

ADULT SABBATH SCHOOL BIBLE STUDY GUIDE

Ecclesiastes

ECCLSIASITES

Jan • Feb • Mar 2007



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EAQ070101

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Ecclesiastes: The

*Solomon shows us
that earthly vanities
fail to satisfy the
longing soul.*

Unlike other books in Scripture, which often begin with a strong affirmation about God (“The Word of the Lord to . . .”), Ecclesiastes commences with a cry about the meaninglessness of life. “Vanity of vanities . . . all is vanity.” This opening sounds more like modern secular writers than a prophet of Yahweh. Nevertheless, as Seventh-day Adventist Christians, we believe that Ecclesiastes was placed in the canon of Scripture because God has in it a message for us.

Nothing, though, about this book, its message, or even its origin, has avoided controversy. For instance, many scholars claim that the author—whoever it was—wasn’t King Solomon. Of course, these are often the same scholars who claim that Daniel was written in the second century B.C. or that Moses never wrote Genesis, so we can dismiss them out of hand. We are, instead, proceeding on the assumption that Solomon was the writer, an assumption based on Christian and Jewish tradition, on internal evidence inside the book that points to Solomon as the author, as well as on Ellen White’s statements that “the book of Ecclesiastes was written by Solomon in his old age, after he had fully proved that all the pleasures earth is able to give are empty and unsatisfying. He there shows how impossible it is for the vanities of the world to meet the longings of the soul. His conclusion is that it is wisdom to enjoy with gratitude the good gifts of God, and to do right; for all our works will be brought into judgment.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 1164.

Yet, anyone who has ever studied Ecclesiastes knows its challenges. Some texts are obscure, their meanings difficult to discern; sometimes, though, the greatest challenge comes from not when we don’t know what the texts mean but when we do. Thus, a few simple points of interpretation will greatly help us as we undertake this study.

To begin, Solomon was writing at the end of his life, a life full of bit-

Painful Perspective

terness and anger at himself and his apostasy. What's unique about the book is that in some places Solomon is writing from the perspective of someone alienated from God. Like modern authors, he's giving us thoughts that flow directly from his head. We see the world as it appears through his eyes.

In such places it is well to heed the words of *The SDA Bible Commentary*: "Those portions of Ecclesiastes that relate the experience and reasoning of [Solomon's] years of apostasy are not to be taken as representing the mind and will of the Spirit. Nevertheless, they are an inspired record of what he actually thought and did during that time (see *Prophets and Kings*, p. 79), and that record constitutes a sober warning against the wrong kind of thought and action. . . . Passages such as these should not be wrested from their context and made to teach some supposed truth that Inspiration never intended them to teach."—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 1060.

How do we know, though, which are those passages? This question leads to the second important principle for studying Ecclesiastes: We must read it in the context of the whole Scripture. What is Scripture's basic message about life, death, and our purpose in life? When a text of Ecclesiastes seems to conflict with the grand themes of the Bible, we can be sure it's Solomon reflecting on life from the perspective of alienation and separation from the Lord. These texts, of course, shouldn't be used as the basis of theology; they should be used, instead, as practical warnings about what happens when we lose sight of God, our Creator and Redeemer.

In the end, that's what this book is really about: It's God showing us how cynical, bitter, and empty life is apart from the knowledge of Him. It's our hope that we can learn this lesson from our study of Ecclesiastes, in contrast to how its author, Solomon, had to learn it—the hard way.

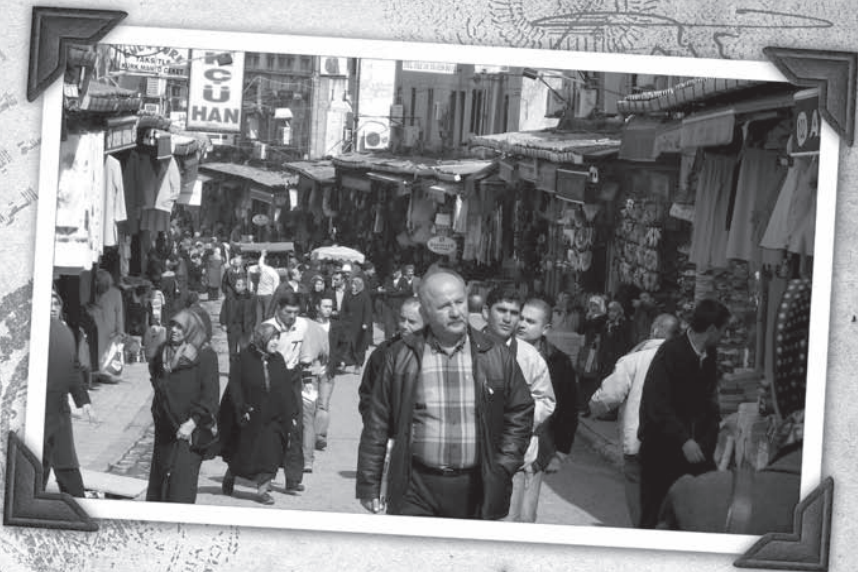
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Will They Know Him?

I walk through the marketplace in a major city in the Middle East. But it's not the wares that I scan. It's the people. They pray, they give to the poor, but do they know God? Really know Him? Do they know Issa—Jesus? Will they know Him when He comes? Will they cry for the mountains to cover them when He appears? Or will they look up and say, "This is our God"?

I want to stop them, ask them, tell them about Jesus, who loves them, who died for them. But they don't see me as they pass, their eyes on the goods in the marketplace, not on the eternal treasure.

But we can tell them. The Church is working in this country, and our Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will provide funds to open an outreach center where we can invite them to come and see, to learn who Jesus is. I want to tell them, but they don't hear my voice. So I'll help their countrymen tell them. For me, it's personal.

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The Rise and Fall of the House of Solomon



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: 2 Chron. 6:1-48, 2 Chron. 7:1-4, 1 Kings 3:16-28, 11:1-43.

Memory Text: “For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required” (Luke 12:48).

Richard Cory” is a poem about a rich man told from the perspective of a poor man—a poor man jealous of Richard Cory, of his money, of his looks, of everything Richard had that made others “wish that we were in his place.” The poem ends, though, when Richard Cory one fine night “went home and put a bullet through his head.”

Solomon, unlike Richard Cory, didn't kill himself, at least not physically. But spiritually, that's another matter. Solomon had all that the world could offer; even more so, he had the best that heaven could offer, as well: “And Solomon the son of David was strengthened in his kingdom, and the Lord his God was with him, and magnified him exceedingly” (2 Chron. 1:1).

What happened? How could someone walking so close to God, and lavished with gifts from heaven and earth, end up so bitter, so cynical, and tortured?

It's easy, really. No matter who we are, what we have, or even how close to God we walk, in the end we are fallen creatures with natures so rotten that unless we daily surrender ourselves to God (Luke 9:23), we are in danger of allowing those natures to ruin us.

This week, before we study Ecclesiastes itself, we'll look at the *Sitz im Leben*, “the life situation,” of Solomon, which will help us understand why, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, he wrote the book as he did.

*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 6.

The Wisdom of Solomon

Look up the following texts. What do they tell us about the nature and character of Solomon, at least in his earlier years?

1 Kings 3:28

1 Kings 4:29-34

1 Kings 10:23

Matt. 12:42

Solomon, clearly, was a man of extraordinary intelligence and wisdom. Of course, intelligence and wisdom are not the same thing. Some of the world's most devilish people were very intelligent. What they lacked was "wisdom," the right kind, anyway.

According to the Bible there are at least two kinds of wisdom: the wisdom of the world (*1 Cor. 3:19*) and the wisdom that comes from God (*Job 28:28, Ps. 111:10*).

What do you think is the difference between these two kinds of wisdom?

Solomon was clearly a person who, whatever worldly wisdom he possessed, had the wisdom that came from God: "And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding exceeding much, and largeness of heart, even as the sand that is on the sea shore" (*1 Kings 4:29*).

If, however, "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," then all wisdom and knowledge that arise after that "fear" must be based on the recognition of the reality, the power, and the goodness of God. God is the starting point of all true wisdom. Any truths not based on that foundation might be knowledge but not wisdom. How unfortunate that so many intelligent, educated, and knowledgeable people know nothing of this wisdom.

He was an educated, intelligent professional, regarded as brilliant. And yet, when told he was a sinner, he responded, "What sin? I'm not a sinner." How is this an example of knowledge without wisdom? What other examples can you think of, and what do they teach you about the difference between worldly knowledge and heavenly wisdom?

Solomon's Walk With the Lord

Whatever native intelligence Solomon possessed, that wasn't enough to give him the kind of wisdom he showed in those early years of his reign.

Read 1 Kings 3:16-28. What does that story tell us about what “the wisdom from God” includes?

Solomon's wisdom, His ability to judge rightly, came to him from God; it was a gift from above. But this didn't happen in a vacuum. Solomon walked with the Lord; he had a relationship with God, one in which his heart was surrendered to the Lord in faith and obedience. Only through such submission could the Lord give him the wisdom he needed to judge rightly in the land of Israel.

Read 1 Kings 3:3-14. What elements do you find in Solomon's words that show what His attitude toward God was?

In this encounter we can see what in many ways was the crucial element in Solomon's great success. Verse 9 says it all: Not only did he ask for the right thing (wisdom to be a good king); his whole attitude in asking showed that this young man, with all the world at his fingertips, understood his need of God. Solomon, the king of Israel, came before the Lord as a humble suppliant. There is no trace of self-sufficiency here. He saw his need of a greater power. As long as he had that attitude, there's no doubt that the Lord could work mighty things through him.

There's another element, too, that mustn't be missed. Read again Solomon's interaction with the Lord here. Obviously his words showed where his heart was. But words aren't enough. How else is Solomon to show the reality of a faith relationship with God? The answer, of course, is in verse 14: “If thou wilt walk in my ways . . .” Here's a great example of the closeness between faith and works. God can work through Solomon, and reward his faith, only as long as Solomon reveals that faith through obedience.

How well do your works reflect your faith? What do your works say about your faith? What changes do you need to make?

Solomon in God's Temple

Perhaps, of all the privileges given Solomon, none was greater than to build the temple in Jerusalem, the chosen city (*2 Chron. 6:6*) of the Lord, the Creator of the heavens and the earth (*Rev. 10:6*). However much David, Solomon's father, had wanted the job himself, it was left to Solomon to fulfill the task.

Read over Solomon's prayer of dedication in 2 Chronicles 6. What elements stand out in your mind as you read Solomon's words? What principles can you find from this prayer that can be applied in our experience with God today, both on a personal and a corporate level?

So many powerful truths come from these words. Notice, for instance, verse 18, Solomon's acknowledgment of the grandness and greatness of the God who created a universe whose size the king could barely comprehend.

Notice, too, all the way through the prayer, Solomon's realization that his people needed to remain obedient to God. None of the special covenant blessings given to Israel were unconditional.

Perhaps the most important point in this whole prayer is the promise of forgiveness. If Israel sinned, and were punished for those sins, God would hear from heaven, from His "dwelling place," "and forgive." Notice, though, how that forgiveness always was linked to their confession and repentance.

Read verse 36, focusing on the phrase "for there is no man which sinneth not." How do you understand this verse in the context of the gospel? What point was Solomon making?

What we see here in Solomon's prayer is a recognition of human weakness contrasted to the loving forgiveness of God. Second Chronicles 7:1-3 shows that God accepted Solomon's sacrifices, which were offered with his prayers.

If there is no person who "sinneth not," why is it so important for each of us to understand Christ's death in our own behalf? Why must our hope of eternal life rest only with Jesus?

The Fall of Solomon

“Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor. 10:12).

However much he was favored of the Lord, however many blessings Solomon had, he started to lose his way. Ellen White makes it clear: “So gradual was Solomon’s apostasy that before he was aware of it, he had wandered far from God. Almost imperceptibly he began to trust less and less in divine guidance and blessing, and to put confidence in his own strength. Little by little he withheld from God that unswerving obedience which was to make Israel a peculiar people, and he conformed more and more closely to the customs of the surrounding nations. Yielding to the temptations incident to his success and his honored position, he forgot the Source of his prosperity.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 55.

What element in particular does the Bible point to as the source of Solomon’s moral and spiritual decline? See 1 Kings 11:1-4. What command were his actions specifically in violation of? See Deut. 17:17.

However wrong he was in taking numerous wives, especially foreign ones who didn’t know the Lord, the problem wasn’t so much that, in and of itself; it was where these marriages would lead him. The women, who were probably closer to him than anyone else in the nation, eventually led him away from the Lord. Notice that 1 Kings 11:4 says that when Solomon was “old,” his wives turned his heart away. In other words, as Ellen White wrote above, his apostasy didn’t happen all at once. It began with an infraction that, in and of itself, didn’t seem to be so bad. That “small” step, however, ended up as a grand leap into apostasy.

What did this apostasy on his part lead him into doing? 1 Kings 11:4-9.

Utterly amazing! From being specifically chosen of the Lord to worshipping and serving pagan gods? If it could happen to him, it could happen to anyone.

Are there some “strange women” in your life? Be brutally honest with yourself. And if the answer is yes, how do you get rid of them?

Solomon's Last Days

The Lord, of course, didn't sit by and do nothing while Solomon fell into apostasy. No doubt the God who is "not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 *Pet.* 3:9) worked on the heart of His once-faithful servant.

What did the Lord say to Solomon regarding Solomon's actions? How, also, do we see in these verses the principle that our actions, for good or ill, impact others? Where, also, do we see God's mercy toward Solomon here? See 1 *Kings* 11:11-13.

What trials did the Lord bring on Solomon as a result of his sinful actions? 1 *Kings* 11:14-43.

Though Scripture itself doesn't say it, Ellen White makes it clear that, in the end, Solomon—no matter how hardened—eventually saw the folly of his ways and repented. Having learned much from this terrible experience, in his later years "the king recorded for after generations the history of his wasted years with their lessons of warning." —Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 79. These words, at least part of them, are what we know today as the book of Ecclesiastes.

Read Ecclesiastes 1:1, 16 and 2:4-10. How do these verses help us identify its writer as Solomon?

Numerous lessons can be learned from the sad story of Solomon. First, no matter how exalted we are, none of us are immune from the follies of sin and apostasy. Second, Solomon's fall brought suffering not just upon himself but upon others, as well, a common principle that many of us know all too well. Finally, as we study the book of Ecclesiastes, we can see the bitterness and suffering that Solomon faced because of his wrong choices.

No matter how far Solomon's fall, God didn't give up on him. What good news do you find in that for yourself, you who have surely stumbled and fallen, as well?

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 25–46, for the story of Solomon. See also *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, introduction to Ecclesiastes.

“For many years Solomon’s life was marked with devotion to God, with uprightness and firm principle, and with strict obedience to God’s commands. He directed in every important enterprise and managed wisely the business matters connected with the kingdom. His wealth and wisdom, the magnificent buildings and public works that he constructed during the early years of his reign, the energy, piety, justice, and magnanimity that he revealed in word and deed, won the loyalty of his subjects and the admiration and homage of the rulers of many lands.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 32.

“But Solomon had begun to lose sight of the Source of his power and glory. As inclination gained the ascendancy over reason, self-confidence increased, and he sought to carry out the Lord’s purpose in his own way. He reasoned that political and commercial alliances with the surrounding nations would bring these nations to a knowledge of the true God; and he entered into unholy alliance with nation after nation. Often these alliances were sealed by marriages with heathen princesses. The commands of Jehovah were set aside for the customs of surrounding peoples.”—Page 54.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ As a class, talk about other great leaders who made horrible mistakes that shouldn’t have been made. What parallels can you see between them and Solomon? What lessons can you learn for yourselves from these mistakes?
- ❷ Though we are not all Solomons, in what subtle ways do we face the same danger of slowly losing our dependency upon God? Also, what are our responsibilities to someone who is starting to fall away? How do we help without appearing judgmental?
- ❸ Do you, as a class, know someone who has fallen away from the Lord? What can you, as a class, do to try to bring this person back to the Lord? What are the first steps you could take to show this person that God still loves him or her? Perhaps the first thing you could do is invite that person to some social gathering outside a church setting.

The Chain of Truth

by KAMALANATHAN KATHIRAMAN

My wife and I live in Sri Lanka. One day she returned from visiting friends to say that an Adventist pastor had come to study the Bible with her friends. She told me many things she had learned—things I had never heard before. She urged me to meet this pastor, but I found reasons not to go.

I had grown up in an idol-worshipping home. But when I was in middle school, a friend gave me a Bible, and I began reading it. I lost interest in worshipping my family's idols and began worshipping God. However, some things about my friend's church bothered me—the loud music and people shouting during worship. But I knew of no other Christian church, so I attended my friend's church for years.

When my wife told me about the Adventist pastor, I was interested. But it took several weeks before I made time to meet him. Finally I agreed to go with my wife to the pastor's house one Saturday morning. I did not know that the pastor held worship services in his home on Saturday. I was surprised to find other people there ready to study the Bible. But as we studied, I became eager to know more about God. We decided to stay for the morning worship service.

What a difference! We sang songs with reverence, and we read the Bible together. The pastor really knew his Bible. This group truly worshiped God in spirit and in truth, and I wanted to worship with them.

That afternoon we studied the Bible some more. Time flew as we dug into God's Word together. When I asked a question, the pastor answered with Bible texts. I liked that!

After this, I was sure to be home when the pastor came to study the Bible. No more excuses. I had found truth, and I wanted it.

Three weeks later we decided to become part of this body of Christ. We were baptized a few months ago. People notice the changes in our lives and ask us what has happened. We gladly share our new faith with others, especially our families, who ask questions about our beliefs.

We invite people to study the Bible with us; but since we are still new Christians, we ask the pastor to teach them. Already some of my family members are turning from their idols and studying the Bible to learn about the living God. God is helping me teach them what I've learned.

Your Mission offerings helped bring my wife and me to Jesus.

KAMALANATHAN KATHIRAMAN quit his job in forestry to become a literature evangelist. He lives in northern Sri Lanka.

Nothing New Under *the* Sun



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Ecclesiastes 1.*

Memory Text: “That which has been is what will be, that which is done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun” (*Ecclesiastes 1:9, NKJV*).

The story is told of a Greek philosopher named Diogenes who walked the streets of Athens with a lantern; his goal was to find an honest man. According to one version of the story, he finally found someone whom he believed fit his expectations. Diogenes, however, was mistaken. The fellow stole his lantern, and poor Diogenes had to find his way home in the dark.

Whether true or not true, this story reveals how easy it is to be cynical about life, how easy it is to put a negative spin on things.

Of course, in one sense, that's not hard to understand. The world can make a person cynical, negative, depressed. Just ask Solomon, at least the Solomon who appears in the opening chapter of *Ecclesiastes*. He looks in nature and sees reason to despair; he seeks wisdom and finds it depressing; he looks at life as a whole and finds it meaningless. And for beings who cry out for meaning and purpose in life, we see this as a hard conclusion to live with. Maybe that's why, even in industrialized countries with lots of wealth, people are depressed. Why else are millions and millions of dollars spent on antidepressants? Because people are happy?

Chapter 1 introduces the book. It begins with a look at the futility and meaninglessness of life lived without the knowledge of God.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 13.*

Kohelet in Jerusalem

“The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem” (*Eccles. 1:1*).

The word commonly translated “preacher” here, *kohelet*, is from the Hebrew root *kahal*, which means “to assemble,” “to gather.” In Greek, *kohelet* is translated into a word similar to the Greek word for “church,” *ekklesia*; from this, of course, we get the name *Ecclesiastes*. The Jews just called the author, and the book, *Kohelet*.

There’s been much debate over the centuries regarding exactly what the word *kohelet* means. Is he gathering people in order to expound his great wisdom? Or is he a gatherer of wisdom, as he himself suggests (*Eccles. 1:13, 16, 17*)? We’ll have to wait for heaven in order to know for sure.

Read Ecclesiastes 1. Write out a short summary of what Solomon seems to be saying. Don’t worry about understanding each phrase (no one does!); rather, focus instead on the general message and tone. What point is he making, and how do we understand these words from a Christian perspective? And, as you read, keep in mind who wrote them, when, and why.

On the surface these are words of a bitter man, a cynical man, a pessimist. All he sees is repetition, fruitlessness, and meaninglessness in life. Taken in isolation, his words sound like many modern atheistic philosophers, who bemoan the meaninglessness and futility of their existence. This, of course, can’t be said about Solomon. Instead, remembering that we need to view this book in light of the whole Bible, we see, instead, the bitterness and cynicism that come from a life lived apart from God, a life lived in disobedience, a life lived only with immediate earthly things in view, as opposed to the greater picture of God and the promise of salvation. Taken in that context, his words fit perfectly with the overall theme of Scripture, however differently they are presented here.

How much bitterness or cynicism do you see in your own life? What caused it? How can these things be purged before they poison your whole spiritual existence?

Vanity of Vanities

“Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity” (*Eccles. 1:2*).

Most translations of this verse use the word *vanity*. The Hebrew word, *hebel*, means literally “vapor” or “breath”; it also carries the idea of emptiness, meaninglessness, and futility. The word will appear numerous times in Ecclesiastes.

When you think of “vapor” or “breath,” what comes to mind? Why would Solomon use this image to talk about life in general? See also *Ps. 144:4*.

