



# ECCLESIASTES

CHARLES H. WELCH

# ECCLESIASTES

'The preacher sought to find out acceptable words: and that which was written was upright, even words of truth'.

*an exposition*

*by*

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*Dispensational Truth*  
*The Testimony of the Lord's Prisoner*  
*Just and the Justifier*  
*The Form of Sound Words*  
*The Prize of the High Calling*  
*This Prophecy*  
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## CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
Preface	3
1 Koheleth, Its Occurrences and Testimony	5
2 The Question of Authorship	7
3 The Theme	9
4 The Question 'What is that good?'	12
Is that life worth living, which is without Christ?	12
Does your business pay? (1:3)	16
Sore travail and its exercise (1:12-15)	18
The search for 'that good' (1:12 to 2:26)	20
Life's true portion (2:4-11)	22
A time for every purpose - both of God and man (3:1-17)	24
Adam; his relation to the theme (6:10)	26
5 The Good Name (7:1)	31
6 Koheleth's Key to the Riddle - The Life to Come (7:11,12)	32
7 The Answer 'What that good is'	34
Death, Mourning and Sorrow, their relation to what is good for man in this life (7:1-6)	35
The maddening effect of 'oppression' and 'crookedness', but for the knowledge of God's purpose (7:7-17)	36
The practical problem of good and evil (7:14)	38
The policy of Laodicea (7:15-22)	40
The 'reason' of evil discovered (7:24-29)	41
Wisdom (8:1-17)	43
Contentment (8:15 to 9:18)	44
8 The Conclusion of the Matter	46
Appendix - The Testimony of the Vocabulary	47
The Structure of the book	51

## PREFACE

The reader of Scripture will be aware how God uses men and women and their manner of life to set forth principles of truth, e.g., Abraham as the illustration par excellence of justification by faith. In like manner the book of Job presents to us one who is attested by God as, in His view, the man outstanding for uprightness on the earth in his day (Job 1:8; 2:3 'none like him'), yet before that book is concluded Job is confessing his 'vileness' (Job 40:4) for there had been raised the question 'How shall man be just with God?' To that there is but one answer, 'I have found a Ransom', 'When we were yet without strength Christ died for the ungodly ... being justified by His Blood'.

Opening the book of Ecclesiastes we find ourselves viewing the wisest man (Eccles. 1:16), a man whose 'wisdom' was accredited by God (1 Kings 3:5-12 'none like thee'), even as Job's 'uprightness' was, but the result of his search 'by wisdom' was, from one angle, a discovery that, *apart from God*, all is 'vanity' (emptiness) and 'vexation of spirit'. To the questions raised in Ecclesiastes the Lord Jesus Christ is once again the answer, 'When in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe ... we preach Christ crucified ... the Wisdom of God'.

Ecclesiastes is a book which deals with the circumstances of every passing hour, and much of its teaching is as applicable today as when it was written - a mirror of what life may come to mean, if light be given but rejected. All life unyielded to God must result in 'vanity and vexation of spirit', but when Christ is given, not merely 'a place', not merely 'prominence', but 'pre-eminence', then life is really known and enjoyed as God meant it to be.

The author of this book, dealing with the principal themes in Ecclesiastes, has for many years devoted his God-given talents and ability to the careful exposition of the Word of God, and the substance of this book appeared as long ago as 1920-1923 in *The Berean Expositor* a (now Bi-monthly) publication edited by the author, and proved then to be of great value. The book is now sent out with the prayer that it may be richly used of God and that readers may find in its pages help in the quest of life's true portion, the deep satisfaction of a life yielded to Him Who loved us and gave Himself for us and does still so love us, and the high privilege of representing here for a time on the earth Christ Who now sitteth at the right hand of God. What a privilege to be here for His pleasure and, in the power of the Spirit, to be always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that our labour is not in vain in the Lord.

A SERVANT OF THAT SAME ONE.

ECCLESIASTES

*The disposition of the subject matter in this book.*

INTRODUCTION.

AUTHORSHIP.

THE THEME.

Chapters 1-6: The Question, 'What is that good?'

- (1) Is that life worth living, which is without Christ?
- (2) Does your business pay?
- (3) Sore travail and its exercise.
- (4) The search for 'that good'.
- (5) Life's true portion.
- (6) A time for every purpose.
- (7) Adam; his relation to the theme.

THE GOOD NAME.

THE KEY TO THE RIDDLE.

Chapters 7 to 12: The Answer, 'What that good is'.

- (1) Death, mourning and sorrow.
- (2) Effect of oppression.
- (3) Problem of good and evil.
- (4) Policy of Laodicea.
- (5) Reason of evil discovered.
- (6) Wisdom.
- (7) Contentment.

CONCLUSION.

APPENDIX.

AUTHORSHIP.

STRUCTURES: The whole book.

The 'Search', 1:12 to 12:7.

## CHAPTER 1

**Koheleth****Its Occurrences and Testimony.**

One of the hall marks of inspiration and an evidence of a Divine plan and superintendence in the writing of the Scriptures is that which is presented by the underlying Structure. This structure is not limited to the disposition of the subject matter as a whole, but extends to the position and occurrence of words that are employed in a book or an epistle, and indicates by its presence that certain words are to be considered as key words of a book or epistle. One such word in Ecclesiastes is the Hebrew word *koheleth* 'The Preacher'. The Greek title of the book 'Ecclesiastes' is nearer to the meaning of the Hebrew *koheleth* than is the rendering 'The Preacher', for the word *koheleth* speaks of an assembly and 'The Convener' would be a good translation. This appellative is found seven times in the book which number also is an indication of spiritual importance, and the following disposition of these seven occurrences seems to be the result of plan rather than of chance.

## KOELETH

- A 1:1. The words of Koheleth.
- B a 1:2. All is vanity.
- b 1:12,13. Koheleth searching by wisdom.
- C 7:27. What Koheleth found.
- B a 12:8. All is vanity.
- b 12:9. Koheleth wise, taught the people.
- A 12:10. The words of Koheleth; words of truth.

The structure of these occurrences contains a challenge. Emphasis is placed upon 'the words' of Koheleth. What shall we say of these words? Are they the words of a jaded spirit, a satiated appetite? Are they to be deprecated in this age of Christian enlightenment? Are they given as a warning, to show us what is *not* truth? Let the final member of the series answer. 'Koheleth sought to find out acceptable words'. Did he succeed? or was his search in vain? 'And that which was written was upright, even WORDS OF TRUTH'. Here are given three characteristics of the words that are *written* in this book. First notice the careful distinction that is drawn between the endeavour to find suitable words and the result. Koheleth 'sought to find out' acceptable words. His search was satisfactory, for that which was written was in words of truth. Now let us notice the three characteristics.

(1) ACCEPTABLE. - This word has been used in Ecclesiastes before the last chapter, and in three of the passages it is rendered 'purpose' (3:1,17; 8:6). The acceptable words of Koheleth were words that were exactly suited to express his meaning.

(2) UPRIGHT. - This is the term used in 7:29 to describe the state of man prior to his fall. Such is the character of the written words of Ecclesiastes.

(3) TRUTH. - This is the word used to describe the law (Psa. 119:142) and commandments (Psa. 119:151). We have such expressions as 'words (sayings) of truth' (Prov. 22:21), 'the scripture of truth' (Dan. 10:21), 'the law of truth' (Mal. 2:6).

These three descriptions taken together should cause the believer to hesitate long before setting aside the 'words' of Ecclesiastes as those of a worldly-wise misanthrope.

Returning to our structure, we will next note the complete parallel that exists between the preface and the conclusion, 1:2 and 12:8. Before we are given any of the processes whereby the conclusion is reached, the conclusion is stated, 'Vanity of vanities, saith Koheleth, vanity of vanities; all is vanity'. It must not be imagined that Koheleth intimates that his mind was prejudiced before he commenced his research. This writer's preface, like that of most writers since, had to be written when the whole work was accomplished. He states at the beginning, as

it were, his thesis, 'all is superlatively vain', and then conducts the reader through the intricate mazes of investigation to the final statement of chapter 12:8, 'Vanity of vanities, saith Koheleth, all is vanity'. Whatever our private opinions may be, we cannot charge the writer with either inconsistency or wandering. His proposition and his proof are in sight throughout the book, as we shall see more clearly when we trace this special feature through. Another feature that is constant is that which is brought out in the structure, namely, the process of investigation. Chapter 1:12,13 reads:

'I Koheleth was king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I gave my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven'.

So in conclusion (12:9) we read:

'And moreover, because Koheleth was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yea, he gave good heed, and sought out, and set in order many proverbs'.

We have in the appendix sought to show the connection both of theme and wording that exists between Ecclesiastes and Proverbs. Here, Koheleth tells us that many of his proverbs were sought out and set in order *after the experience* recorded in Ecclesiastes, and presumably connected with it. If Ecclesiastes is untrue, we should expect to find that in 'Proverbs', being inspired Scripture, the errors will be corrected. This is not the case however. Where Proverbs speaks of the same things as Ecclesiastes, *it uses similar words* and leads in the same direction. It will be observed that Koheleth refers in this chapter to 'the words of the wise', saying that they are as 'goads'. The words of the wise come in the introduction of the book of Proverbs, and are immediately followed by that section of Proverbs that were written FOR Solomon.

It must be understood that some wise sayings in the collection known as 'The Proverbs' were written BY Solomon, and that some were written FOR Solomon. Those written for the guidance of Solomon are found in Proverbs 1:6 to 9:18; 19:20 to 24:34; 27:1 to 29:27; and 30:1 to 31:31. The opening section, 1:6 to 9:18 is a fivefold alternation of 'the call of Wisdom' with the warning against 'the foreign woman' (see *The Companion Bible*, p. 865).

Solomon gives sound advice on many weighty themes - but in the Proverbs written BY Solomon, warning concerning 'strange women' is absent. Those who know the sad end of Solomon's career can see the reason for this repeated warning, and this ominous omission.

'Did not Solomon king of Israel sin by these things? yet among many nations was there no king like him, who was beloved of his God, and God made him king over all Israel: nevertheless even him did outlandish women cause to sin' (Neh. 13:26).

Turn again to the structure of the seven occurrences of *koheleth*. Look at the central reference 7:27. What did Koheleth find? He found by bitter experience what he might have known by simply believing the words of the wise that were written for his guidance:

'I find more bitter than death the woman, whose heart is snares and nets, and her hands as bands: whoso pleaseth God shall escape from her; but the sinner shall be taken by her' (Ecc. 7:26).

This is entirely in harmony with the introductory proverbs for Solomon's guidance, and with his own conclusion:

'Whoso findeth a wife findeth a good thing, and obtaineth favour of the LORD' (Prov. 18:22).

'A prudent wife is from the LORD' (Prov. 19:14).

The Book of Proverbs closes with an acrostic. Chapter 31:10-31 contains twenty-two verses, and each verse begins with one of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, in their true order. This acrostic is written in praise of the 'virtuous woman in whom the heart of her husband can safely trust'. It was a full-length portrait of the wife that Solomon should have chosen. Instead, the Song of Solomon reveals the faithful Shulamite and her shepherd lover in vivid contrast with Solomon and his 'three score queens, and four score concubines, and virgins without number' (Song of Sol. 6:8). In 1 Kings 11:3 we find that Solomon's quest has at length burdened his soul with 'seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines'. A THOUSAND in all! No wonder the

Shulamite on her return home after rejecting all Solomon's overtures, says 'My vineyard, which is mine, is before me: thou, O Solomon, mayest keep thy THOUSAND' (Song of Sol. 8:12, see *The Companion Bible*). These passages give point to Ecclesiastes 7:28:

'One man among A THOUSAND have I found; but a woman among all those have I not found'.

Solomon with all his wisdom played the fool, because he did not heed this particular word of the Lord. 'The conclusion of the whole matter' refers all happiness under the sun to 'fearing God' and 'keeping His commandments'. Solomon found the word 'vanity' written across life by reason of his failure in this particular.

Lives differ, and what is one man's weakness may be no temptation to another, but all experience leads to the same conclusion. Whoever transgresses the commandment of God must of necessity wreck his career. In Solomon's case, he ignored the warning concerning outlandish women. In the case of others, the warning of Scripture concerning wealth, fame, business entanglement, the world &c., being ignored, *Ichabod* is as surely written across the wasted life. These seven occurrences of Koheleth reveal the unity of the book and direct us to its theme, its conclusion and its consistency.

## THE QUESTION OF AUTHORSHIP 7

### CHAPTER 2

#### **The Question of Authorship**

'All Scripture is given by inspiration of God' (2 Tim. 3:16)

At the conclusion of the Gospel according to John, we read:

'This is the disciple which testifieth of these things, and wrote these things: and WE KNOW THAT HIS TESTIMONY IS TRUE' (21:24).

At the conclusion of Ecclesiastes, we read:

'The preacher sought to find out acceptable words: and that which was written was UPRIGHT, even WORDS OF TRUTH' (12:10).

As believers in the Lord and His Word, we unhesitatingly accept the testimony of John, yet many orthodox Christians have no hesitation in sweeping aside the testimony of Ecclesiastes with the remark 'It is all under the sun' - but why statements concerning things 'under the sun' should not be at the same time true is left unexplained.

Two important considerations arise out of the fact that Ecclesiastes is a part of the canonical Scriptures and claims to be written in words of truth.

(1) Seeing that Ecclesiastes was included in the Hebrew Scriptures long before the time of our Lord's earthly ministry, it received His approval when He referred in Luke 24 to the complete Old Testament by using the accepted title, 'The Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms'. This threefold title of the Old Testament Scriptures includes, under the heading of 'The Psalms', or as it is sometimes given 'The Writings', all the Hebrew Scriptures not already included in the Law and the Prophets. Among these 'Writings' or 'Psalms' are the Song of Solomon, Ezra, Nehemiah, Daniel, Ruth, Job and such a book as Esther which does not contain the name of God, except in acrostic form. The attitude of mind that so lightly dismisses Ecclesiastes could, with little difficulty, dismiss Esther or the Song of Solomon.

(2) To omit this book from our study is to deprive ourselves of one aspect of truth which will prevent us from being 'perfect' and 'thoroughly' furnished. This book being inspired Scripture, must be profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness.

Adverse critics of this book may be concluded under two headings. Those whose theological opinions do not agree with some of its teaching, and those who, on the grounds of 'higher criticism', pronounce the book to be either

a pious forgery or that it teaches that which is inconsistent with the rest of Scripture. The former can hardly have pondered the consequences of their attitude, for if books or even verses of Scripture may be rejected according as they disagree with the individual's creed, there will hardly be one book of either Old or New Testaments that sooner or later will not fall out of a universally accepted Canon. The second class of critics bring with them a variety of methods and motives. We cannot deal with all in this booklet but those which are based upon criticism of a literary and historical nature we may be able to consider, for the original is open to all, and a careful comparison of Scripture with Scripture requires neither genius nor inspiration.

While the criticism of the former class says in effect, 'Solomon's wisdom led him no higher than "under the sun" poor soul, we however know better'; the criticism of the latter school usually commences with a most emphatic repudiation of the possibility that Solomon could be the author of the book. One great authority declares that if this book were written by Solomon, or in Solomon's time, then there is no such thing as the history of the Hebrew language.

As the examination of parallels involves grammatical forms of the Hebrew language and makes hard reading for the average reader, we have transferred the results of this examination to an Appendix. We sincerely trust that our reason for this will not be misconstrued, we believe that the evidence which this comparison brings to light is overwhelming in its proof that none other than Solomon is the writer of Ecclesiastes.

In the first place it may be asked, 'What does the book itself say with regard to authorship?' Solomon's name is nowhere mentioned, but the following statements are made, and these, we submit, apply to no other man than Solomon.

(A). He was the son of David, king in Jerusalem (1:1). This is a title that is true of Solomon, but not exclusively so, for it is true of all the kings who reigned in Jerusalem up to the captivity.

(B). He was king over Israel in Jerusalem (1:12). The only other king whose name is put forward as being the author of Ecclesiastes is that of Hezekiah. Hezekiah, though a son of David and reigning in Jerusalem, is spoken of in Scripture as king of Judah. There are only two kings of whom it can be said that they were kings over ISRAEL in JERUSALEM, they are David and Solomon.

(C). The writer of Ecclesiastes was not only a king, but he claims to have gotten 'more wisdom than all they that have been before me in Jerusalem'. The wisdom of Solomon is proverbial. The Lord said:

'Lo, I have given thee a wise and an understanding heart; so that there was none like thee *before thee, neither after thee* shall any arise like unto thee'. 'And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding exceeding much, and largeness of heart ... Solomon's wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the children of the east country, and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all men' (1 Kings 3:12, 4:29-31).

The writer of Ecclesiastes claims to have gotten more wisdom than ALL they that were before him in Jerusalem. Solomon was in Jerusalem, and inspired Scripture tells us that he stands alone regarding wisdom. Neither before nor since has anyone had such wisdom. We have therefore no need to pursue this section further.

Solomon was the son of David.

Solomon was king in Jerusalem.

Solomon alone was, with the exception of David, king of Israel in Jerusalem.

Solomon was wiser than any before him or after him in Jerusalem.

The writer of Ecclesiastes was son of David, king in Jerusalem, king of Israel in Jerusalem, and wiser than all who were before him in Jerusalem.

We are therefore obliged -

- (1) To accept the teaching that Solomon was the author of Ecclesiastes, or,
- (2) To reject the explicit testimony of 1 Kings 3:5-12; 4:29-34, and
- (3) To believe that an unknown writer assumed the name and title of Solomon.

