Ecclesiastes

Reformed Expository Commentary

Douglas Sean O'Donnell

"With frequent references to modern and classical literature, O'Donnell illustrates the ever-present problems and dilemmas of life that Ecclesiastes deals with. But his fresh and relevant style never strays from the biblical text that he so artfully expounds. And he never leaves the various parts of Ecclesiastes alone until he has explored how they testify to the Christ in whom all the riches of wisdom and knowledge are found."

—**Graeme Goldsworthy**, Former Lecturer in Old Testament and Biblical Theology, Moore Theological College, Sydney, Australia

"Douglas O'Donnell's new commentary is a delight to read. Although originally preached (in part) as sermons, this commentary is much more than a series of seventeen well-crafted sermons on the book of Ecclesiastes. These footnoted sermons are based on solid research and spiced with wonderful insights, good humor, striking metaphors, clarifying illustrations and quotations, smooth transitions to Jesus Christ in the New Testament, and relevant applications. This commentary will serve preachers well for one or more series of sermons on Ecclesiastes. It will provide them with many sermon ideas, solid exegesis and applications, illustrations, and quotations from numerous books, songs, and movies. Above all, this commentary, with its God-centered, redemptive-historical approach, clearly shows how one can preach Christ from Ecclesiastes."

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"This is a fine commentary because it represents the confluence of, first, a deft exegetical precision in dealing with the words and symmetries of wisdom literature, therefore providing the reader with an unusually rich, polychrome understanding of God's glory amid the dark realities of earthly existence. Second, the book exhibits a masterly tracing of the exalted, Christ-infused, intercanonical connections that will aid the reader in focusing on Christ Jesus, the only answer to an empty life. Third, the author's engaging style—packed with wide-ranging literary references (from the ancients to Woody Allen)—makes for superb reading as well as study. Certainly its resources will be a boon to all students. And fourth, the commentary's application of the grand theme of how believers ought to live the brief span of their lives 'under the sun' will harrow and elevate the heart of every serious reader. This book is a tonic for the soul. Doug O'Donnell's *Ecclesiastes* is a masterwork that will be read for generations to come. It deserves an honored place in the libraries of those who would preach and teach the Word."

—**R. Kent Hughes**, Senior Pastor Emeritus, College Church in Wheaton

"Ecclesiastes is a book for our time: its relentless examination of the source of meaning and relevance finds echoes in every facet of contemporary life and its restless pursuit of happiness. Douglas Sean O'Donnell's treatment of Ecclesiastes is both fresh and thorough. Resolutely committed to exposition, O'Donnell makes these sermons come to life and speak with clarity and conviction. Reading these chapters proves a rich and nourishing experience. A wise pastor and careful exegete takes you to the heart of the gospel in Ecclesiastes again and again. A wonderful achievement."

—**Derek W. H. Thomas**, Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary, Atlanta; Senior Minister, First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, South Carolina; Editorial Director, Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals

"O'Donnell is a gifted preacher and pastor who is passionate about Christ and the gospel. In this engaging exposition, he pastors us by introducing us to "Pastor Solomon" (the author of Ecclesiastes), and though him to Jesus Christ, the greatest pastor of all. He shows how the glorious gospel of Christ shines all the more brightly when set against the depressing backdrop of the book of Ecclesiastes."

—**Barry G. Webb**, Senior Research Fellow Emeritus in Old Testament, Moore College, Sydney, Australia

"Witty, insightful, and exceptionally well researched, Doug O'Donnell's new commentary is one that I enthusiastically recommend. If you're a preacher who is interested in communicating the truth of Ecclesiastes in a fresh way, this is a must-have volume for your library."

—**Scott A. Wenig**, Haddon Robinson Chair of Biblical Preaching, Denver Seminary

Ecclesiastes

Reformed Expository Commentary

A Series

Series Editors

Richard D. Phillips
Philip Graham Ryken

Testament Editors

Iain M. Duguid, Old Testament
Daniel M. Doriani, New Testament

Ecclesiastes

Douglas Sean O'Donnell

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To my three daughters—
Lily Ruth, Evelyn Grace, and Charlotte Elise.
May you always fear the Lord by enjoying his blessings.

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Series Introduction

In every generation there is a fresh need for the faithful exposition of God's Word in the church. At the same time, the church must constantly do the work of theology: reflecting on the teaching of Scripture, confessing its doctrines of the Christian faith, and applying them to contemporary culture. We believe that these two tasks—the expositional and the theological—are interdependent. Our doctrine must derive from the biblical text, and our understanding of any particular passage of Scripture must arise from the doctrine taught in Scripture as a whole.

We further believe that these interdependent tasks of biblical exposition and theological reflection are best undertaken in the church, and most specifically in the pulpits of the church. This is all the more true since the study of Scripture properly results in doxology and praxis—that is, in praise to God and practical application in the lives of believers. In pursuit of these ends, we are pleased to present the Reformed Expository Commentary as a fresh exposition of Scripture for our generation in the church. We hope and pray that pastors, teachers, Bible study leaders, and many others will find this series to be a faithful, inspiring, and useful resource for the study of God's infallible, inerrant Word.

The Reformed Expository Commentary has four fundamental commitments. First, these commentaries aim to be *biblical*, presenting a comprehensive exposition characterized by careful attention to the details of the text. They are not exegetical commentaries—commenting word by word or even verse by verse—but integrated expositions of whole passages of Scripture. Each commentary will thus present a sequential, systematic treatment of an entire book of the Bible, passage by passage. Second, these commentaries are unashamedly *doctrinal*. We are committed to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Each volume will teach, promote, and defend the doctrines of the Reformed faith as they are found in the Bible. Third, these commentaries are *redemptive-historical* in their orientation. We believe in the unity of the Bible and its central message of salvation in Christ. We are thus committed to a Christ-centered view of the Old Testament, in which its characters, events, regulations, and institutions are properly understood as pointing us to Christ and his gospel, as well as giving us examples to follow in living by faith. Fourth, these commentaries are *practical*, applying the text of Scripture to contemporary challenges of life—both public and private—with appropriate illustrations.

