

ECCLESIASTES



Read Ecclesiastes 1:1–11

The book of Ecclesiastes is a collection of observations on life. It opens with a description of some of the movements of the natural world. As is the case with all wisdom writings, a particular characteristic of natural creation is employed to teach something about human nature.

Reflect: While nature may be beautiful and inspiring, its repetitious unfolding can be seen as monotonous. Those who expect that everything useful generates a profit might consider nature's repetition to be pointless.

Pray: Praise God for the beauty of the universe, for the sun and the moon and the stars; for the challenge of the days and the comfort of the nights; for the change of seasons.

Act: Put everything aside and concentrate on the natural world of which you are a part. Be attentive to some of its regular movements, which provide us all with a certain sense of security.

Reflections of a Royal Philosopher

1 The words of the Teacher,^a the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

2 Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher,^a vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

3 What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?

4 A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.

5 The sun rises and the sun goes down, and hurries to the place where it rises.

6 The wind blows to the south, and goes around to the north; round and round goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns.

7 All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they continue to flow.

8 All things^b are wearisome; more than one can express; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, or the ear filled with hearing.

9 What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun.

10 Is there a thing of which it is said, "See, this is new"?

It has already been, in the ages before us.

11 The people of long ago are not remembered, nor will there be any remembrance of people yet to come by those who come after them.

^a Heb *Qoheleth*, traditionally rendered *Preacher*

^b Or *words*

Read Ecclesiastes 1:12—2:26

Qoheleth, the Teacher, sets out on a quest to discover what life has to teach. He seeks and achieves riches, pleasure, and wisdom. As precious as these treasures are, they do not satisfy him. He judges such efforts pointless, “vanity and a chasing after wind.”

Reflect: As much as we might desire and need the good things of life, we know that they cannot fully satisfy us. All they can do is whet our appetite for more of the same, and then we simply experience their fundamental inadequacy once again.

Pray: Ask God for the wisdom to appreciate the blessings of life and to realize that, as wonderful as they may be, they cannot really satisfy the deepest cravings of the soul.

Act: Commit yourself to the search for meaning in life and never give up, regardless of the difficulties you might encounter along the way.

The Futility of Seeking Wisdom

12 I, the Teacher,^a when king over Israel in Jerusalem, ¹³ applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with. ¹⁴ I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind.^b

¹⁵ What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted.

¹⁶ I said to myself, “I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.” ¹⁷ And I applied my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a chasing after wind.^b

¹⁸ For in much wisdom is much vexation, and those who increase knowledge increase sorrow.

The Futility of Self-Indulgence

2 I said to myself, “Come now, I will make a test of pleasure; enjoy yourself.” But again, this also was vanity. ² I said of laughter, “It is mad,” and of pleasure, “What use is it?” ³ I searched with my mind how to cheer my body with wine—my mind still guiding me with wisdom—and how to lay hold on folly, until I might see what was good for mortals to do under heaven during the few days of their life. ⁴ I made great works; I built houses and planted vineyards for myself; ⁵ I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. ⁶ I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. ⁷ I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house; I also had great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. ⁸ I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and of the provinces; I got singers, both men and women, and delights of the flesh, and many concubines.^c

⁹ So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem; also my wisdom remained with me. ¹⁰ Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them; I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. ¹¹ Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again, all was vanity and a chasing after wind,^b and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

^a Heb *Qoheleth*, traditionally rendered *Preacher*

^b Or *a feeding on wind*. See Hos 12.1

^c Meaning of Heb uncertain

Wisdom and Joy Given to One Who Pleases God

12 So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly; for what can the one do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done. ¹³ Then I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness.

¹⁴ The wise have eyes in their head,
but fools walk in darkness.

