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Ecclesiastes: Chapter-by-Chapter Commentary

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CONTENTS

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Transcript

The Book of Ecclesiastes is part of what has been called the biblical wisdom literature. Traditionally, although there is no direct identification or clear claim to have been authored by Solomon, the book has been attributed to King Solomon on the grounds of verses 1 and 12 of chapter 1. The author speaks of himself as king over Israel in Jerusalem. We know that it isn't David, and given the split in the kingdom after Solomon, the Solomon connection seems natural.

Taking into account the fact that Solomon was a king so renowned for wisdom, the idea that a book of the wisdom literature should be attributed to his authorship is far from unreasonable, especially when we consider that many of the other books are written by him. The strength of the tradition of Solomonic authorship should not be lightly dismissed. On the other hand, there are statements in the book that seem strange coming from the mouth of Solomon.

He speaks of all who were over Jerusalem before me, which, while possible for Solomon to say, Jerusalem had been a city for centuries prior, many commentators think it rather odd. However, 1 Chronicles chapter 29 verse 25 uses a very similar mode of expression about Solomon. The purpose of the speaker's self-identification as the preacher, or koheleth, should also be considered here.

Why speak of himself as Koheleth and not simply as Solomon? Koheleth is itself arguably a pseudonym. Furthermore, as we move beyond the opening chapters, the idea that the author of the book was a king seems less obvious, and a number of the book's statements would make a lot more sense on the lips of someone who wasn't. See chapter 8 verse 2 to 4 for instance.

Relatively few commentators make the identification with Solomon nowadays, and even conservative commentators largely reject it. That said, the majority of commentators believe that the author of the book was intending its hearers or readers to associate the speaker with Solomon in some manner. While we should weigh such claims extremely carefully, we should also be clear that what might be the true nature of the speaker's claim is not the author's What might be the use of a persona as a literary device, for instance, should not necessarily be considered as falsehood.

There are many cases where writers and poets have adopted the persona of a historical character and put words in their mouths. Generally with genre expectations and the recognition of the distinction between the author or speaker and their persona, all parties understand what is taking place in such instances and don't believe that the author is actually claiming that the historical figures themselves made the statements.

Like wise fictions are not falsehoods, and much of the greatest wise literature of the world has adopted the form of fiction.

For this reason we should beware of rejecting non-Solomonic authorship out of hand, even though doing so might require expanding our notion of the sort of genres that inspired scripture could include. On the other hand, we do need to distinguish sharply between forms of pseudepigraphical literature that are designed to deceive hearers and readers, something that would be directly contrary to a belief in the truthfulness of scripture, and forms of such literature that are adopting historical personae as a device in a manner that is well within the mutually understood bounds of genre of the author and his original audience. Michael Fox is an example of someone holding such a position, someone who believes that the preacher or Koheleth is intended to evoke Solomonic features without being identified as Solomon, even as a persona.

He writes, This commentary assumes that Koheleth is a persona, a fictional figure through whom the author speaks. This persona, at least in the first two chapters, is portrayed as a king whose lineaments are taken from the biblical image of Solomon. For purposes of the intellectual exercise that Koheleth undertakes, the author wants us to conceive of the persona's wisdom, power and prosperity as Solomonic in quantity and quality, at least in chapter 1 verse 2 to 2 verse 26, without necessarily trying to make us believe that Koheleth truly was Solomon or to give the book full Solomonic authority.

If Solomon was the author of the book, then the book in its original form needs to be dated to the 10th century BC. That said, the frame narrator who introduces the character of the preacher at the beginning of the book and speaks concerning him at the end complicates matters. For those who advocate Solomonic authorship, this character may be largely translucent, but for those who support non-Solomonic authorship, the frame narrator is likely the creator of the persona of the preacher that dominates the book.

While arguments for Solomonic authorship would focus upon the figure of Solomon in terms of the authority of the book, leaving supporters of Solomonic authorship dismayed by opposition to it, those advocating non-Solomonic authorship may be more attentive to the way that the persona of the speaker is constitutive of the message of the text. For instance, it makes a difference if Shakespeare said something wise himself or whether he put it in the mouth of one of his characters. In the latter case, the hearer must weigh the words differently.

Belief in non-Solomonic authorship tends to go hand in hand with a much later dating for the book, commonly to around the 3rd century BC. The late dating is supported by the presence of many words and other linguistic features that are characteristic of post-exilic period writings, not least a number of Aramaisms. If the book dates to the time of Solomon, many have argued that it would throw our understanding of the history of the Hebrew language into utter disarray.

Others have argued for intertextual references to works like Isaiah, which would also support a much later date than Solomon would give us. There are references and allusions to Ecclesiastes in 2nd century BC writings, such as the work of Ben Sirah and the fragments of the text of Ecclesiastes that have been found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, so it must be dated before that date. Liang Xiao, an important recent commentator on the book, has suggested a window of time between the late 5th and early 6th centuries BC for its writing.

Interpretations of the book also weigh in questions of dating and Solomonic authorship. Those who perceive influences of Hellenic philosophy, for instance, or who believe that the book represents a challenge to Israel's religious orthodoxy, are going to be much more likely to favour non-Solomonic authorship and late dating. Although one generally has to get into the less scholarly commentaries to find support for early dating and Solomonic authorship, Douglas Sean O'Donnell and Geoffrey Myers are both examples who support Solomonic authorship, for instance.

There are more scholarly holdouts against the general consensus on the later dating of the book and its non-Solomonic authorship. One of the more notable of these is Daniel Fredericks, who particularly takes on the linguistic argument for the late dating in some detail. He makes a case that, at the very least, significantly lessens the weight that that line of argumentation has hitherto enjoyed in certain quarters.

He writes, Most scholars have thought the theory of a pseudonymous writer to be preferable, because Ecclesiastes' alleged lateness in its language and theology precluded Solomon as the author, and the work is then estimated to be 400 to 700 years later than the great king. However, the language of Ecclesiastes is either vernacular in dialect or transitional in the history of the Hebrew language. If transitional, it appears to be more transitional from early biblical Hebrew to later biblical Hebrew than between later biblical Hebrew to the still later Mishnaic Hebrew.

Therefore no later than an 8th or 7th century BC date for the current text is probable, as we have it, if the language is not vernacular. If it is an example of a more vernacular dialect, then it could be earlier yet. Of course, this does not mean that the words are not those of a creative writer other than Solomon, just that the Hebrew dialect itself does not necessarily preclude him, especially if what we have is a crystallation of oral tradition.

Transmission of this speech through the writing process could have modernised the language to the extent that it looks somewhat later than earlier written Hebrew. Furthermore, the probability that the book was in the first instance a speech might help to explain certain divergences of literary style from other texts that were originally composed as written. Summing up his sense of the state of debate, Trempe Longman writes, my conclusion is that the language of the book is not a certain barometer of date.

This might leave us in a situation where, although the weight of the considerations

against Solomonic authorship and a late date seem substantial, it is nonetheless insufficient finally to decide the matter, leaving the interpreter to arrive at their positions cautiously on the balance of possibilities given their own theological commitments, an interpretation of the book and its theology, and the shifting weight of the various lines of argumentation. Several commentators highlight keywords in the book as a way of discovering its unity and coherence, even as the author develops lines of argument that might push against each other. Fox, for instance, lists toil, do or make happen, and work and event, portion, senselessness or absurdity, wisdom, pursuit of wind, enjoyment or pleasure, good, and profit as examples of these keywords.

Peter Enns expands the list. He includes keywords like God, seek, walk, know, all, fool, heart, righteous, fate, evil, and under the sun. The author of the core material of the book is introduced to us as Koheleth or the preacher.

The meaning of this term is debated. The English name of the book, Ecclesiastes, comes from the Greek Septuagint title, referring to a member of an assembly. However, the meaning of the original Hebrew term is less clear.

Most now take it to refer to someone who addresses or speaks before the assembly, hence the preacher. The preacher begins by introducing the problem that will exercise him in his investigations, and simultaneously introduces a problem that exercises many commentators in theirs. What is the meaning of the keyword Hebel? The way that we translate such an important keyword will cast its shadow upon our reading of the book more generally, and conversely our reading of the book will have some influence upon our interpretation of this term.

Translations commonly render the term Hebel as vanity or meaningless. Elsewhere in the Old Testament the term is used to describe idols. It is also related to the name of Abel.

The use of the term in relation to idols weighs in favour of an interpretation as vanity. Other suggestions include absurd, worthless, incomprehensible, unknowable, futile, temporary, and transitory. More concretely, Hebel means vapour or breath.

This does not mean that such a translation is automatically to be preferred. Many terms which do have a concrete reference of that kind have less concrete reference alongside it, in relation to which they operate as relatively weak or even dead metaphors. For instance, if I were to speak about broadcasting my opinions far and wide, you are unlikely to be thinking of someone casting seed.

The original metaphor is no longer really operative. Fredericks criticises those who interpret the term as breath or vapour. He sees this as involving an equivocal switch between more specific meanings from context to context.

Fox takes a similar approach, writing that, to do Ecclesiastes justice, we must look for a concept that applies to all occurrences, or failing that, to the great majority of them. Against such claims, Myers has, I believe correctly, taken vapour as a strong governing metaphor and interpreted the book accordingly. This is not equivocation in the manner criticised by Fox and Fredericks.

Rather, the reader is being invited to see life as a vapour of vapours and to explore different dimensions of that metaphorical association. There are few more potent and rich metaphors for human life, activity and thought than that of vapour, breath or mist. Life is like groping through a dense fog, which shrouds and veils reality, preventing us from seeing through to the heart of things.

It is an experience of inscrutability. We can read neither the comings nor the goings of being. We can neither grasp nor control it.

It slips through our fingers. It eludes all of our attempts at mastery. It is fleeting and ephemeral.

It leaves neither trace nor mark of its passing, but passes into nothing. It produces no lasting fruit nor gain, and has no permanent effects. It is insubstantial.

It is formed of nothing. It provides no bedrock for security against decay or change. Humanity's attempts to fashion and understand the world for itself will all ultimately founder, as the unforgiving wind of time whisks away our kingdoms of dust.

It is this metaphor that lies at the heart of the book of Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes declares the ultimate futility of all of our attempts at building and figuring out the world for ourselves. Comparing these to attempts at shepherding the wind, this is the character of life under the sun.

Life lived beneath the veil of heaven is inescapably vaporous. Throughout the book of Ecclesiastes, the preacher searches for some sort of profit or gain, some sort of lasting fruitful or enduring mark of his labors under the sun, and he finds none. He attempts later to find profit through pleasure, through wisdom, and through work, and all ultimately prove futile.

Whatever he does will ultimately fall apart, no labors seem to have a lasting effect on the earth. The vaporous character of the worlds that man seeks to create for himself stand in marked contrast to the fixity and permanence of the world in which he finds himself, which we see in verses 3 to 11. It is this contrast between permanence and ephemerality that manifests his activities as vapor.

We might try to form and fill our own world, much as God formed and filled his world, but his will last and ours will soon perish. In verses 4 to 7, the preacher lists four cycles that illustrate the transitory character of life. Verse 4, the movement of the generations upon

the enduring stage of the earth.

