

UNDER THE SUN (ECCLESIASTES 1-6)

By David Feddes

Under the Sun (Ecclesiastes 1)

I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind. Ecclesiastes 1:14

Have you ever had the Sisyphus syndrome?

According to an old Greek legend, a man named Sisyphus offended the gods, and they decided to punish him. They ordered him to push a heavy, round stone to the top of a mountain. But every time he got to the top and let go of the stone, it would roll right back down to the bottom, and he'd have to start all over again. Push it up, watch it roll down; push it up, watch it roll down; push it up, watch it roll down; over and over and over again for all eternity. That's the Sisyphus syndrome: always working hard and never accomplishing anything. Know the feeling?

The Sisyphus syndrome can hit students. You get up and go to school and come home. The next day you get up and go to school and come home. The next day you get up and go to school and come home. Each day you go to class and do your homework, and what's the reward? More classes, and more homework!

The Sisyphus syndrome can also hit stay-at-home moms. You change one diaper, but soon there's another diaper, then another and another. You make a meal for your family, but soon the meal is digested and you're making another meal. You scamper here and there picking up around the house, but the next day the place is as messy as ever, and you're picking up all over again. It's like shoveling snow in a blizzard.

The Sisyphus syndrome also hits people on the job. You slave away to finish a pile of paperwork, and tomorrow there's an even bigger stack waiting for you. Or you finish one unit on the assembly line just in time to do the next, then the next, then the next. Or you're a trucker, driving mile after mile after mile to haul one load, only to pick up the next load and drive mile after mile after mile with it. Or you're a farmer doing all the same things you did last year, or a store manager stocking the same shelves over and over, or a salesman giving the same sales pitch again and again and again. Whatever your job is, don't you sometimes feel like you're pushing a stone to the top of the mountain only to have it roll down so that you can start all over again?

Nobody is immune to the Sisyphus syndrome. No matter how exciting something looks from the outside, it can seem routine and useless to the person doing it. A professional athlete going from game to game and hotel room to hotel room; a rock star doing yet another concert; an author writing still another book; a government leader working on still another piece of legislation—their lives can seem as monotonous and repetitive as students doing yet another homework assignment. A business tycoon getting on the next airplane or making the next million can get as bored as a mother changing diapers.

What's the Use?

You can be the richest, smartest, most powerful person around and still feel empty and insignificant. Listen to the opening statement of the Bible book of Ecclesiastes: "The words of the Teacher, son of David, King in Jerusalem: 'Meaningless! Meaningless!' says the Teacher. "Ut-

terly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.” Or, as another version puts it, “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity!”

Now remember, these aren't the words of some poor dummy without the imagination to think of anything exciting or the brains to do something impressive. These are the words of a genius called Mr. Teacher. The Hebrew word is *Koheleth*. (The word *Ecclesiastes* is the Greek equivalent.) *Koheleth* literally means the person people gather around. This is the guy people listen to: the authority, the pundit, the expert, the Teacher. He is smart, and what's more, he's rich and famous. He's a son of the great King David and reigns as king in Jerusalem. It appears that the writer of *Ecclesiastes* is none other than the brilliant and mighty King Solomon, though he avoids using his own name and speaks of himself as “the Teacher.”

At any rate, he's got a bad case of the Sisyphus syndrome. After years of hard work and brilliant thinking, what does he have to show for it? Nothing. He hasn't changed a thing. The rock just rolls back to the bottom of the mountain.

What does a man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun? Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises. The wind blows to the south and turns to the north; round and round it goes, ever returning on its course. All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. To the place where the streams come from, there they return again (*Ecclesiastes* 1:3-7). Everything seems to be going in circles, always moving but never getting anywhere. The sun keeps going, the wind keeps blowing, the water keeps flowing, and nothing much changes. So what's the use of all our labor and effort?

The Teacher's view here is like the view you get from a skyscraper or an airplane. You see farther than you've ever seen before. You see the big picture. When you look down and try to see people, they're almost invisible. If you see them at all, they look like tiny ants crawling along. Then you realize that you are one of those ants yourself. When an ant enters a place, nothing much changes; and when the ant gets stepped on, nothing much changes. So too, people's lives have an ant-sized impact on the world and the universe. Entire generations come and go without leaving a trace. Millions, even billions, of us live and die and turn to dust, and the earth remains as it always has. The cycles of nature roll on and on.

We don't seem to amount to much in the bigger picture. So what's the use of living? What's the point? What value or meaning do our lives really have? Nature goes through the same cycles with or without us, and during our short lives we seem to be going in circles just like the rest of nature. We do the same things and go through the same routines over and over. Then we die and disappear and leave the wheels of nature to go on turning without us. How can we deal with such monotony and emptiness?

All things are wearisome, more than one can say. The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing. What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which one can say, “Look! This is something new”? It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time. There is no remembrance of men of old, and even those who are yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow (*Ecclesiastes* 1:8-11).

Many of us would rather not face reality, so we get hooked on distractions. When we've got a spare moment at home, what's the first thing we do? We turn on the television. Even if we don't like anything that happens to be on TV at the moment, we watch it anyway, just to kill time—about four hours a day, on the average. If we do turn the TV off, it's only to turn on the

radio or stereo or computer instead. As the Teacher puts it, “The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing.”

Take away all our noise and distractions, and what’s left? Most of us would rather not know. So we keep stuffing our eyes and ears with sights and sounds. Is that the cure for the Sisyphus syndrome? Just give poor Sisyphus a TV to watch and a set of headphones to listen to as he pushes the rock up the mountain for the umpteenth time, and maybe he won’t notice how monotonous and meaningless his life really is!

Under the Sun

The Teacher won’t settle for distractions, and neither should we. We need to take a hard, honest look at life under the sun. That phrase “under the sun” is one that’s repeated over and over in Ecclesiastes—about 30 times, in fact. “Under the sun” is life lived through human effort without trusting God. It’s life seen from a human perspective without looking at things from God’s perspective. And from that point of view, we can’t see any true purpose or meaning to our lives. Life “under the sun” is vanity of vanities. It’s monotonous, empty, meaningless.

This isn’t just a grumpy complaint from a man in a bad mood. It’s the result of careful study and realistic observation and thorough thinking. The Teacher says,

I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. I devoted myself to study and explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven. What a heavy burden God has laid on men! I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after wind (Ecclesiastes 1:12-14).

He’s seen it all and analyzed it all, and that’s his conclusion.

Remember, he’s relying only on what he can discover for himself without listening to God. He knows that God exists, but in “under the sun” thinking, God is just a label for whatever higher power made this world. He’s not a Lord to be worshipped or a Friend to be trusted or a Father to be loved. He’s just a distant factor in an equation. He’s the One who set the whole boring cycle in motion, the One who burdened us with lives that don’t seem to accomplish much or make much sense.

That’s life under the sun: even if you believe in a God of some sort, when it comes to your work, you rely on your own efforts, not his grace; and when it comes to your thinking, you rely on your own wisdom, not his revelation. And what’s the result? Your work seems useless, and so does your wisdom. You feel like you’re just chasing the wind.

Facing Our Limits

Secular, “under the sun” wisdom has to face the fact that there’s much that it can’t control or change, and much that it can’t even know. As the Teacher puts it, “What is twisted cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted” (v. 15).

Living in a twisted world, we hear over and over that we need better education in order to straighten things out. Whether it’s AIDS or alcoholism or child abuse or teen pregnancy, we expect education to straighten out what is twisted. But it doesn’t. Journalist Malcolm Muggeridge once said,

Education—the great mumbo jumbo and fraud of the ages—purports to equip us to live and is prescribed as a universal remedy for everything from juvenile delinquency to premature senility. For the most part it serves to enlarge stupidity, inflate conceit, enhance credulity,

and put those subjected to it at the mercy of brainwashers with printing presses, radio, and television at their disposal.

Perhaps Muggeridge was exaggerating a bit, but it's time we realized that education isn't the solution to everything. There are limits to what human thinking can do. It can't straighten out what is twisted by sin. And it can't figure out things to which it has no access. "What is lacking cannot be counted." If there really is something missing from our lives, then humanistic thinking—"under the sun" thinking—can't tell us what it is. God himself will have to show us what it is, or we'll never know. We can't rely on education or brain power to solve all our problems or to find out all we need to know.

So, then, it makes no sense to be snooty or self-satisfied about how smart we are or how much we know. In fact, there are times when it seems we'd be better off not knowing. The Teacher puts it this way in the last part of Ecclesiastes 1.

I thought to myself, "Look, I have grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge." Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind. For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.

In other words, the more you know, the more it hurts. With so much education and research data and investigative reporting, much of the information you learn just makes you sadder and more cynical. You admire a certain person as your hero—and then some news report or biography shows just how rotten that person can be. You enjoy a certain food—only to hear a news report that it could give you cancer (if it doesn't give you a heart attack first). Sometimes you wish you could just go back to not knowing. The more you know, the harder it is to believe in anybody or enjoy anything. "For with much wisdom comes much sorrow," says the Teacher, "the more knowledge, the more grief" (v. 18).

So what's the alternative? If knowledge makes us more miserable, does that mean ignorance is bliss? And what about work? If it seems monotonous and empty, does that mean we'd be better off not doing anything? Should we just drop out and be a bunch of know-nothing, do-nothing, good-for-nothing bums? No, that may be tempting, but that would just make us lazy and foolish and empty, instead of hard-working and educated and empty. Either way, we're still empty.

Our main problem isn't that we work too hard or know too much. It's that we pursue our work apart from God's blessing, and we pursue education without God's revelation. The main trouble with our work isn't that we work too much and accomplish too little; it's that we don't know whom we're working for or why we're working in the first place. The main problem with our wisdom isn't that we know too much about earth; it's that we know too little about heaven. As long we work and think with an "under the sun" perspective, we end up feeling like nobodies who are headed nowhere, like the "Nowhere Man" in the Beatles song:

He's a real nowhere man,
sitting in his nowhere land,
making all his nowhere plans
for nobody.
Doesn't have a point of view.
Knows not where he's going to.
Isn't he a bit like you
and me?