To think of any other king as author necessitates two men each wiser than the other, which is absurd. Those who tell us that the book must have been written much later than Solomon's day adopt numbers (2) and (3). There is no alternative for the believer in inspired Scripture with regard to number (1) which he accepts as truth.

## CHAPTER 3

### The Theme

What is the theme of the book of Ecclesiastes? Is it the quest for the *summum bonum*. 'that good' (2:3)? Is it an endeavour to solve the problem of the origin and purpose of evil? We feel it best to defer any answer until we have set before the reader one or two of the most prominent features of the book. Then possibly the Scriptures will have provided their own explanation. We know what Koheleth's summary is, for it is written both in the preface and the conclusion:

'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity' (1:2; 12:8).

The Structure given on page 80 xxxx should be consulted from time to time.

The word 'all' must be limited to its context as in other places, for of all the words that have made havoc of theology this seems one of the chief. 'All means all' may be a most untruthful conclusion. All means as many as the context intends and no more. Whatever the writer has in view, his conclusion concerning it is, 'All is vanity'. Before reading on in Ecclesiastes, let us see what has been written elsewhere concerning vanity.

Psalm 39:4-6. - This Psalm of David, we trust, is clear from any of the insults heaped upon the book of Ecclesiastes, this is not 'under the sun' in the sense often intended:

'LORD, make me to know mine end, and the measure of my days, what it is; that I may know how frail (short lived) I am. Behold, Thou hast made my days as an handbreadth; and mine age is as nothing before thee: verily every man at his best estate is altogether (or, only all) vanity. Selah. Surely every man walketh in a vain shew: surely they are disquieted in vain: he heapeth up riches, and *knoweth not who shall gather them*'.

Here, it will be observed, the vanity of man is seen in the one great fact that stands at the end of his career - DEATH. Death writes *vanity* over the whole creation of man. His labours are spent in accumulating that which some unknown person shall use.

Psalm 49:6-14 :

'They that trust in their wealth, and boast themselves in the multitude of their riches; none of them can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him ... that he should *still live* for ever, *and not see* corruption. For he seeth that wise men die, likewise the fool and the brutish person perish, and leave their wealth to others ... Like sheep they are laid in the grave'.

The Psalmist gives as a parenthesis the inward thought of these people. 'Their inward thought is, that their houses shall continue for ever, and their dwelling places to all generations'. To effect this they:

'call their lands after their names. Nevertheless, man being in honour abideth not: he is like the beasts that perish ... For when he dieth he shall carry nothing away: his glory shall not descend after him ... they shall never see light'. (parts of verses 11,12,17,19)

Here again the dread of death and of being forgotten urges men to do all kinds of things to perpetuate their memory. All the riches a man may accumulate, however, avail but for this transient life, 'for when he dieth he shall carry nothing away'. Surely this also is *vanity*?

Romans 8:20,21 says:

'The creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of Him Who hath subjected the same, in hope that the creature itself also shall be set free from the bondage of corruption into the liberty of the glory of the children of God' (Author's translation).

Yet again we find vanity linked with the bondage of corruption with no release apart from resurrection. Let us now turn to Ecclesiastes. What makes the writer there emphasize the vanity of all things? Precisely the same reason is found that we have read in Psalm and Epistle. Death writes *Ichabod* across the labours of man. The very first observation of the book is this. 'One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh', and the section ends with the thought 'There is no remembrance'.

In chapter 2:14-17 this observation is developed. He perfectly realized that wisdom excelled folly as light does darkness, yet he is faced with this chilling fact. Death comes to the wise as well as the fool:

'One event happeneth to them all ... As it happeneth to the fool, so it happeneth even to me; and why was I then more wise? Then I said in my heart, that this also is vanity. For there is no remembrance (same word as 'memorial', 1:11) of the wise more than of the fool for the age (*olam*); seeing that in the days to come all will have been already forgotten. And how dieth the wise man? As THE FOOL! Therefore I hated life' (Author's translation)..

The writer not only hated life, but he hated all his labour by reason of the fact that death would nullify it.

'Yea, I hated all my labour which I had taken under the sun: seeing that I must leave it to the man that shall be after me. And who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man or a fool? yet shall he have rule over all my labour wherein I have laboured, and wherein I have shewed wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity' (Ecc. 2:18,19 Author's translation).

The theme is not dropped, for within a few verses we read, 'For there is a man whose labour is with wisdom, and with knowledge and with skilfulness'. Yet he must leave it, perhaps to a fool! Surely life and its labours are vanity!

Chapter 3 develops a new phase of teaching. It is concerned with the set times and seasons for all the purposes under heaven. Although a new phase is commenced, the vanity of the creature by reason of mortality is not forgotten. What is the first couplet of the twenty-eight statements?

'There is ... a time to be born, *and a time to die*'!

After pursuing the question of time, the writer comes back to the subject of death:

'I said in mine heart concerning the estate of the sons of men, that God might manifest them, and that they might see that they themselves are beasts. For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even ONE THING befalleth them: as one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all ONE BREATH; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast: for all is vanity. All go unto ONE PLACE; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again ...' (3:18-20).

In 4:8 there is still a reference to the same sad theme. He looks at one 'alone' having neither child nor brother. Yet he does not say, 'For whom do I labour'? The suggestion is, of course, that death will prevent him from enjoying the result of his labour himself. So whether a man has an heir (2:18), or whether he has not - 'all is vanity, yea, a sore travail'. Speaking further of the accumulation of riches Koheleth observes:

'As he came forth of his mother's womb, naked shall he return to go as he came, and shall take nothing of his labour, which he may carry away in his hand. And this also is a sore evil, that in all points as he came, so shall he go: and what profit hath he that hath laboured for the wind?' (5:15,16).

'Do not all go to one place'? he asked (6:6), and speaks of this life as:

'Vain life which he spendeth as a shadow? for who can tell a man what shall be after him under the sun?' (6:12).

'It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting: for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to his heart' (7:2).

'The laughter of a fool is like the crackling of thorns under a pot' (7:6 Author's translation).

Nothing but senseless and unbridled licence can explain why those who are aware that 'the end of those things is death' do not appear moved by the prospect and saddened at the outlook.

In chapter 8:4 we read, 'Where the word of a King is, there is *power*', but verse 8 reveals the need of a greater than Solomon. 'There is no man that hath *power* over the spirit to retain the spirit; neither hath he *power* in the day of death: and there is no discharge in that war'. Not only does the sense of vanity come to the writer as he sees all men, fools and wise, subject to death, he contemplates the burial of the wicked and the fact that they are forgotten with an equal sense of vanity (10). Still the subjects haunts him:

'All things come alike to all: there is ONE EVENT to the righteous, and to the wicked; to the good and to the clean, and to the unclean; to him that sacrificeth, and to him that sacrificeth not: as to the good, so to the sinner: and he that sweareth, as he that feareth an oath. This is an evil among all things that are done under the sun, that there is ONE EVENT unto all ... madness is in their heart while they live, and after that they go to the dead' (9:2,3 Author's translation).

Surely, had Ecclesiastes lived in this twentieth century he would have heard the echo of his words in the colloquial, 'What's the good of ANYTHING - *nothing*!' A Proverb is the wisdom of many in the wit of one, and slang though it may be, it is the subconscious finding of man at large.

'Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, *whither thou goest*' (9:10 see also 9:5).

Here the writer reveals the identity of the *one place* whither all go, *Sheol*, the Hebrew equivalent to *Hades*. The uncertain tenure of life also appeals to him:

'For man also knoweth not his time: as the fishes that are taken in an evil net, and as the birds that are caught in the snare; so are the sons of men snared in an evil time, when it falleth suddenly upon them' (9:12).

Whatever the condition in which a man may live, he is wise never so to live as though the rude intrusion were not bound to come.

'Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun: But if a man live many years, let him rejoice in them all, yet let him remember the days of darkness; for they shall be many. ALL THAT COMETH IS VANITY' (11:7,8 Author's translation).

The survey concludes with the exhortation to the youth to remember his Creator while the evil days come not. For:

'Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God Who gave it. Vanity of vanities, saith Koheleth; all is vanity' (12:7-8).

Thus ends the search and the survey. Dust returns to dust. Spirit returns to God the giver. What an end! What can we say after viewing the travail, the labour, the inequalities, the just suffering as the wicked, the wicked prospering as though just, the time and the chance, the one event to wise and to fools, but *Vanity, all is vanity*! Is this a sceptic's finding, or a believer's verdict? We dare to say that it is the finding of every Scripture-taught believer. One thing, and one thing only, can alter the verdict - RESURRECTION.

'If Christ be not RISEN, then is our preaching *vain*, and your faith is also *vain* ... if Christ be not raised, your faith is *vain*; ye are yet in your sins ... If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable' (1 Cor. 15:14,17,19).

That the teaching of the apostle is similar to that of Ecclesiastes when resurrection is removed from the argument is manifested by the fact that he echoes Ecclesiastes 2:24; 8:15, where Koheleth, looking at the just man who suffers like a wicked man, commends mirth saying:

'Eat, and drink, and be merry'.

So the apostle says:

'If after the manner of men I have fought with beasts at Ephesus, what advantageth it me, if the dead rise not? let us EAT AND DRINK; FOR TOMORROW WE DIE' (1 Cor. 15:32).

Few would be found who would pick out this verse from its context, and then try to show that the apostle was untrustworthy or that he was a cynic, or a sceptic, or any other of the names heaped upon Koheleth; yet what Ecclesiastes has spread over a book Paul has condensed into a verse. Koheleth wishes to impress the fact of *vanity*, Paul of *triumph*, yet where they touch upon the same thing they speak with the same words.

All is vanity, even Paul teaches that, *apart from the risen Christ*. We shall find that Koheleth, too, teaches the same thing in his own way. Does this resurrection chapter continue the refrain, 'What advantageth it me? What profit is there in labour?' No. Let us hear the last word on the matter:

'O death, where is thy sting? O grave (the *sheol* of Ecclesiastes), where is thy victory? ... thanks be to God, Which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that YOUR LABOUR IS NOT IN VAIN in the Lord' (1 Cor. 15:55-58).

Having examined 'The Theme' and discovered what it is, as found in Chapters 1 to 6, we now return to give these chapters an examination. We find that the question 'What is that good?' which covers this section, can be examined and in measure answered, by subdividing the subject matter under the following seven heads.

#### **Ecclesiastes 1 to 6**

##### **The Question 'What is that good?'**

- (1) Is that life worth living, which is without Christ?
- (2) Does your business pay?
- (3) Sore travail and its exercise.
- (4) The search for 'that good'.
- (5) Life's true portion.
- (6) A time for every purpose.
- (7) Adam; his relation to the theme.

#### **CHAPTER 4**

##### **The Question 'What is that good?'**

#### **Ecclesiastes 1 to 6**

##### **(1) Is that life worth living, which is without Christ?**

'*Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher, Vanity of vanities; all is vanity*'.

The Hebrew superlative is expressed in the words 'Holy of holies', 'Servant of servants', &c., and this opening statement of the preacher indicates the most utter emptiness and vanity. Vanity is the word that meets us at every turn throughout this book, and we must at least give the passages a consideration before passing on, otherwise we shall miss much help in the subsequent interpretation.

First of all let us notice the repeated detailed confirmation of the opening utterance by observing in what connections the preacher remarks, 'this also is vanity'; for these mark progressive examinations with their conclusions.

'I said in mine heart, Go to now, I will prove thee with mirth, therefore enjoy pleasure' (Eccles. 2:1).

*Prove.* - This word in the same grammatical form is mostly rendered 'tempt', and specially in the connection of tempting God. In slightly different forms it is rendered 'prove' in such cases as Deuteronomy 8:2,16. The underlying idea is that of trial by means of some ordeal.

*Enjoy.* - The Hebrew word thus translated means, literally 'to see', as in chapter 1, verse 14; and in the form of the verb used in chapter 2, verse 1, it occurs seven times, translated 'see', 'consider' 'behold' 'lo' 'enjoy' and 'joyfully' (Eccl. 1:10; 2:1; 7:13,14,27,29; 9:9).

It will be seen that the 'enjoyment' advocated is a considered joy, not the reckless dissipation of a fool.

*Pleasure.* - This is translated in the third verse 'good' and recurs constantly throughout the book. It is the word which comes in 7:11, where the highest meaning must attach to it. Instead therefore of accusing Koheleth of taking a mad plunge into pleasure, we must credit him with a sober and sane investigation of mirth in order to notice its effect upon himself, and particularly upon his heart. The real thought seems to be that Koheleth in his search for what was 'that good' tested himself with mirth, looking carefully concerning 'that good' which is the reason for all these trials and experiments.

We translate 'concerning good', and rightly so. The Hebrew *beth* is usually rendered 'in', sometimes 'to', 'against', 'with', and sometimes, as Leviticus 6:2 illustrates, it bears the thought of 'concerning'. Here therefore was a properly planned, and carefully conducted test. What was the result? 'This also is vanity'.

'I said of laughter, IT IS MAD: and of mirth, WHAT DOETH IT?' (Eccles. 2:2).

This question 'what doeth it?' is echoed in verse 3 - 'what they should do' - and shows that we have here a very real and careful investigation. Koheleth is after something. Shame on those misinterpreters who load their commentaries with their attempt to show superior knowledge. He is still consistently pursuing his theme when he confesses that whatsoever God *doeth* it is for the *olam* (age) (3:14). So also when he pities the poor mortal, whose vain life he spends, or 'does' as a shadow (6:12). The word appears again immediately in the next verse. 'I heightened my *works*' (lit.) (2:4), and all these 'doings' are pronounced at the close 'vanity' (11). We must not pursue this interesting theme now, it will form a separate study later.

The next case in which the writer pronounces the judgment 'this also is vanity' is that of wisdom and folly:

'And I turned myself (*same word "looked" in verse 11*) in order to look (*not the usual word, it means "consider"*) at wisdom, and madness, and folly; for what can the man do that cometh after the king?' (that is to say, he had as many advantages as, if not more than, any successor was likely to have) 'even that which hath been already done' (2:12 Author's translation).

This is a continual refrain:

'Is there anything whereof it may be said, See, this is new? it hath been already of old time, which was before us. There is no remembrance' (1:10,11).

'For there is no remembrance of the wise more than the fool for the age; seeing that which is already, in the days to come shall be forgotten' (2:16 Author's translation). (So again 3:15).

There is something baffling which Koheleth experiences, and which he clearly records, as we shall see. Here he refers to it. Concerning his consideration of wisdom and folly, he saw clearly that wisdom excelled folly as light darkness, yet at the end was that ONE EVENT which wrote its dread *Ichabod*. 'Then said I in my heart, that this also is vanity'. In verses 18 and 19 another phase of this same thought appears. Koheleth was to leave all his labours to another. But said he:

'Who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet shall he rule over all my labour wherein I have laboured, and where I have showed myself wise under the sun. This is also vanity' (Author's translation).

The theme is restated in verse 21 with the more positive thought that the result of all his labours will go to one who has not given one moment's thought to its production. Yet once more:

'What hath man of all his labour, and of the vexation of his heart ... all his days are sorrows, and his travail grief; yea, his heart *taketh not rest* in the night. This is also vanity' (2:22,23).

How completely in harmony is this with Psalm 127, a song of degrees BY SOLOMON (*see Companion Bible*):

'Except the LORD build the house, they *labour in vain* that build it: except the LORD keep the city, the watchman waketh *but in vain*. It is *vain* for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows: for so He giveth His beloved IN (their) SLEEP' (1,2).

We must note Ecclesiastes 2:24-26 and remember that the word 'than' is not in the original. The Vulgate and Luther make the sentence interrogative. In verse 25 the weight of MS. evidence is in favour of reading 'apart from Him' instead of 'more than I'. Hence the passage reads:

'Is it not good for man that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour? This also I saw, that it (*i.e.* enjoyment of good) was from the hand of God'.

Man himself cannot accomplish it. 'For who can eat, or who else can hasten hereunto *apart from Him*'? Here Koheleth sees the truth of Romans 2:5-10:

'For God giveth to a man that is good in His sight wisdom, and knowledge, and joy: but to the sinner He giveth travail, to gather (as the fruits Lev. 23:39) and to heap up (same word 'I *gathered me also* silver and gold' 2:8), that he may give to him that is good before God'.

How similar is Proverbs 28:8:

'He that by usury and unjust gain increaseth his substance, *he shall gather it for him* that will pity the poor'.

'This also is vanity and vexation of spirit'. Do not let us jump to the conclusion, as many do, that Koheleth is taking sides with the sinner. He is expressing a *fact*, that the fraudulent accumulation of riches is simply vanity and vexation of spirit for the sinner, for none can enjoy the results of his labours apart from God's permission.

In chapter 4:4,8 and 14 three further observations are recorded: first, *the envy* which even righteous work begets in one's neighbour; secondly, *the vanity* of increasing and unsatisfying labour on the part of one having neither kith nor kin; and thirdly, by the contemplation of *the instability* even of a despot's throne. This passage has been paraphrased by A. A. Morgan thus:

'Better cried they, a youth the land should rule  
Than one whom time and age hath made a fool.  
The heir of poverty, of bondmen born  
If wise, disarms hereditary scorn,  
And claims a people's homage more than he,  
Whose mind is wasted by infirmity'.

While an old and foolish king can be no good to a people, and while we may argue with every appearance of right along such lines as 'A man's a man, for a' that, and a' that', yet there is something very unscriptural in the democratic view of kingship. Prophecy illuminates the goal of democratic rule. The world will not be better for exchanging the head of *gold* for the feet of *clay*. God's ideal rule is by a king upon a throne, and nothing can finally be right that disregards that fact. Therefore Koheleth is right when he contemplates this up to date rebellion. 'Surely this also is vanity and vexation of spirit'. Five more observations will complete our survey.