Again, think about the perspective that he was writing from: The years of his life, so full of potential and promise, were squandered on things that do not last, things of no permanent value. When most of your whole life is made up of *hebel*, of vapor, when you get to the end of that life the whole thing can seem like a vapor because it passed by very quickly and seemed so full of meaningless things.

Look up the following verses. How are they expressing, in their own way, the same idea presented above?

Isa. 52:3

Matt. 6:19, 20

Mark 8:36

James 4:14

What makes Solomon’s words so powerful is that here was a man who had everything this world could offer. He, perhaps unlike anyone else, had his fill of worldly pleasures. As he himself said later, anything that he wanted he got (*Eccles. 2:10*). Yet, in the end, he calls it all meaningless, an empty vapor or breath. What a lesson about what’s important in life and what isn’t.

Take stock of your life. How much of what you are doing could be deemed as *hebel*? What things are you striving for? What things do you think are important? If you get what you are striving for, might you one day deem them as *hebel*, as well?

The Sun Also Rises

Solomon, in his earlier years, was apparently a keen student of nature, and from nature he learned many spiritual lessons (*see, for instance, Prov. 1:17-19; 6:6-9; 17:12; 26:1-3, 11; 31:10*). In his later years, as well, he was still looking at nature; given his frame of mind, however, we can't be too certain about the lessons he draws from what he sees.

Read Ecclesiastes 1:4-11. What point was Solomon making? How accurate were his conclusions?

Solomon was doing what's often termed "natural theology," the attempt to discern truth about God, reality, and life from nature itself. Which is fine. Nature has been deemed God's "second book" (*see, for instance, Ps. 19:1-7, Isa. 40:26, and Heb. 11:3*).

How does nature speak to us about God? What are the limits of what it can teach us, especially in a fallen world?

However powerful the message of this second book, you can put the most brilliant and wonderful text before someone who can't read, and it will mean nothing to that person. Or, regardless of what you put before them, if they are not open to what it says, if their hearts are set in another direction, then not only will they not accept what the text or what nature says but they could draw the wrong conclusions from them. Solomon here, grousing over his life, looks at nature and draws a conclusion that's not necessarily the lesson to be learned. He's pouring his own negativity and his cynicism into nature itself.

It's easy to do. One eighteenth-century writer argued that, because nature—through famines, pestilence, and floods—is so destructive, "man follows nature's impulses when he indulges in homicide." In other words, because nature kills, so can we. Talk about drawing a wrong conclusion! But again, this shows how easy it is to read our bad attitudes into what's around us.

How capable are you at looking at things "objectively"? How often do you let your bad moods or negative attitudes impact your actions and words? Why is death to self so important in order to protect ourselves from projecting our wrong attitudes onto other things?

Beyond the Cycles

Solomon looked around at nature and saw endless and seemingly meaningless repetition. The sun rises and sets, the wind blows, the rivers flow, and it goes on and on for generation after generation. What was, it will be done again; what will be, it already has been. “There is nothing new under the sun” (*Eccles. 1:9, NKJV*).

His tone, however, suggests that something is wrong in all this and that things shouldn’t be this way. His attitude comes through clearly in the first verses of the chapter.

Read again Ecclesiastes 1:1-4. What is Solomon saying in those opening verses about the transience of humanity in contrast to the endless cycles of nature?

The earth goes on and on; we don’t. We are nothing but vapor, *hebel*. These thoughts get to the ultimate dilemma of humanity: We are beings capable of understanding the idea of eternity, of transcendence, of something greater than ourselves, and yet, we see that it’s beyond our reach. The sun, the rivers, the wind—all were here before us and will be here long after we return to the dust. We come and go; the rivers, the sun, and the wind remain. No wonder life can seem to be, as Shakespeare wrote, a tale “full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

How do the following texts answer the dilemma that Solomon touched on here in the first chapter of Ecclesiastes? *1 Cor. 15:26, 51-55; Heb. 2:14; Rev. 21:4.*

There have been many great thinkers, many great philosophers, with all sorts of elaborate and logical systems, all designed to explain the hard questions of life. But unless they can solve the question of death, they have no answers for the questions of life, for, in the end, all life is swept up in death. And, as one can guess, none of these philosophers has answered the problem (most of them are dead themselves). Only Jesus, by His death and His resurrection, has. Jesus has shown us that death isn’t the end and that we, indeed, can one day be alive long after the endless cycles of life on this fallen planet have ceased to exist or even be remembered (*Isa. 65:17*). If not for that hope, Solomon would be justified in his pessimism.

Wisdom “Under the Sun”

Verses 12-18 in chapter 1 of Ecclesiastes give more insight into the background of the author. Not only does he reiterate his role as king, he mentions that he had more wisdom than all before him in Jerusalem, more evidence pointing to Solomon. This all makes sense, considering that the reign of Solomon was one of great peace and prosperity. The king, not worrying about invaders or rebellion or economic collapse, had time to seek for knowledge and wisdom “under the sun.”

Notice the phrase used here, “under heaven” (*vs. 13*), is another way of expressing the same idea as the phrase “under the sun” (*vss. 3, 9, 14*), which appears more than twenty times, and only in Ecclesiastes. What does the phrase mean, and how does it help us understand what Solomon is saying here?

Under heaven, under the sun, is another way of talking about what goes on here, on earth. What we see here is, again, another example of the futility of all earthly knowledge and wisdom. The world, and all that’s in it, can’t answer the hard questions of life; indeed, the world and all that’s in it *cause* many of the hard questions of life. The answer has to be from something greater than the world, above the world, something that has “overcome the world” (*John 16:33*). And that, of course, is Jesus. Otherwise, as Solomon sees here, the world leaves one frustrated, angry, cynical. He gains all this wisdom, and for him it brings only grief and an increase of sorrow.

German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, sounding like Solomon, wrote, “Everything in life [‘under the sun’] shows that earthly happiness is destined to be frustrated.”

Go back over Ecclesiastes 1:12-18. What things in particular does Solomon find so frustrating and vain? Also, how do the words here fit in with 2 Timothy 3:7?

Notice Ecclesiastes 1:15: “That which is crooked cannot be made straight: and that which is wanting cannot be numbered.” What bent or broken things in your life just can’t be fixed now; what things do you lack that the world just can’t supply? How do these things make you long even more for the return of Jesus?

Further Study: Ludwig Wittgenstein once said: “The world of the happy man is a different one from that of the unhappy man.” Go to Proverbs to get another view of Solomon in a different period of his life. What differences in attitude do you see? How does this show why a proper relationship with God is so important in how we view life as a whole?

“Solomon was not complaining of the ceaseless cycles of nature, but saw in them a parallel to the cycles of human life (Eccl. 1:4). Is man’s life, from generation to generation, a mere matter of repetition, with no more sublime object in view? Will there not be a climax to the life of the human race? Does not God have an eternal purpose that will eventually supersede this seemingly endless repetition of human activity from generation to generation?

“The scientific accuracy of the description here given of the motion of air masses about the surface of the earth is unparalleled in ancient literature and reveals an insight into the laws of nature greatly superior to that of most men in ancient times.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 1064.

“In its human wisdom the world knows not God. Its wise men gather an imperfect knowledge of God through his created works, and then in their foolishness exalt nature and the laws of nature above nature’s God. Nature is an open book which reveals God. All who are attracted to nature may behold in it the God that created them. But those who have not a knowledge of God, in their acceptance of the revelation God has made of Himself in Christ, will obtain only an imperfect knowledge of God in nature.”—Ellen G. White, *Healthful Living*, p. 293.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 As a class, spend some time in nature together and then discuss the following questions: What revelation of God do we get in nature? What can nature tell us about God? What can’t it tell us? What wrong lessons can we draw from nature? What does all this tell us about the importance of revelation for a fuller picture of God?
- 2 Why is it so easy to get cynical about life? Is a certain amount of cynicism valuable? After all, this is a fallen world destined to destruction. How do we strike the right balance so that, while cautious about the world, we don’t sink into the extreme negativity seen in the first chapter of Ecclesiastes?

The Priest Started It!

by HOMER TRECARTIN

We had a delightful visitor at church recently. Joe is a retiree from the United Kingdom who has lived in Cyprus for the past seven years. Earlier in the week he had called the Middle East Union to get directions to the nearest Adventist church. He seemed so excited to know finally where a church was.

Joe explained that he had been watching 3ABN for several months and wanted to visit the church. But he could not find a street address for a church. Armed with the church's address, he showed up for church.

Over lunch he shared more of his story. He has been a faithful member of his church for 66 years. But one Sunday last summer his priest announced that the following week mass would be on Saturday so he could leave for vacation.

"But Father," Joe objected, "we can't do that. The Bible says we are to keep God's Sabbath holy."

The priest smiled and said, "It's OK, Joe. It won't hurt at all. In fact, the Bible says that Saturday is the Sabbath, not Sunday."

Joe was stunned and upset. He bought a Bible—the first he had ever held—and started reading it. He searched the channels on his satellite TV for something that might help, and he found a program that was discussing the Sabbath! He listened intently and wrote down all the Bible texts they read. He found answers to other questions, such as what happens when a person dies.

He realized that his priest was right—Saturday is God's true Sabbath! But suddenly Joe did not know what to do. He decided to ask another priest, but every priest he talked to told him simply to stop reading the Bible, for it would just confuse him.

But Joe loved God and was learning so much from the Bible that he could not bear to stop reading it. So, he turned to the television programs that had brought him the truth.

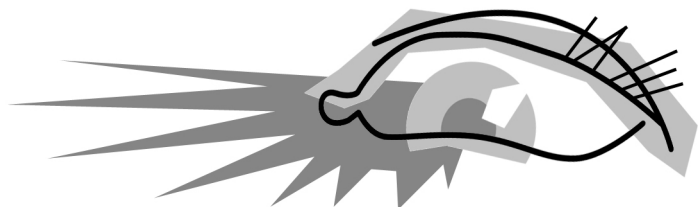
Joe had just one question: "Why don't Adventists celebrate Communion? I've heard nothing about that on television."

I smiled. "We do celebrate Communion. Today is Communion Sabbath."

Joe rejoices in his new knowledge of God's love and enjoys the fellowship he has found with his new family, those who keep the Sabbath because the Bible says to and not because it will let someone start their vacation early.

HOMER TRECARTIN was secretary-treasurer of the Middle East Union of Seventh-day Adventists when he wrote this. He currently lives in Maryland.

“All That My Eyes Desired”



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Prov. 3:13-28, Ecclesiastes 2.*

Memory Text: “For what has man for all his labor, and for the striving of his heart with which he has toiled under the sun?” (*Ecclesiastes 2:22, NKJV*).

“I have pursued, alas, philosophy,
Jurisprudence, and medicine,
And, help me God, theology,
With fervent zeal through thick and thin.
And here, poor fool, I stand once more,
No wiser than I was before.”

—Johann Goethe, *Faust* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), p. 12.

Sounds as if Faust didn't find his pursuit of knowledge any more satisfying than Solomon did. Even the study of theology, if not done with a humble and seeking heart, leads nowhere.

And though Solomon, unlike Goethe's *Faust*, didn't openly sell his soul to the devil in pursuit of happiness and fulfillment, he might as well have, considering how far he fell. Fortunately for Solomon, Jesus stooped even lower, becoming “sin for us” (*2 Cor. 5:21*) in order that He could lift even the lowest of us from the degradation of sin.

This week we pick up on more of Solomon's words regarding this general frustration with life; that is, a life lived apart from God. If we heed his words carefully, there will be some valuable lessons for us. Why make the same mistakes he did?

*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 20.

Striving After Wind

Chapter 1 ended with Solomon bemoaning all the wisdom and knowledge he had acquired over the years (*Eccles. 1:16-18*). For him it all was meaningless, a striving after wind. How sad that he should end up with these sentiments when the Bible more than once talked about how people marveled at the wisdom of his earlier years (*1 Kings 10:1-8*; see also *1 Kings 4:29-34*).

Compare the attitude of Solomon toward wisdom with the attitude he displayed earlier, such as in Proverbs 3:13-26. What do you think made the difference?

Solomon, old and bitter, had lost his way; hence, all the knowledge and wisdom he acquired meant little to him. In contrast, the wisdom he talks about in Proverbs is a wisdom centered on a knowledge of God, the source of all true wisdom and knowledge. This point is brought home even more powerfully when Solomon links knowledge and understanding with God as the Creator (*Prov. 3:19*), which proves again how the foundation of all knowledge and wisdom begins with Him. Notice, too, that this wisdom isn't just abstract theological concepts regarding the nature of God or the limits of omnipotence. Instead, in these verses in Proverbs we can see a practical element. True wisdom will be reflected in how we live our lives. Solomon, as he lost his way, lost the true wisdom he once had, and he found, instead, only the worldly kind, the kind under the sun. Hence, in his mind it all became vain, meaningless, even a source of pain.

Though there's a chapter break, a logical progression of thought flows from the last verses of chapter 1 to the first few verses of chapter 2. Read Ecclesiastes 1:16-2:3. What is Solomon talking about now?

How typical of human beings to go from one worldly pursuit to another, all in a vain attempt to find happiness and fulfillment. What's been your own experience in trying to find worldly happiness? Why does it never work? Why can it never work?

The Pleasure Principle

Solomon, finding wisdom a vain endeavor, goes after pleasure instead. The constant search for pleasure is called hedonism. Most people who are pleasure seekers are just looking for a good time. Some people, however, truly believe that pleasure is the sum of all good, and whatever is pleasurable is, therefore, also good.

Put yourself in the mind of someone who does not believe in God. According to their thinking, if this life is all there is, if there is nothing beyond it, if there is no moral law that we all are answerable to, then why not just kick back and enjoy yourself in any way you please, even at the expense of others? What answer do you have for someone like this?

Compare what Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes 2:1-3 with what he wrote in Proverbs 6:23-29, 7:6-27, 20:1, 23:1-6. How is he, here in Ecclesiastes, expressing the same sentiments that he wrote out years earlier?

There's something incredibly tricky about seeking pleasure just for pleasure's sake. For some reason, when we get it and even enjoy it, sooner or later it doesn't satisfy. Sooner or later the pleasure loses something, or we need more and more of it to reach the same level of immediate satisfaction. Sooner or later we realize that there's much more to life than just pleasure and that pleasure alone leaves us hollow, empty, dissatisfied. This is a lesson that Solomon learned for himself the hard way.

Solomon is a man who, though once warning people about lust, ended up with “seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines” (1 Kings 11:3); a guy who, though warning against gluttony, eventually would feast like a pig (1 Kings 4:22, 23). How easy it is to fall! What lessons can you take away from this fall that should serve as a warning to you?

“All That My Eyes Desired”

One of the most famous, and successful, businessmen in American history was Lee Iacocca, who ran the giant Chrysler Corporation for many years. Toward the end of his life, he once said, “Here I am in the twilight years of my life, still wondering what it’s all about. . . . I can tell you this, fame and fortune is for the birds.”

Read Ecclesiastes 2:4-11. What’s the basic point of his message here?

Solomon gained a certain satisfaction from his material prosperity (*Eccles. 2:10*) but, in the end, the satisfaction did not last, did not fulfill the most basic longings of his soul (*vs. 11*). If material possessions could bring happiness, Solomon should have been the happiest person in the world. As you read Ecclesiastes, you can see that these are not the words of a happy man.

Read again Ecclesiastes 2:4-11. What things did Solomon acquire? See also *1 Kings 7* and *1 Kings 10:10-29*.

Why, though, with so much, was he still not happy?

All that Solomon had were physical things; all his physical desires were satiated. Yet, as human beings, we are more than the sum of our organs and flesh. There’s a spiritual, moral component to us that all the physical things in the world cannot satisfy. Solomon was proof of that. It’s interesting, too, that even in the so-called “developed” world, in which people have wealth and material prosperity, the levels of unhappiness and dissatisfaction with life are sometimes even higher than nations in which the people have less.

Read Matthew 6:33. How could this great truth have solved Solomon’s problem? What does the text say to you amid your own temptations?

The Fate of a Fool

“Then I thought in my heart, ‘The fate of the fool will overtake me also. What then do I gain by being wise?’ I said in my heart, ‘This too is meaningless’ ” (*Eccles. 2:15, NIV*).

Solomon is having a hard time. All his wisdom, he believed, did him no good. He then sought after pleasure and mirth and found it empty. And then, even being perhaps the richest man in all antiquity didn’t satisfy the innermost needs of his soul. He found it all “vanity and striving after wind” (*vs. 11, NASB*).

As if all these weren’t bad enough, it gets worse.

Read Ecclesiastes 2:12-17. What is he complaining about now? How valid are his complaints? How can you, as a Christian, answer him?

Jesus said something that in a close way relates to what Solomon is saying here. Talking about the Father, Jesus said, “He maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust” (*Matt. 5:45*). In another place, after talking about some Galileans whose “blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices” (*Luke 13:1*), Jesus then said: “ ‘Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish’ ” (*Luke 13:2, 3, NKJV; see also verses 4, 5*). In both these places Jesus is talking about what seems obvious to all of us: that pain and suffering aren’t just the lot of the wicked. The good suffer as well. The difference is that Solomon, seeing this fact, believes that everything we do is useless because we all, the fool and the wise, wind up dead. Jesus, though, comes to a different conclusion: “ ‘Unless you repent you will all likewise perish’ ” (*NKJV*). Jesus was pointing them to something beyond the immediate fate of either the wicked or the just.

How does your faith in God help you deal with the nondiscriminatory reach of death? What Bible promises offer you the greatest hope in the context of the inevitability of the grave?

Legacy

Solomon doesn't know when to give up. It's bad enough that all his worldly pursuits came to nothing; it's bad enough that everyone, the wise and the fool, dies; but now he's complaining about what happens even *after* he dies.

Read Ecclesiastes 2:17-26. What's his complaint here?

Solomon does have a good point. People are concerned about their legacy, whatever it is. How depressing to think that you work so hard all your life to build up something, only to have someone come after and bring it all to nothing. In one sense, too, his concern is kind of ironic: After all, considering the life that Solomon lived after he assumed the throne, one might wonder what his father David would have thought about what Solomon did with what David had left him. On the other hand, perhaps it was that very thought that got him thinking about what his heirs would do with their inheritance.

Read verses 24-26. What is Solomon saying now?

Though the texts themselves are difficult, Solomon seems to be saying now, *Well, since there's nothing I can do about what my heirs do, I might as well live life well now.* He's not advocating licentiousness, however (he's been there and done that already); instead, he seems to be following the Bible idea that life, lived in harmony with God's will, can bring many earthly blessings that include physical enjoyment: "He causes the grass to grow for the cattle, and vegetation for the service of man, that he may bring forth food from the earth, and wine that makes glad the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread which strengthens man's heart" (*Ps. 104:14, 15, NKJV*).

You're an heir (*Rom. 8:17, Gal. 3:29, 4:7*), **receiving from your heavenly Father the greatest gift possible, salvation in Jesus Christ** (*Heb. 9:28, 1 Pet. 1:5*). **What kind of daily choices are you making to help ensure that you don't squander this "legacy" left to you by God through the death of Jesus in your stead?**

Further Study: Ellen G. White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, p. 422; *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 364; *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 258.

“He [Solomon] gives us the history of his search for happiness. He engaged in intellectual pursuits; he gratified his love for pleasure; he carried out his schemes of commercial enterprise. He was surrounded by the fascinating splendor of court life. . . .

“Solomon sat upon a throne of ivory, the steps of which were of solid gold, flanked by six golden lions. His eyes rested upon highly cultivated and beautiful gardens just before him. These grounds were visions of loveliness. . . . Birds of every variety of brilliant plumage flitted from tree to tree, making the air vocal with sweet songs. Youthful attendants, gorgeously dressed and decorated, waited to obey his slightest wish. Scenes of revelry, music, sports, and games were arranged for his diversion at an extravagant expenditure of money.

“But . . . Dissipation had left its impress upon his once fair and intellectual face. . . . His brow was furrowed with care and unhappiness. . . .

“His shattered nerves and wasted frame showed the result of violating Nature’s laws. He confessed to a wasted life, an unsuccessful chase after happiness.”—Ellen G. White, *My Life Today*, p. 167.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ A university professor once remarked to a Seventh-day Adventist student, “I don’t need your Jesus. I am famous, I have a good home, I have a good job. What do you have that I don’t have?” As a class, discuss what you would answer.
- ❷ As a class, talk about some modern-day Solomon, some rich and famous person seeming to have it all who, in the end, reveals just how miserable his or her life has been. What lessons can you learn?
- ❸ Talk about your own experiences with desiring worldly things, only to get them and realize that, in the end, they didn’t give you the happiness and satisfaction that you had expected. What advice might you give to some young person who is in hot pursuit of riches?

Finding God's Message of Love

by SOFIA BARAHONA

While walking through the market one day, Sofia saw a friend talking to another couple. Her friend introduced Sofia, and the four talked easily. The recent hurricane that had ravaged their country, Honduras, was on everyone's mind. The heavy rains had damaged Sofia's house and ruined many of her possessions. Sofia wondered whether the hurricane had been a message from God. So, when the couple turned the conversation to God, Sofia listened with interest. Her new friends saw her interest and offered to study the Bible with her. Sofia eagerly agreed.

