

# INTRODUCTION TO 21<sup>ST</sup> BIBLEBOOK

## ECCLESIASTES (before 333 B.C.)

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### **A. THE ORIGIN OF THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES.**

#### **1. The name of the book.**

In the Hebrew Old Testament, the book is called ‘Qohelet’ and means ‘speaker, preacher’ (in a congregation/assembly, Hebrew: qahal) or ‘convenor’ of the assembly. In the Greek Old Testament it is called ‘Ecclesiastes’ (Greek: ekklesiastés, the speaker in the congregation, Greek: ekklésia). It is not clear how the word should be translated. The word ‘Qohelet’ is derived from words that mean *to assemble* and *the peoples’ assembly*.

The name is found several times in the book itself, for example in Ecclesiastes 1:1-2, where it is translated with the word *Teacher* or *Preacher*. It is clear that this person has something to do with an assembly. He may have been the person who called the assembly together, or who led the assembly or who actually spoke at the assembly. Ecclesiastes 12:9-10 says, “Not only was the Teacher/Preacher wise, but also he imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true.” Therefore, the best is to regard him as the person who is so filled with wisdom that he actually speaks in the assembly in order to instruct others. Therefore, the name ‘Teacher of wisdom’ or ‘Preacher of the Way’ are very good translations.

#### **2. The writer of the book.**

According to Jewish and Christian traditions, the writer was king Solomon (971- 931 B.C.) himself. This conclusion was based on several facts. Ecclesiastes 1:1 says, “The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem” (1:12). Ecclesiastes 1:16 says, “I thought to myself, “Look, I have grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me.” According to Ecclesiastes 2:4-9, he undertook great building projects, possessed many slaves and owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before him. He amassed gold and silver, a harem of women and became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before him. And Ecclesiastes 12:9-10 said that he was a teacher of wisdom to the people and a writer of many proverbs. The only person in the history of Israel that fits this description perfectly is king Solomon, the son of David.

However, there are other arguments, which show that it may not have been king Solomon. In the book of Proverbs, king Solomon’s name is directly used, but in the book of Ecclesiastes the writer only calls himself by a pseudonym. While king Solomon only had two kings who ruled before him in Jerusalem, this writer gives the impression that there were many kings who ruled before him in Jerusalem. Although these kings could have been Gentile kings of Jerusalem, it is not likely that the writer was referring to them. In Ecclesiastes 8:2-3, the writer urges people to obey the king’s command and not to leave the kings’ presence in a hurry. In Ecclesiastes 3:16, 4:1 and 5:8, the writer says that he saw injustice in the legal system, the rights of the poor were denied and they were oppressed. Ecclesiastes 10:6 even says that fools were appointed in high government positions. Some people feel that such social evils could not have happened when Solomon was king. However, the strongest argument that is used against Solomon being the writer is the fact that *the Hebrew used in this book belongs to the period between the Babylonian exile and the establishment of the Old Testament Canon*. It uses the same kind of Hebrew that is used in the books of Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther and the later Jewish writings.

If that is the case, then why does the writer speak as if he is king Solomon? This is not deliberate deceit, but rather a form of literature in the east, namely, to use the example of a very well known person to teach truth. The writer puts his teaching in the mouth of Solomon, because king Solomon was the best known example in history of a wise, wealthy and powerful king. It seems that *the writer introduces king Solomon as speaking from the ancient past*, because Solomon would undoubtedly have been the king who discovered all this wisdom.

It is not really important who actually wrote the book of Ecclesiastes, king Solomon or another unknown wise Teacher. The important thing to remember is that the real Author of the book of Ecclesiastes is the Spirit of God, and therefore it does not matter which human instrument he used to write this book.

### 3. The time and place the book was written.

If King Solomon himself wrote the book, it must have been written before 932 B.C. But because of the kind of Hebrew language used, the writer was more likely another unknown wise teacher or preacher after the Babylonian exile (586 B.C.). Because the same kind of social evils as described in the book of Ecclesiastes existed among the Jews during the last period under Persian rule, the book was most probably written before 333 B.C.

### 4. The place of the book of Ecclesiastes in the Canon.

The Hebrew Canon consists of three parts:

- the Law
- the Prophets
- the Writings

The Writings consisted of three parts.

