

MAKING THE MOST OF LIFE (ECCLESIASTES 7-12) **By David Feddes**

The School of Hard Knocks (Ecclesiastes 7)

When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider: God has made the one as well as the other. Ecclesiastes 7:14

What times in your life have done the most to make you a better person: the easy times when everything was going your way, or the tough times, the crisis points, the hardships? Be honest now. I suspect most of us would have to admit that many of our deepest changes and moments of growth have come during times of stress and trouble and humiliation and heartbreak.

Some folks claim that God has nothing to do with the bad times in life, that only the happy times come from God. But that's not what the Bible says. Right at the center of Ecclesiastes 7, the chapter we're going to look at on today's program, comes this statement: "When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider: God has made the one as well as the other" (7:14). So don't try to avoid thinking about the hard side of life, and don't pretend God has nothing to do with it.

God often teaches us things in the school of hard knocks that we don't learn anywhere else. And what's the toughest and most effective teacher in the entire school of hard knocks. Death. The deepest, wisest people around are those who face death squarely instead of trying not to think about it. Listen to the first four verses of Ecclesiastes 7.

A good name is better than fine perfume, and the day of death better than the day of birth. It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of every man; the living should take this to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, because a sad face is good for the heart. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure.

In other words, if you're smart, you won't spend all your time on movies and parties and escapist entertainment. You won't avoid places that remind you of sickness and death. You'll visit people in hospitals and nursing homes and funeral homes. You'll do it for their sake but also for your own sake. A party tickles your feelings, but a funeral grips your heart. It moves you to think about the big picture. What matters most isn't whether you're a cute baby at the time you're born, but what your life amounts to by the time you're buried. So don't be so shallow that your highest goal is to have fun and be in style and wear the right perfume. Look ahead to your own death. The name you build over a lifetime, the identity you carry with you into eternity, matters far more than the momentary smell of perfume.

I know what it's like as a nineteen-year-old to crawl out of a wrecked car, knowing how close I came to being killed. I realized as never before that my life is a precious and fragile gift and that I had better make the most of it. I know what it's like as a young father to visit a hospital for months on end and then to hold my own dead child in my arms and dig her grave with my own hands. Never have I felt so strongly the desire for eternal life and for Christ's return, and never will I take any of my living children for granted. I've heard people with terminal illnesses express faith and longing for God that were stronger than when their bodies were healthy.

Having seen and heard and experienced these things, I'm still not nearly as wise as I should be, but I'm wiser than I would be if I had never walked into a hospital or nursing home or funeral

parlor. Looking squarely at sickness and death isn't fun, but it clears away the fluff on which we waste so much time and energy and forces us to focus on what really counts.

Sadness often does more than gladness to make us better people. That's true of places we'd rather not go and things we'd rather not endure, and it's also true of words we'd rather not hear. We don't enjoy being confronted about something we need to change, but sometimes that's exactly what we need. "It is better to heed a wise man's rebuke," says Ecclesiastes, "than to listen to the song of fools. Like the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of fools. This too is meaningless" (7:5-6).

If a friend or spouse insists that you have a problem with alcohol, you might rather just listen to the laughter of your drinking buddies—but it's better to listen to a wise rebuke than to the song of fools. When someone at work points to problems in your performance, you may not enjoy hearing it, but that rebuke might make you a better worker and save your job. Flattery makes you *feel* better and *become* worse; an honest rebuke makes you *feel* worse and *become* better.

We can learn valuable lessons from hard times and hard-hitting words. But the learning doesn't come automatically. Hardship can improve us, but it can also make us more depraved. Criticism can set us straight, but it can also make us more stubborn. Trouble can bring out the best in us if we trust God to mold and shape us, but it can bring out the worst if we ignore God and follow our own sick strategies for coping. As we read on in Ecclesiastes 7, we see four such strategies: dishonesty, shortsightedness, anger, and wishful thinking.

Verse 7 speaks of dishonesty: "Extortion turns a wise man into a fool, and a bribe corrupts the heart." If you don't have faith, a harsh world can make you cynical and dishonest. If you fear people more than you fear God, you may cave in to threats and extortion and do what you know is wrong. If tough times make you feel you're not getting as much as you deserve, you may try to get money any way you can, even if it means corruption and taking bribes. Dishonesty is one way of coping in a harsh world.

A second bad reaction to hardship is to be shortsighted. Verse 8 reminds us, "The end of a matter is better than the beginning, and patience is better than pride." Patience waits on God's timing; pride wants it all at the beginning. If you live by faith, the school of hard knocks makes you more patient and more sure than ever that some things are worth waiting for. But if you're proud, delayed gratification makes no sense to you. You don't want to wait for anything: you don't want to wait for marriage to have sex; you don't want to wait for heaven to enjoy perfect happiness. Why should you have to wait? Why should you be denied anything, even temporarily? With pride you want what you want, and you want it now. If you have to go through things you don't like, you get more impatient and shortsighted than ever.

A third bad way of coping with hard knocks is to get angry. Verse 9 says, "Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools." When you go through something painful, don't flare up right away. You may want to blame other people for your problems; you may get angry at life in general; you may even rage at God. But if you're too quick to anger, you won't learn the lessons you need to learn, and you'll be a fool.

A fourth sick strategy for coping with tough times is wishful thinking. Verse 10 says, "Do not say, 'Why were the old days better than these?' For it is not wise to ask such questions." It's been said that the good old days are a combination of a bad memory and a good imagination. Often the good old days weren't nearly as good as we make them out to be. But even if your past really was happier than your present, the fact is that you're not living back then. You're living now. Learn what God is teaching you now. No more living in the past!

If you're going to learn from the school of hard knocks, don't give in to dishonesty, short-sightedness, anger, or wishful thinking. Instead, seek wisdom. Ecclesiastes says, "Wisdom, like an inheritance, is a good thing and benefits those who see the sun. Wisdom is a shelter like money is a shelter, but the advantage of knowledge is this: that wisdom preserves the life of its possessor" (7:11-12). Money can be useful, but true wisdom can enrich and protect your very life, even through hardship.

And what is true wisdom? It is to see your life in the light of God's rule over you. Listen to verses 13 and 14, the center of Ecclesiastes 7. The Teacher says, "Consider what God has done: Who can straighten what he has made crooked? When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider: God has made the one as well as the other. Therefore a man cannot discover anything about his future."

Even if you can't know what the future holds, you can know who holds the future. In the school of hard knocks, the heart of wisdom is the awareness that God is in charge and that good times and bad times alike are under his control. This wisdom helps us to know our limits and to depend on him. God sends enough twists and turns into our lives to keep us from thinking that we're on a straight track to a future we've got all mapped out. There's a lot we don't know or control, but God knows and controls it all.

Once we know the truth about God, the school of hard knocks can teach us a lot about ourselves. At first we may not like what we learn, but we need to face it. The second half of Ecclesiastes 7 shows that the entire human race is limited and sinful.

When you believe that God is in charge, you might be tempted to think that you can measure up to God's standards and guarantee a happy life for yourself by doing everything right: clear thinking and clean living guarantees God's favor. But the school of hard knocks destroys any such idea. Real life shows that some of the finest people go through some of the worst things, while some of the worst people enjoy good things. The Teacher says, "In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these: a righteous man perishing in his righteousness, and a wicked man living long in his wickedness" (7:15).

When it comes to the question of being righteous, you can't guarantee your own prosperity through proper behavior. Still, you should beware of two extremes.

One extreme is to be a holier-than-thou know-it-all. You pride yourself on being a cut above the crowd. You're never wrong. If you're playing Scrabble and make a word which can't be found in the official Scrabble dictionary, you simply assume that the dictionary must be wrong! If you get in a dispute with someone, it's always the other person's fault. When it comes to religion, you assume that your own goodness will send you soaring straight to heaven—if you don't overshoot it!

At the opposite extreme, you can be a person who doesn't really care about moral behavior or sound beliefs at all. You don't pretend to be a goody-goody, and you don't claim to be sure of anything when it comes to religion and morality. You figure you don't have a pipeline to God, and neither does anyone else. Your motto is, "I do what I please and believe what I want—no apologies, no excuses." No behavior is too perverted, no belief is too outrageous. Whatever works for you.

In the face of these extremes, Ecclesiastes says, "Do not be overrighteous, neither be overwise—why destroy yourself? Do not be overwicked, and do not be a fool—why die before your time. It is good to grasp the one and not let go of the other. The man who fears God will avoid all extremes" (7:16-18).

Fear God. Take the Lord seriously. That's the way to keep your balance and avoid extremes. You can't possibly be holier-than-thou or a know-it-all in light of the infinite holiness and mind-boggling wisdom of God; but neither can you pretend that holiness and wisdom don't matter. When you revere the holy and wise God, you know that holiness and wisdom matter enormously—and you also know that you don't have a corner on these things. God does. So instead of being an overrighteous, overwise hypocrite, or being an unrighteous, unwise fool, seek the kind of righteousness and wisdom that only God can give.

Verse 19 gives another quick reminder of the great value of wisdom. The Teacher says, "Wisdom makes one wise man more powerful than ten rulers in a city" (7:19). Then he goes on to show how, of ourselves, we lack such wisdom and goodness. In verse 20 he says, "There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins" (7:20). Nobody is guiltless.

Ever hear the story about the judge who visited a prison? He talked to various inmates, and they all insisted either that they hadn't broken the law or that it really wasn't their fault. Finally, the judge met one prisoner who admitted to some awful crimes. The judge summoned the warden: "Let this man out of this prison. I wouldn't want him to corrupt all the nice, innocent people that live here." That story may not be true, but many of us behave exactly like those prisoners who claimed innocence. We hate admitting we're wrong; we'd rather pretend we're just fine.

If only we could see our own sins the way we see other people's sins! Here's one area that the school of hard knocks can knock some sense into us. When people insult or offend us, we tend to be oversensitive and outraged. But instead of paying so much attention to their faults and getting upset at them, we should let hard knocks remind us how often we do the exact same thing to others. In verses 21 and 22 of Ecclesiastes 7, the Teacher advises: "Do not pay attention to every word people say, or you may hear your servant cursing you—for you know in your heart that many times you yourself have cursed others."

Deep within our sinful nature is the tendency to maximize the sins of others and minimize our own sins. We need to stop pretending we're soaring to new heights of wisdom and purity. We need to face the truth about ourselves. We need to admit how warped and self-absorbed and limited our thinking is and see the seriousness of sin. As the Teacher puts it in verses 23-25, "All this I tested by wisdom and I said, 'I am determined to be wise'-but this was beyond me. Whatever wisdom may be, it is far off and most profound—who can discover it? So I turned my mind to understand, to investigate and to search out wisdom and the scheme of things and to understand the stupidity of wickedness and the madness of folly."

In the school of hard knocks, one classroom which drives home the stupidity of wickedness is the classroom of male-female relationships. The Teacher says, "I find more bitter than death the woman who is a snare, whose heart is a trap and whose hands are chains. The man who pleases God will escape her, but the sinner she will ensnare" (7:26). A wicked woman, says the Teacher, is almost harder on a man than death itself. Of course, looking at it from a woman's point of view, it would be just as true to speak of how a sinful man enslaves and wounds a woman. Either way, notice the sobering observation: if you were perfectly pleasing to God, you'd escape such a trap. If you've been hurt by someone of the opposite sex, don't just get angry and bitter. Let it remind you of your own sin as well.