That's life "under the sun." Doesn't have a point of view: you don't have God as your supreme point of reference and you don't see your life in light of God's plan. You know not where you're going to: you leave your eternal destiny out of the equation and focus on the here and now. You have no personal relationship to the God who rules all things; you have no idea where your life is headed; and so all your work and wisdom is empty.

Without God you are a nowhere man or woman, and God will make sure you stay that way. He will make sure that your work and wisdom remain meaningless as long as you live without him. "Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain... In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat—for he grants sleep to those he loves" (Psalm 127:1-2). Any work without God's blessing is ultimately in vain—vanity of vanities, meaningless.

As for wisdom, it too is worthless without God. The Lord says, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate." ... Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" (1 Corinthians 1:19-20). Education without revelation is vanity.

You see, God never designed us to work without him or to think without him. The Lord made us for himself. God created the universe through his Son, Jesus Christ, and he designed all things to thrive and find their meaning and fulfillment and happiness only in Christ. When humanity fell away from the Lord through sin, God subjected us and the entire creation to a frustrating cycle of monotony and eventual decay (Romans 8:21).

From Frustration to Fulfillment

Is there any way out? Is there anything new under the sun? Yes, there is, but only because of someone who came from beyond the sun. Jesus Christ has come into this world, and he has done what we could never do. He has broken the cycle of repetition and decay by doing something truly new under the sun: he has risen from the dead, never to die again. And he has sent his Holy Spirit to fill our emptiness and give our lives meaning and draw us into the eternal life of God and make all things new. For those who trust him, that changes everything.

When we live for the risen Lord Jesus and work for him, our work is not meaningless. 1 Corinthians 15, God's Word speaks magnificently of Jesus' resurrection and of the fact that all who trust him will also be glorified. And how does that great chapter end? It says, "Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:58). Not in vain! Not vanity! Not meaningless! If you know the risen Lord, life is no longer a matter of going in circles. It's a journey that leads to glory. And on that journey everything you do for God and in his power is of immeasurable value.

And what about wisdom? Well, in 1 Corinthians 2 the Bible picks up on the theme of knowledge without God. It says that people who have only "the wisdom of this age" are "coming to nothing." But, the Bible goes on to say, there's another brand of wisdom, "God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began... 'No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him'—but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit" (1 Corinthians 2:6-10).

If your work seems empty and your wisdom seems worthless, there's only one way to escape. Stop living on your own. Stop ignoring the Lord. Stop living life under the sun (S-U-N), and start living under the Son (S-O-N), God's Son, Jesus. As the Bible puts it, "set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things" (Colossians 3:1-2). Then your work and your thinking can begin to glow

with a sense of meaning and purpose and wonder and gratitude. Then, instead of being a nowhere man or woman, you can sing a new song.

He's a real Christian man,
headed for the promised land.

Living life within God's plan,
he's somebody.

God gives him a point of view,
shows him where he's going to.

Oh, I pray that's true of you
and me.

Chasing the Wind (Ecclesiastes 2)

This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? Ecclesiastes 2:24-25

“I can’t get no satisfaction. I try, and I try, and I try, and I try. I can’t get no satisfaction.” Those words from the Rolling Stones could be the theme song of our age. They speak for a great many of us.

Take a rich and famous person like Paul Newman. After playing the leading man in countless movies and being a sex symbol for decades, after driving race cars and starting a successful company, was it enough to satisfy him? Paul Newman said, “I look like I’m having a lot of fun, and I am. But I should be having more fun than I’m having. In work, I’m not happy because it will never be good enough.” And what about the publicity that makes his life look so grand and glamorous? “They make that up about you,” says Newman, “but it has nothing to do with you.”

But we don’t have to listen to the Rolling Stones or look at Paul Newman. We just have to look in the mirror. Many of us have to admit that *we* “can’t get no satisfaction.” We sometimes think we’d be happy if only we could reach our dream. But all too often, we *do* reach our dream—and it turns out to be a nightmare. There’s nothing more depressing than getting everything you ever wanted—and then finding out that it’s not enough and that you wanted the wrong things all along.

In Ecclesiastes 2 the Bible gives us the journal of a man who knew that feeling. He went on a quest to find out what makes life worth living, and he had the resources to try anything. In Ecclesiastes he labels himself simply as “the Teacher,” but from what he says about himself, it seems that he was really King Solomon: a ruler, scholar, billionaire, and playboy, all rolled into one. Nothing could stand between him and his dreams. He did everything he felt like doing and got whatever he wanted; and still he came up empty. If a movie were made of Ecclesiastes 2, the theme song would be “I can’t get no satisfaction.”

Pleasure

The first thing he tried was the first thing many of us try: *pleasure*. Maybe the secret of life is simply to have as much fun as possible and enjoy yourself as much as you can. As he puts it, I thought in my heart, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.”

But that also proved to be meaningless. “Laughter,” I said, “is foolish. And what does pleasure accomplish.” I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly—my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do under heaven during the few days of their lives (v. 1-3).

The Teacher could hire the funniest jesters to make him laugh, and still today we have no shortage of comedians. Some of them are so funny that they make us laugh about sexual filth and ruined families and nasty bosses and corrupt rulers, even as these things are wrecking our lives. But after awhile the laughter seems hollow. We begin to suspect that the main reason we laugh is to keep ourselves from crying.

But maybe there’s another way to fill the empty spaces and cheer ourselves up. How about alcohol? The Teacher says, “Been there, done that.” He enjoyed party after party with the best booze money could buy. But the party life didn’t satisfy him. Maybe you’ve seen beer commercials that show people laughing and drinking together and saying, “It doesn’t get any better than

this!” Oh, really? If it doesn’t get any better than this, says the Teacher, if life is nothing more than laughs and drinks, then we’re in the middle of a meaningless muddle.

That still wasn’t the end of the Teacher’s pleasure trip, however. After all, silly comedy and wild parties are mainly for the young and the foolish. More “mature” folks get their thrills from more “mature” pleasures, like building a dream house or having lots of power and money. The Teacher says,

I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees (2:4-6).

You may dream of an ideal house in a lovely neighborhood or beside a lake. Well, the Teacher didn’t just build *a* house; he built *houses*. And he didn’t look for a nice neighborhood; he *built* the neighborhood, with all those gardens and parks and fruit trees. He didn’t look for a place beside a lake; he simply built the lakes himself by constructing reservoirs. But it wasn’t enough.

So he checked out the pleasures of power and wealth. It can be a delicious feeling to be the person in charge, to have people working for you and taking orders from you. The Teacher took that feeling to the limit. He didn’t just have employees; he had slaves. “I bought male and female slaves,” he says, “and had other slaves who were born into my house” (2:7). No corporate boss could possibly match Solomon’s power over others.

Nobody could match his income and assets, either. He says, “I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces” (2:7-8). Elsewhere the Bible says that Solomon took in about 25 *tons* of gold every year, not to mention his other income (1 Kings 10:14). If power and money were the answer, this man would have been happy. But he wasn’t.

Maybe, though, he missed something on his pleasure trip. What about sex? These days we’re bombarded with the message that sex is the supreme pleasure and source of happiness. Did the Teacher somehow overlook sex? No, when he says he tried everything, he means *everything*. He says, “I acquired men and women singers, and a harem as well—the delights of the heart of man” (2:8). The Bible says that Solomon had 700 wives, plus 300 more women hanging around just in case (1 Kings 11:3)—he had a thousand of the loveliest women to be found. What some people can only fantasize about or lust after in magazines, videos, and internet sites, Solomon did, with an endless variety of women.

And what was the result of his pleasure trip? Being a realist, he’s not about to lie. He doesn’t say it wasn’t any fun. Of course it was fun! But it wasn’t fulfilling. He was still as empty and unsatisfied as ever. Here’s how he puts it:

I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me. I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward for all my labor. Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun (2:9-11).

Have you ever eaten cotton candy? You know, the fluffy, sugary stuff you buy at circuses or carnivals? The first few bites taste wonderful. The next few bites taste okay. But by the time you’ve eaten half of it—yuck! You’re sick of the stuff. It’s even worse if you’re really hungry. It’s all sweetness and no nourishment. The moment it touches your tongue, it melts to nothing, and your stomach is as hollow as ever. A little cotton candy may taste fine once in awhile, but it’s not much of a meal.

That's what pleasure is like. Some pleasures are okay, and they may taste great for awhile; but when you're hungry for meaning and fulfillment, trying to live on nothing but pleasure can get downright sickening. Pleasure alone can't satisfy a hungry soul. When you're really hungry, you don't need more cotton candy. You need a sandwich. You need the bread of life.

Education

The Teacher tried every possible pleasure and came up empty. So he decided to look for fulfillment elsewhere. How about *education*? Maybe the main point of life is to learn as much as you can and to be more knowledgeable than anyone else.

If that were the case, then Solomon had it made. He was brilliant. He had amazing understanding of people and politics. He was a poet and songwriter. And not only did he excel in the humanities, he also knew the sciences better than anyone. According to the Bible, Solomon studied many varieties of plants and animals and gave lectures on what he discovered. He was the foremost scientific authority of his time. People came from all over just to hear him speak (1 Kings 4:29-34).

But what did it all amount to? Knowledge has advantages, but is it the ultimate answer? The Teacher says,

Then I turned my thoughts to consider wisdom, and also madness and folly. What more can the king's successor do than what has already been done? I saw that wisdom is better than folly, just as light is better than darkness. The wise man has eyes in his head, while the fool walks in the darkness; but I came to realize that the same fate overtakes them both. Then I thought in my heart, "The fate of the fool will overtake me also. What then do I gain by being wise?" I said in my heart, "This too is meaningless." For the wise man, like the fool, will not be long remembered; in days to come both will be forgotten. Like the fool, the wise man too must die! (2:12-16)

It's better to be smart than stupid, no doubt about it. Education is better than ignorance. There's a night and day difference between the two. But does it really make any difference in the end? Everybody ends up dead, and one corpse is no smarter than another. Your I.Q. and your report card and your academic degrees aren't likely to be inscribed on your tombstone.

