

The Applied Bible Commentary

Ecclesiastes

Introduction

The name "Ecclesiastes" is derived from the Greek word "ekklesia," which means assembly; the title "Ecclesiastes" indicates that a leader or teacher is speaking before an assembly. Thus the book of Ecclesiastes is, in effect, a sermon—a sermon that explores the most important question a person can ask: What is the meaning of life?

According to traditional belief, Ecclesiastes was written by King Solomon. In the first verse of [Chapter 1](#), the writer identifies himself as **the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem**. There is evidence of later editing, but we can assume that Ecclesiastes originated from the hand of Solomon (see [Ecclesiastes 2:4-9](#)).

The "Teacher" writes as an old man who has found much of life to be **meaningless** ([Ecclesiastes 1:14](#)). Yet he is aware that life can have meaning as long as it is lived in dependence on God and in accordance with His will. It is only life without God that is meaningless and hopeless.

The Teacher realizes the limits of human wisdom. God has purposes for human life, but we can't fully understand those purposes. Humans must simply trust God and act on the knowledge He has given them. God's purposes will ultimately result in **good** for those who love Him and obey Him ([Romans 8:28](#)).

The book of Ecclesiastes teaches us the folly of living a life that is not centered on God. We are encouraged to enjoy the gifts of God—food, drink, family and friends—but only as we seek first His kingdom and His RIGHTEOUSNESS ([Matthew 6:33](#)). At the end of the book, the Teacher writes: . . . **here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man** ([Ecclesiastes 12:13](#)).

Outline

- A. The Search for Meaning ([1:1-11:6](#)).
 - 1. Everything Is Meaningless ([1:1-6:12](#)).
 - 2. Wisdom ([7:1-11:6](#)).
- B. Meaning Found ([11:7-12:14](#)).
 - 1. Remembering God ([11:7-12:8](#)).
 - 2. Conclusion ([12:9-14](#)).

[Chapter 1](#)

Everything Is Meaningless ([1:1-11](#))

[1-2](#) The **Teacher** (Solomon) begins his sermon: "**Everything is meaningless**" ([verse 2](#)). To be "meaningless" is to be without purpose. The Teacher is setting out to show us that apart from God, "everything" is futile, vain and worthless—without purpose or meaning. Only when our life is based on God does it become worthwhile and meaningful.

[3-11](#) Here the Teacher shows us what he means by "everything": he is referring to everything **under the sun**—that is, "on earth" ([verse 3](#)). In these verses, he mentions the activities of man, the rising and setting of the sun, the ever-blowing wind, and the flow and evaporation of the earth's water. Everything repeats itself; everything goes round and round: **there is nothing new under the sun** ([verse 9](#)).

Note that modern science can explain many things; man's scientific knowledge has advanced greatly. However, it cannot answer the question: "Why?" Scientific advances have improved life, but they have not improved humans—their characters, their morality. There is as much evil in the world today as there has ever been.

When we look only at nature and at secular history, we find nothing that tells us about the meaning of life. But nature points us to the Creator ([Romans 1:20](#)), and history points us to the Redeemer—our Creator-Redeemer God. Ecclesiastes shows us that to find the meaning of life, we must look beyond what is "under the sun" to the God who is the Creator of the universe and the Redeemer of all mankind. Then we shall discover what is truly "new": a new birth, a **new self, a new creation** ([John 3:3](#); [2 Corinthians 5:10](#); [Ephesians 4:24](#)).

The Teacher was right: there is nothing new "under the sun." But there is something new "under the Son." Indeed, for Christians, everything is new under Jesus the Son of God, for it is He who makes all things new.

Wisdom Is Meaningless ([1:12-18](#))

[12-14](#) The Teacher had sought **wisdom** ([verse 13](#)), but the only thing wisdom had taught him was that everything was meaningless, a **chasing after the wind** ([verse 14](#))—that is, a chasing after something unattainable. In other words, human wisdom itself was meaningless! Not only was all human striving meaningless, but even seeking wisdom was meaningless!