Look, this is what I have discovered: Adding one thing to another to discover the scheme of things—while I was still searching but not finding—I found one upright man among a thousand, but not one upright woman among them all. (7:27-29)

Upon reading those words, women may protest and men may feel smug. Every man tends to think he's that one man in a thousand! But this countdown from one to zero is really just a meth-

od of Hebrew poetry to say that *nobody* is perfect. After all, the Teacher just got through saying in verse 20, “There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins.” But just suppose that you (mistakenly) took the one in a thousand literally. It would still mean that a man has 1/10 of 1% chance of being better than a woman. Some superiority! Anyway, the point is that sin is everywhere, and sin is especially hurtful in the way men and women mislead and manipulate and mistreat each other.

The upshot is not to rage against the opposite sex but to see that humanity is sinful, and that I am no exception. Men and women are indeed equal: equally sinful. Is that the way God made us? No, we’ve done it to ourselves. Ecclesiastes 7 closes by saying, “This only have I found: God made mankind upright, but men have gone in search of many schemes” (7:29).

The chapter began by speaking of death, and it ends by talking about sin. The connection isn’t accidental. The Bible says that “death came to all men, because all sinned... The wages of sin is death” (Romans 5:12, 6:23). Sorrow is good for the heart because it shows us our sin and misery apart from God.

When the Teacher wrote, “There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins,” he was speaking the truth. But then one upright man did appear, a righteous man who lived on earth and did what was right and never sinned. Jesus of Nazareth went through a school of hard knocks that made our lives look like easy street. But he remained perfectly obedient to his heavenly Father, all the way to death on a cross. Jesus was holy but not holier-than-thou, perfect but not a perfectionist, good but not too good to associate with others; he became known as a friend of sinners. Jesus knew all things but wasn’t a know-it-all; he was wise but never overwise; he never looked down on others who were less knowledgeable. Instead, he used plain words and stories from everyday life to convey his message; he even welcomed children. Jesus lived a perfect life; he died to pay for the sins of others; and then he arose again in triumph over death. He is the one righteous man we all need.

The best thing about the school of hard knocks, then, is that it drives us to Jesus. God uses the hard times to make us give up on ourselves and ask hard questions. We wonder where pain and death come from, and God drives us to the conclusion that though he made us upright, we’ve sinned and run off in pursuit of schemes which lead to misery and death. At that point, we long for a Savior. We long for someone to replace our stupidity with his wisdom, our sin with his righteousness, our death with his eternal life. And who can do that but Jesus? “If we claim to be without sin,” says the Bible, “we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

But what if we already know Jesus? Well, we still haven’t graduated from the school of hard knocks. God often uses trials to teach and shape his children. “When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider: God has made the one as well as the other.” Bad times remind us to keep trusting a God we haven’t figured out, a God who works all things for the good of those who love him. Bad times teach us to hold on to Jesus tightly and everything else loosely, to love this world less and heaven more, and to keep believing that the day of death is better than the day of birth, for at death we leave our sin-stained existence, graduate from the school of hard knocks, and go to eternal joy with Jesus.

Living With Limits (Ecclesiastes 8)

I saw all that God has done. No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun.

Question: What do Batman and James Bond have in common?

Answer: Neither one has to live with limits.

No matter how tangled and confusing a mystery might be, Batman and Bond are always smart enough to figure it out. No matter how hopeless a predicament they're in, Batman and Bond always have a special gadget that enables them to escape. No matter how smart and strong the bad guy is, Batman and Bond always win in the end. They can do anything; they can figure out anything; they have no limits.

Even death itself is no limit for them. No matter how many people around them die, they remain alive and healthy. Shucks, they don't even get older. The years go by, but Batman and Bond remain forever lean, muscular, and handsome. Time doesn't affect them or limit them, and neither does authority. Nobody gives Batman orders; they don't even know his true identity. Nobody orders Bond around, either. He works for a government, but Bond's bosses are usually just the butt of some joke. He has the right to do whatever he chooses, including a license to kill.

Batman and Bond both live without limits—they have that in common. Oh, and one more thing they have in common: they're both fictional, unreal. If you want to know how to handle yourself in a world that isn't make-believe, if you want deal with the world as it actually is, then forget Bond and Batman and look in the Bible at Ecclesiastes 8.

The world of Ecclesiastes 8 is a world with limits. It's a world where our choices are limited by the policies of people in power, a world where time takes its toll and all of us end up dying, a world where rulers can be rotten and sometimes bad guys win and good guys lose, a world with problems nobody can solve and puzzles nobody can figure out. In other words, it's the world we're living in. It's reality.

Ecclesiastes 8 deals with some tough realities, but it opens on a positive note, in praise of wisdom. "Who is like the wise man? Who knows the explanation of things? Wisdom brightens a man's face and changes its hard appearance" (8:1). Have you ever seen a comic strip where someone thinks of a good idea and a light bulb goes on in his head? That's a good picture of what wisdom does: your mind brightens with the right answer, and your face brightens in a smile.

But remember: even when the light bulb goes on, any wisdom you or I might have is still just a light bulb; it's not the sun. It can shed a bit of light to help us take our next few steps down life's path, but it's not the blazing brilliance that enlightens and energizes the whole world. God's wisdom is the sun; our wisdom is a little light bulb. It can be useful, but it doesn't enable us to take charge of every situation or to answer every question. In fact, an essential part of wisdom is knowing our limits and learning how to live with those limits.

One limit we all face is authority. Unlike Batman or Bond, we can't simply do as we please. We live within boundaries set by those who have authority over us. Those in the army have commanding officers. Those who work in companies have bosses. And all of us have political rulers and police making us live under certain laws. Unless we want trouble, we'd better obey orders from our superiors and live within the policies they set for us. Listen to verses 2–6 of Ecclesiastes 8.

Obey the king's command, I say, because you took an oath before God. Do not be in a hurry to leave the king's presence. Do not stand up for a bad cause, for he will do whatever he

pleases. Since a king's word is supreme, who can say to him, "What are you doing?" Whoever obeys his command will come to no harm, and the wise heart will know the proper time and procedure. For there is a proper time and procedure for every matter, though a man's misery weighs heavily upon him.

That last phrase reminds us that sometimes it's miserable to live with the limits imposed by other people. The Bible says that when the Israelites first decided they wanted a king, the prophet Samuel warned them, "Here's what you're getting when you get a king. He'll draft your sons to serve in the military. He'll put your daughters to work for the government. He'll claim some of the best land as government property. He'll make sure his political pals have the best of everything. He'll tax you terribly—the tax rate will be ten percent" (see 1 Samuel 8:10–18). Does any of that sound familiar? Actually, a ten percent tax rate sounds low compared to what most of us pay. But aside from the fact that today there are even higher taxes and more regulations, government is a lot like it was back in the days of the ancient kings.

And government isn't the only authority we find burdensome. Many of us work for bosses who limit our freedom. They cram us into cubicles. They set strict schedules. They work us harder than we like and pay us less than we want. They tell us to do some things that seem silly and make some policies that seem crazy. That's why the comic strip "Dilbert" is so popular: it pictures the way many office workers feel about their bosses.

We don't like living with the limits of other people telling us what to do. But, says Ecclesiastes, that's life. Deal with it. How? Well, in general the best way to deal with it is to follow orders. Do what you're told. Why?

One reason is that you have a duty before God. At the time Ecclesiastes was written, people would swear an oath of loyalty to the king in God's name. If they later disobeyed the king, they had to answer to God. Maybe you haven't taken a formal oath, but you must still answer to God for how you respond to authority. If you're a citizen of a country, you are under its laws and you're subject to its leaders. If you've agreed to work for a company, you have a duty to serve the company well and do what your boss says. That's a moral obligation before God.

But there's also another reason for obeying your superiors, an obvious, practical reason: they can make life miserable for you if you don't obey. The king "will do whatever he pleases," says Ecclesiastes. So don't second-guess him or say, "What are you doing?" If you want to avoid harm and save yourself a lot of trouble, it's usually best to follow orders.

God's will and your own wellbeing: those are two big reasons to obey your superiors. As the Bible says in Romans 13:5, "it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment, but also because of conscience."

Obedience isn't your only option, of course. If you get an order you don't like, you can get angry and walk out. But that's a sure way to make unnecessary trouble for yourself. "Do not be in a hurry to leave," says Ecclesiastes. Another option is to stand up to your superior. On rare occasions, if your superior's orders go against God's orders, you may have to disobey. As the Bible puts it, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29) But if you decide to stand up against orders, make sure it's not for a bad cause. Make sure it's to keep God's commands. When it comes to living with the limit of authority, wisdom tells us that obedience is usually the best policy.

Still, wisdom isn't content with "Yes, sir; no, sir; anything you say, sir." There are ways to influence our superiors without opposing them, and there are times when a wise person can make the most of a situation. Wisdom recognizes and honors limits, but it also looks for opportunities

within those limits. As Ecclesiastes puts it, “the wise heart will know the proper time and procedure.”

One biblical example of this is Nehemiah. Nehemiah was a talented Jewish man who worked as part of the staff of the king of Persia. One day Nehemiah heard that the people of Jerusalem were in trouble: their city remained in ruins, and nobody seemed to be doing much about it. The news broke Nehemiah’s heart. He wanted to go help them—but how could he? He couldn’t very well go straight to his boss and say, “King, I quit. My people need me.” He could get thrown into prison or even killed, and that wouldn’t help anybody. Nehemiah knew that no matter how miserable he felt, no matter how much he wanted to get away and help his people, it wasn’t the right time to take his problem to the king.

So what did Nehemiah do? He took his problem to a higher king: he prayed to the God of heaven. He asked God to grant him success by making the king favorable to him. Four months went by. Nothing changed. The situation weighed heavily on Nehemiah, but he kept obeying orders and doing his job. Then one day the king asked him why he was looking so sad. Nehemiah was frightened, but he saw his chance. He explained his sorrow over Jerusalem and his desire to go there and lead a rebuilding project. The king liked the idea and sent Nehemiah on his way (Nehemiah 1-2).

So you see, there’s more to wisdom than wanting the right goal. Wisdom also watches for the right time and the right way to reach that goal. For at least four months Nehemiah’s misery weighed on him, and there may have been times when he felt like plunging ahead no matter what. But that would have defeated his whole purpose, so he simply kept obeying the king and praying and watching for his opportunity. “For there is a proper time and procedure for every matter,” says Ecclesiastes, “though a man’s misery weighs heavily upon him.”

Maybe you’ve got something weighing on your heart, and you really can’t do much about it. You have obligations to keep, bosses to obey, and other things that limit your options. What can you do? Well, live with your limits: obey orders and do a good job. But then start praying. Pray for those who are in authority over you, and pray that God will give you a chance to do more and serve him better and that he will give you the wisdom to seize the opportunity when it comes.

The authority of superiors is a limit we have to live with, and it’s not the only one. There are other limits which none of us—not even rulers and bosses—can control. We can’t control the future; we can’t avoid death; in some cases, we can’t even escape our own patterns of behavior. Ecclesiastes 8:7-8 says, “Since no man knows the future, who can tell him what is to come? No man has power over the wind to contain it; so no one has power over the day of his death. As no one is discharged in time of war, so wickedness will not release those who practice it.”

Who can say what the future holds? The Bible says, “Now listen, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money. Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you should say, ‘If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that’” (James 4:13-15).

Batman and James Bond know the future. They know they’ll catch the crooks and be hearty and healthy when the movie ends. They know time can’t affect them: they’ll always be tall, dark, and handsome. (There’s always a new actor waiting in the wings to make sure of it.) Time doesn’t affect them; death can’t touch them. But it’s another story for all of us who live outside movieland fantasies. The future is uncertain, and death is certain. The only uncertainty about death is when it will come.

