

Understanding the Ways of the Lord - 2

What Is The Greatest Good?

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The Vanity of Human Effort

"Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity. What profit hath a man of all his labor which he taketh under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:2-3). This is the way the book of Ecclesiastes begins and this is the general theme all through this book. The Bible largely reveals truth about God, about the world, about man and the future. It reveals what actually is and has been done. The principle thrust of the Bible revelation is that God is almighty; that He is sovereign.

The Bible will reveal that God made the world and God controls it. About man, the Bible reveals that he was created in the image of God; and that he was made of the dust of the ground. About the future, the Bible reveals that it is all in God's hands. No human being knows, not even the angels in heaven know, the things that are in God's authority.

Man in himself is egotistical. He thinks of "I". The first thing he was interested in as an infant was getting hold of things and taking them to himself. Man is vain. He is puffed up, has big notions, big ideas of himself and what he is going to do; but they are just like wind. Man is proud. If he does any little thing he begins to strut around and feel like he is big. He is covetous. Everything he sees that is any good, he wants it for himself. And he is self-indulgent. He actually strives to please himself in all things.

Do such thoughts sound a sour note on man? Not at all. This is what one must think if he is trying to be realistic. Man also has feelings. He is not made of wood. He can suffer and mourn, and he can rejoice. This means that man develops certain values. He prefers some things. He realizes there are some things that are bad and ugly and they hurt. These he tries to avoid. In any effort he puts out, man wants the greatest benefit. In any struggle that he ever enters, he wants to win. By experiencing things, by observing things, man learns. He compares, evaluates and learns. In all of his thinking man seeks the answer to one big question: What is the greatest good? Of all that is good, what comes first? Some things are good, some better, a few best. He knows the wise thing to strive for is the best and the greatest. As man looks around him, he has one question in his heart always, which promises the most blessing for benefits for me? The Bible deals with this and it undertakes to show man something about it.

The matter of "what is the greatest good?" is dealt with in the book of Ecclesiastes on the basis of experience. The word that was noted was "vanity of vanities, all is vanity." The tone, the mood of this book of Ecclesiastes is strictly modern. Today men take pride in being scientific. They like to examine things. This book is like that. Of all the books in the Bible the style of Ecclesiastes is closer to modern day than any other book. It reports what was discovered by a smart man who sought to find "what is good." He was not hindered by traditions, assumptions or presumptions. He simply tells the honest truth about what he sees.

In looking at the universe, the one important reality is God. A person need not be pious, just sensible, to recognize this happens to be the truth. God is invisible, it is true, yet the heavens declare the glory of God, the firmament showeth His handiwork. Anyone willing to open his eyes and look, can see this. God is, and God is just. He's fair and He moves according to His Law. He is consistent. His Law will prevail. Fearing God, i.e., holding Him in utmost awe just makes good sense. God is almighty and He judges man. This is not being pessimistic: it is merely being realistic. Recognizing that "I am going to face God and I'm in trouble" is simply good sense. God will not be mocked. "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap" (Galatians 6:7).

One thing can be known for sure, God is against sin. He will judge sin, and destroy the sinner. Thank God the Bible tells us more. The Bible reveals the grace of God, the goodness of God. This is hidden from the natural mind. Do you realize that the natural man as he looks at the world will never see the grace of God. God's goodness, grace and mercy is hidden from sight so far as the natural mind is concerned. "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him" (I Corinthians 2:9).

The book of Ecclesiastes reveals facts about the natural world as seen by the natural mind. Indeed it talks about "everything under the sun," i.e., in this world. The book of Ecclesiastes apparently was prepared by a man who had the opportunity to do anything he wished. He had the money, the means; and he was wise. He undertook by experimentation to determine "what is the greatest good." What is the best thing a man could do? Then he wrote a report, which is found in the first chapters of Ecclesiastes. In the first few verses there is a general statement that describes the course of nature. It is seen that nature goes round and round.