The couple visited Sofia and studied the Bible with her. Soon she began attending church with them on Sabbath. Her teacher's mind helped her appreciate the in-depth Bible study Adventists enjoyed. Sofia wanted to follow Jesus in baptism. She was relieved when her husband did not object to the changes in their lives that her new faith brought.

Sofia became an active soul winner. In her school system it is legal to talk about religion, and Sofia encourages her young students to sing a song or pray in class. Sometimes students stop after school to talk to her about God, and she invites them to visit the little church that meets in their town. Recently the church held evangelistic meetings, and Sofia invited the students to bring their parents.

Sofia is an active leader in a small group that meets in her town. She loves to share God's love with others, just as her friends shared God's love with her. She studies the Bible with anyone who is interested.

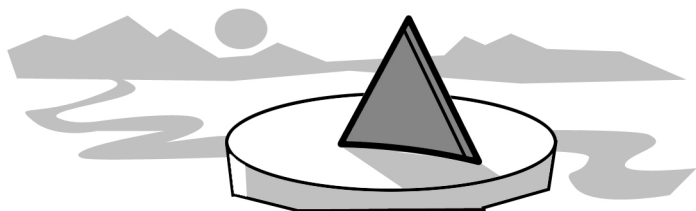
Sofia looks forward to retiring from teaching soon. "There's too much to do," she says. "I want to spend time with my family and do more missionary work. I will have more time to work for God when I retire." To Sofia, her family is her first mission field. One of her children has been baptized, and another is preparing for baptism. Her prayer is that her husband and older children will see the beauty of life in Jesus.

Mission offerings helped bring Sofia to Christ and establish the new group of believers in her town. They continue to provide materials that Sofia uses to lead others to Jesus' feet.



SOFIA BARAHONA (left) shares God's love in El Chimbo, Honduras.

Of Being *and* Time



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Ecclesiastes 3.*

Memory Text: “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*” (*Ecclesiastes 3:17*).

“For I have known them all already, known them all / Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons, / I have measured out my life with coffee spoons.”—T. S. Eliot, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.”

Maybe we all don't measure our lives out with coffee spoons, but we do measure out our lives, and for most of us, if blessed, that measurement comes out to about “threescore years and ten” and, if especially blessed, “fourscore.” As those who already have seen a good portion of their years pass by, it's not a lot. Time is, therefore, a precious commodity for mortal beings.

For that reason, maybe, chapter 3 opens up a theme important to us all: time. Beginning with some of the most beautiful poetry ever written, Solomon touches on various themes all related one way or another with the question of time: How important is the timing of the things we do? What does the concept of eternity mean to human beings, who, in and of themselves, are left behind by eternity? When will all the evil and iniquity in the world be judged by God? What's the ultimate difference between humanity and animals if, in the end, all wind up in the same place?

Heavy themes for just one chapter. But, as we've been saying all along, they can be understood only through looking at these verses in the context of all Scripture, which has much to say on these crucial topics.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 27.*

The God of Time

How accurate is your watch? Probably not as accurate as a cesium-beam clock, which measures time down to the 9,192,631,700th of a second—the frequency at which certain atoms absorb and emit radiation. In other words, that’s the timing that God has built into that part of nature. Talk about precise!

At the NASA-Goddard Space Flight Center in the United States, scientists have a chart on which they have written down all the eclipses from about 2000 B.C. until A.D. 3000. In other words, the timing that God has built into this aspect of nature is so accurate that we are able to know not only when past eclipses occurred but when future ones will, as well.

As nature shows, the Lord is in control of time. As Adventists, people who are particularly interested in prophecy, this comes as no surprise. After all, many of the prophecies that have helped us understand our identity and mission as a movement are tied in with time.

Review the following time prophecies that have meant so much to us as a people, prophecies that have been fulfilled (*Dan. 7:25, 8:14, 9:24-27, Rev. 12:14*). What do these prophecies tell us about the power and sovereignty of God over human affairs?

In numerous places the Bible talks about the role of time in God’s plans. Jesus appeared in Galilee declaring that “the time is fulfilled” (*Mark 1:15*). Paul, in reference to the first coming of Jesus, wrote that “when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son” (*Gal. 4:4*); in reference to the Second Coming, he wrote: “until our Lord Jesus Christ’s appearing, which He will manifest in His own time” (*1 Tim. 6:14, 15, NKJV*). An angel appeared to John and said to him, “ ‘Do not seal the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is at hand’ ” (*Rev. 22:10, NKJV*). We can see that God works through time in order to bring about His will.

Are there any issues you are struggling with regarding the timing of events? If so, you must get on your knees, surrender your will to the Lord, and trust in Him who has shown that He is in control of time. What else can you do to learn to trust in the Lord’s timing of events?

A Time to . . . ?

Read Ecclesiastes 3:1-8. Notice the contrast of opposites: birth, death; build, break down; love, hate; and so forth. Though scholars debate the exact meaning of these verses, Solomon seems to be talking about various aspects of human life and that at certain times some things are appropriate while at other times the opposite things are.

The key, perhaps, to help unlock the meaning is the beginning of verse 11 in which, after talking about God, Solomon says, “He has made everything beautiful in its time” (*NKJV*); that is, these various things, in their proper time, are right. Rather than these verses being about God’s overriding providence, they deal more with human freedom and our timing of events.

Most problematic, of course, is “a time to kill” (*vs.* 3). Though various explanations have been given, it’s important to remember who Solomon was, the king, and that he ruled over a nation that had the death penalty (*see Exod. 22:18-20; Lev. 20:2, 9-16; 24:14-16; Num. 15:35*). Also, it’s worthwhile noting that the Hebrew verb for “kill” in Ecclesiastes 3:3 is not the same Hebrew word as that in Exodus 20:13, a word that is commonly understood as “murder.”

How do these following verses help us understand how important timing is in our lives?

Ps. 37:9

Matt. 5:21-24

Matt. 8:21, 22

Rom. 8:25

Rom. 12:19

1 Cor. 4:5

James 1:19

Are there any big decisions or choices you have to make? If so, how important is timing in your decision? Might the decision be better off being delayed? Or might delay be the wrong thing to do? Think through, again, the importance of the words “To every thing there is a season, and a time.” How could prayer, Bible study, and counsel with others help you make the right decision at the right time?

Eternity in Their Hearts

The concept of time continues in Ecclesiastes 3:11-15. As you read through these difficult texts, take note of the various references to time in them (it's important to note that in verse 11 it can be translated as "he has put eternity in their heart" [NKJV]).

According to your best understanding of these texts, what point is Solomon making? Again, interpret them by taking into account all Scripture.

Solomon here acknowledges the power of God in contrast to the weakness and folly of humanity. Again, Solomon isn't advocating a life of mindless physical pleasure; instead, in their right time, the fruits of human labor can reap enjoyment now, "under the sun," in this life.

We can't fully understand the works and providence of God ("no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end" [vs. 11]); we don't need to. Might Solomon be expressing what Jesus said in Matthew 6:34? "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."

How do you understand the phrase that God has "put eternity" in the hearts of human beings? Think of the answer in the context of Solomon's unhappy and unfulfilled life as king (see also Heb. 11:13-16, 1 John 2:15-17).

As we'll see in Thursday's lesson, humans and animals alike have a common destiny "under the sun." We—along with goats, alligators, and weasels—die. The difference, though, is that God has put eternity in our hearts. As humans we can conceive of an existence beyond us; we realize that though we die, time will go on, even for eternity, while we are left behind. Thus, every day of our lives we are confronted with death, and this causes us worry, fear, and a sense of incompleteness. Which is how it should be; we shouldn't be content with, or indifferent to, our fate, because we were never meant to die. Death is an intruder, the work of Satan (Heb. 2:14, 1 John 3:8). That's one reason why, in the end, all physical enjoyments are so hollow, empty, such *hebel*—they can't answer the reality of death, which is always lurking over our shoulder and never farther than a heartbeat away.

Of course, the good news, the great news, is that Jesus came in order to destroy death and thus, for now, free us from the fear that death often brings (Heb. 2:15).

Jesus and Judgment

Solomon again continues exploring the question of time. Now, though, he switches the topic to something else entirely. In Ecclesiastes 3:16, 17, he opens up a theme that will be repeated in the book of Ecclesiastes: human injustice and God's judgment.

Read verse 16. What is he saying? How could there be wickedness in the “place of justice” (*NIV*)? And in the place of righteousness, iniquity? What could he be talking about? Where have you seen, even today, wickedness where there should be justice and iniquity where there should be righteousness? Also, how do these things make you feel? How did they make Solomon feel? (See also *Prov. 17:23, 21:27, John 2:14.*)

Who, of course, isn't upset at injustice and iniquity, especially in places in which there should be justice and righteousness? Thus, Solomon, like us, wanted to see judgment done, and despite his sour attitude about a lot of things, he still believed in the ultimate justice that God would mete out in His own time (*Eccles. 3:17*), for, as he said, there is a time “for every purpose and for every work,” especially the work of God's judgment.

Read John 12:31, where Jesus says “Now is the judgment of this world.” In what sense could we say that the Cross was a judgment of both the righteous and the wicked?

At the Cross, a place of judgment, we see incredible injustice: the sinless Son of God dying for the sins of an ungrateful and wicked world (*Rom. 5:6, 1 John 2:2*). At the same time, it is a place of righteousness because Jesus, who has “the righteousness of God” (*2 Pet. 1:1*) Himself, is there. And yet, in this place of righteousness, we see iniquity—the iniquity of the whole world being punished in the person of Jesus, who became sin “for us” (*2 Cor. 5:21*). We can say that judgment of the righteous occurred at the Cross, because there, through the death of Jesus, vindication in judgment is assured (*Rom. 8:1*); at the same time, the condemnation of the lost is guaranteed, because, in light of the Cross, they will have no excuse (*John 3:19*).

If someone were to ask you to explain, in a short paragraph, what the death of Christ offers you, what would you write? Bring that paragraph to class to share with others.

Of Men and Beasts

Read Ecclesiastes 3:18-22. Keeping in mind, again, the whole message of Scripture, not to mention the context in which Solomon was writing, what important point is he making here? What message is here that we all should pay heed to?

It is true: At one level what's the difference between a dead person and a dead dog? And the longer they're dead, the harder it is to tell them apart, for eventually both become nothing but crumbled bones.

Solomon is, again, looking at the meaninglessness of life lived apart from God, a life lived only for the immediate pleasures of this world. It has to be meaningless because when it's all done, humans and beasts "all go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again" (*vs. 20*). As we saw in Tuesday's lesson, that's a conclusion most humans find unsettling, one that makes all that comes before death not only *hebel* but even worse. One atheist author wrote about the "absurdity" of life: It taunts us with the hope and promise of meaning, and yet in the end we all end up in the same meaningless place as the beasts.

What Bible texts can you find that would answer each of the verses in Ecclesiastes 3:18-22?

vs. 18 (for example, Ps. 8:5-8)

vs. 19 (for example, John 3:16)

vs. 20

vs. 21

vs. 22

Life itself, even in the best of circumstances, can be hard. We all struggle, one way or another. How thankful we should be for the hope that awaits us once this is all said and done.

Which is your favorite Bible text that talks about life for the redeemed after the Second Coming? Read it over, pray over it, and then write out in your own words what the text says to you.

Further Study: Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, pp. 662–678.

“True, refined independence never disdains to seek counsel of the experienced and of the wise, and it treats the counsel of others with respect.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 4, p. 240.

“The timing of things may tell much in favor of truth. Victories are frequently lost through delays. There will be crises in this cause. Prompt and decisive action at the right time will gain glorious triumphs, while delay and neglect will result in great failures and positive dishonor to God.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, p. 498.

“Christ was treated as we deserve, that we might be treated as He deserves. He was condemned for our sins, in which He had no share, that we might be justified by His righteousness, in which we had no share. He suffered the death which was ours, that we might receive the life which was His. ‘With His stripes we are healed.’ ”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 25.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 As a class, discuss your answer to Wednesday’s question. What can you learn from what each other wrote?
- 2 It has been said that a right decision at the wrong time is still a wrong decision. Is there anyone in your church about to make an important decision? If so, and that person is open to counsel, what could you do as a class to help that person know not only what decision to make but to know the best timing for it?
- 3 As a class, talk about death, about what it means to us as Christians, about how we should face it, about the hope that we have despite death, about why even with the promises of God it’s still so painful.
- 4 What are some of the great injustices that you have seen in your lifetime? How should the knowledge that God will bring final and perfect justice help you deal with so much human injustice here? Also, as a class, discuss this question: Should the fact that God promises to bring final justice hinder us in our pursuit of justice in this life now?

Soldier for Christ

by MICHAEL SOKIRI

Sudan is a nation that has been at war with itself since before I was born. When I was 12, I joined the army.

One day as I walked along a path near a village, I heard a group of people arguing about religion. I had no religion, but I was curious, so I stopped to listen.

In our culture we listen to what visitors have to say. But these villagers were arguing with their visitors. I urged them to let the visitors speak. They were discussing the Sabbath. The villagers listened for a while, but they started arguing again about which day is God's day. "Let those who want to worship on Sunday do so," I urged, "and those who wish to worship on Sabbath do so."

I learned that the visitors lived near me. So, I went to talk to them about religion. I sensed they knew the truth, but I tried to provoke them to argue. When they refused I began asking sincere questions. Eventually I studied with them and decided to follow them. But before I could be baptized, I was sent to the front lines.

When I shared my new faith with fellow soldiers, they were surprised, for they knew I used to smoke opium. When they learned that I had cut down my opium bushes, some soldiers were angry, for they had bought opium from me. They found the lay evangelists who had taught me the Bible and beat them. The evangelists dared not flee because the soldiers would kill them.

The war turned against us, and we soldiers fled. I fled into Uganda, where I lived as a refugee. There God taught me to read the Bible. I became a gospel evangelist and returned to Sudan to work for God.

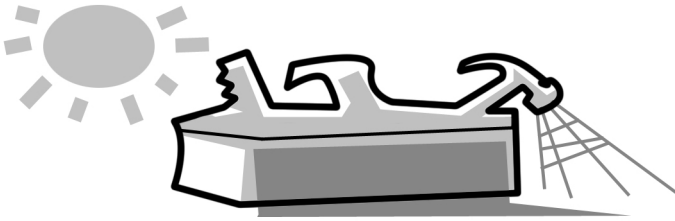
I shared my faith with Simon and told him what God was doing for me and the beliefs that Adventists hold dear. Simon became an Adventist, but his wife rejected his new faith and left him. However, when she saw the changes in his life, she returned and joined him in baptism. His sisters also accepted the Adventist faith. Word spread about Simon's conversion, and people from his village were so amazed at the changes in him that they studied the Bible with him and became Adventists too.

I share my faith with everyone I can, both in the refugee camp and in my home area. How precious it is to read God's Word and share it with others, to watch their faith grow until they accept God's truths.

Your Sabbath School Mission offerings support the work of the church in difficult-to-reach areas such as Sudan.

MICHAEL SOKIRI *is a church elder in Yei, Sudan.*

More Life Under *the* Sun



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Ecclesiastes 4.*

Memory Text: “Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ” (*Galatians 6:2*).

As we begin this week, you’ll perhaps notice something interesting, something that commentators have written about over the ages. *Ecclesiastes* starts to sound more and more like the book of *Proverbs*. *Proverbs* is often a series of short little sayings that deal with practical knowledge about daily life, though not always necessarily in an order that is easy to follow.

Take, for instance, *Proverbs 6*, which begins with some thoughts about work, such as “Go to the ant, thou sluggard” (*Prov 6:6*), followed by words about a “naughty person” (*vs. 12*), to a warning about the six things “that God hates” (*vs. 16, NKJV*), to words about obeying parents (*vs. 20*), and finally to a warning about the dangers of wanton women (*vss. 24-35*).

We can see some of this same style in *Ecclesiastes 4*, where Solomon covers a number of issues, everything from the oppression that many people suffer from to the meaning of life, to the issue of envy, then to questions about the purpose of work, and finally to ideas of community and fellowship. Though oftentimes his sentences are sharp, to the point, very poetic, and without much elaboration, they touch on larger themes that can be explored in a number of ways that have relevance to us even today. Let’s take a look and see what the Lord is saying to us here.

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 3.*

The Oppressors

Read Ecclesiastes 4:1-3. Rewrite in your own words what Solomon is saying.

Solomon is, again, looking at life from a worldly perspective, from “under the sun.” These words, though, are somewhat interesting when you consider who is writing them: the king himself. It would be one thing if a slave were bemoaning his fate at the hands of his or her masters or if a poor person were lamenting his or her fate under the oppression of the rich. But in this case, you have the richest and most powerful leader in the nation complaining about injustice and oppression.

We tend to think of oppression usually in the context of politics or wealth. There are, though, other ways people can be oppressed. What about husbands and wives, or parents and children? What about religious oppression, the use of religion to oppress and exploit others? Or what about employers and employees? Or sexual harassment; is not that a form of oppression? What other kinds can you think of? Could someone be an oppressor without even realizing it? Look up the following texts. What principles are found there that, if applied, would protect someone from falling into that role, even unwittingly? *Mark 10:43, 44; 1 Cor. 9:19; Phil. 2:3; 2 Tim. 2:24; 1 John 3:16; 4:11.*

Power can be a subtle thing. Used correctly, it can be a great blessing, for with power one can guide, even command, others in the right direction. It’s also a very easy thing to abuse. As has been said, “Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Most of us, in one way or another, have power over others. The crucial question is how do we use it?

Look at yourself. What kind of power do you exert? How well are you following the principles expressed in the texts for today? What changes might you need to make in order to make sure you’re not abusing that power?

Is Life Worth it?

“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” (*Eccles. 4:2, 3*).

“There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.”—Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), p. 3.

However differently phrased, both quotes touch on a similar question: Is human life worth the bother? Considering all the pain, suffering, and disappointment that go into living, and we still die anyway—is life worth it?

The answer, ultimately, depends upon your view of what the meaning of life is. If one takes the position that our life here is capped and culminated at death and that nothing comes after, you will have one view. If you believe that this life is only a temporary stop on the way to something better, something eternal, then you will have another view. Thus, in many ways, the answer to the question Is life worth it? depends, ironically enough, on the question of death. Is death the end or only the end of the beginning?

Write out your answer to the question Is life worth it? Give a yes or no answer and then defend your position the best you can, using whatever Bible texts you deem necessary. Bring your answer to class on Sabbath.

Envy

Solomon here is on a real roll. After saying, basically, that one is better off not to have ever been born than to live and see all the oppression “done under the sun” (*Eccles. 4:1*), he then delves into another theme, envy (*vss. 4-6*). Fair enough; after all, it’s a worthwhile topic to look at from a biblical perspective. Even one of the Ten Commandments deals, at its root, with the issue of envy (Which one?). Solomon, though, takes it to another level: *All toil and all skillful work is nothing but a person being jealous of a neighbor*. That’s a cynical attitude, to be sure, and though there’s some truth to it, he certainly pushes the problem of envy to an extreme.

Nevertheless, envy is a human problem. In fact, it’s more than a human problem. It was, indeed, the original sin. “Satan was envious and jealous of Jesus Christ. Yet when all the angels bowed to Jesus to acknowledge His supremacy and high authority and rightful rule, Satan bowed with them; but his heart was filled with envy and hatred.”—Ellen G. White, *The Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 1, p. 18. Thus, when we start manifesting envy and jealousy, we are reflecting the character of Satan.

Find three accounts in the Bible of where envy played a big role in the unfolding story. Write out the nasty results that this envy brought. What lessons can we learn about the fruit of envy?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

What has been your own experience with jealousy and envy in your own heart? What steps can you take in order to help subdue this beast? Think through the life of Jesus. How, by dwelling on Him, can you, through God’s grace, destroy this sin before it destroys you?

Labor for Whom?

“I have shewed you all things, how that so laboring ye ought to support the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, It is more blessed to give than to receive” (*Acts 20:35*).

Read Ecclesiastes 4:7, 8. After attacking all work and skill as nothing but envy, Solomon, in verses 7 and 8, takes another spin on work: What do people work for? In this case, he is talking about someone who is alone, who has no children, no one either to support or to pass on the fruits of his labor. Is he doing all this only for himself? If so, what’s the purpose?

Whatever the immediate context, these verses raise an important question regarding humanity. Oftentimes the most miserable of all human beings are the most selfish, the ones who live only for self and who care only about themselves. Whatever the immediate gains, after a while, as they see how small they are, how fleeting life is, how little they matter in the scheme of things “under the sun,” such people find so little purpose, so little meaning, to their existence. As human beings we were not meant to live only for ourselves; on the contrary, the whole purpose of selfless love, as exemplified in the life of Jesus, is to live in order to help others. There’s a sense of fulfillment, of joy, of purpose when one gives of oneself for others. And the good news is that you don’t have to be married or have children in order to do this. As long as there are human beings around, there will be people to whom you can be a blessing, and by blessing others you receive a blessing for yourself.

Look up the following texts. What message do they have for us, as followers of Christ, in regard to issues raised in today’s lesson? *Matt. 25:31-46, Mark 10:45, Acts 2:43-45, Heb. 13:1-3.*

What are your priorities? How much time do you spend thinking only about yourself and your own needs, in contrast to others and the needs of others? Be honest. How well are you fulfilling the Bible call to live not just for yourself but for others?