We live under the limits of time and death, and we also live under the limits of our sinful nature. Ecclesiastes says that just as an army won't let soldiers desert in war, so wickedness won't release those who are caught up in it. That's one limit we hate to face. We like to think we can turn over a new leaf any time we choose. But we're driven and dominated by forces that are beyond our control, forces we can't simply walk away from, forces that direct us the way a general directs a private. Once we start marching with the army of sin, there's no getting out of it on our own. And this is one army where everybody dies.

Sin has made us all part of an army that's marching toward death. We see those on the front lines, the oldest among us, falling rapidly. Occasionally, we see someone further back, someone younger, struck down. As for ourselves, we don't know or control the exact time of our own death, but we know it's coming. Even if we survive while others fall, advancing age keeps moving us closer and closer to the front line where everybody dies.

Those are the facts. I'm not my own boss. I'm not in charge of my own future, my own death, or even my own character. There are limits on what I can do. And I'm not just limited in what I can do; I'm also limited in what I can understand. The last half of Ecclesiastes 8 deals with some of the strange things that stump us, puzzles that defy explanation.

In verse 9 the Teacher says, "All this I saw, as I applied my mind to everything done under the sun. There is a time when a man lords it over others to his own hurt." Why would rulers abuse their people and provoke a revolution? Why would corporate bosses mistreat employees and wear them out or else drive them to leave and work for a competitor? Who can understand why a rotten ruler or a bad boss hurt the people under him and ruin himself in the process? It makes no sense—but it happens.

But here's an even more perplexing puzzle: sometimes rotten rulers and bad bosses are actually admired. They're immoral and nasty, and yet people praise them and churches welcome them. Even when they die, instead of having people spit on their grave, these lowlifes get a beautiful burial, a fancy funeral filled with flowery phrases. Ecclesiastes 8:10 says, "Then, too, I saw the wicked buried—those who used to come and go from the holy place and receive praise in the city where they did this. This too is meaningless." In the movies Batman and James Bond always get the bad guy, but in reality many crimes go unpunished and many crooked people live in luxury. Who can figure it all out?

Well, whatever else we don't know, one thing is sure: if crime pays, people are quick to go bad. Ecclesiastes says, "When the sentence for a crime is not quickly carried out, the hearts of the people are filled with schemes to do wrong" (8:11). What should we think about that? Should we simply conclude that we're better off doing evil as long as we can get away with it? No, says Ecclesiastes. "Although a wicked man commits a hundred crimes and still lives a long time, I know that it will go better with God-fearing men, who are reverent before God. Yet because the wicked do not fear God, it will not go well with them, and their days will not lengthen like a shadow" (8:12-13).

In other words, I don't care how many crimes they get away with. I don't care how long they live. I don't care how much they prosper. I can't make sense of it all, but I know, I just know, that it's better to honor God than to get on the wrong side of God. It may look like the wicked are doing well and living long, but there's got to be another angle, another perspective, and from that perspective, it will suddenly become obvious that it's not going well for them at all. In saying this, Ecclesiastes went beyond what seemed to be true to what simply had to be true. And he was right, as Jesus later showed.

Jesus told of a man named Lazarus who revered God and yet went through life poor and disabled, homeless and malnourished. The closest he ever got to medical help was when stray dogs would lick his open sores. The closest he ever got to decent living conditions was when he would lie on the street outside the entrance to the estate of a certain Mr. Moneybags. Eventually Lazarus died. As for Mr. Moneybags, he cared little about God or about other people, and yet everything seemed to go his way. He wore expensive clothes and lived in luxury on his magnificent estate. After a long and prosperous life, he died and received a splendid burial. So far, this sounds like a classic case of the godly suffering and the wicked prospering, doesn't it?

But listen to the rest of the story. Jesus lifts the curtain that stands between this life and the life to come. He says that when Lazarus died the angels carried him to a place where Abraham and all of God's people live in joy. Meanwhile, Mr. Moneybags found himself in hell, pleading for even a drop of cold water to cool his burning mouth. But a gaping canyon separated him from all help and hope. He was doomed to eternal fire.

So Ecclesiastes was right: even when the wicked prosper, in the long run it is infinitely better to revere God.

Still, even if we know that, it still doesn't answer all our questions or make it easy to stomach the injustices that are all around us. Verse 14 of Ecclesiastes 8 says, "There is something else meaningless that occurs on earth: righteous men who get what the wicked deserve, and wicked men who get what the righteous deserve. This, too, I say, is meaningless." Even knowing about heaven and hell, it's hard to understand why some of the best people suffer and some of the worst prosper.

At that point, we must learn to live with our limits. Where we see injustice and have the power to help, we should do so; but sometimes there's not much we can do. Where we can warn the wicked of hell and encourage the faithful with the hope of heaven, we should do so; but sometimes there's not much more we can say. You and I can't stop every crime or abuse of human rights that we see in the news, and we can't make sense of such things. When we've done what we can, we need to face our limits and then enjoy the time we have and the good things God sends our way. Ecclesiastes 8:15 says, "So I commend the enjoyment of life, because nothing is better for a man under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany him in his work all the days of the life God has given him under the sun."

Don't let questions about the past or worries about the future ruin your enjoyment of what God gives you right now. Jesus once said not to worry about tomorrow because each day has enough trouble of its own (Matthew 6:34). So too, perhaps we shouldn't worry about everyone else's problems because each of us has enough trouble of his own. Deal with your own troubles and the struggles of people you can help, but don't take the weight of the world on your shoulders. Only Jesus has shoulders big enough for that. Trust him, and then enjoy the life God gives you.

Ecclesiastes 8 ends by stating in no uncertain terms that we will never be able to figure out how every human problem fits into God's plan. The Teacher says,

When I applied my mind to know wisdom and to observe man's labor on earth—his eyes not seeing sleep day or night—then I saw all that God has done. No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. Despite all his efforts to search it out, man cannot discover its meaning. Even if a wise man claims he knows, he cannot really comprehend it.

Living with limits may seem like a burden, but it can also be a great relief. Isn't it a relief to know that you don't have to know it all? Isn't it a relief to know that you don't have to take charge of everything? Isn't it a relief to live with limits on your power and wisdom, knowing you

can trust the unlimited power and wisdom of God? As the Bible says, “The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. But the man who loves God is known by God” (1 Corinthians 8:2-3).

Trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you can rejoice, even when you face limits on your own power and freedom. You can't always make your own choices when you're limited by a ruler or boss, but faith tells you that submitting your will to a boss you can see is good practice for submitting your will to a God you can't see, and faith also tells you that in prayer you are speaking the Ruler over every ruler and boss. You can't control your future, but faith tells you that Jesus does control your future. You can't prevent your own death, but faith tells you that Jesus has conquered death. You can't save yourself from wickedness; but faith tells you that Jesus has saved you.

Trust in the Lord Jesus, and you can rejoice, even when there are loose ends and unanswered questions. Indeed, you may see some of those questions in a new light. Like Ecclesiastes, you can't figure out why people would mistreat others even to their own harm; but then you realize how often you've mistreated the very people you need most, and you repent. You can't figure out why the sentence for crimes isn't quickly carried out; but then you realize that if God instantly carried out the sentence on every sin, you would be in hell right now. You can't see why the righteous get what the wicked deserve and the wicked get what the righteous deserve; but then you realize that when Jesus was nailed to a cross for you, the righteous Savior got what your wickedness deserves, and you (though wicked) get what his righteousness deserves: eternal life through faith in Jesus.

Once you know the truth of the gospel, you still don't know everything, but you know enough. By faith in Jesus you know that the very mysteries that defy explanation turn out to mean salvation. The strange ways of God which force you to live with limits are part of his plan to bring you into wisdom and freedom and life without limit.

You Only Live Once (Ecclesiastes 9)

Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for it is now that God favors what you do. Ecclesiastes 9:7

Do you believe in reincarnation? Is your present life just one of many lives that you live? Actress Shirley MacLaine talked about her past lives so much that a Hollywood personality remarked, “Shirley MacLaine is a good friend of mine. I’ve known her a long time. Why, I’ve known her ever since she was a cocker spaniel!” For millions of people, though, reincarnation isn’t a joke. It’s a basic part of how they think and live and see their place in the world. Many intelligent people believe in reincarnation; perhaps you’re one of them.

You may think that before you were born into this life, you had past lives as various kinds of people or other creatures. There’s something appealing about that. For one thing, it’s fun to think that you may once have been a princess or a pirate or a puppy, a tycoon or a tiger or a toucan—or all of these and more. Sounds more exciting than just being plain old you, doesn’t it?

And there’s another advantage to the idea of past lives: it offers a way to explain your troubles without blaming yourself for anything you’ve done in your present life. When something bad happens, you can look at it simply as bad karma from another life catching up with you. You may not remember your past life or what you did wrong, but you can still blame the person you were then, not the person you are now.

Perhaps the most appealing thing about reincarnation, though, isn’t the idea of past lives but of future lives. Belief in future lives gives you something to look forward to and aim for. If you make the most of this life, if you hang in there through tough times and live the way you should, then the next time around you’ll be reincarnated as something better.

And if you’re bad throughout this life, the idea of future lives is especially appealing. It means you always get another chance. Even if you reject God and do evil your entire life, you won’t suffer in hell forever. Even if you make a mess of this life, you get another life to get it right. There’s always next time. Okay, so maybe next time you’ll be reincarnated into a life that’s lower and more painful, and that may not be fun—but at least you get another chance. You can work off bad karma through suffering and build up good karma through wise choices.

Gary Zukav is the favorite spiritual adviser of TV superstar Oprah Winfrey. Zukav is a big believer in reincarnation, and Oprah helps him spread his ideas. Gary Zukav says, “You do not suffer for eternity because you do the wrong thing once, or twice, or even time after time. It is not possible to do a wrong thing. You do what you do, and you experience the consequences of it. It’s that simple. If you don’t experience those consequences before you die, your soul creates another life so that you can. That is reincarnation.” If reincarnation is real, you don’t have to worry that if you waste this life, you’ll be ruined forever. “If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again.” Take as many lives as you need.

Those are just some of the reasons why reincarnation sounds appealing. But no matter how appealing it sounds, there’s one big problem: it’s not true. Reincarnation doesn’t happen.

You Only Live Once

According to the Bible, you only live once. You don’t have any past lives before you’re born, and you won’t have any future lives in this world after you die. This is it. You get one life on this earth, and then comes eternity. You only live once.

Belief in reincarnation often comes as part of a bigger package, an entire worldview. In this worldview, everybody and everything is part of God—and “God” isn’t personal but an impersonal power that energizes all things. In this worldview, death isn’t really death; it’s just moving into another life form. In this worldview, there’s ultimately no real difference between good and evil; it’s all part of God, all part of the impersonal force that energizes all things and moves them from life to life and ultimately makes them one. In this worldview, death is not the wages of sin or the final break from life in this world or the moment when our final destiny is decided. Death just means another chance in another life.

That way of looking at things is very different from what the Bible says. In Ecclesiastes 9 the Bible speaks not of all creatures being part of an impersonal divine force but of a personal God who is distinct from his creatures and who holds people in his hands. The author says that death is unavoidable. He says that wickedness and craziness are all too real and rotten, and that all too often people waste the one and only life they have. He says that where there’s life, there’s hope, but that death is final: you only live once. Let’s take a closer look at each of these findings.

The first foundational fact in Ecclesiastes 9 is that a personal God holds in his hand those who are in tune with him—but that’s no guarantee that life will always be easy or fun. Verse 1 says, “So I reflected on all this and concluded that the righteous and the wise and what they do are in God’s hands, but no man knows whether love or hate awaits him.” If your heart is filled with God’s goodness and your mind is filled with his wisdom, you may be sure that you are in his hands and under his care. But there’s no automatic karma that makes you popular and trouble-free if you are godly. People may love you, but they may also hate you. Anything can happen, and you can’t really know in advance. The Lord is faithful, but that doesn’t mean life is predictable or easy.