Yet I perceived that the same fate befalls all of them. ¹⁵ Then I said to myself, “What happens to the fool will happen to me also; why then have I been so very wise?” And I said to myself that this also is vanity. ¹⁶ For there is no enduring remembrance of the wise or of fools, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How can the wise die just like fools? ¹⁷ So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me; for all is vanity and a chasing after wind.^a

¹⁸ I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me ¹⁹—and who knows whether they will be wise or

foolish? Yet they will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. ²⁰ So I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labors under the sun, ²¹ because sometimes one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. ²² What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? ²³ For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity.

²⁴ There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God; ²⁵ for apart from him^b who can eat or who can have enjoyment? ²⁶ For to the one who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy; but to the sinner he gives the work of gathering and heaping, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a chasing after wind.^a

Everything Has Its Time

3 For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

- ² a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
- ³ a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
- ⁴ a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
- ⁵ a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
- ⁶ a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to throw away;
- ⁷ a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
- ⁸ a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace.

The God-Given Task

9 What gain have the workers from their toil?

^a Or a feeding on wind. See Hos 12.1

^b Gk Syr: Heb apart from me

Read Ecclesiastes 3

Qoheleth says there is a proper time for everything. However, only God knows when that right time might be. In the face of this, Qoheleth advises his readers to accept and enjoy the life that God has given them.

Reflect: Qoheleth says: “He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.” St. Augustine reflected this when he wrote: “Our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”

Pray: The ambiguities of life invite us to stand before God in humble confidence. Ask God to grant you the trust and courage you need to live faithfully and wisely.

Act: The order in the natural world suggests that life is not haphazard. This realization can provide you with a sense of security within the world.

¹⁰ I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. ¹¹ He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. ¹² I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; ¹³ moreover, it is God’s gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil. ¹⁴ I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him. ¹⁵ That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is; and God seeks out what has gone by.^a

Judgment and the Future Belong to God

¹⁶ Moreover I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, wickedness was there, and in the place of righteousness, wickedness was there as well. ¹⁷ I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for he has appointed a time for every matter, and for every work. ¹⁸ I said in my heart with regard to human beings that God is testing them to show that they are but animals. ¹⁹ For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity. ²⁰ All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again. ²¹ Who knows whether the human spirit goes upward and the spirit of animals goes downward to the earth? ²² So I saw that there is nothing better than that all should enjoy their work, for that is their lot; who can bring them to see what will be after them?

4 Again I saw all the oppressions that are practiced under the sun. Look, the tears of the oppressed—with no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power—with no one to comfort them. ² And I thought the dead, who have already died, more fortunate than the living, who are still alive; ³ but better than both is the one who has not yet been, and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun.

⁴ Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from one person’s envy of another. This also is vanity and a chasing after wind.^b

⁵ Fools fold their hands
and consume their own flesh.

⁶ Better is a handful with quiet
than two handfuls with toil,
and a chasing after wind.^b

^a Heb *what is pursued*

^b Or *a feeding on wind*. See Hos 12.1

Read Ecclesiastes 4

Qoheleth is unhappy with the injustice in the world. Good people frequently suffer, and the wicked are not always brought to justice. However, since he is convinced that no human success is lasting, he maintains that justice will win out in the end. To think otherwise would be “a chasing after wind.”

Reflect: It does not take long for us to discover that life is not always fair. As we grow in wisdom we come to realize that we can seldom do much to change things. Therefore, we are challenged to change our expectations of life and to learn how to live our lives with integrity.

Pray: Pray for the insight to recognize what in life you cannot change, and for the humility to accept this gracefully.

Act: Life is too precious; we cannot simply throw up our hands in disillusionment. Live life as fully as you can.

7 Again, I saw vanity under the sun: ⁸ the case of solitary individuals, without sons or brothers; yet there is no end to all their toil, and their eyes are never satisfied with riches. “For whom am I toiling,” they ask, “and depriving myself of pleasure?” This also is vanity and an unhappy business.

The Value of a Friend

9 Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. ¹⁰ For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. ¹¹ Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? ¹² And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.

13 Better is a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king, who will no longer take advice. ¹⁴ One can indeed come out of prison to reign, even though born poor in the kingdom. ¹⁵ I saw all the living who, moving about under the sun, follow that^a youth who replaced the king;^b ¹⁶ there was no end to all those people whom he led. Yet those who come later will not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and a chasing after wind.^c

Reverence, Humility, and Contentment

5^d Guard your steps when you go to the house of God; to draw near to listen is better than the sacrifice offered by fools; for they do not know how to keep from doing evil.^e ^{2f} Never be rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be quick to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven, and you upon earth; therefore let your words be few.

3 For dreams come with many cares, and a fool’s voice with many words.

4 When you make a vow to God, do not delay fulfilling it; for he has no pleasure in fools. Fulfill what you vow. ⁵ It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not fulfill it. ⁶ Do not let your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake; why should God be angry at your words, and destroy the work of your hands?

7 With many dreams come vanities and a multitude of words;^g but fear God.

8 If you see in a province the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and right, do not be amazed at the matter; for the high official is watched by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over them. ⁹ But all things considered, this is an advantage for a land: a king for a plowed field.^g

10 The lover of money will not be satisfied with

^a Heb *the second*

^b Heb *him*

^c Or *a feeding on wind*. See Hos 12.1

^d Ch 4.17 in Heb

^e Cn: Heb *they do not know how to do evil*

^f Ch 5.1 in Heb

^g Meaning of Heb uncertain

Read Ecclesiastes 5

According to Qoheleth, faithfulness to one's responsibilities is at the heart of genuine piety. The pleasures experienced through wealth, though they may be gifts from God, cannot ensure lasting happiness. Everyone must learn to love the life given by God. That is the only source of true happiness.

Reflect: So many people today are unhappy with the life they have, and they want the life of someone else. Qoheleth would call this pointless ("vanity"). The life we have is the only life we can live.

Pray: Thank God for the life with which you have been blessed, for the gifts and abilities you have been given to live that life, for the people who cherish you and who are an important part of your life.

Act: Recommit yourself to the responsibilities that are yours, particularly to those related to people who are part of your life.

Read Ecclesiastes 6

The one devoted to gaining riches may well die before those riches can be enjoyed. It often happens that these riches are then enjoyed by someone else. According to Qoheleth, such life pursuits are "a chasing after wind."

Reflect: Life is for living, not for amassing goods or the cultivation of power. If we do not enjoy life as we are living it, we might end up with nothing at all. Should this turn out to be the case, our lives will have been nothing but "vanity and a chasing after wind."

Pray: Ask God for the grace to be satisfied with what life offers to you, to be generous with those who have less than you do, and to trust God in times of uncertainty.

Act: Take an inventory of your priorities. Be honest about what might have to be changed.

money; nor the lover of wealth, with gain. This also is vanity.

11 When goods increase, those who eat them increase; and what gain has their owner but to see them with his eyes?

12 Sweet is the sleep of laborers, whether they eat little or much; but the surfeit of the rich will not let them sleep.

13 There is a grievous ill that I have seen under the sun: riches were kept by their owners to their hurt,¹⁴ and those riches were lost in a bad venture; though they are parents of children, they have nothing in their hands. ¹⁵ As they came from their mother's womb, so they shall go again, naked as they came; they shall take nothing for their toil, which they may carry away with their hands. ¹⁶ This also is a grievous ill: just as they came, so shall they go; and what gain do they have from toiling for the wind? ¹⁷ Besides, all their days they eat in darkness, in much vexation and sickness and resentment.

18 This is what I have seen to be good: it is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of the life God gives us; for this is our lot. ¹⁹ Likewise all to whom God gives wealth and possessions and whom he enables to enjoy them, and to accept their lot and find enjoyment in their toil—this is the gift of God. ²⁰ For they will scarcely brood over the days of their lives, because God keeps them occupied with the joy of their hearts.