- The first part consisted of the books: Psalms, Proverbs and Job.
- The second part consisted of five books: These were read during five Jewish festivals:
  - Song of Songs was read during Passover.
  - Ruth was read during Pentecost.
  - Lamentations was read during the Commemoration of the destruction of the temple of Solomon.
  - Ecclesiastes was read during the Feast of Tabernacles.
  - Esther was read during the Purim festival.
- The third part consisted of the books of Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah and Chronicles.

We follow the Greek translation and Canon, which placed the book of Ecclesiastes within the group of five Poetical books, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs.

### 5. The use of the book of Ecclesiastes in the New Testament.

There is not a single quotation from the book of Ecclesiastes in the New Testament. This is also true of other Old Testament books, like Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Song of Songs, Obadiah, Nahum and Zephaniah. But this does not mean that the New Testament writers did not know or read Ecclesiastes or these other Old Testament books.

Ecclesiastes 2:4 and 18 say, "I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. ... I hated all the things I have toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me." Compare these with the parable of the rich fool in Luke 12:16-21.

Ecclesiastes 5:2 says, "Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few." Compare this with Matthew 6:7. "And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words."

Ecclesiastes 7:9 says, "Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools." Compare this with James 1:19. "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry."

Ecclesiastes 7:18 says, "The man who fears God will avoid all extremes." Compare this with Matthew 23:23. "Woe to you teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices - mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law - justice, mercy and faithfulness."

Ecclesiastes 12:14 says, "God will bring every hidden deed into judgement, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil." Compare this with Romans 2:16 and 2 Corinthians 5:10. "God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ. ... We must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad."

## **B. THE PURPOSE OF THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES.**

The theme of the book of Ecclesiastes is the following:

**"Finding the lasting significance of all man's toil here on earth is futility."**

*The book focuses on the meaninglessness of life, work and toil without God.* This theme is also mentioned by the apostle Paul in Romans 8:20, when he said, "The creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it."

The book of Ecclesiastes begins and ends with the words "Meaningless! Everything is meaningless" (1:2 and 12:8). A better translation would say, "Everything is vanity or futility."

The same theme occurs in several places in the book, for example, in Ecclesiastes 1:14, "I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind." Throughout the book, the writer describes the hard work and toiling of man in various areas of life, and then ends with the remark that all that hard work and toiling is *meaningless*. In Ecclesiastes 1:3, he says, "What does man gain from all his labour at which he toils under the sun?" But the writer's intention is not to judge life on earth negatively.

In Ecclesiastes 12:13-14, he says, “Here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgement, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.”

*The real purpose of the writer is to preach the meaninglessness/futility of things that do not have eternal value, in order to cause people to seek the things that do have eternal value.* Thus, the book of Ecclesiastes is also a part of the gospel, a part of the good news that Christians must preach. The human heart always longs for that which can permanently satisfy. But only when people realise the insignificance and the lack of value of all their earthly toil, accomplishments and possessions, will they seek after that which is eternal and imperishable. Only Jesus Christ can give eternal and imperishable life and satisfaction to the human heart!

### **C. THE DIVISION AND A SHORT SUMMARY OF ECCLESIASTES.**

The book of Ecclesiastes may be divided into four parts: The introduction to the book in chapter 1, the development of the argument in chapters 2 to 10, the practical conclusions in chapter 11:1 to 12:7, and finally the conclusion of the whole book in chapter 12:8-14.

#### **1. The introduction of the book.**

##### Chapter 1:1-11. Introducing the question.

The big question of the Teacher/Preacher is, “What is the advantage, what is the essential or enduring value, what is the lasting significance (meaning) of man’s work (labour, toil) on earth (1:3)?”

Many things have happened and are happening *under the sun*, that is, here on earth. Throughout the book, the Teacher is speaking from the perspective of man’s work and activities under the sun, that is, here on earth. Generations of people come and go. The cycles of nature come and go. All the apparent changes in generations of people and in the cycles of nature are nevertheless happening again and again. Although there is continuous activity among people and nature, it does not produce anything lasting (1:3-8). Everything that has happened before will happen again, and everything that has been done before will be done again. There is nothing new under the sun (1:9). All human toil is just wearisome. Therefore, there is no enduring value or lasting significance in any human toil on earth.