The Cord and Community

Solomon, in verses 8-12 of Ecclesiastes 4, has moved toward another thought in a fairly logical progression: from living only for oneself to the advantages of community. Though he's talking in a very poetic manner and uses a few specific examples of how much better two are than one, the general point is important: As human beings, we were made for community. We were made to live in contact with others. We were made in a way that we need others.

In 1998, a landlord entered the Bonn, Germany, apartment of Wolfgang Dircks when rent invoices to Dircks's bank stopped being paid. The landlord found a skeleton—a skeleton!—in a chair in front of a television set that, though broken, was still on. Just as incredible was that Christmas lights on his tree were still blinking; near his chair was a TV program guide from December 5, 1993. He probably died that day, and nobody, for at least five years, missed him. Talk about the need for others!

Read 1 Corinthians 12. What point is Paul making that is, basically, the same point that Solomon is making in these few verses in Ecclesiastes?

In the same sense that there is no established “one-man or one-woman physics,” there is no “one-man or one-woman Christianity.” Of course, Christian faith means nothing unless a person has a one-to-one relationship with God. That is crucial. But it's directly out of that vertical relationship, that human-to-God relationship, that a person is also established in a relationship with a community, a church.

It's common to hear people say “I want nothing to do with organized religion.” Well, what do they want, disorganized religion? No, of course not. Instead, that line is often a cover for people who don't want the commitment or responsibility or even the submission that comes from being part of a group that's bigger than themselves.

How well do you relate to your local church community? What can you do to be a more active participant, using your gifts to help those who don't have what you do? At the same time, how willing are you to go to the church and seek help for something that you can't do on your own?

Further Study: Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6, pp. 261–265; *Testimonies to Ministers*, pp. 29, 30.

The writer Kurt Vonnegut once said: “What should young people do with their lives today? Many things, obviously. But the most daring thing is to create stable communities in which the terrible disease of loneliness can be cured.”

Koinonia is the Greek word for “fellowship.” As humans we were created for community, for fellowship, for human interaction. But not just any kind of interaction. After all, if you want human interaction you can go to a bar or to a football game and interact with others. No, the biblical idea is human interaction of a different kind, an interaction arising out of a community of people who, out of their love for God, have covenanted to love and care for and help each other. People sharing common views, common goals, common dreams, and a common purpose—but most of all, people who care about each other and who are dedicated to helping each other, regardless of their needs. That’s what Christian community should be about.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 As a class, discuss this important question: How well does your local church function as a community? How well does it work together to meet the needs of its members, whatever those needs are? Assess the areas where your church is strong and where it is weak. What can you all do, as a class, to help your local church fulfill its role as a community of believers grounded in love for God and love for each other?
- 2 Read aloud and discuss your answers to the question Is life worth it?
- 3 Discuss more this question of power and how power is wielded. In what subtle ways can someone abuse power; at the same time, what problems can arise when someone doesn’t use the power they have been given?

The 17-Year Effort

Wani and Wai are two villages located on opposite sides of a lagoon on the coast of Papua New Guinea. Adventist missionaries came to Wani and raised up a church. After several years they felt led to visit Wai and teach the people there that Jesus was coming soon. They hired a boat and set out across the lagoon to Wai.

The believers from Wani played hand-cranked cassettes of Christian music for the people of Wai. The local elders allowed the people of Wani to hold a meeting that day to share their faith. The people of Wani told the people of Wai that Jesus was coming soon.

The people of Wai were Christians and invited the Adventists to return on Sabbath to share their beliefs with them. Most of the two hundred people who attended the Sabbath meeting were children, so the villagers from Wani geared the meeting toward them.

The Adventists helped build houses and worked in the gardens on Wai. The people of Wai appreciated the friendship and the help; but except for the children, they were not interested in listening to their message of hope. After a year, the leaders on Wai told the people of Wani, "We have our own church. Don't try to convert us."

The people of Wani knew that a few people in Wai wanted to learn what they taught, but if the local elders refused to let them preach, they could not preach. Sadly the people of Wani stopped going every week to Wai.

Tautin was an old man living in Wai. He had listened to the Adventist message, and he believed. When the Adventists stopped coming, Tautin found a boat going to Wani and rode along. "Please," he begged the Adventists, "come back, visit me, and teach me God's truth."

Gladly some believers from Wani returned to Wai to teach Tautin and his family about God. Sixteen years later Tautin asked to be baptized. But he did not come alone. He brought six of his children with him, and they all were baptized.

Today 30 or so people worship on Sabbath in Wai. Seven have been baptized, and others are preparing for baptism. It took 17 years, but the village of Wai at last has a congregation of believers. They plan to build a chapel on Tautin's land. In the meantime, they hire a boat and worship with their brothers and sisters in Wani.

And what did the 17-year effort do for the believers in Wani? Their church grew so much that it cannot hold everyone who attends. That happens when believers catch the spirit of mission. Catch the spirit of mission each time you give your Mission offering in Sabbath School.

Rich Man, Poor Man



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Ecclesiastes 5.*

Memory Text: “He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with increase: this is also vanity” (*Ecclesiastes 5:10*).

Leo Tolstoy wrote a short story called “How Much Land Does a Man Need?” It was about a peasant, Pahom, who swore, “If I had plenty of land, I shouldn’t fear the devil himself.” Pahom then heard about the Bahkirs, people who sold land cheaply. He traveled there and was offered land at “a thousand rubles a day.” What did that mean? They told him: “We sell it by the day. As much land as you can go around on your feet in a day is yours.” Only one condition: If you didn’t return on the same day to the spot you started, the money would be lost. Pahom, delighted, started walking and walking and walking. . . . He was getting so much land! He kept going, all day, only to realize that he had better get back before the day ended. He had gone too far. He had to rush, or else all was lost! He hurried and hurried, only to collapse dead within sight of the starting spot.

His servants dug a grave and buried him. How much land does a man need?

“Six feet from his head to his heels was all he needed,” wrote Tolstoy.

This week we’ll look a little more at what Solomon has to say about wealth and poverty. He said a lot; we’ll cover what we can.

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 10.*

God in Heaven, Humanity on Earth

Read Ecclesiastes 5:1-7. Though you might not understand every phrase, summarize the basic message:

However much Solomon in Ecclesiastes, as in Proverbs, focused on practical living and moral injunction, he did so always with an awareness of the reality and presence of God. Here, too, in these lines, Solomon expresses not only the reality of God but the closeness of God; that is, God cares how you approach Him, God cares how you talk to Him, and God cares about you paying your vows to Him. Solomon's God, the God of the Bible, isn't the God of deists, some distant deity who created the world and then left it to its own devices. If so, we would truly have reason to despair.

In this context, Solomon is talking about how we as humans should relate to God.

Read Matthew 21:28-31. How does this text fit in with the message of Solomon here?

The point, of course, is obvious: If we tell the Lord that we plan on doing something, we'd better do it. However, that's easier said than done. How often have we made vows to God, promising and swearing oaths that we will stop doing this or that or that we will always do such and such, only to fail? Sure, we might have meant it at the time, and really tried, but we failed either way. What's our situation then?

How do Matthew 18:21-23, Romans 2:4, and 1 John 2:1 help us understand the hope that we can have despite failures?

Have you made promises to God that you haven't kept? If so, what's the only thing you can do?

Poor Man

“For ye have the poor always with you” (*Matt. 26:11*).

Solomon now returns to a key theme of this whole book: money and those who have a lot and those who don’t.

Read Ecclesiastes 5:8. Kind of strange words, if you think about it. After all, it was Solomon himself or, at least, his government who set up taxation for his nation. At least in Ecclesiastes Solomon noticed some of the problems the poor had under this oppressive bureaucracy.

What are some of the problems people often encounter when working through a typical bureaucratic system? Solomon offers no solution to the problem; all he says is don’t be surprised by it.

Look up the following texts; note what each one says about how the poor should be treated. What common theme appears in all of these texts?

Exod. 23:6

Lev. 19:15

Lev. 25:39-43

Deut. 15:7, 11

Deut. 24:14, 15

Earlier in the book (*Eccles. 4:1*), Solomon bemoaned the oppression he had seen under the sun. We saw, too, that there were different ways people could oppress others. A common one, known all through history, has been the oppression of the poor by the rich. The few texts above, and there are others, show how the Lord, while acknowledging the existence of the poor, gave strict rules on how they were to be treated. All human beings are equal before God—the Cross more than proves that; the sad fact, however, is that it’s so easy for those who have money to wield abusive power over those who don’t. Such actions, of course, are condemned in the Word.

When Jesus came to this world, did He come as someone rich or poor? What does your answer say to you about how you should relate to those who are poorer, at least in finances, than you are? What is your attitude toward them?

The King and the Field

“Moreover the profit of the land is for all; the king himself is served from the field” (*Eccles. 5:9, NKJV*).

Read the above text. What is it saying? What message should everyone, especially the rich and the powerful, take from it? See also *Deut. 10:14, Pss. 8:6, 24:1, 115:16*.

Rich or poor, powerful or oppressed, there's one thing we all have in common: We all live on this planet. We all breathe its air, drink its water, and eat the food that grows out of its ground. Some might get cleaner air, purer water, better food, but in the end we're all equally dependent upon what God has provided for us.

That realization, however, hasn't stopped the gross inequities we see in this world today, just as Solomon saw them in his day.

What would Solomon say about a world in which people can spend almost \$13,000 a night for a room at a hotel in Paris while millions of others the world over are homeless?

What would he say about a world in which people can spend \$370,000 on a Ferrari while others don't even have shoes?

What would he say about an auction a few years ago in Canada during which someone paid \$85,000 for a bottle of 1735 wine from Germany while billions of people don't even have regular access to fresh drinking water?

He would be appalled, for sure. The Lord has provided more than enough of everything for human beings here. Though the causes of poverty are complex, there's no doubt that greed, corruption, and covetousness have made it a lot worse.

No question, those who have made themselves rich through the exploitation of the poor will find themselves face to face with an angry God.

Read James 5:1-8. Though the obvious message is clear, what principle is being expressed that could apply to each of us in how we treat others? Whether rich or poor, ask yourself, What could this text be saying to me?

Never Enough

A poster once read, “Money doesn’t make you happy, but it sure makes misery a lot more comfortable.”

Most would agree. But as the book of Ecclesiastes shows, money and wealth don’t solve all our problems, don’t guarantee happiness, and don’t come without problems of their own.

Read Ecclesiastes 5:10. What point is being made? What principle is seen there that applies to more than just money? *See also Prov. 27:20; Isa. 56:11, 12.*

Any desire, passion, or even ambition that isn’t under the control of the Lord is never easily satisfied, no matter how greatly indulged. This problem is seen especially among drug addicts. Before long, the amount of drugs they had before isn’t enough; they keep needing more and more. It can work with a lot of other things, as well, including money.

Read Luke 12:13-21. What’s the point of this parable? Is Jesus talking against wealth per se, or is something else going on? If so, what?

Perhaps the key to understanding this parable is found at the end of verse 21, when Jesus warns about those who are not “rich toward God.” Though He doesn’t explain here, Jesus seems to be warning about those whose life is swept up in the pursuit of riches at the expense of everything else, including one’s obligations to God. As Jesus said elsewhere, to whom much is given “much [is] required” (*Luke 12:48*), and someone who has wealth has a responsibility to use it wisely. Oftentimes, though, those who have the most are the greediest, while those with the least are willing to share the little they have.

Take an honest look at yourself: What are your attitudes toward money? If you are more interested in being rich as opposed to being “rich toward God,” how can you change? Why *must* you change?

Naked in the Dust

However much Ecclesiastes has challenged Bible students over the centuries, if there is one message that comes through, perhaps it could be found in Ecclesiastes 5:15. He’s talking about some of the foibles and challenges of wealth, such as gaining money only to lose it all before it can be passed on to the next generation (*Eccles. 5:14*).

Ecclesiastes 5:15 in the original Hebrew reads like this: “As he came forth from his mother’s womb, naked he will go again as he came, and he will not carry in his hand anything of his work when he does go.”

The point is obvious. The rich die along with the rest of us, and in death all their money becomes meaningless. Yet, the message is bigger than that. Solomon’s whole point in the book is that, Hey, look at your life—what are you living for? What matters in an existence that’s filled with *hebel*? What, then, are the important things that we should be focusing on?

Read Matthew 16:24-26. What is Jesus saying to us in these few verses?

What shall someone give for his or her own soul? Money, fame, power, passion, even love? While these things can have their place, and are even gifts from God (*Eccles. 5:18*), they also can be the devil’s tool to ensnare our souls. Whatever we have in this life, it’s only as temporary and transient as we are. When we die, that’s it, at least as far as we are concerned here. The next thing we know is eternity: either “the kingdom prepared for [us] from the foundation of the world” (*Matt. 25:34*) or “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (*Luke 13:28*) and everlasting destruction (*2 Thess. 1:9*). What earthly things, as temporal and fleeting as we are, will be worth it when “ye shall see Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets, in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrust out” (*Luke 13:28*)?

What are the cords that Satan uses to bind you to this world? What things do you find very tempting, hard to resist? What Bible promises can you claim in order to keep your soul from sin, from despair, and from giving up on yourself?

Further Study: Go back over Ecclesiastes 5 and read it again a few times, focusing on the parts of the chapter that we didn't get to discuss this week.

In the context of the rich man in Luke 12:13-21, Ellen White wrote: "The situation of the poor, the orphan, the widow, the suffering, the afflicted, was brought to this rich man's attention. . . . This man's aims were no higher than those of the beasts that perish. He lived as if there were no God, no heaven, no future life; as if everything he possessed were his own, and he owed nothing to God or man."—Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, pp. 256–258.

"In giving ourselves to God, we must necessarily give up all that would separate us from Him. Hence the Saviour says, 'Whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple.' Luke 14:33. Whatever shall draw away the heart from God must be given up. Mammon is the idol of many. The love of money, the desire for wealth, is the golden chain that binds them to Satan. Reputation and worldly honor are worshiped by another class. The life of selfish ease and freedom from responsibility is the idol of others. But these slavish bands must be broken. We cannot be half the Lord's and half the world's. We are not God's children unless we are such entirely."—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 44.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ In your own society, what ways are the poor oppressed by the rich? In what ways can we, as a church, help the poor in those situations?
- ❷ In what ways might some of you, even as Christians, be oppressing the poor?
- ❸ Solomon spends a lot of time talking about wealth because money, and the pursuit of money, remains one of the great challenges for Christians. How can we profess to be "strangers and pilgrims on the earth" (*Heb. 11:13*), while hoarding up treasure here? At the same time, we have to live, we have to pay the bills, we have to feed ourselves, and this all takes money. How much is enough—or, indeed, is there ever enough? As a class, discuss the challenges we face with this difficult subject.

More Than Language

by KIM, SUNG AE

When my daughters, Tina and Kay, were in elementary school, I looked for an English language school to supplement the classes they take in school. I chose the Adventist Institute of English because of its high standards of academics.

After seeing how well the girls were doing in the language school, I enrolled them in the Adventist school, which had the same reputation for quality education. The girls thrived in their new school, where the staff encouraged cooperative learning rather than the stiff competition that most schools encouraged.

Tina and Kay studied religion in their new school, and they often asked me questions about God. “Why don’t we attend church?” Kay asked me one day. I made excuses, because I knew that my work required me to do things that were at odds with Christianity. But Tina’s questions about God were more direct and troubling. Finally I told the girls if they wanted to go to church, they could go.

Tina and Kay began attending the Adventist church. They signed up for Bible studies with the pastor. The pastor visited our home and invited us to attend Bible studies too. I went twice, but the girls continued studying. In time they were baptized. My husband often attended school and church functions when the girls invited him. But I resisted.

Then I was injured in a climbing accident and could not work. With time on my hands, I decided to enroll in English classes at the Adventist language school. I began attending the weekend activities, including Bible classes on Sabbath. At first my husband did not want to attend, but the entire family was attending worship and taking Bible studies. I rejoiced to see the changes that Christ was bringing to our home. We are growing in faith together and now use the Bible as our standard of faith.

When Tina finished her classes at the Adventist elementary school, she enrolled in a public high school. Now she must attend classes on Sabbath, and this has affected her faith. When we realized the difficulties Tina faces in school, we decided that Kay must study in Adventist schools, where she can continue growing in Christ.

I still study English at the Adventist language school and love to invite my friends to study and worship there too.

Mission offerings help fund the Adventist English Language schools throughout Korea, which are a major evangelistic outreach in my country. Thank you for helping my family find Christ through language studies.

KIM, SUNG AE and her family live in Seoul, Korea.

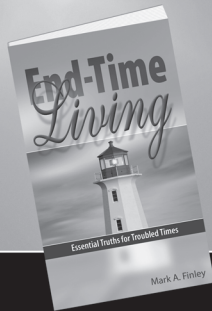
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How does one introduce Christ to people too busy to care? Show God's face to those who don't know where to look? Plant a church in a city where most churches stand nearly empty?

Geneva, Switzerland, is one of the most secular cities in the world. Its historic churches stand empty while people pass by pursuing their futures. A group of dedicated young people at the Adventist seminary in Collonges, France, have set their sites on Geneva. Their challenge is to find ways to present the gospel that is relevant and appealing to the unchurched in Geneva.

And it's working. The young people are creating new and deeply meaningful encounters with God, brushing away 2000 years of dusty tradition. At one meeting, some 60 people, mostly college-age students and many university students in Geneva, gathered for a meal and an encounter with Christ. These young people are searching for God, for meaning, and the Adventist youth are helping them find it.

I want to help these young people, hold up their spiritual hands, support their efforts to build a vibrant, living group of believers in this great city of Europe. I can do that through my mission offerings and especially through my Thirteenth Sabbath Offering, part of which will help plant this church. For me it's personal.



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Striving After *the* Wind



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Ecclesiastes 6.*

Memory Text: "All the labor of man is for his mouth, and yet the soul is not satisfied" (*Ecclesiastes 6:7, NKJV*).

W e do not require great education of the mind to understand that on this earth is no real and lasting satisfaction; that our pleasures are only vanity; that our evils are infinite; and, last, that death, which threatens us every moment, must infallibly place us within a few years under the dreadful necessity of being forever either annihilated or happy.

"There is nothing more real than this, nothing more terrible. Be we as heroic as we like, that is the end which awaits the noblest life in the world. Let us reflect on this, and then say whether it is not beyond doubt that there is no good in this life but in the hope of another; that we are happy only in proportion as we draw near it; and that, as there are no more woes for those who have complete assurance of eternity, so there is no more happiness for those who have no insight into it."
—Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*.

Pascal, writing in the seventeenth century, is in his own way expressing some of the sentiments that Solomon expresses in *Ecclesiastes*. This week we'll continue to follow more of Solomon's woes; that is, more of his musings about the frustrations, inequities, and injustices of life here in a fallen world.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 17.*

Safest Place on Earth?

“They have also healed the hurt of My people slightly, saying, ‘Peace, peace!’ when there is no peace’ ” (*Jer. 6:14, NKJV*).

In the 1930s some of the world’s best minds, concerned about the future, sought to find what they believed would be the safest place on earth. That is, what place on this planet would be the least likeliest location where anyone would be threatened by war? Using the best resources, the finest data, the sharpest analysis, these great minds found the ideal location, the safest place in the world in the 1930s. It was an island in the Pacific. Its name?

Okinawa.

The point? It’s simple. Our world is a fallen world. Sin, death, and suffering pervade the planet. The world, as it is, is not what it should have been. There’s nothing “under the sun” that we can totally rely on. Not even the ground beneath our feet, as anyone who ever suffered through an earthquake could tell you.

In one sense, though, that could be good. Why? Because this world, as it now is, is not our home. It’s a place scheduled for destruction (*2 Pet. 3:10-13*); everything here will pass away (*Luke 21:33, Rev. 21:1*). One of the greatest dangers we face is to forget this, to get so caught up in the world or to be so in love with the world that we end up perishing with it.

Read Psalm 115:1-7, Isaiah 44:9-17, and Isaiah 45:20-22. Even though these verses were written a long time ago, what’s the message for us today? What danger is the Lord talking about that we need to be careful of, as well?

So much of the Old Testament was the story of the Lord trying to point His people away from the world, the practices and teachings and gods of the world, things that, in the end, could not save them. Even worse, not only could they not save them, they could not satisfy them either.

What are some things in this world that make life here so hard? In what ways can these hardships be a blessing; that is, in what ways do they help you remember that this world is not your final home?

When Gold Rusts

The Great Depression began in October 1929, when the stock market in the United States dropped rapidly. Thousands of investors lost large sums of money, and many fortunes were wiped out; many people, both rich and poor, lost everything overnight. One wealthy businessman who owned three homes found himself and his family living under a bridge for almost two years; they survived by selling off various leftover clothes and other odds and ends. This was a family that two years before had taken an extended cruise and vacation in Europe.

Read Ecclesiastes 6:1, 2. What point is Solomon making? In what ways do you see this principle expressed with other things in the world? What should be the ultimate message here for us?

We've all heard stories about people who have accumulated great wealth, only to lose it all one way or another. What makes this even more frustrating is that Solomon, of all people, knew that money couldn't buy happiness or peace of mind even when one gets to keep it. And then there's the great pain that comes when one loses it to others, as well.