[15](#) Here the Teacher inserts a proverb, which states that things are unchangeable (they can't be **straightened** out) and that what is lacking is too great to be **counted**—it can't be supplied. Therefore, one should accept things the way they are and "make the best of it."

[16-18](#) Here the Teacher acknowledges that his pursuit of **wisdom**—and also of **madness and folly**—was a **chasing after the wind**; it was in vain. For the only thing that "wisdom" led to was

sorrow and grief. The Teacher is, of course, referring to purely human wisdom; such wisdom reveals much about our human situation, but it offers us no meaning, no hope.

[Chapter 2](#)

Pleasures Are Meaningless ([2:1-11](#))

1-11 The Teacher recounts his continuing search for the meaning of life. When he found no meaning in human wisdom ([Ecclesiastes 1:13-14](#)), he next tried **pleasure** ([verse 1](#))—laughter, **wine** and **folly** ([verses 2-3](#))—but here again he found nothing worthwhile. He undertook great projects and amassed great wealth ([verses 4-9](#)), but all this was **meaningless, a chasing after the wind** ([verse 11](#)). Yes, he took temporary **delight** in these achievements; that was his **reward** ([verse 10](#)). But still, **nothing was gained** of lasting value ([verse 11](#)).

Wisdom and Folly Are Meaningless ([2:12-16](#))

12-16 Here the Teacher thinks again about human **wisdom**. He acknowledges that wisdom is better than folly ([verse 13](#)), but the question is: How much better? Not much, because the wise man and the fool come to the same end—death ([verse 14](#)). So, asks the Teacher, what is to be gained by wisdom? ([verse 15](#)).

Toil Is Meaningless ([2:17-26](#))

17-23 In these verses, the Teacher concludes that all toil is meaningless because one doesn't get to keep the fruit of one's labor; someone else gets it who didn't work for it ([Psalm 39:6](#); [Luke 12:16-20](#)). It's even possible that a fool will inherit it ([verse 10](#)).

When the Teacher thought about this, his **heart began to despair** ([verse 20](#)). All his labor was in vain; all it produced was **pain and grief** ([verse 23](#)). This is the end result of man without God. With God, however, everything is different: our **labor in the Lord is not in vain** ([1 Corinthians 15:58](#)).

24-26 What is the Teacher's conclusion at this point? Man should **eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work** ([verse 24](#))—even though such satisfaction can be only temporary. And then the Teacher says: **This too, I see, is from the hand of God**. Eating and enjoyment are gifts of God; if one pleases God, the enjoyment of life will be greater ([verse 25](#)). God will provide **wisdom, knowledge and happiness** to those who please Him ([verse 26](#)), and they will even end up gaining that which the **sinner** has stored up (see [Proverbs 13:22](#); [28:8](#)).

In these verses, the Teacher has presented a kernel of truth: real happiness is only possible when we acknowledge God and try to please Him. The simple pleasures of life can be enjoyed ([1 Timothy 6:6-8, 17-19](#)) and needed wisdom can be obtained ([James 1:5; 3:13-17](#)). But this life is soon over; what is its purpose? To the Teacher, life is still **meaningless, a chasing after the wind** ([verse 26](#)).

Chapter 3

A Time for Everything ([3:1-22](#))

1-8 In this chapter, the Teacher provides us with additional glimpses of truth. He starts by telling us: **There is a time for everything** ([verse 1](#))—that is, there is an appropriate, God-ordained time for every human activity. As humans live their lives day by day, they need to discern the proper times for their various activities; then each activity will be **beautiful in its time** ([verse 11](#)).

9-11 The Teacher has shown us in [verses 1-8](#) that there is a proper time for everything in life, and he implies that God purposefully controls these "times." DAVID wrote: **My times are in your hands** ([Psalm 31:15](#)). But, in [verse 9](#), the Teacher still asks: What does one gain from all life's activities? ([Ecclesiastes 1:3](#)).