##### Chapter 1:12-18. Introducing the theme.

The theme is the following: “Finding the lasting significance of all man’s toil here on earth is futility.”

All man’s toil under the sun *to find wisdom, that is, to find an answer to the above question*, is futility. The Teacher devoted himself to study and explore the wisdom in everything that is done under the sun (1:12). His discovery was that it is in vain that people try to find *wisdom*, that is, the essential or enduring value or the lasting significance in what they are doing here on earth. It is useless to try to discover a reasonable meaning in anything they do on earth. There is so much that is crooked and so much that is lacking in what people do, that it is impossible to discover wisdom or a reasonable meaning in anything people do (1:15). The seeking after wisdom causes only much sorrow and the gathering of knowledge causes only more grief (1:18). Therefore, the seeking after wisdom and knowledge is a chasing after the wind (1:17).

#### **2. The development of the argument.**

From chapter 2 to 10, the Teacher describes the various ways and means he has employed to try to discover the real meaning of man’s endeavours in this life.

Chapter 2:1-11. Pleasures and possessions prove that finding the lasting significance of all man’s toil is futility. The Teacher tries to find an answer to the question of the significance of human toil by the way of pleasures and possessions (2:1-3). He did everything possible to make his experiment succeed. Great projects were undertaken, great quantities of wealth were amassed, and not a single desire or pleasure was denied (2:4-10). And yet, all pleasures and possessions were a disappointment, because in all the toil to gain these pleasures and possessions nothing worthwhile was found. What he had toiled to achieve was meaningless, a chasing after the wind. After so much toil under the sun, nothing was gained under the sun (2:11). There is no permanent value in human toil for pleasures and possessions. This is exactly what the apostle John says in 1 John 2:16-17, “For everything in the world - the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does - comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away.”

Chapter 2:12-23. Leaving all one’s possessions to others prove that finding the lasting significance of all man’s toil is futility. The Teacher turns his thoughts to the matter of wisdom and folly. Although wisdom is better than folly, the wise person and the fool will both share the same fate and die. Everything the wise man had gained and achieved by tiresome toil he must leave to the one who comes after him, no matter whether that person is wise or foolish (2:12-16). Although he had employed the greatest wisdom to gain and achieve things, all his laborious work will prove in vain, because he must leave everything to another person. Therefore he hated all the things he had toiled for on earth (2:18).

Chapter 2:24-3:15. The inability to determine whether he will enjoy the fruit of his labours prove that finding the lasting significance of all man’s toil is futility. Only God determines whether a person will enjoy the fruit of his labour or not.

If it pleases God, he gives to one wisdom, knowledge and happiness. But if it does not please him, he gives to another only tiresome toil in order to hand it over to another person.

Man is completely dependent on God for everything he does and receives (2:24-26 and 3:12-13). God has sovereignly determined a time for everything. If it is not in the hand of man to dispose over the fruit of his labours, but in the hand of God to sovereignly decide what he gives to each in his own time, then there is no enduring value or lasting meaning in all man's tiresome toil on earth (3:1-8).

The Teacher does not deny that toil according to God's decree has value, but only that toil by itself is a burden and without God it is without value (3:9-10). Therefore, he acknowledges that God has made everything beautiful in the time God has determined for it and not in the time man determines for his activities. "God has set eternity in the heart of man" means that God has given man the desire to think about what happens in time, but he has not given to man the ability to fathom what God is doing from the beginning to the end of time. God's sovereign rule cannot be fathomed with the human reason. It can only be accepted by faith in God's revelation (3:11). Whatever God gives to each to eat, drink or enjoy in his work is purely a gift of God (3:12-13). God's sovereign plan and deeds will endure forever and no man can change that. Man is completely dependent on God, so that he will learn to fear and revere God (3:14). Whatever has happened will happen again, because it is God who determines what happens in all times in history (3:15).

Chapter 3:16-4:6. *The injustice on earth proves that finding the lasting significance of all man's toil is futility.* The Teacher saw wickedness in the place where justice should be spoken (3:16). He saw the oppression of the oppressors and the suffering of the oppressed and concluded that to be born in this life is a great sorrow (4:1-3). Although there comes a time when God will judge both the righteous and the wicked (3:17), for the present he temporarily allows injustice to happen in order to put people to the test and make them discover their own insignificance. *Taken by themselves, that is, without God, people are equal to animals and die like animals* (3:18-20). Although the spirit of man rises upward to God (12:7) and the spirit of animals goes down into the earth, there is no one who can observe this distinction. *For people looking only from a human point of view, there is no difference between humans and animals* (3:21). People cannot see God's future justice, but only live under the present injustice on earth. Therefore, there is no good reason for a man to enjoy his work (3:22). Because envy of one's neighbour (due to personal ambition) plays such a great role in man's labours and achievements, the seeking of an enduring value in human toil is in vain (4:4). It would be foolish not to work (4:5), but in all work there is hardship and pain (4:6). This is exactly what God says in Genesis 3:17-19, "Through painful toil you will eat of the cursed ground all the days of your life. ... By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food ... until you return to the dust from which you were taken."

Chapter 4:7-12. *The toiling of the single person proves that finding the lasting significance of all man's toil is futility.* The Teacher observed that all the toil of a single person is a miserable business and meaningless, because he has no one to inherit what he works for (4:7-8). That is why there is relatively speaking much greater advantage in doing things together with another person (4:9-12).

Chapter 4:13-16. *The instability (fickleness) of popularity proves that finding the lasting significance of all man's toil is futility.* It is better to be a poor youth who is wise, than an old king who is foolish and who does not want to accept warning and counsel anymore. "All who lived and walked under the sun" is an exaggerated expression<sup>1</sup> for the crowds. The crowds followed this wise youth and cheered him enthusiastically and endlessly (4:13-16a). But later, these same crowds were no longer pleased with him. Thus, the fickleness of popularity with the crowds proves that all human toil is meaningless.

Chapter 5:1-7. *Using God to advance one's own plans will bring God's wrath upon one's work.* Listening to God's Word is better than bringing sacrifices without understanding. Not making a vow is better than making a vow, but not fulfilling it. Making vows was bad, because it was purely selfish. Man endeavoured to use God in order to accomplish his own plans. Not fulfilling vows was even worse. God is in heaven and man is on earth. Therefore let man not play with God, but rather stand in awe of God.

Chapter 5:8-6:12. *The gathering of wealth proves that finding the lasting significance of all man's toil is futility.* The following 8 reasons prove the futility of wealth:

- Corruption never stops: Wealth is very often acquired by applying unjust means, like extortion and corruption of justice (5:7-9).
- The thirst for money cannot be satisfied: Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income" (5:10).
- Personal enjoyment is always limited: As wealth increases, so do other people who consume it, like employees, family, friends, institutions and parasites (5:11).
- Wealth causes sleeplessness: Wealth often robs a person from the opportunity to work hard and sleep well at night (5:12).
- Wealth is unstable: Due to unforeseen circumstances or misfortune, wealth can be quickly lost, so that a man leaves this world as naked as he came into it. All his hard work gained nothing except frustration and the angry quarrelling of those who were also depending on that wealth (5:13-17).

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<sup>1</sup> Hyperbolic language

- Temporary enjoyment of wealth is only by grace: Enjoyment of the fruit of wealth is only possible as a gift from God<sup>2</sup>. The few people on earth who enjoy this privilege do not reflect on the question about the significance of all human toil (5:20).
- Wealth is passed on to others: God may give one person wealth, possessions and honour. God may also pass it on to another person before the first person could enjoy it himself (6:1-2).
- It is sometimes impossible to enjoy wealth: A person may have many children and live a very long life. But if for any particular reason he fails to enjoy his wealth, he is worse off than a stillborn child. If his roving appetite for wealth is never satisfied so that he cannot even enjoy a little of it, then his great wealth is meaningless.

If a person during his long and fruitful life has not been able to discover the enduring value of all his toil, then the only conclusion is that such a value does not exist (6:3-9). No man can contend with the one who is stronger than he. Man is absolutely small and insignificant before the almighty sovereignty of God, who determines his life on earth. Man is warned not to criticise God's sovereignty. Man hardly knows what is good for him during his few days on earth and he certainly knows nothing of what will happen in the future (6:10-12).

Chapter 7:1-14. *The wrong appreciation of things proves that finding the lasting significance of all man's toil is futility.* Man's wrong appreciation of things leads to his inability to determine the real value of things. In trying to determine the enduring value of things, man makes wrong judgements. He judges as valuable those things that feel good and create joy. But actually, things that do not feel so good and create pain often strengthen man and enrich him spiritually. *Because man toils for things that do not have enduring value, like pleasure and laughter, he is unable to determine the essential or enduring value of things* (7:1-6). Likewise, the too high appreciation of material goods leads to man's inability to determine the enduring value of things (7:7). Man's inability to see the end of a matter makes him impatient, and causes him to complain against God or angrily question God's sovereign rule (7:8-10). Wisdom, which seeks the right relationship with God, has greater advantage than material possessions, because it gives its possessor life (7:11-12). But because God's rule is unfathomable, man's judgement and appreciation of things is absolutely limited (7:13-14).

Chapter 7:15-22. *The absence of judgement of injustice in this world proves that finding the lasting significance of all man's toil is futility.* Ecclesiastes 3:16-4:6 already taught that injustice on earth proves that seeking the lasting significance of all man's toil is meaningless. Here the emphasis is on the fact that this injustice does not receive retribution on earth. A person, who is excessively righteous by maintaining (arguing) that strict retribution of injustice is already taking place on this earth, or who pretends to be overly wise by determining how justice ought to be executed on earth, will become bewildered by the opposite facts of life (7:15-16). A person, who behaves in excessive wickedness, because he believes that the wicked will live long, could die before he expects it (7:17). Therefore, man must grasp both these warnings. The man who fears God will avoid both these extremes (7:18). *The theme of Ecclesiastes may be that there is no enduring value in all man's toil 'under the sun', that is, on this present earth, but the wise know that there is more than just this earth!* The wise fear God and are more powerful than the rulers of this earth (7:19).

Chapter 7:23-8:1. While attempts to discover the answer to his question failed, the Teacher discovered the wickedness of man instead. The Teacher investigated wisdom and searched out the scheme of things, but he discovered that wisdom was most profound and beyond the discovery of man. He could not discover the lasting significance of all man's toil on earth. The problem cannot be solved (7:23-25). However, what he did discover was the wickedness of man, especially demonstrated in the seductive tricks of the immoral woman (7:26). Nevertheless, God created man right (7:29), and true wisdom, which consists in the fear of the Lord<sup>3</sup> changes the appearance of man's face and makes it radiant (8:1).

Chapter 8:2-8. The relationship of this paragraph with the theme of the book is not clear. It is possible that Israel was living under foreign domination at that time. *Foreign domination proves that finding the lasting significance of all man's toil on earth is futility.* The nation of Israel had sworn an oath that they would remain faithful to that foreign king. By obeying the king, no one needed to be anxious. But standing in the neighbourhood of a riot, could cause one to be accused of complicity. Therefore, submit to a foreign king or face judgement (8:2-4).

The wise, that is, those who fear God, not only obey the king out of self-preservation, but also in the knowledge of the coming judgement. They know that there will be 'a time and a judgement'. That is, they know that there will come a time of God's judgement, in which everyone will have to give account of all his deeds, including his wrong attitude towards the king who had been appointed over him. There is certainly going to be a time of judgement for every matter, because the wickedness of man on earth has very much prevailed over him (8:5-6)! But the wise do not know the time when this judgement will come (8:7). Whoever does wickedness will certainly not escape this judgement. Just as it is impossible to stop the wind, to escape death or to get discharged in the middle of a battle, so it will be impossible to escape the Judgement Day.

Chapter 8:9-17. *The disproportion in the fate of the wicked and the righteous on earth proves that finding the lasting significance of all man's toil is futility.* Several unjust relationships between people are described: There are those who lord it over others and cause them harm (8:9). The wicked receive honourable funerals, while the righteous are driven from Jerusalem to be forgotten (8:10). *The sentences for crimes are not quickly carried out, with the consequence that people become more arrogant in committing crimes* (8:11).

<sup>2</sup> 1 Timothy 6:17-19

<sup>3</sup> Proverbs 9:10

Thus wicked people commit hundred crimes and still live a long life. Nevertheless, it will go better with those who fear God, even if it cannot be seen on this present earth (8:12). It will not go well with the wicked. They will not escape God's righteous judgement and many of them will live short lives on earth (8:13). The fact that the righteous get what the wicked deserve and vice versa, proves that finding the lasting significance of all man's toil on earth is futility (8:14). It is commendable to enjoy life, when joy accompanies his work during the days God gives him to live on earth (8:15). However, to discover 'wisdom', that is, to comprehend the lasting significance of all man's toil on earth, is impossible. It is futility. It is only idle pretence when a man claims that he can comprehend God's inscrutable (impenetrable) rule of people and events on earth, and especially that he understands why the wicked prosper, while the righteous suffer (8:16-17).

Chapter 9:1-10. *Inescapable death proves that finding the lasting significance of all man's toil is futility.* All people and the things they do are dependent on God's sovereign will and control. No one can comprehend that (9:1). The futility of everything that happens under the sun is proven by the fact that all people share the same destiny. Death overtakes them all and no one can escape that lot (9:2-4). Therefore, when God favours a man and has determined this to be his lot on earth, let him enjoy life on earth. Let him do whatever his hand finds to do with all his might (9:7-10). Because when he dies, he will have no more part in what happens under the sun on earth. In the grave, where everyone is going, that is, where everyone's body is buried, there is no more working, nor planning, nor knowledge, nor wisdom (9:10).

Chapter 9:11-12. *The inability of personal capacities to influence time and chance proves that finding the lasting significance of all man's toil is futility.* Man's swiftness, strength, wisdom, brilliance and learning do not determine a man's fate in this life. Time and chance happen to all people and unexpected misfortune (evil times) can end all expectations.

Chapter 9:13-10:3. *Folly that destroys the influence of wisdom proves that finding the lasting significance of all man's toil on earth is futility.* Wisdom has great advantage, as the Teacher teaches in several places in this book<sup>4</sup>, but the advantage wisdom could have had, is nullified when it is not given a chance to show what it could do (9:14-16). Wisdom has a greater effect than strength, but it is spoiled by foolishness that causes decay and a bad smell (9:17-10:1). The deliberate way of the wise leads to virtue, but the unthinking way of the fool leads to damage (10:2). Even in the most ordinary and simple things, a fool cannot act properly (10:3).

Chapter 10:4-20. *The power that folly exercises in this world proves that finding the lasting significance of all man's toil on earth is futility.* Because there is so much folly, no lasting significance can be given to all man's toil. Folly is to walk away when a ruler (leader) reacts in anger (10:4). Folly is to place fools in high positions (10:5-7). Folly is to neglect consultation with others involved in the same undertaking (10:8-9). Folly is to use unsuitable instruments and needlessly tire oneself. Success can only be gained by acting with wisdom (10:10). Folly is to wait taking the proper measures until it is too late to do anything about it (10:11). Folly is to be blunt, to multiply words and to speculate about the future (10:12-14). Folly is to wear oneself out by work without gaining any result (10:15). Folly is when people in high positions live a luxurious life and feast at the wrong times (10:16-17). Folly is to be lazy or idle around and allow conditions to deteriorate (10:18). Folly is to live a frivolous and carefree life, to eat, drink and make fun, while money takes care of whatever they wish (10:19). Folly is to speak evil of any ruler (10:20).

### **3. The practical conclusions.**

Chapter 11:1-6. The first practical conclusion. *Man is called to energetic and persistent work in this present life.*

In spite of the conclusion of the investigation, that the lasting significance of all man's toil on earth cannot be discovered, man is nevertheless called to be industrious. The fact that he cannot penetrate the mysteries of God's sovereign rule over people and events on earth, should not lead man to be slack or spineless. On the contrary, man is called to exert himself and work with perseverance (11:6). Man should employ his energy and possessions as royally as possible, even when he cannot see which results it may bring (11:1). However, his courage to invest must not lead to recklessness. He should invest economically, because he does not know what disaster might strike (11:2). Evil will happen as certainly as rain falls from a cloud. And an evil situation cannot be changed, as certainly as the direction in which a felled tree lies cannot be changed (11:3). Man should not be overly scrupulous and wait for the most ideal conditions, lest he misses his chance. He must tackle the venture (11:4), because he cannot know the mystery of God's sovereign rule. Therefore, exaggerated scrupulousness, in which man wants to know the most suitable time to act, is foolish, because God has hidden his plan of sovereign rule from mankind (11:5). Precisely because the outcome is uncertain, man should do whatever he can (11:6).

Chapter 11:7-12:7. The second practical conclusion. *Man is called to prepare for the life to come.*

However wonderful it may be to live on this earth, man must remember that the time spent in death will be longer than the time spent in life. The sentence, "Everything that has come is meaningless" refers to everything that man has acquired and achieved during his toil under the sun on this present earth. Nothing of these things has any advantage, essential or enduring value, or lasting significance (meaning)! Man must remember that when he dies, he will not take anything he has acquired or achieved with him across the grave (11:7-8).

The young people may enjoy their youth and may follow their ideals to a certain extent. But they must remember that they will have to give an account of everything they have done on earth in the Final Judgement (11:9). They may freely

<sup>4</sup> Ecclesiastes 2:13-14; 4:13; 7:11-12,19; 8:1

try to banish anxiety out of their heart and avoid all kinds of physical problems. But they must realise that youth and vigour are meaningless, that is, their youthful years pass by very quickly, just like a gust of wind (11:10). *The young people must remember their Creator in the days of their youth. They must seek God, think of him, acknowledge him, honour him, love and serve him, because the day when age overtakes them is coming very quickly.*

Old age are days of trouble, because many problems arise (12:1). Old age is described in terms of an allegory: Old age is like the darkness of the Palestinian winter, when dark rain clouds blot out the sun, moon and stars (12:2). ‘The keepers of the house’ stand for *the hands*, which begin to tremble in old age. ‘The strong men’ stand for *the bones* in the body, which begin to bend over. ‘The grinders’ stand for *the teeth*, which begin to be few. ‘The windows’ stand for *the eyes*, which grow dim (12:3). ‘The closed doors’, which cause the sound of grinding to fade, stand for the mumbling of *the lips of a mouth*, which has fallen in.

Then the allegory is dropped and old age is described as a time when people find it hard to sleep and are awakened by the early birds. Old age is a time of becoming hard of hearing (12:4), a time of being afraid of heights and of the dangers on the streets, because old people cannot move fast anymore. Then the allegory is taken up again. ‘The almond tree’ stands for the grey hair. ‘The grasshopper dragging himself along’ stands for the great difficulty with which he walks. ‘The caper herb that is useless’ stands for the diminishing appetite. Finally, old age ends in certain death (12:5).

The allegory is dropped and figurative language is used to further describe death. The golden lamp hanging on a silver cord is a symbol of the lamp of life. The lamp is shattered, the oil flows away, and the lamp of life is extinguished. The broken waterwheel at the well and the shattered pitcher symbolise that the supply-line of life has been cut (12:6). Then plain language is used to describe what happens at death: The body or physical part of man returns to the dust from which it came, and the soul or spiritual part of man returns to God who gave it to man at his creation (12:7).

#### **4. The conclusion of the book.**

The Teacher repeats the theme of his book, “Everything is meaningless.”

He does not conclude that whatever man does is meaningless. He concludes *that finding the lasting significance of all man’s toils on earth is futility*. The real significance of life cannot be found in mere human activities. It lies beyond the discovery of man and *must be revealed by God* to man (12:8)<sup>5</sup>. The Teacher had thoroughly meditated on this question and had searched it out. Much wisdom has been produced in the world. No matter how many proverbs or books there are in the world, they are wearisome to write and to read (12:9-12). *Real wisdom and the whole duty of man are to fear God, to keep his commandments and to remember that God will bring man’s whole life into judgement.*

This is the peak of the Teacher’s teaching: *The fact that no lasting significance can be found in all man’s toiling here on earth is designed to cause man to look up to God in heaven and to expect everything from him! The Teacher calls people, not to try and discover meaning in the things or activities on earth in themselves, because they are all temporary. But to open man’s eyes to see that he is on his way to an eternal destination and that man is above all else called to direct his spirit to God and the eternal things!*

“Fix your eyes, not on what is seen, but on what is unseen<sup>6</sup>.”

“Set your mind and heart on things above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. ... Your life is now hidden with Christ in God<sup>7</sup>.”

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<sup>5</sup> For example: God may reveal the significance of your personal life through a personal calling or through a specific verse in Scripture.

<sup>6</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:18

<sup>7</sup> Colossians 3:1-3