Maybe you've heard it said, "Tough times don't last; tough people do." But Ecclesiastes sees it from a different angle: Tough times last; tough people don't. They die. Everybody dies. And your level of education doesn't make much difference in a coffin. Is that morbid? Maybe so, but it's also realistic. To know what makes life truly meaningful, you need something that can take you beyond the unavoidable reality of death. And education can't do that.

Work

So, then, if pleasure isn't the answer, and education isn't, what is? Someone might pipe up and say, "How about *work*?" But what kind of answer is that? If you're a sober, hard-working type, you may have agreed that pleasure is meaningless. "Amen! You tell 'em, preacher. We've got way too many people chasing pleasure." But is it any better to be a workaholic? At least pleasure seekers have some fun once in awhile. But to work just for the sake of working? That's the dumbest idea yet! As the Teacher thinks about work and striving for success and achievement, he gets really gloomy. He says,

So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, be-

cause I must leave them to the one who comes after me. And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the work into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless. So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. For a man may do his work with wisdom, knowledge, and skill, and then he must leave all he owns to someone who has not worked for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune. (v. 17-21)

No matter how hard you work, no matter what you accomplish, you can't take it with you. And as if that's not bad enough, you can't even leave it behind! It just disappears. You leave the results of your hard work to someone who hardly works, and who knows what he'll do with it? He might ruin everything. You may be working hard so that you can leave it all to Junior—but who knows how stupid Junior is going to be? As the Teacher puts it, “who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool?”

Perhaps when Solomon said this he was looking over his shoulder at his own son, a bonehead named Rehoboam. During Solomon's reign, his political brilliance made the nation of Israel larger and greater than ever before. But when Solomon died and his son took over, boneheaded Rehoboam soon ruined it all. He made stupid decisions that split the splendid kingdom Solomon had built, and things were never the same again (1 Kings 12). All of Solomon's grand achievements came to nothing.

You can't take it with you, and you can't even leave it behind. So what does all your work amount to? “What does a man get,” asks the Teacher, “for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labors under the sun? All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is meaningless.” Stressful days and sleepless nights, ulcers and insomnia—that's the payoff for the workaholic.

What a depressing picture! Pleasure, education, hard work—all meaningless, all empty. Why would God direct anyone to put such depressing stuff in the Bible? What's the point? Well, the point isn't, “Get depressed.” It's “Get smart!” In a way Ecclesiastes 2 is almost an unnecessary part of the Bible. You can learn these things from experience. But why do that to yourself? There's an old saying that experience is the best teacher. But it's also the nastiest teacher. Why not listen to the Bible instead of learning from bitter experience? Why keep chasing the wind until you wake up one day to find that you're frustrated and empty and hate life?

If you're chasing pleasure or education or work in an attempt to find true satisfaction, give it up. The Teacher had more fun than you'll ever have. He was smarter than you'll ever be. He worked harder and achieved more than you ever will. But it wasn't enough. He found out that he needed something else, something he could never get on his own, something only God could give. In Ecclesiastes 2 we read the journal of a man who tried to find satisfaction in pleasure, education, and work, but ended up feeling like he was chasing the wind.

Insight

At the end of the chapter, however, a glimmer of light shines through. The Teacher realizes that satisfaction is not impossible. He says,

A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? To the man who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind (2:24-26).

True happiness comes not from chasing what you don't have but in being able to appreciate what you do have. And how can that happen? Only as a gift from God. "For without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?" Now we're finally getting somewhere. Now God is in the picture. True happiness is received, not achieved. It's a gift, not something you can earn. It comes from God, not from your own efforts. Trying to grab happiness for yourself doesn't work. Without the Lord, you'll be empty and unsatisfied.

I remember watching a boy open a Christmas present. He excitedly tore off the wrapping paper and opened the box to see what was inside. Then his face fell. He stared in disbelief. The box was empty! His mother had forgotten to put the gift into the box before she wrapped it. Tears began to trickle down the boy's cheeks. His mother realized what she had done, of course, and she rushed off to a closet shelf to get the gift for her son.

Pleasure, education, and career achievements make nice wrapping paper, but they're empty if they don't come with the gift of satisfaction. It's not that these things are bad; they're just not enough. Wrapping paper is nice, but only if there is something more inside. So, too, pleasure, education, and work can be good things—but only if there is something more inside.

And who can give us that "something more"? Only God can. In fact, the "something more" that we need is God himself. As St. Augustine put it, "Lord, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." Our hearts have a hunger the size of eternity, and only something the size of eternity—or rather, *Someone* the size of eternity—can satisfy that hunger. Without him, we "can't get no satisfaction."

In order to be satisfied and fulfilled, we need the fullness of God himself. And God's fullness is found only in Jesus Christ. Jesus is often presented as the one who solves our crisis of guilt by dying in our place. And that's true—thank God it's true. But Jesus isn't just the solution to our crisis of guilt. He's also the solution to our crisis of emptiness. He's not just the source of forgiveness; he is also the source of fullness. "For," says the Bible, "in Christ all the fullness of Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ" (Colossians 2:9-10).

Our society has become so ignorant of God's will that sin is hardly even talked about and many people don't feel any crisis of guilt. But even when the crisis of guilt is forgotten, the crisis of emptiness won't go away. It's possible that you know so little of the Bible and so little of God's standards that you don't realize that you're a sinner in God's eyes. All you know is that you can't get no satisfaction. Your heart is hollow and hungry. Even if God lets you get some of the stuff you're chasing, he won't let you feel satisfied. You can't find happiness apart from God, and you can't find God apart from Christ. So if you don't have a relationship with the Lord, stop chasing the wind. Trust in Jesus. Ask him to forgive your sins and turn you from sin. Welcome him as your fullness and your very life. Jesus says, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty" (John 6:34).

But what if you already know Jesus? Well, Ecclesiastes doesn't just speak to those who ignore God. It also speaks to Christians. If we're honest, we too have to admit that we still have hollow spots in our hearts. All too often we've thought that we could look to Jesus for forgiveness but then look elsewhere for happiness and fulfillment. We get almost as obsessed with pleasure or education or work as the world around us—and then we wonder why a sense of emptiness gnaws at us. It's time to stop chasing the wind. Let's not only look to Jesus' death for forgiveness; let's also look to Jesus' life for fulfillment. Then, instead of complaining that we "can't get no satisfaction," we can say, "From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another" (John 1:16).

Time on Our Hands, Eternity in Our Hearts (Ecclesiastes 3) **By David Feddes**

He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end. Ecclesiastes 3:11

Timing is everything. There's a time to be happy and a time to be grumpy—and in my opinion morning is definitely a time to be grumpy. Some people leap out of bed before sunrise, smiling and singing and saying happy hellos to everyone they meet. I'm not a morning person, so these early-morning cheerleaders just make me grumpier than I already am. I agree with the Bible verse that says, "If a man loudly blesses his neighbor early in the morning, it will be taken as a curse" (Proverbs 27:14). Bad timing can make a blessing feel like a curse.

Timing is everything, and everything has its time. Perhaps the best-known passage about timing in all of world literature is in the Bible at the beginning of Ecclesiastes 3.

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build, a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance, a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them, a time to embrace and a time to refrain, a time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to throw away, a time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak, a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace. (3:1-8)

Timing is everything. Thanks to recent discoveries in medical technology, a woman in her sixties now has a chance to give birth to a child. It can be done, but *should* it be done? Is it fair to the child whose parents are likely to die before the child reaches adulthood? There's a time to be born and a time to die. When people are only a decade away from the average time to die, should they deliberately go against natural timing, use various medical treatments, and make it a time for a child to be born to someone of retirement age?

Timing is everything in economics. A farmer needs to know when it's time to plant and when it's time to harvest. An investor needs to know when it's time to buy and when it's time to sell. An employee needs to know when it's time to ask for a raise and when it's not. Timing often makes the difference between failure and success.

Timing is everything in emotions. There's a time to weep and a time to laugh. If there's a happy celebration going on, it's no time to be serious or somber. If somebody has just been struck by tragedy, it's no time to be jolly or tell jokes. The Bible says, "Like one who takes away a garment on a cold day ... is one who sings songs to a heavy heart" (Proverbs 25:20).

Timing is everything in relationships. If you're convinced it's "a time to embrace," but the other person thinks it's "a time to refrain from embracing," it can be mighty awkward. If you think it's a time to speak and the other person thinks it's a time to be silent, there could be trouble. Relationships require a proper sense of timing.

Timing is everything in daily decision-making. When you're in the middle of a project, you may have to decide whether it's time to build on previous progress or time to tear it down and start over. When you've lost something, you have to know when to keep searching and when to give up and hope it turns up later. When you're getting ready for a garage sale, you have to decide whether it's time to keep various items or time to throw away. From big decisions to small details, timing matters.

Timing is everything in the affairs of nations. British prime minister Neville Chamberlain tried to appease Adolph Hitler. Chamberlain's goal, he said, was "peace in our time." But it was not a time for peace; it was a time for war. Chamberlain couldn't see that, but Winston Churchill could. More often, though, leaders have the opposite problem: They are quick to think it's time for war, when it's time to give peace a chance.

Looking Beyond Time

These are just a few examples of how the right move depends on timing. But how can you develop a good sense of timing? Well, strange as it may sound, the best way to understand time and to use it well is to look beyond time. If you simply go from one time to the next and bounce from one event to another, you never see the big picture. Timing is everything, and everything is a matter of timing—but only in a certain sense. If time is all you look at, you never see what time is all about. But if you look beyond time to eternity, you find that all the various times are in the hands of the eternal God and unfold according to his plan. Even when you can't understand it all, God enables you to savor the beauty of everything in its proper time and to use time to prepare for eternity.

Ecclesiastes 3 begins by saying, "There is a time for everything," and lists a number of things that are part of life at one time or another. The author then repeats a question he has already asked a number of times: "What does the worker gain from his toil?" (3:9, see 1:3, 2:22) What's the point of it all?

When the author first asked that question in chapter 1, he answered that everything was empty and meaningless. At that point he was speaking from an "under the sun" perspective, an outlook focused on the here-and-now that ignored God almost entirely. In chapter 2, he told how he tried almost everything imaginable to satisfy his longings and still came up empty, and he began to see why. He saw that it's impossible to find satisfaction without God. It comes only as God's gift. By the time he reaches chapter 3, the writer of Ecclesiastes still has hard questions, but he's gained some insight, and he's beginning to develop some answers.