The Frustration of Desires

6 There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, and it lies heavy upon humankind: ² those to whom God gives wealth, possessions, and honor, so that they lack nothing of all that they desire, yet God does not enable them to enjoy these things, but a stranger enjoys them. This is vanity; it is a grievous ill. ³ A man may beget a hundred children, and live many years; but however many are the days of his years, if he does not enjoy life's good things, or has no burial, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he. ⁴ For it comes into vanity and goes into darkness, and in darkness its name is covered; ⁵ moreover it has not seen the sun or known anything; yet it finds rest rather than he. ⁶ Even though he should live a thousand years twice over, yet enjoy no good—do not all go to one place?

7 All human toil is for the mouth, yet the appetite is not satisfied. ⁸ For what advantage have the wise over fools? And what do the poor have who know how to conduct themselves before the living? ⁹ Better is the sight of

the eyes than the wandering of desire; this also is vanity and a chasing after wind.^a

10 Whatever has come to be has already been named, and it is known what human beings are, and that they are not able to dispute with those who are stronger.

¹¹ The more words, the more vanity, so how is one the better? ¹² For who knows what is good for mortals while they live the few days of their vain life, which they pass like a shadow? For who can tell them what will be after them under the sun?

Read Ecclesiastes 7

Like the other wisdom teachers, Qoheleth evaluates life according to the theory of retribution: righteous living will be rewarded with prosperity and happiness; wickedness will give rise to misfortune. However, he sees how actual life does not conform to this pattern. Finally, Qoheleth is very critical of women.

Reflect: Qoheleth's biases are exposed in his proverbial statements. He holds very negative opinions of those who do not conform to his standards. Many readers think he is pessimistic, cynical, and overly judgmental. Furthermore, he is unduly critical of women generally.

Pray: Pray that you can learn from the hardships that befall you in life. Pray also that you do not fall into the trap of blaming others for those hardships.

Act: Try to be open and understanding of others, even when they do not seem to measure up to your standards of right living.

A Disillusioned View of Life

- 7** A good name is better than precious ointment,
and the day of death, than the day of birth.
- ² It is better to go to the house of mourning
than to go to the house of feasting;
for this is the end of everyone,
and the living will lay it to heart.
- ³ Sorrow is better than laughter,
for by sadness of countenance the heart is
made glad.
- ⁴ The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning;
but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.
- ⁵ It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise
than to hear the song of fools.
- ⁶ For like the crackling of thorns under a pot,
so is the laughter of fools;
this also is vanity.
- ⁷ Surely oppression makes the wise foolish,
and a bribe corrupts the heart.
- ⁸ Better is the end of a thing than its beginning;
the patient in spirit are better than the proud
in spirit.
- ⁹ Do not be quick to anger,
for anger lodges in the bosom of fools.
- ¹⁰ Do not say, "Why were the former days better
than these?"
For it is not from wisdom that you ask this.
- ¹¹ Wisdom is as good as an inheritance,
an advantage to those who see the sun.
- ¹² For the protection of wisdom is like the protection
of money,
and the advantage of knowledge is that
wisdom gives life to the one who possesses it.
- ¹³ Consider the work of God;
who can make straight what he has made
crooked?

¹⁴ In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day
of adversity consider; God has made the one as well as
the other, so that mortals may not find out anything that
will come after them.

The Riddles of Life

¹⁵ In my vain life I have seen everything; there are

^a Or a feeding on wind. See Hos 12.1

righteous people who perish in their righteousness, and there are wicked people who prolong their life in their evildoing. ¹⁶ Do not be too righteous, and do not act too wise; why should you destroy yourself? ¹⁷ Do not be too wicked, and do not be a fool; why should you die before your time? ¹⁸ It is good that you should take hold of the one, without letting go of the other; for the one who fears God shall succeed with both.

¹⁹ Wisdom gives strength to the wise more than ten rulers that are in a city.

²⁰ Surely there is no one on earth so righteous as to do good without ever sinning.

²¹ Do not give heed to everything that people say, or you may hear your servant cursing you; ²² your heart knows that many times you have yourself cursed others.

