

Bible Study # 88
May 12, 1992
Mr. John Ogwyn

The Writings Series—Ecclesiastes

We are progressing through our series this evening. We have most recently been going through that section of the Old Testament known as the Writings, which is the third division of the Old Testament scriptures. That section is primarily poetic. The book of Psalms is the longest and the primary book in that section. The section also includes Proverbs and Job as other books that have a poetic cast to them. Then there is this particular group of five books called by the Jews, the Megillot or the Festival Scrolls. These five little books (Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentation, Ecclesiastes and Esther) were traditionally read at various festival occasions in ancient Israel.

This is the section of the Writings we have been going through most recently. We have gone through Song of Solomon, Ruth and Lamentations. Now we **are up to the fourth of the five Festival Scrolls, the book of Ecclesiastes**. There's only a little bit remaining in this section. Once we finish Ecclesiastes and Esther, then the only portion of the Writings left is the books of Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and 1 and 2 Chronicles. We have already covered Ezra, Nehemiah, and 1 and 2 Chronicles when we went through the historical books of the Old Testament. We will take a very brief look in those four books from a little different standpoint than we went into before. We will take a brief look at them in one Bible study because we have already gone through them in depth a number of months ago.

Once we finish up Ecclesiastes and Esther, we will have finished the five Festival Scrolls. We will then go through the book of Daniel. After Daniel we will take one Bible study to look at Ezra, Nehemiah and Chronicles, just to sort of round off, since we have been going through this as a specific section. That will conclude our study of every book in the Bible except the book of Revelation, which we will go into afterward. We are going to spend seven Bible studies on the book of Revelation. We will go into some depth into that.

Some books we have covered a little more quickly; some books we have gone into more detail. The books of the Bible are written in different ways, and we have to understand that when we study them. Some books are written in

a poetic fashion, and, as a result, there is a great deal of repetition. They deal with topics in a little different way. Others are written as a straightforward narrative account, as in the case of many of the historical books. Some are written where there is a great deal of exposition of particular theological subjects. In Paul's epistles, for instance, there is a great deal of exposition of topics—as distinct from the Gospel accounts where we have the story of what Christ did and, yes, the story of what He said. There's exposition there, too. In some of the prophetic books, we get into more symbolism that is directed.

We are going to cover Daniel in two Bible studies. We will get an overview of Daniel, but when we go through Revelation in much detail, we will have to go back to the prophetic sections of Daniel. So, to avoid being repetitious, when we cover Daniel, we will concentrate on the areas that are not repeated so heavily in Revelation. Then when we cover Revelation, we will go back in more detail to earlier chapters of Daniel. We will find, as we go through it, several chapters of Daniel form the backdrop to understanding the book of Revelation. It gives you a little bit of an idea as to what will have occurred.

We will have covered every single book of the Bible. Since some of you have been here all through that time, you will have had the opportunity to go through in a detailed, systematic way, every single book of the Bible. But since none of us will have learned everything there is to know about the Bible, we will still need to go back to the Bible. We will find there is plenty more to study in the Bible, but at least we will have had an overview of all of the books.

This evening we are getting into the book of Ecclesiastes. As I have mentioned, it is the fourth of the five Festival Scrolls. It was and is traditionally read to this day in Orthodox synagogues at the Feast of Tabernacles. Normally it would be read on the weekly Sabbath that comes during the Feast of Tabernacles. At first glance, it may strike us as a rather odd book to read during that particular period because the Feast of Tabernacles is a festive time. It is a time that looks forward to and pictures the time of the millennial reign of Jesus Christ on the earth—the time when the Kingdom of God will hold sway over all the earth. We might think of certain prophetic passages that would tie in to that meaning.

The book of Ecclesiastes is a book that, at first glance, strikes many people as being sort of negative and pessimistic. Even some commentators have wondered over the years how a book like this got into the Bible. Well, it got into the Bible because God wanted it there, and it stayed in the Bible because God wanted it there. Perhaps as we go through this evening, we will understand a little more clearly the message that God wants us to have. This book describes living life to the full from a physical standpoint. There were no desires unmet. Yet, after all of that, there is a certain feeling of emptiness and futility when all is said and done. Solomon's reign was, in many ways, a type of the Millennium.

We refer to certain things as being a type of something else. We refer to that in prophecy. To be a type of something means to be a forerunner and in certain ways picture a later, greater event or a later, greater person. For instance, in certain passages made in the Psalms, we find that in certain ways David was a type of Christ, a type of the Messiah. That simply means that there were certain things about him that were typical of or referred to the Messiah. That's why so many passages of the Psalms that David wrote, which reflects experiences and feelings that he had, are actually quoted in the New Testament by Jesus Christ Himself to apply to and to be descriptive of the Messiah. Many events that occurred in history are used in the Bible as a type of some future event. In other words, it illustrates on a small scale, some later, greater event. We say that Solomon's reign was a type of the Millennium. Let's understand what that means.

1 Kings 4:20-21, "Judah and Israel were as numerous as the sand by the sea in multitude, eating and drinking and rejoicing. So Solomon reigned over all kingdoms from the River to the land of the Philistines, as far as the border of Egypt. They brought tribute and served Solomon all the days of his life."

Verses 24-25, "For he had dominion over all the region on this side of the River [referring to the Euphrates River] from Tiphshah even to Gaza, namely over all the kings on this side of the River; and he had peace on every side all around him. And Judah and Israel dwelt safely, each man under his vine and his fig tree, from Dan as far as Beersheba, all the days of Solomon."

We are told that the nation dwelt safely, every man under his vine and under his fig tree.

Now let's turn back to the prophets.

Micah 4:1, "Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the Lord's house

shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and peoples shall flow to it." It is talking about the government of God. "Mountain" is used symbolically in the Scriptures to refer to a government. 'The mountain [government] of the house of the Lord will be established.'