Verse 5, the cycle of days and the enduring reality of the sun. Verse 6, the various occasions of the blowing of the wind but its enduring circuits. Verse 7, the constant movement of waters to the sea without ever filling the sea up or ceasing the cycle.

What is there to show from any of these unceasingly repeating natural cycles? Is there any gain to show for them, any lasting residue? Do they make any enduring mark upon the world? All actions are transitory, yet the cycles seem to be unending. This is a source of frustration to human beings who want to escape incessant cycles and to leave some enduring mark for themselves. We strive to attain to something eternal or lasting.

We build our proud sandcastles only for the relentless cycle of the tide to break them down and erase all signs that they were ever there. However, the cycles of human life will repeat themselves and there won't be anything that is truly and enduringly new. The past has faded into the mist of forgetfulness and we too in our time will suffer a similar fate.

If we are very lucky we might be remembered for perhaps even 100 years after our death but in time we also will be forgotten. Verses 12 to 15 and verses 16 to 18 are two brief sections in which the preacher applies himself to reflect upon human life and activity. Speaking as a Davidic king in Jerusalem, in at the very least a Solomonic persona, the preacher devotes his heart to investigating human activity under the sun, another key expression in the book.

As a powerful monarch, one would think that the Davidic king over all Israel and Jerusalem had achieved genuine gain. However, he is all too keenly aware of the modest limits of human activity and the great constraints that we find ourselves in as we expend our efforts in the vapour in the sub-celestial realms below the heaven and the highest heavens. All such activity is vaporous, is striving after wind or perhaps, as Frederick suggests, the whim of the wind.

There is no way in which we can alter or amend our fundamental condition, no matter how much we try, even though we might, with a well-built wall and a broad moat, delay the encroachment of the incoming waves upon our constructions in the sand. The tide is inexorable and it will ultimately overwhelm all of our defences, wiping clean the beach and restoring it to its original state, so that all must begin again. The king in Jerusalem would have the advantage of leisure, access to the wisest counsellors, exposure to foreign sages, possession of the most learned books and chronicles, extensive opportunity to observe human nature up close, and the freedom and the resources to explore the potential of human enterprise.

With such advantages he devoted himself to the deep study of wisdom. We should recall the description of Solomon's wisdom in 1 Kings 4, verses 29-34. And God gave Solomon

wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the men of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt.

But he was wiser than all other men, wiser than Ethan the Ezraite, and Heman, Chalcol, and Dada, the sons of Mahal, and his fame was in all the surrounding nations. He also spoke three thousand proverbs, and his songs were one thousand and five. He spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon, to the hyssop that grows out of the wall.

He spoke also of beasts, and of birds, and of reptiles, and of fish. And people of all nations came to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and from all the kings of the earth, who had heard of his wisdom. However, the king's study of wisdom merely acquainted him more with the limits of human endeavour and purpose, and the ways that wisdom can fail.

The more knowledge he gained, the more frustration and sorrow he experienced. Wisdom itself, for all there is to commend it, is not a solution to the vaporousness of life, it mostly deepens our awareness of it. A question to consider.

In modern society, we tend to see the world in terms of progress, rather than in terms of futile repeating cycles. How might reflecting upon the teaching of the preacher in this chapter, puncture some myths that we might hold? In Ecclesiastes chapter 2, the preacher continues his exploration to discover if there is anything of lasting and enduring value. He wants to find out if there is any gain to be found.

Daniel Fredericks argues that verses 1-3 need to be associated more with the preceding chapter than with that which follows. Verse 3, he claims, is a bookend or inclusio with verse 13 of chapter 1. And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.

The experiments that he engages in in verses 1-3 are similar to those of verses 12-15 and 16-18 of chapter 1. The preacher will later make some positive claims about enjoyment, although it is nonetheless here included with the vapor. Fredericks cautions against presuming that the answers to the preacher's rhetorical questions in verse 2 are negative. He maintains that the preacher holds a distinction between laughter and pleasure, a distinction that can be substantiated by study of the rest of the book.

Rather than thinking that the rhetorical questions are immediately answered, perhaps we are being invited to follow the preacher's investigations to their conclusion, to discover his thoughts on these matters. There is a parallel between the relationship that the preacher establishes between his body and wine and that between himself and wisdom. He drags his body along with wine, while his heart guides him along with wisdom.

He experiments with what he calls folly in keeping with his intended quest outlined in chapter 1 verse 17, and I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. Drinking alcohol as such is not condemned in scripture, although drunkenness and allowing oneself to come under wine's power is. The preacher seems concerned to explore wine's potential as a source of pleasure and release, although he is also concerned not to give himself over to it in a way that would undermine his quest.

He wants to explore folly without abandoning himself to it. How we interpret the nature of the preacher's quest here might be coloured by our beliefs concerning his identity. If the preacher is a persona of the great and wise Solomonic king, a fictional character created by the author of Ecclesiastes, rather than Solomon himself, we may allow him rather more liberties in this area.

However, we should also consider the fact that the historical Solomon did take a path of folly himself, so we need not presume that his exploration of wine was a particularly sober one, even if it was part of a mindful investigation. Furthermore, folly need not be read in a stronger sense. Drinking wine allows even the wise man temporarily to experience the folly of light intoxication, without surrendering his wisdom to do so.

The folly of wine might be akin to the laughter of verse 2. Those who surrender themselves to wine and laughter are fools. However moderated by wisdom, wine and laughter need not be foolish at all. They provide a measure of relaxation and release which may, in their own ways, serve the wise person, who might otherwise be too weighed down in his toil to be able to establish any distance from it.

Wine and laughter can be the servants of rest. Verses 4-9 describe the preacher's kingly activity of creating a world of delights. Many commentators, rightly I believe, see parallels with the Lord's activity of planting Eden in Genesis chapter 2 here, although Catherine Dell expresses reservations, suggesting that what intertextual connections there are have been greatly overstated.

The opening chapters of 1 Kings present a similar portrait of the creation of a new Eden in its description of Solomon's earlier reign, his construction of the temple, his adorning of the city of Jerusalem with great and beautiful buildings, and the visit of the Queen of Sheba. There are several allusions in those chapters back to the early chapters of Genesis. Whether or not we believe that the preacher was Solomon, he is clearly the figure most evoked by the preacher's description of his work here.

Humanity was always called to follow God's pattern in forming and filling the world, to create their own beautiful worlds. The preacher, as the king in Jerusalem, makes the city a sort of great garden city, filled with beauty, riches, pleasure and delight. The point of this exercise was not merely the pleasures to be enjoyed within the realm, but also the wise activity of forming the realm itself, an activity that, in many respects, follows the pattern of God's own activity.

However, after creating this great and beautiful realm, and enjoying the satisfaction of creation and all of its sensual pleasures and delights, he returns to consider his labours in terms of the question of chapter 1 verse 3, what does man gain by all of the toil at which he toils under the sun? There are definitely benefits and advantages to his labour and its transitory rewards, but they are just that, they are transitory. They do not represent the sort of lasting gain that he is seeking. They are good, but they are still vapour, destined to pass away without trace in their time.

Compared to folly, wisdom is clearly to be preferred. Indeed, for the preacher, it is to folly as day is to night. There is considerably more gain to it.

However, in the end, both the wise man and the fool will pass away, and their wisdom and folly with them. They will die, and ultimately be forgotten, as he argues in verse 16. The legacy of both will ultimately fail, be misused, be abandoned, or be forgotten.

The meaning of the past is in many respects at the mercy of the future. Our labour and our sacrifices are of little worth if their benefits are despised and squandered by those who come after us. Our lives are retroactively robbed of meaning.

This is why children dishonouring their parents and despising their sacrifices can be so painful. When we invest our lives in establishing a good legacy, we put the meaning of much of our lives at the mercy of our children and others who come after us, with no guarantees that they will respect and honour our labours, and ensure that our sacrifices achieve their fruit. Solomon was tragically doomed to leave a vast and glorious kingdom to a proud son who would precipitate a catastrophic split and the loss of most of its riches.

The preacher sums up the results of his investigation in verses 22-23. He experiences sorrow and vexation, and lacks rest. Solomon's great works reached their zenith in 1 Kings, 500 years after the Exodus, when he completed the temple and palace complex in Jerusalem.

It would seem that, of all times when rest or Sabbath might have been achieved, it was in that time, a year of jubilee times ten. However, restlessness was still the outcome. All is fleeting vapour, slipping through our fingers, beyond our attempts to grasp and control, to attain lasting substance, or to say at any point that we have truly arrived.

Again, none of this means that wisdom, joy and life's pleasures are worthless. They have their value. They are gifts to be received from God in our toil, they are signs of God's goodness.

Indeed, there is nothing better than to enjoy these transitory things, even as we appreciate that they are nonetheless vapour. Every breath is a remarkable gift from God, even though little is more transitory than a breath. Wisdom is finding delight in the

vapour, without losing sight of its vaporous character.

We discover God's goodness in the transitory but good joys of life. We also see his justice in the way that God elevates some and brings others low in order to serve the righteous. This too is transitory, however, but it is good in its time.

A question to consider, how might this chapter be read against the backdrop of Genesis chapters 1 to 4? Temporality and transitoriness, the vaporous character of life, was the subject matter of chapters 1 and 2 of Ecclesiastes. In Ecclesiastes chapter 3, while temporality remains prominent, it is in the form of seasonality that it most appears. The activities listed in verses 1 to 8 were all temporary, but they all have the setting of a fitting time.

The pairings of the verses are not contrasts between good and bad things, or even pleasant and unpleasant things. Rather, the pairings concern contrasting times to which fitting activities correspond. Killing, war, and even hating are not always wrong, they have their appropriate occasions.

However, discerning these occasions is imperative and one of the greatest tasks of human wisdom, as human beings so often give themselves to these things on inappropriate occasions. When the psalmist, for instance, speaks of hating those who rise up against the Lord with a complete hatred, in Psalm 139 verses 21 to 22, it is imperative that we consider carefully what kind of hatred is and is not in view, and pay attention also to its proper objects. As James Jordan has argued on several occasions, while the law presents its principles as timeless and enduring, wisdom is much more alert to that which is timely, to the right action for the right occasion.

In many respects, we could argue that wisdom is timing. It has a musical character, it's like the trained ear of the musician. The wise person has an extensive repertoire of actions and responses.

They are able to make war, but they are also able to make peace. They know when to hold their tongues, but they also know the truth of Proverbs chapter 15 verse 23. To make an apt answer is a joy to a man, and a word in season, how good it is.

They are people who can enter fully into the right feelings at the right times. They can weep in times of mourning, they can laugh in times of joy. They perceive the right times to abandon a cause, and the right times to take one up.

They are attentive and adaptable. There are people who can only operate, for instance, in the mode of courage and conflict, while there are others who are temperamentally circumspect to the point of paralysis. The wise person is neither.