²³ All this I have tested by wisdom; I said, "I will be wise," but it was far from me. ²⁴ That which is, is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out? ²⁵ I turned my mind to know and to search out and to seek wisdom and the sum of things, and to know that wickedness is folly and that foolishness is madness. ²⁶ I found more bitter than death the woman who is a trap, whose heart is snares and nets, whose hands are fetters; one who pleases God escapes her, but the sinner is taken by her. ²⁷ See, this is what I found, says the Teacher,^a adding one thing to another to find the sum, ²⁸ which my mind has sought repeatedly, but I have not found. One man among a thousand I found, but a woman among all these I have not found. ²⁹ See, this alone I found, that God made human beings straightforward, but they have devised many schemes.

Read Ecclesiastes 8

No one knows exactly what the future holds. No one knows when death will strike. Neither conformity to political custom nor fidelity to religious practice can guarantee a peaceful future. Qoheleth counsels living life fully and leaving the future in God's hands.

Reflect: We are often so preoccupied with pleasing others or so distressed over the ability of wicked people to escape the fate we think should be theirs that we often fail to appreciate the blessings of our own lives and we miss the genuine enjoyment of life that is within our reach.

Pray: Ask God for the wisdom to recognize what is superficial in life and what is of true value. Then ask God for the courage to choose what is lasting.

Act: Try not to worry about the future. All you really have is the present. Live it faithfully.

Obey the King and Enjoy Yourself

8 Who is like the wise man?
And who knows the interpretation of a thing?
Wisdom makes one's face shine,
and the hardness of one's countenance is changed.

² Keep^b the king's command because of your sacred oath. ³ Do not be terrified; go from his presence, do not delay when the matter is unpleasant, for he does whatever he pleases. ⁴ For the word of the king is powerful, and who can say to him, "What are you doing?" ⁵ Whoever obeys a command will meet no harm, and the wise mind will know the time and way. ⁶ For every matter has its time and way, although the troubles of mortals lie heavy upon them. ⁷ Indeed, they do not know what is to be, for who can tell them how it will be? ⁸ No one has power over the wind^c to restrain the wind,^c or power over the day of death; there is no discharge from the battle, nor does wickedness deliver those who practice it. ⁹ All this I observed, applying my mind to all that is done under the sun, while one person exercises authority over another to the other's hurt.

God's Ways Are Inscrutable

¹⁰ Then I saw the wicked buried; they used to go in and out of the holy place, and were praised in the city where they had done such things.^d This also is vanity. ¹¹ Because sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the human heart is fully set to do evil.

^a Qoheleth, traditionally rendered Preacher

^b Heb I keep

^c Or breath

^d Meaning of Heb uncertain

¹² Though sinners do evil a hundred times and prolong their lives, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they stand in fear before him, ¹³ but it will not be well with the wicked, neither will they prolong their days like a shadow, because they do not stand in fear before God.

¹⁴ There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people who are treated according to the conduct of the wicked, and there are wicked people who are treated according to the conduct of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity. ¹⁵ So

I commend enjoyment, for there is nothing better for people under the sun than to eat, and drink, and enjoy themselves, for this will go with them in their toil through the days of life that God gives them under the sun.

¹⁶ When I applied my mind to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how one's eyes see sleep neither day nor night, ¹⁷ then I saw all the work of God, that no one can find out what is happening under the sun. However much they may toil in seeking, they will not find it out; even though those who are wise claim to know, they cannot find it out.

Read Ecclesiastes 9

Qoheleth continues his questioning of the value of the theory of retribution. He may be skeptical about this theory, but he clearly cherishes life itself which, even though difficult at times, is far better than death.

Reflect: All people face the common fate of death regardless of the moral quality of their lives. Righteous living does not safeguard them from this fate, for God determines human destiny and no one knows the mind of God. Therefore, to adopt a way of living in the hope of guaranteeing protection from misfortune is foolish.

Pray: Continue to thank God for the gift of life itself. You cannot be grateful enough for this remarkable blessing.

Act: Develop within yourself the realization that a life of integrity should be chosen, not for any reward that it might bring, but for its own sake.