And it's not just wealth either. How many people put great stock, for instance, in power or prestige or a good name, only to have it all lost? Again, this should tell us why we need to be careful about how much we love this world, for most things in this world will one day be gone forever.

Read Matthew 6:19, 20. (See also *Luke 12:33*.) It's easy to understand about not laying up treasure on earth, but how does one lay up treasure in heaven? As you formulate your answer, also write down the ways you are laying up treasure in heaven.

Family Matters

God created the family to be a blessing—parents loving each other while bestowing great love and affection on their children. The love and closeness and commitment created in a family has been and still continues to be one of the greatest joys that human beings can know.

Of course, Satan is real, and so is sin; the result is that families, while a source of great joy, also can be a source of great pain and sorrow.

Look up the following texts. What kind of family turmoil is depicted here?

Gen. 4:1-8

Gen. 37:19-36

2 Sam. 11:1-4

2 Sam. 13:1-14

Matt. 10:35-37

1 Cor. 5:1

Of course, most of those family situations depicted above were pretty pathetic. In Ecclesiastes 6:3, in contrast, Solomon is depicting what would be kind of an ideal situation: A man lives a long life and has many children, yet even that in the end doesn't satisfy the deepest needs. These "good things"—and they are good—still aren't good enough. God has created us with a longing for something that nothing in this world, even a large loving family, can satisfy.

"Creatures are not born with desire unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world."—C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), p. 121.

Though, ultimately, our hope and security exist only in God, family is still important. What can you do to help strengthen your family bonds? Make an effort, through prayer, to deny yourself in order to give more of yourself to your family.

A Long Life?

Imagine this imaginary scene. Two people from another world are talking. One says to the other, “You know, I just don’t understand the meaning of life. Here I am, getting old. I have had a good life, but now it’s coming to a close. Look at all those who came before me; look at all those who will come after. We’re here, and then we are gone. It all goes by so fast. I’ll be five thousand years old on my next birthday. It seemed like just yesterday I turned four thousand. What does it all mean?”

This imaginary paragraph captures somewhat of what Solomon is saying here in Ecclesiastes 6:1-7. In it, groaning over the inequities and unfairness of life, he uses another symbol, this time a stillborn infant (*compare to Ecclesiastes 4:1-3*), saying that it would be better to die like this rather than see the meaninglessness and suffering of life. Again, however negative, if you view this world as all there is, with nothing else beyond, then it’s hard to argue with the logic: What’s the sense of living a life that has no meaning?

Read Ecclesiastes 6:6. What point is he making?

Life does go by fast; maybe, though, that’s a blessing for us in this fallen world. Would you like to live for five thousand years in a sinful world full of pain and suffering? However much we hate death, it’s a relief for the dead, if not for the living left behind.

What do these texts have to say about the problem of death? What hope is found in them for us? *John 5:28, 29; 6:54; 10:28; 2 Tim. 1:10; Heb. 2:14; Rev. 21:4.*

Using either some of the texts above or any other ones you find, write out your favorite texts about eternal life, just one after another, in a paragraph. Use as many as you like. Then read it aloud and pray over those promises and claim them for yourself. Also, be prepared to share them with the class on Sabbath.

More Griping

In the last six verses of Ecclesiastes 6, Solomon continues his laments about the fate of humanity. He expressed in another way (*vs. 7*) what he has been saying all along, that there is no ultimate and lasting satisfaction in this life. It's a truth, of course, that we know too well.

Ask yourself, Why is this true? Why is it that the things of this world don't satisfy us? *See also Gen. 3:19; Ps. 104:29; Isa. 57:12, 13; John 8:34; Rom. 7:5; Eph. 2:12.*

The British poet Alexander Pope once wrote about how “pleasures are ever in our hands or eyes,” and yet, when we do them, they cease to bring us the pleasure we imagine. It's only “in prospect” of doing them that they seem so great; in reality, they don't give us what we ultimately hope they would.

Verses 8-12 of Ecclesiastes 6, though difficult, are again talking about the general futility of life itself. We aren't satisfied with what we have; if we are wise or foolish, what does it matter; we can't fight those stronger than us; so often words are meaningless; and, finally, who knows how to live our short lives here? And yet, given the context of what he is talking about (a life lived apart from God), he makes a lot of sense.

Though we don't know exactly what Solomon meant by the question, **What advantage does a wise person have over a foolish one?** he answers the questions for us in **Proverbs**. *See Prov. 1:5-7; 3:35; 10:1, 14; 12:15; 14:1, 3; 15:7; 17:10-12; 21:20.*

Meanwhile, how does Jesus show the difference between the wise and the foolish? *Matt. 7:24-27, 25:1-13.*

According to what you have studied today, were your actions in the past 24 hours those of a wise person or those of a fool? What changes might you need to make?

Further Study: Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, p. 1026; Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, pp. 223, 374, 375; *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, pp. 258–262.

“But the great study and ambition of the world is to obtain material, temporal advantages, to the neglect of spiritual good. Thus it is with some members of the church. When at last they shall be called to render their account to God, they will not only be ashamed but astonished that they did not discern the true riches, and have not laid up treasure in the heavens. They have bestowed their gifts and offerings upon the enemies of truth, expecting a time to come in this life when they would receive the returns for what they have invested.—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 2, p. 134.

“Every family is a church, over which the parents preside. The first consideration of the parents should be to work for the salvation of their children. When the father and mother as priest and teacher of the family take their position fully on the side of Christ, a good influence will be exerted in the home. And this sanctified influence will be felt in the church and will be recognized by every believer. Because of the great lack of piety and sanctification in the home, the work of God is greatly hindered. No man can bring into the church an influence that he does not exert in his home life and in his business relations.” —Ellen G. White, *Child Guidance*, p. 549.

Discussion Questions:

- 1** Read aloud the paragraphs put together at the end of Thursday's lesson. Share your thoughts after they are read.
- 2** Have some in class share their own experiences with how fleeting and untrustworthy things are in this world. What can you learn from these accounts?
- 3** As a class, discuss this question: As Christians, we all know that things of this world are only temporary; and yet, why is it so easy for us to get so caught up in them, even to the point of risking our souls? Also, talk about what the solution to that problem is.

Good Life From Bad

Maria Medina grew up in Chile with an abusive alcoholic father. She had to quit school at 15 to work. The next year her mother fled her husband, taking Maria with her. Maria became pregnant at 18, but instead of marrying the baby's father, she decided to raise the child alone. She did not want to risk giving her child the same kind of life she had fled. She, her new baby, her mother, and her brother shared a small apartment, managing the best they could.

When she was 21, an Adventist neighbor gave her some tracts about God and offered to study the Bible with her. Maria loved reading the Bible. At last she realized that God loves her. She joined the Adventist Church and was overjoyed with her new relationship with God. As she learned of the power of forgiveness, she realized that she must forgive her father for what he had done. She prayed a lot about it, and then she visited her father. "Father," she said, "I forgive you for what you have done to me and to our family. I want to live without hate in my heart, so I forgive you."

"How can you forgive me for all the bad things I did to you and your mother?" he sobbed. He had lost everything the family had because of alcohol, and he still drank. He had tried to quit and was drinking far less than when the family lived with him.

Maria shared her new faith with her mother and brother, who are deaf. It was difficult for them to form bonds of friendship with others, but eventually they accepted the Adventist faith and joined the church.

When her son Hector was seven, he developed a high fever. The doctor found that Hector had a heart condition and feared that he would not survive. Hector needed emergency surgery to repair his heart, and Maria asked the church members to pray throughout surgery. Soon he could live a normal life. Maria took her son's case to the pastor and asked the church members to pray.

Today Hector is studying for the ministry at Chile Adventist University. He has two brothers, and Juan, 16, also wants to become a minister.

Maria rejoices that God has brought so much good into her life, which started out so bad. She loves to sing praises to God and share her faith with others.

Mission offerings provide materials and evangelistic outreach to lead people such as Maria to Christ. Thank you.

MARIA MEDINA lives in southern Chile, where she shares her faith with all who will listen.

God Made Man Upright? What Happened?



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Ecclesiastes 7.*

Memory Text: “Lo, this only have I found, that God hath made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions” (*Ecclesiastes 7:29*).

In reference to women in Paris feeding birds with pieces of bread “a bit chewed and soggy,” the poet Rainer Rilke wrote: “It does them good to think that their saliva is getting out into the world a little, that the small birds will fly off with the taste of it in their mouths, even though a moment later they naturally forget it again.”

Talk about *hebel*. What a sad example of human beings seeking for meaning and purpose in the wrong place. As humans, we do seek for meaning, for purpose, for direction, and sometimes in some strange ways, too. Here we are, in this world, with so many variables, so many options, so many paths to choose from. How do we know which ones are right?

This week we will study Ecclesiastes 7. The first 14 verses read like Proverbs, short pithy little sayings about morality, life, inequity, injustice, wisdom, and so forth. Though not always easy to understand, they are filled with the kind of wisdom we expect from the man whose wisdom even Jesus referred to. The rest of the chapter sounds more like Ecclesiastes—the older, bitter Solomon who, even in his angst, still has plenty of wisdom to share.

This chapter, like the whole book, deals with more questions about life. Taken with the Bible as a whole, Ecclesiastes 7 shows that the right answers can be found only in the God who has created us, redeemed us, and thus has given us the meaning and purpose that so many often seek in such useless and unsatisfactory places.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 24.*

A Good Name

“A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of one’s birth” (*Eccles. 7:1*).

The original Hebrew here has a play on words that you can’t see in translation. The word for “name” (*shm*) is very close to the word for “ointment” or oil (*shmn*). It’s one of those linguistic and poetic devices that, while maybe not full of deep and hidden meaning, gave the original language a force and beauty that, unfortunately, is lost in translation.

At first glance this verse, especially the last part, seems like more of Solomon’s pessimism: better to not have been born than to live and see all the evil done under the sun; better to have died in childbirth than to live, and so forth. Ecclesiastes 7:1, however, seems to be saying something else. The key, perhaps, is in the first part of the verse.

What’s the basic message that Solomon is saying in the first half of Ecclesiastes 7:1? See also *Prov. 22:1; Dan. 6:5; 1 Tim. 3:2, 10*.

This part is obvious, the value of a good reputation. What comes next in the text easily fits in. Frenchman Jean-Paul Sartre argued that a person’s life is basically defined by that person’s death, in the sense that at death it’s finished. No more changes, no more potential, no more growth. You’re nothing more than what you were when you died.

In a sense, that’s correct. Our opportunities to get a good name, to have a good character, and to be a positive influence in this world and for God’s kingdom are over once we die. Character is formed here, not in the grave. Our chance for salvation is now, not after death.

Thus, in a sense, this verse is really about priorities. A good name will last; an evil, wicked person will be here and gone, perhaps like the fragrance of ointment. How important then that we are careful with our time, that we prioritize our actions. What things do we do that will have a lasting, even eternal, impact for good, in contrast to the things that will one day be long gone and forgotten? Certainly something worth thinking about.

What are you doing with your own time? If you had to stand before God and give an account for the past 24 hours of your time, how would you fare?

House of Feasting, House of Mourning

The Baptists have a saying: “He has just enough religion to make himself miserable.” Everyone, probably, has seen those types. Perhaps they were the ones Jesus referred to in Matthew 6:16, those who walked around with “a sad countenance” in order to show everyone just how holy they were.

Yet, a quick reading of Ecclesiastes 7:2-6 could give one the impression that this attitude is what religion should be about. It’s better to be mourning than feasting, better to be sorrowing than laughing, and so forth. How does all that fit in with the whole concept of joy in the Lord, of rejoicing in Christ (*Lev. 23:40, Pss. 5:11, 149:2, Phil. 4:4, 1 Thess. 5:16*)?

If you read these verses in Ecclesiastes 7 carefully, there’s a hint in them that helps put all this in perspective.

Look carefully at verse 2, the last few phrases. What point is Solomon making here that helps us understand his basic message in verses 2-6?

In a sense, Solomon is repeating the idea touched on in yesterday’s lesson. No matter how much feasting you do, in the end there’s always mourning because, in the end, we all die. The wise understand this. They understand the gravity of the human situation and that feasting and laughter, while they have their place, need to be understood in the larger context of life as a whole. Our lives don’t end in a feast; they end in mourning. Our lives don’t end in laughter; they end in sadness. Fools go along, oblivious to the end that ultimately awaits them. One day, instead of laughter, there will be “weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Read Luke 12:41-48. In what ways is that giving the same message talked about above?

As Christians, how do we find the right balance? After all, the great controversy is a serious thing. It is, literally, a matter of not just life but eternal life. How do we balance this important truth with the fact that we are to rejoice in the Lord? Or are these ideas not contradictory at all? Bring your answer to class.

Patience and Pride

We've already looked at the first six verses of Ecclesiastes 7. Today we'll finish this first section, which is composed of short proverblike sayings.

Read Ecclesiastes 7:7-14. What points is Solomon making? Which ones speak clearest to you, personally; that is, which touch you in a sensitive area?

There's a lot of wisdom to choose from packed in here. Verse 7, for instance, about a bribe corrupting the heart, touches on a key spiritual point: One compromise leads to another. It's saying not that a corrupt heart takes a bribe but that a bribe corrupts the heart. What a powerful warning to us all about what sin does to the soul.

Look at verse 9. What point is being made there? What do these other texts add to that message? *Matt. 5:22; 18:21, 22; Rom. 12:19-21.*

Look at verse 12. How is wisdom a protection? How does wisdom preserve life? *See also Prov. 1:7, 9:10, Col. 1:28, James 3:13-18.*

How do you understand the meaning of verse 14? *See Phil. 4:11-13.*

How well are you doing in these areas? What things need to be changed in your life? Anger, compromise, lack of trust? How crucial to get on your knees before the Lord and seek the things He freely offers through Jesus.

Our Fallen Natures—Part One

Read Ecclesiastes 7:15-21. Which of the verses below best describe the basic message in there?

(a) 1 Cor. 13:13

(b) Gal. 6:2

(c) Rom. 3:10

Solomon here paints a fairly negative picture of humanity. Though one could be tempted just to chalk it up to more of his basic pessimism, it's not so simple.

At the beginning of the Enlightenment, in seventeenth-century Europe, humans began bursting at the seams with new knowledge. Amid this new understanding of the world was the great hope in human perfection. Sure, the world has been bad, and people have been bad, but now that we are gaining new knowledge and a greater understanding of the world, ignorance will be defeated, and humanity will improve and move steadily toward the path of moral perfection.

Things so progressed that by the beginning of the twentieth century people believed that through the discoveries of science and through new technology humanity would soon learn to conquer all the things that had caused it so much trouble. We would, through our machines, devices, and inventions, overcome disease, overcome natural calamities, overcome hatred and war.

Think about events over the past century. How well did science fulfill the grand hopes that people had for it? *See also Matthew 24.*

Things didn't turn out quite as expected, did they? Though we gained new knowledge, our sinful human natures got the best of us, and so much of that knowledge and new power gained has been a source of evil and suffering. Power and knowledge in and of themselves aren't necessarily good or bad. It's what people do with them. The ruler of a powerful country has a lot of power. He can use that power to build houses or bomb them. What we need isn't so much new knowledge or power but hearts molded in the image and character of God; otherwise, knowledge and power can be used for evil.

All of us, to one degree or another, have some knowledge and some power. How are you using it? For good, for God's glory? Or are you exploiting it for less-than-honorable purposes? Be honest with yourself, no matter how painful.

Our Fallen Natures—Part Two

In Ecclesiastes 7:15-27, Solomon utters a litany of human woe.

Read verse 15. What is Solomon complaining about here? How valid is this complaint?

This verse, however, isn't the first time he has talked about this. What does he say in Ecclesiastes 3:16, 17 that helps us understand what is going on here?

Perhaps most striking are his words in Ecclesiastes 7:20, which sound very close to Paul in Romans 3:10 (“There is none righteous, no, not one”) or John in 1 John 1:10 (“If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.”). Though Christians are often derided for their “pessimistic” and “negative” views of humanity, all one has to do is look at the world, both its history and its present condition, to get verification for its teaching about the sinful state of humanity. You might need faith to believe in a lot of what Christianity teaches, but the fallen nature of humanity isn't one.

Read verse 26. What in Solomon's background would have caused him to say this? *1 Kings 11:1-4*.

Though Solomon is obviously pointing to certain kind of women (*compare with Prov. 18:22*), the important message goes far beyond gender: Be careful of anyone whom the devil can use to ensnare you and turn you away from the Lord.

Perhaps the most striking verse in this chapter is the last one, verse 29. How quickly it captures the human condition. God made us holy, and we have become unholy. Solomon's life, in a sense, could be used as an example of this principle. Sure, he was never sinless, but he started out on the right track. The Hebrew word translated “upright” is a common word for “straight” or “right” and is often used to describe human actions (*Deut. 6:18; 1 Kings 22:43; 2 Kings 18:3; Job 1:1, 8*). However “upright” he was at the start, he eventually wandered away.

Read 2 Corinthians 13:5. Are you in the faith? How do you justify your answer?

Further Study: Ellen G. White, *Child Guidance*, p. 166; *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 4, p. 606; *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 8, p. 86; see also *Mind, Character, and Personality*.

“True education does not ignore the value of scientific knowledge or literary acquirements; but above information it values power; above power, goodness; above intellectual acquirements, character. The world does not so much need men of great intellect as of noble character. It needs men in whom ability is controlled by steadfast principle.

“ ‘Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom.’ ‘The tongue of the wise useth knowledge aright’ (Proverbs 4:7; 15:2). True education imparts this wisdom. It teaches the best use not only of one but of all our powers and acquirements. Thus it covers the whole circle of obligation—to ourselves, to the world, and to God.

“Character building is the most important work ever entrusted to human beings; and never before was its diligent study so important as now. Never was any previous generation called to meet issues so momentous; never before were young men and young women confronted by perils so great as confront them today.”—Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 225.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ As a class, go over your answers for Monday’s study.
- ❷ Talk about the Ellen G. White quote above. Notice specifically the first paragraph. How does it fit in with some of the things that we have studied this week? Why does character matter, especially among those who have a lot of power?
- ❸ The lesson touched upon the question of influence and how the wives of Solomon led him astray. The question of influence and peer pressure is especially crucial for young people, many of whom have been seriously led astray by wrong friends. As a church, what can you do to help your young people avoid the wrong influences? What things can your church do to provide them with better alternatives?
- ❹ As a class, read aloud the Rilke quote from Sabbath afternoon. What does it say to you about the human need for meaning and purpose? How does our faith answer these needs? Also, how can we better share what we have been given with those who seek meaning in the most meaningless of things?

Never Alone: Part 1

by SELINA MWAKIPUNDA

Saturday morning I walked into the dean's office at the government school I attended in Tanzania. I signed my name in a book on the desk, and the monitor noted the time beside my name. I walked out of the building and through the school gate. I knew I would be punished for leaving campus, but I had to go to church, no matter what awaited me when I returned.

I heard singing and sprinted to the Adventist church. I slipped into a pew and sang along. My heart filled with joy.

Earlier that year I had met some Adventist girls in the dormitory at school. Their lives radiated peace and love, and I wanted to know what made them so different from me. They offered to study the Bible with me so I could learn how to live closer to God. I was raised in a Christian home, and I welcomed the Bible studies. When I learned about the Sabbath, God's wonderful gift of time to His children, I was amazed that I had never heard of this before. It made so much sense to me.

I told my parents what I had learned about the Sabbath, expecting them to share my joy. But my father thought that Adventists were a sect, and he ordered me to stay away from them. He told the dean at school not to let me leave the campus on Saturday, hoping it would end my association with Adventists.

But I had found something beautiful, and I was not ready to give it up. The dean ordered me to sign her book every three hours on Saturday to be sure I did not go to church. She threatened me and gave me extra work to try to force me to obey my father's wishes. But I had found something I could not let go, and when I missed the twelve o'clock sign-in, the dean demanded to know where I had been. It never occurred to me to lie, so I told her I had been in church.

The dean gave me some garden tools and ordered me to go work in the school's large garden. I took the tools and told her I would work in the garden on Sunday, for I did not want to break the Sabbath. Her look told me I was in trouble.

(Continued next week)



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Seeing Through a Glass Darkly



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Ecclesiastes 8.*

Memory Text: “Though a sinner do evil an hundred times, and his days be prolonged, yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before him” (*Ecclesiastes 8:12*).

In Ecclesiastes 8 Solomon continues exploring many of the themes he touched on earlier. Again, it would be easy to get caught up in all the pessimism and complaints. But then again, life “under the sun” is something easy to be pessimistic about, is it not?

Nevertheless, as in most of these chapters, powerful gems of deep spiritual truth can be found amid all the more difficult rhetoric. No doubt that's another reason God had this book included in the Bible.

Look, for instance, at the memory text. What a promise, what a hope, is contained in there, a hope that must extend to something beyond this life. Indeed, amid all the negativity, Solomon shows a keen understanding of final justice and judgment, that regardless of how bad things on earth are now—as we are in the midst of the great controversy (*Rev. 12:12*)—God's final justice will be executed. That's one thing we can be certain of, even if we just have to wait. Maybe that's why the saints are said to, among other things, have “patience” (*Rev. 13:10, 14:12*).

This week we continue to explore more of the foibles, fears, and hopes of fallen humanity, all given from the unique perspective of King Solomon.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 3.*

Keep the King's Commandment!

As Christians we constantly are faced with the tension that comes from living in this world while accepting the reality that we already belong to another kingdom. Augustine called it the distinction between the City of God and the city of man.

Read Hebrews 11:13-16. How do these verses reveal the reality of the two lands between which we are pulled back and forth?

One source of potential tension Christians face deals, of course, with how we relate to the government under which we live. We all live under a government that holds the reins of power, that makes and enforces the rules and laws of our particular country. The Bible, time and again, makes it plain that Christians are to follow the laws; that is, they are to be good citizens.

Read Ecclesiastes 8:1-5. What is Solomon saying here? How do his words here fit with these texts: *Rom. 13:1-4, Titus 3:1, 1 Pet. 2:13-17*?

It's not all that surprising that Solomon would be saying this; after all, he is the king. However, the words do bring out an important principle of Christian citizenship. Regardless of where we live, we are obligated to obey the law of the land, even if there are laws we might not, personally, like. Notice the use of the word *personally*. There's a world of difference between obeying laws we might not *personally* like and obeying laws that are in violation of God's commandments, laws that directly contradict the basic principles of how God has told us we should live (see tomorrow's lesson). The crucial point, however, is that as people called to a standard of morality higher than the world's, we should be seeking to "keep the king's commandment."

What would happen were everyone simply to decide that they would obey only laws that they, personally, like? Why is this not a valid option? Why should we, as Seventh-day Adventist Christians, be particularly sensitive to the importance of law?

Keep the King's Commandment?

Keep the king's commandment? Like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (*Daniel 3*) or like Daniel (*Daniel 6*)?

As we said yesterday, it's not always easy living in one land while your heart, ideally, is in another (*Matt. 6:20, 21*). What's a good Christian citizen to do?

What other examples can you think of from the Bible in which God's people were forced to disobey those in political power?

The Bible is filled with examples of people who have faced persecution, threats, jail, and death as a result of being in conflict with earthly rulers. What makes this even more complicated is that many of these earthly rulers were leaders of God's chosen nation.

Meanwhile, as students of the book of Revelation, we know, too, that right at the end of time God's people are going to have to disobey the laws of earthly leaders in order to be faithful to God (*Rev. 13:12-16; 14*). Thus, we see that we are to obey the king's commandment, just as long as it doesn't conflict with the King's commandment (*John 19:19*).

Such actions, though, are very serious matters and shouldn't be undertaken lightly. One, instead, should move only after counsel with others who are wise in the ways of the Lord and, of course, only after seeking the guidance of the Lord, who speaks to us through His Word.

"The laws of the land at all levels may at times conflict with some of God's commandments. While magistrates bear responsibility for the law, each citizen is accountable to God for the choices he or she makes. In such cases Christians will explain their convictions and appeal to freedom of conscience, which is a God-given right on the basis of creation in His image. If the appeals are rejected, faithfulness to God first may result in fines, persecution, prison sentences, or other sacrifices that Christians in centuries past had to make."—*Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, vol. 12, p. 701.

If you knew someone about to challenge the legal authorities over an issue regarding what that person believed was a biblical imperative, what advice and counsel would you give? What principles would you look for to help guide this person in doing the right thing?

Trust Amid Uncertainty

Solomon then shifts to another train of thought. If you read the last part of verse 5 (“and a wise man’s heart discerneth both time and judgment”) and then go through to verse 9, you will see that (however difficult the texts) he’s talking about the uncertainties of life, that there are things that happen that we just don’t understand. No matter how wise a person is or however much his or her heart can discern “time and judgment,” there are things we just can’t make sense of, things that even the wisest among us can’t fathom.

The good news, however, is that as Christians we can trust God even when things unfold that make no sense. This trust, though, doesn’t happen automatically; we just don’t wake up after a life of faithlessness and suddenly start trusting God. Instead, we learn to trust God by reading His Word, claiming His promises, and living by faith and obedience. If we do these things with a will surrendered to Him, we will learn to trust Him no matter what we face.

Below are texts that deal with faith and trust in God. After each text, write down what it means to you personally, how you have experienced the reality of the promise. Also, if there are some texts we’ve missed that have been special to you, write them down and what they have meant. Bring your answers to class on Sabbath.

Ps. 118:8, 9

Ps. 34:8

Prov. 3:5, 6

Isa. 12:2

Rom. 8:28

James 2:22

Trust and Justice

Read Ecclesiastes 8:11-13. What point is Solomon making?

vs. 11

vs. 12

vs. 13

Solomon is, again, dealing with the painful question of injustice in this life (*see also vs. 14*). He notices that, indeed, the wicked often seem to get away with their deeds, with no immediate punishment. Though at times we do see the wicked suffering from the wages of their deeds, they don't always. That it happens sometimes is fine, but that it doesn't always happen leads to the question of Why not? Why is there no justice here?

Solomon doesn't have the answer; what he does have, however, is a powerful admonition: Don't worry about the evildoer; just be faithful to God, and He will reward you.

In a certain sense here, Solomon is calling us to live a life of faith, of trust. Sure, there is injustice; we all know that. And, certainly, God does. The Lord, though, hasn't given us here an explanation about all these things. Instead, He has called us to live a life of faith and obedience, trusting on the merits of Jesus Christ as our hope of salvation. These are the truths He has revealed to us now (*John 14:9; Gal. 3:21, 22; Heb. 1:1, 2; 1 John 5:3*), not the reasons for so many bad things that happen "under the sun."

The point of today, as with yesterday's lesson, should be that we need to trust not in what we can see or understand but in the promises of God, who has revealed Himself and His love to us through Jesus, especially Jesus crucified.

Are you troubled by the injustice you see in this world? Think about the injustice of the Cross, the greatest injustice ever. How should this great truth of Christ as the victim of injustice, all for our salvation, help you trust in the goodness of God despite all the injustice around you?

The Business That Is Done on Earth

Read Ecclesiastes 8:16, 17. What point is Solomon making? How does this fit in with what came before in the chapter? Why is this point so important?

In the past years there has been an explosion of knowledge. We know more about our world than ever before. Every day new discoveries are made in all areas, especially in science. And yet, the more we learn, the more we realize our ignorance. The “simplest” things turn out to be so full of mysteries that we can’t begin to explain. No matter what level we get at, there’s always something underneath it, something out of our reach. The work and power of God in nature alone is something that we only barely grasp. And, of course, the greatest of all God’s work, the plan of salvation, is itself deemed a “mystery” (*1 Cor. 2:7, Eph. 3:9, Col. 2:2*).

Perhaps one of the best insights into how we are to deal with things we don’t understand comes from the book of Job. Though terrible calamities befell Job, when God appears to Job at the end of the book, He doesn’t give Job any explanation for the events that ruined his life.

Skim over Job 38–42. What is the essence of God’s reply to Job regarding the trials that Job faced?

You probably noticed that the Lord said nothing about Satan’s taunt (*Job 1:9*) or about God’s reply to Satan (*Job 2:6*); indeed, He gave no explanation for anything that happened to Job. Instead, the Lord unleashed a flow of rhetorical questions about His own might and creative power in contrast to Job’s transience and weakness. For Job, that vision of God was enough to convince him that his bemoaning about his dead children, ruined health, and destroyed property was all simply him uttering “things too wonderful for me, which I knew not” (*Job 42:3*).

Job, with his glimpse of God as Creator, was silenced; what about us, we who have a view of God not only as Creator but as Redeemer? How should the revelation of God at the Cross teach us that we can trust the Lord even in the worst situations?

Further Study: Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, pp. 203–205; *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 602, 603; *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 699; vol. 6, p. 203.

“We are to recognize human government as an ordinance of divine appointment, and teach obedience to it as a sacred duty, within its legitimate sphere. But when its claims conflict with the claims of God, we must obey God rather than men. God’s Word must be recognized as above all human legislation. A ‘Thus saith the Lord’ is not to be set aside for a ‘Thus saith the church’ or a ‘Thus saith the state.’ The crown of Christ is to be lifted above the diadems of earthly potentates.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 68.

“No finite mind can fully comprehend the character or the works of the Infinite One. We cannot by searching find out God. To minds the strongest and most highly cultured, as well as to the weakest and most ignorant, that holy Being must remain clothed in mystery. But though ‘clouds and darkness are round about him: righteousness and judgment are the foundation of his throne.’ Psalm 97:2, R.V. We can so far comprehend His dealing with us as to discern boundless mercy united to infinite power. We can understand as much of His purposes as we are capable of comprehending; beyond this we may still trust the hand that is omnipotent, the heart that is full of love.”—Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 169.

Discussion Questions:

- 1** “There is, it seems to us,
At best, only a limited value
In the knowledge derived from experience.”
—T. S. Eliot, “East Coker”

Look at this quote from T. S. Eliot. Think of it in the context of the last two verses of Ecclesiastes 8, about the futility of trying to find out the ways of God by seeking them or by laboring. What does this tell us about the limits of what we can learn about God, apart from the truths He has revealed to us through divine inspiration?

- 2** As a class, go over your responses to Tuesday’s lesson. What can you learn from one another’s answers?

Never Alone: Part 2

by SELINA MWAKIPUNDA

My father told me that if I insisted on disobeying him, my education was over. I begged him to let me return to school. The school dean encouraged my father to let me stay in school and promised to watch me more carefully. Finally my father allowed me to return to school.

I signed the dean's book every Saturday and slipped out to church, satisfied to work in the garden on Sunday so I could worship on Sabbath.

Eventually the dean realized that she could not change my mind. She stopped making me sign her book or work in the garden.

But when my father learned of my disobedience, he told me I did not have to come home during vacation. "Since you love to be with Adventists, go live with them," he said. He hoped that I would give up this "foolishness," as he called it. But church members let me stay in their homes and even provided money for basic needs, such as soap.

I stayed at school until graduation. I was baptized, and I had my church friends but lived without my parents' support. While in college I met a young pastor. I tried to take him to meet my family, but my father refused to allow us on his property. We married and made a happy home. A year later our first child arrived, and the next year I became pregnant with our second. Then my husband suddenly died of a heart attack. I was 24 and a widow with a baby and another on the way.

My family refused to help me, and my husband's family blamed me for my husband's death. They took everything we owned—our furniture, even our clothes. I had nothing, no one to support me, and nowhere to go.

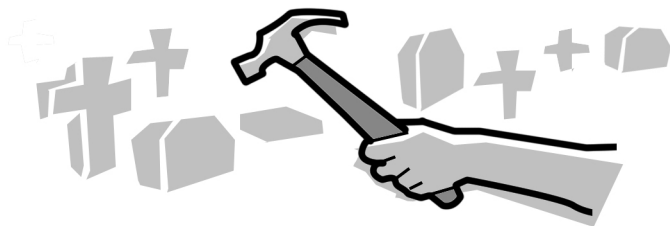
A missionary family took us into their home and helped pay my tuition and living expenses while I took a secretarial course. When I finished school I found work so I could support my daughters.

Life has not been easy, but God has never left me. No matter how difficult things have become, He has always been there for me. He means everything to me.

Mission offerings helped lead me to Jesus and support the schools that educated me. Thank God for the privilege of sharing.

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“Whatever Your Hand Finds *to Do*”



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Ecclesiastes 9.*

Memory Text: “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” (*Ecclesiastes 9:10, NIV*).

In 2004, a 70-year-old Italian man died. Though 70-year-old Italians dying isn't anything out of the ordinary, how he died was. Aldo Busato, a retired farmer, was killed instantly by a World War I bomb, part of his collection of military memorabilia. He was in his garden, showing the relic to some friends, when the ordnance exploded, killing him and seriously injuring the person he was showing the bomb to.

How do we make sense of things like this, crazy things that just defy rational explanation? The fact is, as we saw last week, we just can't. What we have to do is simply learn to trust in the goodness of God, despite what's for now inexplicable.

Solomon, again, touches on this theme (and others) in the chapter for this week. His focus here, though, is on death, a theme that has appeared in other places in *Ecclesiastes*. As we read, remember that Solomon at times is expressing views from a “secular” perspective, a perspective that should help us understand the futility and meaninglessness of our existence if there is no God who promises us justice, answers, and eternal life. At the same time, though focusing on death, he is also talking to us about life and how we should be living now.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 10.*

In God's Hands

“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” (Eccles. 9:1, NIV).

Verse 1 of chapter 9 continues the flow from the last verse of chapter 8. If you remember, Solomon was talking about our inability to understand God’s ways. Though he ends with that thought, chapter 9 opens up with the above line, which, taken with what preceded it, could be expressed like this: *We surely don’t understand God’s ways, but we can know that the Lord looks after those who are faithful to Him, regardless of whatever they face.*

How fair an assessment do you think this conclusion is? And, even if you agree, what does it mean to say that the faithful are “in God’s hands”?

To say, however, that we are in God’s hands doesn’t, of course, mean that we will never have pain, suffering, or tragedy in this life. The most faithful of all Christians can never be sure of what will await them “under the sun.” That’s perhaps what Solomon meant by the last phrase of verse 1: Sure, we might be in God’s hands, but that doesn’t mean we won’t face suffering. The difference, however, is that as Christians we can trust in the goodness and mercy of God in spite of these tragedies. Imagine going through the things we so often go through without the belief that there’s a loving, caring God who promises to one day “wipe away every tear from their eyes” (*Rev. 7:17, NIV*).

Put yourself in the place of some faithful Bible character who was amid a great trial and, yet, who was certainly still in God’s hands. How about Joseph or John the Baptist, when they were in jail? How about Job, sitting on his refuse heap, just about everything but his life gone? Or maybe Daniel thrown into the lions’ den? Whichever one you pick, try to imagine how easy it would be for that person, in the midst of their trial, to doubt or question the Lord’s love and care. What lessons can you learn that could perhaps help you in whatever situation you are facing now, when you, too, are tempted to doubt?

One Fate?

Ecclesiastes 9:2 is a prime example of how important it is to read Ecclesiastes in the context of the whole Bible; here, too, is a good place to repeat the admonition given in *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 1060, that “passages such as these should not be wrested from their context and made to teach some supposed truth that Inspiration never intended them to teach”.

At the same time, Solomon’s point, if understood in the proper context, is well taken. Death is stronger than nature, at least nature as we now know it. One could argue that death is part of nature itself; anything that lives dies. And as we all know too well, it makes no difference if you are righteous or not. Death always wins out.

Yet to say that one fate awaits everyone (and that is death) regardless of how we live is like saying that one fate awaits everyone who drinks (and that is swallowing) regardless of whether we drink water or arsenic. If we take only the short view of things, death is indeed the common fate of all. The short view, however, is just that, the short view; it’s like listening to the first few notes in Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony and mistaking them for the whole symphony. The Bible, as a whole, gives us the long view.

Look up the following texts: What is the ultimate fate of humanity?

Dan. 12:2, Matt. 25:32-41, John 3:16, John 5:29, Rev. 20:6-15.

No question, the Bible is clear that there is not one fate common to all; there is one of two fates: either eternal life or eternal destruction. No middle ground here; no compromise. Either we will live forever, or we will be dead forever.

The good news is that through Jesus, every human being has the opportunity to live forever. Christ died as the Substitute for all humanity, with no one left out. His provision was more than enough for everyone. In the end, which of the two fates is ours is, really, our own choice.

Think about your choices, not just the big ones, but the day-to-day “little” ones. By these choices, what fate are you, ultimately, choosing?

The Dead

Here let me die: for to give birth to those
Who can but suffer many years and die,
Methinks, is merely propagating death,
And multiplying murder.

—Lord Byron

“Once a man has realized,” wrote Russian Leo Tolstoy, “that death is the end of everything, there is nothing worse than life either.”

However negative his words, Tolstoy does have a good point. It’s kind of hard, isn’t it, going through life knowing that it ends in death and that death is the end of everything?

Read Ecclesiastes 9:3-6 and think about it from the perspective of someone who doesn’t believe in God or in any afterlife at all. Try to put yourself in the mind of someone who believes that death is the end of everything. What kind of purpose can you find to life? What sense can you make of all the things you do, knowing that you, as well as all your children and all their children, might die before Jesus comes?

Now, however, read the same texts from our perspective as Seventh-day Adventist Christians, with our belief that death is merely a sleep and that through what Christ has done for us, when He returns—which seems to the dead to be only in a “twinkling of an eye” after they die—we will be raised to eternal life in a new heaven and a new earth. How different is the message you get from looking at them from this perspective in contrast to the one above?

We should be so thankful for what Christ has offered us through His death and resurrection. Without it, we would face the kind of hopelessness expressed in the texts for today. How precious our faith should be to all of us; how crucial that we guard and protect it as if our lives were at stake. Indeed, they are.

Now Is the Day of Salvation

As Adventists, we love to use Ecclesiastes 9:5, 6 in support of our position on the state of the dead. And rightly so, for the dead indeed “do not know anything” and indeed “they will no longer have a share in all that is done under the sun” (*NASB*); at least, that is, not until Jesus comes back. Solomon’s point here, however, wasn’t so much to make a theological statement about the state of the dead as it was to make a statement about life. Though these texts are talking about death, they do so in the context of life and how life should be lived.

Read Ecclesiastes 9:5-10. What is the point about life that Solomon is making? How is he telling us to live? How can we apply this basic idea to our lives here as Christians?

We should be so thankful for what Christ has offered us. Our life here is the only one we are given, at least in this world. And although this life is transient (*Job 8:9*), and though one day this earth and all that’s in it will be gone (*2 Pet. 3:10-12*), it’s fraught with eternal consequences now because how we live here utterly determines our fate for eternity. That’s right: Decisions here, in our short lives, decisions that can take only seconds, can decide our fate for eternity. How crucial it is then that we take our time of probation seriously; that we live a life of vigilance and care for our souls. With such consequential things at stake, how foolish it would be to live any other way.

Look up the following texts. How do they reinforce the idea expressed in the above paragraph?

Mark 14:38

Rom. 14:12

2 Cor. 6:2

2 Pet. 3:10-14

However important the decisions we make, the most important one of all is the one for Christ, the one in which responding to the Holy Spirit, we choose to die to self and live for Him. Have you made that decision yet? Just going to church, or even believing in Jesus, isn’t making that decision, the one that—more than any other—will decide how you’ll spend eternity.

Time and Chance

We've all heard or seen or even experienced for ourselves great injustice, and not necessarily at the hands of others. Sometimes "time and chance" just seem to work in a way that's so unfair, so unjust, so uncaring.

A young woman in the prime of life is struck down with a debilitating disease; a man is laid off from work because of economic conditions; a star athlete slips and falls on some stairs, and a career is ruined. The list goes on and on.

Read Ecclesiastes 9:11-18. What is Solomon's overall point? Do you agree or not? If not, why not?

Again, from a human standpoint, it can seem that "time and chance" rule over all our lives. But that's not the Bible position, which teaches that there is a God who not only sees all things (*Ps. 11:4, Prov. 5:21*) but is intricately involved in human affairs (*Prov. 16:9, Dan. 2:21, Matt. 6:25-31*), no matter how difficult it is at times to see it. The crucial thing for us, as Christians, is to come to a personal knowledge of God, a knowledge of Him and His love that enables us to cling to Him in faith and obedience when it seems that, indeed, "time and chance" are treating us cruelly.

Look specifically at Ecclesiastes 9:13-16. What point is touched on there?

There are probably a number of ways to look at these verses, but given the context, we could say that Solomon is talking about more injustice, about someone who does something worthy but, for whatever reason (in this case because of poverty), that person's contribution is not acknowledged, or even is forgotten about. Again, from a human perspective that's all true; fortunately, a human perspective isn't the most important one. God's perspective is, and He not only won't forget but will also reward (*Luke 6:35, Col. 3:24, Heb. 10:36, Rev. 22:12*).

What do you say to someone to whom "time and chance" have dealt a cruel blow? How can you assure them of God's love and care amid their sufferings?

Further Study: Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 2, p. 191; vol. 3, p. 453; vol. 4, pp. 306, 307; *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, p. 245; *The Great Controversy*, p. 662; *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 91.

“Christ desires His hearers to understand that it is impossible for men to secure the salvation of the soul after death. ‘Son,’ Abraham is represented as answering, ‘remember that thou in thy lifetime receivest thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented. And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed; so that they which would pass from hence to you can not; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence.’ Thus Christ represented the hopelessness of looking for a second probation. This life is the only time given to man in which to prepare for eternity.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 263.

“In every age there is given to men their day of light and privilege, a probationary time in which they may become reconciled to God. But there is a limit to this grace. Mercy may plead for years and be slighted and rejected; but there comes a time when mercy makes her last plea. The heart becomes so hardened that it ceases to respond to the Spirit of God. Then the sweet, winning voice entreats the sinner no longer, and reproofs and warnings cease.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 587.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ As a class, do you know someone whom “time and chance” have really hurt? What can you, as a group, do to show that person the reality of God’s love, even during times of crises?
- ❷ What are ways that you can help those in your church who haven’t yet made a choice to surrender to the Lord? How can you help them see the importance of not delaying this crucial decision?
- ❸ Have people talk about a specific instance in which they saw clearly the closeness and nearness of God in their lives. What can you learn from each other’s experiences?
- ❹ As a class, discuss the idea, expressed in the Ellen G. White quote above, about the need to “prepare for eternity.” What do you think she means by that? How are we to “prepare for eternity”?