The contributors to the Reformed Expository Commentary are all pastor-scholars. As pastor, each author will first present his expositions in the pulpit ministry of his church. This means that these commentaries are rooted in the teaching of Scripture to real people in the church. While aiming to be scholarly, these expositions are not academic. Our intent is to be faithful, clear, and helpful to Christians who possess various levels of biblical and theological training—as should be true in any effective pulpit ministry. Inevitably this means that some issues of academic interest will not be covered. Nevertheless, we aim to achieve a responsible level of scholarship, seeking to promote and model this for pastors and other teachers in the church. Significant exegetical and theological difficulties, along with such historical and cultural background as is relevant to the text, will be treated with care.

We strive for a high standard of enduring excellence. This begins with the selection of the authors, all of whom have proved to be outstanding communicators of God's Word. But this pursuit of excellence is also reflected in a disciplined editorial process. Each volume is edited by both a series editor and a testament editor. The testament editors, Iain Duguid for the Old Testament and Daniel Doriani for the New Testament, are accomplished pastors and respected scholars who have taught at the seminary level. Their job is to ensure that each volume is sufficiently conversant with up-to-date scholarship and is faithful and accurate in its exposition of the text. As series editors, we oversee each volume to ensure its overall quality—including excellence of writing, soundness of teaching, and usefulness in application. Working together as an editorial team, along with the publisher, we are devoted to ensuring that these are the best commentaries that our gifted authors can provide, so that the church will be served with trustworthy and exemplary expositions of God's Word.

It is our goal and prayer that the Reformed Expository Commentary will serve the church by renewing confidence in the clarity and power of Scripture and by upholding the great doctrinal heritage of the Reformed faith. We hope that pastors who read these commentaries will be encouraged in their own expository preaching ministry, which we believe to be the best and most biblical pattern for teaching God's Word in the church. We hope that lay teachers will find these commentaries among the most useful resources they rely on for understanding and presenting the text of the Bible. And we hope that the devotional quality of these studies of Scripture will instruct and inspire each Christian who reads them in joyful, obedient discipleship to Jesus Christ.

May the Lord bless all who read the Reformed Expository Commentary. We commit these volumes to the Lord Jesus Christ, praying that the Holy Spirit will use them for the instruction and edification of the church, with thanksgiving to God the Father for his unceasing faithfulness in building his church through the ministry of his Word.

Richard D. Phillips
Philip Graham Ryken
Series Editors

Preface

My original preface began: "My comments are slender and insignificant; but those who have nothing better or who, like me, were once led astray by false glosses can find here an opportunity in their wisdom to become better themselves and to find something better." I then realized that Martin Luther had said precisely the same thing 480 years ago.[1] Alas! There is nothing new under the sun.

On a more serious note, I am thankful to the many excellent commentators who have gone before me and upon whose shoulders I stand. In some sense, the footnotes will show you whose work I found most stable and uplifting; in another sense, if I put a footnote to every thought I have gleaned from another, there would be more footnotes than pages—or, to borrow a Solomonic metaphor, more silver than stone.

The book of Ecclesiastes gets you to think. Have you thought much about death, work, wisdom, time, joy, and fearing God? If not, you will.

These sermons were originally (and in part) preached at New Covenant Church in Naperville, Illinois. I am grateful to the elders for their hearty approval of yet another series on an Old Testament wisdom book and the congregation for their persistent eagerness to hear Christ preached from *all* the Scriptures. I am also grateful for my longtime colleague in the ministry: Pastor Andrew Fulton. Without his steady support, constant encouragement, and prayerful protection, I wouldn't be freed to study, pray, and preach. I am also grateful for my family. This book is dedicated to my three girls—Lily, Evelyn, and Charlotte. After dedicating books to my wife (Emily) and sons (Sean and Simeon), I have finally succumbed to my daughters' constant plea,

1. Martin Luther, "Notes on Ecclesiastes," in *Luther's Works*, trans. and ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, 56 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1972), 15:5.

"Daddy, when are you going to dedicate a book to us?" (It was too hard to resist.) Yet this book, my three little ladies, is not merely dedicated to you out of feminine pressure or filial fairness. My sincere hope and prayer is that the sober and celebratory truths of Ecclesiastes would make you wise unto salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

I also hope this new commentary will be an encouragement to other young preachers to take up, read, study, *and preach* the tough texts of Scripture for the good of the church and the glory of God. Or, as Luther put it:

> I hope that someone endowed with a more abundant spirit and more eminent gifts will come forward to expound and adorn this book as it deserves, to the praise of God and of His creatures. To Him be glory forever through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.[2]

2. Ibid., 15:6.

Ecclesiastes

Enjoyment East of Eden

1

The *End* of Ecclesiastes: An Introduction

Ecclesiastes 1:1–2

The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.
Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities!
All is vanity. (Eccl. 1:1–2)

How do we read the book of Ecclesiastes?

The first day of my Introduction to Philosophy class at Wheaton College, my professor, Dr. Mark Talbot, nonchalantly declared, "None of you know how to read." The students, all of whom had scored well on exams in order to get into that college, had various expressions—from "how arrogant" to "I'm dropping this class"—written across their unimpressed faces. Yet most of us, by the end of the term, after we had read all the words, sentences, and paragraphs from classic books such as Plato's *Republic*, Hume's *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, and Augustine's *Confessions*, confessed our inability to *really* read.