In [verse 10](#), the Teacher says that men are under a **burden**(see [Ecclesiastes 2:13](#)); God has given them life, but He hasn't explained life's purpose. Humans go from activity to activity, but they are not satisfied. The reason is that God has **set eternity in the hearts of men** ([verse 11](#)); men have a longing to know the larger purpose of their existence. They are aware of eternity, of an eternal God, and they long to know Him. In every man and woman there is an "empty space" that only God can fill; and until that space is filled, their lives will lack both happiness and meaning.

12-14 Since humans **cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end** ([verse 11](#)), the best they can do is to treat life as a **gift of God** ([verse 13](#)) and to **be happy and do good while they live** ([verse 12](#)); to "do good" means to please God (see [Ecclesiastes 2:24-26](#) and comment). When they do this, they will begin to find meaning in life. In [verse 14](#), the Teacher goes one step further and gives us a foretaste of the conclusion of his sermon: God is sovereign; nothing can be added or subtracted from what He does; the whole purpose of man's life is to **revere Him**—to fear Him and keep His commandments (see [Ecclesiastes 12:13](#)).

15-17 God is sovereign over history; it may seem as if the past has no connection with the present, but God will **call the past to account** ([verse 15](#))—that is, He will judge the past deeds of men ([Ecclesiastes 12:14](#)), **both the righteous and the wicked** ([verse 17](#)).

18-22 Here it seems that the Teacher has returned to his pessimism; but in fact he is merely teaching us the truth about ourselves, truth that should make us humble. As far as our physical bodies are concerned, we are no different from animals! Like them, we return to dust ([verse](#)

20)—an echo of [Genesis 3:19](#). **Who knows** what happens after death? ([verse 21](#)). We humans cannot fully know—though the Old Testament has already given us glimpses. The final revelation comes from the New Testament, **through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel** ([2 Timothy 1:10](#)).

But the Teacher is still back in the Old Testament; for him, God's revelation is not yet complete. The Teacher has discovered only this, that man should **enjoy his work, because that is his** (God-given) **lot** ([verse 22](#)).

Chapter 4

Oppression, Toil, Friendlessness ([4:1-12](#))

1-3 In this chapter, the Teacher mentions a number of problems he has observed during his life, all of which contribute, he feels, to life's meaninglessness. The first problem is the **oppression** of the weak by the powerful. Those who are oppressed cannot **be happy** and **find satisfaction** in their day-to-day lives ([Ecclesiastes 3:12-13](#)). The Teacher is saying: It's sad enough to find life meaningless, but to find it cruel is even sadder.

4-6 A second problem concerns man's heart, his motives; in everything he does, natural (unspiritual) man is motivated by self-interest—by pride, selfishness, greed and **envy** ([verse 4](#)). The Teacher sees that "everyone is out for himself." Any human activity that is not motivated by love for God is ultimately meaningless.

Some people withdraw from this self-centered activity and choose self-centered laziness instead; but they are no wiser than the others. **The fool folds his hands** ([verse 5](#)). This is an equally bad course, for he soon comes to ruin (see [Proverbs 6:6-11](#)).

The wisest course between "no handful" (laziness) and **two handfuls** (activity) is to choose **one handful** ([verse 6](#))—not too much, not too little—the "handful" of **tranquility**, contentment (see [Philippians 4:11-13](#)).

7-8 Here the Teacher notes how meaningless it is to spend one's life toiling for wealth and then in the end be unable to enjoy it or even pass it on to one's family.

9-12 At least, says the Teacher, don't go through this meaningless life **alone** ([verse 11](#)): **Two are better than one** ([verse 9](#)). And **three** is better yet ([verse 12](#))—as long as the **three strands** are "pulling together"! Jesus Himself followed this teaching when He sent His disciples out **two by two** ([Mark 6:7](#)). For Christians, especially Christian couples, the "cord of three strands" has a

special meaning: the third strand represents Jesus. With Jesus, the cord **is not quickly broken** ([verse 12](#)).

Advancement Is Meaningless ([4:13-16](#))

[13-16](#) Here the Teacher comments on yet another meaningless thing in life: advancement. As an example, he tells of a foolish old king who was replaced by a younger and wiser man. At first the people followed the new king ([verse 15](#)), but soon they tired of him ([verse 16](#)). The Teacher's implication is that the young king gradually became like the foolish old king he replaced; he had made a tremendous advancement from poverty, but he ended up no better off than his predecessor. Thus even progress and advancement are meaningless; without God, humans end up no better than they were before.