This time, when he repeats his question, "What's the use of it all?" he's not quite so gloomy. He doesn't just complain about meaningless drudgery and emptiness. Instead he says, I have seen the burden God has laid on men. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end. I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live. That everyone may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all his toil—this is the gift of God. I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that men will revere him. Whatever is has already been, and what will be has been before; and God will call the past to account. (3:10-15)

These words from verses 10-15 of Ecclesiastes 3 give us a key that unlocks the door to the mystery and meaning of time and eternity. The basic assumption is that God is in charge, and this passage reveals four implications of that.

Beautiful In Its Time

First, God's timing is beautiful and meaningful. From our perspective life can seem like a burden, and time can seem like a jumble of unconnected events. But God has a plan in which he appoints a time for everything, and his plan brings a kind of beauty to each event and time. "He has made everything beautiful in its time." God arranges all the various times into a wholeness

that reveals the beauty of the Lord and brings blessing to his people. As the New Testament puts it, “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).

When we think about beautiful timing, then, it’s not just a matter of us knowing what we should do at a given time. It’s also a matter of realizing that there are all sorts of times and events that come into our lives regardless of any choices we make. It’s God’s choice—not just our choice—that shapes the times of our lives. God lays on us the burden of a life we might not have chosen for ourselves. Should we fight that burden and be frustrated by it? Or should we trust the God who makes everything beautiful in its time? As long as we think we have the right to run our own lives, we’ll find God’s control burdensome. But once we surrender to God and trust his providence and plan, we begin to sense his beautiful timing.

Eternity in Our Hearts

The second and perhaps central truth in this passage is that God has set eternity in our hearts. No matter how much we focus on material things, we sense a need for something more, something greater than anything we see or touch. We have time on our hands but eternity in our hearts.

God has made everything beautiful in its time, but he never designed us to be satisfied with time. Material things, things that come and go with time, are not enough to satisfy our deepest longing. These things are beautiful gifts of God, but they were never meant satisfy us. Time is an appetizer. It’s not the main meal, and it was never meant to be. Time is meant to stimulate our appetite for eternity.

In each of our hearts there is a God-shaped, eternity-sized emptiness, an emptiness that only the fullness of God can fill. And where is the fullness of God? In Jesus Christ. “For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form,” says the Bible, “and you have been given fullness in Christ” (Colossians 2:9-10). When Ecclesiastes 3:11 speaks about eternity in the heart, it adds that we “cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.” But what we can’t fathom on our own, God shows us in Jesus. The New Testament says that the goal of believers is to “have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3). God’s eternal fullness and wisdom in Christ is his answer to the eternity-sized longing of our minds and hearts.

Enjoying Appetizers

And that brings us to a third truth: Only when we look to eternity can we begin to enjoy, really enjoy, the beauty of the various times in our lives right now. If we keep trying to find our deepest satisfaction in things that aren’t eternal, we’ll be terribly frustrated. But if we seek first the kingdom of God, we won’t expect earthly things to do for us what God never intended them to do, and we’ll be able to enjoy life right for what it is: a good gift of God—not his ultimate gift, but a good gift nonetheless. As Ecclesiastes puts it, “I know that there is nothing better than to be happy and do good while [we] live. That everyone may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all his toil—this is the gift of God.” It’s ironic, but the less you depend on the here and now to meet your deepest hungers, the more you’re able to enjoy the here and now.

If you go to a banquet hoping for a big meal and someone offers you just a few little treats when you arrive, how do you react? You might be so upset about the shortage of food that you’re

hardly able to enjoy even the tasty tidbits that are there. But if you know that those tidbits are just appetizers that come before the main meal, your experience changes. You can relish each morsel without being upset that it hasn't filled you up. You know that the full feast is still coming.

In the same way, once you realize that this life isn't all there is, that the main feast is not in time but in eternity, you can relish the various times and treats of life without being frustrated at your growing hunger. You know why the hunger is there: God put eternity in your heart. If you belong to Jesus, you know that he is going to satisfy that hunger at the eternal feast in the kingdom of God. In the meantime, you can enjoy various times and experiences in life as appetizers from God, even as your hunger for eternity keeps growing.

The Final Say

A fourth insight of this passage is that God is in charge and has the final say on everything. Nothing can change God's purpose or plan. Nothing can undo what God does. As Ecclesiastes puts it, "I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that men will revere him." Instead of resisting God's timing, rest in it. Instead of resenting God's rule of all things, revere him. Instead of rebelling against the Lord, rejoice that your times are in his hands (Psalm 31:15).

Because God is in charge, he is the one who makes the final evaluation of everything. It may seem that there's nothing new under the sun, that history doesn't really get anywhere, that it just keeps repeating itself without much meaning, and that each generation has to face the same basic issues as any other generation. If we're hoping to find the purpose of history in some grand story of progress or discovery, we're looking in the wrong place. History is just a stage. The real drama is the individual people God has placed on that stage and how they relate to God. The stage of history doesn't really change all that much, but the actions of each individual matter very much, and God will examine and give a final ruling on everything. In the words of verse 15, "Whatever is has already been, and what will be has been before; and God will call the past to account." The true meaning of history is in what God makes of it in light of the eternal.

What About Injustice?

Having provided a glimpse of these profound insights, the writer uses the rest of Ecclesiastes 3 to address a couple of harsh realities that seem to go against what he's just said. That's one of the great things about the book of Ecclesiastes: it never dodges hard questions or offers easy answers.

The first problem is this: If it's really true that God is in charge and all times are part of his plan, then how can there be so much injustice in the world? Verse 16 says, "And I saw something else under the sun: In the place of judgment—wickedness was there, in the place of justice—wickedness was there." How can we believe in God's beautiful timing and his perfect plan when there is so much that is obviously rotten?

Here is the Teacher's reply: "I thought in my heart, 'God will bring to judgment both the righteous and the wicked, for there will be a time for every activity, a time for every deed'" (Ecclesiastes 3:17). You see, there's not just a time for every deed to be done. There's also a time for every deed to be judged.

Some people are so upset by injustice that they take it as proof that God doesn't exist. But it's really proof that God does exist. How can something be unjust, except by contrast to a supreme standard of justice? If God doesn't exist and there is no supreme standard, then nothing is

unjust or wicked, even if we happen not to like it. But since we know that some things really are wrong, there must be some supreme standard of right, and so there must be a God who sets that standard and holds us to it.

But what about people who seem to get away with injustice? Doesn't that prove either that God is unjust or that he is unable to carry out his will? No, it only proves that ultimate justice is not in our hands but in God's hands, and that final justice will be served in God's good time, not our time. God allows wickedness to happen, true enough, but he has also appointed a time for every deed to be judged. Timing is everything. So, then, the sense that some things are unjust and ought to be judged, far from disproving God, actually points to the fact that a just Judge does exist and that all events are leading up to his final judgment at his appointed time.

Dying Like Animals?

A second objection to all this talk of eternity and God's purpose and his judgments is the fact that we all end up dying like animals. The last part of Ecclesiastes 3 says,

I also thought, "As for men, God tests them so that they may see that they are like the animals. Man's fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; man has no advantage over the animal. Everything is meaningless. All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return. Who knows if the spirit of man rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?" So I saw that there is nothing better for a man than to enjoy his work, because that is his lot. For who can bring him to see what will happen after him? (3:18-22)

Some people think that since we die like the animals, it would be nice if we could live like animals and relax and follow our urges without any thoughts of morality or eternity. The poet Walt Whitman wrote: "I think that I could turn and live with animals/ they are so placid and self-contain'd/ I stand and look at them long/ and long/ They do not sweat or whine about their condition/ They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins/ They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God."

Animals don't worry about right and wrong, and they don't think ahead to their own death. They just live and die and turn to dust. People live and die and turn to dust too, but somehow people are different. Even if we don't understand why injustice is so common, even if we're not sure what happens to the spirit after we die, the very fact that we think about such things shows that we are utterly different from animals.

The Lord shows us that we're like the animals in some ways, but unlike the animals, we have eternity in our hearts. Eternity gives us a conscience, a sense of God's eternal standard of right and wrong—so we can't rest content living like animals. Eternity also gives us a longing for immortality, a sense that death should not be the end—and so we can't get used to the idea of simply dying like animals. Rather than waste time wishing we could be content with an animal existence, why not face the fact that we have eternity in our heart and that God put it there?

The Teacher of Ecclesiastes, writing centuries before Christ, saw hints of God's beautiful timing and of eternity. And what were only hints and hopes at the time of Ecclesiastes became reality in Jesus. God's timing came together with eternity. As the Bible puts it, "when the time had fully come, God sent his Son" (Galatians 4:4). At Jesus' birth eternity entered time: God became a man. At Jesus' resurrection, time entered eternity: man became immortal with the life of God. In the words of Scripture, "Christ Jesus ... has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (2 Timothy 1:10).

Now back to where we started: timing is everything. There is “a time to be born and a time to die.” So, too, there is a time to be born again, and a time to die forever in hell. There is a time to be saved, and a time to be judged. “God has set a day,” says the Bible, “when he will judge the world by the man he has appointed” (Acts 17:31)—Jesus Christ. There is a time to repent, and a time when the opportunity to repent is gone. There is a time to turn to Jesus in faith, and that time is now. God’s Word says, “*now* is the time of God’s favor, *now* is the day of salvation” (2 Corinthians 6:2). Now is the time to get ready for eternity. Later may be too late. Timing is everything.

PRAYER

Eternal Father, thank you for each precious moment of time you give us. Put us in tune with you and your timing, so that we may understand how you make everything beautiful in its time. Thank you also for creating us with a craving for eternity, and for providing your own fullness to satisfy our deepest desires. Fill us with your Holy Spirit and satisfy us with your fullness in Jesus. Help each of us to use the opportunity we have right now in this day of salvation to accept Christ as Savior and to receive eternal life in him. Amen.

