.

And that's because, of course, in Ecclesiastes, Solomon is telling us how he thought at one time, when he was trying to consider things as they are under the sun, and restricted to matters under the sun, that is not including God, not including heavenly realities. But he was not ever an atheist. Even when he worshipped other gods, he still had a measure of piety, it was simply a compromised kind of piety that did not allow him to really reach the heights of what his wisdom would have permitted him to attain if he had remained faithful to God.

Because as he points out in the book of Proverbs, the fear of Yahweh is the beginning of wisdom. And unfortunately, at a certain point in Solomon's life, he did not adequately fear Yahweh, and he did not, therefore, have a full grasp on what's right and what's wrong. Nonetheless, he was aware that there was a God, and throughout the book of Ecclesiastes, he mentions God, though he never mentions Yahweh.

He never uses the covenantal name of God, he only uses the generic term for God. Even gods, because Elohim is the term that he uses, and in Hebrew, Elohim, depending on context, can be translated God or gods, it's that generic. But he certainly has God, some God, probably Yahweh God in mind at the beginning of chapter five.

And here he's talking about the taking of oaths. This was often done at the temple. When people would come to the temple to worship, they would sometimes make vows to God.

A vow was essentially just a promise, but it was a very solemn promise. It was something that you were somehow trying to express appreciation to God, or get God's attention, maybe even impress God with something you would do for him. Sometimes it would be in exchange for something he would do for you, as in the case of Jephthah making the vow, God, if you will deliver the Ammonites into my hands, then I will offer to you the first thing that comes out of my house.

Or Hannah saying, Lord, if you give me a son, then I will give him to you. This is an example of a vow. Hannah made that vow at the tabernacle while she was worshiping, though Jephthah made his out on the battlefield, apparently.

But the point is that people would sometimes make vows to God, promise to do things for God, sometimes in exchange for God doing something for them, and sometimes just to show their piety or their gratitude to God. They would promise to do a certain thing. Now, taking a vow would generally be done in the name of God, in the name of Yahweh.

And in the law, God had said that Israel should take their vows in the name of Yahweh. That would be as opposed to taking them in the names of other gods. However, the Jews, as time progressed, became squeamish about overmuch use of the name of Yahweh.

And so they would use other terms like heaven, swear by heaven. And sometimes they would even modify that. They'd swear by earth or by Jerusalem or by this mountain or something.

Whatever it was, the important thing was that what they swore by was something they regarded to be greater than themselves, something more trustworthy, something more permanent, something whose honor no one would wisely wish to impugn. Because when someone vowed by something or someone else, they were invoking the virtue of that something else. And for instance, if you said I swear by Yahweh that I will do such and such a thing, what you're saying is if I fail to do this, may Yahweh himself, his own honor, be compromised.

Now, the assumption is no one would swear by Yahweh with the intention of compromising his honor. In fact, they would, for fear of compromising the honor of the one by whom they swore, they would certainly never violate their vow. And even impious people like Herod, who took an oath that he would give to Herodias' daughter anything she asked, as she danced for him, when she asked for the head of John the Baptist on a charger, it said it grieved him.

He didn't want to do that, but it said because of the oath, because those who sat by, he had to fulfill it. When a person takes an oath, they have to keep it. Now, in the days of

Jesus, the rabbis had come up with a lot of substitution words for God, and lots of alternative ways to swear.

And they had decided that certain oaths, invoking certain objects that they'd swear by, would be not binding, and some would be binding. For example, in Matthew 23, Jesus points out that the Pharisees said, if you swear by the temple, it doesn't count, but if you swear by the gold of the temple, then you're bound by your oath. And they said, if you swear by the altar, it's not binding, but if you swear by the gift on the altar, it is binding.

And they began to swear by things like Jerusalem, or heaven, or earth, or the altar, or the gift on the altar, or whatever, and the legal experts had decided that certain oaths, which perhaps only they knew the total number, were not really binding. The average person wouldn't know that. And that way, if they wished to be deceptive, they could make a deal with somebody, say, I swear by the altar that I will pay you on such and such a day, just give me the product today.

Well, the person would give it to them on the assumption that they'd made an oath, and then when it came time to collect it, oh, you didn't check it out, I didn't swear by the gold on the altar, or the gift on the altar. I only swore by the altar, if you check the books, that's really not a binding oath. In other words, they would deceive people by taking oaths that they themselves had decided were not binding, and that's why Jesus said, don't use any oaths.

Now, he wasn't saying that oaths are wrong in themselves. And there are actually oaths in the New Testament that Paul takes, and that even Jesus, a lot of stuff, he put under oath on trial. But when he said, don't swear at all, what he meant was not that it's wrong to swear, but it should be absolutely unnecessary, because whatever you say should be as binding to you, binding upon your conscience and your integrity as if you had sworn by God himself.

You should just be so honest that you consider yourself a person of your word, and no oath, whether it's on the books as a binding oath or an unbinding oath, would make any difference, because you will do what you say with or without an oath. And Jesus, when he said, don't swear at all, he's not saying swearing is a bad thing. He's saying swearing is an unnecessary thing to an honest person.

And Pharisees had turned the whole system of taking oaths into another way of deceiving people, because they alone knew which oaths were not really binding, and therefore they could fool people. And so Jesus said, don't swear at all, neither by heaven, for that's God's throne, nor by earth, for that's his footstool, nor by Jerusalem, for that's the city of the great king. But just let your yes be yes, and your no be no.