Ecclesiastes is a tough read.[1] You know it's a tough read when books that are supposed to help you read it (commentaries) contain sentences such

1. It is certainly true of Ecclesiastes, as Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) 1.8 has it, that "all things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all."

as: "This book is one of the more difficult books in all of Scripture, one which no one has ever completely mastered,"[2] and "Two thousand years of interpretation . . . have utterly failed to solve the enigma,"[3] and (my favorite) "Ecclesiastes is a lot like an octopus: just when you think you have all the tentacles under control—that is, you have understood the book—there is one waving about in the air!"[4] And so while I could start this commentary on Ecclesiastes by saying something bold such as "None of you knows how to read it," instead I will start more modestly. I will safely assume that we all need some help, and thus begin at the beginning of wisdom: in awe of God and in need of his divine assistance.

As I have asked for God's wisdom and with a prayerful and long-suffering attitude studied the book, and as I now seek to guide you in our understanding and application of it, I believe the best way to read Ecclesiastes is as (1) God's wisdom literature (2) with a unified message (3) that makes better sense in light of the crucified, risen, and returning Christ.

God's Wisdom Literature

First, we must read Ecclesiastes as *God's wisdom literature*. Note that the first word in that short summary is *God's*. As Christians, we come to this book as believers who are convinced that Ecclesiastes, as peculiar and puzzling as it is at times, is rightly part of the canon of Scripture because it has been uniquely inspired by God.[5] While it shares similarities with other wisdom literature of the world, including Jewish writings (e.g., Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon), it is unique among the wisdom books of the world in that it has Yahweh's breath in and upon and around it. And because of this, it is living and active and can cut us to the core of who we are.

Second, it is wisdom literature. This is its genre. It is not an epistle (like Galatians), a lawbook (like Leviticus), or an apocalyptic revelation (like

2. Martin Luther, "Notes on Ecclesiastes," in *Luther's Works*, trans. and ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, 56 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1972), 15:7.

3. R. N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, Old Testament Guides (Sheffield, UK: JSOT Press, 1989), 12.

4. Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 13, summarized in Craig G. Bartholomew and Ryan P. O'Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature: A Theological Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 188. Gregory of Nyssa's analogy of "wrestling in the gymnasium" is good, too! *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on Ecclesiastes*, ed. S. G. Hall (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1993), 33.

5. See WCF 1.2 on the canon and 1.8 on inspiration.

Revelation). And as a book of wisdom, it shares characteristics found in Proverbs, Job, and the Song of Songs. There is a plethora of poetry. There are piles of parallelisms (synonymous, antithetic, synthetic, and inverted), as well as many metaphors, similes, hyperboles, alliterations, assonances, and other wonderful wordplays. There might even be onomatopoeia. There are proverbs. There are short narratives with pointed, parable-like endings. There are practical admonitions. There are rhythmic-quality refrains. There are rhetorical questions. There are shared key terms, such as *wisdom*, *folly*, and *my son*. There are shared concepts, such as *the fear of God*. And as is true of much other biblical wisdom literature, it was written by or about or by *and* about Solomon, the Old Testament's ultimate wisdom sage (1 Kings 4:29–34).[6]

In the Christian canon, the order of the wisdom books is Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs. Proverbs begins: "The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel" (Prov. 1:1). Ecclesiastes is introduced with: "The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem" (Eccl. 1:1) = Solomon? The Song starts out: "The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's" (Song 1:1). Regarding Ecclesiastes, because Solomon wrote wisdom literature and was literally a "son of David" as well as a "king in Jerusalem" (Eccl. 1:1; see also 1:12), commentators before the nineteenth century thought Solomon was the author. Yet for various reasons (many legitimate ones),[7] most scholars today shy away from Solomonic authorship.[8] They claim that Ecclesiastes might have been written about Solomon (a fictional autobiography)[9] or in the tradition of Solomon, but probably not by Solomon.

Whatever the truth (who can know for certain and who doesn't eventually get a headache arguing about authorship?), I will call "the Preacher" (as the ESV translates the Hebrew word *Qoheleth*) *Solomon*. I will call him

6. Cf. 1 Kings 3:12; 5:12; 1 Chron. 29:25; 2 Chron. 1:12.

7. For a helpful, short summary of the grounds for non-Solomonic authorship, see Michael V. Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, JPS Bible Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), x.

8. What Brevard Childs wrote over three decades ago still well summarizes the situation today: "There is an almost universal consensus, shared by extremely conservative scholars, that Solomon was not the author." *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 582. But a growing number of conservative scholars now think Solomonic authorship probable (e.g., Walter Kaiser, Duane Garrett, Daniel Fredericks, James Bollhagen, and possibly Richard Schultz).

9. It might be that Ecclesiastes is a "royal autobiography," that is, that "the person who calls himself Qoheleth pretends to be Solomon in order to argue that if Solomon cannot find satisfaction and meaning in life in these areas, no one can." Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 7.

Solomon because I'm not completely convinced by the consensus of modern scholarship,[10] and also because I'm sentimental when it comes to the opinions of the ancient church. Plus, *Solomon* is simpler to say than *Qoheleth*.

In fact, simple, down-to-earth preacher that I am, I will call him not only *Solomon* but also *Pastor Solomon*. I add the title *Pastor* because of the book's pastoral tone, motive, and message and also because the word *Qoheleth* is the Qal feminine singular participle of the verb *qāhal*, which means "to assemble." This verb was used of Solomon when he assembled God's people together for the temple consecration ceremony in 1 Kings 8:1 (cf. 2 Chron. 5:2). The implied setting for Solomon's speech here—the body of the book of Ecclesiastes itself—is that of an assembly or a church (*ekklesia* is the New Testament word for *church*).[11] This is why Phil Ryken writes that Qoheleth or the Assembler is "not so much a teacher in a classroom but more like a pastor in a church. He is preaching wisdom to a gathering of the people of God."[12] Precisely. So *Pastor Solomon* it is. But whoever the original author was (Pastor Solomon, King Qoheleth, Simon the Sage, Ephraim the Editor, or whatever we want to call him)—and whenever he wrote it (tenth century or third century B.C.)—his timeless message is what matters most. We turn to that message next.