The Friendship Factor (Ecclesiastes 4)

If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! Ecclesiastes 4:10

If you're a young person going to a new school for the first time, what's the biggest question on your mind? Well, you may wonder how tough your classes will be or whether you'll be good enough to make the team in your favorite sport—but your biggest question is probably this: “Will I have any friends?”

School can be a lonely, hurtful place for a kid who doesn't have friends. Is there anything worse than being the one nobody likes, the one everybody picks on? If some people make fun of you once in awhile, you can handle it as long as you have a friend or two. But if a bunch of kids start being mean to you even before you've made any friends, it's almost hopeless. Once you're being picked on, the last thing anybody wants to do is stick up for you and be your friend and get the same treatment.

This doesn't just happen among kids. It happens among adults too. Once you're labeled a loser, life gets lonely. People avoid you. It happens at work and in social gatherings all the time. If your boss or fellow workers treat you badly, even the people who think you're okay might stay away from you. If you take a position that's not popular with people around you, you find that everyone suddenly avoids you. They don't want to be unpopular or have other people look down on them.

Sometimes a government and almost a whole nation can turn against certain people. At that point, nobody is willing to help. Nobody wants even to be seen with them. People ignore what's happening and hope it won't affect them. Listen to the words of a German man who lived under the Nazis:

In Germany they came first for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew.

Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me, and by that time no one was left to speak up. (Martin Niemöller)

In Ecclesiastes 4 the Bible talks about the friendship factor: the need for loyal companions and the tragedy of being alone. The chapter starts by focusing on oppression and on the isolation and despair that go with it.

Oppressed

Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun: I saw the tears of the oppressed—and they have no comforter; power was on the side of their oppressors—and they have no comforter. And I declared that the dead, who had already died, are happier than the living, who are still alive. But better than both is he who has not yet been, who has not seen the evil that is done under the sun. (4:1-3)

When it seems that you're all alone and the whole world is against you, you may wish you were never born. You may think you'd be better off dead. Sad to say, some people not only *think* they'd be better off dead; they *act* on their thoughts and kill themselves. They think it's the only way to escape the feeling of being all alone in a world where might makes right, where nobody cares, where life doesn't seem worth living.

Maybe you know the feeling. It's dark and dreadful. But listen: Don't even consider something so foolish and final as taking your own life. There were times when the author of Ecclesiastes thought that life wasn't worth living, but he didn't quite trust those dark thoughts, and he wouldn't consider acting on those thoughts by committing suicide. No matter how grim life seemed, he kept searching and hoping for something better. So if you've had thoughts that you'd be better off dead, don't believe those thoughts or give in to them. The world can be a nasty place, and loneliness can be awful, but don't give up. Hang on! You may yet find fresh hope. You may yet find the friendship factor.

Obsessed

Before we look at friendship, however, we need to explore a little further why the friendship factor is missing in the lives of so many people. We've seen that oppression is one cause of loneliness. But it's not the only cause. Some of us are lonely not because we're oppressed by others but because we're obsessed with getting more than others. We're caught up in competition. We're so busy trying to get more for ourselves that we don't build relationships or enjoy life.

In verse 4 of Ecclesiastes 4, the Teacher says, "And I saw that all labor and all achievement spring from man's envy of his neighbor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind." If you see someone else's house or car or career, you want the same thing—and more. So you do everything possible to get it. All too often, labor and achievement spring from envy.

This mentality may grow the economy, but it shrivels relationships. When life is one big competition, you're going to end up mighty lonely. You can't be friends with your neighbors; you're too busy envying and trying to surpass them. You can't be friends with fellow workers; you're too busy trying to beat them out for a promotion. You can't be friends with people who are in the same business; you're too busy trying to increase your market share at their expense.

What's the alternative to greed and competition? Should you just sit back and not have any goals or ambitions? No. Ecclesiastes 4:5 says bluntly, "The fool folds his hands and ruins himself." If you're a lazybones, you won't make a living, and you won't make friends, either. Who wants a friend that's too lazy to provide for himself and mooches from others? Even family members can't put up with that for long. People avoid a parasite who tries to live off the work of others.

So, then, what's a healthy approach? Simply this: work to earn what you need, and then be content. The Teacher says in Ecclesiastes 4:6, "Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind." Now there's good advice! If one handful is what you need, don't sit around expecting a handout, but don't go chasing a second handful, either. Instead, work to earn the one handful you need—and then enjoy it. Realize when enough is enough. Work to live, but don't live to work. Then you'll be free to enjoy what you have, and you'll also be the sort of person who can develop healthy relationships with others.

For those who get stuck in a rut of more, more, more, Ecclesiastes 4 offers this observation in verses 7 and 8.

Again I saw something meaningless under the sun: There was a man all alone; he had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth.

"For whom am I toiling," he asked, "and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?" This too is meaningless—a miserable business!

Here he is, Mr. Success! He'll do almost anything to make it big. He tramples competitors. Instead of loving people and using money, he loves money and uses people. He uses acquaintances

to his own advantage. He ignores family concerns. If he has a wife and kids who want him home more, too bad. Why not get a divorce and leave the dead weight behind? Time to move out, move on, and make more money! Then one day it dawns on Mr. Success: he doesn't really love anyone in the whole world, and nobody loves him. If he ever had anyone who cared about him, he doesn't anymore. Now, at last, he finds himself asking: What is my success worth if I don't have anyone to enjoy it with? When Mr. Success dies, the only people who care at all are those who are busy suing each other for a bigger chunk of the estate.

Years ago the Beatles sang, "All the lonely people, where do they all come from?" Ecclesiastes 4 answers by saying that lonely people come from the ranks of the oppressed and also from the ranks of the successful. The kid others pick on is friendless, but so is the class big shot who makes others feel worthless. He may have lots of people around him, but secretly they can't stand him. The same is true in the adult world: the despised and disadvantaged can be lonely, but so can those who have made it to the top. Sometimes loneliness is forced upon us by others; sometimes we bring it upon ourselves; and sometimes it's a combination of both: people aren't befriending us, but we aren't exactly befriending the people around us, either.

But enough about loneliness. Let's see what Ecclesiastes 4 says about the friendship factor.

Two Are Better Than One

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not easily broken. (4:9-12)

There's a saying which summarizes these verses well: "Pleasure shared is pleasure multiplied. Pain shared is pain divided." Let's explore four advantages of the friendship factor.

The first is simply that it's more rewarding to work together than alone. You get more done by combining talents, and you enjoy the results of the work more when you have someone to share the joy and celebration. When is the last time you had a big party all by yourself? Success is empty if you're alone. But it's wonderful when you can share joy with fellow workers or friends or family or spouse. "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their work."

A second advantage of the friendship factor is that you have someone to help you when you're down. Like everyone else, you're going to have times when you stumble and fall, when you end up in a hole that you can't get yourself out of. When that happens, it's great to have a friend who can help you get you back on your feet again. "If one falls down," says Ecclesiastes, "his friend can help him up."

A third advantage of companionship is warmth in a cold situation. If you somehow get trapped outside overnight in cold weather, it's almost impossible to stay warm by yourself. But if you crawl under a blanket with someone else, the two of you can keep each other warm. This isn't just true of cold weather. It's true any time the world around you seems cold and harsh. When you feel exposed and vulnerable, the warmth of someone close to you, the encouragement of someone who cares, can help you both to survive. "If two lie down together, they will keep warm." When two people huddle under a blanket, they're not changing the harsh weather—but they're sure changing their ability to survive it. Having someone close to you may not make the

rest of the world any less cold or harsh, but it helps you to survive and be warm no matter what the rest of the world does.

A fourth advantage of the friendship factor is defense in the face of attack. Friends can stick up for each other and defend each other. A bully likes to pick on a person who is weak and alone, but if weaker people band together, that bully will think twice before causing trouble. A rapist or mugger may attack a person walking alone, but he's much less likely to attack people who are walking together, because they can defend each other. Again, this doesn't just apply to school-house bullies or street crime. It's true in political and even spiritual affairs. There is strength in banding together. Two are better than one, and three are even better. "Though one may be overpowered," says Ecclesiastes, "two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not easily broken." When people stand together and stay together and pray together, they become mighty, and their enemies—even Satan and his demons—are driven back.

What a difference the friendship factor makes! In a world where selfish striving for success comes up empty, friends work together and enjoy "a good reward." In a world with so many pitfalls and problems, friends can help each other up again. In a world that is often cold and harsh, friends can stay close and warm each other with encouragement and love. In a world that is often cruel and hostile, friends can defend each other. In a world that can seem grim and hardly worth living in, friendship can make the difference between joy and despair.

Designed for Relationships

The most basic truth about the friendship factor is simply this: You and I are not designed to be solitary individuals; we're designed for relationships. We're designed above all for a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, and we're also designed for relationships with others. The heart of being human, the key to surviving and even thriving, is to live in love: loving and being loved by God, loving and being loved by people whom God puts in our lives. In the Bible Jesus says,

"My command is this: Love each other as I have commanded you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants... Instead I have called you friends" (John 15:12-15).

The supreme friendship is friendship with the Lord. Believe that Jesus laid down his life for you, and you will see just how much he loves you. Ecclesiastes 4 spoke of people who were oppressed and had no comforter. But that was written before Jesus came. There is a Comforter. Jesus knows what it's like to be oppressed and alone. He befriends the friendless and sends his Holy Spirit as a Comforter to all who call on him. So believe in Jesus. Trust that he will never leave you nor forsake you. Resolve never to forsake him, and join him in his great cause. Why go through life friendless and defeated by trouble? Why not say with the Bible,

We are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:37-39).

That unbreakable relationship of love, that everlasting friendship with the Lord, makes a great foundation for building other friendships. Once Jesus is your friend, you don't have to sit around lonely and friendless, feeling sorry for yourself. Instead of wondering why no one will befriend you, pray to your friend Jesus, and then start looking for ways to befriend others. Often the best way to make a friend is to be a friend. This is true especially where you see people suf-

fering oppression or trouble: a friend in need is a friend indeed. When, with God's help, you can stand with people in their time of need, you may find some wonderful relationships developing as a result.

And remember: no matter how well life is going for you, don't get so focused on your own goals and success that you neglect relationships. Your relationship with God is worth more than the whole world. One good friend is worth more than any amount of money. A happy marriage is worth more than any promotion. Relationships matter more than status. So treasure the Lord Jesus, and treasure the people he's brought into your life.

No Substitute for Friendship

Ecclesiastes 4 ends with a reminder that position and popularity are no substitute for true friendship.

Better a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer knows how to take warning. The youth may have come from prison to the kingship, or he may have been born in poverty within his kingdom. I saw that all who lived and walked under the sun followed the youth, the king's successor. There was no end to all the people who were before them. But those who came later were not pleased with the successor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind (4:13-16).

When a politician or business executive makes it to the top, he may leave behind his true friends who can speak to him honestly. He's too important for them now! He surrounds himself with yes-men who tell him only what he wants to hear. After awhile he loses touch with what's really happening and with what people care about. His prominent position fools him into thinking he doesn't need the advice and helpful criticism of true friends. That's a formula for failure.

People would rather be led by a less experienced person who knows how to listen than by a prominent and experienced person who has forgotten how to listen. An intelligent, energetic, friendly person has the best chance of success. However, even a person like that should realize that success is fragile and popularity is fleeting. The new kid on the block replaces the old, out-of-touch leader, and everybody is glad about it. But before long they are complaining about the new guy.

It happens to politicians and business people all the time. One moment they're stepping to the top of the ladder; the next, they're over the hill. Sometimes it's the person's own fault: he allows power and success to make him complacent and stubborn. But sometimes, it's just the timing. Things change. Today's up-and-coming stars are tomorrow's has-beens. Prominent positions come and go. Popularity rises and falls. But true friendship remains constant. Even if you lose your position and popularity, you haven't lost all that much if you still have your friends and your family and your God. Be true to these relationships when you're climbing the ladder, and they'll be true to you when you're over the hill.

The upshot of all this is that no matter who you are, you need the friendship factor. If you're poor or oppressed, you need the friendship factor. If you're moving up in life, you need the friendship factor. If you've made it to the top, you need the friendship factor. And if you're over the hill, you need the friendship factor.

You need to know the Lord Jesus as your dearest friend. No matter how low you might be, you need his arms beneath you. No matter how high you might rise, you need his wisdom over you and guiding you. You need to know Jesus as your friend, and you also need the friendship of other people. You need faith companions; you need family; you need the fellowship of a church

where you can be friends with friends of Jesus. Two are better than one, and three are better still—especially when one of the three is the Lord Jesus. So put relationships first. Love the Lord with all that is in you, and love others as God has loved you. And live each day in the joyful awareness that you are never alone. Jesus promises his friends, “Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20).

Worship Warnings (Ecclesiastes 5:1-7)

Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Ecclesiastes 5:1

As a boy going to church, I sometimes entertained myself by watching other churchgoers. I remember watching a well dressed woman with perfect hair reach into her purse and pull out a file and go to work on her fingernails. Many a Sunday she spent half the sermon filing her nails. I don't know if she heard what the preacher was saying, but I do know she always had lovely nails.

I remember watching a rugged man who did a lot of nodding—but not necessarily to show agreement with the sermon. His eyes were often closed—but not necessarily in prayer. The man spent a lot of time sleeping. He just couldn't seem to stay awake in church, no matter how hard he tried. It was fun to observe his body slouching, his eyelids falling, his head drooping. Then suddenly he would jerk awake, banging his head on the bench. He would sit straight and try his best to pay attention, but before long he would be nodding off again.

I remember beeping watches, bawling babies, bickering kids, babbling teenagers, and other sights and sounds of Sunday church. Of course, there were people who focused on God and whose hearts were moved by reverence and love, but there was also a lot of other stuff going on. Some of it was the sort of thing that's bound to happen whenever ordinary people gather together. But there were also times when people's behavior made me wonder how serious we really were about worshipping God.

What would happen if the God we were supposedly worshipping actually showed up in tangible form at a worship service? Would I do anything differently than I do now? Or, to put it another way, do I now worship as carefully and reverently as I would if I could actually see the Lord right there? How serious am I, really, about the God I am supposedly there to worship?

All too often we worshipers seem to forget that we are in the presence of a holy and awesome God. Even when we pay attention in church, what are we really paying attention to? Nowadays many churches are going out of their way to make worship more inviting and exciting. Preachers (myself included) try to weave something colorful or humorous into our sermons to make it easier for people to stay interested. But interested in whom? The Lord God, or a clever preacher? Music leaders want lively, fast-paced songs to create a sense of enthusiasm. But enthusiasm about what? The mighty acts of God, or the fun of singing a bouncy tune? Sometimes it seems as though worship isn't really worship at all but just a professionally planned event. People go to church out of habit, expect to be finished on time, and consider it a success if a good time was had by all.

Many people have kicked the church habit. They don't take God seriously enough to go to church and worship him, and that's a problem. But what if our biggest problem isn't those people who would rather stay in bed or cut the grass or go to the lake or play golf than go to church? What if the biggest problem is all those people who *do* go to church but aren't really serious about God and don't seem to know what they're getting into? Author Annie Dillard writes:

Why do people in churches seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? ... Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up batches of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash

helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake some day and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return (*Teaching a Stone to Talk*).

Danger Zone

Do you realize that when you go to church you are entering a danger zone? It's like being close to a high voltage electrical wire: it's a power that can do many wonderful things, but if you get careless, it can destroy you in a moment. The God who created electricity is far more powerful—and dangerous—than any high voltage current. Get careless around him, and it could cost you. Trifle with him, and it could destroy you. The place of worship is a danger zone. So get serious. Watch your step!

The writer of Ecclesiastes was a careful observer. He was especially quick to note things that were empty and meaningless, so he couldn't help noticing the casual attitudes and careless words that many people brought into the place of worship. He knew that not only was this kind of worship hollow, it could be fatal. Ecclesiastes 5:1-7 is a warning to watch out when we worship.

Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know what they do wrong. Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few.

When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it. Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. And do not protest to the temple messenger, "My vow was a mistake." Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands? Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. Therefore stand in awe of God.

With those words Ecclesiastes puts up two major warning signs around the danger zone of worship. The first sign says, TAKE GOD SERIOUSLY. Get serious about this Lord who is so much higher and greater than anything you can possibly imagine. The second warning sign says, TAKE YOURSELF SERIOUSLY. In particular, take your promises seriously. Say what you mean and mean what you say, because God will hold you to it. Let's think some more about each of these two warning signs.

Take God Seriously

First, TAKE GOD SERIOUSLY. "God is in heaven and you are on earth," says Ecclesiastes. Never forget it. You are a small creature on a tiny planet in one corner of a universe so vast it boggles the mind; God is the all-powerful One who created and controls this enormous universe using barely a fraction of his infinite power. You are a sinful person on an earth corrupted by evil; God is the holy Lord of heaven, radiating a purity so fierce and fiery that no mortal can see him and live.

What kind of worship is fitting for such a God? The Bible says, "Worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness; tremble before him, all the earth" (Psalm 96:9). "Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling" (Psalm 2:11). "...worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for 'our God is a consuming fire'" (Hebrews 12:29).

Scripture tells terrifying stories of what happens when worshippers get careless around God. Early in Israel's history, God appointed Aaron and his sons to be priests. But Aaron's two older sons, Nadab and Abihu, decided to do things their own way. They offered incense in a way God

had not commanded. “So fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord” (Leviticus 10:2). No wonder Ecclesiastes 5 says not “to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know what they do wrong.” God commands us to worship him according to his Word. If we decide to do things our own way and come to God with whatever kind of worship we dream up, we “offer the sacrifice of fools.” And that can be fatal.

Another lesson in taking God seriously came from the ark of the covenant. The ark was an ornately decorated, sacred box which was made at the time of Moses and Aaron. It contained the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments, and it marked the presence of God in a tangible way. The Lord gave strict commands for how the ark was to be treated, and it was fatal not to take those commands seriously. Once a group of people got curious and decided to open the ark and look into it. It was the last thing they ever saw on earth. God struck them dead. The cost of curiosity and carelessness was seventy corpses. Those who saw what happened were terrified and asked, “Who can stand in the presence of the Lord, this holy God” (1 Samuel 6:19-20)?

After the death and resurrection of Jesus, the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper became the special, physical token of the Lord’s presence. Thanks to the saving power of Jesus, the Lord’s Supper is far more accessible to us than the ark of the covenant ever was. The ark could not be touched or looked into, while the Lord’s Supper may be seen and touched and even tasted and swallowed. What a privilege! But it’s a privilege that can’t be taken for granted or handled carelessly. “Therefore,” says the Bible, “whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord.” He “eats and drinks judgement on himself.” The Bible says that there were many people in the church of Corinth who got sick, and some even died, because of their obnoxious handling of the Lord’s Supper (1 Corinthians 11:27-30). Maybe churches should post a warning label near the bread and wine of holy communion: **HARMFUL OR FATAL IF SWALLOWED IN AN UNWORTHY MANNER.**

But maybe none of this is getting through to you. Maybe you’re thinking that these examples of God’s judgment are just stories from long ago. You prefer a kinder, gentler, more relaxed religion. You’ve never seen anybody struck dead for being careless in church, and you figure that church services should be designed around what people happen to like. Who’s to say that God minds? Maybe God likes it!

But it’s disastrous to start with our own preferences and then assume that if God doesn’t punish us immediately, he must be thinking pretty much the way we do. In Psalm 50 God says, “These things you have done and I kept silent; you thought I was altogether like you. But I will rebuke you and accuse you to your face. Consider this, you who forget God, or I will tear you in pieces, with none to rescue” (Psalm 50:21-22).

God refuses to be taken lightly. So take him seriously. Watch your step when you worship. In general it’s best to keep your ears open and your mouth shut as much as possible when you’re in God’s presence. As Ecclesiastes 5 puts it, “Go near to listen ... Do not be quick with your mouth... God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few.” It’s wiser to be a humble, obedient listener than a blabbermouth.

Guard your steps when you enter the danger zone. Before you come to worship, clear your mind and close your mouth. Clear your mind of distractions and daydreams so that you can focus on the God of Scripture, the God who reveals himself in Jesus. Close your mouth so that you can hear God’s Word from Scripture and from a preacher who proclaims biblical truth.

Our words of praise and prayer and promise have a place in worship, but only as a response to God, not something we come up with on our own. The beginning of worship and the heart of worship is to be reverent before God and receptive to his Word. God says, “Be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10). “This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word (Isaiah 66:2). Take God and his Word with utmost seriousness. Only then do your words begin to be worth anything at all. Only then are your prayers and praises and promises truly a response to God and his truth, rather than foolish daydreams and empty babble.

Take Yourself Seriously

The first warning sign in Ecclesiastes 5 says, TAKE GOD SERIOUSLY. The second warning sign says, TAKE YOURSELF SERIOUSLY. Now, taking yourself seriously doesn’t mean you’re a conceited, self-important person with no sense of humor. But it does mean that you’re not careless or flippant, that you choose your actions and words carefully.

There’s a connection between how seriously we take God and how seriously we take ourselves, between how seriously we take God’s Word and how seriously we take our words. We’re living in a time when promises are taken lightly, sometimes even by church people. Why is that? The answer is simple: we take promises lightly because we take God lightly. Show me a church where more and more people are breaking their marriage promises and getting divorced, and I’ll show you a church where worship has either become a dreary formality or else a circus side-show. Show me a society where people won’t keep their word without legions of lawyers armed with legal contracts, and I’ll show you a society which does not tremble before the living God and his commands. When worship is weightless, words become worthless. And life becomes hollow and hellish.

Ecclesiastes 5 warns us to take God seriously and then to take ourselves seriously—because God takes us seriously. He hears what we say, and he holds us to it. Too often our worship and our words focus on our own changing feelings rather than on the changeless majesty of God and his changeless Word and the changelessness of promises made in his presence. When we’re feeling-oriented rather than God-oriented, we may say one thing when we’re feeling a certain way but then do something entirely different the moment our feelings change. We say, “Oh, I didn’t really mean what I said before. That’s how I felt back then, but I’ve changed my mind. It was a mistake.”

Not so fast, says Ecclesiastes. If you make a promise, you’d better keep it. God has no use for fools who break their word. You’re better off saying nothing than saying something and then not doing it. Don’t let your mouth lead you into sin. Don’t try to weasel out of a promise or say you’ve changed your mind. “Why should God be angry at what you say,” asks Ecclesiastes, “and destroy the work of your hands?” (5:6). Jesus says “men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned” (Matthew 12:36-37).

The Lord is watching whenever you worship, and he is listening whenever you speak. So say what you mean, and mean what you say. This certainly applies to the words you speak in church. When you make promises at baptism, God holds you to those promises. When you say that you will follow Jesus and live by the Bible, the Lord holds you accountable. When you sing a hymn that says, “Take my silver and my gold,” God expects you to put your money where your mouth is. When you make wedding vows to stick with someone for better or worse until death, God expects you to keep those vows. It’s not always easy to keep promises. Sometimes it’s hard. Some-

times it's even painful. But the Bible says in Psalm 15 that a godly person "keeps his oath even when it hurts."

And let's not limit this only to what we do and say in church. There's no doubt, of course, that on a day set apart as the Lord's day and in a place set apart as the Lord's house, worship and words are surely important. But is God any less present at any other place or time? Every place, every moment is his. All of life is lived before the face of God and bears something of the weight of his glory. So, then, everything we do should be an act of worship to God. Every word we say should be trustworthy and true.

If you say you'll help someone, or you say you'll do something, then do it. Don't say, "Well, it wasn't really a vow or a promise. I wasn't in church and I didn't swear by anything or make a formal oath." Jesus says that if you're a child of God, you shouldn't need oaths at all. Your word is your bond. Your yes means yes, and your no means no (Matthew 6:33-37). Treat every word you speak and every promise you make as a sacred obligation; you'll be far less talkative and far more truthful.

Rejoice With Trembling

Take God seriously, and take yourself seriously. Live life as though you're in a danger zone—because you are. Does that mean you always have to be grim? No, seriousness isn't the same thing as grimness. A danger zone is a place to be careful, but that doesn't mean it's ugly or unpleasant. Some of the most beautiful and exciting and enjoyable places in the world are also dangerous—mountains and waterfalls, for example. In fact, the danger is often part of the awe you feel, and the awe is part of the delight. But even in your delight, you still need to watch your step. So too with the worship of God: when you take God seriously, you don't have to be grim, but you do have to be careful. Rejoice in God's awesome reality, but don't forget to watch your step. Be joyful and enthusiastic in worship, but never lose your sense of awe. "Rejoice with trembling," says the Bible (Psalm 2:11). Life in the danger zone can be wonderful, but stay alert to the infinite majesty of God and the importance of your own words. Otherwise your worship becomes dreamy and deathly, and your words become babbling, blathering, yammering, jabbering claptrap. "Much dreaming and many words are meaningless," says Ecclesiastes 5:7. "Therefore stand in awe of God."

Wouldn't life be empty and boring if there were nothing at stake? If the god you worship is a soft, sweet marshmallow, and if the promises you speak are forgotten like a dream, then life is all vanity, meaningless. The thrill of living before an awesome God and the challenge of keeping your word even when it hurts—these things give excitement and purpose to life. The people who are most serious about God and about keeping their word—these are the people for whom life is a wonder and a joy.

And these are the people who really know and love Jesus. Only when you tremble with fear that God is in heaven and you are on earth will you tremble with joy at the knowledge that God came down from heaven to earth and become one of us in the person of Jesus. Only when you know the value of promises can you put your faith in the promises of God fulfilled in Jesus. Only when you know how horrible it is to dishonor God and break your word can you appreciate the price Jesus paid on the cross to take those sins away. Only when you revere the God of heaven will you rejoice that an earthling like you can have access to his heavenly splendor, thanks to the risen Christ.

"Therefore stand in awe of God."

What Money Can't Buy (Ecclesiastes 5:8-Ecclesiastes 6)

When God gives any man wealth and possessions and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work—this is a gift of God. Ecclesiastes 5:19

There's an old comedy routine where an armed robber walks up to a comedian, shoves a gun in his ribs and snarls, "Your money or your life!" There's a long pause. The comedian does nothing. He says nothing. The robber nudges him with the gun and impatiently asks: "Well?" The comedian hesitates a moment longer, then says, "Don't rush me. I'm thinking about it."

That's how attached some of us are to money. Given a choice between our money or our life, it's hard to decide. If a robber pointed a gun and asked for our wallet, we'd probably give him the money instead of losing our life; but in other ways, we have in fact chosen money over life. Some choose what career to pursue and what job offer to accept based not on our life's dreams but on what pays the most money. Some move from one place to another not because it will be a better life for their family but simply because if it will mean a pay increase. Some worry more about property values in their neighborhood than about bad moral values being taught in their school district. When faced with the question, "Your money or your life?" too many of us have chosen money, not wholesome and abundant life.

Is it possible to really get a life instead of merely getting more money? Yes, it certainly is. The Bible offers an extended discussion of money matters in Ecclesiastes 5 and 6, and in the heart of that discussion it says: "When God gives any man wealth and possessions and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work—this is a gift of God." In order to reach that point and accept God's gift of happiness, we first need to let it sink in that there are some things money can't buy.

Money Problems

One thing money can't buy is a *fair system*. Money, we think, is the fuel that runs our lives. Money makes the world go round: the structures of society and government are based on money. The question of all questions is, "What's in it for me?" It's no shock, then, to see corporate bosses and even government officials who care more about their own financial interests than about the people under them. The Bible speaks of this in Ecclesiastes 5 when it says,

If you see the poor oppressed in a district, and justice and rights denied, do not be surprised at such things; for one official is eyed by a higher one, and over them both are higher still.

The increase from the land is taken by all; the king himself profits from the fields. (5:8-9)

Social and political structures are often shaped more by money than by what's best for the life of society. Each person along the chain of command wants a cut of the profits. In some societies officials take blatant bribes. In other societies they take "campaign contributions" and offer friendly legislation or government contracts in return. But either way, it's people with money who have access to government and call the shots. They follow their own version of the golden rule: those with the gold make the rules. Business leaders and politicians may have started their career with high ideals for public service, but many end up letting money determine all their decisions. Love of money corrupts the system; money cannot buy a fair system

Another thing money can't buy is *contentment*. Ecclesiastes 5:10 says, "Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income. This too is

meaningless.” Have you ever had poison ivy or some other kind of itchy rash? You feel like you have to scratch that itch to feel better, but the more you scratch, the more the itch spreads and becomes worse. You scratch harder and harder, you may even draw blood and hurt yourself, and still you keep scratching. You can’t stop. So it is with the itch for money: the more you scratch, the more you itch. The more money you make, the more money you want. You’re never satisfied. Enough is never enough. Money can’t buy contentment.

Something else money can’t buy is *friendship*. Money can bring you lots of people who pretend to be your friends, but how many of them are more interested in your money than in you as a person? The more money you make, the more parasites you attract. Verse 11 of Ecclesiastes 5 says, “As goods increase, so do those who consume them. And what benefit are they to the owner except to feast his eyes on them?” A woman wins the lottery, and suddenly she’s got long-lost relatives and friends coming out of the woodwork. An athlete gets a huge paycheck, and suddenly he’s got an entourage of groupies trailing him wherever he goes, all wanting a piece of his fame and fortune. Someone builds a booming business, and instantly he becomes the darling of lawyers, accountants, investment advisers, political and charitable fund raisers, and people with a thousand other ways to get some of his money. Once you get rich, it’s hard to know whether people are interested in you—or just your money. Wealth attracts greedy parasites as meat attracts maggots.