They know when courageous confrontation is necessary, and when cautious restraint and conciliation is the most prudent course of action. They are neither prisoners of their

reckless courage, or of an overcautious trepidation, but they perceive the time, and act wisely within it. Wisdom, then, is not just a matter upon reflecting upon what is timelessly good, but also one of deliberating about what is right, about the specific prudent actions that we ought to take in the light of that which is good in our particular situations and times.

I know, for instance, that it is good to be generous and charitable, but should I give that person this gift, or should it go to some other cause? Would it be better if I refrained from giving on this occasion, and gave on some other occasion instead? These are the sorts of questions of timing that wisdom needs to be concerned with. People often confuse what is good and what is right between those values that should guide me, and between what I ought to do in this specific situation. The preacher returns to this point later in the book, in chapter 8 verses 5-6, Whoever keeps the command will know no evil thing, and the wise heart will know the proper time and the just way.

For there is a time and a way for everything, although man's trouble lies heavy on him. There is a marriage here, as Daniel Fredericks recognises, between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, between God who establishes the times and human beings who must act appropriately within them, discerning what is fitting and when. Human beings need to move well with the variegated seasons of life, rather than trying to overcome life's seasonality in a sort of timeless ethic.

The preacher returns to the key question in verses 9-11, What gain has the worker from his toil? In creation, God established man to be fruitful, to multiply, to fill the earth, to subdue it, and to exercise dominion over all of its creatures. Man was created to till the ground. Man was later cursed with toil and difficulty in that task, frustrated in his primary endeavour.

God made man for this task, and he also established the seasonality of life, the movements of weeks, months, seasons, years, the various seasons of a person's life, the movements from generation to generation, the life cycle of a great kingdom or empire, the changes in geology and climate over vast spans of time. All of these things were created and established by God, and we dwell within them. We need to move with his providential direction, discerning the times and acting accordingly.

Besides making everything beautiful in its time, God also has placed eternity into man's heart, even in the changing character of life. We are not merely caught in a flux, we have a sense of what is lasting and enduring. Human beings can have some sense of who God is, a God who is not seasonal, a God who is not transitory, and does not change with the times.

Nevertheless, despite the fact that we can come to some apprehension of God and his works, we can never comprehend him or them completely. God always exceeds our knowledge. He communicates himself truly to us in a way fitted to our limitations.

How ought we to respond to our limitations, the limited duration of our lives, and our greatly constrained capacities? By practising joy and pursuing righteousness within our short lifespans. These are modest, creaturely aspirations, but they are good nonetheless. God has given us good gifts to enjoy, and so we should eat, drink, and take pleasure, appreciating the rewards of, and the rest within, the labour that God has committed to us.

Some people reading this instruction of the preacher see it as negative or unwise advice. Eat, drink, and be merry, because tomorrow we die. In the light of our mortality, hedonism is the only way to go.

But this is not what the preacher is saying here. We should note that he talks about doing good. He also talks about eating, drinking, and having pleasure in our toil as God's gift to man.

Eating, drinking, and having pleasure with thanksgiving in one's heart to the Lord was at the very heart of Israel's life. Thanksgiving, contentment, and generosity are the means by which the tenth commandment is fulfilled. And with that, it's the way in which our hearts are set right, postured appropriately towards our neighbour in generosity and avoiding all envy, and related appropriately towards God in thanksgiving for his manifold gifts.

In many respects, the preacher's claim here is that the good of our toil is discovered in the Sabbaths that God has given us. On the Sabbath, we perceive the beauty of things in their time. We also feed the eternity that God has put within our hearts.

It's a time of eating, and drinking, and rejoicing in the presence of the Lord. It's a time of doing good to our neighbours. The meaning and gain for our toil is found in being people of the Sabbath.

Yes, the Sabbath as a single day is transitory, but that does not mean that it's not good. Yes, the musical note is short-lasting, its sound swiftly dying in the air, but the very beauty of the note is discovered in the temporal movement that it serves. So it is with our lives.

God's work contrasts with all of this. God's work can endure forever. Besides the fact that it's enduring, it is absolute.

Nothing can be added to it nor taken away from it. Seeing the character of the work of God should lead human beings to fear him, to honour him, recognising the difference between the creature and the creator. Even mankind's greatest activities are afflicted with limitations and flaws.

In the task of justice, judges and rulers act in the name of the Lord and seek to uphold his righteousness and his governance within the world. Yet in the very place where

justice is supposed to be dispensed, wickedness is to be found. Perceiving this, the preacher reflects upon the penultimacy of human justice.

Imperfect human justice anticipates perfect divine justice, which will be enacted upon the righteous and the wicked. There is a day when everything will come into judgement, and all of the failures of human justice will be exposed and rectified. The temporality and seasonality of life is powerfully seen in the beasts.

They pass through cycles of birth, procreation and death. They hibernate, they migrate, they grow new plumage and shed old skins. And the preacher reflects upon the fact that human beings are animals too.

While we are distinguished from the animals in being the image of God, in our bodily existence we have an animal nature. And there is a very great deal about us that is analogous to the animals. If you want to understand why human beings act in the way that they do, often there are lessons to be learned from similar animals.

Their brains, their hormones, their bodies and their various systems work in much the same ways as ours do. They also sleep and eat, they have sex and they give birth, they are born and they die. Like us, they are creatures that live with blood and breath.

When we die, we decompose much as they do, and our whitened bones will not much distinguish us from them. When this fate of death will befall us, we don't know. Verse 21 is not necessarily denying the afterlife.

It could be translated, who knows when the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth, as Frederick suggests. Later on the preacher will say in chapter 12 verse 7, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. It might also be a reference to the limitations of our knowledge of what comes after death.

Which of us has any first-hand experience of the afterlife, of any horizon beyond our immediate lives? Verse 22 concludes the chapter by reaffirming the point that was made earlier. There is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot. As he argued in the previous chapter, there's no telling who's going to come after us and what they will do with our life and our sacrifices.

So while we may hope to leave a lasting legacy, it's important that we enjoy our sabbaths now. A question to consider, where else in the wisdom literature are we taught concerning seasonality and the timely character of true wisdom? Ecclesiastes chapter 4 continues the preacher's exploration of the vaporous character of life, the ways in which it can be transitory and futile. In this chapter the focus is more upon the relationships between human beings and their interactions.

He speaks of oppression and envy, of sluggishness, of overwork and of isolation, of the

benefits of mutual support and the vaporous character of status and position. In the previous chapter he had spoken about injustice in society. In verses 16 and 17, Moreover I saw under the sun that in the place of justice even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness even there was wickedness.

I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work. Considering the reality of oppression, he sees the tears of the oppressed and the power of the oppressors, and indeed there seems to be no relief in sight. God doesn't seem to be doing anything.

No human judge is acting on their behalf, and in such misery and desperation, what hope is there? The preacher is not sure that it is worth living in those sorts of situations. Indeed the dead who are delivered from such oppression could be considered fortunate, and indeed more fortunate still would be those who have never been born into such oppression in the first place. They've never seen the cruelty of life under the sun.

One might perhaps think here of Job's lament and curse upon the day of his birth in Job chapter 3. To make matters worse, commitment to one's toil seems to exacerbate the situation. As if one succeeds in one's work and gains great riches, one only ends up becoming the object of envy for other people, encouraging their predation. This could be read in two different ways.

Either it is the envy of the person who works that drives him, or the result of the person who works is envy in other people, most probably the latter. The character of the sluggard is a familiar one from the book of Proverbs. Proverbs chapter 6 verses 9 to 11.

How long will you lie there, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man. Chapter 19 verse 24. The sluggard buries his hand in the dish and will not even bring it back to his mouth.

And chapter 20 verse 4. The sluggard does not plough in the autumn. He will seek at harvest and have nothing. The inactivity of the sluggard's hands means that he has no food and he ends up consuming himself.

He squanders and devours his own resources, wastes his patrimony and ends up losing his capital. But there is a problem on the other side. If the sluggard's hands are both inactive, there is also the overworked person who has both of his hands full of toil and enjoys no rest.

Having one hand full of toil is a very good thing, but you need a handful of quietness to go with it. Work needs to be accompanied by rest. A particularly powerful example of this futility is seen in the person who is isolated, the person who is without friends or companions.

This person toils non-stop, but he's not toiling for anyone else. He has no one to give anything to, and since he's not enjoying rest in his own labour, what is it all for? Relief and reward in toil is found in companionship. While the preacher's point here would include marriage, it's a far broader point than just marriage.

The good companion is a way to avoid the vaporousness of the situation of verses 7 to 8. It's also a way by which oppression and loss can be relieved, because the companion can be a deliverer. The companion also relieves discomfort and hardship. The preacher expresses this by speaking of two people lying together to keep each other warm, perhaps on journey, in the watches of the night, or in the marriage bed.

Likewise, the companion is someone who can watch your back, who can stand by your side and support you, who can fight with you, and as he stands with you, together you can withstand whatever opponents come your way. If two people together is good, three people together is even better. Knowing and valuing companions is a common theme within wisdom literature.

We can think about Proverbs chapter 17 verse 17, a friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity. Or chapter 18 verse 24, a man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother. Much of the book of Job is concerned with Job's struggles, when his companions have turned against him, and his desire for an advocate or intermediary to stand up for him.

The vaporous character of succession has already been an issue within the book of Ecclesiastes, in chapter 2 verses 18 to 21. I hated all my toil, in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me. And who knows whether he will be wise or a fool, yet he will be master of all for which I toiled, and use my wisdom under the sun.

This also is vanity. So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun, because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it. This also is vanity, and a great evil.

Whereas earlier he had spoken about generational succession, here he speaks about succession on the throne. He presents us with a roughly drawn picture, which seemed to refer to three different characters. First of all, there is an old and foolish king.

This foolish king does not listen to counsel. And then on the other hand, there's a poor and wise youth. This youth rises from nothing at all, from the prison all of the way to the throne.

This might give us a sense of the transitory character of the glory and power of man, even of those who enjoy the status and the office of kings. It also suggests that wisdom

wins out over folly. However, there's a twist in the tale.

A third character comes along. There is another young upstart who's going to stand in the place of the one who rose to the position of the king. Although he gained his position through wisdom, he's going to lose it and be forgotten.

This story does not seem to refer to any specific situation that we know of in scripture. Although it is clearly reminiscent of a couple of major stories in scripture, the story of Joseph, who rose from the prison to the second in the realm, and then after all of his work for Egypt, was later forgotten by a pharaoh that rose up. It might also remind us of the story of Saul and David.

Saul is the old and foolish king who won't take advice, who rejects the Lord. And then David rises up to take his place. He's the wise and faithful youth of humble background.

Nevertheless, when Absalom, his son, rises up against him, all the people flock to Absalom. Despite all of the wisdom of that young man who rose to be king, the people prove to be fickle and will reject him. This too is vaporous and striving after wind.

A question to consider, what are some of the ways in which pursuing companionship might relieve certain of the problems that the preacher has discussed to this point? In Ecclesiastes chapter 4, the preacher focused upon the vaporousness of human society and its dynamics, our horizontal relationships. Now at the beginning of chapter 5, he turns to our relationship with God, our vertical relationship as it were. We can observe a parallel between verses 1 to 3 and verses 4 to 7. They are two sets of teaching concerning cultic actions that need to be taken mindfully, sacrificing and making a vow.

Both of these teachings are followed by a strange proverb concerning dreams. The preacher here warns against the danger of thinking that going through the motions is enough, that a mechanical and unmindful attitude to worship is sufficient, that sacrifice and other cultic actions can substitute for moral integrity and a heart ordered towards God, or that good intentions that don't give birth to actions suffice. The teaching here is similar to teaching we find elsewhere in scripture, in James chapter 1 verses 19 to 20 for instance.

Know this my beloved brothers, let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Guarding the tongue and ruling one's spirit are chief among the hallmarks of wisdom. Circumspection in our approach to worship is particularly singled out by the preacher as a crucial occasion for the expression of these traits.

When we enter into the house of the Lord or join with his people for our sacrifice of praise, we are entering into his intentional presence by which he is with us to judge and to bless. Consequently we must be very cautious and not rashly draw near to our own

judgment and destruction. The preacher's warning here anticipates the apostle Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians chapter 11 verses 27 to 31.

Whoever therefore eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.

That is why many of you are weak and ill and some have died, but if we judged ourselves truly we would not be judged. Warnings about inappropriate and reckless worship are common in the scriptures and also elsewhere in the wisdom literature, for instance in Proverbs chapter 15 verse 8, the sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord, but the prayer of the upright is acceptable to him, and a similar verse in chapter 21 verse 27, the sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination. How much more when he brings it with evil intent? That the preacher especially focuses upon the tongue and our need to be guarded in speech in worship is noteworthy.

Worship can so often be filled with our own words, words that come rather too easily to our mouths. For the preacher, however, worship should be a place of mindful listening first and foremost, of guarded speech and weighty utterance. When we speak in worship we should not speak lightly, but ought to speak as those who will be judged by and held to what we declare to be true.

A particular case of our need to guard our speech is seen in the case of the vow. The danger of rash vows is well illustrated by the story of Jephthah and his daughter. Deuteronomy chapter 23 verses 21 to 23 also cautions against taking vows without recognising their weight.

If you make a vow to the Lord your God, you shall not delay fulfilling it, for the Lord your God will surely require it of you, and you will be guilty of sin. But if you refrain from vowing, you will not be guilty of sin. You shall be careful to do what has passed your lips, for you have voluntarily vowed to the Lord your God what you have promised with your mouth.

As in the teaching of verses 1 to 2, the warning makes clear that the Lord does not suffer fools. If you are entering into his presence, you must be in earnest. There is no requirement that you must take a vow, as Deuteronomy points out, so don't be hasty to make one.

If you make a vow you haven't sinned, indeed you might have done something very good. However, it places a heavy responsibility upon you to fulfil what you have declared that you will do. The person who vows rashly will bring judgement upon himself.

The cryptic proverbs concerning dreams of verses 3 and 7 punctuate these two sections

of teaching. The meaning of these two statements is difficult to determine. Verse 3 might refer to the way in which people can imagine great deeds that they might perform, when they would never put in the effort required to make those dreams materialise, meaning that the dream remains a dream.

The fool's speech is like this. He is full of empty words that never come into reality. Verse 7 makes a similar point.

The more that people are given over to an imagination divorced from action, the more their words will multiply. Words come easily for such dreamers, because their words are hollow and light. However, the wise man weighs his words and speaks prudently when he isn't carefully holding his tongue.

This is all a result of the fear of the Lord. It's the awareness of the Lord's presence that causes us to be careful about what we say and not to speak rashly or thoughtlessly. At the beginning of the previous chapter, which Daniel Frederick suggests forms a unit with verses 1-9 of chapter 5, the issue of oppression was raised.

Again I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun, and behold the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them. On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them. Here in verses 8-9 we return to this theme.

Oppression is not something to be astonished at. However, there are limits upon oppression. The preacher particularly draws attention to the fact that oppressors are often under others who watch over them and may perhaps remove them from their office or punish them for their injustice.

And even if no human judge will establish justice in such situations, ultimately the Lord watches over all and he will bring all deeds to account. The king committed to cultivated fields might be a way of speaking of the king who manages his realm well, removing the weeds of unjust judges from it and planting faithful rulers in their place. Frederick's notes the structural parallels between verses 10-12 and 12-20, which he argues belong with verses 1-9 of chapter 6, three sections dealing with the temporary character of wealth.

He also, however, offers an alternative structure which presents verses 10-12 as the introduction and verses 13-20 are paralleled with chapter 6 verses 1-9. The common structure can be seen as follows. There is an evil, followed by riches possessed and riches lost.

Second, begetting, having nothing and then coming and going. Third, what advantage from toil, no satisfaction and then the theme of contentment, with which the section ends. The person who is a lover of money will not ultimately find it satisfying.

Greater wealth increases responsibilities. It increases hangers-on, fair-weather friends

and the expectations and demands of others. Besides all of this, wealth provokes others' envy and their desire to take advantage of the wealthy man, to defraud him, to steal from him or otherwise depart him from his wealth.

The wealthy man may well struggle to enjoy untroubled sleep. By contrast, the laboring man, who makes a subsistence living, may sleep with few worries and enjoy contentment. The Apostle Paul seems to allude to this passage in 1 Timothy 6 verses 6-10, where he explores the same points.

For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs. Having enough and being content is true wealth.

Verses 13-17 present us with a specific instance of the vaporous character of wealth. A man who loves and hoards wealth, yet who loses it all in an unwise venture and has nothing left to leave to his son. He has devoted his entire life to the pursuit of money and ends up with nothing whatsoever to show for it, his son being left without any inheritance either.

We might think here of Jesus' parable concerning the rich fool and the danger of covetousness in Luke chapter 12. It is death especially that exposes the emptiness of such pursuit of wealth. The soul of the rich man was required of him by God and all of his wealth was of no use to him at that point.

Similar warnings about laying up treasure on earth, where it can be lost to thieves and corruption or to failed ventures, are given by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Verses 18-20, with which the chapter concludes, are like chapter 6 verse 9 which concludes the parallel section in counselling contentment. A question to consider, what is money? What does it stand for? Why do we so pursue it? What are some of the ways that the Bible demythologises money, helping us to think about it more accurately? Ecclesiastes chapter 6 is a brief chapter which largely continues the theme of vaporous wealth from the latter half of chapter 5. Daniel Fredericks has remarked upon the similarity of structure between chapter 5 verses 13-20 and chapter 6 verses 1-9.

Both sections begin by referring to an evil under the sun in chapter 5 verses 13-14 and chapter 6 verses 1-2 respectively. An evil that involves the possession and then the loss of riches. Both move to speak of begetting, yet of being without, and they also speak of the relationship between birth and death.

Finally both raise the key question of the advantage of toil where satisfaction is not present, concluding by stressing the importance of contentment. This chapter concerns the case of a man who is granted the power to get rich, yet is denied the opportunity to enjoy his wealth. Like the person who loses his great wealth suddenly and has nothing to pass on, the person who gains great wealth, yet loses his life or his ability to enjoy his

wealth, is an instance of the temporary and vaporous character of riches.

We might again think of Jesus' parable of the rich fool, who plans to build bigger barns, yet loses his life before he can truly enjoy his wealth. We are not the masters of our lives, nor are we the ones who determine how long we will live. Man proposes, as the saying goes, but God disposes.

James most likely has Ecclesiastes in his mind when he writes in chapter 4 verses 13-16 of his epistle. The case discussed at the beginning of chapter 6 contrasts with the situation described in chapter 5 verses 18-19. The enjoyment of the good things of life is a gift of God, both the good things themselves and the power to enjoy them.

These gifts, however, are not universally enjoyed. For various reasons, some wealthy people lose their ability to enjoy their great riches, and their wealth falls into the hands of strangers. The person who dies prematurely is an example of this.

The person struck with serious illness, or the person who is taken from his land by exile. In another way, the person who is given over to dissatisfaction can never enjoy the good gifts of his life. Every one of his gifts is a sign of what he does not possess, what he envies in his neighbor.

Verses 3-6 may continue to refer to the same man as was the subject of verses 1 and 2, or perhaps it refers to another person. This person, by outward appearances, has the great blessings of long life and numerous children. However, his life is one of misery and discontentment, without enjoyment of the good gifts of life.

It ends in dishonor, as he doesn't even receive a proper burial, already being forgotten at the time of his death. Children and long years, far from being gifts to such a person, may even compound his misery. Perhaps his children become burdens upon his meager resources, and each further year of life is another year of bitter suffering, with ill health or social rejection, or maybe just a deep discontentment that he has fostered in his heart.

Like Job cursed the day of his birth, and considered that he would have been better off had he never been born, this man is less well off than the stillborn child, the child who had never seen or experienced the evils that occur under the sun. In the stillborn child's greatly premature death, at least he knows some rest, while the man who lives a long life of bitter toil has an extended and unrelieved sentence of hard service. Adding years to such a man's life won't improve his lot.

The emphasis given to the man's lack of burial is also in keeping with one of the preacher's consistent concerns throughout the book, of the transitory character of life seen in being forgotten. As Fredericks observes, the man who receives no proper burial is like the stillborn infant in many respects, both pass away nameless, their bodies

disposed of without much regard of their unique selfhood. The tragedy of failing to achieve satisfaction has been a recurring theme of the book to this point.

It's underlined again in verses 7-9, which recall us to chapter 5 verse 10, with which this short body of teaching on wealth began. He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income. This also is vanity.

The toil of the man in verse 7 is Sisyphean. He is constantly laboring to satisfy an appetite that is inordinate, it's never satisfied. He never gets beyond the barest sustenance to true enjoyment.

The problem here, however, is likely not the meagre products of his toil, as the unruly appetite that he possesses. This is supported by verse 9, which partly answers the question raised by verse 8. The person given to a wandering and excessive appetite will never be satisfied. However, the wise person seeks to enjoy and reasonably to improve his actual lot, whatever it may be, rather than giving himself over to the service and pursuit of unrealistic appetites and desires.

He will be less in the thrall of pursuing the vapour and seeking to shepherd the wind than the man who is given to envy, for instance. Human beings can take up arms against their lot in life, not reckoning with the strength of limiting circumstances, capacities and other factors. But we are transitory and impermanent creatures, doomed to pass away like breath when our time comes.

We can multiply our words, but the hot air will only add to the vapour. It is far wiser to have the measure of ourselves, to know our limits, and to think and to act accordingly, pursuing enjoyment within those limitations, rather than dooming ourselves to dissatisfaction by constantly chafing at them. A question to consider, how does the modern world compound the human problem of the wandering appetite? And how might we apply the preacher's counsel to our cultural situations? As Trempe Longman remarks, the opening verse of Ecclesiastes chapter 7 wouldn't sound out of place in the book of Proverbs.

Indeed, there are verses like it within that book, perhaps most notably Proverbs chapter 22 verse 1. A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favour is better than silver or gold. However, the second half of the proverb here perhaps suggests a connection with what precedes it in chapter 6. Daniel Fredericks maintains that this verse needs to be understood as the response to the question of chapter 6 verse 12. For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow? For who can tell man what will be after him under the sun? In the end we all die, but a good name might outlive us.

Interpretations of the second half of the proverb vary in part according to commentators' sense of how pessimistic and or cynical the preacher's vision is. There are occasions

when death might be referred to life. We might think about Job's description of his experience, for instance.

The preacher has also spoken of situations of extreme suffering with no relief from toil. Perhaps the verse ought to be read in light of that. Alternatively, we might consider the way in which the day of death can be the seal of a good reputation, to which the person yet to be born has yet to attain.

It seems to me that in the light of the first half of the proverb there is a good case for this interpretation. It has been said that Christian faith is practice in the art of dying well. The preacher is convinced that the house of mourning, where we consider the day of a person's death and our own lives in terms of our own coming death, is a site where we will best learn wisdom.

We might think of the statement in the Psalm of Moses in Psalm 90 verse 12. So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom. In fact, perhaps paradoxically, the hearts of people who mourn will be made better.

Unlike several translations, it might be best to translate this as made better rather than made glad. The heart that gives itself to the activity of mourning can be deepened and matured in wisdom. By contrast, fools are drawn to feasting and levity.

They adopt a hedonistic disregard for the death that awaits them and thereby miss out on the opportunity to learn wisdom. On paper, the eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we shall be dead. The idea of the mindless hedonist may sound similar to the counsel of the preacher in places like chapter 2 verse 24.

There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. However, when we look closer, there are marked differences. The preacher's approach is not one of a determined thoughtlessness with respect to the approach of death, but of grateful enjoyment of life in the vapour, while being mindful of its transitory character and of the importance of measuring our own lives.

Death is the end of life, but in forcing us to consider the end or terminus of our lives, it also encourages us to think of the end or telos of our lives, what our lives are ultimately about. Such lessons are well sought in a wise man's funeral as we look back with others upon a life well lived. The preacher focuses upon a further aspect of this in verses 5-6, drawing attention to the company that we will find in these verses.

The wise may give painful rebukes and correction, however such rebukes, in contrast to the smooth words of the flatterer or the seductress, will encourage our long-term good. The company of fools is found in a place of shallow song and levity, which, like thorns burning under a pot, are of little use or value and will only last for a short time. The connection of verse 7 with what surrounds it is difficult to ascertain and some

commentators believe that some part of the text might have been lost in transmission.

However, the actual textual arguments for this are relatively weak. Perhaps the point of the text is to underline the fact that the wise should never be complacent in their imagined wisdom, as wisdom can easily be corrupted when not kept burning through good company. Much as the fools congregate together like thorns under the pot, so the wise need to be like clusters of burning coals, keeping each other glowing hot through rebuke and correction and encouragement and wisdom.

Wisdom, if we are not careful, can be subverted or compromised, not least through temptations to exercise oppression and the allure of a bribe. Verse 8 recalls verse 1's claim about the day of a person's death being better than the day of their birth. The proverb of verse 8 has two mutually interpreting halves, like many such proverbs.

The end of a thing is connected with the patient in spirit, who bides his time and sees a matter through to its proper conclusion, while the beginning of a thing is connected with the proud in spirit, who boasts greatly before having accomplished anything. We might think of the proverb uttered by Ahab in 1 Kings 20, verse 11. Let not him who straps on his armour boast himself as he who takes it off.

The patient in spirit is a person who has mastered his spirit, while the proud in spirit is mastered by his pride. The picture is filled out in verse 9, which shows the connection between pride and anger, which makes a person rash, hot-headed and reactive, quite ill-suited for prudent circumspect and effective action. The wise man masters his own heart first of all, and consequently is able to act in the proper manner at the proper time, rather than preceptorly and incautiously.

The warning against romanticising the olden days in verse 10 should probably be read in connection with verse 8, with its claim that the end of a thing is better than its beginning. The person who asks such a question may by implication be driven by pride, impatience and an unruly spirit. There are plenty of occasions where present things are unfavourably compared to past things in scripture, for instance the Laodiceans being called to return to their former works, so this verse should be interpreted with some care.

Like most such verses, we need to consider it in light of other things that we know, and especially in the light of the surrounding context, to arrive at a good understanding of what is being said and what is not. Here are a few suggestions. First, we ought to consider the way that excessive nostalgia for the past can serve to distract us from present responsibilities and possible joys.

Our responsibility is to live in and learn to find some joy in our own times, not to render ourselves fruitless and joyless by yearning for some other time that God has not given us. Second, such an attitude can arrest necessary movement towards maturity. The

wides do consider the past, they assess their own times both favourably and unfavourably in terms of what they learn from it.

However their posture is forward-looking and creative, determined to leave something for the future, not just to long for a vanished past. Third, in terms of the broader themes of Ecclesiastes, there is nothing new under the sun. A romanticised past is a greatly airbrushed past, while there are indeed many respects in which our own times may compare poorly to the past, a general preference for the past almost invariably comes with a blindness to the evils of the past, which may have taken a different form to our own, but were no less real.

It might be a temptation to read this statement as a support for a progressive vision over a conservative one, but we ought to consider that the preacher's perspective is no less dismissive of the progressive's equally unrealistic and airbrushed future of lots of new things under the sun that will fundamentally change humanity's situation. The progressive's future is no less illusory than the conservative's past. Verses 11 and 12 explore the relationship between wisdom and wealth.

Solomon was blessed with both, his wealth largely proceeding from his wisdom in ruling his kingdom. Having both wisdom and wealth is a blessing indeed. Indeed wisdom and wealth are alike in their protection of their possessor.

However, if one is to be preferred, it must be wisdom. Nevertheless, as we might have come to expect from the preacher, this positive statement about wisdom and wealth, the sort of statement that we might encounter in the Book of Proverbs, is counterbalanced by a reminder of the vaporous character of life. While wisdom and wealth are powerful, we are not ultimately the masters of our fate, not even when we have great wealth and great wisdom.

God is. Life is transitory and opaque and the lives of righteous persons may be cut short, while those of wicked persons are often prolonged. There are several perplexing verses in Ecclesiastes chapter 7. Verses 16 to 18 are definitely some of them.

What does the preacher mean by saying that we shouldn't be overly righteous and not be too wise? It seems a very strange thing for scripture to say. It is in such statements that many are led to believe that the words of Ecclesiastes are not really canonically authorised. These are words, perhaps, of a cynical sage that are within the canon but are not held as authorised by the canon.

Rather, the canon includes this voice in order to deny it. Popular as this position may be with many commentators and pastors, I don't find it persuasive in the slightest. However, if we dismiss this position, we still face the problem of trying to interpret these verses.

What does it mean to be overly righteous or overly wise? Or, on the other hand, is he saying that moderate wickedness is okay in verse 17? On closer reflection, it should be apparent that there are several ways in which these statements could be taken as wise biblical teaching. We might, for instance, think about Martin Luther's startling counsel. Luther's counsel here is valuable for those who might struggle with what people have called scrupulosity, with an overly sensitive conscience whose demand for perfection is preventing them from actually living.

Righteousness becomes a sort of spiritual obsessive-compulsive disorder, a constant attempt to avoid incurring the slightest guilt. However, we are sinful human beings. We live in sinful societies and perverse orders.

Such an obsessive righteousness fails to acknowledge our flawed human nature, our inescapable embeddedness in sinful structures and other such things. Rather, we should recognize our fallenness, our frailty and our limitations. We should abandon any of our messianic conceptions of ourselves, any excessive obsessions with personal moral purity that prevent us from actually living and serving God and our neighbour.

We should also abandon our hubristic attempts to pursue some angelic purity as weak and sinful human beings. Much as there are dangers in an obsessive quest for righteousness, there are dangers in an obsessive quest for wisdom. We might consider, for instance, the fact that life goes on, irrespective of the fact that our tasks of reflection and deliberation are less than perfectly accomplished.

At some point, we have to turn from our reflections and deliberations to the tasks of living well. This will very often feel premature as we must satisfy ourselves with a limited and imperfect attainment of wisdom in any particular matter. However, if we were obsessed with making perfect choices, always exercising the optimal degree of wisdom, we might never conclude our deliberations in actual decisions and actions.

We would always be second-guessing ourselves or be paralysed in indecision. Once again, appreciating our human limitations and moderating our quest for wisdom as our quest for righteousness is important. Sin and folly are to be expected and perfection is a futile quest.

We must acknowledge the fact that we are sinners and foolish in many respects. We must curb our sin and our folly as much as we can and throw ourselves upon God's mercy and gracious protection for the rest. This is the difference between a healthy pursuit of righteousness as self-confessed sinners and a futile and self-destructive quest for angelic perfection in a manner that will actually prevent us from the positive business of righteous life.

Fear of the Lord is the answer to our own human deficit of righteousness and wisdom. Human wisdom is limited but nonetheless it's powerful. The preacher compares it to

rulers in a city which can coordinate and order the people.

Wisdom is like this to the wise man enabling him to master and direct his own spirit and also to help others around him. To ground his warning against a preoccupation with pursuing a level of righteousness that unhealthily chafes at human limitation, the preacher reminds us that no one will or can escape the reality of human foolishness and depravity. All of us are corrupted by sin.

None of our acts are free of it. Yet this account need not be understood in an incredibly negative sense. Much of the preacher's point here is to give us a better measure of ourselves, not to drive us to despair.

As Fredericks notes, moral realism is central to the preacher's counsel in these verses. Verses 21 to 22 continue the theme. Which of us has never said something carelessly in the heat of the moment, due to peer pressure or otherwise through weakness and general human sinfulness and folly? Recognising our own imperfections, we should be a lot more merciful in our assessments of others, putting more charitable constructions on their actions and thereby also saving ourselves from the sting of cruel statements that we might otherwise needlessly take to heart.

There are many times, for instance, when someone will say something bitterly cruel in the heat of an argument and then long to take it back. The person who recognises their own imperfection will not hold others to their statements in such situations, but will give them an easy way to climb down from their statements as they can, not making them lose face. A number of commentators observe the way that the concluding verses of this chapter return us to the preacher's opening statement concerning his quest in chapter 1. There are several parallels between the statements of the two passages that substantiate these connections.

In returning to his initial statement, the preacher is presenting us with some of his findings in the matters that he had aimed to seek out. Wisdom is a lot less scrutable and much harder to be grasped than many might suppose. This itself is an important lesson.

Wisdom, the reason beneath things, is deeper and less accessible than people might suppose. It typically eludes us. One of the great findings of true wisdom is the extent of wisdom's limits.

Prominent in the first nine chapters of the Book of Proverbs is the figure of the adulterous woman and the woman folly, who seduces simple young men away from the path of wisdom. We can even see such women ensnaring the wise, like Solomon, whose heart was led astray by his many wives. The woman is powerful because the heart of the young man goes after her, and if she is not a wise woman, she can lead him to his doom.