A second foundational fact is that death is unavoidable, no matter who you are. In the words of verses 2 and 3,

All share a common destiny—the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean, those who offer sacrifices and those who do not. As it is with the good man, so with the sinner; as it is with those who take oaths, so with those who are afraid to take them. This is the evil in everything that happens under the sun: The same destiny overtakes all.

We don’t all share the same destiny in eternity, but we do share the same destiny on earth. Good people don’t move on to a better life form on earth; when they die, they’re dead. Bad people don’t drop to a lower life form on earth and try to do better next time; when they die, they’re dead. Their earthly life is over. “The same destiny overtakes all.”

A third basic finding is that in general people tend to waste the one life they’ve been given. Ecclesiastes says, “The hearts of men, moreover, are full of evil and there is madness in their hearts while they live, and afterward they join the dead” (9:3). What a waste! Rather than facing the fact that life is sure to end and making the most of our time on earth, we squander our brief time here on sin. Some worldviews pretend that sin isn’t all that serious, that it’s ultimately just a part of the great universal force that unifies everything. But the Bible says bluntly that sin is evil and insane, and that if we live in sin and die in sin, we’ve wasted the one life we’ve been given, and we won’t get another chance.

And that brings us to a fourth fact: Where there’s life, there’s hope; but once you’re dead, all earthly hope is gone. Ecclesiastes 9:4 says, “Anyone who is among the living has hope—even a live dog is better off than a dead lion!” At the time that was written, the lion was admired as the king of beasts, while dogs were despised as filthy, flea-bitten strays. But, says Ecclesiastes, even

a live dog is better off than a dead lion. Once the lion is dead, it's dead. Its time on earth is over. It won't be reincarnated as something else, not even as a lowly dog.

So it is with people. No matter how great you are in life, it all ends when you die. A live bum is better off than a dead billionaire. As long as you're alive, you have a will to live and an inner drive and a sense of expectation. In this world, the living have hopes and desires and at least some effect on things, but the dead have nothing. "For," says Ecclesiastes, "the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no further reward, and even the memory of them is forgotten. Their love, their hate and their jealousy have long since vanished; never again will they have a part in anything that happens under the sun (9:4-6).

Let me repeat that last part: "never again will they have a part in anything that happens under the sun." When people die, they don't come back in a different form for another round of life under the sun. Life isn't a recurring cycle; it's a one-way journey that eventually takes us through a doorway called death. Wherever the journey goes beyond death, one thing is certain: there's no going back. We pass through this life only once, and then we leave it behind. We'll never pass this way again. We can't come back into the world in another human body or animal body and make the earthly part of the journey all over again.

Now, when you hear all this, when you hear Ecclesiastes say that you only live once and that death is the end, you might take it as a signal to get dreary and depressed. How can you enjoy life in this world if you focus on the fact that death is going to end it? And why should you put energy into achieving something if you're eventually going to die and be forgotten anyway? Well, that's one way to react to these things, but Ecclesiastes 9 encourages the very opposite. Rather than moping and moaning over the fact that life is short and that we only live once, we should make the most of life. We should relish the good things of life with joy and gladness, and we should throw ourselves into everything we do with wholehearted enthusiasm. Listen to what the Bible says in Ecclesiastes 9:7-10.

Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for it is now that God favors what you do. Always be clothed in white, and always anoint your head with oil. Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun—all your meaningless days. For this is your lot in life and in your toilsome labor under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom.

Let me summarize that in eight simple words: *Enjoy what you have. Do what you can.* If you want to make the most of life, then remember those eight words: Enjoy what you have. Do what you can.

Enjoy What You Have

Instead of wishing you were somebody else or wishing for what you don't have, enjoy what you do have. Relish your food. If you've got a sizzling hamburger or a piping hot pizza or a juicy peach, enjoy it! Don't be thinking about the caviar you can't afford. Take each new day as a time to celebrate. When it comes to clothing, don't sit around wishing you had the latest fashion or the most expensive tailor-made stuff. Just wear your favorite and look your best and enjoy it! And if you've got a loving spouse, then by all means enjoy your life together. One loving wife is better than a thousand sex objects. Instead of wondering whether you could be happier with someone else, delight in your spouse and in your family life.

You see, the best things in life are often the simplest. You don't have to be a king or a billionaire to enjoy what you have. The writer of Ecclesiastes was fabulously rich and sampled every kind of pleasure and had a thousand women, but when it came time to summarize how to live life, he didn't say to chase a lavish lifestyle. Instead, he said to enjoy the simple things. God has put the greatest delights of this world right within the reach of most ordinary people: savoring good food, dressing up and celebrating, marriage and family.

These blessings are fleeting, since life is short and often wearisome. They may seem empty and meaningless, since they can't satisfy our spiritual yearning for the eternal. But God has given them to you to enjoy, so enjoy them! "It is now that God favors what you do," says Ecclesiastes. Trust God to accept and approve you in Jesus Christ. Trust him to satisfy your hunger for meaning and for eternity. Then enjoy! Relish every gift he sends you in this life. You only live once, so enjoy what you have.

This is very different from the advice you get from the worldview which teaches reincarnation and the goal of merging with one great impersonal divine force. In that worldview, the body and the physical world are really just an illusion, and the ultimate goal is to renounce all the experiences of this world and empty our minds and escape our bodies and lose our identity and enter a world beyond thought and experience. Life in this world is not to be enjoyed but escaped. But that's not the biblical worldview. The Bible says, "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it" (Psalm 24:1). The Bible says that our bodies are real, that the world around us is real, that the experiences of this life are real, and that we should enjoy them as gifts from God. "For everything God created is good," says the New Testament, "and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer" (1 Timothy 4:4-5). So, then, enjoy what you have. And along with that, do what you can.

Do What You Can

When you've got a chance to do something, says Ecclesiastes, "do it with all your might." Give it everything you've got. Our biggest problem usually isn't that we're not given enough opportunities, but that we're not giving enough of ourselves to the opportunities we have. Don't waste energy fretting about the career you couldn't pursue or the opportunities that went to someone else or the goals you couldn't reach. Instead, do what you can, and put all of your enthusiasm and effort into it.

That's great advice for just about anyone, and it's especially fitting for those who know Jesus Christ. What should you do if Jesus is your Lord but you're stuck slaving away at work nobody else wants to do? The Bible speaks to people in that situation, and it says, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving" (Colossians 4:23-24).

You may wish you had a life with greater opportunities or different work, but this life is the only life you have. You won't get another one. If you want to do something worthwhile, if you want to serve God and his people, don't wait for some major project that will change the whole world instantly. Seize any opportunity you have, no matter how small. Do what you can; do it well; and do it now. "Whatever your hand finds to do," says Ecclesiastes, "do it with all your might, for in the grave where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom."

Again, this is far different and far more urgent than the advice you would get from a worldview of reincarnation and eventual escape from this world of illusion. That worldview tells

you to do less and meditate more, to stop trying to affect the world around you and to try to detach yourself from it. It also tells you that if you blow it in this life, you've got plenty of lives left to get it right. But according to the Bible, you only live once, and if you want to do something in this world, you had better do it now. Once you're in the grave, you'll never have another chance to work and plan and affect this world.

You can't come back reincarnated in another body, and you can't even come back as a spirit or ghost. Sometimes you hear at funerals: "Although her body is dead, her spirit is still with us." That sounds nice, and we'll say almost anything at funerals to feel better and to avoid the terrible finality of death. But it's just not true that a dead person's spirit will remain with us. Memories remain with us, but the dead person's spirit doesn't remain. The spirit instantly goes to its eternal destination, never again to be in this present world or to do anything in it. As Ecclesiastes puts it so plainly, "never again will they have a part in anything that happens under the sun."

In popular films like *Ghost* and *The Sixth Sense*, a person's spirit hangs around even after the person dies, and that spirit may be doing all sorts of things. But that's just the movies. In the realm of reality, death ends our ability to love and hate and affect people in this world. Dead people can't communicate with the living, and the Bible strictly prohibits the living from trying to communicate with the dead. Death forms a barrier between the inhabitants of this life and the inhabitants of the afterlife.

So if you want to do good on this earth, you must do it now. If you're wasting your life, don't think you'll be reincarnated for another try. Don't think that if you die with too many things unsaid and undone, you can come back as a ghost to take care of unfinished business. If you love someone, now is the time to show it. Once you die, you won't get another chance to express your love like they do in the movies. If you are at odds with someone, now is the time to forgive and to ask for forgiveness. Once death comes, it will be too late to set things right with them. If you want the world to be a better place, now is the time to take action. Right now, while you have life in your body, is the time to strengthen your relationships and make a difference in this world. Do what you can, and do it now.

Final Reckoning

But that still leaves the question: if there's no reincarnation, and if we can't come back as ghosts, what does happen after we die? If death is the absolute end of our life under the sun, does that mean we just vanish forever? No, says the Bible, once we die and leave this earthly life, we must stand before the Lord of heaven. The last sentence of the book of Ecclesiastes says, "God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil" (12:14). Elsewhere the Bible says bluntly, "Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment" (Hebrews 9:27). You won't live and die over and over again. You die once; and then you answer to God for the one life he has given you.

That final reckoning gives fresh meaning and urgency to the fact that you only live once. It's bad enough to waste your life. It's bad enough not to enjoy what you have and not to do what you can. But it's far worse if, in wasting your life, you also throw away your only chance at eternal life. Once this life is over and you stand before God, your destiny will be determined. You won't get another chance to repent of your sins and call on Jesus to save you and change your ways. If you're not ready to meet the Judge by the time you die, you will be lost forever in hell. That's horrible to think about, but it's the truth.

There's another, far brighter truth, however, so listen carefully. If in this life you enter into a right relationship with God, then you will live forever in the love and joy of his new creation.

You won't be reincarnated back into this broken world, but you will be resurrected in a glorified, immortal body, never to die again, and you will reign with the risen Jesus and enjoy his happiness forever.

How can you enter a right relationship with God? First, admit your own wickedness and repent of your sins. Second, believe the good news that Jesus died to pay the price of your sin and that he rose again that you might rise to new life. Third, enjoy what you have with gratitude for his gifts, and do what you can in the Lord's service, obeying the Bible and relying on God's Holy Spirit at work within you.

And let me remind you one last time: Don't put it off. You may think there's no hurry, that you can wait awhile and maybe give more attention later to Jesus and to your eternal destiny. But don't waste any more of the precious time God has given you in this world. And don't assume you'll even be around tomorrow or next week. No matter how healthy or strong or smart you think you are, you don't control everything that happens in your life, and you don't know how soon or how suddenly you might die. As Ecclesiastes 9:11-12 puts it,

I have seen something else under the sun: The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favor to the learned; but time and chance happen to them all. Moreover, no man knows when his time will come: As fish are caught in a cruel net, or birds are taken in a snare, so men are trapped by evil times that fall unexpectedly upon them.

You only live once. An opportunity that's here today may be gone tomorrow. "No man knows when his time will come." So don't think you're safe just because you seem to have a lot going for you at the moment. You're never safe unless you're safe in Jesus. Trust him and live for him. Only then can you make the most of this life. Only then will you be ready to meet the Judge when your time comes. In the words of a Christian poet, "Only one life, 'twill soon be past. Only what's done for Christ will last."

Stupidity Stinks (Ecclesiastes 10)

*As dead flies give perfume a bad smell,
so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor. Ecclesiastes 10:1*

Winston Churchill was an amazing man. He had such strong ideas that many people in Great Britain didn't like him or want him to be their leader. They preferred a mushy-minded "moderate" named Neville Chamberlain. But when Chamberlain's appeasement of Hitler helped the Nazis to overrun most of Europe, the British people saw that Churchill was right, and they made him their prime minister. Against all odds, Churchill's wisdom and courage rallied his nation through the dark days of World War II. And what happened afterward? They voted Churchill back out of office!

That's not the only time something like that has happened. Ecclesiastes told of something similar already thousands of years earlier. The author wrote:

I also saw under the sun this example of wisdom that greatly impressed me: There was once a small city with only a few people in it. And a powerful king came against it, surrounded it and built huge siegeworks against it. Now there lived in that city a man poor but wise, and he saved the city by his wisdom. But nobody remembered that poor man. So I said, "Wisdom is better than strength." But the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are no longer heeded (9:13-16).

What a bunch of ingrates! You'd expect them to be thankful, you'd expect them to praise the one who saved them and listen to him and have a celebration in his honor, but giving thanks was the last thing on their minds. Even if there were a public holiday commemorating their deliverance, these people wouldn't make it a time of genuine thanksgiving. They'd use the holiday to stuff their faces, have a good time, do their own thing, and forget the one who made their freedom and prosperity possible.

If the value of wisdom is measured only by how much praise and thanksgiving it gets, then it may look as though wisdom isn't worth much. A wise person might save a city or an entire nation and yet be forgotten or despised. High intelligence often has a low profile and a low popularity rating.

Isn't it true that in public life, image often wins over substance? Instead of careful, respectful discussion that helps people understand what's really involved, politicians often resort to sound bites and 30-second spots and loud propaganda. It degrades the politicians and their supporters, but hey, it works! A savvy pollster and a slick promoter will beat sound character and seasoned wisdom almost every time.

Even so, wisdom is the way to go. Be thankful for the wisdom of those who are truly wise, and seek to be wise yourself. After all, even when stupidity seems to succeed, it is still stupidity! Ecclesiastes 9:17 says, "The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouts of a ruler of fools." Wisdom may not be the noisiest, it may be drowned out by slogans and sound bites, opinion polls and peer pressure, but it's still better to be wise than to follow whatever fool happens to be making the most noise.

If you're foolish, you evaluate something by how much publicity it's getting or by how many people are doing it. You figure, "Well, it must be the thing to do." But if you're wise, you don't just ask, "Is it the thing to do?" You ask, "Is it the *right* thing to do?" The answer to that question often comes in a still, small voice.

Wisdom is often quiet and low-key, but it has a tremendous power all its own, and it is positive power. Sinful stupidity has a certain kind of power, too, but it is negative power, power to destroy. As Ecclesiastes 9:18 puts it, “Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.” Wisdom seldom gets credit for the good it does, but at least it does some good. Stupidity just makes matters worse for everyone.

The last part of Ecclesiastes 9 makes that clear, and when we get to Ecclesiastes 10, the message is even more pungent. We could summarize all of Ecclesiastes 10 in just two words: STUPIDITY STINKS! In fact, that’s exactly how the chapter begins: “As dead flies give perfume a bad smell, so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor” (10:1). Stupidity stinks! One stupid blunder can foul up everything.

When you hear the name Richard Nixon, what’s the first thing you think of? Watergate. Nixon won the biggest landslide in U.S. history; he was a brilliant strategist and a public figure for decades; but what most of us remember about Nixon is Watergate. When you hear the phrase “television evangelist,” what comes to mind? Scandal. Most ministers, including many who preach through the media, are people of integrity, but the actions of a few soil the reputation of all. “As dead flies give perfume a bad smell, so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor.”

One stupid mistake can ruin a reputation, and one mistake can explode the grandest of projects. Think of the space shuttle *Challenger*. Thousands of parts were in perfect condition. There was just one little problem with some O-rings. But that one little problem destroyed the shuttle and everyone in it.

One mistake! That’s all it takes. Just one sexual mistake can result in shame, an unwanted pregnancy, or even AIDS. Just one cigarette—just one stupid, stinking cigarette that you tried just because it was the thing to do—and years later you find yourself still hooked on a deadly habit. Just one moment of getting drunk or getting high or getting angry, and you can do something that lands you in prison for years. One mistake! A little folly equals a big mess. Now, if even one mistake, if even a brief moment of stupidity, can do so much damage, then it would be absolutely crazy to devote your whole life to being stupid.

Ecclesiastes 10 talks about stupidity and how it shows up in different areas of life. It starts by making the point that the things we do, whether wise or stupid, come from inside. Our outward actions rise out of our inward inclinations. Verse 2 says, “The heart of the wise inclines to the right, but the heart of the fool to the left.” This doesn’t mean that righthanders are wiser than lefties, or that people who prefer right-wing politics are always wiser than those on the political left. It simply means that wise people have hearts that lean one way, and stupid people have hearts that lean the opposite way. If your heart, your inner self, is stupid, it’s bound to come out. Verse 3 says, “Even as he walks along the road, the fool lacks sense and shows everyone how stupid he is.”

How does happen? How does stupidity show itself? Ecclesiastes 10 explores a number of areas where stupidity stinks: in the chain of command, in the work we do, in the things we say, in public life and in private life.

Verses 4-7 give us a whiff of stupidity in the chain of command. One problem is that some bigshots are hotheads. They make a big stink over the littlest thing. But that’s no excuse for you to add to the stink by reacting in a stupid, shortsighted way. “If a ruler’s anger rises against you,” says verse 4, “do not leave your post; calmness can lay great errors to rest.” In other words, if your boss loses his temper, don’t you lose your temper and quit on the spot. That would just add to the stupidity. Instead, keep your cool and try to clear the air. Give calmness a chance to overcome foolishness.

Another stupid thing that sometimes happens in the chain of command is that top positions go to bungling losers, while smart, capable people end up in the bottom spots, getting ordered around by people who shouldn't be giving orders at all. "There is an evil I have seen under the sun," says Ecclesiastes, "the sort of error that arises from a ruler: Fools are put in many high positions, while the rich occupy low ones. I have seen slaves on horseback, while princes go on foot like slaves" (10:5-7). Those who are rich in wisdom, who are princes in character, get treated like slaves, while those who barely qualify for the lowest jobs end up getting promoted and riding high in the saddle. Doesn't it stink when that happens? Several years ago, a Canadian politician won an election and appointed several of his cronies to high positions, even though they didn't appear to be qualified. When asked about the appointments, he retorted, "You dance with the lady that brought you." Wisdom says to put the best, most qualified people in charge, but all too often, in politics and business, we end up with a bunch of stiffs whose only qualification is that they happen to be buddies of the boss.

After describing stupidity in the chain of command, Ecclesiastes talks about stupidity in the work we do. There are at least four types of stupidity that can spoil our efforts: nastiness, carelessness, brainlessness, and hastiness.

Verse 8 deals with nastiness: "Whoever digs a pit may fall into it; whoever breaks through a wall may be bitten by a snake." You can work hard digging a pit and making a trap for someone you don't like, only to fall into the trap yourself. You can bully and smash your way into places you don't belong, only to get bitten by something you didn't see coming. The Bible tells about Haman, a nasty fool who somehow got himself appointed to a top political position where he didn't belong. Haman hated a man named Mordecai simply because Mordecai wouldn't bow down to him. Haman schemed and worked to get rid of Mordecai. He even had a giant gallows built on which he planned to hang Mordecai. But on the very day he was going to get the king's permission to hang Mordecai, Haman's plot unraveled, and Haman was hanged on his own gallows. That's the trouble with nastiness: it tends to backfire.

Let's look at another kind of work-related stupidity: carelessness. Verse 9 says, "Whoever quarries stones may be injured by them; whoever splits logs may be endangered by them." Carelessness on the job can cost you. Carpenters with mechanical saws, farmers with corn pickers and combines, factory workers with powerful equipment, truckers and miners—there are all sorts of dangers on the job, and if you ignore the danger and get careless, it can cost you an arm or a leg or even your life. Even if you have a fairly tame office job, you can't afford to get careless driving back and forth to work. All it takes is just a little stupidity, just a brief moment of carelessness, to do awful, even permanent damage. So don't get careless!

Still another on-the-job problem is brainlessness: using your muscles but not your mind. Ecclesiastes 10:10 says, "If the ax is dull and its edge unsharpened, more strength is needed, but skill will bring success." The duller the ax, the harder you have to swing it to accomplish anything—unless you resort to skill instead of brute strength. Why keep swinging the ax harder and harder, when you can just take a break and sharpen the ax and then accomplish twice as much with less effort? Don't just work harder; work smarter. Use your brain. It's stupid to get so busy working that you never think about a better way of doing it.

One more example of stupidity in the workplace: hastiness. Don't be in too big a hurry to get your pay; first make sure you complete your task. You know the old sayings: "Haste makes waste" and "Don't count your chickens before they hatch." Well, verse 11 says much the same thing in a more striking way: "If a snake bites before it is charmed, there is no profit for the charmer." Picture yourself as a snake charmer, playing your little tune, swaying back and forth in

front of a cobra. But you're in a hurry to get money from the onlookers, so you suddenly stop playing and reach for the cash. Wham! That old cobra strikes. If he bites the customer, you're obviously not going to get paid, and if he bites you, the money won't do you much good.

Now, you're probably not a snake charmer. But if your work involves any kind of marketing or deal-making, some of the people you try to charm may seem a bit like cobras! If you don't know when to back off and take your time, if you're in too big a hurry to close a deal with someone who still isn't convinced, your hastiness can ruin the deal.

Another case of hastiness, of wanting to have something before you've done the job to get it, is buying on credit. To spend money you don't have—that's foolish and poisonous for a lot of people. Credit and cobras have a lot in common: both are dangerous, and both will bite you if you're in such a hurry to get something that you grab for it before you've done the work to earn it.

So, then, nastiness, carelessness, brainlessness, and hastiness are examples of how stupidity stinks in the work we do.

After making that clear, Ecclesiastes 10 moves on to deal with stupidity in the way we talk. Listen to verses 12-15. "Words from a wise man's mouth are gracious, but a fool is consumed by his own lips. At the beginning his words are folly; at the end they are wicked madness—and the fool multiplies words." A big mouth and a small brain go together. The fool is so busy giving people a piece of his mind that he doesn't have much of a mind left. He talks too harshly, and he talks too much.

The first step in mouth control is learning to keep it shut. One reason we talk a lot is to show people how smart we are, but that's often precisely when we put our stupidity on display. Better to remain silent and have people think you're a fool than open your mouth and remove all doubt. "Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent" says the Bible (Proverbs 17:28).

A second aspect of mouth control is choosing words that build up rather than tear down. "Words from a wise man's mouth are gracious," says Ecclesiastes. In another place the Bible says, "Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones" (Proverbs 16:24). So keep your words soft and sweet. Some day you may have to eat them.

If you don't know how to say anything positive, then don't say anything. Have you ever had to listen to a chronic complainer? He drones on and on about how his wife is impossible to live with, his kids are scoundrels and ingrates, his boss is a moron, his neighbors are a nightmare, and his church (if he has one) is full of dolts and idiots. He talks like he's a genius surrounded by a cast of fools, but the more he talks, the more obvious it becomes who the real fool is. "A fool is consumed by his own lips."