Verses 2-4, "Many nations shall come and say, 'Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths.' For out of Zion the law shall go forth, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between many peoples, and rebuke strong nations afar off; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. But everyone shall sit under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken."

The phrase, "But everyone shall sit under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid," is used three times in the Bible: 1 Kings 4:25, Micah 4:4 and in Zechariah 3:10.

Zechariah 3:10, ""In that day," says the Lord of hosts, "Everyone will invite his neighbor under his vine and under his fig tree."""

The statement in Micah 4:4 is almost an exact repetition of the statement in 1 Kings 4:25. That is descriptive of a time of peace, safety, security and prosperity.

Right now, if we look around the world, we see great unrest. We see tremendous amounts of ethnic strife and conflict all over the world, whether it is internal problems in this nation or whether it's the world's problems. Right now, the nation of Yugoslavia has really ceased to be a nation. It is split into four small sub-groups. I may be mistaken, but I doubt if there are any of us in this room that could actually tell the difference between a Slovene, a Croat, a Serb or a Bosnian. Maybe you could, but I don't really think that I could at first glance or anything. They existed together as the nation of Yugoslavia for much of the mid-portion of this century. Now they have split into various warring factions. That is just one tiny example. You find it all over the world. We've seen the breakup of the Soviet Union into 15 constituent republics, and some of these constituent republics are in the process of further dividing. You can go to Africa, Asia or anywhere you want on the face of the earth, and we see ethnic

strife and warring. Of course, there have always been conflicts that have existed.

What is it that everyone wants? What's all the strife about? Well, basically, what it comes down to is that what everybody wants is to be able to dwell safely, every man 'under his own vine and under his own fig tree.' Everybody wants his little spot where nobody can come in and intimidate him and threaten to take it away from him. Everybody has a yearning. That is the basis of all these nationalistic yearnings. People desire their own spot where they are not going to have to worry about some larger, stronger neighbor coming in and deciding to annex their spot and take it away from them, chop down their fig tree, steal all the grapes off their vines and leave them there beaten to a pulp. That has so often been descriptive of our history.

God uses that symbolism to describe Tomorrow's World, a time when every nation will have its spot. It will have its place under the sun. It is a time when all people will be able to sit under their own vine and their own fig tree—which by the way, shows that the millennial period is not going to be a time of communism or socialism. It doesn't say that every man will sit under the communal vine and the communal fig tree. It says 'every man will sit under his own vine and his own fig tree.'

The eighth commandment that enjoins us not to steal, presupposes private property. There's nothing wrong with private property. Again, there is a yearning that people have to have their own stuff. There's nothing wrong with that, as long as greed doesn't motivate them to try to steal their neighbor's spot and annex it to theirs. God is the One who divides to the nations their inheritance.

Deuteronomy 32:8-9, we are told, "'when the Most High divided their inheritance to the nations, when He separated the sons of Adam, He set the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the children of Israel. For the Lord's portion is His people; Jacob is the place of His inheritance.'" And He will do so once again.

What we have is a description of a time in the history of Israel when the nation, for a brief period, existed in peace and in harmony. The phrase that is used is a phrase that is typical of the way the whole world will be under the reign of Jesus Christ.

Solomon's name is derived from the Hebrew word "Shalom," which means "peace." In that sense, Solomon's reign was a type of the

millennial reign of Jesus Christ. It was a time of abundance, peace and prosperity—at least, during a brief period of that reign when people were able to dwell in the land in safety, free from incursions and threats of invasion and things of this sort. We have a reign that was a type of the Millennium.

In many ways, the book of Ecclesiastes explains the difference between the Millennium and the Kingdom of God. There is a difference. "Millennium" is a word that simply means "a thousand years." It comes from the Latin. By definition, a thousand years is a limited, finite period of time. It has a beginning and it has an end. But the Kingdom of God is eternal; it will go on and stretch out into eternity. We are told of the Messiah's reign.

Luke 1:33, "'And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His reign there will be no end.'"

Isaiah 9:7, "'Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end,'"

So, we are looking out into eternity and to infinity. The Millennium has a limitation. The Millennium is that time when the Kingdom of God rules over physical human beings and over the earth for the period of a thousand years. It has its beginning at the return of Jesus Christ and its conclusion at the time when Satan is released and allowed to go forth to deceive the nations for a very short duration, just prior to the White Throne Judgment period (Revelation 20:7-8).

The Feast of Tabernacles looks forward to and pictures the Millennium. It reminds us of that period in God's plan, and it is a time when we are enjoying the fruits of our labor. God commands us to set back a portion of our income to utilize at the Feast. It is a time when the ancient Israelites were enjoying the fruits of their labor in great abundance. They were being reminded that there was a greater, ultimate reality because when you are enjoying everything physical to the full, there is still something on beyond that. Everything physical, by its very nature, is temporary.

I don't care how great a meal you eat, how big the steak is or how delicious the food was, it's just a matter of a few hours until you are hungry again. It's temporary. You may be full and may think you won't ever be able to eat again. Well, in a few hours you'll be hungry and you will want to eat again. No matter what it is, it may be great, but no matter how thrilling or exciting, it's temporary. There is nothing wrong with enjoying something physical, as long as it's done in the

right way. The point is that by its nature, it is temporary.

The book of Ecclesiastes is written from the perspective of a lifetime of experience and experiment. After trying every possible way to achieve self-fulfillment, Solomon came to the conclusion that no humanly devised scheme will produce lasting results. The modern “self-actualizers,” the “me-generation” and all the theorists who advocate these various things could save themselves a lot of pain by simply reading and heeding the message of Ecclesiastes because the ultimate conclusion is that only God’s way works. That’s the conclusion of the whole matter that Solomon arrives at by the end of the book.

God inspired that he record his experience in poetic fashion as an example for us. Let’s look through this particular book and note the various things that we find here.