She is a snare or a trap from which God protects those who cling to him. However,

sinners readily get entangled by her. Verses 27 and 28 are verses that unsettle many, as at first blush they seem to be quite misogynistic.

Indeed, a number of commentators read them in such a manner. Some, like Tremper Longman, argue that verse 26 is also making a more general comment about the perverse moral character of women, albeit from the perspective of a confused sage, rather than as the authorised teaching of the book itself, comparing such a statement to those of Job's friends in the Book of Job, present in the canon, but not canonically authorised voices. He is talking about something that he has failed to find to this point, although he has searched for it.

We are not, however, as R. N. Wybray and others point out, told what exactly he was searching for. Given the surrounding context, there are a few possible hints in how to understand his statement concerning his failure to find a woman, in contrast to his discovery of one man in the thousand. Humanity's lack of moral uprightness is the theme of much that surrounds this section, particularly underlined in the final verse of the chapter.

The woman who leads astray is the subject of the immediately preceding verse. As a matter of possible historical background, we might consider that Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines, exactly 1,000 women in his harem. He proved unsuccessful and unwise in his seeking out a woman as they led him astray.

They proved unreliable and sinful, and they exposed his own fickleness and corruption. He might not be claiming that no remarkable and outstanding morally upright woman can be found, just that he has failed to find one, and he has only chanced upon finding one such man in the thousand. This is hardly an empirical basis upon which to prefer one sex to the other.

Perhaps against such a reading, we might consider the description of the valiant wife in Proverbs 31, verse 10. An excellent wife, who can find, she is far more precious than jewels. Although if the preacher is Solomon, referring to the men he has chosen for his officials and the women he chose for his harem, his statement may be much more limited in its scope.

Merely referring to his own failures in finding such outstanding persons to this point, he praises the excellent wife, but has, in 1,000 attempts, failed to find the perfect woman himself. The immediately preceding verse is focusing on a particular type of woman, the seductress. Fredericks, for instance, suggests that the preacher is especially referring to this class of woman, rather than women in general.

Others, Roland Murphy among them, suggest that, in fact, what the preacher has not found is the truth of the supposed discrimination between men and women in this matter, that one man in a thousand could indeed be found, rather than one woman.

Rather, what he has discovered is his statement of verse 29, that all have gone astray. That supposed one man in a thousand proves to be illusory.

Dwayne Garrett suggests that the preacher is contrasting the companionship and kinship of mind that a man can find in one special male friend, which he is less likely to discover in a woman. We might perhaps think of the friendship that David describes between himself and Jonathan in 2 Samuel 1, verse 26, for instance. I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan.

Very pleasant have you been to me. Your love to me was extraordinary, surpassing the love of women. Geoffrey Myers pays more attention to the term found.

What does it mean? Not so much that the preacher is trying to identify a particular class of item or person from a larger set, but that he is trying to figure or fathom out things and persons. Yet human persons, twisted by sin, prove largely inscrutable to wisdom. While one man in a thousand may be someone he could figure out, the preacher has yet to find a single woman that he really believes he has figured out.

Whatever the actual meaning of his statement, there is no reason why it need be assumed to be misogynistic, and several interpretations would fit in the context. Perhaps Myers' interpretation has the strength of more strongly connecting with the concluding statement of the chapter. Sinful human beings are inscrutable.

The one thing that wisdom can clearly recognise about human beings is our universal corruption and sinfulness. God created us upright. It is not God who created sin within us, but rather human beings fell and have pursued sin themselves.

A question to consider. The moral realism of Ecclesiastes chapter 7 might be arresting at several points. What are some of the areas where we might face the danger of being overly righteous? Much of Ecclesiastes chapter 8 concerns rule and the exercise of authority and judgement and how these play into the vaporous character of life.

The preacher also explores the temporary prosperity of the wicked. Wisdom transforms the wise. It makes their faces to shine and relieves the frustration, anger and tension that can harden a person's countenance.

Here as elsewhere in the wisdom literature, wisdom is not merely mental intelligence. It is closer to mastery of the art of living well. Service to the king comes with an oath to God.

So the servants of the king must be careful to obey the king, not merely out of obedience to a legitimate earthly ruler, but also out of their concern not to take the name of the Lord in vain, in swearing falsely. The power of the king means that the wise subordinate must be very prudent in his actions and speech before the king. Michael Fox suggests that the meaning of verse 3 is that the subordinate should leave the king's

presence when his anger is aroused, rather than in his rendering tarrying in a dangerous situation.

However he connects the counsel to that of chapter 10 verse 4 which makes a contrasting claim. If the anger of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your place for calmness will lay great offences to rest. Fox argues that we need to take these alongside each other and follow the appropriate counsel in the appropriate situation.

Daniel Fredericks, like the ESV, reads this as a warning not to leave the king's presence hastily, more in keeping with chapter 10 verse 4, suggesting that it might relate to leaving without being properly dismissed. The authority of the king cannot be directly challenged. Questions such as what are you doing? are also ruled out with respect to the Lord's authority in Isaiah chapter 45 verse 9. Obedience is the best defence a subordinate has in such a situation.

The meaning of the end of verse 5 is not immediately clear, given the multiple possible meanings of the Hebrew expression. Fox observes that it could refer to a time of doom, the time when the king will die and his rule come to an end. It could refer to a time of judgement, the time when the Lord, as a higher judge, will call the king to account, a fact that means that the king's rule is not truly absolute.

Or as Fox himself believes we should take it, to the time and right way. The prudent subordinate appreciates that direct confrontation with the king is pointless and counterproductive. Rather shrewdness would support a more circumspect approach which chooses the right time and the right way to approach and win over the king.

This understanding of the expression might be supported by verse 6 which follows. Verse 6 also might refer to the doom that awaits all the unrighteous, even kings, teaching subordinates to bide their time and wait for the Lord's judgement. We might perhaps think here of David, who while pursued by King Saul, stressed obedience to and honouring of the king, who was trying to kill him, while also biding his time and not directly opposing Saul, confident that the Lord would act in his cause in time.

The inability of anyone to avoid the day of doom is underlined in verses 7 and 8. None of us, not even the most powerful king, can evade our deaths or determine our futures. No one can excuse themselves from the great mustering of death. No amount of wickedness, treachery, deceit and trickery can enable us to escape it.

The preacher had considered all of this while closely observing a time during which a man in power used his power to harm others. Frederick's remarks upon the way that this reveals the logic of the section. He writes, He writes later, He

writes later, He writes later, observed the presence of love and hate connected with envy in verse 6. On this basis, he argues that these belong to human beings, not God.

No one knows whether they will experience love or hate from others. However, in light of the more immediate context, Michael Fox claims that it refers to God's favour or disfavour. We don't know what our fortunes will be in advance.

The same fate of death ultimately befalls all human beings, irrespective of their moral character and piety. No matter how different two persons may be in their behaviour and their relationship to God, death is the universal and ultimate equaliser. Life swiftly passes and we will die.

Life, however, is much to be preferred to death. Death is inert. It is the extinction of all possibility and potential.

The preacher describes this in terms of the arresting contrast between a dead lion and a living dog. William Brown writes, The lion and the dog were emblematic of opposing reputations, intelligence and folly, might and weakness, majesty and lowliness. According to the sages of convention, reputation is the individual's lasting legacy for future generations.

It is the immortalised self. But for Koheleth, the grovelling dog holds an absolute advantage over the lion's carcass. Life cannot be lived for the sake of the future.

A dog at least receives the crumbs that fall from heaven. Strangely, for the preacher, the advantage of the living over the dead, in verse 5, is that the former know that they will die. Perhaps their awareness of their coming demise excites their sense of the fleeting possibilities of the present.

Man's period upon the stage of life is brief, and who knows what awaits him when he departs it to the darkness of the wings. The dead fade into the shadows, forgotten, their part in the drama of life over. Dwayne Garrick maintains that the claim that they know nothing is not a claim about the metaphysical nature of the afterlife, or perhaps the lack of one, but is rather another way of making the preacher's claim that they know nothing more of the business of life.

Their time has passed, and they have moved on. Whatever awaits us after death, the current brief season of life, is the only such opportunity that we will have. Geoffrey Myers

uses Jesus' statement in John 9, verse 4 to illustrate this point.

We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day. Night is coming, when no one can work. Verses like these might trouble Christians, who have a far more positive view of the afterlife.

However, the afterlife, in the Old Testament particularly, is veiled in darkness and shadow. To the extent that a continuing form of existence is envisaged, it is in the grave or sheol, a place to which all go, a place where men are much reduced from what they were in life. While there may be continuing distinctions between the righteous and the wicked, the dead are all in a less fortunate position than the living.

Positive hope for life after death only starts to appear as the promise of resurrection, of God's gracious, purposeful overcoming of the power of the grave, starts to come into view in the scriptures. And, with the death and resurrection of Christ, there is a decisive change in the position of the dead. The dead are raised up to God's presence to be with Christ.

Consequently, following the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ, death can be viewed very differently, indeed very positively. However, we should never forget that death used to have a quite different character, and the only reason that it doesn't still have that character for the righteous, is because God has acted decisively in history, in Christ, to change things. Given the certainty and finality of death, the preacher exhorts his hearers to make the most of their span of life, while they still can enjoy it.

In verses 7-10, he gives a fuller expression of his frequent counsel to pursue joy in God's gifts in the midst of our toil. He lists some of the things that we should enjoy. Sustaining and tasty food, wine to make our hearts glad, God's gracious approval of our works, comfortable, clean and attractive clothing, the refreshment of sweet-smelling oil and other things upon our bodies, and the pleasures of life with a woman that you love.

God has given us these good gifts, and as we know his gracious smile upon us, and a right standing before him, all of these gifts should be delighted in. Holiness is not dullness, drabness, and miserableness. It's joy in the kindness and grace of God, and the goodness of his world and his gifts within it.

Justification and forgiveness, God's having approved of what we do, are gifts to be enjoyed. They give us relief from anxiety and the accusations of conscience, and assurance of acceptance and standing with God. Part of what it means to receive these things is to know true joy.

We all have a limited window of opportunity in which to enjoy the possibilities of life. We should throw ourselves into it. Over time, the rich array of possibilities that lie open to the young child dwindle and narrow, and we find ourselves set in a particular course,

perhaps yearning for a time when the possibility of us being something different still seemed open to us.

Rather, however, than yearning for now closed possibilities of the past, we should devote ourselves fully to the realization of those possibilities to which we have committed ourselves. Half-hearted activity should have no place in such brief lives. Toil is our lot in life, and we should devote ourselves to doing it well, and to pursuing joy within it, and not futilely longing for things that lie outside of our grasp.

Life is unpredictable. Fortune does not invariably favor the brave. We are all at the mercy of time and chance.

No man rises above fickle fortune, or escapes the cruel interruption of death. However we prepare ourselves for the challenges and struggles of life, the vaporous movements of life and death will outwit and wrong-foot us. The Preacher tells the story of a poor man who illustrates both the fact that wisdom can exceed military might in its effectiveness, but also exhibits our limitations in the face of the swirling vapor of life.

This poor man delivered a besieged, weakly defended city with his shrewd wisdom, yet despite the greatness of his wisdom, he was soon forgotten and unheard. We read a very similar story to this in 2 Samuel 20, verses 15-22, where a wise woman saves her besieged city from destruction by delivering the head of Sheba to Joab. We know of the existence and the action of this wise woman, but her name is forgotten to history.

Proverbs often teaches about the great power of wisdom, for instance in Proverbs 24, verses 5-6. A wise man is full of strength, and a man of knowledge enhances his might, for by wise guidance you can wage your war, and in abundance of counsellors there is victory. The poor man of the besieged city may not have gained personal fame, received regard or enjoyed status, but his wisdom is nonetheless to be preferred over the might of those who enjoy fame, wealth and honour, being foolish.

Unfortunately, although the poor wise man achieved great good through his wisdom, it is generally easier to damage and destroy than to create and establish. A one sinner or fool can do much harm. A foolish son can squander in a few years the great legacy that a family took many generations to create.

A wicked king can bring a mighty kingdom to ruin. An abusive minister can devastate a once faithful and flourishing church. These things too are tragic aspects of the vapour of life under the sun.

A question to consider, where in the New Testament can we see a positive vision of death that contrasts with the preacher's vision of it in this chapter? What are some of the ways that we can apply the teaching of the preacher here, while nonetheless recognising the difference between death after the advent of Christ and death prior to it?

Ecclesiastes chapter 10 contains a selection of proverbs, which perhaps most especially treat the way that wisdom itself operates in the realm of vapour, and is limited by it. While being much to be preferred to folly, a little misfortune, error, accident or intrusion of folly can undermine all of its achievements. The opening verse should be read along with the verse that precedes it at the end of chapter 9. Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.

Wisdom is implicitly compared to perfume, something that's delightful and good and that has a scent that is quite distinctive. In the sharpest contrast to wisdom, folly is like a dead fly, associated with impurity and the smell of putrefaction. However, one of the aspects of the vaporous character of life is that wisdom and folly are not equal and opposite.

Wisdom can so easily be outweighed and overcome by just the littlest bit of folly, all of its efforts proving to be in vain. The sharp contrast between wisdom and folly continues in verse 2. The wise man moves towards the right, the fool moves towards the left. They are polar opposites, and just as the smell of the fly announces its presence even when it cannot be seen, so the fool declares his folly in the way that he does everything.

As Proverbs teaches on many occasions, the fool pours out folly. He cannot help but express it. Indeed, there are few things that a fool more delights to express than his own folly.

No matter how much he dishonours himself in the process, a fool is seldom that ashamed of his folly. Wisdom is not always found in kings, and shrewd subordinates need to know how to deal with foolish masters. In Ecclesiastes 8.3, the preacher had said, Be not hasty to go from his presence.

Do not take your stand in an evil cause, for he does whatever he pleases. Proverbs 25.15 encourages the use of careful speech to change the mind of the ruler. With patience a ruler may be persuaded, and a soft tongue will break a bone.

The good subordinate responds to the anger of the ruler with calmness, and with wisdom and circumspect speech is able to turn the mind of the ruler round to his opinion. His calm response will also soften the temper of the ruler. The wisdom literature is often alert to the mismatch between character and station.

It is not a good thing to have weak people in positions of power. While some might think that scripture generally delights in reversals, and sometimes it does, poor, vulnerable, subservient and weak people are generally ill-suited to exercise power. The ideal is that the ruler is wise, rich, personally powerful and able to dominate.

Weak and insecure people in power can easily turn to tyranny. We might think about the paranoia of King Saul, who as a result of his sense of insecurity terrorised the whole land.

When the rulers of a land are not rich and powerful, you will also have to deal with the danger of the rich and powerful people being elsewhere, fomenting rebellion.

Proverbs 30.21-23 also speaks about such a situation. Under three things the earth trembles, under four it cannot bear up, a slave when he becomes king, and a fool when he is filled with food, an unloved woman when she gets a husband, and a maidservant when she displaces her mistress. Each of these situations speaks about someone who is poorly suited for a position of power, who gains it.

The slave may be subservient and resentful, ill-suited for exercising the responsibilities of power. The fool filled with food is emboldened in his folly. The unpleasant woman who gains a husband gains new authority and influence within the community, and the maidservant who displaces her mistress, presumably by committing adultery with her master, is someone who will use her new power according to her evil character.

The notion of someone falling into their own pit or getting trapped in their own snare is a familiar one in the book of Proverbs. In Proverbs 26.27 for instance, The wicked who seek to trap others end up being trapped themselves. He who lives by the sword will die by the sword.

However, in Ecclesiastes chapter 10 a slightly different point seems to be made. The person who falls into the pit that he has dug is here connected with the person who suffers a serpent bite as a result of breaking through a wall, or the person who is injured in the course of quarrying or forestry. These are inherently dangerous occupations, and a slight slip of awareness, or a bit of carelessness or incaution, can lead to great injury.

The person engaging in the toil of life clearly needs wisdom, but wisdom is walking a tightrope. A minor misstep or accident can lead to ruin, and no matter how great our wisdom and skill, it cannot account for or master all possible eventualities. This too is part of the vapour.

In verse 10 we have an example of the benefit of wisdom in toil. The person who sharpens the edge of his iron axe is able to work far more effectively. Likewise, the person who acts with wisdom can spare himself a great deal of toil.

However, even with wisdom and skill, our toil can easily come to ruin. The preacher illustrates this with the work of the wise snake charmer. This figure deploys considerable skill in a dangerous endeavour.

In this regard, he has much in common with the person who is trying to master the vaporous character of life. Like the serpent, the vaporous character of life is dangerous and has a mind of its own, as it were. It should be treated with respect and caution, and only a fool would complacently regard himself as its master.

The vicious serpent that must be tamed might relate quite nicely to the verses that

follow, concerning the tongue of the fool. The tongue itself is like a serpent, and the fool has never truly mastered it. Just as the careless snake charmer gets bitten by his serpent, so the lips of a fool consume him.

He speaks boldly and presumptuously, and because he is speaking light and airy words, he multiplies them exceedingly. They pour out profusely from his mouth, never having been weighed by his heart. The fool is worn out by his toil.

What is the toil in question? Daniel Frederick suggests that it's his speaking, that which comes most naturally to the fool, and what he has been doing in the preceding verses. Craig Bartholomew argues that it's his work more generally, since he lacks wisdom, skill and competence, the most basic tasks exact of him far more effort than they do of anyone who applies that bit of wisdom to them. Indeed, this fool is so incompetent that he does not even know the way to the city.

Commentators differ on what this means. Is the city the place of business? Is knowing the way to the city just an example of basic competence? Or is the city being thought of as the place of council? I'm inclined to think of the city here as the place of business. The fool exhausts himself by wandering aimlessly, because he does not know the way to his destination.

A little wisdom applied to that task would save him a lot of misery. Verses 16-17 return to the theme of the mismatch between character and status, which the preacher spoke of earlier in this chapter in verses 5-7. It is not a good thing to be ruled over by children.

In the notion of bossiness, for instance, we recognise the mismatch between the child's desire to exercise authority and their actual capacity and aptitude to represent and exercise it in a positive form. In Isaiah chapter 3, being ruled over by children is presented as a judgment upon the land. Verses 4 and 5 of that chapter.

And then in verse 12. In Ecclesiastes chapter 10, the particular feature of the child that seems to be picked out is the fact that their character has not been formed. They desire instant gratification, and so they feast in the morning, rather than waiting to feast at the proper time.

In Proverbs chapter 31, King Lemuel's mother warned him about the danger of being given to drink and to feasting as a king. Indeed, feasts celebrated at the proper time can strengthen a people. Joyous celebration and festivity is one of the forces that brings people together, and so feasts can be forces for strength.

But the person who is given to feasts will squander a great deal of wealth. This should probably be connected to verses 18 and 19, which speak about the danger of the sloth and indolence that lead to the roof leaking. The person who is always feasting will end up having nothing.

The joy and gladness of a good feast of bread and wine are positive things, but everything has its cost, and money must be sufficient for all such pleasures. Where it is not, ruin is near at hand. The ideal king is the son of the nobility, someone who has been raised with an aristocratic background, who is familiar with and able to exercise money and power, who has a formation of character sufficient to fill the office.

When faced with wicked, unjust or oppressive rulers, it can be very tempting to curse them. Exodus chapter 22, verse 28 commands us not to do so. In verse 20 we are also warned against cursing the rich in our bedroom.

The preacher may be referring to more than just people who exercise official authority, but also to people who exercise power in other ways. The advice may be less about the moral command of Exodus chapter 22, and more about the prudence with which we should deal with powerful people. The chapter began with a very small creature, a fly in the ointment.

It also ends with a very small winged creature, the little bird or other flying thing that might bring our words to the king or the rich man. We often fancy that we have more power over our words than we actually do. A careless word once uttered can end up in all sorts of places where we never intended it to go.

People eavesdrop, people betray confidences, and carelessly uttered secrets can return to bite the speaker. Our desire for catharsis in the face of misrule and injustice can tempt us to unwise utterances that can make our situations much worse. The wise person must be circumspect in his speech and guard his lips, and no more so than when dealing with the rich and powerful.

A question to consider. Can you think of examples of the imbalance between wisdom and folly that the preacher describes in this chapter? Ecclesiastes chapter 11 explores what it means to act in a world that is radically unpredictable, where the vaporous character of life renders the outcome of our actions inscrutable. It is a chapter that is full of natural imagery.

Water, earth, clouds, rain, trees, wind, sowing seed and reaping grain, breath, bones and the womb, light and the sun. It begins with a verse that has given rise to several different interpretations. Casting one's bread upon the waters could, according to Craig Bartholomew, mean at least one of three things.

Many have taken it to be a reference to acts of charity. This is perhaps the most dominant of traditional Jewish readings. Others have seen the casting of the bread on waters as a reference to diversified trade.

Casting bread on waters is an image of sending out merchandise on ships. The supposed advice is to send out your merchandise on a number of different ships, so that, to shift

the metaphor, all your eggs are not in one basket. A further reading that Bartholomew mentions is senseless action that is undertaken that can have unexpected consequences.

Whatever the meaning of the verse, it probably should be read in terms of verse 2, which is paralleled with it. The portion given to 7 or even to 8 may be an image of charity. Alternatively, it may be another way of speaking about diversified investments.

Not knowing what might befall any particular ship, it is the wisest course to divide your merchandise between a number of them. While Bartholomew favours this reading, William Brown finds it unpersuasive. No good merchant merely expects the return of his initial investment.

He hopes for some profit upon it. Referencing similar Arabian and Egyptian proverbs, Brown argues that this is a reference to doing good works, and he also points to Proverbs 19, verse 17 as a parallel. Casting one's bread upon the waters is an image of surrendering control.

It is an image also of uncalculated charitable action. There is no knowing where bread cast upon the waters will go. To return to the governing image of the Book of Ecclesiastes, this is action willfully undertaken at the mercy of the Vapor.

The person who casts his bread upon the waters is not trying to resist the Vapor. He engages in bold, enterprising and seemingly risky action, trusting in the mysterious operations of something else within the Vapor. There is some inscrutable moral governance that makes this a wise action.

Daniel Fredericks argues that we should not read this as an either-or principle. There is an image here of boldness and trade, but also of uncalculated charity. In both cases, the actor is instructed to act confidently and with determination, even in a world of Vapor.

The person who exhibits uncalculated charity may end up being the recipient of such charity himself. Natural events will happen when and how they will. They can't necessarily be predicted or foreseen.

How they happen cannot be controlled, and when they happen they cannot be reversed. Many have connected the image of the tree falling to death. Death has a finality to it, and the way that the tree has fallen is the way that it will lie.

Once you have died, the character of your life is out of your control. There is no way to reverse the manner of your end. This may be an implication of the verse, but I don't think it's the primary meaning of it.

More likely it refers to the way that the natural world operates beyond our sphere of control or prediction. The earliest beginnings of life in the womb, for instance, are

mysterious and veiled. They are an analogy to the world as a mysterious realm of possibilities and potential in the hand of God, whose outcome cannot be predicted.

We cannot predict the movement of the Lord's Spirit. Life is uncertain, and we can neither foretell nor control the outcome of our actions. If we are looking for predictable results in this life, we will never act.

Far better to act diligently throughout our endeavours, not having a misplaced confidence in the success of any of our actions, but making ample allowance for risk and uncertainty. We ought to act boldly in the vapour, putting our actions and our deeds in the hands of God, who directs and disposes all things. Our days are transitory.

We should welcome each dawn and recognise the gift that it represents. The sun and the eyes by which we see it are pleasant and a blessing. We should be mindful of the days of darkness that we will also experience, days that, as we will see in the chapter that follows, particularly are associated with the lengthening shadows of old age.

Life, both in its sunny days and in its days of darkness, is short, is transitory, is vapour. The preacher especially counsels young people to enjoy their youth. Youth and its pleasures are fleeting, but they are also good and should be enjoyed.

While being spiritually circumspect, it is good for young people to follow their hearts and to delight in life. God will bring all things into judgement, and perhaps one of the things that he will bring into judgement is a person's failure to enjoy life as they ought to. God hasn't given his gifts merely to test us and trip us up, but for us to enjoy.

As we saw in chapter 9, verses 7 to 9, Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do. Let your garments be always white, let not oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life, and in your toil at which you toil under the sun.

Although God will bring all things into judgement, he is not a withholding God, he is a good and generous God, and he wants us to find joy in him and his gifts. Youth in the early days of our life are fleeting, and so we should enjoy these days while we still have them, recognising that they will pass, without being mindless and spiritually unconcerned in our enjoyment. We should release our hearts from vexation and our bodies from toil when we can, and enjoy God's good rest.

A question to consider, what are some actions that we can undertake that are forms of casting our bread upon the waters, which the preacher recommends at the beginning of this chapter? Ecclesiastes chapter 12 concludes the book, returning to the theme of death that the preacher has explored throughout it. In the previous chapter in verse 8 he had written, So if a person lives many years, let him rejoice in them all, but let him

remember that the days of darkness will be many, all that comes is vanity. The counsel given here is given to the youth, to the person who still has many years ahead of them.

This clearly continues the thread of the immediately preceding two verses. Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes, but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgement.

Remove vexation from your heart, and put away pain from your body, for youth and the dawn of life are vanity. Days of darkness of the closing shadows of old age are about to come, and before that time the young man should rejoice as he can. These verses however present the present duty of the young man against the backdrop of those days of darkness that await.

These richly poetic verses begin with a charge to remember your creator, and end with a reminder that the spirit will return to God who gave it. The young man ought to enjoy his youth, but as a gift of God, in light of the fact that it is temporary and fleeting, it is still vapour. Indeed, the proper enjoyment of his youth can be a way in which he remembers his creator, a conscious appreciation of the goodness of the creator in his gifts.

The pleasure and the delights of life won't last forever. The time will come when he may not have the ability to enjoy any more. The verses that follow have traditionally generally been taken as a reference to the body closing down.

The grinders for instance are a reference to the teeth that are falling out. The darkening of the sun and moon and stars may be a darkening of the consciousness, or perhaps of the eyes. The keepers of the house may be the arms.

Those who look through the windows may be the eyes. The doors leading out to the street that are shut have been taken by some to refer to constipation, by others to the closing down of the mouth and the ears, as the old person's hearing and his voice weaken. However, many commentators have seen other things going on here.

Some see a lot more of a literal description here. The description of the death of a lord, the mourning for him, and then the collapse of his estate over time. Beyond this we could also see a lot of eschatological imagery here.

The imagery, particularly that of the darkening of the sun, moon and stars, has much in common with the sort of language that we find in the prophets concerning the day of the lord. For instance in Joel chapter 2 verses 1-2 and 6-10. Before them peoples are in anguish, all faces grow pale, the earth quakes before them, the heavens tremble, the sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining.

Jesus of course uses similar language in the Olivet Discourse. Michael Fox goes through the passage, exploring each one of these sorts of readings one by one, the allegorical,

the literal and the eschatological for each particular verse. Craig Bartholomew, rightly I believe, challenges this particular approach.

He maintains that it is unhelpful to draw such a sharp line and division between metaphorical and literal language. All language is metaphorical. Rather he argues that the preacher is working from the death of the individual to the end of history, thereby invoking the prophetic vision of God's cosmic judgement.

That is why it is so important to remember your creator in your youth. Like Genesis and the rest of the Old Testament, Kohelet does not work with the notion of the isolated individual subject here, but conceives of humankind as an integral part of God's creation. The connection between the individual and the whole cosmos could also be seen for instance in Job's curse upon the day of his birth in Job chapter 3. Themes of God's creation of the whole cosmos and of his particular birth are drawn together.

Rather more helpfully than his threefold reading of the passage, Fox writes, in Kohelet's telling, the two events, the end of a world and the end of a person, resonate in each other. The poem is intended to be mysterious and ambiguous, and the process of interpreting it may be as important as the particular solution one arrives at. Kohelet sets us in a dark and broken landscape, through which we must find our way with few guideposts.

In a fundamental sense, however, the obscurity of the details does not prevent us from understanding the poem. In fact, it is hard to fail. The gist of the poem is clear.

Enjoy life before you grow old and die. Clear too is the poetic power of the passage. The scene is weird and unsettling, evocative of dimunition, quaking, darkening, silence and fear.

The poem depicts the inevitable aging and death of the youth who is addressed in chapter 11 verse 9 and who merges with the you of the reader in chapter 12 verses 1 to 7. We can never fully penetrate the fog of the scene, but when we peer through the murk of the images, metaphors and symbols, we realise with a shudder that we are describing our own obliteration. In the interwoven images of a person, maybe a world, or perhaps a whole cosmos that's collapsing, we are reminded once again of the vaporous character of life. All levels of our reality have a transitory and vaporous character to them.

A man will ultimately die, a culture or civilisation will finally collapse, and the whole cosmos will ultimately come to its end. In images of the life of a house and a street closing down, of smashed pottery, broken vessels and snapped cords, we have a multifaceted image of a world failing. This is all summed up in the preacher's great motto, Vapor of Vapors, says the preacher, all is vapor.

The words of the preacher end where they began, but returning to this same point, those now familiar words are far more evocative and powerful. The words of the preacher are now over and we return to the framing words of some other figure in the concluding verses of the book. Given the fact that the words of the introduction and the epilogue frame the entire book and the words of the preacher, the vantage point taken by the writer at this point is a matter of some concern.

Some have argued, for instance, that the writer of the epilogue takes a rather ambivalent approach to the words of the preacher. Michael Fox writes, for instance, The words of the wise are not always comfortable, pious and traditional, as the books of Ecclesiastes and Job prove. They can sting and they must be approached with care.

However, I agree with Craig Bartholomew that Fox's position is unpersuasive. The preacher is described in verse 9 as being wise. He is described in terms that are reminiscent of Solomon.

We might think of the description of 1 Kings 4, verses 29-34. The proverbs and his songs were 1005. He spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall.

He spoke also of beasts and of birds and of reptiles and of fish. And people of all nations came to hear the wisdom of Solomon and from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom. Whether or not the preacher himself is Solomon, the description of him here certainly evokes the character of Solomon.

He is praised as the teacher of the people, as someone who studies and gathers together various anthologies of proverbs. He gives thought to the best forms of expression, wanting to communicate truth in a way that is beautiful. We might think of Proverbs chapter 25, verse 11.

A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver. The words that he writes are also described as words of truth, taking all these details together. While we might be able to render them in part in a more ambivalent sense, in their cumulative force they do seem to give a far more positive vision of the preacher than Fox allows for.

The writer of the epilogue, Addressing a Son, describes the words of the wise, collections of which we find in the book of Proverbs for instance, or see in the book of Job, as like goads or nails firmly fixed. Nails and goads might both be images of things that prick and prompt people to action. The words of the wise, correct and direct.

They're not comfortable, but they are good for us. Alternatively, the image of the nails firmly fixed might stand in contrast to all the things that we've seen about the vapour to this point. The vapour and everything else swirls around and is unpredictable.

But if you want something that's secure and lasting and that can be depended upon,

look to the words of the wise. Their words can be depended upon because ultimately they come from one shepherd, from God himself. However, although it is very good to learn from the wise, there is a danger of going beyond their words.

The writer of the epilogue is probably not forbidding this. Rather, he's cautioning the son that if he moves beyond the tutelage of the wise and tries to understand these things for himself, he has set for himself a daunting and a difficult task with a great many associated dangers. The person who leaves behind the clear sight of the shore provided by the straightforward teaching of the wise and ventures forth upon the sea of wisdom for himself is in great danger of becoming shipwrecked.

The preacher who sought out these things for himself undertook such a journey. But such a quest is not for everyone to try at home. We must all recognise our limitations and few of us should undertake to think things through from first principles for ourselves.

The writer of the epilogue concludes the book by summing up the message that he wants the son to take away. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. It's a message that we hear in the book of Psalms, in Job and also on several occasions in Proverbs.

Here, as in those other places, the fear of the Lord and the keeping of the Lord's commandments are put at the forefront of the task of wisdom. Indeed, the writer of the epilogue describes these as the whole duty of man. In considering death, mortality, temporality and the vaporous character of life, we are excited into a new awareness of our end as human beings, both the terminus of our lives and the telos of our lives.

This chapter began by charging the young man to remember his creator in the days of his youth and it ends with the writer of the epilogue reminding the son that every deed will be brought into judgment. He should enjoy his life, he should eat, he should drink and he should rejoice before the Lord, but he must also recognize that he will give an account for everything that he does. We live in the shadow and the vapor under the sun, but that does not mean that our deeds are of no consequence.

Where the realm of sight is transitory, inscrutable and insubstantial, we must learn to live by faith in the God who is above the vapor. A question to consider. On what basis do you believe that the writer of the epilogue writes that fearing God and keeping his commandments is the appropriate response to all that the preacher has raised within the book?