Chapter 5

Stand in Awe of God ([5:1-7](#))

[1-3](#) The Teacher continues his comments on things that are meaningless; in this section he talks about meaningless worship. We must not go before God like **fools** ([verse 1](#)), who think that offering a **sacrifice** will make up for the **wrong** in their lives (see [Proverbs 15:8](#); [21:27](#)). Rather, we need to listen to what God says to us. More important than speaking to God is listening to Him; too often in our prayers we do all the talking ([verse 2](#)). And when we talk too much—even to God—we usually talk like fools (see [Proverbs 10:19](#); [13:3](#); [Matthew 6:5-8](#)).

[4-7](#) Of course, there is a **time** for speaking ([Ecclesiastes 3:7](#)); there is a time for making vows to God ([verse 4](#)). But, says the Teacher, let us not be hasty in making a **vow**, because any vow we make must be fulfilled (see [Numbers 30:1-2](#) and comment). A fool makes a vow rashly and then does not fulfill it; not to fulfill a vow is a **SIN** ([verse 6](#)). It is surely meaningless, says the Teacher, to make a vow and then not keep it.

Riches Are Meaningless ([5:8-20](#))

[8-9](#) It's no wonder the **poor** are **oppressed**. Officials abuse their authority; each one takes some land for himself, usually with the connivance of the official above him. The king himself **profits** from the system. When a leader oppresses the poor, those under him are sure to do likewise.

[10-12](#) Yet this desire for land and wealth is never satisfied ([verse 10](#)); one always craves more (see [1 Timothy 6:9-10](#), [17-19](#)). And with more wealth comes more anxiety—even loss of sleep ([verse 12](#)).

13-17 In these verses, the Teacher further describes the folly of storing up treasures on earth; it's much better to store up **treasures in heaven** ([Matthew 6:19-21](#)).

18-20 Here the Teacher repeats the observations he has made earlier (see [Ecclesiastes 2:24-25](#); [3:12-13](#), [22](#)): it is good to enjoy the gifts that God has given us in life—including **wealth and possessions** ([verse 19](#)). If men and women seek to please God and do good day by day, He will keep them **occupied with gladness of heart** ([verse 20](#)). In saying this, the Teacher acknowledges that life can be satisfying—even if we cannot know its full meaning.

Chapter 6

Life Without God Is Meaningless ([6:1-12](#))

1-6 In this chapter the Teacher seems to disregard what he said in [Ecclesiastes 5:18-20](#). There he talked about man enjoying God's gifts; but here he says that God **does not enable [man] to enjoy them** ([verse 2](#)).

In this chapter the Teacher is speaking about one who has received from God **wealth, possessions and honor** ([verse 2](#)) but who still does not acknowledge God. Such a person's life is truly meaningless. He cannot enjoy God's gifts—even if he lives two thousand years! ([verse 6](#)). It would be better if he had never been born ([verse 3](#)).

7-12 In these verses, the Teacher's pessimism continues; he is still struggling to find the meaning of life. Even the **wise man** (humanly wise) has no advantage over the fool ([verse 8](#)). God is sovereign: whatever exists **has already been named**, predetermined by God ([verse 10](#)). No man can contend with **one who is stronger**—that is, God. Arguing and complaining is of no profit ([verse 11](#)). The life of a godless man is **like a shadow** ([verse 12](#)); he passes without knowing where he came from or where he is going.

Chapter 7

Wisdom ([7:1-29](#))

1 At the end of the previous chapter, the Teacher asked: . . . **who knows what is good for a man in life?** ([Ecclesiastes 6:12](#)). Here in this chapter, the Teacher gives some partial answers to that question. He presents a number of wisdom sayings, some in the form of personal observations and others in the form of proverbs. Each saying relates to the question of how to live a "good" life on earth—even when much of life still seems meaningless.