Let’s look at the first chapter in the *Jewish Publication Society Bible*—JPS.

Ecclesiastes 1:1, “The words of the Koheleth, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.” The Hebrew term “Koheleth” is translated “preacher” in the KJV and NKJV. Various translations may render it a little differently. The Hebrew term “Koheleth” is the way the Jewish translation transliterates it into an English spelling. It simply means “a speaker in an assembly.” The word “preacher” would be one rendering of it. This is a reference to Solomon.

This speaker is described as ‘the son of David, the king of Jerusalem.’ Which king in Jerusalem was the son of David? Well, Solomon. Was Solomon a teacher in an assembly? Well, he certainly was a wise man. We are told that people came from all over the known world to hear Solomon’s wisdom. He was celebrated for his collection of Proverbs, for his teaching and for all the knowledge and wisdom that came from him (1 Kings 4:29-34). Here, he is writing in that context.

Verse 2, “‘Vanity of vanities,’ says Koheleth; ‘vanity of vanities, all is vanity.’” What is that reference to? The word that is translated “vanity” is a word in the Hebrew language that literally means “breath.” In other words, it is something that lacks substance. The term “vanity of vanities” is a superlative in Hebrew, like “holy of holies” or “song of songs.” It is the superlative in Hebrew, the ultimate. When he says, “vanity of vanities, all is vanity,” the statement is being made right off that there is a pervasive emptiness and a pervasive sense of futility that comes when “things” are pursued.

Verses 3-4, “What profit has man of all his labor wherein he labors under the sun? One generation passes away, and another generation comes; and the earth abides forever.” The earth goes on and on, but there is a temporary finite nature to man. No matter what you do, one generation passes and another generation comes along. There is a transitory character to human life.

He says, “What profit has man of all his labor?” The word “profit” in Hebrew means basically what our word “profit” means in English. It is used ten times in the book of Ecclesiastes and not anywhere else in the Bible. This is the only place that this particular word is used. The literal meaning of the word is “a surplus” and “a balance sheet.” It’s basically the same as what our English word “profit” means. The point is: What is the profit? When you figure up the accounts at the end and tally it all up, what is the profit? What is the surplus that a man has of all his labor? What does he have left over? Well, he’s not going to be here. He perishes; he passes away. “One generation passes away and another generation comes.” There is a transitory character to human life.

Verse 5, “The sun also rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to his place where he arose.” You look back and, sure enough, it comes up the same place the next day.

Verses 6-7, “The wind goes toward the south, and turns about unto the north; it turns about continually in its circuit, and the wind returns again to its circuit. All the rivers run into the sea, yet the sea is not full; unto the place from where the rivers go, there they go again.”

It just goes on that way. The Mississippi has been running down into the Gulf for centuries and millennia, but it doesn’t empty out and the Gulf doesn’t fill up. It’s amazing how that works. The river just keeps flowing on. Thousands of years go by and the river just keeps coming.

Verses 9-10, “That which has been is that which shall be, and that which has been done is that which shall be done; and there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said: ‘See, this is new’?—it has been already, in the ages which were before us.”

This simply shows that there is a repetitive effect to life. There is a cyclical effect to life in the physical realm. There are cycles that nature follows—the rain cycles, the wind cycles, the patterns of the weather, the seasons, the rotation of the earth on its axis and its revolution around the sun. There are patterns and there are cycles. We also find it in terms of human conduct.

Now, he doesn't mean that every technology that could ever be invented had been invented. When he says there's nothing new under the sun, the reference is not to the fact that automobiles existed before the flood or something like that. That's not what it's talking about. It is simply the fact that there is really no particular change to what people do. The motivating force behind virtually every technological revolution man has come up with has been inspired by the military. This has always been the driving force. There have been peaceful spin-offs, but whether it was the development of the bow and arrow, the advancement in bow and arrow technology in development of the long bow, the crossbow and various things that were developed through the Middle Ages, it was to give armies one "step up" on the opposing army. There were various developments in the technology of the bow and arrow, which can be great if you are a bow hunter, but it was developed to give armies a "step up" on the opposing army.

It's the same thing with aviation. Aviation was sort of a novelty prior to World War I. The greatest boost to aviation was when government money was put into it in World War I. If we could figure out a way to do this a little better, well, we would be able to drop bombs down on top of our enemies. A lot of money was put into aviation during World War I. It went from a novelty to being something that served an important use. The same thing happened. There was another big jump during World War II with advancement of various other kinds of technology.

In other words, human nature has remained the same. It's what man does with the opportunities that he has. There is predictability to human nature. That's part of the basis of prophecy. You put the same people in the same situation, and they basically do the same thing over and over and over again.

We see that there are historical cycles. We see it in economics. What it amounts to is one generation forgets the lessons learned by the previous generation. We find ourselves in economic problems today, just a generation down the road from the depression. The generation that grew up during the depression and learned the economic lessons of the depression have to a great extent been replaced by the generation that "cut his teeth" on post-World War II prosperity. So, we go back and do the same thing. You see over and over and over certain repetitive cycles. We see that and Solomon brings that out here. There is nothing

really new or novel when it comes to human nature and the way that people respond.

Verses 12-15, "I Koheleth have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven; it is a sore task that God has given to the sons of men to be exercised therewith. I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and striving after wind. That which is crooked cannot be made straight; and that which is wanting [lacking] cannot be numbered." He applied himself to know wisdom.

Verses 16-18, "I spoke with my own heart, saying: 'Lo, I have gotten great wisdom, more also than all that were before me over Jerusalem'; yea, my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge. And I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly—I perceived that this also is striving after wind. For in much wisdom is much vexation; and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow."

The possession of wisdom, of and by itself, merely serves to reveal more realistically the imperfections of the current world order and increases one's weariness and unhappiness. If you clearly saw and understood everything that's going on in the world scene today, apart from an understanding of God and His revelation, there would be an awful lot of despair. In that sense, "ignorance is bliss" to a lot of people. The reason they get along as well as they do is because they really don't understand how bad things are.