A Unified Message

The book of Ecclesiastes can be, and too often has been, read as a noninspired, postexilic Jewish wisdom book that is as unorthodox as it is disjointed. I hold that Ecclesiastes should not be read that way. I find it unlikely, as some estimate, that an editor got hold of the raw material of what we now call *Ecclesiastes* and tried to clean up the contradictions and clear up the

10. For a critique of the consensus, see Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, New American Commentary 14 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 254–67; and Daniel C. Fredericks, "Ecclesiastes," in Daniel C. Fredericks and Daniel J. Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary 16 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 31–36.

11. The ancient Greek (LXX) rendering of *Qoheleth* is *ekklēsiastēs*, from which we get, via the Vulgate (*Liber Ecclesiastes*), the English word for *church* (*ekklesia*). As Jerome notes, "Now the name 'Ecclesiastes' in the Greek language means 'one who assembles the gathering' (that is, the church)." *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, trans. Richard J. Goodrich and David J. D. Miller, Ancient Christian Writers 66 (New York: Newman, 2012), 33–34.

12. Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*, ed. R. Kent Hughes, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 16.

confusions by adding a corrective verse here and there as well as tacking on an appropriate theological addendum at the end, and still in the end botched the whole project (i.e., that the canonical book remains slightly unorthodox and disjointed). Rather, the best way to read Ecclesiastes is as God's wisdom literature *with a unified message*.[13] For as we will see in our study of the whole book, there is persistent literary intention and a consistent theological argument to Ecclesiastes.

With that claim and clarification made, it is nevertheless true that if you look at all the separate parts of Ecclesiastes, the book is an enigma. It is confusing. What is meant by saying "the race is not to the swift" (Eccl. 9:11) or by the image "the grinders cease because they are few" (12:3)? Ecclesiastes is also filled with seeming contradictions. How does the maxim "For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow?" (6:12) fit with the refrainlike call to eat, drink, and find satisfaction in our work? And how does the observation "He who loves money will not be satisfied with money" (5:10) blend with the claim that "money answers everything" (10:19)? Ecclesiastes is like a thousand- piece puzzle taken from the box, thrown on the floor, and kicked around by the kids. But if you discipline the children (sit them in time-out or lock them in some "box of shame," to quote from the marvelous movie *Despicable Me*), quiet the house and your heart, start to lift the scattered pieces from the ground, lay them on a clean table, and slowly, humbly, and prayerfully (as one should always approach God and his Word) piece the pieces together, a clear picture emerges.

The obvious edge pieces are all filled with the unmistakable and undesirable word *vanity*. In Hebrew it is the word *hebel*, which is the same Hebrew spelling as the name of the first man to die, Abel (Gen. 4:8), and it is an example of an onomatopoeic word! As Daniel Fredericks notes: "One must aspirate twice with the initial he-sound, then again with the soft bet, pronounced as '-vel'. So the speaker illustrates what the nature of a breath is simply by saying the word."[14] This word is found thirty-eight times throughout the book, most prominently at the bookends—"Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of

13. Since we do not know the prehistory of the book, Michael V. Fox's proposal that we read Ecclesiastes as a literary whole makes good sense. "Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qohelet," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 48 (1977): 83–106. Moreover, I agree with Garrett that the book is "seamlessly joined" because of "literary technique," not later redactions. *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 263.

14. Fredericks, "Ecclesiastes," 68.

vanities! All is vanity" (Eccl. 1:2; cf. 12:8). This word is translated in various ways, including "temporary," "transitory," "meaningless," "senseless," "futile," "ephemeral," "contingent," "incomprehensible," "incongruous," "absurd," "empty," and more visually as "a striving after wind," "a bubble," "smoke that curls up into the air,"[15] "mist," or "breath"/"mere breath."[16]

> Man is like a breath [*hebel*];
> his days are like a passing shadow. (Ps. 144:4)

> Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths,
> and my lifetime is as nothing before you.
> Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath [*hebel*]! (Ps. 39:5)

However we are to translate *hebel* (in most contexts, I like "breath" best), listen to a short list of Solomon's long list of mist. What is like your hot breath on a cold day disappearing into the air?

Every effort	Eccl. 1:14; 2:11, 17, 19
Any fruit of our labors	2:15, 21, 26
Pleasure	2:1
Life	3:19; 6:4, 12; 7:15; 9:9
Youth	11:10
Success	4:4
Wealth	4:7–8; 5:10; 6:2
Desire	6:9
Frivolity	7:6
Popularity	4:16; 8:10
Injustice	8:14
All future events	11:8
Everything!	1:2; 12:8[17]

15. See William Ernest Henley, "Of the Nothingness of Things," in *Poems* (London: David Nutt, 1919), 94–97. Jerome suggested "smoky vapor." *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 36.

16. For example, Fredericks's translation is "'Breath of breaths,' said Qoheleth, 'Breath of breaths. Everything is temporary!'" "Ecclesiastes," 65. Robert Alter's is "Merest breath . . . . All is mere breath." Robert Alter, *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2010), 346.

17. Fredericks, "Ecclesiastes," 30–31.

Look again at Ecclesiastes 1:2, and let this ash-in-your-mouth, curse-filled concept fill your imagination. It reads, "Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity." In Hebrew, as in English, there is a nice wordplay on this superlative genitive: *vanity of vanities* (English) or *hăbēl hăbālîm* (Hebrew). As "the Song of Songs" is the best of all songs, "the God of gods" is the greatest or the only God, and "the heaven of heavens" is the highest heaven, so Solomon sounds this sad and sober message of "vanity of vanities"—everything is utterly futile. Put differently, because of God's curse on creation (the consequences of the fall recorded in Genesis 3:14–19 are assumed throughout),[18] in all our endeavors we cannot find *much* meaning or *sustainable* joy in this world or present age. It's vanity. Vanity. Vanity. Vanity. Vanity. It's all vanity.

These are dark pieces to the puzzle. They constitute the black border that connects to the dark gray pieces of death, injustice, and other bleak realities. And yet like a Rembrandt painting, in which darkness and light play off each other and blend together in seemingly inexplicable ways, those gray pieces of Ecclesiastes do eventually connect with God, who is at the center of the picture and is bright in all his incompressible glory and wisdom.

This God of glory and wisdom is touched, if you will stay with my puzzle analogy, only through the *fear of God*.[19] This is the central concept of biblical wisdom literature, and we will explore its meaning and significance in the chapters to come. For now, I'll summarize this central concept as *trembling trust*. Those who, in the midst of all the hard truths and awful troubles of this fallen world, come before the Lord with trembling trust are given by him the gift of grateful obedience, steady contentment, and surprising joy.[20] The puzzle of Ecclesiastes includes the black border, the seemingly random gray pieces, the white, bright center, *and* the multicolored blessings given to those who have given

18. As Barry G. Webb summarizes: Vanity "is not simply a brute fact, something which happens to be there without cause or explanation. It is a judgment, a condition, imposed on the world, and on human beings in particular, by God. It is a manifestation of the fall and, positively, of God's rule as creator and judge." *Five Festal Garments: Christian Reflections on the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 10 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 104.

19. Eccl. 3:14; 5:7; 7:18; 8:12–13; 12:13.

20. Eccl. 2:24; 3:12–13, 22; 5:18; 8:15; 9:7–9; 11:9–12:7.

themselves to God. "The fear of God . . . is not only the beginning of wisdom; it is also the beginning of . . . purposeful life."[21]

In order to arrive at the picture above, I have taken key words—such as *vanity* (thirty-eight times), *wise/wisdom* (fifty-three times), *God* (forty times), *toil* (thirty-three times), *give/gives/given* (sixteen times), *death* (mentioned or alluded to twenty-one times), *sun*, as in "under the sun" (thirty-three times), and *joy* and derivatives such as *rejoice*, *enjoy*, *enjoys*, *enjoyed*, and *enjoyment* (seventeen times)—as well as key themes such as *God and man*, *futility and fleetingness*, *time and chance*, *gain and portion*, *work and toil*, *wealth and poverty*, *power and domination*, *wisdom and folly*, *justice and judgment*, *eating, drinking, and pleasure*[22]—and attempted to show you what Ecclesiastes looks like. It might be better, however, to simply state what the unified message is.

Three authors on Ecclesiastes have summarized the book as follows. (These are the three best I have found.) Michael Eaton claims that Ecclesiastes "defends the life of faith in a generous God by pointing to the grimness of the alternative."[23] Jeffrey Meyers says that "true wisdom" that Ecclesiastes offers us "is to fear God and keep his commandments, to receive and use the gifts of God with joy and gratitude."[24] And Sidney Greidanus writes this excellent summary admonition: "Fear God in order to turn a vain, empty life into a meaningful life which will enjoy God's gifts."[25]

Another way to get at the unified message is to answer the key questions raised by Pastor Solomon. The first key question is the one raised in Ecclesiastes 1:3, "What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?" The implied answer is "nothing." Death makes all human work and wisdom and wealth and pleasure "vain." From a mere observation of this world and its workings, human work, wisdom, wealth, and pleasure appear to be of no eternal value or significance.

21. Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries 16 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 48.

22. See Thomas Krüger, *Qoheleth*, ed. Klaus Baltzer, trans. O. C. Dean Jr., Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 1–5. I added "justice and judgment."

23. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 44.

24. Jeffrey Meyers, *A Table in the Mist: Meditations on Ecclesiastes*, Through New Eyes Bible Commentary (Monroe, LA: Athanasius Press, 2006), 17.

25. Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 22.

The second key question follows that blunt and realistic reality: "In light of such vanity—the fact that our work and knowledge and pleasures and possessions are ultimately made futile by death—how, then, should we live this temporary life under the sun?" The answer to that riddle is simple. We are to live our earthly lives by abandoning human "illusions of self-importance" and "all pretense of pride" and by embracing divine wisdom.[26] This is done, according to Ecclesiastes, by trusting the Lord and doing what he says: "[This is] the end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man" (Eccl. 12:13). Obedient trust—that is the *end* (or goal) of Ecclesiastes.

In Light of the Crucified, Risen, and Returning Christ

That might be the end of Ecclesiastes (its goal and its conclusion), but it is not the end (the conclusion) of God's story of salvation. When the last chapter of Ecclesiastes was completed, hundreds of chapters in God's inspired book were yet to be written. Soon Ezra and Jeremiah, as well as Peter and Paul and all the others, would pick up their pens and add their voices to the divine drama ultimately fulfilled in Jesus.

While Ecclesiastes contains no obvious messianic prophecy or promise, and while the New Testament rarely quotes from or alludes to the book, my ultimate concern as a Christian preacher is to preach the words of "the Preacher" in light of the words and works of the Word incarnate. This is not a concern or commission laid upon me by my local church or the denomination in which I am ordained, but by Jesus himself. Our Lord taught us to read our Old Testaments with him in mind—"everything written about *me* in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms" (Luke 24:44). Even "the Psalms" (or "the Writings"), which includes Ecclesiastes, bear witness to him (John 5:39) and can "make [us] *wise* for salvation" (2 Tim. 3:15). So woe to me if I teach through Ecclesiastes as though Jesus had never touched his feet on this vain earth!

Derek Kidner writes that one way to read Ecclesiastes is to see "the shafts of light" (i.e., the call-to-joy refrain) and "the author's own position and

26. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 278.

conclusions" to get to the purpose of the book.[27] To that helpful reading strategy, we may add that if we read the book *through* the lens of Jesus Christ—the true embodiment of wisdom who has crushed the curse of death on the cross, brought hope through his resurrection, and will bring justice at his return—we actually understand the book better. Put simply, the best way to read Ecclesiastes, as we have noted, is as (1) God's wisdom literature (2) with a unified message (3) *that makes better (but not perfect) sense in light of the crucified, risen, and returning Christ.*

Earlier, I painted the picture of Ecclesiastes—with its black border, shades of gray, and white, bright center. There is another image of Ecclesiastes that I have found tremendously helpful in reading the whole book. It is the banner that Marge Gieser made for the original book jacket for Phil Ryken's commentary on Ecclesiastes, which is aptly and cleverly titled *Why Everything Matters*. The banner has three colors—black, gold, and red. In the black section, which takes up the bottom third of the banner, are words such as *meaningless*, *wearisome*, *twisted*, *toil*, *nothing*, *grievous*, *madness*, and *folly*. Those words are in gold. Above the black section is a red section, also with words, such as *pleasure*, *contentment*, *abundance*, and *joy*. Those are also written in gold. The black and red sections are divided by a slanted, slightly off-center gold cross that is faintly lifted above the rest of the fabric. About the design Gieser wrote:

> Words such as meaningless, wearisome, . . . folly, etc., cover the background of the banner, describing life as it really is. Life without God is futile. But for the believer, redeemed by the blood of Christ, life takes on meaning, and there is hope for all of life's tough questions.
>
> The colors included in the banner all have a meaning. Black symbolizes life lived in struggle and confusion with no hope; the gold of the cross that cuts through the entire design symbolizes the redeeming work of Christ, who intercedes for us at the right hand of the Father in Heaven; the red background at the top of the design stands for Christ's blood shed for us, offering us a hopeful and eternal worldview.[28]

Jesus Christ redeemed us from the vanity that Pastor Solomon so wrestled with and suffered under by subjecting himself to our temporary, meaningless,

27. Derek Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes: An Introduction to Wisdom Literature* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 93.

28. See "About the Book Jacket," in Ryken, *Ecclesiastes*, 319.

futile, incomprehensible, incongruous, absurd, smoke-curling-up-into-the-air, mere-breath, vain life. He was born under the sun. He toiled under the sun. He suffered under the sun. He died under the sun. But in his subjection to the curse of death by his own death on the cross, this Son of God "redeemed us from the curse" (Gal. 3:13). By his resurrection, he restored meaning to our toil. And by his return, he will exact every injustice and elucidate every absurdity as he ushers those who fear the Lord into the glorious presence of our all-wise, never-completely-comprehensible God.

Love and Death . . . and God!

In Woody Allen's comedy *Love and Death*, Allen's character, Boris, and Diane Keaton's character, Sonia, have the following exchange:

> *Boris*: Sonia, what if there is no God?
> *Sonia*: Boris Demitrovich, are you joking?
> *Boris*: What if we're just a bunch of absurd people who are running around with no rhyme or reason.
> *Sonia*: But if there is no God, then life has no meaning. Why go on living? Why not just commit suicide?
> *Boris*: Well, let's not get hysterical; I could be wrong. I'd hate to blow my brains out and then read in the papers they'd found something.[29]

In the small book of Ecclesiastes we will discover (it's quite the finding!) a great God who brings rock-solid meaning to everything under the sun by means of his Son. We will discover that he brings meaning to our work, learning, possessions, and pleasures. We will discover that he will bring meaning even to the world's accidents, injustices, oppressions, absurdities, and evils.

And so our quest begins!

29. Woody Allen, quoted in Thomas V. Morris, *Making Sense of It All: Pascal and the Meaning of Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 51.

2

Why I Wake Early[1]

Ecclesiastes 1:3–11

What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? (Eccl. 1:3)

I have something to confess. I am addicted to reading modern poetry. Pray for me. I will also admit that since doing the research for my book *The Beginning and End of Wisdom*, I have been obsessed with finding and collecting illustrations for Ecclesiastes sermons from modern poems. I will give you two now, and maybe forty later. The poet Billy Collins, in his poem "Forgetfulness," begins by bemoaning the frailty of the human memory as ironically illustrated by the longevity of a writer's work:

> The name of the author is the first to go
> followed obediently by the title, the plot,
> the heartbreaking conclusion, the entire novel
> which suddenly becomes one you have never read, never
> even heard of . . . .[2]

The second example comes from the poet Mary Oliver. In her poem "The Orchard," she writes:

1. The chapter title is borrowed from the title of one of Mary Oliver's poems and books: *Why I Wake Early: New Poems* (Boston: Beacon, 2005).
2. Billy Collins, *Sailing around the Room: New and Selected Poems* (New York: Random House, 2001), 29.

I have dreamed
of accomplishment.
I have fed

ambition.
I have traded
nights of sleep

for a length of work.
Lo, and I have discovered
how soft bloom

turns to green fruit
which turns to sweet fruit.
Lo, and I have discovered

all winds blow cold
at last,
and the leaves,

so pretty, so many,
vanish
in the great, black

packet of time,
in the great, black
packet of ambition,

and the ripeness
of the apple
is its downfall.[3]

The book of Ecclesiastes is a God-inspired look into what Mary Oliver called "the great, black packet of time . . . [and] of ambition." It examines how "the ripeness of the apple is its downfall." That is, it shows us the futility of our work in this world, even our most fruitful work. Like an apple that

3. Mary Oliver, *Red Bird* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008), 20–21.

ripens only to fall to the ground and decay, so our work eventually comes to nothing. This is what "the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem" (Eccl. 1:1)—whom I'm calling *Pastor Solomon*—saw many years ago, and what we will see now in our exploration of Ecclesiastes 1:3–11.

Our Work: Its Major Vanities

We begin with Ecclesiastes 1:3. After the abrupt (and I imagine loud!) opening cry, "Vanity of vanities, . . . vanity of vanities! All is vanity" (1:2), we come to the key question, "What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?" (1:3; cf. 3:9; 5:16; 6:8, 11).

Allow me three brief observations about this question. First, the word *man* is the word *adam* in Hebrew. Just as the word *vanity* (*hebel*) is the same word as *Abel* (*hebel*) in Hebrew, so the word *adam* leads us back to Genesis and reminds us that the fall of *Adam* is never far from Pastor Solomon's mind.

Second, the repetition of the word *toil*—"all the toil at which he toils"—reminds us of Adam's curse. God said to Adam:

> Cursed is the ground because of you;
>   in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
> thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
>   and you shall eat the plants of the field.
> By the sweat of your face
>   you shall eat bread,
> till you return to the ground,
>   for out of it you were taken;
> for you are dust,
>   and to dust you shall return. (Gen. 3:17b–19)

Third, the phrase "under the sun" (used twice in our text and twenty-eight times in the book, synonymous with the expressions "under the heavens" and "on earth") draws a geographical line between God, who is "in heaven," and man, who lives "on earth" (Eccl. 5:2; cf. Matt. 6:9), and also a theological one. This phrase designates not the secular life (life without reference to God) but the fallen world that both the secular and nonsecular share as sinners under God's curse—his faithful carrying out of his promised punishment to Adam. What is found on earth—the thorn and thistle-infested ground, our sun-soaked sweaty toil of the ground, our bodies dying and returning to the ground—is not found with God in heaven. We are "under the sun"; he is above it.

So when Pastor Solomon asks his question ("What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?" Eccl. 1:3), it is a curse-filled question, one that has already been answered by that sober superlative—"Vanity of vanities, . . . all is vanity!" (v. 2). It is also one that will be further answered pessimistically in verses 4–11,[4] to which we next turn.

Nothing New

Like an overcritical building inspector, in Ecclesiastes 1:4–11 Pastor Solomon shows us what is wrong with our work. Later, he will point out what I call "minor problems"—that our willingness to work often comes from impure motives such as envy (4:4); that our work, if profitable, often leads to sleepless nights (5:12; cf. 2:23); and that all the wealth from our work must be bequeathed to someone who doesn't deserve it and might foolishly squander it (2:18–19). The two major problems in our construct, however, he addresses in verses 4–11.

The first major problem is that our work adds *nothing new* to this world.

> What has been is what will be,
>   and what has been done is what will be done,
>   and there is nothing new under the sun.
> Is there a thing of which it is said,
>   "See, this is new"?
> It has been already
>   in the ages before us. (Eccl. 1:9–10)

We might balk at this strongly pessimistic view. In fact, we might instead boast of how "new and improved" everything is. This is the information age! The day of discovery! The time of technology! Yet I doubt that we would balk or boast if our perspective were appropriately shaped by Solomon's two important insights about our work.

4. Later, Pastor Solomon admits that there are some natural advantages and God-given rewards for working wisely and industriously (e.g., Eccl. 2:13; 3:13, 22; 5:18; 7:11–12; 10:10). In 1:3–11, the picture is only pessimistic.

The wisdom literature of the Bible most often deals with general realities. The book of Job is different, as is Psalm 73. Such texts speak of the exceptions to the rule. But in general, the wicked are punished and the righteous prosper. In general, sloth leads to poverty and adultery to discord. Thus, in general, most of our work is not new.

Think of it this way. Thousands of people today still labor with their hands, doing work similar to what was done thousands of years ago. There is not much difference between the guy who dug ditches in Jerusalem in 942 B.C. and the guy who digs them today for Shanghai's sewer and sanitation department. As for those who do not work with their hands, even if they are part of the new division of a new company selling a new product that was newly invented, what they actually do isn't so new: an owner is still an owner, a manufacturer is still a manufacturer, and a salesman is still a salesman. The computer salesman who sells the latest gadget follows in the same line of work as the Spanish merchant 550 years ago who sold the newest silk from the Far East. The newest is relative to the age in which we live. But when viewed against the backdrop of human history, the novelty fades.

In Ecclesiastes 1:4–8, Solomon describes this unoriginality and repetitiveness of our activities in comparison with the earth's circularity and in contrast with its stability:

> A generation goes, and a generation comes,
>   but the earth remains forever.
> The sun rises, and the sun goes down,
>   and hastens to the place where it rises.
> The wind blows to the south
>   and goes around to the north;
> around and around goes the wind,
>   and on its circuits the wind returns.
> All streams run to the sea,
>   but the sea is not full;
> to the place where the streams flow,
>   there they flow again.
> All things are full of weariness;
>   a man cannot utter it;
> the eye is not satisfied with seeing,
>   nor the ear filled with hearing.

Here Solomon illustrates the weariness of our work—what is uninspiring to the eye and humdrum to the ear, as well as too wearisome for words (Eccl. 1:8)—with the sun, the wind, and the streams. These hardworking forces all seem to be quite busy doing something *new* each and every day. But a closer look will show their motion-filled monotony.

First we have the sun. The sun rises and sets—over and over and over again, same old, same old. It never gets anywhere. It never does anything new. It is still a big old ball of hot gas seemingly doing perpetual somersaults around the earth. It is exhausting even to think about. Then we have the wind, the second example of "the dreary rhythm of ceaseless activity."[5] One day the wind blows south, and then the next day that same wind journeys north. What a lot of commotion for so little consequence. What a lot of hot air! It appears that this wind is getting somewhere, when in reality it is just moving in an endless circle.[6] Finally, we have the streams and rivers. How is it that the Mississippi River can flow into the Gulf of Mexico and then into the Atlantic Ocean, but that ocean never overflows or gets any deeper? The mighty Mississippi works exhaustively, pushing its waters south every second of every day. But what does it accomplish? What can we see? It does not even affect the ocean's water level. We know about the precipitation and evaporation process (as even the wisdom literature notes, Job 36:27–28), but to the naked eye, where does all the water go? It is especially amazing in Solomon's context; perhaps he is thinking of the Dead Sea. The Jordan River incessantly empties into the Dead Sea (from which no river flows out), and yet this sea is "not full" (Eccl. 1:7).

Do you see what the Preacher is saying? The work of the sun, wind, and waters is like our work on the earth. We think we are making such a difference, but the irony (the sad reality of the curse) is that the earth remains and we die: "A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth" sticks around forever, or so it seems (Eccl. 1:4). Jerome put it this way: "What is more a vanity of vanities than the fact that the earth endures, although it

5. Walter C. Kaiser, *Ecclesiastes: Total Life*, Everyman's Bible Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1979), 51.

6. Robert Alter's translation of Ecclesiastes 1:6 expresses this well: "It goes to the south and swings around to the north, round and round goes the wind, and on its rounds the wind returns." *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2010), 346.

was made for the benefit of man, while man himself, the master of the earth, suddenly crumbles into dust?"[7]

Nothing Remembered

The first major problem with our work is that there is nothing significantly or substantially new. The second major problem is that our work will not be remembered. Nothing new, *nothing remembered*. Look at the last verse of our text: "There is no *remembrance* of former things, nor will there be any *remembrance* of later things yet to be among those who come after" (Eccl. 1:11).

Again we are dealing with generalizations. Daniel Fredericks summarizes the situation:

> History notes and respects the efforts of an infinitesimally small fraction of the earth's inhabitants, and the intensities of even these legacies are evanescent, fading with every passing year. Anyone who sees their eternal significance referred to in their journals and diaries or autobiographies has not sat at the feet of Qoheleth. Any artist, ruler, entrepreneur, hero, scientist or theologian who aspires to be read about in a "Who's Who" should understand that their innovations, awards, writings, or whatever feats that are honoured now, will be assessed in the new earth much more modestly compared to the pomp with which they were first celebrated.[8]

So while every generation might remember the work of David, Isaiah, or Paul, as well as Aristotle, Shakespeare, or Mozart, how will other famous people fare? For example, what about Elvis Presley, Muhammad Ali, John F. Kennedy, and Walt Disney? These men made a recent list of the top ten most famous people of all time. How well will they be remembered a century from now? Or consider John Lennon, who said that he and his band were "more popular than Jesus." In 1966, at the height of Beatlemania, Lennon made this prediction: "Christianity will go . . . . It will vanish and shrink. I needn't argue with that; I'm right and I will be proved right. We're

7. Jerome, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, trans. Richard J. Goodrich and David J. D. Miller, Ancient Christian Writers 66 (New York: Newman, 2012), 36.

8. Daniel C. Fredericks, "Ecclesiastes," in Daniel C. Fredericks and Daniel J. Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary 16 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 106.

more popular than Jesus now; I don't know which will go first—rock and roll or Christianity."[9]

Well, John, I can tell you which will go first. Imagine there's no Beatles; it's easy if you try! Just ask children today to name "the Fab Four." Just name them. With two of these superstars still alive and touring—coming to a city near you—there should be no excuse if our six-year-olds, twelve-year-olds, or eighteen-year-olds don't know the names of the Beatles. But they probably don't. Or if they do, just wait a few years—maybe 20 or 120—and soon the memory of even the Beatles will be as dead and buried as George and John. The black-and-white silhouettes of these four extraordinarily famous men will soon be relics in a time capsule buried deep in the Liverpool soil.

Today's celebrities are tomorrow's obituaries, and their names are as disposable as the morning paper in which their life stories will be printed. And if that is what becomes of our celebrities, what will become of us?

A few years ago, I went back to my high school to play in an alumni basketball game. I was "the star" back in the day. Yet when I returned to play in this game (a mere fifteen years after my graduation), almost nobody recognized my face or name. The alumni team I was on, which had players mostly ten years older or younger than I, didn't know me. I was so frustrated that I wanted to pull out the record book, point to my name, and say, "Hey, that's me." But then I looked at the record book and saw that my name had been relegated to the bottom of a few long lists. Someone had broken every glorious record that I had once held. How tragic! I had worked so hard back then, only to be forgotten now. What a waste. What vanity. My fame was as short (and embarrassing) as an air ball. To add irony to this tragedy, my high school was closed and then leveled shortly after the alumni game.

Have you ever had that kind of realistic look in the mirror? It is not a pleasant thing to do or see, for we all want to be remembered. This "need" makes us call our friends and relatives when our name or our picture makes the paper. It attracts us to social media, where our face and our story and even our deepest thoughts can be shared. It is also this need, so twisted and distorted, that makes people do the most banal things on the most banal reality TV shows. In part, it is also what makes a deranged teenager walk into his school and open fire on his own classmates—the need to be remembered.

9. From Lennon's famous interview with Maureen Cleave of the London *Evening Standard* on March 4, 1966.

But what does it all matter? That is what Pastor Solomon is getting us to think about. There is one problem with our need to be known and remembered. That problem is death.[10] "And therefore never send to know for whom the *bell* tolls; it tolls for *thee*."[11] Death stands, almost boastingly, at the end of the corridor of our lives. And death doesn't play favorites. It takes everyone's solid labors and vaporizes them.

Just think about it. Think seriously, soberly, and realistically about it. What good is work? What good is ambition? What good is fame? We must admit that the history of the world appears to be a mass of men and women living, working, and dying—punching in and punching out of this life. Each weekday, as the sun lifts its head over the horizon, we peek out over the bedsheets, hit the alarm, wash and feed our bodies, and then spend the remainder of our day working. But working for what? Will we ever be remembered?

> Naked a man comes from his mother's womb, and as he comes, so he departs. He takes nothing from his labor that he can carry in his hand. . . . As a man comes, so he departs, and what does he gain, since he toils for the wind? (Eccl. 5:15–16 NIV)

As the hourglass of human history is turned over, all our accomplishments are slowly buried by the sands of time. All our laborious labors—they are nothing new, nothing that will be remembered. