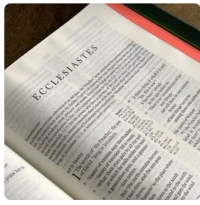


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Ecclesiastes 1 - 4



Ecclesiastes - Steve Gregg

In this lecture, Steve Gregg discusses Ecclesiastes 1-4 and its message about the emptiness of worldly pursuits. The author, who identifies himself as the preacher and son of David, sets out to discover if anything in life is not vanity. Unfortunately, his conclusion is that everything is vanity, including knowledge and human pursuits. While the book acknowledges God's existence, it encourages readers to enjoy life, acknowledging that everything will pass away, but God will remain. The lecture ends with Gregg discussing the importance of relationships and the need for individuals to work together to accomplish tasks.

Transcript

I don't intend to make extensive comment, not like Proverbs anyway. In Proverbs, almost every proverb had sort of a study that could be given concerning its content, but we're going to go through Ecclesiastes somewhat more rapidly, partly because it is not like the book of Proverbs in having every verse be on a separate subject, and there's more of a train of thought, little blocks of subject matter, and sometimes the subject matter is simply an expression of cynicism and not really necessarily a conveyance of deep spiritual truth, as we shall see. However, the general mood of Ecclesiastes is one of cynicism and is of pessimism, and is conveying the idea that life under the sun, that is of course not taking God into account, but only considering things from a worldly standpoint, is truly emptiness, and the word emptiness here is represented in the New King James with the word vanity.

The words of the preacher, or kohelet in Hebrew, some people take kohelet to be a proper name, but it means one who gathers and addresses an assembly, and since this term is used a number of times in the book to speak of the main thinker whose ideas are presented here, it is likely not really a reference to a proper name, and since Solomon would seem to be the one so described, he's simply being referred as one who is addressing a group of listeners. Now this group of listeners may be an intended readership rather than an actual gathering, so to call him one who gathers an assembly and addresses it may be figurative. He may be gathering whoever may ever read this to hear his voice rather than some actual geographical gathering.

He says he's the preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem, and this of course is the first indicator that we're looking at Solomon. Vanity of vanities, says the preacher, vanity of vanities, all is vanity. Now vanity of vanities is a Hebraism that is a Hebraism of emphasis, of course, like when we think of the holy of holies, it means the holiest place of all, and vanity of vanities means the emptiness, ultimate emptiness.

Life is just as empty as can be imagined, he's saying. All of it is just plain emptiness. What prophet has a man from all his labor in which he toils under the sun? One generation passes away and another generation comes, but the earth abides forever.

The sun also rises and the sun goes down, and it hastens to the place where it arose. The wind goes toward the south and turns around to the north. The wind whirls about continually and comes again on its circuit.

All the rivers run into the sea, yet the sea is not full. To the place from which the rivers come, there they return again. All things are full of labor.

Man cannot express it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. That which has been is what will be.

That which is done is what will be done. There is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which it may be said, see, this is new? It has already been in ancient times before us.

There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of things that are to come by those who will come after. Now, this is a poem that seems to introduce the book before the preacher actually begins to explain his experiment. His experiment, he begins to explain in chapter 1, verse 12, and it goes on into chapter 2 and so forth.

And his experiment, of course, was to discover whether there was anything that is not vanity. Is there anything under the sun that is not mere emptiness and a waste of effort? Now, this opening poem, as it were, states his theme. His theme is that nothing really progresses.

What good is labor? You may make some progress, but like everything else, your progress will come to an end and someone else is going to have to start from their own starting point. And it may be that all that you've done will come to nothing, as he points out later in the book. He says, if a man toils all his life, all his days under the sun, yet nothing is really going to permanently change.

The wind goes north, the wind goes south. The river runs into the sea, the river water returns back to the source of the rivers. The sun rises, the sun goes down.

Everything is just really a cycle that doesn't make any particular progress. It's just all

repetition. Everything is old.

Nothing is new. Now, this is not entirely true, and of course, we're not going to stand by what Solomon says in Ecclesiastes, nor would he necessarily stand by it at the time later in his life when he wrote this book. He is expressing what he had found to be true in his life apart from God, and he had spent some of his years apart from God and realized that life was empty.

He was not such a man as could live a shallow, unexamined life and be happy that way. Just living for shallow pleasures was not enough. Pleasures, yes, he wanted pleasures, but he could not live a life of pleasure without examining it and saying, is this really making sense? He was too philosophical for that.

And so, he writes the book telling us that while he was away from God, he could find nothing worth living for under the sun. And even the accomplishments that a man might accomplish, and he accomplished a great deal because he built a lot of fancy buildings, he wrote a lot of proverbs, he became famous, he built up the nation in some ways, and yet he's saying, you know, so what? So what? It's all big cycles. Someday this nation I built is going to be dust again.

The earth will go on forever. Generations come and go, but the earth goes on forever. Now, that doesn't necessarily, that's not necessarily true.

He didn't know whether it was true or not, but it seemed to him that the earth just doesn't change. The Bible does indicate there will be an end of the world. There will be a new heavens and a new earth, and the present heavens and earth will pass away.

Again, Solomon is not giving us here eschatology, he's not giving us even doctrine. He's giving us his impressions of life as a man who had wandered from God. And so, he says there's really nothing new to report.

Everything that's happening now has happened before in ancient times, it'll happen again. Now, in verse 12, he begins to explain this experiment he did with his life. He says, I, the preacher, I, Koheleth, was king over Israel in Jerusalem, and I set my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all that is done under heaven.

This grievous task God has given to the sons of man, by which they may be exercised. Now, he's saying that man has been given the task by God of figuring out what life is about, and what the significance is of life. Animals don't have that task, they don't have the capacity even to reflect upon such things.

As near as we can tell, animals just live their lives to reproduce and eat and die. And they don't really reflect on why they're here, what it's all about. You know, what's out there, what happens after death, these deep reflective ideas are only humans.

They are part of the image of God in us to be concerned about such things. Later, he's going to say that God has put eternity in man's heart. God has given man the task of contemplating things that the animals cannot contemplate, and therefore it is our responsibility to contemplate them, because it is our special gifting.

He says this is what the task that God has given to the sons of men, by which they may be exercised. I have seen all the works that are done under the sun, and indeed, all is vanity and grasping for the wind. What is crooked cannot be made straight, what is lacking cannot be numbered.

I communed with my heart, saying, look, I have attained greatness and have gained more wisdom than all who were before me in Jerusalem. My heart has understood great wisdom and knowledge. And I sent my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly.

I perceived that this also is grasping for the wind. For in much wisdom is much grief, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow. So, he says, as a human being, I have the capacity and no doubt the responsibility under God to figure out what life is about, what matters, what brings satisfaction, what is the purpose of existence.

And he says, the more I learned, the unhappier I get. You know, you can't be happy in ignorance, although they say ignorance is bliss, but a thoughtful person cannot be happy knowing that he is ignorant of things perhaps that can be discovered. Just to live a shallow life, ignorant of things that you know you could discover and probably should discover, is unsatisfying, at least to an intelligent person.

And yet, when that intelligent person conducts the exploration and gains more knowledge, it's not encouraging. The more you learn of reality, the more you learn of the tragic effects of the fallenness of this world, and how much evil there is, how much injustice, how much bloodshed, how much dissatisfaction, how many broken relationships, how much pain and suffering there is. It's almost like I kind of wish I didn't know all this.

With increased knowledge is increased grief, or sorrow. And that's what he's saying. He says we've got this capacity to figure things out, to search out, to discover, to know things, and yet the more we know, the sadder it is, what we find out.

Life is tragic, and in some senses, meaningless. At least under the sun, without taking God into account, one cannot discover what the meaning of life is. What does a person live for? Why do we exist? Is it any different than the animals? It's, of course, the assumption of the naturalistic scientists and evolutionists that there is actually no transcendent purpose for man's being here at all.

That man's arrival here is more or less an accident of evolution. It's just something that

we're just the next thing that came along. And after us will come along something superior to us, and after that, something more.

We're just one of the stages in evolution. We don't exist for any particular reason. The world didn't know we were coming, and it won't know when we left.

According to evolutionists, the cosmos did not intend for us to be here, did not predict us coming. We're just one of the species that came along. We just happen to be the first one to come along that can actually do some analysis of our lives.

And yet, any perception that there is a purpose for existence is a misperception. It's a delusion. What is the purpose of a frog? Well, the purpose of a frog, no doubt, is to hold down a place in the food chain, and not much else.

It eats certain creatures smaller than itself, and it is eaten by creatures larger than itself. And apart from that, it just reproduces more frogs to do the same thing. What is the transcendent purpose of a frog? There doesn't seem to be any, unless we take God into account, in which case we could say the purpose of a frog is to give pleasure to his creator, and perhaps to humans.

But the point is that until you take some transcendent being into account, some creator who had a purpose, no actual purpose of any depth can be imagined for a frog or a man. Now one could say, but a man is capable of doing so much more good, yes, and so much more evil, but what a man is capable of doesn't tell us what his purpose is. A man is capable of destroying the world.

Is that what the purpose of man was, to destroy the world? Well we could say, no, the purpose of man is to enhance the world with his better gifts and so forth. Well, how do we know that's the purpose? Just because that's what we would prefer for man to do. You see, a philosopher can say, it's our purpose to do good to our fellow man.

Well, who says that? It certainly is more natural for us to do selfish things and harmful things to our fellow man. Who is it who tells us that it's our purpose to do good for our fellow man? Who can say that that's why humans exist? That's only a person who's expressing their own sentiments. I wish people would do good for their fellow man.

I think it's nicer if people do good to their fellow man. Well, we all would agree with that, but who's to say that that's the purpose for our existence? In fact, how can there even be a purpose for our existence if there is no God? Because if there's no purposer, if there's no mind and will conferring ultimate purpose, then any other purpose we can imagine is imaginary. It's simply delusional.

And one person said it'd be an amazing thing if a purposeless universe produced creatures like ourselves who are obsessed with finding purpose. Why would evolution produce people who have been obsessed with figuring out what it's all about if in fact

evolution is all it's about and that's nothing at all but a mechanistic thing that has no direction, no end, and no purpose in view? It's just kind of chance. You see, so Solomon says men know better than that.

Men know that there must be a purpose. If a person believes in a mechanistic, atheistic evolution, that person cannot really say why there would be a purpose or what that purpose would be. They can only say what they would like to see people do, and they can maybe define that as the purpose of living.

But that's only their own sentiments. You know, Adolf Hitler thought his purpose was to rid the world of the Jewish race and of all inferior beings and to promote the super race. That's what he preferred for the purpose of life to be, and that's the purpose he chose and pursued.

Most of us would say that's not the purpose of humanity, but who's to say he was wrong and we're right just because we don't prefer his way? Until there is God in the picture, there is no one standing above saying this is what you're here for and you must conform to this because I made you for that. You take God out of the picture, there's no one whose ideas of purpose have any more authority than anybody else's. And when Solomon is trying to figure out what life is for, without God as his anchor point, there's really nothing to settle on.

He's just adrift, seeking purpose, seeking some reason for humans to be existing. And so he conducted an experiment which he explains. He says, I tried this.

I looked into that. I explored this thing. I experienced this.

And I sought that. And everything I sought and experienced and explored, I found to be the same thing, empty. It really didn't have ultimate purpose that could be defined in it.

He says, I said in my heart, chapter 2, come now, I will test you with mirth. He's speaking to his own heart apparently. I'm going to test myself with mirth.

That would be basically partying. He says, therefore enjoy pleasure. But surely this also is emptiness.

I said of laughter, it's madness. And of mirth, what does it accomplish? So that was shallow. That was a phase that he went through rather quickly.

He could see immediately that just laughing and partying and drinking and, you know, ignoring the world for a while while you go into a state of temporary artificial bliss, that really didn't count for anything in the long run. You still have to go home. You still have to face the world the next day.

It's emptiness. He could see that right off. That didn't distract him for very long.

Verse 3, I searched in my heart how to gratify my flesh with wine while guiding my heart with wisdom. So he said, I'm trying to see how much I can drink without losing my wits. You know, let's experiment that.

Where's the edge here? How much can I make myself happy with wine without losing my control over my thoughts, over my mind? And he says, and how to lay hold on folly till I might see what was good for the sons of men to do under heaven all the days of their lives. Now how to lay hold on folly, I don't think he means that he wants to be foolish. I think he wants to figure out how to distinguish between wisdom and folly and to not lose his discernment between the two.

Although at the same time, gratifying his flesh as much as he could, even with wine, he knew that if he drank too much wine, he'd lose some of that rational capacity, so he didn't want to go over that edge, but he wanted to enjoy it as much as he could without losing his wits. I made my works great. I built myself houses and planted myself vineyards.

We know that Solomon's projects, building the temple, building his own house and building many others, were one of the things that he occupied himself with. Apparently in this case, it sounds like he's trying to find some kind of satisfaction in life through his building projects. I made myself gardens and orchards, and I planted all kinds of fruit trees in them.

So like many people, he got into horticulture. And I made myself water pools, he got into landscaping, from which the water, to water the growing trees of the grove. I acquired male and female servants and had servants born in my house.

Yes, I had greater possessions of herds and flocks than all who were in Jerusalem before me. So he's the richest king they've had, and that would of course apply to Solomon, it would not apply to any of his successors. I also gathered for myself silver and gold, and the special treasures of kings and of the provinces, I acquired male and female singers, the delights of the sons of men, and musical instruments of all kinds.

He got into music, concerts, thinking maybe music would satisfy his thirst of his soul. So I became great and excelled more than all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me.

That is, I didn't stop thinking, clearly. Whatever my eyes desired, I did not keep from them. Talk about the lust of the eyes being greed.

Lust of the eyes refers to just wanting to possess things. This is not the same thing as the lust of the flesh. He was talking about gratifying his flesh in verse 3, and now he's talking about gratifying his eyes.

Whatever his eyes desired, he didn't keep from them. He was the richest man in the

world. He could get whatever he wanted.

Whatever anyone could buy, he could buy more of it. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart rejoiced in all my labor, and this was my reward from all my labor. Then I looked on all the works that my hands had done, and on the labor in which I had toiled, and indeed all was emptiness and grasping for the wind.

There was no profit under the sun in all this stuff. Then I turned myself to consider wisdom and madness and folly, for what can a man do who succeeds the king? Or what can the man do who succeeds the king? Only what he has already done. I don't know why I found that so difficult to read.

Then I saw that wisdom excels folly, as light excels darkness. The wise man's eyes are in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. Yet I myself perceived that the same event happens to all of them.

Of course, he's talking about death. Now he said that in life, it's much better to be wise than to be a fool, just like it's much better to be in the light than in the dark. The wise man sees, the fool doesn't see.

Now of course he's not talking about physical sight, he's saying that the wise man who contemplates things understands and grasps the nature of things in a way that a fool never will. It's like he's got the light on, and he's not in the darkness. Wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness.

He's got his eyes open. The fool walks in darkness. Yet, even so, even though it's much better to be wise than foolish in terms of earthly advantages, still we all leave this world.

And no matter how wise we've been, it doesn't change the fact that the same event happens to them all. So I said in my heart, as it happens to the fool, it also happens to me. And why was I then more wise? Then I said in my heart, this also is emptiness.

For there is no more remembrance of the wise than of the fool forever, since all that now is will be forgotten in the days to come. And how does the wise man die? Just like the fool does. So he said it is indeed some gratification to be a wise person rather than a fool.

But when you're wise, you contemplate the future. A wise man looks ahead, and you can only look so far, and you realize that at some point in the head is your last day, and you're going to die. After that, you won't enjoy your wisdom anymore.

After that, anything you've done will not matter to you. Unless you can find satisfaction that lasts beyond that point, beyond the point of death, then all the satisfaction you've had is transient and fleeting. And although some people are quite happy to live with transient and fleeting satisfaction as long as they can keep it up, a wise man isn't that

way.

A wise man says, okay, I'm enjoying myself tomorrow, next year, a few decades from now, when I'm really old, or when I'm on my deathbed, what am I going to be thinking about this then? Am I going to look back at this enjoyable day that I've had and this enjoyable night and say, boy, was that great? Or am I going to say, what a waste that was. Here I am at my deathbed, and that day of pleasure I had 30 years ago is not only failing to bring me pleasure now, but it strikes me as a delusional thing. I was not even mindful of this event, death, that I would face.

It was just something that was distracting me from what really matters. But the question is, what does really matter? And that's what Solomon's trying to get at. What does? What is it on your deathbed that you can look back and say, well, I'm sure glad I did that one thing? And as many people have pointed out to our modern workaholic kind of world, there's very few people on their deathbed who sit there contemplating how they wish they'd worked one more day in the office or made just a few more thousand bucks before they died.

They do often regret many other things, like not having spent more time with their children, or not having reconciled with somebody that was important in their life, or something else like that. When you're on your deathbed, you look back at things with a different set of values. The things that seemed so important when you seemed healthy and immortal suddenly seem to be shallow and meaningless, and Solomon says the wise man doesn't wait until he's on his deathbed to think like that.

He's wise enough to realize that day is coming, and now he can look at everything today through that lens. How will I feel about this 30, 40, 50 years from now? And if you ever look to add eternity into the equation, how will I look at what I'm doing today a thousand years from now, a million years from now? What will my thoughts be about the way I use my opportunities on this calendar day? Death sobers life. I mean, the contemplation of death places all of life in a different perspective.

Somebody said that all of life is just a preparation for death, and a lot of people aren't living their lives as if they believe that to be true, but of course that's a reasonable way to look at it, because that's what is the end of all men, he says. How does the wise man die? Just like the fool, possibly with fewer regrets. It's always, I suppose, nice to think that you could die without regrets, that you could be on your deathbed knowing you're going off into eternity and say, you know, I don't have any serious regrets about the major things I did with my life.

A wise man may die with fewer regrets because he's been wiser and he's done fewer foolish things that are regrettable, but nonetheless, he dies, and in one sense, everyone dies alike. Now, verse 17, therefore I hated life, because the work that was done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is emptiness and grasping for the wind. Then I hated

all my labor in which I had toiled under the sun, because I must leave it to the man who will come after me, and who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool, yet he will rule over all my labor in which I toiled and in which I have shown myself wise under the sun.

This also is emptiness. Therefore I turned my heart and despaired of all the labor in which I toiled under the sun, for there is a man whose labor is with wisdom, knowledge, and skill, yet he must leave his heritage to a man who has not labored for it. This also is emptiness and a great evil.

For what has man of all his labor, and for the striving of his heart under which he has toiled under the sun? He says, all his days are sorrowful and his work grievous. Even in the night his heart takes no rest. This also is vanity.

Now Solomon is telling what's going on in his own heart. He has labored, he's accomplished many things. He's built the temple, he's built great civic works, he's built the most glorious kingdom and maintained the most glorious kingdom in the region.

He's very famous, but he says all of his days really are sorrow. Even at night he doesn't rest well. Well that's because his conscience was not clear.

We know that Solomon compromised and departed from the Lord. He knew better, but it's what he wanted to do. He did what he wanted to do instead of what he knew he should do.

When a man does that, he's got a seared, or at least a bothered conscience. Not seared necessarily, but an injured conscience. And an injured conscience deprives one of good sleep and of happiness during his days.

And Solomon knew that no matter how rich he was, no matter how many women he had, no matter how many buildings he built, no matter how many gardens he planted, how many places he landscaped, no matter how many works of art decorated his palace, no matter whatever, how much wine he was able to drink, how many friends he was able to hang out with, all of that was tainted by the fact that his conscience was not clear. He didn't sleep well at night, and he wasn't really all that happy during the day either. There is nothing better for a man, he says, than that he should eat and drink, and that his soul should enjoy the good in his labor.

This also I saw was from the hand of God. Now this is not really true, but this was true from his point of view as one looking at things merely from the worldly vantage point, that nothing really matters in the end, so you might as well enjoy what you're doing. You might as well try to just enjoy your food, and the things that you've worked for.

Whatever you've acquired through your labor, enjoy it as much as you can. That's what God has given you now. He said this is from the hand of God, and he may be saying this

is all there is to be had from the hand of God, because that was perhaps his thinking at the time.

There is a God, and all that you can really say for sure he's given you is what you've got, the food on your table, whatever you've acquired by your labor. That's God's gift to you, enjoy it, because it may be all you're going to get. Now that of course is not what the New Testament teaches, but the Old Testament doesn't have very much information about what happens after you die, and even if it did, Solomon would not necessarily have been in touch with it at this point in his life.

For who can eat, or who can have enjoyment more than I? For God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy to a man who is good in his sight, but to the sinner he gives the work of gathering and collecting, that he may give to him who is good before God. This also is vanity and grasping for the wind. So God gives wisdom and joy and good stuff to good men.

To bad men, God just gives the task of gathering up stuff that will eventually be given over to the good men. This is simplistic, this is not the way it really is, because God doesn't always bless good men with all the things of life, and bad men don't always just, you know, lose out. But this is something that Solomon thinks should be so, and no doubt since he was a prosperous man, felt like he must also be righteous and good, and therefore this must be how God treats good people.

The opening verses of chapter 3 were made famous back in the 60s by a song by the rock group the Birds called Turn, Turn, Turn, was the name of the song, and it was just basically the words of this section of Ecclesiastes, and many people thought this was just a very beautiful observation of life and so forth, but actually it seems to be his way of saying life is monotonous, life is relativistic, there are no absolutes, nothing can be counted on as being always the right thing to do. Sometimes it seems to be right to be born, other times it's the right time to die, sometimes it's time to plant, sometimes it's time to pluck up, sometimes you should kill, sometimes you should heal somebody. He's saying, you know, this is how life seems to be, not consistent.

Now we can take these words and say well there's a truthfulness about it, because in the purposes of God, all of these things have their proper place, and if what you're doing is the will of God, well then that's always the right thing to do. It will not always be the same thing that you're doing, but it will always be right to do what God wants you to do at that time, and therefore we can take this from a Christian point of view and say there are times when Christians should mourn, and times when they should dance. There are times when they should weep, and times when they should laugh.

There are times when they should break things down, and other times they should build them up, in the will of God. And if we're thinking of, you know, God is, you know, he's not simplistic. There's not just one set of robotic things that he programs us to do, and it's

always what we're supposed to do without any variation.

Life is full of changes. Life is full of duties of different kinds, and a hierarchy of duties. Sometimes the most important thing is to do this, and in another situation another thing may be more important to do.

This is not relativism. This is not situational ethics. This is just acknowledging that right and wrong, though they are moral categories, they do not determine always what the right thing to do is in every case, because not all these things are moral issues, and therefore God may want you to gather stones one day and throw stones away another day.

Judy, you know, God has you gathering stones. He may want you sometimes to throw them away too. Yes, she collects stones wherever she goes, but she's in the gathering mode now, but maybe it's time to cast them away, he said.

Now, though we could see this through a Christian point of view, that's not the way that Solomon is looking at it, probably. He seems to be saying, you know, today I'm a builder. That was the right thing to do.

Someday the right thing may be that someone will come and tear this all down, what I've built. Today I'm gathering stones together. Someone may scatter them another time.

There's just, again, it's this repetitious monotony, this unpredictability about life. This is what he's saying in these first eight verses, it would appear. He says, to everything there's a season, a time for every purpose under heaven, a time to be born and a time to die, two opposite things, a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted, a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to break down and a time to build up, a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance, a time to cast away stones, a time to gather stones together, a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing, a time to gain and a time to lose, a time to keep and a time to throw away, a time to tear, a time to sew, a time to keep silence, a time to speak, a time of love and a time of hate, a time of war and a time of peace.

Now, this means that there are times when war is the right thing to do and times when peace is the right thing to do. A time when being silent is the right thing to do and a time when being silent is the wrong thing to do. And essentially what he's saying is, it seems to be saying, there really doesn't seem to be any absolute right and wrong.

It just seems like sometimes one thing's right, sometimes another thing's wrong, right. And as for a philosophical type of man to try to figure out what life is about, he's basically saying you can't get a handle on it because life may seem to be about this, but next thing you know it seems about the opposite thing. There's a time for this and then there's going to be a different time when this is the right thing.

And so it's vanity trying to figure out what life is for. What profit has the worker from that in which he labors? I have seen the God-given task with which the sons of men are occupied. He has made everything beautiful in its time.

Also, he has put eternity in their hearts except that no one can find out the work that God does from the beginning to end. Now, two statements here. He has made everything beautiful in its time.

In the King James Version it says he's made everything beautiful in his time, which has made some people read it as if it's saying that in God's timing everything is good. That is, everything turns out okay in his proper timing. Sort of like all things work out together for the good to those who love God and who are called according to his purpose.

Everything that happens in God's time he makes it beautiful, but that's not really what it's saying. It's just saying the same thing that the first eight verses were saying. That in its own proper time, it's not in his time, it's in its time.

In its own proper time each thing has its own moment to be right and to be beautiful and to be attractive and appropriate, but then the opposite thing may be appropriate at another time. In its own time each thing God has made to be attractive to us, but it's not necessarily absolute, he's saying, which is of course, it's not completely true. There are absolutes, but he seems to be suggesting that there aren't any real absolutes, more of a situational ethics idea seems to be what he's thinking at this point.

He says, also he, that is God, has put eternity in their hearts. Now eternity, the Hebrew word here means something like the vanishing point. You know, looking toward a point where you can't see any further and contemplate what may be beyond that point.

That's what God has put in people's hearts, to think about things that are beyond the point that we can contemplate, infinity. You know, there may be people who do not say that they believe in immortality, but no one can doubt that there is such a thing as infinity. There is an infinite number of numbers, for example.

There may be an infinite amount of space, although I guess Einstein's theories now would suggest that space has its limits, it's not infinite, but certainly there are things that could be, we can imagine things infinitely small. What I mean is they can always get smaller than they are. You can always take whatever exists and cut it in half, and then you've got smaller units, and you keep cutting them in half.

There's no end to how small you can get them. Infinity makes our brains hurt, and yet it's part of reality, at least parts of some reality. Now an infinity of duration, eternity, is something that we really have a hard time with.

To think that we will, either we or God or whatever exists, will always be there, and always was there. And those are the kinds of things that get a person philosophical, but

not necessarily enlightened, because a person has it in their heart to search out eternity. That's something that animals no doubt have no conception of or concern about, but God has put eternity in the hearts of men, and yet, he says, no one can find out the work of God that he does from beginning to end.

We know there is such a thing as eternity. It intrigues us, but we can't figure out really how God began, since presumably he had no beginning if he's eternal. Well, how could something have no beginning? And what was he doing before he was making this planet? You know, we can talk about how old the universe is or how old the earth is, and we can speculate and we can debate about that, but there's another question.

What about before there was a universe? What was God doing with the infinity of his time before that? Could he have had millions of previous universes that ran their course over billions of years and died and then he made new ones? Who knows? We don't really know what he did. No one can find out what God has done from beginning to end. We're curious, but we can't really answer the questions.

He's saying, I know that there's nothing better for them than to rejoice and to do good in their lives, and also that every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labor. It is the gift of God. Again, this is the second time he's said this.

The first time he said it was back in chapter 2, in verse 24. There's nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and his soul should enjoy good in his labor. So that's also what God has given.

He says it again in verse 13. It seems to be what he keeps coming back to. Can't figure out what life is about.

I can sit around and contemplate the heavens and think about eternity and get not very far at all. When it comes down to it, all I really have is what's on my table in front of me, my food and my drink, and the fruits of my labor. I guess I should just enjoy that.

There's nothing really better that I can think of than that. I know that whatever God does, it shall be forever. Nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it.

God does it that men should fear before him. That which is has already been, and what is to be has already been. And God requires an account of what is past.

Now, he seems to be saying God has unsearchable plans about the future. And, you know, like he said at the end of verse 11, no one can search out or know what the work that God does from beginning to end. But we do know this, that there will be something he requires of us from what we did in the past.

And the future is going to just have a lot of repetition of what's already been. But beyond that, there's not much that we can say about the past and the future. Moreover, I saw

under the sun in the place of judgment, that means in the courtroom, wickedness was there.

And in the place of righteousness, iniquity was there. So he sees corruption in the government, his own government probably, not so much that he was a corrupt man. And we know he was corrupt in the sense of, you know, following false gods.

And we know that there were some injustices he did, like his persecution of Jeroboam. But in general, it is probable that his government was a fairly just administration, that he was concerned about righteousness and justice in the courts. And yet, every king must know that there's a whole bunch of lower officials that he has appointed.

Judges and magistrates and governors and people who have to take responsibility that he delegates. And not all of them are good men. A lot of them will take bribes.

A lot of them are corrupt. And he sees that. And it bothers him.

He says, I said in my heart, God shall judge the righteous and the wicked, for there shall be a time there for every purpose and for every work. So he's essentially said, there's justice is not always done in the courts. And the best I can fall back on is that God will settle all the scores eventually.

There are victims of oppression and injustice, and God's going to have to just sort that out someday, because we can't get rid of it from the government. I said in my heart, concerning the estate of the sons of men, God tests them, that they may see that they themselves are like beasts. For what happens to the sons of men also happens to beasts.

One thing befalls them. As one dies, so dies the other. Surely they all have one breath.

Man has no advantage over beasts, for all is vanity. All go to one place. All are from the dust, and all return to the dust.

Who knows whether, the Septuagint says, whether the spirit of the sons of men goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down to the earth. Now it reads differently in the Masoretic text here, but many translators follow the Septuagint on this, that he's saying, who really knows whether it's as we think it may be. We hope that the spirit of man goes up to God, though the spirit of beasts we don't expect that of.

Their spirit just goes back down to the earth, but we expect that our spirit goes up to God, but who knows if that's true. So I perceive that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his own works, for that is his heritage, for who can bring him to see what will happen after him. Again, just rejoice in what you've got, that's what you have, that's all you can be sure of.

Now, again the contemplation of death is on the mind of every thinking person, and

every thinking person has to evaluate the present, has to evaluate their moral behavior, their plans, their major choices in life, in view of the fact that they are going to die, and someday they will face death, and if there's a judgment after that, that too. And Solomon doesn't have any idea what's going to go on after that. He does say God's going to have to do the judging here.

He's going to have to judge the righteous and the wicked, because the courts don't guarantee justice in that area. So he's figuring there must be justice planned by God somehow. He doesn't have any direct revelation from God about how that works, but all thinking people, all religious people certainly, have believed that one way or another the injustices of this world have to be redressed in the long run.

And the two theories that exist pretty much are those of Eastern religion and those of Western religion. In Eastern religion it is karma that settles all the scores, not instantly, but over a series of many lifetimes. If you do injustices in this life, you will receive punishment.

If you don't receive it in this life, you'll receive it in another life. One way or another your karma will catch up with you because you can't just get away with stuff. And you also can't do good things without being rewarded.

You might do good things and not be rewarded in this life, but you'll be rewarded in the next one. Karma will determine that. Karma is your credit score in terms of cosmic reality.

And therefore you'll always collect either the good or the bad that you do. You'll collect on it. That's how Eastern religion settles the question.

Why is there injustice in the world? Well, there really isn't. After all, karma will smooth everything out. Everything will be settled rightly and justly.

Now in Western religion there's the belief in a transcendent God who actually cares about right and wrong and who will judge, not so much through a series of lifetimes through reincarnation, but on one day of judgment. The day will come when all people after death are called before God and he will settle the scores then. Now everybody has got to come up with some idea of how justice will be meted out ultimately after death because everybody has an awareness that justice doesn't happen in this life.

Now the atheist might say, well, just because we think there should be justice doesn't mean that there is. Bertrand Russell in his essay, *Why I'm Not a Christian*, said one of the worst arguments for the existence of God is this idea of justice being served. He said, Christians believe that because not all things are just in this world, there must be a God who will make them just in a final judgment.

But Bertrand Russell said, I don't see why that would follow. He said that the only slice of

reality we know about is this life and it's not just and we might as well deduce that the rest is true. If we could see it all, it's all unjust.

He said, if I ordered a crate of oranges and I found that the top ones were all bad, I wouldn't deduce that, well, the lower ones must be good since the top ones are bad, there has to be some good ones somewhere. He says, I would just figure out it's a bad consignment, a bad lot of oranges. He said, judging from the top layer, the layer I can see, I'm going to extrapolate to the whole box, it's all bad.

He said, same thing with life. He says, judging from this earthly life, the only part we can see, it's unjust. And he said, we could as easily extrapolate that everything is unjust.

There's no justice anywhere. There will never be any resolution. Why do Christians think that there must be a resolution after this? It's only wishful thinking.

But you see, what he fails to understand is why there would be such wishful thinking. If justice is not a reality, a cosmic reality, why does everybody think it is? Why does everybody have a concept of justice if there is no such thing as justice somewhere? Why is it, if there is not some ultimate justice, that everybody feels that there should be? Where do we get this concept of justice? Certainly not from our own instincts, because if we're to go by evolution, our own instincts would lead us to exploit injustice as much as we could, as does exploit other people, because it's the survival of the fittest. There would be nothing to say it's wrong for us to do devious, sneaky, unjust things to other people, since that's being more fit for survival.

That's getting the advantage over the weaker, the more foolish. That's perpetuating my genes to another generation. Is that what evolution is supposed to do? Those of us who are smart enough to take advantage of other people, where is this concept of justice coming from, if not from God? Where is there a species other than man that has a craving for anything that doesn't exist? Animals crave food.

Animals crave, apparently, sex. Animals crave shelter and security, and those things actually are things that exist for them. There is a craving in them because it keeps them alive.

There is something they are craving that really exists in the real world and that they need. So why do humans have a craving for justice if it doesn't exist? How would evolution give some species an insatiable and universal craving for something that just doesn't exist to be had? Where does that come from? Why would evolution select for that kind of orientation if it wasn't something that was really there? It's perplexing because we see injustice in the world, in the courts, in just reality, in the disposition of events. We say there must be justice somewhere.

It must be that God will sort this out. That's what Solomon concluded, he said, is that

God's going to have to judge things. And he says, trouble is, we don't know very much about that.

After death, it seems like people and animals all die just the same. Earlier he said fools and wise men die the same, but that was all people. Now he says people die just like animals do.

Who can say that the human spirit has any other destiny than the animal spirit? We just don't know, he's saying. Now quickly, let's look at chapter 4. Then I returned and considered all the oppression that is done under the sun. And look, the tears of the oppressed, but they have no comforter.

On the side of their oppressors there was power, but they have no comforter. Therefore I praised the dead who are already dead more than the living who are still alive. Yet better than both is he who had never existed, who has not seen the evil work that is done under the sun.

Better to die and get away from all this, or better still never to have seen it, never suffered it in the first place. Better to have never been born. Again I saw that for all the toil and every skillful work a man is envied by his neighbor, this also is emptiness and grasping for the wind.

The fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh. Better is a handful with quietness than both hands fold together with toil and grasping for the wind. Sounds a little bit like some of the Proverbs where it says it's better to have a few breadcrumbs with peace in the home rather than a great feast with striving in the home.

A man who has a little bit but is quiet and tranquil is in a better state than the man who's not tranquil, not content, although he has twice as much stuff. The man who has twice as much stuff is envied by his neighbor, so he's always got to be looking over his shoulder to see if someone's going to try to take his stuff. Then I returned and I saw a vanity under the sun.

There's one alone without companion. He has neither son nor brother, yet there is no end to all his labors, nor is his eye satisfied with riches, but he never asks for whom do I toil and deprive myself of good. This also is vanity and a grave misfortune.

This is a man who has no family, no one to leave his goods to, no companion or brother to share them with. He's just grabbing stuff by the hands full, getting rich and working hard, knocking himself out to get rich, and never crosses his mind thinking, what's the point of this? There's no one here to share this with. There's no one to leave this to.

What's the good of having all this? I often think that about people who are billionaires. Obviously, one good thing they can do is give it to the poor, and some of them do. Some billionaires give a lot of money away, but there are still billionaires that hold on to billions

for themselves.

They have 20 houses around the world that they own, maybe more, and jets and more cars than they can possibly drive. They feel good about having everything they want, but do they ever ask themselves, what can I do with all this stuff? I can't live in all these houses. I can't drive all these cars.

What's the point of accumulating these things? Now, if they say, I can leave them to my large family and my kids can drive all these cars, that might be an answer that's good, but he's talking about someone who really is alone in the world. He's not sharing with a family. He's just somebody who's getting rich for himself, but he can't really, what's the point of having all that just if you're alone? Two are better than one.

It's better not to be alone, verse 9, because they have good reward for their labor, for if they fall, one will lift up his companion, but woe to him who is alone when he falls, for he has no one to help him up. Again, if two lie down together, they will keep warm, but how can one be warm alone? Though one may be overpowered by another, two can withstand him, and a threefold cord is not quickly broken. Of course, we've all heard these words read at weddings, and no doubt it does apply to marriage, although it doesn't seem like he's thinking of marriage primarily as the companionship he's thinking of, because he's talking about someone who can help you ward off an attacker.

He's probably thinking about a man having a male friend who can help him against, you know, probably male attackers. Strong friends who can help you up, but spiritually speaking, certainly, married people can be at an advantage over single people, because they can pray for each other, they can encourage each other, they can help each other up, they can keep each other warm, not just physically, but also spiritually. Coals banked with other coals keep each other hot all night, and they can fight the battles of life together.

So, I mean, it's understandable why these verses 9 through 11, or 9 through 12, are often quoted at weddings, but it's a general thing. It's not good for a man to be alone, because many things cannot be done by one alone, not effectively anyway, and one is vulnerable to problems that he cannot help himself out of if he's alone. But with the proper companion, or companions, a threefold cord's not quickly broken, then you know, there's strength, and there's advantage.

Better is a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who will not be admonished anymore. I wonder if he's thinking of himself here. A man's gotten old and foolish, he won't listen to counsel anymore.

He's worse off than a young person who's poor, if he's wise enough to listen to counsel. For he comes out of prison, that is, the youth, apparently, can come out of prison to be king. I wonder if he's thinking about Jeroboam.

It's almost prophetic of Jeroboam, because Jeroboam was, though not in prison, he was banished from the country by Solomon, and had gone down to Egypt. He was, as it were, imprisoned in exile, away from home, and yet he's going to come out of exile after Solomon dies and become king. And Solomon, he's an old king who wouldn't receive reproof anymore.

The prophet came to him and said, God is angry at you. He's going to take ten nations away and give them to your neighbor. Solomon, if he was wise, and not old and foolish, should have said, wow, I better mend my ways.

But he didn't take that exhortation. Instead, this younger man, this worker on his cruise, eventually would come out of exile and become the king of the northern tribes. Now Solomon didn't live to see that, so he could almost be speaking prophetically, inadvertently here.

Although he was born poor in his kingdom, I saw all the living who walk under the sun, they were with the second youth who stands in his place. Apparently the young man who comes out of exile or out of prison and becomes king has all the people standing with him. Certainly the ten tribes stood with Jeroboam, rather than with the king.

There was no end of all the people over whom he was made king, yet those who come after him will not rejoice in him. Surely this is also vanity and grasping at the wind. I don't know that he's talking about Jeroboam, and if he is, he must be speaking prophetically.

He could say, I saw this vision of this young man who came up and became king out of obscurity, and he had a multitude of people following him. He was riding the crest of the wave of popularity, but after he's gone, people didn't honor him. As a matter of fact, Jeroboam's son was assassinated along with all other Jeroboam's children.

They were all wiped out, and so he came to nothing. So all that Jeroboam had accomplished was like striving after the wind. I don't know that Solomon's talking about Jeroboam.

He might have in mind some other situation he's seen before elsewhere, in another kingdom somewhere that he knows about. But it's interesting how closely what he describes here parallels what happened with his own kingdom and his own rival's kingdom. And here we must take our break because we run out of time.