"One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever. The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place where he arose. The wind goeth toward the south, and turneth about unto the north; it whirleth about continually, and the wind returneth again according to his circuits. All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again. All things are full of labor; man cannot utter it: the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun. Is there any thing whereof it may be said, See, this is new? it hath been already of old time, which was before us. There is no remembrance of former things; neither shall there be any remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall come after" (Ecclesiastes 1:4-11).

The created world manifests a continuous cycle . . . over and over. The author of this book was king over Jerusalem. "I the Preacher was king over Israel in Jerusalem." This meant he had money, the power, and the opportunity.

"And I gave my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven . . . I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit. That which is crooked cannot be made straight: and that which is wanting cannot be numbered. I communed with mine own heart, saying, Lo, I am come to great estate, and have gotten more wisdom than all they that have been before me in Jerusalem: yea, my heart had great experience of wisdom and knowledge. And I gave my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly: I perceived that this also is vexation of spirit " (Ecclesiastes 1:13-17).

The first thing he undertook was to learn everything he could. He was going to find out what was good so he studied everything he possibly could. He studied all the philosophies that are called wise and his conclusion is in the last verse in the first chapter: "For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow" (Ecclesiastes 1:18). His discovery was startling: it would appear that the more you know, the worse you hurt. This may sound terrible but it is true.

His report is continued, "I said in mine heart, Go to now, I will prove thee with mirth, therefore enjoy pleasure: and, behold, this also is vanity" (Ecclesiastes 2:1). In modern times people talk about some

big time they are going to have, which may include drinking intoxicating liquor. Yet, there is always that dark brown taste in the mouth afterwards. This man ran the gambit of pleasures, laughter, wine, folly.

"Till I might see what was that good for the sons of men, which they should do under the heaven all the days of their life. I made me great works; I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards: I made me gardens and orchards, and I planted trees in them of all kind of fruits: I made me pools of water, to water therewith the wood that bringeth forth trees. I got me servants and maidens, and had servants born in my house; also I had great possessions of great and small cattle above all that were in Jerusalem before me: I gathered me also silver and gold, and the peculiar treasure of kings and of the provinces: I had me men singers and women singers, and the delights of the sons of men, as musical instruments, and that of all sorts. So I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem: also my wisdom remained with me. And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them, I withheld not my heart from any joy: for my heart rejoiced in all my labor: and this was my portion of all my labor. Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labor that I had labored to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun " (Ecclesiastes 2:3-11).

This is the sad conclusion to which this open-eyed man came after he tried in every way to please himself. This truth is now openly exposed to all who will read and admit things are just as they are.

"And I turned myself to behold wisdom, and madness, and folly: for what can the man do that cometh after the king? even that which hath been already done. Then I saw that wisdom excelleth folly, (he's tried both, and discovered it was a whole lot better to have good sense than to just have a good time and spend.) The wise man's eyes are in his head; but the fool walketh in darkness: and I myself perceived also that one event happeneth to them all. (And this is what was really discouraging to him.) I said in my heart, As it happeneth to the fool so it happeneth even to me; and why was I them more wise? Then I said in my heart, that this also is vanity. For there is no remembrance of the wise more than of the fool for ever; seeing that which now is in the days to come shall all be forgotten. And how dieth the wise man? as the fool. Therefore I hated life; because the work that is wrought under the sun is grievous unto me: for all is vanity and vexation of spirit. Yea, I hated all my labor which I had taken under the sun: because I should leave it unto the man that shall be after me. And who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man or a fool? For there is a man whose labor is in wisdom, and in knowledge, and in equity; yet to a man that hath not labored therein shall he leave it for his portion. This also is vanity and a great evil. All his days are sorrows, and his travail grief; yea, his heart taketh not rest in the night. This is also vanity. There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labor" (Ecclesiastes 2:12-24).

This is the report and the opinion of a natural man who has tried to evaluate pleasure. He knows that God is good and he knows that God will do the good thing. He brings this to mind as he ends his reflection upon the value of mirth.

"For God giveth to a man that is good in his sight wisdom, and knowledge, and joy: but to the sinner he giveth travail, to gather and to heap up, that he may give to him that is good before God. This also is vanity and vexation of spirit " (Ecclesiastes 2:25).

As a person reads this discouraging report one might ask whether there is no more to be said. And there is. This world is sinking into destruction and ruin. This need not be too depressing since no person will stay here. And it is certainly true no one is going to be able to take it all with him. This man found that even while one lives here all is vanity and vexation of spirit. And if one asks, "What else is there?" The answer is plain: "*Oh, there's God!* There's the grace of God. There is eternal life." When Jesus of Nazareth was here He promised His disciples "Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid. You believe in God, believe also in me. In my father's house are many mansions, if it were not so I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you and if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto myself that where I am there ye may be also" (John 14:1-3).

Chapter 6 – Ecclesiastes Chapters 1-2
"The Vanity of Human Effort"
Questions for Study and Research

1. What different patterns of living were investigated to discover "what is the greatest good?"
Which pattern seemed the best and why? What were its limitations?
2. Why is looking at life in this world so depressing and so meaningless to the natural man?
3. Why does Ecclesiastes seem to be such a modern book?
4. How could the book of Ecclesiastes be considered a scientific report?
5. Why would much learning cause sorrow of heart?
6. In what way does the book of Ecclesiastes portray a realistic picture of living in this world?
7. Why is it good for anybody, even a Christian, to look realistically at life in this world?
8. In what way is wisdom better than folly?
9. How would a study of the book of Ecclesiastes be helpful for young people? What else needs to be held in mind to make the study complete?
10. Why should a Christian be not too depressed about the findings reported in the book of Ecclesiastes?

How To Be Wise

Do you realize that even if a person were doing the right thing but were doing that at the wrong time, the results would be only more trouble?

The third chapter of Ecclesiastes opens with a most remarkable description of time. "To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven" (Ecclesiastes 3:1). Things are so mixed up in the world that it becomes important that a man choose wisely in every situation. Sin further complicates this. Because of sin a man will do things that don't make sense. A man's own vanity or appetite may disguise the sinful nature of what he is considering. All that is before a man challenges him. It would be better if he had a guide, someone to follow. The natural man in himself is doomed to failure. He's not going to make it. The book of Ecclesiastes is an honest, candid report of the situation as it is in the world, for the natural man. There is one phrase that recurs "under the sun," or "in this world." In this book there are bits of truth; glimpses of insight. Ecclesiastes is a revelation of the truth about the natural world which shows that man needs a Savior.

In chapter 3 of the book of Ecclesiastes the question is raised: how can a man be wise? The answers given make a sort of suggestion kit. The first eight verses point out that timing is important. If a man wants to be wise; it is important that he should know what to do as well as when to do it. The New Testament reminds us "Now is the time, today is the day of salvation." "Now" is the Holy Spirit's word. It is not when a man can get to it, when he has a little time – it is now! "Let the wicked forsake his way" *now*. "Let him return unto our God" *now*. "And He will have mercy upon him" *now*. If a man is going to be wise, he should act without delay *now!*

"What profit hath he that worketh in that wherein he laboreth? I have seen the travail, which God hath given to the sons of men to be exercised in it" (Ecclesiastes 3:9-10).

Ecclesiastes 3:9-15 seems to show that hard labor is vain. There is a curse upon man, and the Bible reveals that the whole world is under this curse. The nature of that curse is that a man will eat his bread in the sweat of his brow. This is saying that it will be hard to get things done. The call of the Lord says,

"Come unto me all ye that are weary and heavy laden" and this is so important because living in this world is a wearisome business. Any person could be wise. He could rest in God.

In the New Testament there is an important statement: "There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God" (Hebrews 4:4). If anyone were struggling, trying real hard to live wisely, this Scripture gives clear guidance. Such a person should yield to the Lord. He should do the thing that is before him. He would not need to force it, only yield. God will do it. Put his trust in God. "Whatsoever God doeth, it shall abide forever."

"And moreover I saw under the sun the place of judgment, that wickedness was there; and the place of righteousness, that iniquity was there. (Sin is everywhere.) I said in mine heart, God shall judge the righteous and the wicked: for there is a time there for every purpose and for every work. I said in mine heart concerning the estate of the sons of men, that God might manifest them, and that they might see that they themselves are beasts. For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast: for all is vanity. All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again " (Ecclesiastes 3:16-20).

Actually so far as this world is concerned, sin is everywhere, death prevails on all sides. There is no use being morbid about it; but one should be honest about it. As one looks around there is not a single thing living that is not going to die. Death has marked everything in this world. So far as the natural man is concerned, the horse dies and the man dies. A cow dies and a man dies. They all go unto one place as far as this world is concerned. This makes it so wonderful to think of the Gospel. "Whosoever believeth in me shall never perish." Isn't that marvelous! If one were going to be wise, he should put his faith in the Lord. Nothing could be more foolish than to seek for and to abide in the things of this world.

"So I returned, and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun: and behold the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power; but they had no comforter. Wherefore I praised the dead which are already dead more than the living which are yet alive. Yea, better is he than both they, which hath not yet been, who hath not seen the evil work that is done under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 4:1-3).

When this earnest man looked around and saw the trouble people had, when he saw the way in which people were oppressed, the injustice; that there was no comforter, he praised the dead. In contrast the Gospel has a triumphant expectation:

"Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost"(Romans 15:13).

The person who believes in God can look forward into the future with confident expectation.

Continuing his observations of human affairs the author came upon another distressing fact. "Again I considered all travail, and every right work, that for this a man is envied of his neighbors" (Ecclesiastes 4:4). Thus he found out that if a man worked hard and got things together, that actually there would be other people envy him and hold this against him.

"There is one alone, and there is not a second; yea, he hath neither child nor brother: yet there is no end of all his labor; neither is his eye satisfied with riches; neither saith he, For whom do I labor, and bereave my soul of good? This is also vanity, yea, it is a sore travail" (Ecclesiastes 4:8).

The industrious man will have work, work, work with no end to all his labor, and yet he is only laying up treasures upon earth, which he must leave behind him. At this point it is good to remember what the Lord Jesus said about that: "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal" (Matthew 6:19). It is such a vain thing that a person will try to work and gain and pile up; when actually it cannot last: moths and rust corrupts, thieves break through and steal. A person should believe the Gospel and be wise about his work. He should lay up treasures in heaven. Everything a person is doing down here could be done with heaven in mind!

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 shows that it is sad for a man to be alone. But this is not necessary; he need never be alone. God sent His own Son into the world "to seek and to save the lost." The Good Shepherd has come looking for the lost sheep. When a person feels he is all alone, he could feel as if he were a little sheep out in the wilderness with night coming on. He might be scared to death, but he would not be alone. The Good Shepherd came to seek and to save the lost. Then how can a man be wise? Put his trust in the Lord. Do not stay by himself. He could come to Christ. No man needs to live all day in himself: he can walk with the Lord. No man needs to lie down at night in his bed and feel all alone. He can have the Lord, because Christ Jesus came into the world to seek and to save the lost.

Ecclesiastes 4:13 reports "Better is a poor and a wise child than an old and foolish king, who will no more be admonished." As the author "considered all the living which walk under the sun" he saw there are many different people, yet each person was by himself. And this was not good. But what could any man do? Trust in God!

In Ecclesiastes 5:1-7 something very significant is revealed about praying:

"Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools: for they consider not that they do evil. Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few. For a dream cometh through the multitude of business; and a fool's voice is known by multitude of words. When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for he hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed. Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay. Suffer not thy mouth to cause thy flesh to sin; neither say thou before the angel that it was an error: wherefore should God be angry at thy voice, and destroy the work of thine hands? For in the multitude of dreams and many words there are also divers vanities: but fear thou God" (Ecclesiastes 5:1-7).

When a person comes into the presence of God, it is fitting that he should be humble. God is in heaven and the person is here on earth. He would be wise to let his words be few. It is helpful to remember the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican. The Pharisee was walking into the presence of God and feeling he was just all right; but that man was a fool. But that very same parable will reveal the wise person, the Publican, who durst not so much lift up his eye unto heaven but smote upon his breast and said, "God be merciful to me a sinner."

Ecclesiastes 5:10-20 shows something about the vanity of riches. "He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver." That is one of the sad things about life. If money is what a man loves, he will never get enough. In fact, keeping it for himself, a man can keep it to his own harm. How could a person be wise then? "Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness" (Luke 16:9). A man should use the money he has in such a way that what he is doing pleases God. Then it is certain he can never lose.

Ecclesiastes chapter 6 deals with a person working and not getting anywhere: "All the labor of man is for his mouth, and yet the appetite is not filled" (Ecclesiastes 6:7). Throughout this discussion a person can be reminded of how the Lord asked this question: "What is a man profited if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul" (Matthew 16:26)? Would a person want to be wise? "Come unto me all ye that are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest." That would be the smart thing to do. Turn to the Lord. Turn away from all that you are working on, depending on and turn to the Lord.

Ecclesiastes 7:1-10 points out that sorrow is better than laughter. But here the contrast with the Gospel is plain again. So far as this world is concerned, Jesus of Nazareth said, "In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). A person will never find joy in this world. Only in Christ!

As he reflected upon the men who could be counted righteous the author was depressed to realize "There is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not" (Ecclesiastes 7:20). In his report of his observations he gives one after another example of this truth. He recognizes "wisdom is good . . . wisdom giveth life to them that have it." But then he is moved also to write:

"In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of adversity consider: God also hath set the one over against the other, to the end that man should find nothing after him. All things have I seen in the days of my vanity: there is a just man that perisheth in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man that prolongeth his life in his wickedness" (Ecclesiastes 7:14-15).

When this man looked around, what he saw reminded him of the saying: "the good die young;" so he goes on to write further "Be not over much wicked . . . Be not righteous over much; neither make thyself over wise . . . Be not over much wicked, neither be thou foolish: why shouldest thou die before thy time?" In the midst of all his observations he comes out with a bit of light in his understanding: "For he that feareth God shall come forth of them all." What this man saw when he looked round about him was just what the Scripture says: "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God." But tragically what he did not know was the revelation of truth that is revealed in Christ Jesus. In the Gospel is the revelation of the grace of God. "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow. Though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool" (Isaiah 1:18). In this world there is no rest for the wicked. If a person wants to be wise, he should turn to God, look unto God, put his trust in Him. God can save the soul, which is much more important than anything the world has to offer.

Chapter 7 Ecclesiastes 3- 7 **"How To Be Wise"** **Questions for Study and Research**

1. Is there any hope for the natural man if he remains only natural? Why?
2. How would you present the Gospel to a person who has in mind what Ecclesiastes reports about life?
3. How does the natural man 's view of life differ from that of a Christian ?
4. Interpret Hebrews 4:9 "There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God."
5. What should be the attitude of a Christian toward the things of this world?
6. What should a person do about living if he wanted to be wise?
7. Explain "Everything a man does on earth could be done with heaven in mind."
8. How does the coming of the Holy Spirit into the heart of the believer affect the loneliness of the individual soul?
9. How would a wise man act when he comes to worship God? (5:1-7).
10. How does the Gospel change the burden seen in Chapter 6?

How To Be Happy

Can you understand that in spite of all that is wrong and evil in the world, it is yet possible for a person to be blessed?

"Who is as the wise man? and who knoweth the interpretation of a thing? a man's wisdom maketh his face to shine, and the boldness of his face shall be changed" (Ecclesiastes 8:1). Ecclesiastes continues to raise the question, what is the greatest good that a man can have or can do? The Bible reveals truth. It reveals truth about evil, and evil is ugly. And the Bible reveals the truth about virtue, and virtue is beautiful. The Bible is candid, honest, straightforward. The Bible reveals the salvation of God: what He will do for anyone that turns to Him. God will save anyone, "whosoever believeth in Him;" but nothing can be

done to help whosoever does not believe. It is wonderful to be able to announce to the whole wide world "whosoever will may come." People must not forget "whosoever won't, don't."

The Bible shows us the nature of this world. Scripture reveals this world lieth in the lap of the evil one and reveals very plainly natural man cannot please God: "flesh and blood shall not inherit the Kingdom of God." This raises a natural question, what then can a man do? And the word is very simple: receive. Receive the grace of God. God offers it to men. God provides it for all. God sent His Son to bring grace into the world, and He calls men to Him to receive it. The Lord Jesus proclaimed His Word to the whole wide world as He does to this day: "Come unto me all ye that are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, learn of me, for I am meek and lowly of heart and you shall find rest for your soul" (Matthew 11:28). The Bible reveals that the grace of God will be given to the willing heart.

It is a sad fact that many people who claim to speak in the name of the Gospel about Jesus Christ give the impression that everyone, everywhere, can expect God to be good and kind and gracious and merciful to all men. That is overstated. That is not the way in which it is. It is true God is gracious and His grace is marvelous. His grace is unspeakably rich to the willing heart, to the one who yields, to the believing one, to the one who comes, but to no one else.

Now any person can become willing, and so qualify for the favor of God. But there are things that are involved for any man seeking to do the will of God. One of them is to realize the unsatisfactory nature of this life. When a person finally gets "fed up" with trying to live here, and that person looks up into the face of Almighty God to seek the grace of Christ Jesus, God will help. This is what the Bible will seek to help any soul to do; showing men the unsatisfactory nature of living in this world and urging men to leave it, turn their backs on it, and turn to God.

It has been noted the book of Ecclesiastes is the report of an able honest student who tried to find out what is the greatest good a man can have or do. This report in Ecclesiastes is drastic: it is revealing and shocking. It was scientifically prepared. This book is about the natural world as it is. The first two chapters describe the man's general approach to the problem and his attempts to solve it. The last ten chapters are very much like a notebook that the researcher might have had with him all the time. In it are bits of truth, glimpses of insight, as pieces of a broken mirror: with bits of shining light reflecting part of the truth, yet failing to present the whole picture.

It is normal and natural for anyone to want to be happy. People naturally would like to see people smile, to see them cheerful. The book of Ecclesiastes asks the question, "How to be happy?" Chapters 8-12 deal with this negatively. However, the Christian is not limited to that. With the whole Bible in hand he knows the truth of God as manifested in Jesus Christ has been written in the Scriptures. This can be brought to mind by the Holy Spirit and will be useful in understanding how the Lord will help the believer to live well.

Ecclesiastes, chapter 8, reveals what things are like in this world. Wisdom makes a man's face shine, and lightens the heart. It is obvious then that any person with wisdom is just better off. In this world there is uncertainty; this makes for unhappiness.

"There is no man that hath power over the spirit to retain the spirit; neither hath he power in the day of death: and there is no discharge in that war; neither shall wickedness deliver those that are given to it" (Ecclesiastes 8:8).

Death is sure, there is no escape from that for anybody. Sometimes a man can actually hurt himself by the way he treats other people. "There is a time wherein one man ruleth over another to his own hurt" (Ecclesiastes 8:9). If judgment against an evil work is not executed speedily, the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil. A man is such that if he does wrong, and doesn't get punished for it, he will do more wrong. If he's not promptly punished he will increase in wickedness. But at the same time the author admits "I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before him" (Ecclesiastes

8:12). Keeping the truth of God in mind, a man can be wise and can be happy. However, trying to understand keeps a person burdened. Trying to analyze and figure things out keeps a person frustrated, and this makes for unhappiness.

Jesus of Nazareth told His disciples: "Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof" (Matthew 6:34). When anybody, even a Christian, tries to understand things as they happen in this world, he will be upset. This will make for unhappiness. The Christian has a better way.

"Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6-7).

In chapter 9, the first three verses record that the author observed that all things come alike to all in this world. It is so discouraging that the heart of the sons of man is full of evil. As men look around and see that everyone dies anyway, they are inclined to say, "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die. And you'll be long time dead." With this in mind men are inclined to do wrong things. It is true that while there is life, there is hope; but the threat of death causes man to indulge in sinful things now.

It is refreshing to bring to mind the testimony of Paul the Apostle:

"For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal. For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (II Corinthians 4:17-5:1).

What a wonderful contrast there is between the hope in the Gospel and the despair in Ecclesiastes. The Gospel looks forward and upward with a blessed hope.

Ecclesiastes 9:11-18 again reports discouragement:

"The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither, yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favor to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all" (Ecclesiastes 9:11).

So far as this world is concerned things are unfair, uncertain and can never satisfy. In this world there are many injustices: "I have seen servants upon horses, and princes walking as servants upon the earth" (Ecclesiastes 10:7). Things are so mixed up. Jesus of Nazareth told the parable of the wheat and the tares. Since they both grow together in the same field, how could anyone ever be happy? The Christian knows the secret: he will put his trust in Christ, yield, and be content.

There is a coming judgment, as shown in the 11th chapter. So in order to be happy, one should not become too much attached to this world. This is good advice for anybody so far as this world is concerned. Men can have in mind that this world is a sinking ship, it is a leaking vessel, so it will be better not to be attached too closely to it. A person should be ready to leave because this world has no promise in it of ever being able to satisfy the soul.

Chapter 12 begins with what is probably the most eloquent passage in the Bible dealing with the reality of death. The author has been pondering the question: how can a person be happy? He discovered by careful, diligent observation it would not be in this world. This will be a special interest to young people. Young people seem to be so much more inclined to be optimistic in their outlook. One reason may be they have not been over this road before. They have not yet run the race. They know of no reason why they could not win it. A young person must trust Jesus Christ to be able to plan, dream and be happy. It is when young people study the Word of God that they can be really happy. Believing young people really do enjoy life. It is because they have found something other than this world.

"Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when

thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them; while the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars, be not darkened, nor the clouds return after the rain: in the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble, and the strong men shall bow themselves, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look out of the windows be darkened, and the doors shall be shut in the streets, when the sound of the grinding is low, and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird, and all the daughters of music shall be brought low; also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail: because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets: or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern. Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it" (Ecclesiastes 12:1-7).

Following this grand expression of deep feeling the author goes on to close his meditation.

"Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher; all is vanity. And moreover, because the preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yea, he gave good heed, and sought out, and set in order many proverbs. The preacher sought to find out acceptable words: and that which was written was upright, even words of truth" (Ecclesiastes 12:8-10).

Then he concludes:

"Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil" (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14).

Throughout the whole discussion has been shown the many unhappy, unsatisfactory, sad things of this world. But now suddenly the veil is lifted; the reader is allowed to look out into the sky, into the brightness of the presence of God and hear the Word of God as to how to be happy, "Fear God and keep His commandments." Christians know that in Christ Jesus this really can be done. They trust in Him and He will do it through them. So let Him bring His blessing to our hearts while we rest in Him who is the Savior of our souls.

Chapter 8 Ecclesiastes 8-12 **"How To Be Happy"** **Questions for Study and Research**

1. What light is shed on the practice of criminal judgment? (Ecclesiastes 8:11).
2. List the passages which reflect that God is in control.
3. What great advice is given to young people in chapter 12?
4. What seems to be the only conclusion a natural man can reach as to how to attain even some happiness? Why is it not adequate?
5. Is there any encouragement to make great plans, to dream and to have large ambitions? Explain your answer.
6. In conclusion, what is the greatest good? (Ecclesiastes 12:13).
7. What have you learned in this study that will help you to be wiser and more realistic Christian as you live in this world?
8. Would a person ever need to know more than this truth "Fear God and keep His Commandments, for this is the whole duty of man?" Why not?
9. How could Ecclesiastes help in counseling a young person who feels that all he needs for happiness is plenty of money?
10. What bearing does Ecclesiastes 12:1 have for parents, Sunday School teachers and preachers?