A fourth thing money can’t buy is *peace of mind*. Money lovers have a hard time with worry. We might think that an ordinary working person with bills to pay and almost no money to spare would worry more than the person who is financially set for life. Not so! Verse 12 of Ecclesiastes 5 says, “The sleep of a laborer is sweet, whether he eats little or much, but the abundance of a rich man permits him no sleep.” An ordinary guy who puts in a hard day’s work, eats a sandwich, and lives in a humble home can relax and sleep at night. Meanwhile, the tycoon tosses and turns. The head of one of the world’s most successful corporations wrote a book awhile back. Did he title it *How Success Freed Me From Worry*? No, he called his book *Only the Paranoid Survive*. He doesn’t say how relaxed and satisfied he is with his fortune. No, he worries constantly that some competitor will catch up with his company or even get ahead. Money can’t buy peace of mind.

Closely related to this is something else money can’t buy: *security*. When you’re a money lover, you can’t live with money, and you can’t live without it. In verses 13 and 14 of Ecclesiastes 5, the Teacher says, “I have seen a grievous evil under the sun: wealth hoarded to the harm of its owner, or wealth lost through some misfortune, so that when he has a son there is nothing left for him.” If you hoard money like a miser, if you’re always focusing on your finances, you miss out on many great things in life that are unrelated to money. Why be a miser? Add a “y” to the word miser, and what do you get? Misery! Money makes a miser miserable, and to make matters worse, the possibility of losing his money makes him even more miserable. Thieves can strike so quickly, markets can change so rapidly, currency can lose value so suddenly that no wealth is safe. The Bible says, “Do not wear yourself out to get rich; have the wisdom to show restraint. Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone, for they will surely sprout wings and fly off to the sky like an eagle” (Proverbs 23:4–5). A fortune can fly away in a moment.

That brings us to the most important thing money can’t buy: *life after death*. Even if your money doesn’t fly away and leave you behind, you will fly away and leave your money behind.

The story is told of an angel who visited a businessman and promised to grant him one request. The man thought for a moment, then smiled and said, “I’d like the financial section of a

newspaper from one year in the future.” His request was granted. Eagerly he scanned the future stock prices, marking the biggest winners, gloating over how much money he’d make by investing in them. Then he glanced across the page. Something caught his eye. It was his own picture. Beneath the picture was his obituary. The man would be dead, unable to enjoy his wealth.

Of all the problems money lovers face, this is the biggest: death. All the money in the world can’t prevent death from coming, and when it comes, you can’t keep one penny of what you’ve piled up. Listen to verses 15–17 of Ecclesiastes 5.

Naked a man comes from his mother’s womb, and as he comes, so he departs. He takes nothing from his labor that he can carry in his hand. This too is a grievous evil: As a man comes, so he departs, and what does he gain, since he toils for the wind? All his days he eats in darkness, with great frustration and anger.

Ecclesiastes doesn’t say that when you die you take nothing with you; it says you take *nothing you can carry in your hand*. But you do take something: you take yourself, your character, and your relationship to God—or the lack thereof. These are the things that last beyond death. These are also the things that make life worth living. And these are things that money can’t buy.

If it sometimes looks as though success depends more on finance than fairness, more on money than morals, look again. If money is all you’ve got, you’ve got nothing—except maybe an itch for more money, some parasites wanting a handout, sleepless paranoia, misery with money or without it, and utter bankruptcy in the face of death. If you love money, you can’t live well, and you certainly can’t die well, because the most important things in this life and the life to come are things money can’t buy.

Gladness of Heart

Ecclesiastes doesn’t stop there. It goes on to talk about the kind of person who really knows how to live and enjoy life “because God keeps him occupied with gladness of heart” (5:20). What a difference between someone blessed with God’s gladness and the kind of person who has money but is unhappy while he lives and unmourned when he dies! In Ecclesiastes 5 the Bible lists some problems of money lovers and then describes a person who really loves life, who is satisfied and full of gladness. The biblical writer says,

Then I realized that it is good and proper for a man to eat and drink, and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given him—for this is his lot. Moreover, when God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work—this is a gift of God. He seldom reflects on the days of his life, because God keeps him occupied with gladness of heart. (5:18-20)

What a huge difference God makes! The money lover has problems galore, but the person with God in his life is delighted to be alive. Sure, he knows that life isn’t always fair and that the poor sometimes get a raw deal from people with money and power. But in spite of all that, he doesn’t get discouraged or down. He relishes his meals; he does his work with gusto; any money or possessions he has are a blessing and not a burden. How is that possible? “God keeps him occupied with gladness of heart.” He’s too busy enjoying God and his gifts, too busy carrying out his God-given tasks, too busy making the most of life, to get bogged down in greed or gloom.

You see, there are certain things only God can give, things money can’t buy. Money can’t buy happiness in this life and it certainly can’t buy eternal life. When you die and stand before God’s judgment, your money won’t be worth the paper it’s printed on. The Bible says, “Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death” (Proverbs 11:4).

There is only one payment which can cover our debt to God, one payment which can give us life now and forever: the perfect righteousness and sacrificial death of Jesus. God's Word says, "It was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ (1 Peter 1:18-19). Existence without God is "an empty way of life," what Ecclesiastes calls vanity, meaningless. Money can't buy your way out of that empty way of life. But Jesus' blood, poured out when he was nailed to a cross, can pay the price of your sins and purchase the gift of eternal life for you.

Money can't buy eternal life with God, and it can't buy the right to have God's life within us right now. God's fullness of life comes to us through his Holy Spirit, and money can't buy the Holy Spirit. The Bible tells about Simon the Sorcerer, a man who offered money to the apostle Peter for the right to receive the Holy Spirit. But Peter rebuked him: "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money... Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you" (Acts 8:18-24). It's not money but the living Lord Jesus Christ who can give you the Holy Spirit as his free gift. The Holy Spirit fills you with God's life both now and forever.

When you have that gift of divine life, you have a source of joy that never runs dry. God keeps you occupied with gladness of heart, as Ecclesiastes puts it. You can "rejoice in the Lord always," as another Bible verse puts it (Philippians 4:4). If you're a child of God, you can enjoy food, fun, family, even money, as gifts from God. And when you lack some of these gifts, you can still have a joy that nothing can take away. God keeps you "occupied with gladness of heart" over his love for you and your eternal destiny with him.

Having It All?

Now, take this joyous life of faith, and contrast it with a person who "has it all"—except faith in Jesus. Step from Ecclesiastes 5 into Ecclesiastes 6, and you find a portrait of someone who has everything he ever wanted. He has money, he has fame, family, and long life—but he still isn't happy. Why not? Because although he has everything he ever wanted, he never wanted the one thing that could make him truly happy: the life of God. God gives him everything his heart desires—but his heart doesn't desire the one thing it needs most: God. The Teacher says,

I have seen another evil under the sun, and it weighs heavily on men: God gives a man wealth, possessions and honor, so that he lacks nothing his heart desires, but God does not enable him to enjoy them, and a stranger enjoys them instead. This is meaningless, a grievous evil.

A man may have a hundred children and live many years; yet no matter how long he lives, if he cannot enjoy his prosperity and does not receive a proper burial, I say that a still-born child is better off than he. It comes without meaning, it departs in darkness, and in darkness its name is shrouded. Though it never saw the sun or knew anything, it has more rest than does that man—even if he lives a thousand years twice over but fails to enjoy his prosperity. Do not all go to the same place? (6:1-6)

Ecclesiastes says that it's better to be a stillborn baby than to exist to a ripe old age as a spiritual stillborn. If you're a spiritual stillborn, if you don't have God's gift of spiritual life, you can't live well or die well. You may think that if you're unhappy, it's because you don't have enough money or because not enough people appreciate you or because your family situation isn't what you want or because your life is too short. But just suppose you had a billion dollars,

plus a million admirers, plus a hundred sweet kids, plus two thousand years until your death. Would that help? No, says Ecclesiastes, it wouldn't change the basic fact that life without God isn't worth living.

Jesus made the same point when he asked, "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?" (Mark 8:36). If God gives you every last thing your heart desires, but you don't desire him, you will be forever empty. The difference between a worthwhile life and a wasted life is whether or not you have God's gift of new life. If you don't have God's life in you, if you're a spiritual stillborn, then what you need more than anything else is to be born again.

Greedy for God

If you have piles of money but don't have God, you have nothing. If you don't have money but do have God, you have everything. If you believe that money makes the world go round, if you think that money is the key to satisfying your desires, then you will miss out on life. But if genuine, joyful life is what you want, then don't be greedy for money. Be greedy for God. Seek him. Pray that his life will live in you.

Forsake the supremacy of money and trust in the supremacy of God. Jesus said, "No one can serve two masters... You cannot serve both God and Money" (Matthew 6:24). Is money supreme or is God? Would you rather be driven by an appetite that will never be satisfied, or rest in the rule of the God who can satisfy your soul's deepest longings? Ecclesiastes 6 says,

All man's efforts are for his mouth, yet his appetite is never satisfied. What advantage has a wise man over a fool? What does a poor man gain by knowing how to conduct himself before others? Better what the eye sees than the roving of the appetite. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. (6:7-9)

If your main comfort is your portfolio, and if your main form of recreation is shopping, you're never going to be happy. Stop trying to earn or spend your way to happiness. You may think it's unrealistic not to go along with a system where money is the answer to everything, but what's really unrealistic is not to go along with a system where God is in charge of everything. In the closing verses of Ecclesiastes 6, the Bible says,

Whatever exists has already been named, and what man is has been known; no man can contend with one who is stronger than he. The more the words, the less the meaning, and how does that profit anyone? For who knows what is good for a man in life, during the few and meaningless days he passes through like a shadow? Who can tell him what will happen under the sun after he is gone? (6:10-12)

God names and knows all that exists, including the heart of man. God is Almighty. He is in control. Money doesn't make the world go round. God makes the world go round. The more we ignore God or resist his ways, the more frustrated we become. The more we talk and argue against his commands and his promises, the emptier our words become. Who knows what is good in life? God knows! Who can show us what is going to happen after we die? God can! What's good in life? Being a new creation in Christ and tasting his eternal joy.

So one last time, which will it be: your money or your life? Jesus says, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth... But store up for yourselves treasure in heaven... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:19-21).

Set your heart on God and on heavenly treasure; then you'll also have a new perspective on earthly treasure. You'll be able to enjoy it, share it, and use it to add to your heavenly treasure. The Bible says,

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life (1 Timothy 6:17-19).