The point is that there is something beyond that represents God's revelation of the fact that He is going to step into history. There is a hope that we have, but that hope is not anchored onto the fact that man is going to fix it all for himself. What we find with human history is a repetition of the cycles, but we find that as man's technology increases, those cycles can be even more destructive. The wars that are fought are increasingly destructive. The American War Between the States (1861-1865) is often referred to as the first modern war, and the casualties of all other wars that had been fought by American soldiers were dwarfed. In fact, if you combine the casualties (North and South), the number of casualties equals more than the sum total of all American military casualties in all of the other wars from the Revolution through Viet Nam.

It was called the first modern war because it involved destruction and carnage on a scale that had never been possible before then. Technology had increased. With the old muzzle-loading

guns, you fired once and you had to stop and reload. That slowed down killing. When the repeating rifle came on the scene, it made it more efficient. You could kill your neighbor more quickly and could kill more of your neighbors. There were various other things that were invented during that time.

Well, just a matter of a generation later, World War I (1914-1918) was fought. It was just about 50-some-odd years later when World War I broke out. The technology changes that had taken place meant that World War I, in terms of the European Continent, far dwarfed what had happened on the American Continent 50 years before. American casualties weren't as much, but it devastated Europe with casualties running into the multiple millions. It was called the Great War, the war to end all wars. Just a matter of 21 years later, World War II (1939-1945) broke out. World War II far dwarfed World War I, and the casualties were far, far higher. It ran into the multiple tens of millions by the time you take in all the casualties that took place there. We have found that the cycles of human nature are the same, but man's technology has allowed it to be far more destructive. A World War III would be far, far more destructive than any of the previous wars of this century.

The nature of man has remained unchanged and that's why, 'that which is done is what will be done.' The nature of man remains the same as when Cain picked up a stick and killed Abel. What's changed? The only thing that's changed is that now the modern-day Cain has learned how to project the "stick" from thousands of miles away. He has improved his technology, but it's the same attitude and the same spirit. It was a little more primitive for Cain; he had to reach down and pick up the club and knock his brother in the head. Now he can be 10,000 miles away, push a button and our modern-day "stick" (we call it a missile) shoots up, goes across and lands and blows up.

So, what's changed? He says that the possession of more wisdom—just seeing clearly how bad things are—doesn't fix everything. That doesn't make you happy. You recognize how difficult it is to actually bring about any sort of real permanent change. That was emptiness. He says maybe pursuing knowledge and an education is the ultimate; maybe that's the way to happiness and fulfillment. He pursued those things and he said all he got was frustrated. He saw these things and realized how puny man really is and how little he can really affect and change things on the earth. "What is crooked cannot be made

straight" (v. 15). Things go on and there are cycles that are to be followed. Just pursuing an education wasn't the ultimate. Solomon tried everything.

Ecclesiastes 2:1 NKJV, "I said in my heart, 'Come now, I will test you with mirth; therefore enjoy pleasure'; but surely this also was vanity." He thought, 'What about having a good time?' He became a party animal. So, he pursued some of that and what did this accomplish?

Verses 3-14, "I searched in my heart how to gratify my flesh with wine, while guiding my heart with wisdom, and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the sons of men to do under heaven all the days of their lives. I made my works great, I built myself houses, and planted myself vineyards. I made myself gardens and orchards, and I planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. I made myself waterpools from which to water the growing trees of the grove. I acquired male and female servants, and had servants born in my house. Yes, I had greater possessions of herds and flocks than all who were in Jerusalem before me. I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the special treasures of kings and of the provinces. I acquired male and female singers, the delights of the sons of men, and musical instruments of all kinds. So I became great and excelled more than all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart rejoiced in all my labor; and this was my reward from all my labor. Then I looked on all the works that my hands had done and on the labor in which I had toiled; and indeed all was vanity and grasping for the wind. There was no profit under the sun. Then I turned myself to consider wisdom and madness and folly; for what can the man do who succeeds the king?—only what he has already done. Then I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness. The wise man's eyes are in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. Yet I myself perceived that the same event happens to them all."

He said he finally figured out that what happens to the fool is going to happen to him. He said, 'We are both going to die. So, am I really that much better off?'

Solomon pursued everything. Where does satisfaction and fulfillment come from? Does it come in the pursuit of knowledge? He did that. Does it come in just partying and having a good time? He did that. Does it come in setting great goals, achieving, accomplishing, and building

things, construction projects or all sorts of pursuits? He said he pursued those things. He practiced those things, and he was making money. He put his heart into various things, and it all turned out empty. Oh, there was excitement and thrill at the time, but when it was over, when he had achieved, when he had accomplished whatever it was he had done, he finally “had it.” He looked around and said, ‘Is this all there is to it?’ There was still an empty spot.

Solomon set out to perform an experiment, to arrive at the purpose of life, to learn what produced real satisfaction. We find the consequence.

Verse 17, “Therefore I hated life because the work that was done under the sun was grievous unto me, for all is vanity and grasping for the wind.” He became depressed. He said, ‘What’s the point of it all? I am going to die and I’ll be gone. Whatever I’ve done will be left for somebody else to tear up or to enjoy or do whatever they are going to do with it. I’m just here for a short time and I’ve “knocked myself out” doing all this and I’m gone.’

There’s still something more. There was this sense of futility.

Verses 18-19, “Then I hated all my labor in which I had toiled under the sun, because I must leave it to the man who will come after me. And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will rule over all my labor in which I have toiled and in which I have shown myself wise under the sun. This also is vanity.” He began to look at that.

Verse 22, “For what has man for all his labor, and for the striving of his heart with which he has toiled under the sun?” ‘What do you get for it all?’

Verse 23, “For all his days are sorrowful, and his work grievous; even in the night his heart takes no rest. This also is vanity.” He thinks about it and he worries about it.

Verse 24, “There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and that his soul should enjoy good in his labor. This also, I saw, was from the hand of God.”

We see, here, in verse 24, that to derive pleasure from your work and to enjoy the material rewards produced from it is the peak of human satisfaction. That is from the hand of God. There is nothing better, humanly, than to enjoy the reward and the benefits of what you’ve done and accomplished, to derive pleasure from your work and your labor.

That’s fine, but is there anything beyond that?

Ecclesiastes 3:1-3, “To everything there is a season, a time to every purpose under the heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up...”

So, there is a time. There is the sense of the cycle of life—the ups, the downs, joys, sorrows, birth and death. There are cycles that are descriptive of life on this planet under the sun. “To everything there is a season and a time to every purpose under the heavens.” There is a time and place.

Verses 9-13, “What profit has the worker from that in which he labors? I have seen the God-given task with which the sons of men are to be occupied. He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts (KJV, “set the world in their heart”), except that no one can find out the work that God does from the beginning to end. I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice, and to do good in their lives, and also that every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labor—it is the gift of God.”

Verse 11, KJV, let’s note there is sort of an interesting term, “He has made every thing beautiful in His time: also He has set the world in their heart,” Now, what does that mean? The Hebrew word that is translated “the world” is the Hebrew word “*olam*.” It is not a word that refers to the physical earth. It really doesn’t refer to society as such. It is the word that is used in Hebrew to refer to the future, to forever or to eternity.

Ecclesiastes 1:4, for instance, it is the word that is used when it says, “one generation passes away, another generation comes; but the earth abides forever.” The literal translation of the Hebrew “but the earth abides forever” is the word “*olam*.”

Back in Ecclesiastes 3:11, I will read the comment out of the *Soncino Jewish Commentary*, “The Hebrew word ‘*olam*’ is interpreted as ‘eternity.’ This is the signification that it has in the Bible. God has endowed man with a sense of the future. He knows that he is more than a creature of the day, and this consciousness is the cause of his dissatisfaction with the transitory experiences which take place within the span of his lifetime.”

Man has set within him a sense of the future, a sense of eternity. This is something that animals do not possess. Animals don’t have that. They are purely creatures of the moment. They are experiencing their excitement, anticipation, joy,

sorrow; whatever they are experiencing, they are experiencing the moment. They have no sense of the future, of a time that existed before they were or a time that will be beyond their life. They have no concept of time, of the future, of eternity. That is one of the things that is characteristically human that is not shared by any other physical creatures. “God has set eternity in our hearts.” He has set within us a sense of the future, a sense of that which stretches out beyond us, both into the past and into the future. That makes us, all the more, desire to have something that stretches beyond the right here and right now.

He looks and he says, ‘There is a time for everything. What is the profit? What is the surplus? What is gained with all the things that are done?’ He looked at what God has given to man to be exercised therewith. Everything has its own beauty. We have a sense of the future, a sense of eternity in our heart, and, yet, we can’t find out everything that God has done from the beginning to the end.

Verses 12-13, “I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice, and to do good in their lives, and also that every man should eat and drink, and enjoy the good of all his labor—it is the gift of God.” Derive benefit from it.

Verse 14, “I know that whatever God does, it shall be forever.” What God does is forever; what man does is temporary.

Verse 16, “Moreover I saw under the sun: in the place of judgment, wickedness was there; and in the place of righteousness, iniquity was there.” Justice is very inequitably carried out—again, characteristic of human society.

Isaiah 32:1, the prophet Isaiah tells us, “Behold, a king will reign in righteousness, and princes will rule with justice.” That is the time of Christ’s millennial reign. Right now, in the world, we find that often other factors are considered. It’s not just a matter of right or wrong, guilt or innocence. Justice hinges on so many technicalities, political factors and various things. There is an adversarial relationship that exists. Each side is not trying to simply discover the truth. They are trying to accentuate the things that make them look good and to obscure, hide and dispute the facts that make the other side look good. We find that there are many things that are not as they should be.

Ecclesiastes 3:17, Solomon said, “I said in my heart, ‘God shall judge the righteous and the wicked,’” What is the answer to injustice and iniquity? –The realization that there is a time of reckoning coming. There are a lot of judges that

you might be able to pay off, but I’ll tell you One you can’t—God Almighty. A lot of judges can be corrupted, a lot of bribes can be passed, but there is a Judgment Day that nobody is going to buy his way out of. They are not going to be able to come up with some slick lawyer and get pass that One. It won’t work; ‘the righteous and the wicked God will judge.’

Verse 17 continuing, “...for there shall be a time there for every purpose and for every work.” There is an accountability that is coming.

Verse 18, “I said in my heart, ‘Concerning the estate of the sons of men, God tests them, that they may see that they themselves are like beasts.’” We are temporary.

Verses 19-22, “For what happens to the sons of men also happens to beasts; one thing befalls them: as one dies, so dies the other. Surely, they all have one breath; man has no advantage over beast, for all is vanity. All go to one place: all are from the dust, and all return to dust. Who knows the spirit of the sons of men, which goes upward, and the spirit of the beast, which goes down to the earth? So I perceived that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his own works, for that is his heritage. For who can bring him to see what will happen after him?”

We are told, right here, that there’s a cessation of consciousness after death. “As one dies, so does the other,” and they “all go to one place.” In other words, we will return to the dust; we return to the ground.

Ecclesiastes 4:1, “Then I returned and considered all the oppression that is done under the sun: And look! The tears of the oppressed, but they have no comforter—on the side of their oppressors there was power, but they had no comforter.” He looked at the injustice, inequity and the people that were cheated and taken advantage of. As he looked at so many of these things, he just despaired.

Verse 2, “Therefore I praised the dead who are already dead, more than the living that are still alive.” This is terrible! You look and see these things.

Verse 4, “Again, I saw that for all toil and every skillful work a man is envied by his neighbor. This also is vanity and a grasping for the wind.” The basic motivation for success is often envy and jealousy—somebody trying to get “one up” on his neighbor. He said, ‘I considered this labor, this excelling in works.’ So often, it’s just a man’s rivalry with his neighbor, and this is empty. Where does that lead? You’re just in a rat race where you’re just racing. The problem is, in

a rat race, the rats win. This is the sort of thing we find in a society that has gotten its priorities distorted. One extreme is people who are just pursuing rivalry with their neighbor and always trying to get “one up” on their neighbor. This is vanity and striving after wind.

Now, there is another extreme.

Verse 5, “The fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh.” He just sits there and doesn’t do anything. He just wastes away. That’s not a solution. That’s not a wise approach either. To be out pursuing success to the point that our whole life is consumed with trying to beat somebody else and being number one, that is vanity. And it’s foolish to sit on the sidelines and do nothing.

Verse 6, “Better is a handful with quietness than both hands full, together with toil and grasping for the wind.” The balance is neither both hands full nor both hands empty. It is a balanced approach, “a handful with quietness.” You’re working and you’re productive, but you’re able to enjoy the fruits of your labor.

There are some people who pursue success and they never have a chance to enjoy the fruits of their labor. They keel over with a heart attack at age 50 or whatever it is. Somebody else has the fruits of their labor because they worked 16 hours a day and never stopped to enjoy life. There is a balance. Yes, “whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might.” We will find that emphasized a little bit later. Yeah, sure, be productive, but don’t be in some race trying to beat everybody else, motivated by jealousy and envy. Nor sit on the sidelines and be lazy and do nothing. There is a balance.

Verses 7-11, “Then I returned, and saw vanity under the sun: there is one alone, without companion: he has neither son nor brother. Yet there is no end to all his labors, nor is his eye satisfied with riches. But he never asks, ‘For whom do I toil and deprive myself of good?’ This also is vanity and a grave misfortune. Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, one will lift up his companion. But woe to him who is alone when he falls, for he has no one to help him up. Again, if two lie down together, they will keep warm; but how can one be warm alone?”

On the one hand, somebody is isolated. He labors by himself and pursues all these things but has no one to share it with. There is the fact that two together are much better. If one falls, the other can help him up. That’s a beautiful description of the way a relationship should be

between a husband and a wife. You find this description, and you might contrast it with one back in the book of Galatians, which I think gives a contrast in terms of what God intended a family relationship to be and what, all too often, it is.

Galatians 5:15, “But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another!” If you fight and devour one another, you will be consumed one of another. That is descriptive of situations that so often exist in families. People tear one another down; in tearing one another down, they are really tearing themselves down. In biting and devouring their mate, they are consuming themselves as well. That’s a very sad and tragic description that we find so often.

It says two are better than one; if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow. That’s the way it should be. When one is down, the other is there to help him up. We all have our times when we are down. That’s what is intended. Here is a description of two who are helping, encouraging and lifting up one another. It makes quite a contrast.

Ecclesiastes 4:12, “Though one may be overpowered by another, two can withstand him. And a threefold cord is not quickly broken.” This is a poetic description of the family. It describes the benefits of a united family. A threefold cord is not soon broken. This is a poetic description of not only the husband and wife but also the child that is the issue of the union.

Ecclesiastes 5:1, “Walk prudently when you go to the house of God; and draw near to hear rather than to give the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they do evil.” “Guard your foot when you go to the house of God. Be more ready to listen, to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools.”

Verse 2, “Do not be rash with your mouth, and let not your heart utter anything hastily before God. For God is in heaven, and you on earth; therefore let your words be few.”

Verses 4-6, “When you make a vow to God, do not delay to pay it; for He has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you have vowed. It is better not to vow than to vow and not pay. Do not let your mouth cause your flesh to sin, nor say before the messenger of God that it was an error. Why should God be angry at your excuse and destroy the work of your hands?”

The point is that the “sacrifice of fools” has to do with rash promises made to God. The point is to not be rash with your mouth. It’s better to listen. When you come into the house of God, you

come before God. It's better to listen to what God has to say than it is to make all sorts of rash promises that you don't keep. It is important. God takes broken promises seriously. The "sacrifice of fools" is a hasty promise or vow to God.

Hebrew 13:15, there is a reference where it says, "Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name." Our words, "the sacrifice of praise," are likened to the sacrifices. Here, there is a reference to hasty vows and promises to God that wind up not being fulfilled. God takes that seriously. When we make a vow, God expects us to keep our vows, to pay our vows. That's one of the reasons marriage is so important and to be taken so seriously because marriage ultimately involves a vow before God. We speak of marriage vows. That's not something to be taken lightly. The commitment we make at baptism is a vow and, again, should not be taken lightly. God takes these things seriously.

Ecclesiastes 5:12, "The sleep of a laboring man is sweet, whether he eats little or much; but the abundance of the rich will not permit him to sleep." That's simply saying that when someone gets out and works hard, he is able to get a good night's sleep, but someone whose whole intent is on trying to accumulate more is probably so worried about it, he can't sleep. Again, Solomon focuses on these things.

Ecclesiastes 6:1-2, "There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, and it is common among men: a man to whom God has given riches and wealth and honor, so that he lacks nothing for himself of all he desires; yet God does not give him power to eat of it, but a foreigner consumes it. This is vanity, and it is an evil affliction." Here, he focuses on an individual working hard and accumulating wealth, yet, he is never able to enjoy the fruits of his labor. That, again, is an evil and a tragedy that he focuses on.

We better pick up speed a little bit.

Ecclesiastes 7:1, "A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of one's birth." Why is the day of one's death better than the day of one's birth? Perhaps the best way to express it or to give a parallel verse is what Paul said in 2 Timothy.