A third aspect of mouth control is knowing what you're talking about and being able to carry through on it. It is stupid to use big words and fancy talk to make people think you know more than you do. Most folks can see right through that. It's especially stupid to talk about the future as though you've got it all figured out. Verse 14 says, "No one knows what is coming—who can tell him what will happen after him." In spite of that, a fool goes right on talking about his great insights and his grand plans, but he's all blow and no go. He talks big, but he never really accomplishes anything. "A fool's work wearies him," says verse 15; "he does not know the way to town." What a guy! To hear him talk, you'd think he had the energy of Superman and the intellect of Einstein. But when it's actually time to do some work, he's got no energy, and the moment he actually has to figure something out, he's stumped—he can hardly find his way to town.

Now, there are always going to be people who don't have mouth control, who talk too much and too harshly and say all kinds of things that they don't have the ambition or the brains to back

up. Just make sure you're not one of them. When it comes to words and conversation, stupidity stinks.

The writer of Ecclesiastes doesn't suffer fools gladly. So far he's given us a whiff of stupidity in the chain of command, in the work we do, and in the words we say. Then, in the last few verse of Ecclesiastes 10, he closes with a flurry, saying that stupidity stinks in public life, and it stinks in private life.

He speaks of public life in verses 16 and 17: "Woe to you, O land whose king was a servant and whose princes feast in the morning. Blessed are you, O land whose king is of noble birth and whose princes eat at a proper time—for strength and not for drunkenness." Pity the country where leaders use their authority only to indulge their own appetites and not for the good of the people. Those in public life must see it as a noble calling and put their energy into doing good; only then will their leadership be a blessing to their people. This applies not only to political leaders but also to teachers, pastors, and parents. The wisdom or stupidity of people in leadership has a huge impact on others.

It's devastating when leaders are lazy and greedy, and it's also disastrous when that's the attitude of ordinary people: wanting to do as little work as possible, yet eager to have as much fun as possible. It's the entitlement mentality: I'm entitled to all the fun and money I want, and I shouldn't have to work for it. Once I start to think that way, I'm 50% couch potato, 50% party animal, and 100% stupid.

Ecclesiastes slams that combination of laziness and greediness. Verse 18 says, "If a man is lazy, the rafters sag; if his hands are idle, the house leaks." In other words, you snooze, you lose! If you're too lazy to work on things that need attention, your house starts to fall apart, and not only that, your family and marriage start to fall apart. If you're wise, you pay attention to small problems and you take care of them while they're still small. If you're foolish, you say, "It's no big deal. I'll get around to it some time later." And before you know it, things are sagging and leaking and collapsing all around you.

Laziness stinks, and so does greediness. Verse 19 gives us the motto of the greedy, self-indulgent fool. "A feast is made for laughter, and wine makes life merry, but money is the answer for everything." More parties, more laughs, more booze, more fun, and the key to it all: more money. If that's your philosophy, then there's no nice way to say it—you are a stinking fool. If even a little stupidity stinks, then devoting your entire life to such a stupid philosophy stinks to high heaven.

The last verse of Ecclesiastes 10 seems anticlimactic, but it's the type of hard-headed, no-nonsense advice we'd expect from Ecclesiastes. Verse 20 says, "Do not revile the king even in your thoughts, or curse the rich in your bedroom, because a bird of the air may carry your words, and a bird on the wing may report what you say." Don't say anything about your boss that you wouldn't want to say directly to him—because no matter how carefully and privately you say it, words have this amazing ability to find their way to the ears of the person you're talking about. If you ask how he could possibly have found out, he might say, "A little bird told me." Even if your superior has done something stupid, don't you be stupid by gossiping about it, or it will come back to haunt you.

Well, by now I trust it's clear that no matter what form it takes, no matter where you find it, stupidity stinks. Part of becoming a wise person is being able to recognize stupidity when you smell it. Some very foolish things are often surrounded by noise and publicity, but no matter how appealing it's made to sound, you need to be able to sniff out stupidity and be nauseated by the smell and avoid getting caught up in it.

So far in this chapter, I've haven't mentioned the word "God" at all. Isn't that a bit strange for a preacher talking about a passage from the Bible? Why no mention of God? Well, the passage from Ecclesiastes 9 and 10 that we've been studying doesn't mention God, either—not in the entire 26 verses. And maybe that's no accident.

You see, stupidity isn't just a matter of what's present but of what's missing—or of *Who* is missing. God is missing. The stink of stupidity is partly a matter of the smelly stuff that's there, but it's also a matter of what isn't there: the sweet aroma of God's nearness and blessing. Ultimately, stupidity stinks because it is the odor of something rotting away without the wisdom and life of God.

If even a little folly makes a big mess, if even a little stupidity stinks, then the monstrous stupidity of rejecting God can only mean utter and absolute disaster. The only way out is to turn back to God. The Bible says, "Some became fools through their rebellious ways and suffered affliction ... Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress. He sent forth his word and healed them, he rescued them from the grave" (Psalm 107:17, 19-20). Sinful stupidity lands us in trouble, but even then, we can pray to God and trust him to save us and make us wiser.

A well-known statement in the Bible says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." In light of Ecclesiastes, we could also say: the fear of the Lord is the end of stupidity.

And now back to where we started: the story of a poor, wise man who does what's necessary to save people from a terrible predicament, but who is then ignored by people who don't want to listen to him or give him thanks. One of the poorest, and certainly the wisest of men, was Jesus of Nazareth.

This poor, wise man is the Savior not just of one city but of the world. Jesus came to teach us God's wisdom; he died and rose again to free us from our sinful stupidity. Jesus is God's great antidote to stupidity, the only one who can save us from sin and Satan and hell, the one who leads us in a life of wisdom. So don't leave Jesus out of your life.

All too often, the world he came to save would rather ignore the only wise God and Savior. In spite of all that, however, in spite of being despised and rejected by men, the Savior continues to call, not with loud shouts but in the still, small voice of wisdom, the voice of the Holy Spirit. That gentle voice keeps calling us out of our stinking stupidity and into the sweetness of his truth and love. Listen to his voice, trust in him, and let your entire life be an offering of thanksgiving to the poor, wise man who is also God—Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

Risking Your Life (Ecclesiastes 11:1-6)

Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it again. Ecclesiastes 11:1

Life is a risk. Any time you start a business venture, you hope it will turn out well—and it might. But then again, it might not. There’s always a chance of failure. And it may not even be your fault. You can make all the right moves and still end up losing money. All it takes is a sudden change in the economy, or a lawsuit, or some other problem you couldn’t see coming—and your investment and hard work go down the drain.

The same is true for farmers. Life is a risk. Every time you plant a crop, you hope for a harvest, but you also risk crop failure. All it takes is too much rain, or too little rain, or a hailstorm, or a frost at the wrong time, and your crop is ruined.

Life is a risk. You can go to college and study hard, only to find that the job market doesn’t have an opening for you. Then again, you may find a great opening, but if another applicant has connections with the boss and you don’t, you won’t get the job no matter how qualified you are. No matter what skills you have, no matter how hard you work, you can still fail.

That’s frustrating, isn’t it? We’d like to think that if we plan carefully and work hard and play by the rules, success is guaranteed. But it’s not. Why is that? Why is there always a risk? The answer is simple: It’s because we’re not all-powerful and all-knowing. No matter how hard we work, we can’t control everything: we’re not all-powerful. No matter how carefully we plan, we can’t figure out everything in advance: we’re not all-knowing. And so we can’t avoid the risk factor.

In Ecclesiastes 11, the first six verses, the Bible talks about risk. One thing this passage makes clear is that some things just happen, and there’s not much we can do about them. Verse 3 of Ecclesiastes 11 says, “If clouds are full of water, they pour rain on the earth.” Now there’s a statement nobody can argue with! You may want sunshine and dry weather, but clouds don’t ask your permission before they make things wet. When it rains, it rains, and there’s nothing you can do about it.

There’s a second statement in verse 3 that’s equally obvious: “Whether a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where it falls, there will it lie.” You might think, “Duh! A tree falls where it falls. Do I really need the Bible to tell me something so obvious?” But Ecclesiastes is simply giving another example of something that is beyond our control. When a storm knocks over a tree, you might not like where it lands. It may damage a house or block a road—but the tree lands where it lands, whether you like it or not. Storms don’t ask your permission to blow, and falling trees don’t ask your advice on where to land. That’s life. Stuff happens.

We don’t control everything, and what’s more, we don’t know everything. Verse 5 of Ecclesiastes 11 says, “As you do not know the path of the wind, or how the body is formed in a mother’s womb, so you cannot understand the work of God, the Maker of all things.” You might think, “Well, that may have been true way back when, but we’ve come a long way since that was written. Now we know all about weather patterns and how babies are formed.” Oh, really? If you think we know all about the weather, you obviously haven’t been following the track record of your local forecaster! Their predictions are often wrong. As for knowing exactly what’s happening in the womb, I remember watching an ultrasound with my pregnant wife and hearing the doctor say, “Sure looks like a boy in there.” When the baby was born, we named her Maria! Now, if we still don’t have weather patterns or unborn babies completely figured out, we certain-

ly don't have the infinite Lord of the universe figured out. We "cannot understand the work of God, the Maker of all things."

We know some things and have a measure of control over some things, and to that degree, wise planning and hard work can sometimes reduce the risk factor; but the only way to get rid of the risk entirely would be if we somehow had the wisdom to know everything in advance and the power to control it all. In other words, we'd have to be God. And we're not.

Nothing Ventured, Nothing Gained

Life is a risk. So how should we react? If something involves a risk of failure, why do it? Why not just do nothing? Again the answer is simple: If you try something, you risk failure, but if you don't try anything, you *guarantee* failure.

If you're an investor or business person you'll never get anywhere if you won't take any risks. If you're a farmer, you'll never have a crop if you need a guarantee of ideal weather for the whole growing season before you're willing to plant, or if you demand a perfect weather forecast before you get ready to harvest. As Ecclesiastes 11:4 puts it, "Whoever watches the wind will not plant; whoever looks at the clouds will not reap." If you don't risk failure, you guarantee failure.

If you're a student and you refuse to start writing a test unless you're positive you'll get all the answers right, you won't start writing at all, and you'll flunk. If you need work, but you won't apply for any job that you're not already assured of getting, you'll remain jobless. If you'd like to get married but you're waiting until you know beyond any doubt that it's impossible for the relationship to be anything but sweetness and bliss 24 hours a day for the rest of your life, then just plan on staying single. If you're thinking of buying a house, but you won't close the deal until you know interest rates can't possibly get any better and the value of houses in the neighborhood can't possibly depreciate, then you may as well plan on never owning your own home. In one area of life after another, if you don't risk failure, you guarantee failure.

The passage we're looking at, Ecclesiastes 11:1-6, begins and ends by urging us to keep taking risks. Verse 1 says, "Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it again." "Cast your bread on the waters" sounds like a quick way to get a soggy loaf of bread, but it's really a figure of speech for taking a risk. Merchants would "cast their bread on the waters" by sending out ships full of grain or other goods, hoping to sell or to trade for something they could sell at a huge profit when the ship came back. Those ships could be gone for a long time, and there was always the risk that they'd never come back at all. But "nothing ventured, nothing gained," so you would "cast your bread on the waters," trusting your ship would come in.

Verse 6 of Ecclesiastes 11 closes the section by again urging us to take risks and not to be paralyzed by fear of failure. Using the language of farming, it says, "Sow your seed in the morning, and at evening let not your hands be idle, for you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well." The risk factor isn't an excuse to give up. It's a reason to keep on trying.

Frustration or Faith?

Life is a risk. The Bible is down to earth and realistic about that. When you don't know what the future holds, it's easy to be worried and frustrated; but if you know who holds the future, you see things in a different light. You don't know everything or control everything, but God does. So you've got two options: you can either get frustrated at the fact that you're not God, or else you put your faith in the Lord and rejoice that God is God. Trust him. Take your risks, keep on

trying, and leave the results in God's hands. Life is an adventure, full of challenges and risks, and faith helps us to take those risks.

And faith does more than just help us to take the necessary risks to reach certain goals in this life. Faith at its deepest level moves us to take the ultimate risk: to risk everything on the hope of eternal life. Eternal life is found in trusting a God you can't see, putting your faith in a Savior you can't touch, and investing yourself in a future you can't imagine. Sounds risky, doesn't it? But that's what faith is all about.

Faith means risking your life, betting everything you have on the power of Jesus Christ and the reality of resurrection. If that sounds like too big a risk, I'm sorry, but life is a risk. You can't be saved by playing it safe. "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it," says Jesus, "but whoever loses his life for me will find it" (Matthew 16:25).

We saw earlier from Ecclesiastes 11 how a farmer has to take risks and plant his seed if he expects to have a crop. What would happen if a farmer tried to keep his seed safe from crop failure by storing it in a sack and never planting it? He'd be sure to get no crop. Jesus picks up on this idea and applies it to the risk of believing in him. He says, "I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (John 12:24-25). The only way to save your life is to die and rise again, to hand your life over to Jesus and bet everything on his resurrection power.

Sound Investment

Before you tell yourself that resurrection isn't a good bet, try thinking in terms of ordinary financial decisions. In business you have to risk money to make money. But although a certain amount of risk is unavoidable, you still want to plan carefully and invest as wisely as you can. What does that involve? Here are three guidelines almost any good investor will follow. First, don't invest in a sure loser. Second, think long term. And third, diversify.

It's crazy to invest in a sure loser. That's the first and most obvious principle. If you get a tip that a company is about to collapse and that all of its shares will become worthless, do you put all your money into that company? No way. Taking risks is one thing; dumping money down the drain is another.

Jesus takes that line of reasoning one step further. "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth," says Jesus, "where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:19-21). Jesus says that if we invest everything in earthly things, we're investing in a sure loser. The things of this earth pass away, and even if they don't, *we will* pass away.

A second principle of sound investment is thinking long term. You can't just think about today or tomorrow. You need to look further ahead. You need to put money into something that will give you a good return in the long run. Otherwise, you'll find yourself in deep trouble when you hit retirement age.

Now, if it's so important to think ahead and plan for those relatively few years after you hit age 65, what about the infinite number of years that come after you die? It will be awful if you have to face eternity without any treasure in heaven. Jesus tells about a man who cared only about his earthly wealth. The man got rich and decided to take an early retirement and enjoy himself. But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you." "This is how it will be," says Jesus, "with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich

toward God” (Luke 12:15-21). Any investor knows that it’s a huge mistake not to think long term—and the really long term is eternity.

A third principle of sound investment is to diversify. Any investment involves a risk, but the more you spread your risk around, the safer you’ll be. If you invest in just one thing, you’ll go broke if that one thing fails. It’s safer to invest in a variety of things. That’s the idea behind mutual funds. A mutual fund invests in many things, so that even if one goes bad, the others will pay off, and the fund will still make a profit.

Ecclesiastes 11:2 states this principle of diversifying very clearly. After telling us to take a risk and cast our bread on the waters, the Bible says, “Give portions to seven, yes to eight, for you do not know what disaster may come upon the land.”

Jesus tells a story that explains and applies all this in a surprising way. A rich man had someone managing his business, and this manager was accused of being wasteful. So the owner called the manager in and told him, “Make a summary of the people you’ve been dealing with who still owe me money, and then you’re finished!” The manager thought to himself, “Oh, no! What am I going to do now? I’m too wimpy to dig ditches, and I’m too proud to beg.” Then he got an idea. “I know what I’ll do so that when I lose my job here, I’ll have plenty of friends to help me out.”

The manager called in everybody who owed money. He asked the first, “How much do you owe?” The man replied, “The bill was for eight hundred gallons of olive oil.” The manager replied, “I’ve got the bill right here. Go ahead and change it to four hundred.”

Then the manager asked the next person, “And how much do you owe?” “A thousand bushels of wheat,” he replied. “Did you say a thousand?” said the manager. “I’ve got the bill right here. Let’s make it eight hundred and call it even.”

When the owner found out about all this, he couldn’t help admiring the manager’s shrewdness. He’d given the man authority to clear things up before leaving, and the man had used this last opportunity to slash everyone’s bills and make himself a lot of friends in the process. Now, Jesus doesn’t say, “Go and do likewise.” He doesn’t say to go out and cheat your boss. But Jesus does say, “I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings” (see Luke 16:1-9).

Like that manager, you and I don’t have long before our position and our possessions vanish. Our days are numbered. If my only investments are me, myself, and I, I’ll end up with nothing in eternity. But if I diversify and invest in others, I’ll end up with a lot of friends to welcome me into heaven. Nothing we have can survive death except relationships: our relationships to other people, and our relationship to God. Love is the only thing that lasts forever, love for God and love for others. And the only way to possess love is to give it away.

Is it too big a risk to believe all this and act on it? Maybe you’re afraid that if you invest your life in God and in other people, it might not pay off. Maybe you’re unsure whether you’ll make it to the other side of the grave, or whether anyone else will. Well, even if you’re not quite sure about that, you can be sure about one thing: your money and all your other stuff won’t make it to the other side of the grave. So if you want to avoid a sure loser, and if you want to think long term, and if you want to diversify, then risk your life on the resurrection and turn your life over to Jesus.

Making the Leap

Are you still hesitating? Maybe you want all your questions answered and all your doubts resolved before you give up on yourself and give in to Jesus. You want to know why God allows certain problems and tragedies. You want answers to every last question about Bible passages

that seem difficult. You want ironclad proof of resurrection and life after death. You want proof positive that Jesus is real. You want to be 100 percent sure before you risk putting your life in his hands. But if you're waiting for all the risk and uncertainty to go away, you won't come to Jesus at all. If you try to play it safe, you can't be saved. Life is a risk. You have to risk if you want to live.

Now, when I talk about risk, I'm not saying there aren't sound reasons for becoming a Christian. There are strong reasons to believe that God is real and that he controls this world. There are strong reasons to believe that the Bible is reliable. There are strong reasons to believe that Jesus rose from the dead: many of his first followers claimed to have seen him, and they chose to be killed rather than change their story. They bet their lives on what they saw. So rational study shows that Christianity is reasonable, even probable, though we still might not feel sure, given the way our minds tend to operate.

And not only does rational study show probability, it also shows us what is at stake in this decision to follow Jesus. The philosopher Pascal pointed out that if you bet on resurrection and you win, you win everything; if you lose, you lose nothing you wouldn't have lost anyway. If you bet on resurrection and you're right, you win forgiveness, joy, eternal life, and friendship with the Lord Jesus Christ, and you also become a better, more loving person in this life. If you bet against resurrection and you're wrong, you lose everything. You live on a lower level in this life, and in the life to come you lose the happiness of heaven and condemn yourself to the loneliness and suffering of hell as the final result of your self-centered life. Logical reasoning can't remove every doubt about resurrection, and it can't make your decision for you, but it does show that resurrection is probable, and it shows that you have everything to gain and nothing to lose by risking your life on Jesus.

One author compares it to standing at the window of a burning building. A rescue team moves in with a safety net to a position directly below you. They call out to you, "Jump! We'll catch you." However, the smoke is thick around you, stinging your eyes and making them watery, so you shout back, "I can't see you. What if I jump and you don't catch me?" They shout back, "You can't see us, but we see you. We're in the right spot. Trust us!" At that point, you have two options. You can just keep standing there, wishing you could see more clearly—and you will burn. Or you can trust the voices calling to you, and you can jump. Only when you land do you know for sure that throwing your life into their hands was indeed safe.

So, too, faith seems like a big risk when the smoke of this world gets in your eyes and keeps you from seeing clearly, but the living Lord Jesus is absolutely real, and he catches every person who takes the leap of faith. Faith might seem like a risk from where you're standing, but that doesn't mean it's not certain. It just means you won't feel the certainty until you take that leap of faith and land in the arms of Jesus. Then, as Pascal put it, "you will gain even in this life... and you will see that your gain is so certain and your risk so negligible that in the end you will realize that you have wagered on something certain and infinite for which you have paid nothing."

The Last Word (Ecclesiastes 11:7-Ecclesiastes 12)

Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment. Ecclesiastes 12:13-14

There's an old saying, "The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence." Why is that? Why does it look so much more appealing to be in some other situation than the one you're in? Well, the answer is simple. The grass is greener on the other side of the fence because the grass on the other side of the fence isn't grass at all; it's artificial turf. It looks greener than green, but it's not real. A cow that leaves its grassy pasture for that greener-than-green carpet across the fence will end up with a mouthful of plastic and a big bellyache. One of the surest ways to miss out on happiness is to be so busy looking across the fence at unreal fantasies that you never enjoy what's right under your nose.

For some of us, the other side of the fence is the future. We're waiting for some future event to make us happy. If you're a student, you may tell yourself, "Life isn't much fun right now, but once I graduate and spread my wings, then I'll be happy." But once you finish school, you say, "I'm not very happy yet—but I will be if only I meet the right person and fall in love." Once you're married, you say, "I'm not happy, but I will be once I get a better job and a nicer house." Once you have the house and the job, you say, "I'm too busy to really enjoy life, but once the kids move out and I retire, I'll relax and have a good time and enjoy life." And once you retire, you find that the green grass of the golf course isn't enough to make you truly happy.

Then you start having more and more health problems, and you find yourself going to more and more funerals of friends and relatives, and you find that you're no longer waiting for some future change to make you happy. Now the other side of the fence is the past. Now you're looking back to the good old days: "If only I could be young again! If only I could go back to those carefree school days when life was so much simpler! If only I could have that thrill of first love all over again! If only the children were small again—they were so cute back then! If only I could have a job instead of being retired and useless!" And so it goes. We spend much of life living for a future that won't make us as happy as we think, and we spend the rest of our life longing for a past that wasn't as happy as we now imagine it was.

Instead of always looking ahead or looking back, try looking up! Focus on God. Trust him. You can't find satisfaction chewing artificial turf. But when you look to the Lord Jesus and trust him as your Good Shepherd, he makes you to lie down in green pastures and fills you to overflowing. The Bible book of Ecclesiastes shows over and over that unless God fills us, we're bound to be restless and empty. The conclusion of Ecclesiastes, the Teacher's last word, is an appeal to relish life as God's gift and to base everything on a relationship to the Lord.

The Teacher begins his closing statement by saying what a gift life is. Ecclesiastes 11:7-8 says, "Light is sweet, and it pleases the eyes to see the sun. However many years a man may live, let him enjoy them all." In other words, *be positive!* Don't waste your life worrying: "What if my grades aren't good enough? What if I can't find a good job? What if I can't find the right person to marry?" What if, what if, what if! What if you stopped worrying over all those what ifs? What if you simply notice how sweet and pleasant life can be and decide to enjoy each moment as God's gift?

If you're in your prime, enjoy the energy and drive that you have. And even if you're older, enjoy whatever health and zest for life you still have. I've known people in their mid-eighties

who went on overseas trips and did other exciting things, even though some people told them they were too old to handle it. If your body tells you you're too old to do certain things, fine—live within your limits. But don't let other people or society tell you when you're too old to relish life. Use your time to really live; don't just sit around trying not to die.