Take Life as It Comes

9 All this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God; whether it is love or hate one does not know. Everything that confronts them ² is vanity,^a since the same fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil,^b to the clean and the unclean, to those who sacrifice and those who do not sacrifice. As are the good, so are the sinners; those who swear are like those who shun an oath. ³ This is an evil in all that happens under the sun, that the same fate comes to everyone. Moreover, the hearts of all are full of evil; madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead. ⁴ But whoever is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion. ⁵ The living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no more reward, and even the memory of them is lost. ⁶ Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished; never again will they have any share in all that happens under the sun.

⁷ Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has long ago approved what you do. ⁸ Let your garments always be white; do not let oil be lacking on your head. ⁹ Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that are given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun. ¹⁰ Whatever your hand finds to do, do with your might; for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.

¹¹ Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all. ¹² For no one can anticipate the time of disaster. Like fish taken

^a Syr Compare Gk: Heb *Everything that confronts them* ² is everything

^b Gk Syr Vg: Heb *lacks and the evil*

in a cruel net, and like birds caught in a snare, so mortals are snared at a time of calamity, when it suddenly falls upon them.

Wisdom Superior to Folly

13 I have also seen this example of wisdom under the sun, and it seemed great to me. 14 There was a little city with few people in it. A great king came against it and besieged it, building great siegeworks against it. 15 Now there was found in it a poor wise man, and he by his wisdom de-

livered the city. Yet no one remembered that poor man. 16 So I said, "Wisdom is better than might; yet the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are not heeded."

17 The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouting of a ruler among fools.

18 Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one bungler destroys much good.

Read Ecclesiastes 10

This entire chapter is a collection of loosely linked proverbs that encourage practical virtues. At the same time, this advice warns against depending too heavily on the reliability of wisdom. Experience demonstrates the fickleness of life and the incomprehensibility of its workings.

Reflect: Though it might look like Qoheleth contradicts himself, the ambiguity of his instruction shows that there is no fixed formula for righteous living. True wisdom requires the ability to judge the appropriate behavior for each specific situation.

Pray: True wisdom comes from critical reflection on experience. Ask God for the patience needed to mature and the insight that can come only with such maturity.

Act: Do not be swayed by the shallow standards of the world. Learn to test your decisions against legitimate human experience and the values of true wisdom.

Miscellaneous Observations

10 Dead flies make the perfumer's ointment give off a foul odor;

so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor.

2 The heart of the wise inclines to the right, but the heart of a fool to the left.

3 Even when fools walk on the road, they lack sense, and show to everyone that they are fools.

4 If the anger of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your post, for calmness will undo great offenses.

5 There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, as great an error as if it proceeded from the ruler: 6 folly is set in many high places, and the rich sit in a low place. 7 I have seen slaves on horseback, and princes walking on foot like slaves.

8 Whoever digs a pit will fall into it; and whoever breaks through a wall will be bitten by a snake.

9 Whoever quarries stones will be hurt by them; and whoever splits logs will be endangered by them.

10 If the iron is blunt, and one does not whet the edge, then more strength must be exerted; but wisdom helps one to succeed.

11 If the snake bites before it is charmed, there is no advantage in a charmer.

12 Words spoken by the wise bring them favor, but the lips of fools consume them.

13 The words of their mouths begin in foolishness, and their talk ends in wicked madness;

14 yet fools talk on and on.

No one knows what is to happen, and who can tell anyone what the future holds?

15 The toil of fools wears them out,
for they do not even know the
way to town.

16 Alas for you, O land, when your king
is a servant,^a
and your princes feast in the
morning!

17 Happy are you, O land, when your
king is a nobleman,
and your princes feast at the
proper time—
for strength, and not for
drunkenness!

18 Through sloth the roof sinks in,
and through indolence the house
leaks.

19 Feasts are made for laughter;
wine gladdens life,
and money meets every need.

20 Do not curse the king, even in your
thoughts,
or curse the rich, even in your
bedroom;
for a bird of the air may carry your
voice,
or some winged creature tell the
matter.