In [verse 1](#), the Teacher stresses the importance of maintaining a **good name** in life (see [Proverbs 22:1](#)). He also states it is better to die than to be born; this saying is based on purely human or natural wisdom; such "wisdom" sees life mainly as a **burden** instead of a blessing ([Ecclesiastes 3:10](#)).

[2-6](#) In these verses, the Teacher says that mourning and sorrow are better than laughter and pleasure; this again is from the point of view of natural wisdom. It's true that we learn more from hard times than from happy times. Furthermore, when we confront sorrow and death, we are prompted to think about the meaning of life, and this is beneficial; it is **good for the heart** ([verse 3](#)). The Teacher is not saying, however, that there is no place for laughter and gaiety in life—especially for believers, who have great reason to rejoice.

7 Extortion results in God's JUDGMENT against the extorter ([Proverbs 28:8](#)); a **bribe** corrupts both the giver and the receiver ([Exodus 23:8](#); [Deuteronomy 17:19](#)).

[8-9](#) It's better to bring something to completion with **patience** than to begin something with **pride** and overconfidence.

[10](#) We can learn from the **old days**, but we must live in the present. To wish for the "old days" is, in effect, to complain of the present; this is **not wise**.

[11-12](#) Here the Teacher affirms the advantage of possessing wisdom: it **preserves the life of its possessor** ([verse 12](#)); from a purely human perspective, it is the best guarantee of a good life (see [Proverbs 3:13-18](#)).

[13-14](#) Who can **straighten** what God has made **crooked**? ([verse 13](#)). Man cannot alter or undo what God has done (see [Ecclesiastes 1:15](#)). God has ordained **good** times and **bad** times ([verse 14](#)), and we must accept both from His hand. Though God's ways may be hard to explain, believers can be confident that God will use even the "bad times" for their **good** ([Romans 8:28](#)).

[15-18](#) The Teacher has observed that in this life the RIGHTEOUS sometimes perish and the wicked sometimes prosper ([verse 15](#)); righteousness does not give us automatic protection from death and hard times (see [Psalm 37:23-26](#); [Proverbs 3:12](#) and comments). Therefore, says the Teacher, we should not try to be **overrighteous** ([verse 16](#))—that is, we should not be legalistic in our righteousness (as the Pharisees were in Jesus' day); if ordinary righteousness can't protect us, much less can legalism! Neither should people go to the other extreme and become **overwicked** ([verse 17](#)); that is the way of license. The person who fears God—who has wisdom ([Proverbs 9:10](#))—will avoid the extremes of both legalism and license ([verse 18](#)).

[19](#) Wisdom is more powerful than military might (see [Proverbs 16:32](#)); wisdom is necessary for leading a good life.

[20](#) One must also recognize that all humans have a natural inclination to sin; no one can avoid sin or be completely righteous (see [Romans 3:10](#); [1 John 1:8](#)).

[21-22](#) Don't listen to gossip, says the Teacher ([Proverbs 20:19](#)); you may end up hearing gossip about yourself! All of us have gossiped at some point, so we can be sure that others will gossip too. In other words, the temptation to listen to gossip will always be with us, but we must resist it. Gossip only stops when there is no one to listen to it!

[23-26](#) Here the Teacher (Solomon) describes his determination to be wise, but he finds it beyond him ([verse 23](#)). Nevertheless, one thing wisdom has taught him is the bitterness of a **woman who is a snare** ([verse 26](#)). It was women like this who "snared" Solomon into sin, and left him in great bitterness indeed (see [1 Kings 11:1-13](#)).

[27-29](#) During his search for wisdom, the Teacher has found only one **upright** or wise man among a thousand ([verse 28](#))—that is, essentially no one (see [verse 20](#)). He knows that in the beginning God made mankind upright, but that afterward men disobeyed God and followed their own **schemes** ([verse 29](#)). For the Teacher, this is further evidence that life is meaningless. However, he has indeed found out one thing of great importance: the cause of all man's trouble arises from his sin, his sinful "schemes." It is sin that makes life meaningless. And this is why the Gospel of Christ is such good news: Christ came to take away our sin and give meaning to our lives once more ([John 1:29](#)).

[Chapter 8](#)

Obey the King ([8:1-17](#))

[1](#) The Teacher continues his sermon; he is trying to show us how to make the best of life—life that from a human perspective is mostly meaningless. Certainly wisdom is one of the things that will make one's face brighter and his life better.

[2-8](#) Serving God is like serving one's king; subjects of a king must take an oath of loyalty ([verse 2](#)). It's important to please one's king and not to question him ([verses 3-4](#)). It's important to carry out the king's will properly and not go against it—no matter how much one is suffering ([verse 6](#)). The king has complete power over his subjects; he will not discharge them if he needs them—for example, in time of war ([verse 8](#)). Neither will the wicked be "discharged" from their wickedness and its punishment. Serving God—like serving the king—will make a person's life better.

[9-15](#) Still, there are meaningless things about life: arrogant and wicked people are **buried** in honor—people who pretended to be religious during their lives and then received **praise** at their death ([verse 10](#)). Wicked people commit crimes and aren't punished ([verse 11](#)); what's more, they live a **long time** ([verse 12](#)). The righteous and the wicked end up in the same place ([verse 14](#)). All this, says the Teacher, is meaningless.

Even so, there is meaning to life when God is considered. In [verses 12-13](#), the Teacher expresses his faith that somehow **it will go better with God-fearing men**, and that even though the wicked may live a "long time" on earth, their **days will not lengthen** beyond the GRAVE; God's justice will prevail in the end. In [verse 15](#), the Teacher repeats his belief that meaning in life can be found if one simply resolves to **eat and drink and be glad**, and to rejoice in God's gifts day by day (see [Ecclesiastes 2:24-25](#); [3:12-13](#); [5:18-20](#)).

[16-17](#) Notice how the Teacher wavers between certainty one moment and uncertainty the next. Here his uncertainty returns. **No one can comprehend** life's meaning ([verse 17](#)). And yet the Teacher has already revealed to us some things which do give meaning to life, and we can be content with that. What God has not revealed, we don't need to know; what He has revealed—through His word and through His HOLY SPIRIT—we need to obey (see [Deuteronomy 29:29](#)). If we do that, then our life will have all the meaning we could ever hope for.

[Chapter 9](#)

A Common Destiny for All ([9:1-12](#))

[1-6](#) In this chapter the Teacher continues to show us the limits of human reasoning; human (or natural) wisdom gives us practical insights into life, but it cannot explain life's meaning.

For example, we humans cannot control our destiny; whether people love us or hate us is mainly in God's hands ([verse 1](#)). Everyone ends up in the same place, the grave ([Ecclesiastes 2:14](#); [3:20](#)); this is true whether a person is bad or good, whether he is honest and speaks on oath or whether he is dishonest and refuses to take an oath ([verse 2](#)). Because good and evil seem to be rewarded alike, people are encouraged to do evil ([verse 3](#)); what's the advantage in doing good! All we have is this life, and then we're gone. Yet we can at least "hope for the best" ([verse 4](#)). The dead have no hope whatever; everything about them is forgotten, ended ([verses 5-6](#)). And indeed, from an earthly perspective, all this is true.

[7-10](#) Therefore, says the Teacher, seize the moment! Enjoy your food and drink, because God's favor is **now** ([verse 7](#)). **Always be clothed in white**—live cleanly—and **anoint your head with oil**—as for a festive occasion ([verse 8](#)). Enjoy your wife, your family, and your work ([verse 9](#)), because when you die you'll enjoy them no longer ([verse 10](#)). This is the classic statement of purely humanistic "wisdom" (see [Isaiah 22:13](#); [1 Corinthians 15:32](#)). Fortunately for us, God's wisdom—revealed through Scripture and the Holy Spirit—is much, much greater.

[11-12](#) Here the Teacher gives a further example of natural "wisdom": everything in life is determined by **chance**, by fate. Speed, strength, wisdom and brains do not determine the outcome of our lives; the fastest man in the race can stumble and fall. At any moment, **evil times** can come upon us **unexpectedly** ([verse 12](#)).

Wisdom Better Than Folly ([9:13-18](#))

[13-18](#) In this section, the Teacher tells a story illustrating both the benefits and the limitations of wisdom. First, his story shows the superiority of wisdom over strength ([Ecclesiastes 7:19](#)): the poor wise man prevailed over the powerful king ([verses 14-15](#)). Later on, however, the wise man was forgotten and his wisdom was **despised** ([verse 16](#)). Wisdom may be **better than weapons of war** ([verse 18](#)), but it can be shouted down by fools—even by **one sinner**.

Chapter 10

More Wise Sayings ([10:1-20](#))

[1-20](#) In this chapter, the Teacher gives some additional sayings designed to help his readers live their lives more happily and productively. In [verse 1](#), for example, the Teacher warns us that a reputation gained by much wisdom can quickly be lost by a **little folly!**

In [verse 4](#), the Teacher advises us to endure the anger and displeasure of our leaders calmly, without leaving our post ([Proverbs 15:1](#)); if we remain calm, any error we have made will be forgiven.

In [verses 8-9](#), the Teacher tells us to work carefully in order to avoid harming ourselves. If we dig a pit on our property, we should remember where it is when we go out at night!

In [verses 12-14](#), the Teacher shows us that fools and wise men can be distinguished by their words (see [Proverbs 12:23](#); [15:2](#), [28](#)). Those who are empty of wisdom are often full of words! ([verse 14](#)).

In [verses 16-17](#), the Teacher says that a land **whose king was** (formerly) **a servant** is a land that is cursed. The Teacher is referring to an unqualified upstart who has seized power, and who rules with arrogance and cruelty. The lesson is this: immature, unqualified people should not be thrust into leadership before they are ready (see [1 Timothy 3:6](#)). Furthermore, such immature leaders are likely to be dissolute and self-indulgent; they may even get drunk at breakfast time!

In [verse 19](#), the Teacher says that **money is the answer for everything**. This can be understood in several ways. Perhaps the Teacher was just quoting a common saying. Or perhaps he was saying that money will do more for a person than wine and feasting. Or he may have simply been saying that money is more useful; it can be used for anything.

Finally, in [verse 20](#), the Teacher gives us a warning: do not criticize your leaders—**even in your thoughts**. A critical spirit is fatal to our well-being. If we nurture a critical spirit, some word will slip out, and we can be sure it will return to haunt us.

Chapter 11

Bread Upon the Waters ([11:1-6](#))

1-6 In this section, the Teacher encourages us to take calculated risks, to take action even when one can't predict the outcome. Casting **bread upon the waters** is a metaphor for being adventurous ([verse 1](#)); it is similar to the saying: "Nothing ventured, nothing gained." In [verse 2](#), however, the Teacher cautions us not to put all our resources into one venture, in case it turns out badly; a similar saying is: "Don't put all your eggs in one basket."

At the same time, the Teacher counsels us not to be overly cautious or timid. We must not let the possibility of rain or a "falling tree" keep us from doing what needs to be done. The farmer who waits to be certain of the weather will never plant anything ([verses 3-4](#)). Yes, there are unknowns in life, things beyond our control, but we shouldn't be deterred by them. Parents can't tell how life is imparted to their unborn child, but they have to nurture and raise him nonetheless ([verse 5](#)). In short, says the Teacher: **Sow your seed** ([verse 6](#)); fulfill your daily responsibilities with diligence and enthusiasm. This is the only way to find meaning in life ([Ecclesiastes 9:7](#)).

Notice that the Teacher's advice in these verses requires faith: take risks, move forward into the unknown, be optimistic. This brings us to the concluding section of the Teacher's sermon, where we shall see that this faith, far from being blind or irrational, is FAITH in the living God—the God who orders our lives and gives meaning to our existence.

Remember Your Creator While Young ([11:7-10](#))

7-10 In these verses, the Teacher tells young people to live life to the fullest, because **days of darkness** are coming—days of trial, sickness and old age—that lead inevitably to the grave; after that, everything will be **meaningless** ([verse 8](#)).

But, in [verse 9](#), the Teacher adds a crucial fact: everything we have done in life—**all these things**—will be judged by God. God will either punish us or reward us for what we have done on earth (see [Ecclesiastes 12:14](#); [2 Corinthians 5:10](#)). It is this fact that gives meaning to our lives.

In view of this, says the Teacher in [verse 10](#), let us **banish anxiety** and **cast off** [our] **troubles**—the sins that so easily entangle us ([Hebrews 12:1](#)). If we seek to please God and obey His commands, we can place our future in His hands with confidence ([Ecclesiastes 3:12-14](#); [12:13-14](#)). Our **youth and vigor are meaningless** because they will soon pass, but our life with God will go on forever.

[Chapter 12](#)

A Picture of Old Age and Death ([12:1-8](#))

1-5 In these verses, the Teacher gives us a poetic picture of old age and the gradual deterioration that takes place in our bodies. In view of the coming **days of trouble** (old age), the Teacher urges young people to remember God before it's too late ([verse 1](#)), so that they can give Him the best years of their lives.

6-7 In [verse 6](#), the Teacher again tells us: **Remember him** (God). Then he gives us two pictures of death. The first is the cutting of the **silver cord** by which the lamp of life is suspended; the lamp—the **golden bowl**—falls and is **broken**. The second picture is the breaking of the **wheel** used to draw water from the well of life; as a result, the **pitcher** of water falls and is **shattered**. With life gone, the body—the **dust**—returns to the ground ([Genesis 3:19](#)); but the **spirit returns to God** ([verse 7](#)). The "spirit"—the essence or principle of life—does not die; it is the aspect of a human being that lives on after physical death.

8 If birth, youthful energy, declining health, and finally death are the sum total of life on earth, such life is **meaningless** indeed! Surely Solomon, more than any other, could testify to the emptiness of life without God. Solomon had everything; he was the richest and most powerful person of his time. He even had the gift of divine wisdom. But he turned from God, and lived most of his life as a secular man. Only toward the end did he realize how empty his life had been. That's when he wrote this sermon, the book of Ecclesiastes, so that others might learn from his mistakes. What a tragedy it is when one reaches the end of life and, looking back, realizes it has been wasted.

The Conclusion of the Matter ([12:9-14](#))

9-12 In these verses the Teacher gives his credentials. In [verse 11](#), he acknowledges that the **words of the wise** have one source: they are **given by one Shepherd**, the God of ISRAEL ([Psalm 23:1](#)). God is the only source of true wisdom; the Teacher warns us against following after any so-called "wisdom" that is not from God.

13-14 The Teacher's conclusion has two parts. First, he shows us our duty: **Fear God and keep his commandments**. Second, he shows us why we should fear and obey God: God will judge us (see [Ecclesiastes 11:9](#); [2Corinthians 5:10](#); [Hebrews 4:13](#)). God will reward us for what we have done right (believing and obeying God) or punish us for what we have done wrong (rejecting and disobeying God). The reward is eternal life; the punishment is eternal separation from God. What we do during our short time on earth determines our eternal destiny. Our life on earth is meaningful indeed!

In summary, the book of Ecclesiastes teaches us that life without God is meaningless. The Teacher (Solomon) had himself found life meaningless—that is, until his old age, when he seems to have regained his wisdom and returned to God. But before that, the Teacher's main solution to

the emptiness he experienced was to try and "enjoy life"; even animals did that. But humans cannot "enjoy life" only in the present, because God has **set eternity in [their] hearts** ([Ecclesiastes 3:11](#)). To live only for this present life is neither satisfying nor meaningful.

The only solution to life's emptiness is to look to God, and seek to understand His eternal purpose for each of us. Yes, we are to "enjoy life" **to the full** ([John 10:10](#)). But that is only possible when we look at life from the perspective of eternity. Jesus told us to **store up . . . treasures in heaven** ([Matthew 6:19-21](#)). The Apostle John told us not to love the **world, for the world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever** ([1 John 2:15-17](#)). Finally, the Apostle Paul wrote: **Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things** ([Colossians 3:2](#)); this one sentence sums up the book of Ecclesiastes.

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