Be positive—but also *be realistic*. “However many years a man may live, let him enjoy them all, but let him remember the days of darkness, for they will be many. Everything to come is meaningless.” Children sometimes wish it could always be Christmas, or always their birthday. They wish their favorite moments would never end. Sometimes grownup think that way too. But that's not how life works. Every good thing comes to an end. After sunshine come days of darkness. A moment ago we saw that you shouldn't be so worried about bad times that you can't enjoy the good times, but neither should you be so wrapped up in the good times that you're not ready for the bad times when they come. Be realistic.

The next word of advice: *Be free!* Ecclesiastes says, “Be happy, young man, while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see” (11:9). Be free! Be yourself! Some people may pressure you to be prim and proper and boring; others may pressure you to be stupid and self-destructive by smoking or drinking or doing drugs. You may feel pressure to get A's in school like your sister, or to go into the same line of work as your father, or to make as much money as a couple down the street, or to do your job exactly the same way as the person who held the position before you. But if you live to meet all those expectations, you won't really live, and you won't really be you! You'll just be a hodge-podge of other people's projections. Follow your heart. Be the person you're created to be. Be free!

Does that mean anything goes? No, be happy and follow the ways of your heart, says Ecclesiastes, “but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment” (11:9) In other words, *be accountable*. Have fun—but make sure it's godly fun. Use your energy and enthusiasm to enjoy God's gift of life, not to misuse it. You don't have to answer to all the self-appointed judges who try to run your life, but you do have to answer to one Judge: the Lord God himself. Don't think you can sow your wild oats and then hope for crop failure. Be accountable.

“So then,” adds Ecclesiastes, “banish anxiety from your heart and cast off the troubles of your body, for youth and vigor are meaningless” (11:10). The word which our English Bibles translate as “meaningless” or “vanity” appears often in Ecclesiastes. In the original Hebrew, it simply means “vapor” or “mist.” Life is a mist. It lasts a short while, then it melts away. So enjoy the gift of life and health while you can; don't make yourself miserable if you don't have to. Let God's peace rule in your heart, and treat your body as a temple for his Holy Spirit.

Indeed, says Ecclesiastes, make it your number one priority in life to focus on the Lord—and do it while your body is still strong and your mind is still clear and your life is still enjoyable. You may think faith is mainly for old people. But the Bible appeals over and over to people who are young and in their prime, because faith is a challenging, exciting adventure that occupies all of your energy. Aged people need the Lord too, of course, but even they are best able to handle old age if their relationship with God started way back in their youth. The last chapter of Ecclesiastes, chapter 12, opens with these words:

Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, “I find no pleasure in them—before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark, and the clouds return after the rain; when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men stoop, when the grinders cease because they are few, and those looking through the windows grow dim; when the doors to the street are

closed and the sound of grinding fades; when men rise up at the sound of birds, but all their songs grow faint; when men are afraid of heights and of dangers in the streets; when the almond tree blossoms and the grasshopper drags himself along and desire is no longer stirred. Then man goes to his eternal home and mourners go about the streets. Remember him—before the silver cord is severed or the golden bowl is broken; before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, or the wheel broken at the well, and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. “Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Everything is meaningless!” (12:1-8)

The years of old age and approaching death can be very hard. Things keep getting darker. The storms of life seem to block out the light. Just when one storm ends, “the clouds return after the rain,” and another storm starts. Just when you’ve made it through one health problem, another starts. Just when you’ve buried one loved one, another one dies. When you were younger, you perhaps went to a funeral here or there, but now it seems everybody’s dying. Your generation is vanishing, and your own health isn’t getting any better.

It’s hard to endure what aging does to your body. “The keepers of the house tremble”: your hands become unsteady and shaky. “The strong men stoop”: your sturdy shoulders hunch over, and your straight, muscular legs become scrawny and bent. “The grinders cease because they are few”: you lose teeth and you can’t chew your food very well. “Those looking through the windows grow dim”: your eyesight gets worse and worse. “The doors to the street are closed”: you don’t get out much any more. “The sound of grinding fades”: you become hard of hearing. “Men rise up at the sound of birds”: even though you’re almost deaf, the slightest chirp wakes you up; you can’t get a good night’s sleep. “Their songs grow faint”: your voice, once strong and clear, now quivers and cracks; you can’t speak out or sing on pitch like you once could. “Men are afraid of heights and of dangers in the streets”: you once loved excitement and risks; now you’re fearful. “The almond tree blossoms:” your hair—if you still have any—blossoms into whiteness. “The grasshopper drags himself along”: you used to hop energetically from here to there and bound up steps two or three at a time; now you shuffle along, barely lifting your feet, hoping you won’t fall and break something. “Desire is no longer stirred”: your bodily appetites shrivel to nothing.

Technology tries to deal with some of these problems. For toothlessness, there are dentures. For failing eyesight, there are bifocals and trifocals and cataract surgeries. For hearing loss, there are hearing aids. For sleeplessness, there are pills. For worn-out knees and hips, there are joint replacements.

Technology can relieve some problems, and people today are living longer than earlier generations, but that doesn’t change the fact that the final phase of life is still hard, and it doesn’t change the fact that no matter how long you live, the time still comes when you must die. You’re either going to get old and die, or else you’re going to die young. It’s that simple.

Ecclesiastes speaks of a gold-plated lamp hanging from a silver cord or chain—precious but fragile. All it takes for the lamp’s golden bowl to be smashed to pieces is for just one link in the chain to snap. So, too, all it takes for the precious and fragile gift of life to be smashed and snuffed out is for just a single blood vessel to snap in a brain aneurism, or for a single organ to become cancerous.

Or think in terms of a well. Each day the well’s mechanism does its job and cranks out the water of life—and then one day it falls to pieces. The pitcher is shattered, the wheel that controlled the rope is broken, and there’s no way to get more water. Once the well stops working,

everything turns to dust. So too, once the heart stops pumping blood, the body turns back to dust. “The dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.”

In light of all this, says Ecclesiastes, remember your Creator when you’re young. If you know your Creator and have a living relationship with Jesus Christ, he blesses your younger years by giving you a joy and purpose to channel your vitality and energy, and he blesses your last years by giving you inner strength to sustain you when your body starts to fail. As the apostle Paul once put it, “Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day... we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven” (2 Corinthians 4:16, 5:1).

Do you have that kind of faith? Do you believe in Jesus? Are you being inwardly renewed? Do you have that assurance of heaven? If so, you can face death like the Christian poet who wrote:

Some day the silver cord will break,
and I no more as now shall sing.
But oh! the joy when I shall wake
within the palace of the king.
And I shall see him face to face,
and tell the story: saved by grace.

I pray that you can echo those words.

If not, then I urge you: “Remember your Creator in the days of your youth”—and if you’re not a youth anymore, remember him anyway, because you’re not getting any younger. Fix your mind on him while you still have a mind. Entrust your life to him while you still have a life. Remember your Creator—or your life will be a waste and your death a disaster.

But why should you believe all this? How do you know it’s true? The Teacher who wrote Ecclesiastes (probably King Solomon) gives two reasons to believe his words and take them to heart. One is simply his own brilliance. According to Ecclesiastes 12:9-10, “Not only was the Teacher wise, but also he imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true.” Some people know a lot, but they can’t quite put it into words; others are good with words, but they don’t know what they’re talking about or they’re dishonest. The Teacher, however, had both: he had tremendous knowledge, and he also had an amazing way with words. Mark Twain said, “The difference between the right word and almost the right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug.” Ecclesiastes is lightning. The author had such a brilliant mind, such a vast range of experience and learning, such a skill for choosing just the right words, and such an unwavering commitment to telling the truth, that only a fool would ignore what he says.

But there’s a second reason to take Ecclesiastes to heart: these are more than just the words of a human genius; they are words given by God himself. Verse 11 says, “The words of the wise are like goads, their collected sayings like firmly embedded nails—given by one Shepherd.” That Shepherd is none other than the Good Shepherd himself, the Lord Jesus Christ. The message of Ecclesiastes is God’s message. Like the rest of the Bible, the words of Ecclesiastes are goads that jab and jolt us out of thoughtless complacency and drive us toward God. At the same time, these words are firmly embedded nails that fasten things in place. God’s Word in the Bible provides assurance and certainty; Scripture nails down the truths we need to know.

No other words can compare to words from God. Ecclesiastes says, “Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them.” Don’t listen to anything that contradicts the Bible or that claims to

go beyond it. The Bible is God's last word on why we're alive; it's God's last word on what happens after we die; and it's absolutely trustworthy. As for all the other books out there, be careful. Be careful that they don't lead you into error, and be careful that the sheer amount of information doesn't distract you or wear you out.

"Of making many books there is no end," says Ecclesiastes 12:12, "and much study wears the body." Now, if there were already so many books back in those days of clay tablets and handwritten scrolls, what about now? With our flood of books, newspapers, magazines, radios, televisions, and computers, there is truly no end to information and opinions. Trying to keep track of it all will wear you out. There comes a time to put down the books and newspapers, turn off the TV and radio, set aside the homework, shut down the computer, silence the phone, and pay attention to what matters most. Make space in your life for God's Word. Don't let the other stuff distract you.

The writer of Ecclesiastes urges us not to ignore his message, and then, just in case we somehow missed the main point of that message, he closes his book with a short, blunt, no-nonsense summary of what it's all about. "Now all has been heard," writes the Teacher, "here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil."

The original Hebrew puts it even more strongly than the translation. The original doesn't say, "This is the whole *duty* of man." It simply says, "For this is the *whole of man*." That's it. That's what it means to be truly human: to have a relationship with God that shapes our attitude and directs our actions. "Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole of man."

The poet George Herbert captures the thrust of Ecclesiastes in one of his poems. Herbert says that when God first made man, he had a glass of blessings standing by. From that glass God poured one blessing after another: strength, beauty, wisdom, honor, pleasure. When he had poured out almost the whole glass, God stopped. At the very bottom of the glass lay one last blessing, the blessing of rest—contentment, satisfaction. The Lord decided not to pour that gift with all the others, but to hold it back. For if man found restful contentment in God's gifts, he would adore the gifts and not God the Giver. So God let him keep all the other riches, but he left man restless. That way, even if goodness wouldn't lead him to God, restlessness and weariness and emptiness would toss him into God's arms.

Ecclesiastes is all about that restlessness, that weariness, that emptiness, and how God uses it to hurl us back toward him. God has put eternity in our hearts, says Ecclesiastes, and we find joy and satisfaction only in the eternal God and in eternal life through Jesus. So fear God and keep his commandments—revere God in Christ as the supreme reality of your life, and do what he says. That is the whole of man.

Ultimately, what's at stake isn't just whether you'll be satisfied or empty in this life. What's at stake is how you'll spend eternity. "For," says Ecclesiastes, "God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil."

When the Judge pours out his wrath on the wicked, the frustrations and restlessness of this life, and even the pains and problems of aging, will seem trivial compared to the unending horror of an eternity without God in hell.

On the other hand, when the Judge pours out his favor on those who trust Jesus and obey his teaching, the joys and pleasures of this life will seem a passing vapor compared to the indescribable, unending joy of eternity with Christ in heaven.

So remember your Creator now. Trust Jesus as your Savior now. Fear God and keep his commandments now. “Now is the time of God’s favor. Now is the day of salvation.” Please join me in praying the marvelous words of an old hymn:

O Jesus, joy of loving hearts,
Thou fount of life, Thou light of men,
From fullest bliss that earth imparts
We turn unfilled to Thee again.

Thy truth unchanged has ever stood,
Thou savest those that on Thee call;
To them that seek Thee, Thou art good,
To them that find Thee, all in all.

Our restless spirits yearn for Thee,
Where’er our changeful lot is cast,
Glad that Thy gracious smile we see,
Blest, that our faith can hold Thee fast.