Read Ecclesiastes 11

Qoheleth's criticism of the theory of retribution is really a challenge of rigid, inherent determinism. He promotes a pragmatic attitude toward life, an attitude of choosing whatever seems to be the best approach for specific circumstances. He wants people to enjoy life, not brood over it.

Reflect: Experience teaches us that there is no one universal way of responding to a situation. Without falling into simple relativism, we do have to decide what might be the best approach to take under given circumstances. Other circumstances might require a very different response.

Pray: Ask God to grant you the wisdom you need to make the kind of decisions the circumstances you face might require.

Act: Train yourself to be open to the reality of life as it presents itself to you. Be slow to judge others, but honest in judging yourself.

The Value of Diligence

11 Send out your bread upon the waters,
for after many days you will get it back.

² Divide your means seven ways, or even eight,
for you do not know what disaster may
happen on earth.

³ When clouds are full,
they empty rain on the earth;
whether a tree falls to the south or to the north,
in the place where the tree falls, there it will lie.

⁴ Whoever observes the wind will not sow;
and whoever regards the clouds will not reap.

⁵ Just as you do not know how the breath comes to
the bones in the mother's womb, so you do not know
the work of God, who makes everything.

⁶ In the morning sow your seed, and at evening do
not let your hands be idle; for you do not know which
will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be
good.

Youth and Old Age

⁷ Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see
the sun.

⁸ Even those who live many years should rejoice in
them all; yet let them remember that the days of dark-
ness will be many. All that comes is vanity.

⁹ Rejoice, young man, while you are young, and let
your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Follow
the inclination of your heart and the desire of your eyes,
but know that for all these things God will bring you into
judgment.

¹⁰ Banish anxiety from your mind, and put away
pain from your body; for youth and the dawn of life are
vanity.

^a Or a child

Read Ecclesiastes 12

Qoheleth provides what many believe to be one of the most impressive poetic descriptions of aging. He describes the kind of physical diminishment that awaits every woman and man. Then, in the very last verses of the book, he once again takes up the topic of retribution and, after chapters of consistent challenge of the theory of retribution, he reinforces its validity.

Reflect: The poem that describes the aging process reminds us of our mortality. Though fragile, human life is nonetheless precious. The final reaffirmation of retribution may have been a necessary concession that made acceptable the challenge found within the rest of the book.

Pray: Thank God for life, even in its most vulnerable stages, and ask for a deepened respect for the elderly.

Act: In some concrete ways, show respect for the elderly people in your life or acquaintance. They are the receptacles of the wisdom of the community, and their importance must be acknowledged and safeguarded.

12 Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come, and the years draw near when you will say, “I have no pleasure in them”; ² before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return with^a the rain; ³ in the day when the guards of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the women who grind cease working because they are few, and those who look through the windows see dimly; ⁴ when the doors on the street are shut, and the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low; ⁵ when one is afraid of heights, and terrors are in the road; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along^b and desire fails; because all must go to their eternal home, and the mourners will go about the streets; ⁶ before the silver cord is snapped,^c and the golden bowl is broken, and the pitcher is broken at the fountain, and the wheel broken at the cistern, ⁷ and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath^d returns to God who gave it. ⁸ Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher;^e all is vanity.

Epilogue

⁹ Besides being wise, the Teacher^e also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs. ¹⁰ The Teacher^e sought to find pleasing words, and he wrote words of truth plainly.

¹¹ The sayings of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings that are given by one shepherd.^f ¹² Of anything beyond these, my child, beware. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh.

¹³ The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone. ¹⁴ For God will bring every deed into judgment, including^g every secret thing, whether good or evil.

^a Or after; Heb 'ahar

^b Or is a burden

^c Syr Vg Compare Gk: Heb is removed

^d Or the spirit

^e Qoheleth, traditionally rendered Preacher

^f Meaning of Heb uncertain

^g Or into the judgment on