2 Timothy 4:7-8, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me

only but also to all who have loved His appearing."

In other words, Paul wrote at the end of his life and he says, 'I have fought a good fight, I have finished the race and I know that there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness.' When a child is born, you don't know what the future holds for them. You don't know whether they will be wise or foolish, righteous or wicked, rich or poor or anything that will be about them. You know what you hope, desire and pray for, but there is a completion here.

In Ecclesiastes 7:2, Solomon talks about 'going to the house of mourning.' In other words, it is good to contemplate on the temporary nature of life. There is a sobering aspect to realize that human life doesn't go on forever. We had better order our lives in a way that takes into account that our lives are temporary and are going to end. We better live them in such a way that we are prepared.

We come down a little further.

Ecclesiastes 7:16-17, "Do not be overly righteous, nor be overly wise: why should you destroy yourself? Do not be overly wicked, nor be foolish: why should you die before your time?" These are verses that some find difficult to understand. When he says, "Do not be overly righteous," he is referring to an attitude of self-righteousness. The description is of an attitude, not a fact. There is no way you can be too righteous in the literal sense. Jesus Christ was perfect, but He was not righteous over much. The Pharisees were righteous over much. They were perfect in their own eyes; they were self-righteous. Jesus Christ was righteous. He was the law of God personified.

Psalms 119:172, "...for all Your commandments are righteousness." Jesus Christ personified that, but He didn't have the self-righteous attitude of the Pharisees. They had this attitude of looking down on others.

Ecclesiastes 8:6-8, "because for every matter there is a time and judgment, though the misery of man increases greatly. For he does not know what will happen; so who can tell him when it will occur? No one has power over the spirit to retain the spirit, and no one has power in the day of death. There is no discharge in that war, and wickedness will not deliver those who are given to it."

In ancient times, it was very possible for a person to buy himself out of serving in a war. Even up through the time of the American Civil War or War Between the States, it was possible in the North, when the draft was instituted, to

hire someone to take your place. Many wealthy individuals hired someone to take their place in the war, and that was perfectly legal. There was a legal means of dodging the draft. If you were drafted, you just paid someone to take your place. That was eliminated after the Civil War, but that has been practiced in a lot of societies and still is in a lot of ways. We have just been subtler with it. You don't just come out and ask, 'What do you charge if I hire you to take my place?' We are a little subtler with it now. That's what is being "played on" here. When he says, "There is no discharge in that war," he is speaking of death. No man has power over the spirit to retain his spirit in the day of death. You don't buy your way out of that one. When the time comes for you to die, it doesn't matter how rich you are, how poor you are, how righteous you are or how wicked you are. It doesn't matter anything. You are going to die when the time comes for you to die. You can't buy your way out of it; you can't get out of it.

Verse 11, "Because the sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil." If you want an explanation as to why we have so much of an upsurge in crime, you might just study Ecclesiastes 8:11. It says, "Because the sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily."

What was it? A day or two ago, they executed some guy in Florida who had raped and murdered a teenager 15 years earlier. I mean, it's almost like rolling the dice when you commit a crime. Oh, sure, there are a handful of people who are executed, but none of them are executed speedily. Punishment is not executed speedily. Things drag on for years and sort of lose their deterrent effect. It's like shooting dice. Maybe you'll get in trouble, but then maybe you'll get out of it. It says, 'Because the sentence is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil.' People figure they can get by with it. The carnal human nature sort of weighs the odds, and if they think they have a pretty good chance and can get by with it, if they think they can "beat it," they do it.

Verses 12-13, "Though a sinner does evil a hundred times, and his days are prolonged, yet I surely know that it will be well with those who fear God, who fear before Him. But it will not be well with the wicked; nor will he prolong his days, which are as a shadow, because he does not fear before God." He says you can look at it and think there are people who are getting by with it,

but sooner or later there is a day of reckoning coming. There is a Day of Judgment.

Ecclesiastes 9:2, "Everything occurs alike to all: . . ." This is referring to death.

Verse 5, "For the living know that they will die; but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten." Death is a cessation of consciousness. Verse 10, "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going." We should be wholehearted. We should do what we can and do it all the way. This is brought out here in this verse.

Verses 11-12, "I returned and saw under the sun that—the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to men of understanding, nor favor to men of skill; but time and chance happen to them all. For man also does not know his time: like fish taken in a cruel net, like birds caught in a snare, so the sons of men are snared in an evil time, when it falls suddenly upon them."

The point here is the fact that no matter what you do by way of preparation, you cannot totally guarantee the results. Things happen; sometimes time and chance happen. It's sort of like a bird being caught in a snare or fishes snared in a net. Sometimes things happen and you are in the wrong place at the wrong time.

I don't think the truck driver in Los Angeles was beaten up because he was the most wicked truck driver in all of Los Angeles. God didn't look down and say He was going to teach this guy a lesson because he was the wickedest person in Los Angeles. I don't know anything about him, but I don't think he was singled out for some special divine wrath. He was in the wrong place at the wrong time. He had probably driven through there any number of times before. I don't know whether he will again or not, but other truck drivers will. The point is that time and chance happen to all men. Sometimes a person may just simply be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Things happen, like a bird caught in a snare.

That's not saying you shouldn't do or prepare for anything. It says, "The race is not to the swift." That doesn't mean to sit down and you'll be the guy who wins. It just means that no matter what you do, there are factors that are beyond our control. Man is limited. You can do all that you can do, but there are still factors that are beyond our control. We have to understand that. We prepare and try to use wisdom. We try to be

careful and safe. We try to do the things that we should do and be responsible persons, but we realize that those things cannot guarantee success. There is something on beyond that, and that's God's blessing and protection. Sometimes time and chance can happen to anyone. You're just in the wrong place at the wrong time. He brings that out here.