God and the Fisherman

by A. B. ARLOO

The Afram Plain lies in eastern Ghana, within the 10/40 Window. Because of the difficult terrain, only 14 of the 126 villages that dot the plain had heard the Adventist message, and only 133 members lived among the 1.6 million people. The area was designated a Global Mission focus area for evangelism, and 135 Global Mission workers braved the harsh climate, almost impassible roads, and treacherous rivers to bring the gospel to the people. And God went before the lay evangelists and prepared the ground for sowing the seed.

Maxwell Vitashi is a fisherman who makes his living on a fast-flowing river that slides along the edge of the plain. One day Maxwell paddled his canoe upstream for miles searching for good fishing. Suddenly, his boat capsized, dumping him into the middle of the river. Desperately he swam against the swift current toward the distant shore. But he was no match for the powerful river, and soon he was too tired to go on. He knew he would die.

Maxwell was not a Christian, but in his need he prayed to the great God of the heavens to save him. He had hardly finished his prayer when unseen hands picked him up and tossed him into a spot where the stumps of two trees stood. He grabbed hold of the stumps to catch his breath. But how had he gotten there? He could see no human anywhere near him.

As his hands became numb, he wondered how long he could hold on. Again he prayed, and from nowhere two men in a canoe paddled toward him. They lifted him into their boat and carried him to shore near his village. The men laid him gently on the beach. Dazed, it was several minutes before Maxwell thought to thank his rescuers. But they had disappeared. *Who were those men?* he wondered. He had lived in this village all his life, but he had never seen them before.

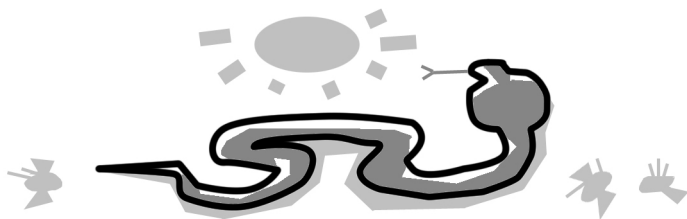
Maxwell told his neighbors of his miraculous rescue, which he attributed to the great God who had heard his prayers.

A few days later, the Global Mission evangelists visited his village. Maxwell welcomed them and listened eagerly to their testimonies. When they held public meetings, Maxwell was the first in his village to ask for baptism.

Maxwell is one of many who found God and His truth through Global Mission pioneers. Your Mission offerings help make possible programs such as Global Mission outreach.

PASTOR A. B. ARLOO is Global Mission/Sabbath School director for the East Ghana Conference in Koforidua, Ghana.

Dead Flies *and* Snake Charmers: More Life Under *the* Sun



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Ecclesiastes 10.*

Memory Text: “Dead flies putrefy the perfumer’s ointment, and cause it to give off a foul odor; so does a little folly to one respected for wisdom and honor” (*Ecclesiastes 10:1, NKJV*).

By this time, as far as we are in *Ecclesiastes*, it should be clear that it’s difficult to find a unified flow of thought. That doesn’t mean there aren’t unified thoughts; it’s just not easy to find the flow of those thoughts; that is, it doesn’t progress from one thought to another and to another in any kind of systematic flow. At least, it doesn’t seem to.

Nevertheless, important ideas and thoughts are there, all well worth our study, especially when studied in comparison with the rest of the Bible.

This week’s lesson also could have been titled “Thoughts, Words, Actions,” for it deals with all three. Solomon talks about our thoughts, he talks about our words, and he talks about our actions, though not exactly in that order. Of course, in one sense, if you cover thoughts, words, and actions, there’s isn’t much left, is there?

With his powerful poetic style, Solomon gives us more to ponder. Though we have to work our way through the thoughts of this chapter, when we do we can see that there’s a lot of meat here, a lot of practical wisdom that would do us all well to heed carefully.

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 17.*

Dead Flies

Ecclesiastes 10:1 really needs to be read along with Ecclesiastes 9:18, at least the last clause. Though not saying exactly the same thing, Ecclesiastes 9:18 helps clarify the principle found in 10:1, which is—no matter how much good one does, a stupid mistake can so spoil it all.

Last week we talked a little about how in this life we have to make the choices that will, in the end, determine our eternal destiny. But many times our choices also have much more immediate consequences. How often someone can, in a weak and unguarded moment, make a choice that brings sudden and painful consequences. What makes these events even more tragic is that so often those who make those wrong choices can be “good” people, faithful and honorable souls who, as we all do, slip and fall. In one sense the more honorable, exalted, and esteemed the person is, the more responsibility upon that person to weigh his or her decisions carefully.

Below are a few biblical examples of good folk making bad choices. What caused these people to stumble, and what were the results of their folly?

Gen. 3:6

Exod. 32:1-4

2 Sam. 11:1-4

A man works many years for the Lord only to, in a weak moment, make a mistake, perhaps a moral fall, and then—suddenly—his ministry is, if not ruined, then certainly damaged. Whether right or not, this harsh consequence is a reality, one that should cause us all, regardless of our position, to walk carefully and circumspectly. In all the biblical accounts listed above, the Lord obviously forgave these people; how much more so should we, then, forgive those who have violated a sacred trust. But forgiveness doesn’t automatically mean that the damage is undone; most times it isn’t. How easily a few dead flies can stink up a whole jar of scented oil!

Whoever you are, whatever your position in the church, think about the negative consequences that could occur if you were to violate a trust. Watch and pray before you act!

The Fool's Heart

Ecclesiastes 10:2 is, obviously, poetic language depicting the difference between the heart (mind) of a wise person and of a foolish one. The imagery of left and right hand is found in various places in the Bible, with the right side considered the side of honor, power, and favor. After all, Jesus Himself talks about, when He returns, sitting “on the right hand of power” (*Matt. 26:64; see also Matt. 25:31-34, Acts 7:55*). In contrast, the left side was considered the side of evil and misfortune. In fact, the Latin word for left hand, *sinistra*, forms the basis for the English word *sinister*. Even today in some countries children who show a proclivity toward writing with their left hand are made to use their right instead.

Keeping these points in mind, what is Solomon saying in Ecclesiastes 10:2?

Because the heart was considered the center of all thoughts, emotions, and plans (*Gen. 6:5, Exod. 25:2, 1 Sam. 16:7*), Solomon's point is simply that the wise person guards the thoughts, the feelings, and the motives, while the foolish person doesn't. This verse shows how important it is that we keep control over what goes on inside us, because what's inside sooner or later becomes manifest on the outside.

How does Ecclesiastes 10:3 reveal the point made in the paragraph above?

Verse 3 fits perfectly with verse 2. The fool's “wisdom,” which is on his left side, eventually exposes him to others as a fool. In other words, sooner or later the corruption of your heart will become clear to others because you will, sooner or later, follow the inclinations of your heart. How important, then, to get control of our hearts! If we have them under control, the rest of our body will follow.

Suppose you are struggling with wrong thoughts. What does Deuteronomy 30:6 say, and what hope does it offer? How does Philippians 4:6-8 offer us practical advice on how to have that promise fulfilled?

More Evil

Solomon here continues with more platitudes and sayings. Verses 4-7, though presenting some difficulty, seem to be talking about the question touched on earlier in the book, that of injustice and unfairness in this life.

What are some of the injustice and unfairness that he talks about in these verses? What are some other examples that you can think of?

“In the time of Solomon only the privileged rode upon horses or mules (2 Sam. 18:9; 1 Kings 1:38; 2 Chron. 25:28; Esther 6:8; Jer. 17:25); men of lower degree used asses for this purpose. In early Israelite history even kings and princes rode on asses or mules (Judges 5:10; 10:4; cf. 1 Kings 1:33).”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 1098.

Though most of us might not have a problem with a few rich sitting in “a low place,” the point is that things aren’t always as expected: Folly wins great dignity and wealth a low spot. Or, in other contexts, faithful people suffer, evil prospers, and so forth. Maybe this theme is repeated in Ecclesiastes because the problem is so universal. Whatever the reason, we can’t allow these things to work against our faith and trust in God. This is just all part of what it means to live in a fallen world.

What role do we have in working to alleviate the injustices and inequities that we see? Is it just enough to say, “Well, that’s what it means to live in a fallen world,” or are we to work for justice, equity, and fairness? And, if so, how are we to do it? In what ways would our activism be different from the world’s? See Isa. 58:6, 7; Matt. 26:52; John 18:36; 2 Cor. 10:4; Rev. 13:10.

The Snake Charmer

Ecclesiastes 10:8-11 is a sequence of short proverbs dealing with various aspects of life. What points can you make from them?

These are difficult texts; many commentators see different things in them. Following the lead of *The SDA Bible Commentary*, we can discern the following ideas here.

Verse 8 seems to be talking about what happens when we are vindictive, when we plan evil against someone. The pit that we dug for someone else we end up falling into (*Pss. 7:15; 57:6; Prov. 26:27; see also Esther 9:23, 25*). The same idea is found in the part about the “hedge” (wall); when you tear down someone else’s wall, you can get bitten by a snake that lodges there.

Though the exact meaning of verse 9 is debated, Solomon simply could be saying that even when you do good things, bad consequences could arise from them. This could fit in with his general pessimism.

Verse 10 is pretty clear. If you are using a dull knife, your work will be much harder. How much more profitable to sharpen it beforehand. In the same way, wisdom, i.e., thoughtful preparation before you undertake anything, would be to your advantage. “The Christian should seek and make use of the finest tools of spiritual craftsmanship for the task of character construction. Effort alone is insufficient; there must be knowledge as well as zeal (see Rom. 10:2).”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 1098.

Verse 11 says, basically, that if the snake bites the charmer before it’s charmed, then there’s no sense in him trying to charm it. The meaning, perhaps, is best seen in the last part of the verse, about the uselessness of a babbler. Charming a snake after it bites you (such as a viper, whose bite is deadly) is as meaningless and useless as someone who babbles.

Go back over the day’s lesson. Which of these points makes the most sense or speaks the clearest to you? What lessons can you learn from it that you should apply to yourself? Are you vindictive? Do you babble too much? How much time do you spend preparing yourself spiritually for whatever trials the day brings?

The Fool's Lips

The rest of Ecclesiastes 10 (*vss. 10-20*) touches on various themes, but for today we'll focus on verses 12-14 and 20, in which the emphasis is on the use of our words. How careful we must be with what we say!

Compare the lips of the wise and a fool, as depicted in verse 12. What point is being made? See *Ps. 45:2, Prov. 22:11, Luke 4:22*.

The word translated “gracious” in the first part of the verse is the same word for *grace* (“Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord” [*Gen. 6:8*]); grace is unmerited favor; that is, we don’t get the punishment we deserve. That’s the essence of salvation: We are not getting the punishment we deserve (Jesus took it upon Himself instead). In contrast, the words of the fool cause him to be swallowed, a word used in various instances to depict sinners being punished (*Exod. 15:12, Num. 16:32, Jer. 51:34, Lam. 2:5*).

Read Ecclesiastes 10:13. How does this verse amplify what was said in the previous one?

How often we dismiss someone as “all talk, no action.” Many times, however, talk leads to action, because talk reflects what’s in the heart. It would be bad enough if the fool did nothing but talk; sadly, that’s not always the case. No wonder we are admonished all through the Bible to watch our words.

Look at verse 20. What’s the wisdom there?

The bottom line: A wise person will be careful with how he or she chooses his or her words; a fool, on the other hand, will speak words that will, one way or another, bring unnecessary pain and sorrow.

Think about a time when unnecessary words you spoke caused you trouble. What lessons did you learn? What advice could you give to someone who hasn’t yet learned to control the tongue?

Further Study: Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 323; *Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 337; *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 2, p. 302.

“It is a law of nature that our thoughts and feelings are encouraged and strengthened as we give them utterance. While words express thoughts, it is also true that thoughts follow words. If we would give more expression to our faith, rejoice more in the blessings that we know we have—the great mercy and love of God—we should have more faith and greater joy. No tongue can express, no finite mind can conceive, the blessing that results from appreciating the goodness and love of God. Even on earth we may have joy as a wellspring, never failing, because fed by the streams that flow from the throne of God.”—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, pp. 251–253.

“The words we utter today will go on echoing when time shall be no more. The deeds done today are transferred to the books of heaven, just as the features are transferred by the artist onto the polished plate. They will determine our destiny for eternity, for bliss or eternal loss and agonizing remorse.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers*, pp. 429, 430.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Think about the power of words—the good they can do or the evil they can do. As a class, talk about whatever practical things we can do to help each other understand how important it is that we carefully guard our words. For instance, who can give personal examples of lessons they have learned regarding the power of words? As a class, try to come up with a list of practical suggestions, simple and basic principles that could guide us in how we use our words.
- 2 Because our thoughts are so important, what can you do as a class to help the young people in your church make the right choices regarding the things they read or watch? Why is it so important that we be careful about what we put into our minds?
- 3 As a class, talk about the issue of anyone who has violated a sacred trust. How have we as a church dealt with such people? What principles should guide us in these cases? How do we show mercy and grace toward those who fall while, at the same time, protecting the flock from those who have violated the trust put in them?

Bright Light of God

by MATSEPO LAURA LEBONA

I was sickly as a child living in Lesotho, a tiny country in southern Africa. When I began having strange dreams, the village witch doctors told my parents that a strong spirit lived in me. Although my family members were Christians, they feared that I would die if I did not follow the spirit. So, I went to study with a witch doctor. But what I learned from the witch doctor was contrary to everything I had learned about God. I remembered that the Ten Commandments teach us to honor God only. I could not bring myself to kneel and pray to insects and snakes. Nevertheless, I stayed and learned to “prophesy” people’s future.

I married a good man, but still I had no peace. God kept a glimmer of truth alive in my heart. When at night the spirit tried to choke me, I called out to Jesus. I prayed that if it was God’s will, He would free me from the spirits. God answered my prayer, and the spirit left me. But my husband began suffering the same symptoms I had suffered.

My in-laws gave me no peace, so my husband and I left their home and moved to South Africa. There I met some Adventists who shared their knowledge of God and helped us understand what the Bible says about spirits. Things became clearer for us. I began attending the Adventist church and answered God’s call to “come unto Me.”

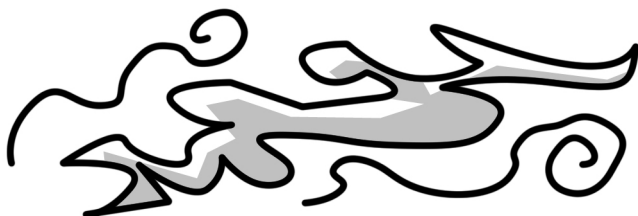
I read *Steps to Christ* to my husband and tried to help him understand God’s will. Often during this time Satan tried to overpower me and draw me back into the life we had left. But I would cry out, “Save me, Lord Jesus.” And Jesus saved me. My husband and I were baptized.

We returned to Lesotho and shared what we had learned with our families and neighbors. It is difficult, because no Adventist believers live in our community. People remember that I once prophesied and had a spirit in me. “How can you be a Christian when you were once possessed by a spirit?” they asked. To make matters more difficult, there are no Adventists in our village, and people think we have joined a cult. Please pray for us, for there is much work to do here in this battlefield. There are many held by Satan who must come to Christ.



MATSEPO LAURA LEBONA shares her faith in her homeland of Lesotho.

The Way of the Wind



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Ecclesiastes 11.*

Memory Text: “As you do not know what is the way of the wind, or how the bones grow in the womb of her who is with child, so you do not know the works of God who makes all things” (*Ecclesiastes 11:5, NKJV*).

The ancient Greeks believed in fate; your destiny was decided beforehand by the gods, and that was it. This ideal was expressed in Homer's *Iliad*, when the great Trojan warrior Hector says to his wife (who had been begging him not to go back to battle, fearing that he would surely die), “No man will hurl me down to Death, against my fate. And fate? No man alive has escaped it, neither brave man nor coward.”—*Iliad*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 212.

That's not, however, the biblical position. We are not objects of cold fate; we have no predetermined destiny, except one: eternal life with Jesus Christ (*Eph. 1:1-11*). God's plan was for all of us to find salvation in Jesus: That's why Jesus' death was for the whole world, with no one left out.

That we all aren't saved shows that our fate isn't sealed beforehand. Our future is open. We have choices to make, choices that will determine our destiny. This week we look at more of Solomon's wisdom regarding the choices left us as free beings who are sometimes swept up in events beyond our control. Maybe the events aren't in our hands, but our responses often are.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 24.*

Casting Your Bread

Ecclesiastes 11:1 has been speculated upon for many long centuries now. What does the phrase “Cast your bread upon the waters” mean? Various interpretations have been offered; the traditional one says that this is dealing with the question of charity. “He that hath a bountiful eye shall be blessed; for he giveth of his bread to the poor” (*Prov. 22:9*). “Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?” (*Isa. 58:7*). This makes a great deal of sense, especially considering the importance the Old Testament puts on helping the poor and the needy; it would seem strange, then, that a whole book dealing with practical wisdom would not say something about such an important teaching.

Read Deuteronomy 15:7-11. What’s the message in those texts and how do they seem to be saying, in another way, the message of Ecclesiastes 11:1?

A lot of speculation has gone into Ecclesiastes 11:2, as well. What are the meanings of the two numbers there? If we keep it in the immediate context of the verse before it, and assume that it is talking about charity, the emphasis seems to be on being generous in what we give. There is so much need and want out there; we all should do our share, to whatever degree we can, for who knows what evil shall come. That is, who knows what kind of trouble and suffering will arise; therefore, we should be ready to help when the opportunity arises.

Whatever the exact meaning of these phrases, the principle certainly is a Christian principle: that of giving of ourselves in order to help others who might be suffering from the evil that is upon the earth. According to the Bible, we are admonished to help others, especially those who are in need.

What’s your attitude toward those who are needier than you? How willing are you to share whatever you have, no matter how meager, with those less fortunate?

Clouds, Rain—and Fate

There are about as many different interpretations of Ecclesiastes 11:3, 4 as there are interpreters. If we read it just for what it says, Solomon is talking about the forces of nature: If a cloud gets full of rain, it pours out on the earth; if a tree falls, then where it falls is where it rests. What's the point?

What is found in verse 4 that could help us better understand what is going on in verse 3?

Verse 3 is talking about rain; sometimes, too, in a rainstorm there is wind, and sometimes that wind knocks over trees. All these are forces much greater and stronger than human beings are. If we today are often at the mercy of nature, how much more so back then? Solomon's point, then, could be about how we deal with events and things that, like nature, are beyond our control. How do we respond? Do we just stand there and watch, allowing ourselves to be dominated by them; or do we, trusting in God and in His love for us, seek to be faithful to our tasks and obligations despite things that we cannot control?

What are some things that we as human beings all face that are, indeed, totally beyond our control?

Though there are forces greater than us, nothing in this world is greater than God, who upholds all things by His power (*Heb. 1:3*). None of the forces you mentioned in your answer above were beyond the power of God. Thus, regardless of events that overtake us, it's so important to remember that over and beyond them all is God, our Creator, who loves and who cares about us. We are not left to blind chance or to cold fate. Storms may come, the wind may blow, and there seems to be little, if anything, we can do about these events. What we can do, however, is remain faithful to God amid whatever happens.

Read Matthew 6:25-34. What is Jesus saying here that fits in with the lesson for today? More important, what's He saying here that could give you hope to trust in God's love and care for you, regardless of your situation?

The Way of the Wind

“As you do not know what is the way of the wind, or how the bones grow in the womb of her who is with child, so you do not know the works of God who makes all things” (*Eccles. 11:5, NKJV*).

Considering the interpretation we gave to Ecclesiastes 11:3, 4, this next verse fits right in. As human beings, we just don’t know so many things. Everything—from the way of the wind (that word for “wind” is also the same word for “Spirit,” which could add a whole new dimension to the meaning of the text) to some basic aspects of the physical world, including our own development in the womb—is filled with awe and mystery. Even today, with all we know about the growth of a fetus, there is still so much that is beyond our knowledge.

Here, then, is a point worth remembering: If so much about God’s work in the physical world is far beyond our understanding, how much more so His work of salvation and redemption? We can see in nature the depths of God’s creative power and genius; the simplest things are filled with mysteries that science cannot explain. Any wonder, then, that there would be other aspects of God’s work of salvation that are far beyond our understanding, as well? (*See Rom. 11:33-36.*)

Read Isaiah 55:6-13. What is the message there? What hope is found in there for us? How does it relate to what we’ve read in Ecclesiastes 11:5?

And though God’s ways are not our ways, and His thoughts are not our thoughts, we can know at least that His thoughts to us are “thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end” (*Jer. 29:11*). And that expected end is eternal life in a new heaven and a new earth, a life without suffering, Satan, loss, and death. That’s the expected end, the promised end, the end that Jesus had in mind for each of us when He died on the cross.

Make a list of the ways in which you have seen that God’s thoughts toward you are, indeed, thoughts of peace and not of evil. Take time to praise and thank Him for what He has done for you.

Light and Darkness

All through the Bible we see the image of light and darkness contrasted with each other, the idea of light being good and darkness being bad.

Look up the following texts. What do we learn from them about the contrast between light and darkness? *Isa. 5:20, Luke 11:34, Acts 26:18, Rom. 13:12, Eph. 5:8, 1 Thess. 5:5, 1 Pet. 2:9, 1 John 1:5.*

Darkness isn't something in and of itself as much as it is the absence of something, in this case light. If you stood in a totally dark room and were asked "What do you see?" you would reply "Nothing," or you would say "I see total darkness." They are the same thing.