And what he's saying is, if you swear by heaven, or earth, or by Jerusalem, and think that by doing so, you're not really swearing by God, you're mistaken. God is involved with

everything. Heaven is his throne, earth's his footstool, Jerusalem's his city.

Whatever you swear by, it belongs to God, and therefore you're invoking God in a sense. And you should be as bound by any oath as by any other. He says, don't even swear by your own head.

You can't change your hair white or black. You can, of course, now, but they couldn't back then, I guess. And so, oaths are not a bad thing, but they had come to be used as another form of deceiving people in the days of Jesus.

In the Old Testament, oaths are always treated as a good thing. It's a way of showing that you really intend to do what you say, and you're willing to put the honor of God himself on the block if you swear by God, or the honor of whatever you swear by. It says in Hebrews, chapter six, that the oath is always sworn in the name of the superior, something superior to oneself.

And it says in Hebrews that, therefore, since God couldn't swear by anyone greater than himself, since none is greater, he swore by himself when he made his oath to Abraham, saying, by myself I have sworn that in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply you. That's Hebrews six, verse 13. For when God made a promise to Abraham, because he could swear by no one greater, he swore by himself.

And so, even God swears, oaths, but there's no one greater than himself he could swear by, so he just swears by himself. In a sense, every word we speak, every commitment we make, every affirmation we utter should be, in a sense, swearing by myself, in a sense. That is to say, my own honor is at stake here, and my own honor matters to me, my integrity before God.

Now, it's that subject that Solomon is discussing in chapter five of Ecclesiastes, where he says, walk prudently when you go into the house of God, and draw near to hear, rather than to give the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they do evil. Now, what's he referring to here? He says, do not be rash with your mouth, and let not your heart utter anything hastily before God, for God is in heaven and you on earth. Therefore, let your words be few, for a dream comes through much activity, and a fool's voice is known by his many words.

When you make a vow to God, do not delay to pay it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you have vowed. It is better not to vow than to vow and not pay.

Do not let your mouth cause your flesh to sin, nor say before the messenger of God that it was an error. Why should God be angry at your excuse and destroy the works of your hands? For in the multitude of dreams and many words, there is also vanity, but fear God. So here we have Solomon giving some, actually, some pious counsel.

Even an unbeliever, which he was not, strictly speaking, an unbeliever, but even a

backslider often knows enough about some things that they would fear God. Even if they're not living their lives to please God in every respect, they often know that the fear of God is the right way to go. And when Solomon wrote this, of course, he had come to that conclusion, which we see in chapter 12.

What's the conclusion? Fear God. That's what he says here. It may be that this little bit of instructions is something he's given in view of, as he reflects upon, some hasty and foolish vows that he made and did not keep, or found it painful to keep.

Remember Psalm 15 says, "The person who will stand and abide with God "in his holy hill is one who,' among other characteristics that are given, "swears to his own hurt and does not change." That's Psalm 15 in verse four, where the first verse of that psalm says, "Lord, who may abide in your tabernacle, "who may dwell in your holy hill?' And he gives a long list of virtues that must be in place in a person's life if they wish to dwell in the presence of God. And at the end of verse four, he says, "He who swears to his own hurt." That means he takes a vow, but it ends up being a painful vow, painful to keep, like Jephthah's vow is painful to keep. And many vows may end up being painful to keep because you make a promise when you're feeling very pious and enthusiastic, and then when it comes time to pay up, then you find out, ooh, that's costly.

I almost wish I hadn't vowed that thing. But you do it anyway. You swore to your own hurt, but you don't change.

You don't try to get out of it. And that's what Ecclesiastes 5 is saying. If you've sworn, if you made a vow to the Lord, then you better keep the vow.

It's better not to make a vow in the first place than to vow and not keep it, because if you don't make a vow, you've violated nothing. There's no command of God to give vows. That's something people would do voluntarily.

But if you do take a vow, then there is an obligation to keep it, and it's better not to have made one in the first place. And that's what he says in those first three verses. "Don't be hasty, don't be rash with your mouth.

"When you come to the house of God, "don't get all out of touch with reality "so you start making promises "that you will not really want to keep. "Don't hastily say, "Oh, I'm feeling so spiritual here in the house of God. "God, I'm never going to drink coffee again.

"I vowed to never drink coffee again.' Well, I may feel like making that vow when I'm feeling in the spirit, but when I'm waking up the next morning, I may think, oh, did I make that promise? I've had people come to me who, when they were young Christians, they made foolish vows, and now they've become mature Christians, realize the vows were foolish, and they ask, well, can we break them? Boy, that's a hard question to

answer because breaking your vow is not okay. On the other hand, keeping certain vows may be really stupid and wrong-headed, too. Obviously, if you vowed something and then later realized that keeping that vow would be a sin, then I guess you just have to break your vow and repent of having made and broken a vow.

I mean, you can't keep a vow that's a sin to keep. A vow that was just stupid and not sinful, it might please God for you to keep it just as a show of your determination to keep your integrity. Obviously, the main vow that almost everyone in our society now makes are wedding vows.

Not everyone gets married, but certainly a majority of people do, and there aren't many vows that we make anymore. We seal our contracts with a written signature now. In an earlier generation in our country, they might have done it with a handshake.

In biblical times, they did it by taking a vow. That's how you determine that you're committed. We don't make those kind of commitments verbally without a signature, usually, anymore, because people are not honest, and we need to have something we can take to the courts if they violate their promises.

But marriage still involves vows, unlike most other things in our present society. It's sort of a throwback to earlier times when solemn commitments were made with a vow. And so in a Christian civilization, generally speaking, we have, especially in Christian marriages, vows are made in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Now, this is swearing by God. I swear it, you know, I pledge, I promise to do these things. I do it in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

And usually that's stated while the ring is being put on. The pledge is made, a covenant is struck, and it sometimes is a foolish one. But the righteous person, though they have sworn to their own hurt, does not change.

There's only extremely rare situations in which a person can really be legitimately freed from that foolish kind of a covenant. Obviously, Jesus gave one example, would be if the person you covenant to shatters the covenant himself or herself. They go out and commit adultery and violate the covenant.

Then there's, you know, the innocent party's in a position to decide, do I want to try to reenact this, reestablish what has been broken, or do I just take my out? Because there is an out, it looks like, from what Jesus said there. But don't make vows hastily, Psalms says. He says, there's a God in heaven, you're on earth, God's in heaven, so let your words be few.

He means make very few vows. Don't get all profuse in your profession of piety so that you're making all kinds of promises to God, extravagant commitments, and then when you go home, you realize, wow, that was really dumb. You know, I don't know if I can do

that.

I don't know if I can afford that. Well, then you should have watched your mouth. When you come to the house of God, make sure your words are few.

Realize that God is in heaven. He's got control of everything. If you don't, you're only an earthly person.

You can't really promise certain things because you can't always fulfill them. So don't promise much. Now, it doesn't mean that it's wrong to make promises, it just means that you better be careful about making promises, because if you do, you've got to keep them.

When you make a vow to God, do not delay to pay it. He has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vowed.

Don't let your mouth cause your flesh to sin. That is, by promising to do something which you cannot perform, your mouth has caused you to sin. That's what he's talking about.

He several times makes reference to dreams here. He said that in verse three, for a dream comes through much activity. And also he says in verse seven, for in the multitude of dreams and many words, there's also vanity.

I don't know exactly how the word dream is being used here. We use the word dream sort of figuratively sometimes. Oh, you're just dreaming.

You're not realistic. And I don't know if they use that term in biblical times that way or not. I don't know if he's thinking about it.

You're just making unrealistic promises. You're dreaming. I have no idea if that's what he means by that.

The word dream in this context is not necessarily an easy one to sort out. Now, verse eight, if you see oppression of the poor and the violent perversion of justice and righteousness in a province, do not marvel at the matter. For high official watches over high official and higher officials are over them.

Moreover, the profit of the land is for all. The king himself is served from the field. Now, I have to say it's not entirely clear what he's saying here.

He says don't marvel. If you see oppression of the poor, if you see perversion of justice in the courts, don't be surprised. He says because, well, maybe he's saying because these people are not living their lives consciously in an accountability to God.

They're just accountability to other officials like themselves, equally corrupt. That a high official is watching over another high official, but none of them are God and none of

them are uncorruptible. And all of them will turn blind eye to their subordinates when they take bribes since they themselves take bribes.

That might be how he's understanding it. Don't be surprised. The whole system is secular.

The whole system is lived out without reverence for God or a sense of being accountable to God. They just have an internal accountability system. And of course, if they're only answerable to other high officials like themselves, that means they're answerable to other corrupt people like themselves.

Much better to be answerable to God than you won't be corrupt. And he says in verse 10, he who loves silver will not be satisfied with silver, nor he who loves abundance with increase. This also is vanity, another empty thing.

You want to increase, you want silver and gold. Of course, people long for that. It always seems like if there's just a little more of that, then we'd be secure against unforeseen future disasters, and we could have a much more comfortable existence in the meantime.

And so most people think that'd be very satisfying to have more silver and more stuff. And he says not so. There's no satisfaction in that, he said.

It's emptiness. When goods increase, they increase who eat them. So what profit have the owners except to see them with their eyes as they go on out? You know, you get rich, suddenly all the relatives show up.

This certainly has proven to be true for many people when they have such a windfall as for example, winning the lottery. Many people who've won the lottery through their whole lives and their relationships, because of course, if you have a cousin who just won \$30 million and you have a hard time paying your mortgage payment, obviously your cousin is gonna help you out along with all the other relatives that are lined up at his door. And so you increase your goods.

If people know you've got them, they'll come after them. I just heard a story last week about a fairly well-to-do couple in Colorado who are apparently the rich people of their family. And a second cousin or someone like that came over from England and allowed them to pay their way to tour around and they used their car and their hospitality and their money of the relative and didn't even thank them afterwards.

They just figured, well, this is our rich relative. Of course, you know, we spread the wealth around in this family. It was a distant cousin, but they just figured, well, these friends of ours in Colorado, they got money.

And so, of course, what's money for? What are relatives with money for? They're to help

you out. And so when you get more money, the relatives and others, the church knows you've got money and they hit you up for stuff. And so there really is never an abundance of money.

No matter how much you have, there'll be plenty of people around to help you consume. So you don't really get to profit from your increase. You just get to watch it go, watch it go up.

What profit have the owners except to see them with their eyes? When the sleep of a laboring man is sweet, whether he eats little or much, but the abundance of the rich will not permit him to sleep. And Solomon would know this because he was the richest man around. He would be speaking for experience.

He knows there are men who actually earn their money in an honest labor, and they may or may not eat a lot. They may be wealthy and eat well. They may be not so wealthy and eat meagerly, but they work.

They don't live in insecurity. They've got a job. They have income and they have a good conscience about it.

And since they're a laborer, they're probably not independently wealthy. And therefore, they're not so much the target of thieves and other con artists and so forth who wanna take their riches from them because they may not have riches. Whereas the rich man, he's always got people after his money.

He can't sleep well. And there may be other reasons he can't sleep well. I think the suggestion is that he can't sleep well because of how many people are after his money.

He's gotta keep one eye open all the time to see who's got their hand out to try to get their hands on it. But also many times a rich person has not gotten their money entirely honestly, they don't sleep well because they don't have a clear conscience. Or because they know that there are needy people that they're not helping and could and should.

And their conscience is not as clear as it could be. There's many things that may make a rich person not sleep well. But a man who's worked a hard day and has earned his keep, he's got a clear conscience.

He's secure because he's got a job. He's tired at night because he's worked. He sleeps well.

So it's all of it. There is a severe evil which I have seen under the sun. Riches kept for their owner to his own hurt.

A man who has riches but it's to his disadvantage to have them rather than his advantage. But those riches perish through misfortune. When he begets a son, there's

nothing in his hand.

As he came from his mother's womb, naked shall he return. As Job also said, when Job lost everything, he had been rich and he lost everything. He said, naked I came from my mother's womb.

Naked shall I return. Solomon is apparently quoting Job here. To go as he came and he shall take nothing from his labor which he may carry away in his hand.

Paul said the same thing, of course, in 1 Timothy 6, 7. He said, we brought nothing into this world and surely we will take nothing out when we go. So we see some parallels here with other things, Job 1, 21, 1 Timothy 6, 7 and so forth. The same thoughts, observations that God gives and God takes away.

You arrive with nothing, you leave and take nothing with you. So what's the point of gathering it in the in-between time? Well, of course, the real point is, and maybe Solomon didn't have enough virtue to understand or practice this and find this out. The real point is it's great to gather a lot because then you can help other people who don't have a lot and that's the real value of money.

It says in 1 Timothy 6 that God richly gives us all things to enjoy. But Jesus says it's more blessed to give than receive. So God gives us all things richly to enjoy and the best way to enjoy them is to give them to people who don't have enough.

There's nothing more blessed than giving. Certainly more blessed or happy to give than it is to receive. Now you might say, well, I actually enjoy receiving.

Well, then just think how much you'd enjoy giving. Because Jesus says it's a happier thing to give than to receive. It is enjoyable to receive.

We do like it when we get paid at the end of the week or when we receive gifts and unexpected windfalls. It's fun to receive, but it's even more fun, more enjoyable, more blessed to give. And so there is much to be said about earning a lot if you can, if that's what God calls you to do.

If God has you involved in a calling which brings in lots of finances, happier you, at least potentially, happier you. Solomon was rich, but he wasn't happy because he apparently didn't know what Jesus knew. And that is that if you give, it's more blessed.

You'll be happier. Solomon collected and he didn't give much. And so all he could see was I got here naked, I leave naked, I don't take anything with me when I go.

What was it worth having it? Well, something could have been done with it. He just didn't do what he should have done with it. Remember the story Jesus told with the rich man whose fields produced so much that he didn't know what to do with it all? He said, I've

got so much grain here, I don't know what to do with it.

What shall I do? I've got more than I can store in my granaries. And he asked the question, what shall I do? And then he says, I know what I'll do. I'll tear down my present granaries and build bigger granaries and fill them up.

And then I'll say to my soul, soul, take your ease. You have much laid up for many years. Eat, drink, and be merry.

Well, when he asked, what shall I do? I have a surplus. There was a right answer, but he didn't come up with the right answer. The answer he came up with was, well, I'll just increase my capacity to store it.

No, there's better things to do with it. You've got a surplus. There's someone out there who has something they need.

In fact, in all likelihood, God has given you a surplus because he knows of somebody who needs it and he wants you to have the blessing of giving it. And so Solomon apparently didn't ever discover that. So his riches were not a blessing to him.

His riches were just vanity to him. Verse 16, and this also is a severe evil that just exactly as he came, so shall he go. Again, without goods, without even clothes on him.

And what profit has he who has labored for the wind all his days? He also eats in darkness and he has much sorrow and sickness and anger. He eats his food in what he calls darkness. Almost certainly he's talking about inward darkness because he also refers to sorrow and sickness and anger.

Inward experiences that are not positive. Yet he's rich and he's eating a lush, lavish meal, I should say. And yet it's not enjoyable to him.

Here's what I've seen. It is a good and fitting thing for one to eat and drink and to enjoy the good of all his labor in which he toils under the sun all the days of his life which God gives him for it is his heritage. This is his continual refrain in this book.

He keeps saying, what sense is there in life? And he keeps saying, I guess the best thing is just to enjoy yourself. Just enjoy the food and the drink you've got and whatever you've been able to earn, just try to get some kind of enjoyment out of it because that's all you've got. And yet all the way through, he keeps coming back to this though he is in between saying, it really isn't satisfying.

Even that. What profit is there in the labor that a man does? He earns goods and then other people come and consume them. Even when he's eating them, he's mindful of the fact that they are transient.

They're like wind. And even as he eats his food, he's in darkness and sorrow and anger

and sickness. So almost his conclusion in verse 18, it seems nonsensical compared to what he's been saying, but that's just it.

Life under the sun doesn't make sense. You ask a person why they go to work, they say, so I can earn money. Well, what do you want money for? Well, I have to eat and feed my family.

Well, what do you want to eat for? So I can survive. What do you want to survive for? So I can go back to work and make some more money and eat some more and survive. It's a cycle that doesn't have anything that rises higher than just perpetuation of a meaningless cycle.

As long as you're confining your thoughts to those things that only reach as high as the clouds under the sun. As for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth and given him power to eat it, to receive his heritage and rejoice in his labor, this is the gift of God. For he will not dwell unduly on the days of his life because God keeps him busy with the joy of his heart.

In other words, enjoy your work and enjoy the stuff and distract yourself from thoughts about meaning. Try to just keep your thoughts off the deeper questions of life so you can be happy. You start getting, if you dwell unduly on the days of life and these reflections of how short your days are and how meaningless everything is, you're not gonna enjoy yourself.

So don't dwell too much on those things. Try not to think about that much. Now Solomon was not able to take his own advice here because his mind was too active and too inquisitive.

He couldn't help but think about those things and that's why he found it to be so vexatious and like striving after the wind. Chapter six, there's an evil which I've seen under the sun and it is common among men. A man to whom God has given riches and wealth and honor so that he lacks nothing for himself of all he desires, like maybe himself.

Yet God does not give him power to eat of it, but a foreigner consumes it. This is emptiness and it is an evil affliction. If a man begets a hundred children and lives many years so that the days of his years are many, but his soul is not satisfied with goodness, or indeed he has no burial, I say that a stillborn child is better than he.

Now there are people who get rich but other people take it from them. Foreigners even break in and invade the country and take your wealth. This happened many times in Israel, that they'd grow crops and the enemy would come in and seize their crops and take their stuff.

He says that's, what a drag that is. That's vanity, that's an evil affliction. Even if you

have a hundred kids to leave your stuff to, and it is desirable, he feels, to have a hundred children, he thinks that's really quite a good thing and you live many years, those are good things, but your soul is not satisfied with goodness.

And there is such a thing as having some blessings but still having no satisfaction. And he even talks about a person who has no burial. Now that's an unusual case.

I mean, Jezebel would be an example, that her body was eaten by dogs. She was a queen, she was rich, but she came to an ignominious end without dignity, and a person who does not have a burial is somebody who's remembered scornfully. People will give a decent burial to anyone they respect.

The person who's denied a decent burial is someone that is held in contempt and scorn by those who survive them and won't even bury them. So then he's saying, you might live a while and have a lot of children, but you might have no one who even cares about you enough to bury you, and though you have lived with a measure of indulgence, yet, what good is it if you're not remembered well and don't have a dignified end? For it comes in vanity and departs in darkness, and its name is covered with darkness. Not sure exactly how to understand that.

Though it has not seen the son, he's talking about the child that was never, the stillborn child, that's what he's talking about here. He says it, I would have expected it to be he, but for the child comes in vanity, it departs in darkness, that's a stillborn child. They arrive, but they don't ever see the light of day.

They come and go in darkness. Its name is covered with darkness, not remembered. Though it has not seen the son or known anything, this has more rest than that man, even if he lives a thousand years twice over, but has not seen goodness.

Do not all go to one place? Now, has not seen goodness, he's mentioned that twice. In verse three, his soul is not satisfied with goodness, and he has not seen goodness. In verse six, probably goodness is not here talking about moral goodness or virtue.

He's probably talking about a good life, good circumstances. The words evil and good are used often in the Old Testament to mean desirable and undesirable circumstances. Evil, when Job said, shall we receive only the good things from the Lord and not the evil things? He meant, shall we only receive the desirable things? Good being desirable rather than virtuous.

And we said, and not receive the evil things? He doesn't mean morally evil, he means undesirable things. Shall we only accept the blessings and not accept the disasters and the calamities? This is what he's saying. Evil and good in the Old Testament often are used in that sense.

Additional to times when it means something, reflecting on moral good and moral evil.

But the words have that flexibility in the Old Testament. Here he says, if you haven't seen goodness, he probably means if you haven't seen blessings in your life, not necessarily that you haven't been a good person.

Don't all go to one place? Well, no, they probably don't, but he didn't know any better than to think this way. Verse seven, all the labor of man is for his mouth, that is to eat, and yet his soul is not satisfied. For what more has the wise man than the fool? What does the poor man have? Who knows how to walk before the living? Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the desire.

That's sort of like a bird in the hand is better than two in the bush. What you can see, what you can lay your hand on right now, what's right now in your presence is a better thing than what you dream about and your desires fantasize about obtaining. Yeah, enjoy what you've got now.

Don't put a lot of hopes in your fantasies and your wandering desires. Just what you can see right now with your eyes is what you've got. He says, this also is emptiness and grasping for the wind.

Whatever one is, he has been named already, for it is known that he is man and he cannot contend with him who is mightier than he. Since there are many things that increase vanity, how is a man the better? I must confess there's much about verse 10 that I can't sort out and will not labor to sort out at this time. Verse 12, for who knows what is good for a man in life? All the days of his vain life, which passes like a shadow.

Who can tell a man what will happen after him and to his son? That is the thing that vexed him. I know what I'm doing today, maybe what I'm doing tomorrow, but what's gonna happen after I'm gone? And that is something that really gives texture and color and enjoyment or lack thereof to almost all of our present activities. How, what is the long-term impact of my life? I mean, I can enjoy the moment, but once the enjoyment is over, and it always is at some point, I mean, enjoyment in life comes in cycles.

It waxes and it wanes. You enjoy some experiences, not others. At those times when you're at the peak of enjoyment of a certain thing, that itself can be tainted and drained of its pleasure by reflections on, well, what is the long-term impact of what's going on right now in my life? Some people just, in order to enjoy the moment, have to just not think very far ahead.

But of course, if you're living your life seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, you'll enjoy all these other things too, because you know that the impact of your life is, after you're gone, you'll be remembered, by the godly anyway, as a godly person. You'll be respected. Your name will be remembered well.

And what you have done will continue to have ongoing impact in the world and perhaps

in eternity, on other people's lives. That is satisfying. That's a lot more satisfying than partying, at least to those who are reflective about such things.

Now, chapter seven, a good name is better than precious ointment. And the day of death is better than the day of one's birth. Those are two strange things to put together.

But I guess the idea is, if you die with a good name, then all is well. The day you're born, you've got a lot of testing. You've got a lot of sorrows, a lot of work cut out for you.

When you're born, you've got a long life of labor, toil. Much of it might end up being done foolishly. It might be fruitless, lots of trials and sufferings.

The day of birth is actually a day where you can look forward to trouble. The death of a person who has a good name is at least a positive thing. And Solomon may not have known where the dead go when they die, but he knew that at least when you die, you're not gonna go through all these trials anymore.

And if you've got a good name, it will linger beyond you. You'll sort of have, you'll be immortalized in the memory of people. And to die in that condition is better than it was to be born and have all those choices and challenges before you.

It is better to go into the house of mourning, he means a funeral, than to the house of feasting, he means a party. Better to go to a funeral than a party. For that is the end of all men.

What is? Funerals are. Death is. Everyone's gonna die.

You'd be wise to spend time at funerals rather than times at parties. It keeps things real. That is the end of all men.

And the living will take it to heart. That is, the living people who attend a funeral, that's when they think for a moment about mortality. Most of the time, they're not thinking about mortality, but when you're driving down the road and you see what was clearly a fatal accident that somebody's been in, you don't even know who they were, suddenly you become, you think, wow, what was he doing 10 minutes before that accident? What was he thinking? Was he thinking the same things I'm thinking? You know what I mean? Was he as oblivious as I am at this moment to the thought that death may be one second away? When you see death, it puts you in touch with reality that you really ought to stay in touch with.

William Law, a Puritan writer, wrote a book called A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life in which his chapters were very challenging and then he punctuated them with stories of made-up characters that illustrated his point. One of which was a fairly wealthy businessman who died young. He had, I think, a year of warning that he was going to die and he was on his deathbed and his friends came and they were sad for him because he

was dying and so forth and he gave this little speech.

It's a very inspiring speech. It's, of course, put into a man's mouth by William Law himself. It's not a true speech, but it's instructive.

It's what a wise man, wise in the world, who's made a good living, but has not paid extra special attention to being godly, might think on his deathbed. And his speech is quite moving. And basically what he says, he says, what is it about a little bit of health and the poor business of a shop that causes men to forget these eternal things? I mean, he says, you may think it's tragic that I'm dying in the flower of my youth.

But he said, but if I am to go into the presence of God and his holy angels, can anyone be sorry that this happened to me before I made a few more deals at my shop? Or if I'm to go be dragged into hell in the presence of the demons and tortured there forever, will there be any consolation to me if this had not happened to me until I was an old man? And he says, if I had 1,000 lifetimes, I would gladly trade them all for just one more year in which to do good things that would make me face death happily. But he's basically, in his speech, he's talking about how just clueless he had been, not how bad he had been. There's no references to him being a sinful man or an impious man or an irreligious man, just a clueless man, that he'd lived his whole life without thinking about death until, of course, he was stricken with some fatal illness in the midst of his life.

And suddenly, he says, how could I have not thought about this previously? How could I have lived these years previously without these reflections that must necessarily come to a man who's facing death? And the idea, as I read it, is that this is what people should be thinking all the time, at least in the back of their minds. It should always be understood that what I'm doing today may be the last things I get to do in my life. And certainly, what I'm doing today will be something I will look back on a thousand years from now and a million years from now, and I'll either be glad or unhappy about what I did today.

Everything that we do that seems mundane and passing, really, is the passage and the usage and the stewardship of a moment that we'll never have again. And to live our life in the awareness that this could be my last day, that I am gonna die, that puts all the activities of this life into a perspective that we need to have because that is reality. And Solomon's not wrong.

He says, it's better to go to a funeral than a party because a funeral will cause you to take it to heart that this is what happens to everybody. Sorrow is better than laughter for by a sad countenance, the heart is made better. You see, a godly sorrow leads to repentance, Paul said.

A sad countenance can be a reflection of movement in a better direction in your heart. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of

mirth. The people who frequent parties are fools.

The people who frequent funerals are at least in their thoughts frequent funerals. In their thoughts, they're frequenting the reality that people they know, who are younger than they were, have died and are now gone. They're finished, their story's over here.

And they didn't expect that any more than I expect that. I don't expect to die today. I'm already making plans for the weekend.

But there are people who are today making plans for the weekend who won't reach there. And they are no better than I am or worse than I am. They're just people like me who will be in accidents or they'll have heart attacks or they'll be victims of violent crime or of terrorism or something.

They don't know they're gonna die today. They've got the same plans for the future I have for my future, but they have no future. And maybe I'm one of them.

Could be me as much as them. And so the wise person contemplates these things, he says. The fool just goes and distracts himself from those kinds of thoughts.

They're depressing. But sorrow is better than laughter if it causes you to take stock of important things and adjust your life accordingly. It's better to hear the rebuke of the wise than for a man to hear the song of fools.

For like the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of a fool. This also is emptiness. When a fool is laughing, it's because he's not paying attention to life.

He's a fool. If he's a fool, he's not ready to die. If he's a fool, he's not walking with God.

If he's a fool, he's pursuing shallow and foolish things. And yet he's enjoying himself. He's laughing.

Today, remember Jesus said, "Woe to you who laugh now. "You shall mourn and weep." In Luke chapter six, in the beatitudes he gave there, in the woes. He says, the laughter of fools like the crackling of thorns under a pot.

Well, those thorns are on fire. The thorns are but gathered to be fuel for the fire to cook something in a pot. And as the thorns are burning, they're crackling.

They're making a cheerful little crackling sound as they are burned up. That's what a laughter of a fool like. It's a cheerful sound.

And he's making it as he is being destroyed. That's also emptiness. Surely oppression destroys a wise man's reason and a bribe debases the heart.

The end of the thing is better than its beginning. And the patient in spirit is better than

the proud in spirit. Now, the end of the thing is better than its beginning could have any number of meanings and applications.

I'm not sure how he means it here, but it may be simply that at the end of the thing, you can give it as fair appraisal. It's like, you know, Ahab said when he was attacked by the Syrian King Ben-Hadad. And King Ben-Hadad said, "'I'm not gonna leave enough dust of Samaria "even for my soldiers to have a handful eat.'" And Ahab said, "'It's better, let not the one who is putting on his armor "'boast as if he's taken it off.'" That is, don't count your chickens before they're hatched.

It's better to appraise things from their finish line and looking back than at the beginning to try to figure out and guess what's gonna happen. "'Do not hasten in your spirit to be angry, "'for anger rests in the bosom of fools. "'Do not say, why were the former days better than these? "'For you do not inquire wisely concerning this.

"'Why were the former days better than these?' Now, I think what he's saying is don't spend your time reminiscing about things in the past that can't be returned. There are times when we should ask, why were the days in the past better than these? Oh, we made a wrong turn here. It was better before we made that wrong turn.

Maybe we should retrace our steps and go back and do what we were doing when things were better because we caused them to be less good by our choices. Sometimes our youth was a better time because we were doing better things, making wiser choices. And since then, we've done some stupid or bad things.

And now we say, how come the former times were better than these? Well, that might be a good thing to ask sometimes. However, what he's thinking of probably is that there are things in the past that, I mean, life just happened as it did. And you can look back to earlier days.

And on your deathbed, the last word you can think of is rosebud, you know, because there was an earlier, simpler, more innocent time that you wish you could recover, but you can't. And sometimes we even look back on our childhood and say, the world was a better place then. And it may have been, although it might not have been either.

After all, these are the days that people will look back on someday and say, those were the good old days. And we don't think they're that good. We think the days that were earlier were the good old days, but back then we didn't think so.

Back then, our parents were saying, no, why aren't things as they were when we were children? So much better back then. To be just reminiscing about the lost past that cannot be recovered is not fruitful. It's better to say, if the earlier days are better than these, let's make these ones better.

Let's try to improve them. That's a wiser course than to sit around and moan over how

much has been forfeited from the past. A lot of times it wasn't as good back then as we remember it in our sentimental memories.

Wisdom is good with an inheritance and profitable to those who see the sun, that's who are alive. For wisdom is a defense as money is a defense, but the excellence of knowledge is that wisdom gives life to those who have it. He says that here, though he says sort of opposite things elsewhere, because he's not always thinking consistently in this book.

Consider the work of God, for who can make straight what he has made crooked? In the day of prosperity, be joyful, but in the day of adversity, consider. Surely God has appointed the one as well as the other, so that man can find nothing that will happen after him. Now, it sounds like a little bit like Job.

God has made the prosperity times, he's also made the days of adversity, God's made both of them. But God has made this changing of situation so we can't anticipate what the future will hold, we can't really make any predictions. For that you ought to say, if the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that, James said.

You say today or tomorrow we'll go into such a city and buy and sell and stay there a year, says that's not wise, you can't think that, you don't know what tomorrow holds. God brings times of prosperity, he brings times of adversity, you never know which one's gonna be next. So you can't really anticipate or tell what will happen next.

I have seen all things in my days of vanity. There is a just man who perishes in his righteousness, and there's a wicked man who prolongs his life in his wickedness. Now that's something that in Proverbs he would have denied, but it's reality.

In Proverbs he always said, if you're righteous it'll prolong your days, if you're wicked you'll shorten your life. And that is true in a general sense in many cases. It is certainly a good rule to act upon, but it's not a guarantee, it's not a promise, it is really an observation that this is often the case.

But now he's observed more. He says, you know I've actually seen the opposite sometimes. A righteous man perishes in his righteousness, a wicked man prolongs his life in his wickedness.

Do not be overly righteous therefore, nor be overly wise, why should you destroy yourself? Why knock yourself out, being too good? Now this is not necessarily good counsel, we should be as righteous and as holy as we can be. As he who has called you is holy, even so be ye holy in all manner of behavior, Peter said, in 1 Peter chapter one verses 15 and 16. But Solomon just said, well you know, why work so hard to be righteous when I've seen righteous people die righteous? Well that's a good way to die by the way.

That's a much better way to die, is to die righteous rather than wicked. True, a wicked man may prolong his life but he still dies, and if he dies wicked he would have been a happier man to die righteous and maybe die sooner. Do not be overly wicked nor be foolish, why should you die before your time? Now that sounds almost contradictory of what he said a few verses later, earlier.

It is good that you grasp this and also not remove your hand from the other, for he who fears God will escape them all. Escape what all? I don't know, maybe extremes? Wisdom strengthens the wise more than 10 rulers of the city. In Proverbs, there's a Proverbs that says, the wise man scales the city of the mighty and overthrows the confidence of it.

A man with wisdom in other words, can defeat a person who's got nothing but strength. Physical strength is a defense but not a defense against someone who's smarter and wise. For there is not a just man on earth who does good and does not sin.

Well there actually have been some, I mean not people who've never sinned, but there are people who do good rather than sin. Job is said to have been a man who feared God and eschewed evil, a blameless man. John the Baptist's parents are described that way too.

It says that they were blameless in terms of keeping the law of Moses. They weren't people who had never committed a sin, but they lived a just life. They lived a life that was not a life of sin.

Solomon may not know anyone like that. Also do not take to heart everything that people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you. Even your servant might curse you.

If he's a lower class person and it's very insulting for someone who you think is inferior to you to be arrogating themselves over you and insulting you, eh, don't take it all to heart. Don't take everything so seriously. It may be that you'll hear things that would aggravate you, but not everything people say is worth worrying about or thinking about.

For many times also your own heart has known that even you have cursed others. So if you've cursed others, then don't be surprised others will curse you. Don't just, don't worry about it.

Don't take it to heart. All this I have proved by wisdom. I said I will be wise, but it was far from me.

As for that which is far off and exceedingly deep, who can find out? Who can find it out? I applied my heart to know, to search and seek out wisdom and the reason of things, to know the wickedness of folly and the foolishness and madness. And I find more bitter than death a woman whose heart is snares and nets, whose hands are fetters. He who pleases God shall escape from her, but the sinner shall be taken by her.

This woman, of course, is described at length in Proverbs, in a number of passages in Proverbs. She is a seductress and she leads a man to his doom. The man who fears God will escape from her.

It says in Proverbs, the man who is abhorred by God will be caught by her. The same thought in reverse. Here is what I have found, says the preacher, adding one thing to the other and finding out the reason which my soul still seeks, but I cannot find.

One man among a thousand I have found, but a woman among all these I have not found. Now, that is not really a complete thought and he leaves something important unsaid. He says, I haven't found one man among a thousand and I haven't even found one, any woman.

I found one man among a thousand, no women among a thousand. Well, wait a minute, found what among them? He doesn't say. Obviously, if you know a thousand women, you've found a thousand women.

If you know a thousand men, you've found a thousand men, but he says, I haven't found one man, or I found only one man among a thousand. One man who what? And he doesn't answer. I mean, he doesn't give that information.

It's possible that he means a good man, a trustworthy man, maybe a wise man. Whatever it is, he says, what I'm looking for in people I don't find very often. Maybe one man in a thousand, I don't think I've found in a woman yet.

And he'd have a thousand women. He'd have 700 wives and 300 concubines. That equals a thousand.

And he says, in all these, I have not found one among all these women. Now, this is Solomon's experience. I would say that I have found more than one good man among a thousand and certainly more than one good woman in my lifetime among a thousand or more that might be acquaintances, but Solomon was not necessarily hanging out with the most righteous crowd.

He was a rich man. People were always after his money. People were always sucking up to him, trying to get advantages because he's the king.

He probably didn't have any loyal friends that he could really count on. The women even in his life were not, disappointed him. Even we must assume the Shulamite woman about which he wrote Song of Solomon had to be among those women.

And he said, I haven't found a good one yet. Or we haven't found something desirable he's looking for in people. He liked her when he was courting her and maybe when he first married her as Song of Solomon tells, but in his old age, she's more cynical about all the women apparently.

Hasn't even found one. You'd think he'd count that one if he still felt the same way about her. Truly, this is one thing I have found that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.

Now, I must confess, I don't know if they is in the masculine or feminine. It would make a difference because if it's in the masculine, it would mean God made men upright, but they men who were made upright have corrupted themselves with many schemes that they've come up with. Or if they is female, then he says, God made man upright, but those women, you know, those women have made many schemes.

He is in the context talking about women who's like snares and things like that. And he's basically saying something that there aren't any good women. I wish I knew whether they is masculine or feminine.

If I had looked it up, which is my own neglect, I could tell you. Maybe you can look it up. But anyway, he's essentially saying that God made people upright, but they have been corrupted.

Either he's saying men have corrupted themselves or women have corrupted men. But in any case, they aren't the same as they were. They were once upright, but no more.

And so to stop there,