'He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance (be satisfied) with increase' (5:10).

This is exactly what Koheleth pronounced (1:8). What is the eye for but for 'seeing'? yet it is not satisfied thereby. If a man love silver will he not be satisfied with it? No. It is a weary business, this seeking satisfaction from a world marked with corruption. Ecclesiastes utters truth at every step. All his findings point in the same direction. Vanity is written over all by reason of death. THE good is the LIFE to come. Satisfaction cannot be found here. 'I shall be SATISFIED when I awake with Thy likeness' is as much the burden of Koheleth as of the Psalmist. In chapter 6:1,2 the writer reverts to a phase of experience already touched upon in 2:24-26.

'There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, and it is common among men (or heavy upon men R.V.): A man to whom God hath given riches, wealth, and honour, so that he wanteth nothing for his soul of all that he desireth, yet God giveth him not power to eat thereof, but a stranger eateth it: this is vanity, and it is an evil disease'.

How many failures may be attributed to the lack of recognition of this principle! The present economic situation is revealing to the mass of men that money is a false standard of value. Today (February 23rd, 1949) the newspaper reports that 10s. notes were being sold in the West End of London for 4s. 3 1/2d. their present value - whether for political purposes, or for a wager is immaterial. And when we remember such words as Haggai 1:6 we can see that to earn much and yet to put it into a bag with holes is indeed vanity. Yet such was the condition of those who in their selfish greed put their own house first and forgot the Lord's. We have still to do with the same Lord who fed the prophet and the widow during famine with the last handful of meal, and who could multiply five loaves and two fishes so that they would satisfy thousands. Chapter 5:19 tells us that this 'power' is the gift of God, and a gift it is verily.

Verses 7-9 of chapter 6, introduce another aspect of unsatisfied desires. 'All the labour of man is for his mouth, and yet the appetite (soul) is not filled'. So Proverbs 16:26, 'He that laboureth, laboureth for himself; for his mouth craveth it of him'. As we analyze the speeches of those who have pleaded for better conditions for labour, have they not insisted that the man who labours week in week out shall earn something over and above the mere satisfying his mouth? Do not they demand a higher standard of living and of bringing within reach some of the intellectual refinements of life? True it is there is nothing new under the sun. Koheleth strikes the same note here. There is no true satisfaction in merely satisfying the craving of the mouth.

Nevertheless Ecclesiastes is in advance of many of his self-appointed teachers. 'Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the desire (soul)' (6:9) - for seek as he will and where he will man will never escape the curse of vanity except by Him Who is the true and living way. Both Ecclesiastes and Christ say 'a living WAY'. 'A living WAGE' is a poor substitute if taken alone. 'This also is vanity and vexation of spirit'.

Chapter 7:6 sums up the senseless laughter of fools as so much crackling of thorns under a pot - mere vanity. Koheleth's opinion of laughter and mirth, expressed in 2:2, remains unchanged. He also reviews the burial of the wicked with all the pomp and splendour that may accompany it (8:10. See also 6:3). They had 'come and gone'. There is no 'complex figure of Ellipsis' here. It is the observation of Ecclesiastes throughout the book. 'One generation passeth away (same word 'gone') and another cometh (same word 'come'). 'He cometh in vanity', and 'goeth to his long home'. 'To come and go' is the summary of human activity. They had conducted their business in the very shadow of the holy place, yet 'what shall it profit a man?' 'This also is vanity'.

Finally, the apparent lack of equity that goes to make up the lives of men, the prosperity of the wicked and the suffering of the righteous, this further emphasizes the unsatisfactory nature of things and cries aloud for the 'conclusion of the matter', viz., a definite hereafter for the rectification of all that now is crooked. Who is there, taught by the Scriptures, that will say that Ecclesiastes is not soundly true? Members of the One Body, blessed with all spiritual blessings, will do well to meditate upon the teaching of this book, for what is the practical exhortation to us but the experimental teaching of Ecclesiastes in the doctrine of Paul?

'If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection (mind) on things above, not on things on the earth' (Col. 3:1,2).

**(2) Does your business pay? (1:3)**

We have scanned somewhat briefly this wonderful book, and have seen the conclusion of the matter, that apart from the blessed hope of resurrection both Paul and Solomon agree that we are of all men most miserable. We now return to the opening section of the book to look more closely at the method which is adopted, the materials that are used, and the result that is achieved.

The thesis with which Koheleth opens chapter 1:2 and closes chapter 12:8 is that which he probes and proves throughout the twelve chapters. *All is vanity*, such is the statement. Now for the proof. The preacher puts forth a question:

‘What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?’ (Eccles. 1:3).

It is most important, in order to arrive at a true answer, that we should have a true understanding of the question, which is one concerning profit. The Hebrew word is *yithron*, and signifies literally ‘What is over and above’, that is, the true commercial everyday idea of profit. Labour, which earns enough to supply tomorrow's strength to labour again, is but an endless circle to be described in the verses that follow, and is profitless however much it may seem to produce. The reader may prove this meaning by the usage of the cognate *yother* which occurs in Ecclesiastes seven times, viz.:

‘Why was I then *more* wise?’ (2:15).

‘What hath the wise *more* than the fool?’ (6:8).

‘What is man the *better*?’ (6:11).

‘By it there is *profit* to them’ (7:11).

‘Neither make thyself *over* wise’ (7:16).

‘And *moreover*’ (12:9).

‘And *further*’ (12:12).

The only positive statement is the central reference. In this book of superlative vanity something *is* profitable. What is it?

‘Wisdom is good, like an inheritance, and by it there is profit to them that see the sun ... the PROFIT (*yithron*) of knowledge, is that wisdom giveth LIFE to them that have it’ (7:11,12 Author's translation).

Here we are plunged at once into the very heart of the matter. All labour is profitless which does not yield treasure in heaven. Merely to toil and toil for the meat that perisheth, for the clothes that wear out, for the gold that fades, for riches that take wings, is to live the life of a bankrupt though we die wealthier than a Croesus. So to dispose of one's time, so to arrange one's labour that some of the seed sown shall be harvested ‘in that day’, that some of the treasure shall be laid up as a good foundation for the life that is life indeed, even though some of our crops down here are sparse and our bank account low - such labour is not without its ‘moreover’. From the verse which asks the question concerning the profitableness of labour (1:3) until chapter 2:26, the great subject of investigation is this one of works, sore travail and labour. After the enumeration of the times and seasons (3:1-8), which in effect summarizes the whole round of human activity, the question of 1:3 abruptly reappears: ‘What profit hath he that worketh in that wherein he laboureth?’ The insane idolatry of mere accumulation is exposed in the next reference to ‘profit’ (5:9-12):

‘Moreover the profit of the earth is for all (or consists in the whole): the king himself is served by the field’.

The verses which follow speak both of the failure of silver and of increase to satisfy. The occupant of the humble cottage, were he taught by this book would never envy the owner of the mansion which overlooks his roof. Can that wealthy man eat more than one meal at a time? wear more than one suit at a time?

‘What advantage to the owners thereof, saving the LOOKING AT THEM with their eyes?’ (5:11 Author's translation).

In contrast with all the vexations and taxations of the wealthy is the poor man:

'The sleep of a labouring man is sweet, whether he eat little or much' (5:12).

A plain and frugal supper satisfies his modest desires, and an extra good meal brings no nightmare to haunt his slumbers. Again the question is raised in 5:16, and labour for riches proves to be labour for the wind, and where is the profit? Did not the Lord Jesus Himself take up the teaching of Ecclesiastes when He said:

'For what is a man profited, if he shall *gain* the whole world, and *lose* his own soul?' (Matt. 16:26).

Here the truth is enforced by a figure that does not speak merely of accumulating silver or adding field to field, it contemplates the possession of the whole world - yet even then we ask where is the profit? there is none, for the reward which the Lord will give when He comes in the glory of his Father is forfeited. Is not the conclusion of Ecclesiastes' investigation expressed in the words:

'Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth ... but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven?' (Matt. 6:19,20).

The apostle Paul knew full well that the balance-sheet is not to be made up annually - it is an affair of life:

For me to live is Christ, and to die is GAIN' (Phil. 1:21).

'What things were GAIN to me, those I counted loss for Christ ... I count all things but loss ... that I may have Christ for my GAIN' (Phil. 3:7,8 Author's translation).

'I have learned, in whatsoever state I am ... to be content' (Phil. 4:11).

We return to the opening chapter, and note the observations which follow immediately upon his question. He instances the generations of mankind, the sun, the wind, the rivers. One thing is common to them, a continuous never-ending circle. One generation passeth away and another generation cometh. The sun is no sooner risen than he seems to hasten along his pathway to complete his circuit. The winds whirl about continually, and return according to their circuit. The rivers run into the sea and return again to their source. 'All things are full of weariness' (*see* 12:12 for same word). There is no satisfaction to be found in the things of this life of themselves. What is the eye for but to see? yet 'the eye is not satisfied with seeing!' The idea of the endless circle comes out again in 1:10 :

'Is there anything whereof it may be said, See, this is new? it hath been already of old time, which was before us'.

The final statement seems to reach the depths of vanity. 'No remembrance' (1:11). After all the toil, the heart ache, the sleepless nights, the weary struggle, the little petty triumph - oblivion, forgotten! *Ichabod*: where is the glory? One writer remarked that if he had to use two geometrical figures, the one to represent man and the other God, he should use a circle for man and a straight horizontal line for God for He alone moves forward, man but treads a never ending mill.

This book has something much more cheerful to say even about this life, when we are ready for the lesson. Here we are in a world of strife, struggle, turmoil. Whether we are officially in a state of Peace or War makes very little difference. Men and women spend their lives in pursuing the unsatisfying round of eating and drinking, buying and selling, losing and gaining, in short, all the items enumerated in 3:1-8, for what use or purpose? If it ends in the things of this life, it has been a mere circle. If that circle is so big that it embraces 'the whole world', yet the Saviour says, 'What shall it profit a man?'

My reader, ask yourself the question as before the Lord, DOES MY BUSINESS PAY? Do not consult your pass book, nor speak of your turnover, do not think of your increasing barns or added acres; where is the profit in the scriptural sense? Does each year find you with an increasing balance stored up 'where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt and where thieves do not break through nor steal'? When you have computed your yield per acre, have you thought of that other harvest? 'God is not mocked, for whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap'. Some commodities are not very saleable. For example how few *Buy the truth and sell it not*. How many of us are keen to *Redeem the time because the days are evil*? And when we labour with our hands do we have the apostle's injunction in mind, *That we may have to give to him that needeth*?

One word in conclusion. 'We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out'. With that 'one event' vanishes all the 'gains' of this life. Oh to realize the value of an everyday appreciation of resurrection ground!

*'Your labour is NOT IN VAIN in the Lord'.*

### (3) Sore travail and its exercise (1:12-15)

After surveying the course of nature and seeing impressed upon the whole of creation the endless circle of objectless activity, Koheleth proceeds to a further detailed investigation. We observed that the opening of verse 3 gave the key to the direction of the search, *What profit?* We shall now observe that verses 12 and 13, which commence a sub-section, likewise provide the key to the matter of the search:

'I Koheleth was king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I gave my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven: this sore travail hath God given to the sons of man to be exercised therewith' (Eccles. 1:12,13).

The search was to be conducted 'by wisdom' and it is essential to our appreciation both of the method and of the results of the enquiry, to see that Koheleth retained that God-given wisdom throughout the investigation. Wisdom is the emphatic word of this section:

'To seek and search out by *wisdom*' (1:13).

'I ... have gotten more *wisdom* ... my heart had great experience of *wisdom* and knowledge' (1:16).

'I gave my heart to know *wisdom*' (1:17).

'In much *wisdom* is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow' (1:18).

In 2:3, even in the apparent plunge, 'giving myself unto wine', Koheleth still could say, 'yet acquainting my heart with *wisdom*'. Further, in 2:9, the writer asserts, 'my *wisdom* remained with me'. We travel as far as 7:25 still to hear the words:

'I applied my heart to know, and to search, and to seek out *wisdom*, and the reason of things'.

In the conclusion of the book, the wisdom of Koheleth is mentioned:

'Moreover, because the preacher was *wise*, he still taught the people knowledge' (12:9).

Whatever we may think of the personal participation of the writer in the objects of his search, we must not ourselves forget the scriptural emphasis upon the searcher's wisdom. Moreover, he declares also for our benefit that at the time he pursued this enquiry, he was King. These investigations were not carried out by an inexperienced minor, but one who for the purposes of his kingly office had received a special grant of wisdom. Further, in a king of such wealth, magnificence and sway as that of Solomon, we see one who was able to the fullest extent to sound the depths and scale the heights in his research.

Returning to 1:13, we observe that Solomon gave his heart 'to seek and search'. The word 'search' (*tur*) is the word used so frequently of the spies in chapters 13 and 14 of Numbers. It indicates a thorough survey according to the charge given by Moses to the spies (13:18-20) of the nature of the land itself, its crops and its inhabitants. So Solomon's search was thorough, it was 'by wisdom' and it was the occupation of his 'heart'. The object of this thorough search was 'all things which are done under heaven', which in turn is further described as:

'This sore travail hath God given to the sons of man to be exercised therewith' (1:13).

The object is the things 'done' under heaven. Verse 14 tells us that Koheleth had seen all the works that are done under the sun, and they were all vanity and vexation of spirit. It is the same sentiment and the same word, rendered 'wrought', that we read in 2:17. Among the things 'done' we may never have included the 'oppressions' that abound

on every hand (4:1-3), but Ecclesiastes does. To limit our observations within handy compass we note the many things 'done' in this practical experiment, as indicated in chapter 2. Each reference is to the same original word:

'Till I might see what was that good for the sons of men, which they should *do* under heaven' (2:3).

'I *made* me gardens and orchards' (2:5).

'I *made* me pools of water' (2:6).

'I *gat* me men singers and women singers, and the delights of the sons of men, as musical instruments, and that of all sorts' (2:8).

'Then I looked on all the works that my hands *had wrought*, and on the labour that I had laboured *to do*' (2:11).

'What can the man do that cometh after the king? even that which hath already *been done*' (2:12).

'The work that is *wrought* under the sun is grievous unto me' (2:17).

Here is an array of doings, and the result - 'very grievous'. In our 'text' the things done are defined as 'sore travail'. This is an expression which we meet several times through the book. The question is asked, 'What hath man of all his labour?' The answer is:

'All his days are sorrows, and his travail grief' (2:23).

'He giveth (to the sinner) travail (namely), to gather and to heap up, that he may give to him that is good before God' (2:26).

'I have seen the travail, which God hath given to the sons of men to be exercised in it' (3:10).

'There is one alone ... he hath neither child nor brother: yet is there no end of all his labour ... this is also vanity, yea, it is a sore travail' (4:8).

'A dream cometh through the multitude of business (travail)' (5:3).

'Riches perish by evil travail' (5:14).

'The business (travail) that is done upon the earth' (8:16).

These references show that the 'things done' by the sons of men, those things which constitute 'business', are a 'sore travail'. Sorrow and grief, heaping up for another, whether the good before God, or for someone else because one has neither child nor brother, disturbing one's very sleep so that the daily business demands the activity of the restless brain at night, the transient character of these hard-earned riches, and the baffling mystery of it all - these constitute one of the causes for vanity and vexation of spirit. There is, however, in all these intricacies the redeeming feature of a purpose. This sore travail is given to the sons of men 'to be EXERCISED therewith'. So fundamentally true is this, that the same Hebrew word that gives us 'travail' gives us 'exercise'. This word comes in many passages of Scripture, e.g.:

'Before I was *afflicted* I went astray' (Psa. 119:67).

'To *humble* thee, and to prove thee' (Deut. 8:2).

This second reference well illustrates the teaching of Ecclesiastes:

'Thou shalt remember all the way which the LORD thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness, to humble (exercise) thee, and to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep His commandments, or no. And He humbled thee, and suffered thee to hunger, and fed thee with manna, which thou knewest not, neither did thy fathers know; that He might make thee know that man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the LORD doth man live' (Deut. 8:2,3).

This is parallel with the teaching of 1 Corinthians 10:13:

'God is faithful, Who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make the issue, that ye may be able to bear up under it' (Author's translation).

And again, in Hebrews 12:11 :

`No chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless AFTERWARD it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are *exercised* thereby'.

Oh, the tragedy of unlearned lessons! The trial passed through without being exercised, the suffering endured without result, the heavy stroke without the blessed fruit. God has so ordered the affairs of men that this world shall not yield only joy and gladness; sorrow, vexation and worry at every turn beset the sons of men, not out of caprice or indifference, but that they may be exercised, humbled therewith. And the Christian too passes through sore trials, so that he may learn to lean harder and more completely upon his Lord.

Has the reader been `exercised' thereby? Have you gone on your knees with your trouble to ask that you may not miss its lesson? Have you realized that He who sends the trial shapes the issue? (1 Cor. 10:13 lit.).

As a conclusion to the opening investigation Koheleth says:

`That which is crooked cannot be made straight: and that which is wanting cannot be numbered' (1:15).

This conclusion, namely the utter inability of man to `reform' this age, is stated again in 7:13 :

`Consider the work of God: for who can make that straight, which He hath made crooked?'

Well may the gloomy Dane say:

`The time is out of joint. O, cursed spite  
That ever I was born to set it right'.<sup>\*</sup>

The sore travail of the age is clarion-tongued in its call for Christ. The whole creation groaneth and travaileth, waiting for the coming of the Prince of peace. *`I will overturn, overturn, overturn, until He come whose right it is'.* The believer who follows the teaching of Ecclesiastes may be spared the fruitless agony of the gospel of reform, and learn to fret not himself because of evil doers, because of him that bringeth wicked devices to pass, but to roll his burden upon the Lord, and wait patiently for Him.

#### (4) The search for `that good' (1:12 to 2:26)

In the opening verse (1:13) the Preacher tells us he gave his `heart' to the search concerning the sore travail of men. In the verses that follow, we can see how his heart went out into all the avenues of human suffering, pleasure and experience in his endeavour to discover `what is that good?'

Throughout this section there is a repetition of the phrases `I gave my heart' either to see, or to know, and the conclusion `Vanity' or `Vexation' comes as a sad refrain ten times.

Koheleth had gotten wisdom more than all that had been before him in Jerusalem. His heart also had `great experience of wisdom and knowledge'. He not only possessed but he had used his gift. The word *experience* is given in the margin `seen much'. It is variously translated in Ecclesiastes, viz., `to see', `enjoy', `perceive', `consider', `behold'. Nevertheless Koheleth realized the unplumbed depths that surrounded him. So he gave his heart `to know wisdom and to know madness and folly'. In many points chapter 7 echoes these opening verses. There he shows that his experiences have taught a needful lesson:

`I said, I will be wise; but it was far from me. That which is far off, and exceeding deep, who can find it out? I applied mine heart to know, and to search, and to seek out wisdom, and the reason of things, and to know the wickedness of folly, even of foolishness and madness' (7:23-25).

Here Koheleth indicates that by wisdom some things cannot be fathomed, and this is more positively taught in 8:16,17:

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<sup>\*</sup> Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 5.

`When I applied mine heart to know wisdom, and to see the travail that is done upon the earth, how that one doth not see sleep with his eyes by day or by night: then I beheld all the work of God, that a man *cannot find out* the work that is done under the sun, because though a man labour to seek it out, yet he shall not find it; yea farther; though a wise man think to know it, yet shall he not be able to find it' (Author's translation).

Again in 3:10,11 the sore travail and its legitimate exercise is contrasted with the `far off' and the `exceeding deep' things which wisdom cannot explore:

`He hath made everything beautiful in its season; also He hath set the age in their heart, so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end' (Author's translation).

Revelation alone can make us know the work that God maketh `from the beginning to the end'. What is revealed we know, what is unrevealed all our wisdom will never supply. We shall but make our folly manifest and ultimately be found wresting the scriptures to make them fit our theories. Again in another parallel with the opening section we read:

`Consider the work of God: for who can make that straight, which He hath made crooked?' (the vain attempt is seen in every department of life today, from theology downwards). `In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of adversity consider: that God also hath set the one over against the other, to the end that man *should find nothing* after him ... neither make thyself over wise' (7:13-16).

Solomon, therefore, when he gave his heart to know wisdom and madness and folly, was simply asking to perceive:

`vexation of spirit. For in much wisdom is much grief (or mortification): and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow' (1:17,18).

This result he arrives at in 2:21-23 :

`A man whose labour is in wisdom, and in knowledge, and in equity ... all his days are sorrows, and his travail grief'.

It is impossible to attain to a knowledge of the world and its ways without experiencing the utter failure of man to save himself or reform the crooked world. Wisdom also fails to make plain the work that God doeth from the beginning to the end. Faith in His written Word is our only safety and rest. We have already indicated that the word *experience* is the word *enjoy*. `I said in mine heart, Go to now, I will prove thee with mirth, therefore "look into" pleasure'. What was the result of the investigation? `This also is vanity' (2:1). His experiment with `mirth' was very thorough. It is set out in detail in the verses that follow. In verse 10 Koheleth says, `I withheld not my heart from any joy (mirth)'.

`*Therefore look into pleasure*'. - This word *pleasure* is rendered `good' twenty-four times in Ecclesiastes, besides `better' and `well'. Koheleth did not `plunge into pleasure' as some of his detractors maintain, but `investigated good', as he repeats in 2:3. Here he examines mirth, there he interrogates folly with the same object in view. All that he could say of laughter was that it was mad. In chapter 7:3,4 we find (as we have found before) his sober judgment on the matter:

`Sorrow is better than laughter: for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth'.

His question concerning mirth was, `What doeth it?' In what way does it help man upon the road to true peace and lasting joy. Surely the beginning of wisdom is to recognize that we are in an evil age, with corruption in our nature, and condemnation as our legal end. The laughter of fools and the mirth that is indisciplined are out of place in the presence of such a state. It is like the crackling of thorns under a pot in its transience. Solomon went the whole gamut of experiences, and in verse 3, when he gave himself to wine, he exposed the subtle philosophy that was expressed later in the *Ruba'iyát of 'Omar Khaiyam*. Chapter 7 answers the `laying hold of folly' by replying `It is good that thou shouldest take hold of (same word) this', indicating the argument of verses 13-17 already quoted above. No conclusion is arrived at in 2:3. All we know is that the writer tested these things in turn with one object:

'Till I might see what was that good for the sons of men, which they should do under the heaven all the days of their life'.

We must now examine the process of investigation more thoroughly.

### (5) Life's true portion (2:4-11)

In these studies we are seeking principles. The limitations of space and time prevent us from a closer consideration of connecting details other than a brief survey. Such a survey must be given now of the subject matter of chapter 2:4-11. The pursuit of the enquiry as to what was 'that good for the sons of men which they should do under the heaven all the days of their life' was not conducted as a theoretical speculation, but as a practical experiment. Koheleth's attention is first described as that which from the days of the flood till the present time had been a summary of human activity: 'I builded, I planted'. Here we see the laying out and equipping of a great establishment. Matthew Henry in his commentary writes:

'Solomon here, in pursuit of the *summum bonum*, the felicity of man, adjourns out of his study, his library, his laboratory, his council chamber, where he had in vain sought for it, into the park and play house, his garden and his summer house, exchanging the company of philosophers and grave senators for that of the wits and gallants, and the *beaux esprits* of his court, to try if he could find true satisfaction and happiness among them. Here he takes a great step downward from the noble pleasures of intellect to the brutal ones of sense; yet, if he resolve to make a thorough trial, he must knock at this door because here a great part of mankind imagine they have found that which he was in quest for'.

The turning from pure wisdom and its abstractions to the concrete erection of buildings and planting of gardens is founded upon the two phases indicated in 1:16; 2:3-10. The books of Kings and Chronicles give some idea of Solomon's activities as a builder.

'He built Tadmor in the wilderness, and all the store cities, which he built in Hamath. Also he built Beth-horon the upper, and Beth-horon the nether, fenced cities, with walls, gates, and bars; and Baalath, and all the store cities that Solomon had, and all the chariot cities, and the cities of the horsemen, and all that Solomon desired to build in Jerusalem, and in Lebanon, and throughout all the land of his dominion' (2 Chron. 8:4-6).

Koheleth not only built and planted, but he gathered a great retinue of servants and maidens. His possessions in cattle were greater than all that had been before him in Jerusalem. Silver and gold and the peculiar treasure of kings and of the provinces were gathered without stint. Singers, both male and female, and musical instruments of all sorts were not omitted. Here was one who had unlimited scope and unlimited power.

'And whatsoever mine eyes desired *I kept not from them*, I withheld not my heart from any joy' (Eccles. 2:10).

Here all men may see ambition and desire gratified and indulged to the utmost bound, and from the record may learn the vanity of their own puny graspings. Here is one who was not an envious spectator of a distant pleasure, nor who merely had a share with others of the good things of this life; here was one who was pivot and centre of all the beauty, luxury, refinement and greatness of kingly estate and gratified ambition. While the scheme was in process, Solomon's whole heart had been engaged and satisfied.

'For my heart rejoiced in all my labour: AND THIS WAS MY PORTION' (Eccles. 2:10).

Here we leave details for principles again, and here we must stop to weigh and consider their bearing. This is the conclusion which Koheleth came to after he had traversed another field of inquiry.

'Wherefore I perceive that there is nothing better, than that a man should rejoice in his own works; FOR THAT IS HIS PORTION' (Eccles. 3:22).

What comes after that no one can say. 'For who shall bring him to see what shall be after him?' (3:22). Yet again in chapter 5:18,19:

'Behold that which I have seen: it is good and comely for one to eat and to drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labour that he taketh under the sun all the days of his life, which God giveth him: FOR IT IS HIS PORTION. Every man also to whom God hath given riches and wealth, and hath given him power to eat thereof, and to TAKE HIS PORTION, and to rejoice in his labour; *this* is the gift of God'.

Finally in 9:9,10:

'Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity, which He hath given thee under the sun, all the days of thy vanity: for *THAT IS THY PORTION* in this life, and in thy labour which thou takest under the sun. Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest'.

These passages come as a revelation from heaven upon the true nature of this present life. Here in this life we are but practising our scales, the public performance is future. We are now perfecting our powers of drawing, the academy picture is future. We do not call our friends around us to hear our scales, neither do we hang in the public gallery our many attempts with chalks and crayon. So with this life. Solomon realized that his portion was in the *doing*, and not in the *result*.

'If what shone afar so grand  
Turns to nothing in thine hand,  
On again: the virtue lies  
In the getting, not the prize'.

This is perhaps pessimistic. Life's lessons need not 'turn to nothing'. The 'exercise' may yield peaceable fruits of righteousness, the sorrows may accomplish our perfecting. A professor of economics once said to his students, *LIVE ALL THE TIME*'. His meaning was - 'Do not set out in life with the idea that you will work hard till you are, say, 50 years of age, and that then you will retire to some nice country house, with well-kept lawns, and enjoy life, for you will do no such thing'. 'Live all the time'. Think, that little one of yours, for whose 'future' you anxiously and wearily toil, whose budding life you hardly know you are engrossed so much with the imaginary youth of the future. If you would learn the lesson of Ecclesiastes, you will put aside that opportunity of 'extra business', which would add so many more pounds to your reserve for your child's 'future', and you will go and 'live' with the little one for an hour or so; you will then enter into your portion, all the rest is simply vanity and vexation of spirit. Too late many a parent wakes up to the fact that in thus slaving and saving he has really robbed his child and himself of their true inheritance. 'Live all the time'.

It is quite untrue to think that the conclusion of Ecclesiastes is wicked or sad. Having faced facts and realized what life is, we conjure up no illusions, and chase no mirages. 'Live *joyfully* with the wife whom thou lovest' says Koheleth, not live morbidly, morosely, grudgingly. Entertain no false ideas of life, and then life can be a blessed thing. Life is a pilgrimage, a series of halts and moving on again. When we make up our minds to achieve anything for *its own sake* then we find that all is vanity and vexation of spirit. When we realize that nothing is a goal in itself, but merely a means to an end, we shall not call the time wasted that helped us on another stage of our pilgrimage, even though the moment we achieved some object of desire, it ceased to attract or be of service. So immediately following upon the rejoicing with which Koheleth had engaged in the labours he had planned, we find dissatisfaction and vexation when viewed in themselves and for their own sakes.

'Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun' (Eccles. 2:11).

The labour that you may be 'exercised' therewith is good. The resulting 'work' which you produce may be very emptiness. If your heart is in the discipline, all is well, but if your heart is set on the result here in this life, then all is vanity. Even Alexander wept because there were no more worlds to conquer. Let us thank God for the portion He gives us, and ever remember that parallel Psalm 73. Speaking of the seemingly prosperous wicked, Asaph says:

'I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked ... they have more than heart could wish ... they increase in riches'.

Need Asaph have envied such? Ask him as he leaves the sanctuary of God:

'Surely Thou didst set them in slippery places ... Whom have I in heaven but Thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside Thee ... God is ... my PORTION for ever'.

#### (6) A time for every purpose - both of God and man (3:1-17)

The remaining verses of chapter 2:12-26 are divided up into a series of quests and conclusions, arriving at length at the same result we saw when referring to 2:10. While Koheleth quite appreciated the superiority of wisdom over folly, yet the maddening thing was that:

'One event happeneth to them all ... And how dieth the wise man? as the fool. Therefore I hated life; because the work that is wrought under the sun is grievous unto me: for all is vanity and vexation of spirit'(2:14-17).

This must be the conclusion if we look for results in this life. Koheleth, however, has something better to tell us of wisdom later on; he says it is 'good like an inheritance', and this does give true 'profit'. 'Wisdom giveth life', that is, the life to come.

At the end of chapter 3, Koheleth again considers the 'one event'. Here, instead of looking at two classes of men, the wise and the fools, he sees all men comparable with beasts in respect to their end: 'One thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other ... all go unto one place ... '(3:19,20). He no longer hates life however, but perceives what is the true 'portion', and is content (3:18-22). Death, if viewed as the destroyer of all our works, must fill us with despair, and raise the sceptic plaint as to the reason of things; but if death simply ends our term of schooling, then we may look forward to true accomplishment in the life to come and rejoice in the opportunities of this fleeting life while we may.

Another reason why Koheleth hated not only life but all his labour, was that he would have to leave it to the man (who may prove the veriest fool) that should be after him. This made his heart despair. Here have I, he says in effect in 2:21, laboured with wisdom, knowledge, and equity, yet now that my labour is accomplished I am faced with the spectre of human frailty. A few short years, and all my toil will pass to another - what then has been the good of all the planning, the labour, the care, the skill? Then he emerges into the sunlight of his previous conviction:

'There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour. This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God. For who can eat, or who can enjoy, WITHOUT HIM?' (2:24,25, *The Companion Bible*).

Chapter 3 opens with the well-known list of times and seasons for every purpose under heaven. There is a real connection with the preceding argument, as the sequel indicates (*see* 3:9-17).

'To everything there is an appointed time (cf. Ezra 10:14; Neh. 2:6; Est. 9:27; Dan. 6:10) and a fitting time for every purpose under the heaven' (Eccles. 3:1 Author's translation).

The word 'purpose' here indicates something *desired* (*see* 2 Sam. 23:5), or *delighted in* (Psa.1:2), or *pleasure* (Eccles. 5:4; 12:1). It is not the purpose of God that is under consideration, we are still pursuing the great theme of the book. There is a time to be born, and a time to die, and between these two events the whole round of positive and negative purposes that constitute the daily round are filled in. Planting or plucking up, killing or healing, getting and losing, loving and hating. The twenty-eight items give the sum of human activity, and when it is all summed up, Koheleth says, 'What profit?'

If the affairs of men, with their profitless labours, are nevertheless regulated by a fitting time, so also is the work of God; 'He hath made everything beautiful in its own time' (3:11). What we must learn is that God's time is not man's time. *Here* is the time for man's purposes, but Koheleth says:

'I said in mine heart, God shall judge the righteous and the wicked: for there is a time THERE for every purpose and for every work' (3:17).

The *olam*, the inscrutable character and indefinite length of the age, is 'set in the heart of man'. The *olam* or age is the 'time and season' for every purpose under heaven. God's purpose, however, goes back before the age, and runs on after it has ended. Man cannot 'find out the work that God doeth *from the beginning to the end*' (3:11). 'I know that whatsoever God doeth it shall be for the *olam* or age' (3:14). God's work goes on beyond the scope and sphere of man's work. 'Nothing can be put to it, nor anything taken from it' (3:14). How unlike man's work, which is spoiled by the 'one event' that happeneth to all. Left to other hands and hearts to waste and spoil, soon to be cast into forgetfulness, its very memorial vanished, what a contrast with the work of God! Man slaves for the temporal, God works for the *olam*, the age. The word *olam* or age occurs seven times in Ecclesiastes, the different ways in which the word is translated are indicated in the following structure of the seven occurrences.

## OLAM.

A 1:4.	Generations pass, the earth abides.	<i>For ever</i>
B 1:9,10.	Nothing new under the sun.	<i>Old time</i>
C 2:16.	No memorial.	<i>For ever</i>
D 3:11.	Set in the heart of man to prevent full understanding.	<i>The world</i>
C 3:14,15.	The past foreshadows the future.	<i>For ever</i>
B 9:6.	No portion under the sun.	<i>For ever</i>
A 12:5.	The passing generation, the 'long' home	<i>Long</i>

God works in the way He does 'that men should fear before Him' (3:14). This is the conclusion of the whole matter:

'Fear God, and keep His commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil' (12:13,14).

The complexities of this span of time, the inequalities, the time and chance which happen to all, the righteous suffering and the wicked prospering, all these and more make up the *olam* set in the heart of man. The relief that comes to the mind when one learns that a time is THERE when the crooked shall be made straight, when every work shall be brought into judgment, is beyond words. It enables one to obey the injunction, 'Fret not thyself because of evildoers ... because of him that bringeth wicked devices to pass' (Psa. 37). God has a purpose and a work that transcends all our thought, 'Wait patiently for Him'. This wholesome scriptural fear is verily a safety-valve in the midst of the baffling problems of Providence, 'He that feareth God shall come forth of them all' (7:18). 'Though a sinner do evil an hundred times, and his days are prolonged' so that Asaph-like we are tempted to say 'I have cleansed my heart in vain', nevertheless what saith the scripture, 'Yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God' (8:12).

Let us return for a moment to chapter 3. Does it not seem strange at first sight for Koheleth to interpolate between his weighty references to the work of God with regard to the age such things as eating and drinking?

'I know that there is no good in them, but for a man to rejoice, and to do good during his life. And also that every man should eat and drink, and enjoy the good of all his labour, it is the gift of God' (3:12,13).

Verily it is the gift of God, this strange unearthly peace in the seething strife of this world. No longer like the caged eagle do we beat ourselves against the bars; we know, and in that knowledge of Him we realize that all is well. We can enjoy the 'good' of our labour, and thank God for His gift. The endless circle of human experience, after all, is a faint echo of the mighty purpose of the ages.

'That which hath been is now; and that which *is to be* hath already been; and God REQUIRETH (SEEKETH) that which is past' (3:15).

How often is this glorious statement of the goal of the ages perverted into a sentence of threatening, 'God requireth that which is past', meaning the sinner's past life.

'That which IS TO BE, hath already been'.

Revelation restores the lost paradise of Genesis. The new creation brings us back to the state of bliss which obtained before man or Satan fell. The whole work of redemption is to seek the lost and bring it back. 'God SEEKETH the past'. Israel's restoration is spoken of in the language of their past. 'I will restore thy judges AS AT THE FIRST' (Isa. 1:26). Before the age-times began, God was all: when the ages shall have reached their consummation, God will be all in all.

'That which hath been is now'.

Type and prophecy continually repeat the final truth. One antichrist there shall be, but there are also many antichrists. Even Scripture moves in the greatest of circles, and God Himself stretches out across the ages to bring a ruined world back to Himself. Such were the lessons which Koheleth learned as he contemplated the times and seasons of human activity. May we drink deeply into the spirit of this passage, and though exercised with the sore travail which God gives, be cheered with the joy of faith, which is also the gift of God.

#### (7) Adam; his relation to the theme (6:10)

The reader is expected to weigh and examine the many and varied investigations conducted by Koheleth. Just a passing note or so must suffice for the details of the next chapter or two.

The marginal rendering of chapter 3:18 of the Authorised Version and the text of the Revised Version, together with the suggested version of *The Companion Bible*, show that some difficulty has been experienced in arriving at the true meaning of this verse. The most difficult word to place is that translated 'manifest'. One of its most frequent meanings is 'to purify'. Parkhurst places this as the primary meaning.

'The commandment of the LORD is *pure*' (Psa. 19:8).

'To *cleanse* as is wheat from chaff' (Jer. 4:11).

'To *purify*, as by suffering and trial' (Dan. 12:10).

'To try them, and to *purge*' (Dan. 11:35).

'And I will *purge* out from among you the rebels' (Ezek. 20:38).

Isaiah 1:25 had been rendered, 'I will melt down as with alkaline salt thy dross, and I will remove all thy base metal'. We suggest that the meaning of Ecclesiastes 3:18 is somewhat as follows:

'I said in mine heart concerning the estate of the sons of men, that God might *purify* (*winnow, cleanse as by trial*) them, and that they might see that (apart from resurrection) the one event levels all to that of the beasts that perish'.

Koheleth evidently did not believe the philosophic conceit so universally believed today that man possesses *an immortal soul*; he left that for these more enlightened days. Though wisdom excel folly, the wise man dieth 'AS THE FOOL'. Though man bear the image of God, he dieth 'AS THE BEAST'. Psalm 49 bears unequivocal testimony to the truth of Ecclesiastes 3:18,21. This is indeed the final thought expressed by Koheleth at the close of his investigations:

'Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return to God Who gave it. Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher; all is vanity' (Eccles. 12:7,8).

Death is the final expression of vanity, and that which is associated with it the aggravating factors.

Oppression (4:1), all travail and rightness of work (4:4), the heaping up of riches for whom? (4:8), pass under review, punctuated at every step by a reflection on that which is good, or that there is nothing better than to accept

'The first man Adam was made *a living soul*; the last Adam a quickening (*life-giving*) *spirit*. Howbeit that was not first which is spiritual, but that which is natural; and afterward that which is spiritual. The first man is of the earth, earthy: the second man is the Lord from heaven' (1 Cor. 15:45-47).

The answer to this set of difficulties is the answer to Ecclesiastes' problem, *the resurrection of the dead*. 'It is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption'. Sown, not as some think when a person is *buried*, but when he is *born* into the world. For no one sows *dead* seed. The contrast is between the two Adams.

'As in Adam all die (wise as well as fools), even so in Christ shall all be made alive (wise as well as fools)' (1 Cor. 15:22).

When once resurrection is believed and seen as the goal of God and the entrance into true life, then we reverse the statement of the vanity of all labour, 'forasmuch as ye know that your *labour is not in vain in the Lord*'.

'For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God. For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of Him who hath subjected the same in hope, because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know (as Ecclesiastes perceived) that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now' (Rom. 8:18-22).

'By one man sin entered in the world, and death by sin ... When I would do good, evil is present with me ... O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?' (Rom. 5:12 and 7:21-24).

These and such like passages echo and illuminate the discovery of Ecclesiastes 6:10. We must avoid 'judging' the One that is mightier than we are. The book of Job reveals something of this:

'But how can mortal man be just with GOD?  
If man contend in argument with HIM,  
Of thousand things he could not answer one.  
However wise of heart, and stout of limb,  
Who ever bravèd HIM, and prosperèd?

\* \* \*

How then can I (address or) answer Him?  
Or choose my words (for argument) with Him?  
I could not be induced to make reply,  
Though just: but I would supplicate my Judge

\* \* \*

If I appeal to strength; Lo! He is strong.  
And if to justice; who could summon Him?'

(Job. 9:2-4,14,15,19 - Metrical Version of *The Companion Bible*).

The paranomasia of the two words *contend* and *content* may help us to see the Divine lesson. To fight against the divinely appointed hiding of God's work 'from the beginning unto the end' leads to contending with or judging God. Judging need not mean condemning, it may mean justifying - God requires us to do neither. We are as wrong when we labour to justify His ways with man, as we are when we rebel against His appointments. Better, far better, to obey Him, walk humbly with Him, wait patiently for Him, and trust Him. Who are we to express our conviction that 'If God were to do so and so then He would be ... !' Is this asked of us? Have we still failed to learn the humiliating estate of the sons of Adam? Not till resurrection dawns shall we begin 'to know even as we are known'.

Elihu speaks in harmony with this, when he said to Job:

'But, surely, thou hast spoken in mine ears,  
And I have heard a voice of words like these:  
'A man without transgression, pure, am I:  
Yea, I am clean; without iniquity.

He is against me; seeking grounds of strife,  
That He may count me as His enemy;  
My feet He setteth fast within the stocks,  
And taketh observation of my ways'.

`Behold, thou art not just: I answer thee:  
HOW GREAT IS GOD COMPARED WITH MORTAL MAN?  
Why, then, 'gainst Him didst thou dare make complaint,  
That by no word of His He answ'reth thee?'

(Job. 33:8-13, Metrical Version of *The Companion Bible*).

Job, afflicted by a discipline the causes of which were hidden from his eyes, contends with God, and when the Lord does speak to him, He says to Job:

`Shall he that contendeth with the Almighty instruct Him? *he that reproveth God*, let him answer it' (Job 40:2).

What a title for Job, `He that REPROVETH God'! His only answer is, `Behold I am vile'.

`Then answered Job, and to Jehovah said: -  
"I know, I know, that THOU canst all things do:  
No purposes of THINE can be withstood.  
[Thou askedst (38:3; 40:2)] -  
`Who is this that counsel hides,  
And darkens all, because of knowledge void?'  
`tis I! I uttered things I could not know;  
Things far too wonderful, beyond my ken.  
Hear now, I pray thee: let me speak this once.  
[Thou saidst (40:2)]: -  
`tis I who ask thee: Answer me.'  
I heard of Thee with by hearing of the ear,  
But now mine eye hath seen Thee, I abhor  
[Myself]. In dust and ashes I repent".

(Job. 42:1-6. Metrical Version of *The Companion Bible*.)

A modern example of this sceptical criticism, the product of failure to discern the plan of the ages, is that expressed in a poem of T. Hardy:

`I have finished another year', said God,  
`In grey, green, white and brown;  
I have strewn the leaf upon the sod,  
Sealed up the work within the clod  
And let the last sun down'.  
`AND WHAT'S THE GOOD OF IT?' I said.

While the age is set in the heart of man, and he is prevented from knowing what God doeth from the beginning unto the end, he only hears with the ear; he knows in part. To jump to conclusions, to construct theories, to attempt to pass the limits of revelation, is to be made ashamed of our words when we `see Him'. Far better to heed the teaching of Koheleth, and fill our humble sphere with contentment. Does not the apostle, when writing to the Thessalonians, take the same line? They had been shaken in mind concerning the Day of the Lord. Paul instructs them concerning such deep things as the manifestation of the Man of Sin, but does not leave them until, like Koheleth, he comes down to everyday life, and says:

`We command and exhort by our Lord Jesus Christ, that with QUIETNESS they work, and EAT their own bread' (2 Thess. 3:12).

What difference is there between these words and those of Ecclesiastes?

It is because of the conclusion arrived at in 6:10, that Koheleth could view the crooked things, and the oppressions, without being 'astonished at the purpose'.

'Lord, my heart is not haughty, nor mine eyes lofty:  
Neither do I exercise myself in great matters,  
Or in things too high for me.  
Surely I have behaved and quieted (silenced) myself,  
As a child that is weaned of his mother:  
My soul is even as a weaned child.  
Let Israel hope in the LORD  
From henceforth and for ever' (Psa. 131).

As we turn to the second portion of the book, the question with which the first portion ends (6:12) will be ringing in our ears and find an echo in our hearts.

'Who knoweth WHAT IS GOOD for man IN THIS LIFE, all the days of his vain life which he spendeth as a shadow?'

'WHO KNOWETH?'

## CHAPTER 5

### The Good Name (7:1)

The question asked by Ecclesiastes is not, simply, 'What is good?' He is not merely probing into the philosophical problem of what constitutes ultimate values, he is concerned to find an answer to the question of what is good for a man IN THIS LIFE, especially remembering the vanity and vexation that are its normal accompaniments, and also remembering its shadowy character.

His first answer focuses attention on the value of a 'good name', which reveals that Ecclesiastes places morals above goods; he anticipates the questions 'What shall we eat? What shall we drink? and Wherewithal shall we be clothed?'

A good name he declares is better than precious ointment and with this he heads a series of comparisons.

'The day of death (is better) than the day of one's birth'.

'It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting'.

'Sorrow is better than laughter'.

'It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise, than for a man to hear the song of fools'.

'Better is the end of a thing than the beginning', and 'The patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit'.

If at the first reading these words should make us feel that Ecclesiastes must be the super-pessimist, let us observe how many points of contact and agreement we find between these sentiments and the utterances of the Lord in the Sermon on the Mount.

#### A GOOD NAME IS BETTER THAN PRECIOUS OINTMENT.

Let us note the literary peculiarities of this opening verse. The Hebrew sentence commences with the word *tob* 'good' and the word translated 'precious' is the same as the word 'good'. Another literary figure is employed called *paronomasia*, where words of like sound are used to call the reader's attention to their deeper similarity. The Hebrew word for 'name' is *shem*; the Hebrew word for 'ointment' is *shemen*. The complete sentence reads, *Tob shem mishshemen tob*.

We must now have a clear image in our mind as to what the 'precious ointment' signifies, otherwise we shall miss the point. With us ointment generally indicates some healing and mollifying substance. In the East it has a deeper and wider range of meaning. First let us notice the occurrences of the word in Ecclesiastes:

'A good name is better than precious ointment' (7:1).

'Let thy head lack no ointment' (9:8).

'Dead flies cause the ointment of the apothecary to send forth a stinking savour' (10:1).

In the Song of Solomon we have a parallel usage to that of Ecclesiastes 7:1 :

'Sweet is the odour of thy good ointments; thy name is as ointment poured forth' (1:3 Author's translation).

Another reference to ointments occurs in Song of Solomon 4:10 :

'How fair is thy love, my sister, my spouse! how much better is thy love than wine! and the smell of thine ointments than all spices!'

The anointing oil which was used in the service of the tabernacle was composed of pure myrrh, sweet cinnamon, sweet calamus, cassia and olive oil. The tabernacle and its vessels were anointed with it, as also was Aaron, the high priest. The kings later were inducted into their high office as 'the Lord's anointed'. Another who was anointed with this holy ointment was the leper in the day of his cleansing. Esther 2:12 tells us that before the women entered into the royal presence they were purified, six months with oil of myrrh and six months with sweet odours.

The 'precious' ointment seems to have specific reference to that which was exclusively sacred to the Lord. The expression occurs in 2 Kings 20:13, repeated in Isaiah 39:2 and in Psalm 133:2. In these instances it refers to the holy anointing oil which was forbidden to the people. To this, apparently Ecclesiastes 7:1 refers. Better even than the holiest external symbol of acceptance and of high priesthood, of kingship, or of cleansing - better even than this is a 'good name' - a good *shem* than a good *shemen*. The moral outweighs the ceremonial.

The word 'name' does not occur more than three times in Ecclesiastes, and it is very evident that 7:1 is in direct contrast with 6:10, 'That which hath been the *name* thereof is called already, and it is known that it is ADAM'.

The very first 'good thing' for any man in this vain life, whose days are numbered, whose character is a shadow, whose end is the 'one event', the very first thing consists in a *change of name*. The mystery of the gospel as revealed in Romans 5:12 onwards was not clearly seen by Koheleth, but the Spirit Who inspired the book not only knew that Adam was the concluding note of the downward progress of chapters 1 to 6, but that the 'good name' which would hereafter be placed over against Adam must be the very beginning of the quest for 'that good thing'. Christ Himself is 'The second MAN and the last ADAM'.

Koheleth has guarded his conception of a good name. He cannot mean that which passes current among men, for he has deliberately set it in contrast with the holiest external symbol known in his day. Those who have been most entitled to the 'good name' have often been covered with calumny and false charges. The apostle Paul, who most surely of all the followers of Christ had that 'good name', could write of himself that he was made 'the filth of the world and the off-scouring of all things'. Not he that commends himself, nor he that is commended by others, but whom the Lord commendeth, is the possessor of this good name.

Those who have this good name carry with them everywhere a sweet savour of Christ. Their daily work and conversation is an offering of a sweet smelling savour acceptable and well pleasing unto God (Phil. 4:8). What though they never 'make a name' in this Babel of a world! what though their names be cast out as evil, and blotted out of the world's conventions! nevertheless, they have started with the first great good thing in this world of shams and unrealities. Every virtue, every fruit of the Spirit, every following after Christ is a contribution to this good name which is better than precious ointment.

May we take the consolation of the Scriptures fully to ourselves in these degenerate times, and rejoice in the blessed fact that we are named with the name of Christ.

## CHAPTER 6

### Koheleth's Key to the Riddle -

#### The LIFE TO COME (7:11,12)

In an earlier study we sought to show that Koheleth was justified in his pessimism by the fact that ONE EVENT happens to all men, whether they be wise or foolish, good or bad, pious or profane, and that all go to ONE PLACE, in short, that death and the grave have the last word in the affairs of man 'under the sun'. Ecclesiastes is a black background solemnly true. Ecclesiastes' conclusion that all labour was vanity, is enforced by the converse statement that the believer's labour is not in vain 'in the Lord'.

If the one word *death* represents 'the sore evil' with which the writer saw the whole of man's activities blasted, we should expect to find by the law of correspondence that *life*, that is resurrection life, would be 'the good' which could alone solve the riddle and justify the experiences of this life.

After having entered the arena and made his challenge, (1:1-3), the writer conducts us along the line of his first investigation (1:4 to 2:17), and tells us that as a result he 'hated life', and he 'hated his labour' (2:18-26). His second method is to consider the bearing of time, season and the age upon the affairs of men (3:1-21). His conclusion is

more sober than the former, as he perceives that there is nothing better than to enjoy the present 'for who shall bring him *back* to see what shall be after him?' (3:22).

In chapter 4 he considers oppression, and concludes it better to be either already dead, or not yet born - anything but being ALIVE! He passes in review the envy and the vexation of life, the childless man labouring endlessly - for whom? Then after speaking about the fickle fate of kings, he enters the sanctuary of God. Asaph in Psalm 73 passes along the same road as Koheleth. They record their findings in different terms, but their findings throughout are the same. In the house of God (5:1-8) he learns to view 'oppression' without such bitterness as he did in 4:1. There he saw 'no comforter': here he says:

'Marvel not at the matter: for He that is higher than the highest regardeth; and there be higher than they' (Eccles. 5:8).

This is a definite acquisition. God knows, and regards, and is higher than the highest. He now returns to his theme, considering riches from a threefold standpoint (5:9-17) and coming to a conclusion concerning that which is 'good and comely' - because 'God hath given him power to enjoy the good of all his labour'. This is contrasted with an 'evil' wherein 'God giveth not power to eat thereof' (6:1,2).

Life, viewed particularly in its utmost length, is considered and the conclusion is that a life of a thousand years twice told is in vain, where no good is seen. Then comes the contrasting reference to GOD, viz., MAN:

'That which hath been is named already, and it is known that it is man (ADAM): neither may he contend with Him that is mightier than he' (Eccles. 6:10).

This is in exact balance with the words, 'He that is higher than the highest', and forms part of the structure, as we may see later. In the sanctuary of God Koheleth learned that God is higher than the highest. He also realized that it is vain for man to attempt to judge God; the word 'contend' being the Hebrew '*din*'. God is mightier than man. It is the same word used by Nebuchadnezzar when he too learned the same lesson that 'the Most High ruleth in the kingdom of men', for he said 'how *mighty* are His wonders' (Dan. 4:3). Job's arguments were all stopped by the revelation of Him Who is *mightier* than man.

We leave this somewhat enigmatical verse (Eccles. 6:10) for the time, and journey on. Verse 12 asks *the* question of the book, 'Who knoweth WHAT IS GOOD for man in this life?' This life is then defined as 'All the days of his vain life which he spendeth as a shadow'. The reason why the quest is difficult is further explained, 'for who can tell a man what shall be after him, under the sun?' In other words, 'If a man die, shall he live again?' Let us notice the balance of thought here.

- Question:*     **a** For who knoweth  
                      **b** What is good  
                      **c** For man in this life?

Life defined. It is vain and a shadow.

- Question:*     **a** For who can tell  
                      **b** What shall be after him  
                      **c** Under the sun?

Comparing these two sets of questions it becomes evident that the problem of what is good, is largely related to the uncertainties of this life - 'What shall be after him?' and 'this life' is balanced by the words 'under the sun', suggesting that there is a feeling out for the compensatory nature of the life to come, which though not yet expressed, we shall find to be the key to the riddle before our quest is ended. We take up our study of this great quest with the observation: 'Wisdom is good with an inheritance' (Eccles. 7:11).

Now this sounds rather like making the best of both worlds. By all means many would say, Let me have the wisdom *with* an inheritance. This however is not what Koheleth taught. The Revised Version gives 'Wisdom is as good as an inheritance', which, of course is quite another thing. The particle 'with' is rendered in 2:16 'as' and 'more

than' and in Psalm 73:5, 'like' other men. The translation we offer is strictly in line with the Hebrew and yields good sense:

'Wisdom is good, like an inheritance, and profitable to them that see the sun. In the shadow of wisdom, in the shadow of silver, but the profit of knowledge (is) that wisdom giveth LIFE to them that have it'.

- A Wisdom like an inheritance.
- B Profitable.
- C Wisdom likened to silver.
- B Profitable.
- A Wisdom gives life.

Koheleth has said some hard things about life. We remember his early conclusion, 'therefore I hated life' (2:17). He calls it 'vain life' and likens it to 'a shadow' (6:12). Again he speaks of 'the days of the life of thy vanity' (9:9).

He has given us his considered judgment even in this chapter, that the day of death is better than the day of birth, and approaches the depths of Job's sounding when he cursed the day wherein he was born! How comes it then that life being so, he finds the good that he is reaching for to be wisdom, and the reason, that wisdom gives LIFE! Common sense, apart from inspiration, demands that the writer must mean something different from the life he has considered so vain, otherwise the book may as well be closed for it is impossible to follow its arguments.

We saw previously that the fact that death was at the end of man's career, rendered all his labour profitless, and summed up all in vanity. Resurrection life is the only thing that can make the crooked straight. That is the life intended here. *The Companion Bible* in its note on Leviticus 18:5 draws attention to the Chaldee paraphrase which reads, 'shall live by them to life eternal' (Sol. Jarchi, 'live in the world that is to come'). This being so, the problem of 2:13-16 is solved. While he may still hate this life, Koheleth can now see that wisdom is not only excellent in itself, but excellent in its results - it leads to LIFE that is life indeed.

Here light breaks. Granted that there is a life beyond the grave, then though wickedness may sit in the place of judgment (3:16), and though many inequalities and perplexing mysteries of providence may still baffle us (6:12; 8:14,17), though the race be not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, but all have to reckon with time and chance, yet the conclusion of the matter sets all right. It will be our wisdom to fear God and keep His commandments, for a day of judgment is coming, and if a day of judgment, then a day when the crooked shall be made straight, the inequalities made equal, a day of LIFE from the dead, where vanity and vexation of spirit shall never more intrude, for death and Hades shall be destroyed in the second death, and God shall solve all life's mysteries in the LIFE TO COME.

Having considered the opening approach to the question 'What is that good?' we now follow Ecclesiastes in his wider search which occupies the remainder of the book and which can be subdivided into seven parts.

#### **Ecclesiastes 7 to 12.**

The answer to the question found.

#### **'What that good is'.**

- (1) Death, mourning and sorrow.
- (2) Effect of oppression.
- (3) Problem of good and evil.
- (4) Policy of Laodicea.
- (5) Reason of evil discovered.
- (6) Wisdom.
- (7) Contentment.

## CHAPTER 7

## The Answer 'What that good is'

## Ecclesiastes 7 to 12

## (1) Death, mourning and sorrow, their relation to what is good for man in this life (7:1-6).

We have noted some of the features with which chapter 7 opens, and we must now give attention to the teaching of the whole section, chapters 7 to 12, and this will demand that we give a more detailed examination of the 'better' things already enumerated as well as the larger unfolding that occupies the bulk of the remaining chapters.

The first 'good thing' we have learned, is a *good name*. The name covers all its outgoings. By nature all have the name of Adam, and the very first 'good thing' is to exchange that name for the better name of a child of God. Koheleth may not have personally understood the full evangelical meaning of his own statement, the statement being increasingly true as one ascends the scale of fuller knowledge and personal faith in Christ.

It is, however, necessary that we appreciate the radical change indicated by the possession of the 'good name', otherwise the remaining 'good things' will not be understood. The second good thing which Ecclesiastes records is apt to sound 'a hard saying', and only those who have tasted the sweets of the new name can heartily endorse his testimony.

'*The day of death (is better) than the day of one's birth*.'- To the unsaved reader these words will be sufficient to confirm his opinion that Koheleth was a pessimist. To the enlightened believer the same words will reveal him as a spirit-taught optimist. From the viewpoint of Ecclesiastes what is this present life? It is summed up in the words 'Vanity and vexation of spirit' to all those who have not reached the 'conclusion of the whole matter' (12:13,14). This present life is expressed in the synonymous clause 'all the days of his vain life which he spendeth as a shadow' (6:12). At the end of that life there is the 'one event', and the 'one place'.

'As he came forth of his mother's womb, naked shall he return to go as he came, and shall take nothing of his labour, which he may carry away in his hand' (5:15).

The flesh profiteth nothing. This life can only be blessed and purposeful when it is viewed as a place of discipline and training, fitting one for true service and life that is life indeed in resurrection. The day of our birth ushers us into a sphere dominated by the law of sin and death. We are at birth 'sown in corruption', dishonour, weakness, merely a natural (*soul-ical*) body. Resurrection changes all this. We shall be raised in incorruption, glory, power, and with a spiritual body. The first state is connected with Adam (1 Cor. 15:45, Eccles. 6:10, *Heb.*), the second with Christ.

If these facts are appreciated in any degree, we shall also appreciate the words of Ecclesiastes 'the day of one's death is better than the day of one's birth'. At death the pilgrimage ceases, the lessons are over, the discipline done. For the believer, sin's *punishment*, *power* and *presence* will have for ever passed away. The death which has fallen upon him shall never fall again. The present life with all its blessings and pleasures and opportunities is a life spent in corruption, and in the sphere of a curse. Such a condition cannot be immortal. Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, neither can corruption inherit incorruption. This being so, even though the mind and heart shrink from the valley of the shadow of death, one can see that it is a necessity ('change' will be the equivalent for the living saints) if we would enter into the full blessedness of redemption.

Ecclesiastes is under no false idea that death is a 'friend' or a 'bright angel'. That is left to the unbeliever in his endeavour to hide the terror of the last enemy. The believer taught by the Scripture is under no illusions as to death. Job could even dare to speak of 'worms destroying his body' when he knew that his *Redeemer* lived. Paul can speak of death and the grave without softening either awful word, because resurrection had robbed them of their sting and their victory. Ecclesiastes teaches that the only ones in this life who can 'enjoy' any good in it, in the true sense, are those who have faced its transient character, realised the fact that this is not their rest but their school, and who, knowing that life in its fulness cannot be entered till they awake satisfied with Christ's likeness, set their mind on

things above where Christ is. As a result of believing that the day of death is better than the day of birth, Koheleth continues:

'It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting: for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to his heart' (7:2).

The man of the world argues in an exactly opposite direction. Seeing that death is the end of all men, he says, 'Let us eat, and drink, *for tomorrow we die*'. Again it is the hope of resurrection that makes the difference. Both can say 'tomorrow we die', but the one as a result says 'feast', the other 'fast'. It is a *natural* thing to say, 'If this brief life is to end in death, why not make the most of it? Why not get all the good one can out of it, in other words, put sadness and sorrow out of sight; eat, drink and be merry'. That is natural. Taught by the Spirit of truth however, we reason that if this present life is to end in death and the full blessings of redemption cannot be enjoyed by flesh and blood; and moreover, if there are spheres of service to be entered in the life to come that shall bear some analogy to our faithfulness here, and if an eternal weight of glory lies over against a light affliction which is but for a moment, if moreover, love to our Redeemer compels us to stand on His side, go without the camp and suffer His reproach - then we cannot help becoming pilgrims and strangers, declaring by our very abstention that we seek a country that lies beyond the grave, that our pleasures are associated with our Saviour, and that while sin and death and the curse are everywhere apparent, we cannot find it in our heart to eat, drink and be merry, but rather find greater and deeper joy in those circumstances which superficially are the saddest and darkest hours of life.

'The living will lay it to heart' (7:2); further, 'Sorrow is better than laughter' (7:3) for the same reason, 'for by the sadness of the countenance (external) the heart (internal) is made better' (7:3). The world thinks only of the *face*, the believer thinks more of the *heart*. True wisdom recognizes the essential difference.

'The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning (and will be thereby made 'better'); but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth' (7:4).

Association with mourners may not prove so enjoyable to the flesh as the hilarity of feasting and mirth, but

'It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise, than for a man to hear the song of fools. For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fool: this also is vanity' (7:5,6).

The choice of worldliness is fleeting. The brief hour of mirth is oft followed by days of bitterness. The poor untaught world sees nothing beyond this present age, and the majority of Christians seem to have conspired to perpetuate its blindness. Present Christendom with its worldliness, its pleasures, its fleshly inducements, its forsaking of the narrow path, its philosophy, its politics, all proclaim the negation of resurrection. The Church is fast approaching the form of godliness which involves the denial of the power of the resurrection, and in song and sermon sounds the hoary tradition that puts resurrection aside, bridges the gulf between the flesh and the spirit, and seeks to improve that which is corrupt, carnal and mortal. Ecclesiastes 7 is sober truth.

Let us hear the rebuke of the wise, and seeing the end of all men let us lay it to heart.

## **(2) The maddening effect of 'oppression' and 'crookedness', but for the knowledge of God's purpose (7:7-13)**

The result of entering into the spirit of Ecclesiastes 7:1-6 must be a chastened and humbled mind, and a frame and a temper not easily provoked. Instead of frantically seeking to bolster up the doomed fabric of Adam's world the believer realizes that God has reserved the honour of complete restoration to His Son. Instead of becoming a member of this society and of that he realizes that all improvements of the flesh are destined to end on this side of the grave. To this aspect the writer now turns.

'Surely oppression maketh the wise man mad; and a gift destroyeth the heart ... Be not hasty in thy spirit to be angry: for anger resteth in the bosom of fools' (7:7,9).

To those who do not possess the wisdom which comes from above, the call of the oppressed sometimes becomes irresistible. Many times the tyranny of oppression and the selfish cruelty of those who have rule and authority, have

stirred the old nature, which has manifested itself in association with fleshly and worldly methods, but which in reality vainly seek to do that which Christ alone can do. The new man however looks beyond the present.

'If thou seest the oppression of the poor, and violent perverting of judgment and justice in a province, marvel not at the matter (margin, will, or purpose): for He that is higher than the highest regardeth; and there be higher than they' (5:8).

Let our indignation be modified by the fact that if *we* see, so also does *He* that is higher than the highest. Moreover the 'matter' is of 'purpose'. It is not a question of indifference on the part of God; He knows, He regards, but the place of judgment is *THERE*, not here (11:9; 12:14; *see* especially 3:16,17). Chapter 5 introduces us to the sanctuary of God, and like Asaph we understand the end and cease to fret ourselves because of evil-doers and of those wicked who prosper.

In our quotation of chapter 7, which appears above, we gave verses 7 and 9, omitting verse 8. There is a helpful alternation which should be observed here:

- A 7. Oppression makes wise man mad.
- B 8. Pause. - Better the end than the beginning, and a patient spirit as a consequence.
- A 9. Be not hasty; anger belongs to fools.
- B 10. Pause. - Do not enquire petulantly concerning the former days.

The great corrective, when we view the inequalities of this life, is to remember that there is a purpose which runs through the ages, that this world is out of joint by reason of sin, and that to attempt to put crooked things straight apart from *Redemption* is the worst vexation of all. Pause and reflect; the end is the great thing; God is overruling oppressions and inequalities and all shall subserve His end. Be 'patient in spirit'; do not be 'hasty in spirit to be angry', for only fools are thus betrayed into impotent wrath. Moreover, do not be tempted to adopt the general idea embodied in the term 'the good old days'; there have been no such good old days, for all days have been marked by the presence and power of sin and death with their accompanying miseries. The days past were no better than the present; all human nature runs in the same direction. The parent assures his erring child that he was 'never so naughty when he was a little boy'. Old people always deplore the awful sinfulness of the rising generation, but this is not wisdom, it is feebleness of mind (Eccles. 7:10). All generations have been wicked and will be until the Lord comes and the new life begins.

Keep an even temper. Ecclesiastes 7:7-10 says in effect, 'Let your moderation be known unto all men: the Lord is near' (Phil. 4:5). 'Wisdom is good like an inheritance ... the excellency of knowledge is, that wisdom giveth life to them that have it'. Instead of allowing the limited horizon of this life to decide our actions, to arouse our anger, lead us in the vain attempt to improve the old nature, we remember 'the Higher than the highest', we reflect upon the purpose that is surely beneath all the happenings, we remember the 'end' and the 'life' to which true wisdom points. So concludes Koheleth:

'Consider the work of God: for who can make that straight, which He hath made crooked?' (7:13).

Contrasted with the works of God are the works of man.

'I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit. That which is crooked cannot be made straight' (1:14,15).

When the apostles came first to Thessalonica they were styled 'These that have turned the world upside down' (Acts 17:6). It is the world that is in reality upside down. The very word rendered 'crooked' is so translated in Psalm 146:9, 'The way of the wicked He turneth upside down'. We do well therefore, before hastily espousing some cause of the world, to 'consider the work of God'. If the deranged affairs be a part of His doing, shall we lead men to fight against Him? Then consider again, Have all the revolutions that have arisen on earth ever made crooked things STRAIGHT? At best they have made the crookedness less apparent, or caused the pressure to be felt in another direction, but God and His people are concerned with utter rectification, not mere palliatives, and that awaits the day

of the Lord. The word `straight' occurs again in Ecclesiastes 12:9, `set in order'. In the Chaldee of Daniel 4:36 (LXX. 33), it is rendered `I was established', with reference to a kingdom.

Such straightening out of the crookedness of Adam's race can never be accomplished by man. We patiently await the day of Christ. We shall not sit inert, we shall not be idle, but rather shall be occupied with nobler and more fruitful service by a due recognition of the true dispensational character of many of the things around us.

### (3) The practical problem of good and evil (7:14)

Four times in chapter 7 does the Preacher bid us `consider'.

`Consider the work of God; for who can make that straight, which He hath made crooked?' (7:13).

`In the day of adversity consider ...' (7:14).

`Behold (*Consider*), this have I found ...' (7:27).

`Lo (*Consider*), this only have I found, that God hath made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions' (7:29).

Let us look at verse 14.

`In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of adversity *consider*: God also hath set the one over against the other, to the end that man should find nothing after him'.

It is sometimes helpful to work back through a passage and it may help us here.

`After him'. - The baffling nature of God's providential dealings is to prevent a man discovering that which comes after him. This is a theme many times repeated in this book. When Koheleth had expended his energies and wisdom on labours vast and wonderful he said:

`What can the man do that cometh *after* the King?' (2:12).

His further investigation was not encouraging:

`I hated all my labour which I had taken under the sun: because I should leave it unto the man that shall come *after* me. And who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man or a fool?' (2:18,19).

Having traversed the thoughts of chapters 2 and 3, Koheleth arrives at the conclusion:

`Wherefore I perceive that there is nothing better, than that a man should rejoice in his own works; for that is his portion: for who shall bring him to see what shall be *after* him?' (3:22).

The question forms the very closing words of the first half of Ecclesiastes, before he begins to enumerate the good things for this life:

`For who knoweth what is good for man in this life, all the days of his vain life which he spendeth as a shadow? for who can tell a man what shall be *after* him under the sun?' (6:12).

Following the verse under consideration (7:14) we pass on to:

`A fool also is full of words: a man cannot tell what shall be; and what shall be *after* him, who can tell him?' (10:14).

These six references focus the attention on the problem of what shall be `after'.

The reference in 3:22 shews resignation and contentment, the enjoyment of one's rightful portion, and leaving the `after' with God. This is seen from another angle in 7:14. The experiences of prosperity and adversity which come upon man are intended to prevent discovery of that which shall come after: `To the end that man should find nothing after him' (7:14). There is a close parallel here with 3:11 :

`He hath made every thing beautiful in His time: also He hath set the world (*olam*, the age) in their heart, so that no man can *find out* the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end'.

So in 7:23,24 :

`I said, I will be wise; but it was far from me. That which is far off, and exceeding deep, who can *find it out*?'

In 7:26,27,28,29 the word `find' comes again and again, leading to the discovery that man has departed from his original uprightness, and sought out many inventions.

The conclusion of this matter is reached in 8:17; 9:1 :

`Then I beheld all the work of God, that a man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun: because though a man labour to seek it out, yet he shall not find it; yea further; though a wise man think to know it, yet shall he not be able to find it. For all this I considered in my heart even to declare all this, that the righteous, and the wise, and their works, ARE IN THE HAND OF GOD: no man knoweth either love or hatred by all that is before them (in the future)'.