With these thoughts in mind, read Ecclesiastes 11:7, 8. What's the message Solomon is giving here?

God is the Giver of light, of truth, of goodness, of joy, and hope. Darkness is the absence of these things, and in darkness come lies, evil, suffering, and despair. Solomon is saying that whatever ways God has blessed your life, there will always be days of darkness, days of pain, of suffering and despair. No one escapes them. Perhaps his message simply is, Don't get complacent. Things might be going well today, but who knows what tomorrow will bring? Not that we should worry but only that we should not take any of the blessings we get from God for granted. We should be praising God and thanking God from a grateful heart for all the good things we have, for who knows what evil will arise?

In your own experience, what has made the difference between your days of light and days of darkness? What caused the days of darkness? What practical things can you do in order to help yourself live better in the light that comes from God?

Days of Thy Youth

Read Ecclesiastes 11:9, 10. What is Solomon saying here? What kind of tension, or contrast, do you see in these verses?

Is God taking away with one hand what He offers to us with another? Have a good time, but just remember that God's going to judge you for it in the end. Is that what this text is saying? An ancient Rabbi, commenting on this verse, said it's like a child being told "You might as well sin now, because you are going to be punished for everything anyhow."

Of course, as the rabbi knew, that's not the point of the text. The point, instead, seems to be that life is a gift from God, and because it is from God, it is something good. We were created to enjoy our lives, to enjoy our bodies, to enjoy the things that God made. In youth especially, when we have energy, power, ambition, and hope, we are to enjoy ourselves.

But *enjoyment* is a relative word. We can "enjoy" ourselves through "the pleasures of sin for a season" (*Heb. 11:25*), or we can enjoy ourselves in the Lord; that is, we can enjoy the gifts that God has given us in the way that He intends for us to enjoy them. So often young people, so full of energy and passion, easily can be led astray to use these gifts from God in a way that will bring ruin on them now (*see Proverbs 7*), not to mention that one day they will have to answer to God in judgment for their actions.

How does Ecclesiastes 11:10 help us keep what he's saying in verse 9 in perspective?

Again, if we keep in mind all of Scripture, what Solomon is saying is, enjoy the gifts that God has given you, but enjoy them as blessings, not as sin and evil, and just remember to keep it all in perspective, because one day your childhood and youth, even your life itself, will be over, and then you will have to answer for all that you have done.

Further Study: Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, p. 272; vol. 6, pp. 271, 272; *Welfare Ministry*, pp. 178–187.

“Remember that you will never reach a higher standard than you yourself set. Then set your mark high, and step by step, even though it be by painful effort, by self-denial and sacrifice, ascend the whole length of the ladder of progress. Let nothing hinder you. Fate has not woven its meshes about any human being so firmly that he need remain helpless and in uncertainty. Opposing circumstances should create a firm determination to overcome them. The breaking down of one barrier will give greater ability and courage to go forward. Press with determination in the right direction, and circumstances will be your helpers, not your hindrances.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, pp. 331, 332.

“Some men have no firmness of character. They are like a ball of putty and can be pressed into any conceivable shape. They are of no definite form and consistency, and are of no practical use in the world. This weakness, indecision, and inefficiency must be overcome. There is an indomitableness about true Christian character which cannot be molded or subdued by adverse circumstances. Men must have moral backbone, an integrity which cannot be flattered, bribed, or terrified.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 297.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ What is your church doing to help those who are in dire need? What more can you do to help?
- ❷ As a class, talk about some events in your own community, or even nation, that are out of your control, and yet that affect all of you. How have you each responded to these events? How has the church responded? What can you do to help others learn to cope better with things that they can’t control?
- ❸ George Bernard Shaw once quipped, “Youth is wasted on the young.” What can you do as a class to help your young people, so full of energy, vigor, and passion, to avoid making decisions that will negatively impact them for the rest of their lives? What practical things can you do to help steer them in the right direction?

The Promise-Keeping God

by Jeane Zachary

Nina and her husband operate a small business in India. One day some people came by giving away pamphlets. Nina requested one and glanced at it. She realized that the pamphlet was a religious tract.

“I have many questions about Jesus,” Nina told the woman who gave her the tract. The woman invited Nina to ask her questions, then she answered them. “I would like to learn more about Jesus,” Nina said. “I want to know why He is called God.”

The visitor invited Nina to attend an evening Bible study the next night. Nina went to the meeting and was relieved when her husband did not ask her where she had gone. But the next Bible study ran longer, and Nina was late getting home. Her husband met her at the door, angry that she had not told him where she was going. She continued attending the Bible studies, though her husband warned her never to take their children to Christian meetings.

The seventh Bible study dealt with returning tithe to the Lord. Nina listened carefully. She and her husband were having some financial problems, and two friends had failed to return money they had borrowed several years before.

The concept of testing the Lord reminded Nina of the overdue loans. That night she prayed, “Lord, You know that my family urgently needs money. If our friends return the money that they borrowed, I will return the tithe to You.” Nina prayed this prayer on Thursday evening. On Friday she received five thousand rupees (about US\$115); one loan was paid in full. The next day Nina placed five hundred rupees in the offering plate. During the next week the other loan was paid in full, and the following Sabbath she placed two hundred rupees in the offering.

“Jesus Christ is a good God,” Nina says. “He keeps His promises. As long as I live, I will follow Jesus and return a faithful tithe to the Lord.” Nina has been baptized and continues to faithfully return a tithe of her business income. Since she first began returning tithe, she reports that her business has doubled.

Nina’s husband is beginning to understand what Nina has discovered. He has told her, “There is power in your God.” Nina prays that her husband will see more of the power of Jesus and give his heart to the Lord as she has.

Our tithes support church workers around the world; our Mission offerings support the many ministries that lead people such as Nina to the feet of Jesus.

JEANE ZACHARY *lives and writes in Southern California.*

The Conclusion of the Matter



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Ecclesiastes 12.*

Memory Text: “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man” (*Ecclesiastes 12:13*).

A Russian writer, Andrei Bitov, explains a seminal moment in his life: “In my twenty-seventh year, while riding the metro in Leningrad, I was overcome with a despair so great that life seemed to stop at once, preempting the future entirely, let alone any meaning. Suddenly, all by itself, a phrase appeared: Without God life makes no sense. Repeating it in astonishment, I rode the phrase up like a moving staircase, got out of the metro and into God’s light and carried on living.”—Quoted in Ravi Zacharias, *Can Man Live Without God?* (Nashville, Tenn.: Word Publishing, 1994), p. 59.

In its own way, *Ecclesiastes* could have been summed up with the phrase “Without God life makes no sense.” But that can be read two ways, not just that if no God exists life makes no sense but that if we live without God, without acknowledging Him or His commands, life makes no sense. And that’s because, among other reasons, death is always there, waiting to swallow us up into oblivion. Without the answer to death, there’s no answer to life, and that answer is found only in Jesus, who beat death and with that victory offers us what we can’t get anywhere else. “‘Without Me,’” Jesus said, “‘you can do nothing’” (*John 15:5, NKJV*), and that includes finding any good reason for our existence.

This week we take our final look at *Ecclesiastes*, one of Scripture’s more creative ways of getting that important point across to us, who can so easily forget it.

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 31.*

Remember Your Creator

Solomon here picks up somewhat where he left off in the previous section. He's still giving advice to young people, still warning them about the "evil days." Though last week we looked at them as being days of any kind of trouble, the emphasis here seems to be on old age. Evil days seem to be (at least in his thinking here) old age.

What is Solomon saying here in 12:1 that reflects what he said in the last few verses of Ecclesiastes 11? What's his basic message?

Solomon's use of the word for "Creator" here comes from the same Hebrew word used in Genesis 1:1 for "created." The Hebrew verb *bara* is almost always found in the context of divine activity (*Isa. 65:17, Amos 4:13, Mal. 2:10*); that is, *bara* is never used to describe humanity's activities. Solomon, therefore, is expressing the biblical concept that ties in God as our Creator. He is our God because He is our Creator.

Also interesting is that the Hebrew word for "Creator" is in the plural, just as the word for God in Genesis 1:1 appears in the plural. Though all sorts of explanations have existed through the centuries for this plural form, some Christians have seen it as evidence of the plural nature of the Godhead (*Gen. 1:26, 3:22, 11:7*).

Solomon, having squandered the best years of his life, his youth, is now seeking to warn others from following in his footsteps. Though it's important for everyone, at any age, to accept the Lord, the earlier the better, for any number of reasons. That's clearly his message now: Don't turn away from God in your youth.

Why would it be better for someone while young to accept the Lord as opposed to waiting until later? What are the advantages of doing it while being young? Take your list to class on Sabbath and compare it with what others say. What can you learn from each other? See also Deut. 10:13; Luke 13:4, 5; Phil. 3:13, 14.

When the Grinders Cease

Ecclesiastes 12:2-7 is a beautiful and poetic description of the aging process. Many commentators agree that the phrase “before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark, and the clouds return after the rain” (*vs. 2, NIV*) deals with the loss of mental faculties in old age. The “keepers of the house” could be the arms, which were once strong and healthy but now tremble and shake.

Read through Ecclesiastes 12:1-7. Work through the images the best you can. But as you read, also ask yourself this question: Why is Solomon here talking about old age? What’s the message for us?

Solomon, especially as he himself reaches old age, is pointing us to our mortality. This is a theme he touched on over and over in the book. And no wonder. Regardless of who we are, how we live, or even how long we live, sooner or later we all face death. It’s an unavoidable reality of life.

Some Christian youth wear a T-shirt with the saying “It’s not that life is so short but that death is so long! John 3:16.” Solomon, now in his old age, with death before him, is seeking to remind us all, especially the young, that our day will come, as well. Of course, if you are fortunate, you will live long, only to face the “evil days” of old age, and then you will die. The other option is that you will simply die young.

In short, Ecclesiastes, among other things, reminds us again of our mortality, reminds us of the shortness of life, that it is *hebel*, a vapor or a breath. Thus, we all need to keep the big picture in mind, the picture of eternity, the picture of what God has offered us through Jesus Christ—eternal life.

Read through Revelation 21 and 22, a description of the future world that God has made available to all of us through Jesus’ death. What elements stand out the most in your mind? What touches you the most? Try to imagine what it will be like. And remember that this will be for eternity. This is the hope God offers us through Christ. All this considered, what else matters? How seriously are you taking the promises offered you through Jesus?

The Making of Many Books

In Ecclesiastes 12:9-12 Solomon starts talking about wisdom, knowledge, and his attempts to teach it to others. Whether he was referring to all his writings or just that in this book, the text doesn't say. His point, though, was that he truly attempted not only to learn truth but to teach it to others.

Look at verse 10 in particular. He wanted words that were “pleasing” (*RSV*). Does that mean he simply wanted to tickle people's ears with what they wanted to hear? That hardly makes sense, considering the kind of words that he wrote, especially in Ecclesiastes. The key, perhaps, is in the rest of the verse. He sought pleasing words but also “words of truth” written “uprightly” (*RSV*). The words were not so pleasing that they ceased to be true. Ultimately, words of truth are pleasing, in the sense that truth itself—Jesus (*John 14:6*), who died for our sins—is pleasing, at least to those who know and accept Him.

Read verse 11. What point is he making there?

The “goad” mentioned here was probably a pointed stick used to prod cattle. Along with the other image of “nails,” his point seems to be that the words of the wise should have two effects: prodding people to action and staying in the memory. According to many commentators, the “one shepherd” here is a reference to God Himself (*Ps. 23:1, Jer. 31:10, John 10:11-14*); that is, in the end, the words of the wise come from God. In short, Solomon here is talking about divine inspiration. He, like other wise men and the prophets, “spoke as they were moved by the Holy Ghost” (*2 Pet. 1:21*).

What's the warning in verse 12?

How interesting that right after talking about divine inspiration Solomon gives this warning about books, which is really a warning about the wrong kind of learning. How many people study themselves right into eternal ruin? Today, especially, when there is so much information out there, how crucial that we be careful about the kind of learning we get.

What kind of “knowledge” is out there that, if not tested and judged by Scripture with the teaching of the “One shepherd,” could lead you astray? Why must you be careful in the kind of knowledge you acquire?

Faith, Law, and Judgment

After going on for so long about all these matters of life, death, and God, Solomon ends this book with two verses, Ecclesiastes 12:13, 14. In your own words, summarize the essence of his conclusion.

Solomon's final message in Ecclesiastes, the sum of all that he wrote before, sounds somewhat like what's at the heart of the three angels' messages of Revelation 14.

Read Revelation 14:6-12. What elements can you find in there that are similar to Solomon's conclusion to Ecclesiastes?

Solomon ends by telling us to keep the commandments of God; that's part of the third angel's message (*Rev. 14:12*). Solomon talks about judgment; the first angel's message also talks about judgment (*vs. 7*). Finally, Solomon's call to "Fear God" is a Bible way of expressing what it means to have faith in God, to worship and obey Him, all part of the three angels' messages (*vss. 7-12*). The fear of God and the worship of God are linked. "O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness: fear before him, all the earth" (*Ps. 96:9*). "But as for me, I will come into thy house in the multitude of thy mercy: and in thy fear will I worship toward thy holy temple" (*Ps. 5:7*). No wonder the first angel's message, which tells us to worship God, tells us (as did Solomon) to "fear God," as well.

Thus the three basic elements in Solomon's conclusion are crucial elements in what we understand as present truth. Does this mean, then, that Solomon was thinking specifically of our time when inspired to write this? Of course not. Instead, this brings home a crucial point: From the beginning, God's message of faith in His atonement for us, reflected in a life of obedience to His commandments, all against the backdrop of a judgment, is nothing new. As Adventists we didn't invent it. We've just been given the call to preach it to the world.

If you were to explain to someone what it means to fear God and keep His commandments, what would you say?

The Conclusion of the Matter

We've come to the end, the conclusion of the conclusion of our study in Ecclesiastes. What is the meaning of this strange book, which is so different from almost every other book of the Bible? What's the message God has for us here? What are we to make of this?

Go back over the book of Ecclesiastes. Mull over it, pray over it, and then write out what you would deem the key point of this book. What was God's message to you from Ecclesiastes? What have you taken away that helps you better in your walk with the Lord? Be prepared to read your answer in class on Sabbath.

It will be interesting to see the various responses. One point, though, does seem clear: God, with this book, warns us against getting too caught up in the ways of the world. Sure, we have been given bodies, we have been given physical pleasures; these are all gifts from God, and they all have their role. But they are not the end; in and of themselves, they are all *hebel*. As you get older, your ability to enjoy them diminishes, and the moment you die they are gone.

In other words, whatever else Ecclesiastes is saying to us, it is at least saying, Think about who you are, why you are here, how you got here, and, most important, where you are going when this short life, this *hebel* of existence, is gone. God has given us gifts, but the gifts don't last; nothing in this life does.

Ecclesiastes is 12 chapters saying to us what Jesus said in one verse: "For 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?" (*Matt. 16:26*). Sadly, what people give for their own soul is, always, *hebel*. How tragic, especially when our souls have already been bought, bought through the precious blood of Jesus, whose death offers all of us a one-way ticket out of all the "madness and folly" that we suffer here "under the sun."

Further Study: Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 2, p. 113; book 3, p. 405; *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 455.

“Human strength is weakness, human wisdom is folly. Our success does not depend on our talents or learning, but on our living connection with God. The truth is shorn of its power when preached by men who are seeking to display their own learning and ability. Such men display also that they know very little of experimental religion, that they are unsanctified in heart and life and are filled with vain conceit. They do not learn of Jesus. They cannot present to others a Savior with whom they themselves are not acquainted. Their own hearts are not softened and subdued by a vivid sense of the great sacrifice which Christ has made to save perishing man.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, pp. 158, 159.

“You need not go to the ends of the earth for wisdom, for God is near. It is not the capabilities you now possess or ever will have that will give you success. It is that which the Lord can do for you. We need to have far less confidence in what man can do and far more confidence in what God can do for every believing soul. He longs to have you reach after Him by faith. He longs to have you expect great things from Him. He longs to give you understanding in temporal as well as in spiritual matters. He can sharpen the intellect. He can give tact and skill. Put your talents into the work, ask God for wisdom, and it will be given you.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 146.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 As a class, go over your answers in Thursday’s lesson and discuss your conclusions.
- 2 Have people of different ages get up and talk about the aging process. What do we learn about life, about God, about faith, as we get older? What lessons can the older ones teach the young?
- 3 What are the things in your society that make it so easy to get caught up in the world? As a class, how can you help each other avoid these pitfalls?
- 4 As a church, how well do we help our members discern between what’s eternal and what’s *hebel*? That is, might we even subtly be promoting things—i.e., wealth, power, prestige, knowledge—in ways that can blur the line between what’s gold and what’s dross? Discuss.

Search for Father

by IGOR KORAL

I grew up in a non-Christian family in Ukraine. My father was in prison during most of my childhood. When other children talked about their fathers, I felt left out, lonely. I did not remember my father. My mom did her best to be mother and father to me, but the incompleteness of our family was a sharp pain in my heart.

This yearning for a father pushed me to search for God. When I visited my grandmother, she took me to church and taught me to pray. She told me stories about God, my heavenly Father. There was that word again, *father*. Could God be my Father? The thought seemed so dear yet so distant.

I prayed with Grandmother when I was little, and as I grew I began talking to God about everything. Slowly, God became my Father. My faith in God—my Father—helped me stand firm when my teenage friends urged me to drink and smoke. I could not dishonor my heavenly Father.

I often read a book of prayers and Bible readings that Grandmother had given me. There I found references to the Sabbath. I did not understand what Sabbath meant, but I determined to keep the Sabbath the best I knew how. It brought me such peace and happiness during this time in my life.

Then when I was 15, my father was released from prison. He wanted to spend time with me, get to know me. I felt honored. He introduced me to his friends—criminals and ex convicts with fancy tattoos and big talk about crimes and prison. I was drawn to these men, and before long I wanted to be like them. This pleased my father, for he wanted me to follow his footsteps. But before I could sink too deeply into trouble, my father died in a swimming accident.

A few months later I saw a poster advertising Christian meetings. I had lost my connection with God, and I wanted to reconnect. But something held me back. My mind was in a turmoil. I attended the last few meetings. The speaker talked about how much God loves us and wants us to be His children. Then he invited us to follow Christ and be baptized. I knew I had to obey. I stood and surrendered my life to Jesus once more.

Today I cannot imagine living without God. I want to be like Him, just as a little boy wants to be like his earthly father. I want my Father to be proud of me.

Your Mission offerings help pay for outreach such as the meetings that brought me back to God. Thank you.

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This quarter's study, *Thy Word Is a Lamp Unto My Feet: The Bible for Today*, written by the Jonathan Oey Kuntaraf and Kathleen Kiem Hoa Oey Kuntaraf, shows us the great lengths God has taken to reveal, not only Himself to us but also His ultimate standard of truth for this fallen world. Perhaps the greatest evidence for the Bible is the influence and impact for good it has had, and continues to have, on the lives of those who apply its teachings to their daily lives. For centuries, the Bible has provided answers to the greatest needs of people all over the world. With such claims made for the Bible, is there any wonder why its authenticity and reliability have been challenged? This quarter attempts to answer some of the Bible's critics and show just how relevant it is for us today.

Lesson 1—The Voice from Heaven

The Week at a Glance:

SUNDAY: God's Search for Humanity (*Gen. 3:8, Isa. 59:2, Matt. 23:37*)

MONDAY: God and the Prophets (*2 Sam. 12:1-7*)

TUESDAY: The Revelation Through Jesus Christ (*Matt. 11:27*)

WEDNESDAY: God Speaks Today (*2 Tim. 1:5*)

THURSDAY: God Speaks Through the Bible (*2 Pet. 1:20, 21*)

Memory Text—*Hebrews 1:1, 2*

Sabbath Gem: Our true worth can be understood only through the life and death of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. If our value wasn't infinite in the sight of God, such an infinite price would not have been paid for our redemption. God still speaks to us today, but we need to make sure we are listening.

Lesson 2—"The Final Word"

The Week at a Glance:

SUNDAY: "The Word of the Lord" (*2 Sam. 23:2; Ezek. 2:2; 11:5, 24; Mic. 3:8*)

MONDAY: God-breathed (*2 Tim. 3:16*)

TUESDAY: Christ's View of the Scriptures (*Matt. 4:4-10*)

WEDNESDAY: Apostles and the Scriptures (*James 2*)

THURSDAY: Unity Amid Diversity (*2 Pet. 3:16*)

Memory Text—*2 Timothy 3:16, 17*

Sabbath Gem: As Christians, we believe that God is the final authority and that He expresses His will through His Word, the Bible. Thus considering who its author is, the Bible comes with God's divine authority built into its very pages.

Lessons for the Visually Impaired The regular *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* is available free each month in braille and on audiocassette to sight-impaired and physically handicapped persons who cannot read normal ink print. This includes individuals who, because of arthritis, multiple sclerosis, paralysis, accident, old age, and so forth, cannot hold or focus on normal ink-print publications. Contact Christian Record Services, Box 6097, Lincoln, NE 68506-0097.