Ecclesiastes 10:1, "Dead flies putrefy the perfumer's ointment, and cause it to give off a foul odor; so does a little folly to one respected for wisdom and honor." Something dies and decays; it can spoil some beautiful oil or perfume. Something crawls up in there and dies and sort of spoils it. The same thing is true—a little bit of folly can ruin a reputation for someone who has a good reputation. One dumb stunt and it can really mess them up.

Verses 5-6, "There is an evil I have seen under the sun, as an error proceeding from the ruler: folly is set in great dignity [exalted positions], while the rich sit in a lowly place." This goes back to the rulers—individuals who are incompetent and untrustworthy are being put in positions of responsibility. This is a tragic thing. Things get turned upside down. People that should be at the bottom, wind up at the top; some that should be at the top, wind up at the bottom. 'This is an evil that I see.' One of the problems of human government is that human beings get "taken in" by other human beings. They get flattered and appealed to in various ways and are impressed by the wrong things.

If God had allowed Samuel to pick the king, he would have picked Jesse's oldest son. You remember, 1 Samuel 16, when God sent Samuel to anoint one of Jesse's sons king over Israel? He brought in the oldest son. When Samuel saw him, immediately he knew this must be the one. 'He's the one. I'll make him king right now.' He was impressed with him. They ran through the list of sons and then, finally, brought in David who was sort of the runt of the litter. His father hadn't even bothered to bring him in from the field. That was the one God chose.

1 Samuel 16:7, "But the Lord said to Samuel, 'Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature...For the Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.'" Things that impress people are not the things that impress God. That's one of the reasons we find folly set in exalted positions. Too many times people are impressed with the wrong things. In the Kingdom of God, that will not be the problem.

The right people will be in the right places. Nobody's going to "pull one over" on God.

Ecclesiastes 11:1, "Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days." In other words, this is simply another way of saying that eventually you are going to reap what you sow. What you send out is eventually what you are going to get back. It's a matter of life that things have a way of coming back at us.

Verse 4, "He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards the clouds will not reap." There is such a thing as being overly cautious. You can be so worried about something going wrong that it holds you back. 'No, better not plant today. I think it is a little too windy to scatter the seed.' The time to plant will pass you by. Or, you look and say, 'There are clouds up there. It might rain. I better not get to harvesting.' Yes, we need to use wisdom. If it's about ready to pour down raining, that's not the time that you want to get out and cut your hay. But there is such a thing as being overly cautious. That's an extreme that is warned about.

Verses 9-10, "Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth; walk in the ways of your heart, and in the sight of your eyes; but know that for all these God will bring you into judgment. Therefore remove sorrow [vexation] from your heart, and put away evil from your flesh, for childhood and youth are vanity." They are temporary. They are passing. They are transitory. They are like a breath.

When you are young, it's hard to believe that your young years pass that quickly, but it does. Just ask someone who is even a few years older than you how quickly those high school years go by—how quickly some of those times go by. That's what it is saying here. Rejoice in your youth; have a good time, but understand that you are accountable for what you know. You are responsible for what you know, whether you are young or old.

"Remove sorrow from your heart, and put away evil from your flesh." Childhood and youth are temporary. They are going to pass. Don't get into something that is going to foul up your life. That's what it is saying. Don't do something dumb that you are going to have to live with the consequences for the rest of your life. Those young years are here today and gone so, so quickly. They are gone. There are some things you can do that you have to live with the consequences. It says to rejoice in your youth.

Ecclesiastes 12:1, “Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth...” The time to think about God is not when you are old. The time to start thinking about God is when you are young, when you have your life before you. You see, there’s nothing God tells you to do that’s going to hurt you and mess you up. There’s nothing God tells you to do that’s going to be to your detriment. There’s nothing God tells you not to do that you are going to be better off having done. So, think about God when you are young. That’s the time to start being mindful of God and His ways.

Verses 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 are a very poetic description of old age. You might look it up in various translations. It is a very poetic description of old age. It is, of course, a poetic book and describes it that way.

Verses 7-12, “Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it. ‘Vanity of vanities,’ says the Preacher [JPS, “Koheleth”]; ‘all is vanity.’ And moreover, because the Preacher [Koheleth] was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yes, he pondered and sought out and set in order many proverbs. The Preacher [Koheleth] sought to find acceptable words; and what was written was upright—words of truth. The words of the wise are like goads, and the words of scholars are like well-driven nails, given by one Shepherd. And further, my son, be admonished by these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is weariness to the flesh.”

You can pursue all sorts of learning and books. There are thousands and millions of books, books that deal with all sorts of things as to the key to getting ahead in life.

Verse 13, but the real conclusion of the whole matter is, “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.” The word “duty” is in italics (KJV), which means the translators put it in thinking it clarified it, but really, just as it is written is the simplest thing. “Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole man.” This is what life is all about.

Verse 14, “For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether it is good or whether it is evil.” The best way is ultimately God’s way. This is the only way that leads to real fulfillment. As you look at life and you pursue any of the things that physical life holds out, if that’s all there is, there’s a sense of emptiness and futility. There are injustices,

inequities and all sorts of things that lead to frustration. The answer is that there is something that lies beyond the right here and right now, the purely human and purely physical.

God’s way is the way that leads to the ultimate and greatest sense of satisfaction and fulfillment. That is the only way that any of us can really be satisfied, happy and productive in life in the long run.

The book of Ecclesiastes has an awful lot that is a source of wisdom. It is a source of a perspective on life and one that can be of aid and benefit to all of us. Certainly, it ties in with the Feast of Tabernacles. The Feast of Tabernacles is the Feast of Temporary Dwellings—the realization that there is something beyond the physical, something beyond even the physical things and blessings that will be poured out during the reign of Jesus Christ on the earth.

The book of Ecclesiastes is the fourth of the five Festival Scrolls.

Next Bible study we will go through the book of Esther, which is the fifth and final of the five Festival Scrolls.