The baffling experiences which have this effect have been `set the one over against the other' by God.

The word `set' is usually rendered `made'. It comes in 3:11 and 7:29:

`He hath *made* every thing beautiful in His time ... the work that God *maketh* ...' (3:11).

`God hath *made* man upright' (7:29).

The two experiences, prosperity and adversity, are made to balance one another, they do not always follow one another as cause and effect, but as 9:11 says, `time and chance' enter in and prevent calculation. No one can foresee what shall be `after'. God alone holds all things in His hands and works all things according to His purposes.

We are to rejoice in the day of prosperity. Blessings of health and friends, of happy labour and happy homes come from the Lord:

`Every man also to whom God hath given riches and wealth, and hath given him power to eat thereof, and to take his portion, and to rejoice in his labour; this is the gift of God. Though He give not much (cf. verse 12) yet he remembereth the days of his life: because God causeth a response in the joy of his heart' (5:19,20 Author's translation).

Those who misunderstand Ecclesiastes think that its teaching makes for gloominess, brooding, austerity and cynicism. This is quite untrue. Only he who has faced the fact of death in the light of resurrection, only he who has ceased from vain speculation and has reached the haven of peace in the will of God, only he who has gratefully acknowledged the limitations set around this life and its possibilities, can really enjoy the blessings as they come without being haunted by the shadow of the `one event', or being troubled by the oblivion of the `one place'.

The word rendered `prosperity' is *tob* which is the word `good'. We are not surprised therefore to find that the word `adversity' is *ra* `evil'. This knowledge of `good and evil', with its concomitant sorrow and death, commenced in the Garden of Eden and will go on until that day when God Himself shall wipe away all tears from off all faces. The whole of the age is associated with the acquiring of this knowledge, and its application. When experiencing the `good', rejoice. When experiencing the `evil', consider. Let the visitation not pass without profit. Let the chastisement yield its fruit. Let the lesson be learned. Let patience have her perfect work. The day of prosperity is not the time when we consider the purpose of the ages with so much profit as in the day of adversity. Then, says Koheleth, consider the purposes of God and learn the humbling lesson. A word almost identical with `adversity' is `sadness' (7:3), and the lesson is the same. Chapter 11:9,10 bases its teaching upon the same truth as does 7:14. Youth will, and should rejoice, but let rejoicing be of that sort that remembers the fact of judgment. The presence of `good and evil', and the right attitude of mind regarding good and evil enters into the warp and woof of life, and Ecclesiastes rightly followed will cast many a ray of light upon the ways of God with man, `all the days of his vain life which he spendeth as a shadow' (6:12).

**(4) The policy of Laodicea (7:15-22)**

'All things have I seen in the days of my vanity: there is a just man that perisheth in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man that longeth his life in his wickedness' (7:15).

This is a recurring observation in this book (*see* 2:14; 8:14, and 9:1-4). Its effect upon the mind and heart has been faithfully chronicled in Psalm 73 where Asaph envied the wicked who prosper, and considered that he had cleansed his heart in vain. It would seem that in Ecclesiastes 7:16,17 we have some such sentiments expressed as those of Asaph before he went into the Sanctuary of God. It seems repugnant to the general teaching of Scripture to understand that God would have us not to be righteous over much, or wise over much, or wicked over much. It is far more likely that Koheleth is expressing the general compromising policy of the world. The very words 'over much' of 7:16 are used of Solomon in 1 Kings 4:29,30, where we read:

'And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding exceeding much ... And Solomon's wisdom *excelled* the wisdom of all the children of the east country'.

Are we to understand that God gave Solomon *much* wisdom and then inspired him to discredit it? The word rendered 'over wise' in verse 16 comes in Ecclesiastes 2:15, 'Why was I then *more* wise', and in 12:9 (margin), 'Because the preacher was *more* wise'.

It appears that when the just man perished in his righteousness the comment of worldly wisdom was, 'Keep the happy medium. Don't be *over* righteous or *over* wise. Why should you destroy yourself? Why not make the best of both worlds? Do not be too strait-laced. On the other hand don't be *over* wicked. This is not good policy either. Why should you die before the time?' This we understand to be the wisdom of the world, but it is not given for us to follow any more than the words of Colossians 2:21. On the contrary Koheleth appears to counteract this teaching in verse 18:

'It is good that thou shouldest take hold of this; yea, also from this withdraw not thine hand: *for he that feareth God shall come forth of them all*'.

Did Joseph in the house of Potiphar listen to the policy 'Be not righteous *over much*'? or did he not rather in the prison and on the throne realize the truth of 'He that feareth God shall come forth of them all'? Did Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego listen to this policy, 'Be not righteous *over much*'? Did they not 'come forth of them all'? This 'coming forth' is used of birth (5:15); of coming out of prison (4:14); of coming out of the ark (Gen. 8:19). Let not the believer heed the temporising policies of the day. He will only too soon meet the kindly-spirited brother who will advise compromise under the guise of long-suffering, gentleness, judging not, &c. Let him beware of such; long-suffering and gentleness let us have by all means, but let us abhor the wisdom of the age which urges us to be neither righteous over much nor wicked over much, but just nicely and comfortably Laodicean through and through. Koheleth says, 'Much study is a weariness of the flesh' (12:12). True, but does he mean then that we should not study? Again, 'In much wisdom is much grief; and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow' (1:18). Shall we infer then that 'Ignorance is bliss'? If sorrow be the price of true wisdom we must pay it. If weariness be the result of much study we must be prepared for it, and we have experienced it in these very studies.

'Wisdom strengtheneth the wise more than ten mighty men which are in the city' (7:19).

Verse 20 commences with 'for' and is usually read as an explanation. It is difficult to see how the fact that 'there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not' can be a reason why 'wisdom strengtheneth the wise more than ten mighty men which are in the city'. Verse 19 concludes the statement of verses 11-18, and verse 20 opens a new section. It may be objected that the verse commences with 'for', and that it cannot open a new subject. The word can also be rendered 'because' and thus read gives better sense:

'Because there is not a just man ... Also take no heed unto all the words that are spoken, lest thou hear thy servant revile thee. For oftentimes also thine own heart knoweth that thou likewise hast reviled others' (7:20-22 Author's translation).

We shall be wise to take no heed to either the policy of worldly wisdom (16,17), or to the censure and criticism of others, however just they may be. Our one aim and desire should be to fear God, and in the confidence that we shall 'come forth of them all' we are to hold on our way. 'It is good that thou shouldest take hold of this' (7:18), said the Preacher. Let us hold fast the truth in the day when it is being deserted; the Lord is faithful, and one day, how soon we know not, *they that be wise shall shine*.

### (5) The 'reason' of evil discovered (7:24-29)

The concluding portion of Ecclesiastes 7 contains an exceedingly difficult statement. Believing it to be a part of that Scripture which is not only inspired but profitable we must seek its meaning, looking continually to the Author Himself to lead us into all truth.

A step towards a truer understanding will be the recognition of the theme of the writer. 'I applied mine heart ... to seek out ... the *reason*' (25). Now this word 'reason' occurs again in verse 27: 'counting one by one to find out *the account*'. We evidently have here the thread, and if we find this same word yet again at the conclusion we shall be justified in assuming that we have established one item. In verse 29 we have the feminine form of the word, 'They have sought out many *inventions*'. In the space of five verses we have 'reason', 'account', and 'inventions'. We must find some common idea that will enable us to understand Solomon's investigation more clearly. The feminine form of verse 29 occurs in 2 Chronicles 26:15, 'He made in Jerusalem *engines* invented by cunning men'. The word translated 'cunning' is also from the same root; the French version reads '*des machines de l'invention d'un ingénieur*'. Many times the root word is rendered 'device', 'curious', and 'cunning'.

If we now come back to Ecclesiastes 7:25 we may be able to perceive more clearly the object of Koheleth's search. We shall observe that the words '*of things*' are in italics and we can ignore them if need be.

'I applied mine heart to know, and to search, and to seek out wisdom, and *the cunning device*, and to know the wickedness of folly, even of foolishness and madness'.

The Preacher was seeking the hidden spring of wickedness, seeking to know what was the ensnaring bait that led men on to sin and death. Out of the bitter experience of his heart Solomon now speaks. He confesses that he had not discovered 'what his soul seeketh' (28), but the example which he gives, together with the conclusion at which he arrives in verse 29, will be sufficient for those who seek guidance in this world of darkness.

The better to appreciate Solomon's warning here we turn to the book of Proverbs. A full account of this book is given in *The Companion Bible*, where it is shown that some Proverbs were written BY Solomon, but others were written FOR Solomon and for his guidance, as David's son and successor. Among the items of solemn warning is the danger morally, religiously and dynastically of the 'alien woman'. In the Proverbs written BY Solomon this one feature *is never mentioned*. The Proverbs FOR Solomon conclude with a marvellous pen portrait of the wife he should seek. Here was evidently Solomon's weak point. Had he hearkened to the Word of God he would have saved his name from the ill savour that must ever attach to it.

In 1 Kings 11:1-8 we read the dismal failure of Israel's wisest king:

'But king Solomon loved many strange women, beside the daughter of Pharaoh, women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Zidonians, and Hittites; of the nations concerning which the LORD said unto the children of Israel, Ye shall not go in to them, neither shall they come in unto you: for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods'.

Nehemiah, when reproofing the people for marrying wives of Ashdod, Ammon and Moab, could find no more tragic example than that of Solomon:

'Did not Solomon king of Israel sin by these things? yet among many nations was there no king like him, who was beloved of his God, and God made him king over all Israel: nevertheless even him did outlandish women cause to sin' (Neh. 13:26).

It is evident, by the account in both 1 Kings 11 and Nehemiah 13, that Solomon's sin was not so much that of immorality as of failure to keep intact the covenant separation of his race and throne. In other words, to the believer of all ages, it represents the temptation of the flesh to overstep the bounds of separation drawn by redemption. It is suggestive in view of Ecclesiastes 7:28 that 1 Kings 11:3 tells us that Solomon had a harem of exactly 1,000:

'And he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines: and his wives turned away his heart'.

Ignoring the warnings of the Proverbs written for his guidance he added wife to wife in vain endeavour, but among the whole thousand found not one. The one depicted in Proverbs 31 he had turned from, and the result was disaster. Just a little earlier in Ecclesiastes 7, Solomon had said, 'There is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good and sinneth not'. His words therefore in verse 28 must not be interpreted as meaning that one man in a thousand was just and sinless. We meet the expression in Job 9:3, 'He cannot answer him, one of a thousand'; and in Job 33:23, 'If there be a messenger with him, an interpreter, *one among a thousand*, to shew unto man his uprightness: Then he is gracious unto him'. Here the one among a thousand is an 'interpreter', one who seems somewhat like the 'days-man' of Job 9:33, who was 'in God's stead', yet 'formed out of the clay' (33:6), and so could mediate between them. We seek to avoid spiritualizing, yet, if Koheleth makes a cryptic reference back to Adam in Ecclesiastes 6:10, it is not unreasonable to suppose that he makes here a cryptic reference onward to Christ. Whether he personally thus understood his own words we cannot say, the application of Solomon's failure and discovery is for ourselves.

One deeply important finding of the Preacher is written with no uncertainty, and this we would set forth with all possible emphasis:

'Lo, this only I have found, THAT GOD HATH MADE MAN UPRIGHT; but they have sought out many inventions' (7:29).

One thing emerged clearly before Solomon's mind. God was not chargeable with the fall of man. In his own case this was clear. God warned him again and again. His fall was entirely due to *disobedience* to the Will and Word of God. From his own personal case he views man as a whole. He weighs over 'one by one to find out the cunning device' which has ensnared them. It is always the same:

'Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth He any man: but every man is tempted, when he is drawn away by his own lust, and enticed ... do not err, my beloved brethren' (James 1:13-16).

Ecclesiastes is a book in which the problem of good and evil is investigated from many standpoints. It is a cause for thankfulness that this clear statement is found here. Man, when he left the hand of his Maker, was upright. The devices for his own undoing proceeded from himself. Mankind has sought out 'many inventions'. The apostle Paul has given a more doctrinal setting to the theme in Romans 6 and 7, and speaks of the dominion of sin in the members of the body, which dominion can be traced back to Adam by consulting Romans 5. Paul, James and Koheleth are at one in this that God is not the Author of sin nor of moral evil. God made man upright. To each of us the experience of Solomon should be a warning. We may not all be vulnerable at the same point. Solomon seemed proof against the snare of riches and power. Many who may have been proof against the alien woman would have lost their heads with half his riches or power. The world is ever seeking access by means of our members and our carnal nature. We have the clear word of God as to the character of our calling and the dangers of fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness. While we may not fully solve Solomon's own peculiar enigma, let us see to it that we learn our own lesson, and profit by his example.

One concluding thought. It has been said that the writing of the book of Jonah argues for his (Jonah's) repentance. The writing of the fifty-first Psalm proves David's deep contrition. Shall we not also believe that Solomon's eyes were opened at the last, and the fact that he subsequently wrote the book of Ecclesiastes indicates his justification of God and of the simple truth of His Word?

#### (6) Wisdom (8:1-17)

Chapter 8 opens with a reference to the wise man, 'Who is as the wise man? and who knoweth the interpretation of a thing?' (8:1). Speaking of the work of God, the writer concludes the chapter by saying, 'though a wise man think to know it, yet shall he not be able to find it' (8:17).

We must keep well in mind that Ecclesiastes is discussing 'What is that good', and among other things he has declared that 'Wisdom is good, like an inheritance ... it giveth life to them that have it' (7:11,12). Though wisdom is so excellent, there are bounds set to its flight; if we observe them it shall be well with us, but if we despise or ignore them, we shall surely come to grief.

'I said, I will be wise; but it was far from me. That which is far off, and exceeding deep, who can find it out?' (7:23,24).

So the Preacher asked the question, 'Who is like the wise man?' and explains the special feature of the wise man that he has in mind by adding 'And who knoweth the interpretation of a thing?'

The Hebrew *peshar* 'interpretation' occurs but once in Scripture, but the parallel Chaldee *peshar* is used in Daniel 2:4 to 7:16 thirty-two times, and always in connection with the dreams of prophetic import given to Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar and Daniel. This is entirely in line with the recurring thought of Ecclesiastes as to 'what shall come after', or as Daniel said, 'what should come to pass hereafter', which the wise men of Babylon could not interpret.

It is very suggestive that another expression that comes in Ecclesiastes 8:1, 'the strength of his face shall be changed' is also found nowhere else but in Daniel. Daniel 5:6 reads 'The King's *countenance was changed*'; so also verses 9,10. The passage however that bears most upon Ecclesiastes 8:1 is that which relates to Daniel himself. In chapter 7 Daniel had a dream which revealed the future of the kingdoms of earth and the final triumph of the kingdom of the saints of the Most High. At the close he wrote:

'Hitherto is the end of the matter. As for me Daniel, my cogitations much troubled me, and my *countenance changed* in me' (Dan. 7:28).

Yet another connection is made by the word 'cogitation', which in Ecclesiastes 1:17, 2:22, and 4:16, is rendered 'vexation'. We return to Ecclesiastes 8:1, and guided by the most evident parallels of Daniel, find that this verse divides up as follows:

- A The wise man.
- B Interpretation.
- A Wisdom makes face to shine.
- B Interpretation often, by lifting the veil of the future, changes the strength of face and plunges one into sorrow.

A little further on in Ecclesiastes 8 the writer returns to the same thought by saying, 'A wise man's heart discerneth both time and judgment' (verse 5). So far this is wisdom and will make the face to shine, but the Preacher continues:

'Because to every purpose there is time and judgment, therefore the misery of man is great upon him. For he knoweth not that which shall be: for who can tell him when it shall be?' (6,7).

What is troubling the man? Verse 8 explains:

`There is no man that hath power over the spirit to retain the spirit; neither hath he power in the day of death: and there is no discharge in that war'.

Here we have an example of those who all their lifetime were held in bondage by the fear of death. Resurrection we have already seen unlocks the teaching of Ecclesiastes.

`All this have I seen', said Ecclesiastes, `and applied my heart unto every work that is done under the sun', and then he gives some examples. He sums up his observations in verse 12:

`Though a sinner do evil an hundred times, and his days be prolonged, yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before Him'.

This is true, even though there be a vanity done upon the earth:

`that there be just men, unto whom it happeneth according to the work of the wicked; again, there be wicked men, to whom it happeneth according to the work of the righteous' (14).

This in no wise alters the previous conclusion that *it shall be well with them that fear God*. We now come to `that good', which is the object of search in this book:

`Then I commended mirth (joy, gladness), because a man hath no better thing (see the series of `better things' in chapter 7) under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry: for that shall abide with him of his labour the days of his life, which God giveth him under the sun' (8:15).

The question arises as one reads these words, Is this God's truth, or is it merely the opinion of man? To arrive at a satisfactory conclusion necessitates a continuance of our study into chapter 9. We will therefore suspend judgment and seek grace that we may find the truth as we proceed. Meanwhile we may profit by what we have seen. Wisdom can give us a child-like and simple faith. It will enable us to see all the baffling perplexities of everyday life, the wicked prospering and the righteous suffering, and it will keep ever before our minds the fact that:

`It is good that thou shouldest take hold of this; yea, also from this withdraw not thine hand: for he that feareth God shall come forth of them all' (7:18).

`I know that it shall be well with them that fear God' (8:12).

This is wisdom, it causes the face to shine. To probe and worry about all the mysteries of Providence however, to ignore the fact that `though a wise man think to know it, yet shall he not be able to find it out', this is seeking trouble, vexation, misery. Wisdom believes God, and the only persons who can really `enjoy life' are those who have thus realized *practically*, as well as theoretically:

`that the righteous, and the wise, and their works, are IN THE HAND OF GOD' (9:1).

### **(7) Contentment (8:15 to 9:18)**

We have arrived at the point where the Preacher commended mirth saying, `A man hath nothing better than to eat, and to drink and be merry'. It must be admitted that these words are associated in some parts of Scripture with worldly unbelief, e.g. Luke 12:19, but we must see whether this is the only context of these words before we judge the passage in Ecclesiastes. Proverbs 17:22 says:

`A merry heart doeth good like a medicine'.

Of Boaz it is written:

`And when Boaz had eaten and drunk, and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of corn' (Ruth 3:7),

but there is no suggestion that Boaz was anything but a proper and God-fearing man in so doing. The Scripture describes the peace and prosperity of Israel under the reign of Solomon with these words:

'Judah and Israel were many, as the sand which is by the sea in multitude, eating and drinking, and making merry' (1 Kings 4:20).

It is rather unfortunate that the present-day conception of the word 'merry' dissociates it from spiritual things. While however the occasions are few where the word is translated 'merry', it is rendered many times 'rejoice', 'joy', 'glad'. Such passages as 'In Thy presence is fullness of *joy*', 'Serve the Lord with *gladness*', will shew that the word carries a wider and deeper meaning than merely that of merriment.

Mirth may be very wrong, as Ecclesiastes 2 shews, but like many things mirth, merriment, joy, gladness, may also be very right. Many there are who can walk by a hard and fast rule, few there are who can rise to the height of the apostle who can say 'Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing'. Partisans for either side could easily be found. So with eating, drinking and being merry. It may be a sign of reckless worldliness. It may also be a sign of godly contentedness. In Ecclesiastes 9:7-9 the subject is repeated, and with emphasis:

'Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy (same word "mirth" and "merry" in 8:15), and drink thy wine with a good heart; for God now accepteth thy works. Let thy garments be always white; and let thy head lack no perfume. Live joyfully (Hebrew "see life") with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity, which He hath given thee under the sun, all the days of thy vanity: for that is thy portion in this life, and in thy labour which thou takest under the sun' (Author's translation).

We can imagine that such language comes as a shock to some, whose conception of spirituality is something devoid of either natural affection, a merry heart, or a cheerful countenance. If however I have given up the futile search into the mysteries of providence and have gratefully fallen back upon the blessed words of Ecclesiastes 9:1 that 'The righteous and the wise and their works are in the hand of God'; if when I see oppression and injustice I remember that 'He that is higher than the highest regardeth; and there be higher than they'; then I too can say with the Preacher:

'Behold that which I have seen: it is good and comely for one to eat and to drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labour that he taketh under the sun all the days of his life, which God giveth him: for it is his portion ... power to eat thereof, and to take his portion, and to rejoice in his labour; this is the gift of God' (5:18,19).

This by no means conflicts with the teaching of 7:4, 'The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth', for a house of mirth, in that sense, can never be a true description of the house of one redeemed by precious blood and taught by God. Sin and its ugly accompaniments press too closely for that. Nevertheless the admonition of the Preacher is salutary and true.

The commendation of mirth or rejoicing, and the finding that a man hath no better thing under the sun than to eat, drink and be joyful, follows immediately upon that inequality seen in the affairs of men where the righteous suffer evil, and the wicked prosper. The parallel in 9:7-9 'Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, &c', follows immediately upon the statement concerning the 'one event' that comes alike to all. In the centre, between the two passages, comes 9:1 :

'The righteous, and the wise, and their works, are in the hand of God'.

The man who believes *that*, in face of the inequalities of providence and the 'one event' which comes alike to all, he of all men can 'eat, drink, and rejoice', and 'live joyfully with the wife whom he loves', &c.

'There is that neither day nor night seeth sleep with his eyes' (8:16).

'The sleep of a labouring man is sweet, whether he eat little or much: but the abundance of the rich will not suffer him to sleep (soundly)' (5:12).

The reference to eating and drinking is incidental; the true and inner thought is summed up in the word 'content'. What Ecclesiastes expressed in his way and for his hearers Paul says to us:

'I have learned, in whatsoever state I am *to be content*' (Phil. 4:11).

## CHAPTER 8

**The Conclusion of the Matter**

We have passed in review some of the outstanding features of this book, and while many and weighty passages remain unexamined, we feel the key-thought of the book has been discovered and applied. The quest before the writer was to discover 'what is that good' that should be the aim and portion in this life. 'Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter'. Ecclesiastes does not leave it to his readers to draw their own conclusions; he sets it out before us:

'Fear God, and keep His commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil' (12:13,14).

'FEAR GOD'. - It is fitting that this book which so emphasizes the excellence of wisdom should conclude thus. In Proverbs 1:7 we read, 'The fear of the Lord is the *beginning* of knowledge', and in Ecclesiastes the fear of God is the *conclusion* of the matter. The outstanding features of Ecclesiastes may be said to revolve around the following words and themes.

(1) VANITY. - We have already considered the reiterated cry of the Preacher, 'Vanity of vanities'. The number of references prevents us from citing them all again; and their scope takes in all the activities of this mortal span from birth to death. Does Koheleth apply his 'conclusion of the matter' to this? He does. 'In the multitude of dreams and many words there are also divers vanities; but *fear thou God*' (5:7). 'A dream cometh through the multitude of business', says verse 3, and therefore, instead of becoming entangled therein, 'Fear God'.

(2) INEQUALITIES. - Over and over again the Preacher speaks of the righteous suffering as the wicked, or the wicked prospering. He speaks of the vanity of the careful labour of a father being dissipated by a foolish son. He further sees that the wise man dieth as the fool, and that one event happens to all, to him that is wicked and to him that is righteous. Does Ecclesiastes find refuge in his 'conclusion of the matter'? He does:

'There is a just man that perisheth in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man that longeth his life in his wickedness ... It is good that thou shouldest take hold of this; yea, also from this withdraw not thine hand: for he THAT FEARETH GOD shall come forth of them all' (7:15-18).

Under this same head may be included 8:12 :

'Though a sinner do evil an hundred times, and his days be prolonged, yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that FEAR GOD, which fear before Him: but it shall not be well with the wicked, neither shall he prolong his days, which are as a shadow; because he FEARETH NOT BEFORE GOD' (8:12,13).

What is there in this wholesome fear of God that can so compensate, so calm one in the midst of the surge and strife of life?

(3) THE TRUTH CONCERNING THE AGES.

'I know that, whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever (the AGE *olam*) ... and God doeth it, that men should FEAR before Him' (3:14).

Associated with this thought is the fact that:

'God shall judge the righteous and the wicked: for there is a time THERE for every purpose and for every work' (3:17),

and knowing this, the believer quietly holds on his way. Connected with the fear of God is the keeping of His commandments. Israel was allowed to wander in the wilderness, to suffer hunger, to experience the miraculous supply of their needs, that they might be humbled, proved, and shown what was in their hearts, whether they would *keep His commandments or no*. Ecclesiastes sees that every believer's life is typified in the wilderness experience of Israel.

Psalms 19:8 says, 'The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes', and this thought enters into 'the conclusion of the matter'. Dispensations change, and the commandments of the Lord change with them, but to keep whatever is the truth for the time is the one sure way of peace.

To fear God and to keep His commandments is the whole of man. The word 'duty' is not needed. Instead of vexing himself with the crooked things that God alone can straighten, he fears God, keeps His commandments, lives his life as the Lord prospers, and knows that a future day, a future life, a future judgment are a necessity and that THERE all crooked places will be made straight, all inequalities rectified. So the book ends:

'For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil' (12:14).

'EVERY WORK'. - Many saints hold such a view of grace as to preclude a judgment of their works. The judgment of works is found in both sets of Paul's epistles, those of the Mystery as well as those of the Acts. While it is right to ponder with chastened heart the judgment of secret things that are evil, surely it is an encouragement to know also that the secret things that are good shall also be fairly judged in that day?

Many problems arising out of this book are still left unsolved, but we feel that the main issue, the search for what is that good that man should do in this life, has been rewarded, and is now in the possession of the reader.

Thus ends our examination of a confessedly difficult book, a book not in high esteem among the 'orthodox', but a book which being given by inspiration of God is not only 'profitable' but to those who have been granted the eye of faith, a book calculated to shed great light upon the tangled pathway of the believer, who, while 'in this tabernacle', must of necessity have continual contact with things 'under the sun', even though his hope and calling place him in Christ 'far above all'.

## APPENDIX

### The Testimony of the Vocabulary

Let us look at the statements of the book a little more closely. Everywhere we have statements that read like autobiography, 'I was king', 'I gave', 'I builded', 'I found', &c. Those who deny the Solomonic authorship on literary grounds admit that Solomon is personated by the unknown author. Grotius bases his argument for the late date of Ecclesiastes on the appearance of (supposed) Aramaic words. These are *sir* 'pot' (7:6), *peshet* 'interpretation' (8:1), *gummat* 'pit' (10:8), *abiyonah* 'desire' (12:5).

Regarding the word *sir* 'pot', it was used by Moses even in Exodus 16:3, and is the very word used in 1 Kings 7:45 for pots in the temple built by Solomon himself! Grotius therefore in this case is singularly unreliable.

Readers may remember that Daniel was 'proved' to be a pious fraud because foreign names were given to musical instruments. The critics, however, were found untrustworthy, for the instruments, being imported, would naturally have native names, and the intercommunication of Daniel's day has been proved, and the critics routed. The wide dominion of Solomon, the coming to him of such as the Queen of Sheba, accounts for the introduction of stranger words than Aramaic.

Let us now notice, some parallels that we find between Ecclesiastes and other of Solomon's writings:

*Ecclesiastes.*

`The fool foldeth his hands together, and eateth his own flesh' (4:5).

`A good name is better than precious ointment' (7:1).

`I have seen servants upon horses, and princes walking as servants upon earth' (10:7).

`The lips of a fool will swallow up himself' (10:12).

*Proverbs.*

`A little folding of the hands to sleep: so shall thy poverty come', &c. (6:10,11).

`A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches' (22:1).

`... for a servant to have rule over princes' (19:10).

`A fool's mouth is his destruction, and his lips are the snare of his soul' (18:7).

Compare also

with

Eccles. 8:5

Prov. 19:16

Eccles. 9:10

Prov. 3:27

Eccles. 10:8

Prov. 23:32

Eccles. 10:10

Prov. 27:17

Eccles. 10:18

Prov. 14:1

Eccles. 5:1,2

1 Kings 8:27,30,43

Eccles. 7:20

1 Kings 8:46

Eccles. 8:15

1 Kings 4:20.

Passages that are somewhat more lengthy are:

Eccles. 7:26

Prov. 5:3-14

Eccles. 9:7-9

Prov. 5:15-19.

We now draw attention to some characteristic words and phrases:

`STREET' (*shuq*). - This word used in this way is peculiar to the books of Solomon, being found elsewhere only in Proverbs 7:8; Song of Solomon 3:2 and Ecclesiastes 12:4,5.

`DELIGHT' (*taanug*). - Translated `delight' in Proverbs 19:10, Song of Solomon 7:6 and Ecclesiastes 2:8. Elsewhere twice in Micah.

`PRE-EMINENCE' (*mothar*). - Ecclesiastes 3:19 `PRE-EMINENCE'; Proverbs 14:23 `PROFIT'; Proverbs 21:5 `PLENTEOUSNESS'.

`FOOL' (*kesil*). - The Hebrew word occurs 70 times; 49 times in Proverbs, 28 times in Ecclesiastes, the remaining three passages being in the Psalms. Grotius would set aside Solomon with three Aramaic words - here, Solomon is established by a greater and more searching criticism.

There are several expressions concerning wisdom and wealth which are peculiar to the writings or times of Solomon, e.g.:

`The giving of wisdom' (Prov. 2:6; Eccles. 2:26; 1 Kings 5:12).

`To know wisdom' (Prov. 1:2; Eccles. 1:17; 7:25; 8:16).

`To seek wisdom' (Prov. 2:4; 14:6; Eccles. 7:25).

`The heart of a wise man' (Prov. 1:6; Eccles. 9:17; 12:11).

`Wealth' (*nekasim*) (Eccles. 5:19; 6:2; 2 Chron. 1:11,12; Josh. 22:8). In Joshua the A.V. translates `riches', but `wealth' in all other places.

The four Aramaic words of Grotius look small against this list of words peculiar to Solomon, and inasmuch as one of them is used by Moses as we have shown, there are but three Aramaic words to be considered in this connection.

Besides the above there is also the witness of *style* to be considered. Notice, for example, the way in which the word *grace* is used. The use of *chen* absolutely, is a feature of Proverbs. See 1:9; 3:4,22,34; 4:9; 5:19; 11:16; 13:15; 17:8; 22:1; 22:11; 28:23; 31:30. In Ecclesiastes 9:11; 10:12 it is used in the same way.

The meaning of the expression `the use of *chen* absolutely' may call for a word of explanation. In forty passages *chen* is preceded by the word that means `to find', as `to find favour in the eyes of some one'. In other passages *chen* is preceded by `to give' or `to obtain'.

In these passages the word *chen* is used *relatively*, and up to the time of writing the Psalms this word is never used absolutely. There we read `Grace is poured into thy lips' (Psa. 45:2) and `The Lord will give *grace*' (Psa. 84:11), and it is this *absolute* use of the word that is characteristic also of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

*Love* occurs 18 times in Proverbs, Song of Solomon and Ecclesiastes, and is used absolutely in every place, except Proverbs 5:19 and Ecclesiastes 9:6. These three books occupy 42 *pages*. The word occurs elsewhere 22 times in 568 *pages*, and is used absolutely at the most on *three occasions*. If there is any argument in style, this is unanswerable.

*My son* is always an appellative in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. So also is the term `The sons of men' (Eccles. 8:11; 9:3; Prov. 15:11; 1 Kings 8:39; 2 Chron. 6:30).

`*The heart knoweth*'. - This expression is peculiar to Solomon (1 Kings 2:44; Prov. 14:10; Eccles. 7:22; 8:5).

`*Assembler*' (*Kohleth*), which is the word translated `Preacher', is the language of David's time. David and Solomon were the only kings who assembled the congregation (1 Kings 8:1,2; 1 Chron. 28:1). This signal honour is enshrined in the name adopted in Ecclesiastes. So with `nails' and `bowl', both have to do with the Temple.

`*Peculiar treasure*' is used of God six times. Twice only is it used of man (1 Chron. 29:3; Eccles. 2:8). The peculiarities of Ecclesiastes are all in favour of its Solomonic authorship.

The reader who is not yet satisfied with either the quantity or the quality of the evidence here brought together is recommended to consult `A Treatise on the Authorship of Ecclesiastes' by D. Johnston, the book which has supplied most of the data here assembled. We are convinced that Solomon is the author and have adopted this position throughout this booklet. We also believe that Ecclesiastes is inspired Scripture and have treated it accordingly. Who would think of treating the Psalms in the way that Ecclesiastes is treated even by the orthodox? and yet many, if not most, of the Psalms are in their primary setting the experiences and the findings of men who had not even the `wisdom of Solomon'.

Asaph's experience recorded in Psalm 73, so parallel in many ways with the outlook of Ecclesiastes, is accepted as inspired truth by the very ones who in their superiority speak of Ecclesiastes as `under the sun'! Surely Ecclesiastes has himself summed up the true nature of all adverse criticism in his inimitable words, `Vanity of vanities, all is vanity'.

The same kind friend who provided the incentive to issue this booklet, wrote the Preface and also supplied the following structure. As this book largely consists of articles taken from *The Berean Expositor* of 1921, it would

have caused too great an upheaval to have attempted to thread this structure through the book; we believe, however, that the diligent student will appreciate it even though it is added here.

### **The Structure of the Book.**

- A 1:2-11. The 'Theme', propounded.
  - a 1:2. Vanity of Vanities.
  - b 1:3. What profit?
- B 1:12 to 12:7. The 'Search' pursued.
  - a 1:12 to 2:26. Personal experience.
  - b 3:1 to 6:12. Personal observation.
  - c 7:1 to 12:7. Contemplation, Reasoning.
- A 12:8-14. The 'Conclusion' pronounced.
  - a 8. Vanity of Vanities.
  - b 13,14. The end of the matter.

### **The 'Search' B: 1:12 to 12:7 above, expanded.**

- B C c 1:12 to 11:26. WISDOM AND FOLLY.
  - a 2:13. Excellency of wisdom.
  - b 2:14. One event to all.
- D d 3:1 to 6:12. DIVINE ORDER, HUMAN IMPOTENCE.
  - e 3:1. A time for every purpose.
  - f 3:12,13. (1) God hath set (*nathan*), the age in the heart.  
(2) No man can find out ... beginning to end.  
(3) Eat and drink and enjoy.
- E g 4:7. I returned and saw vanity under the sun.
  - h 6:11,12. Who knoweth ... Who can tell a man?
- D d 7:1 to 9:1. DIVINE ORDER, HUMAN IMPOTENCE.
  - e 8:6. To every purpose there is a time.
  - f 7:13,14; 8:15-17. (1) God hath set (*asah*) one against the other.  
(2) To the end that man should find nothing after him ... cannot find out the work done under the sun.  
(3) Eat, drink and to be merry.
- E h 8:7. He knoweth not ... who can tell him?
  - g 9:11. I returned and saw under the sun - time and chance.
- C c 9:2 to 12:7. WISDOM AND FOLLY.
  - b 9:2,3. One event to all.
  - a 9:16-18. Wisdom is better.

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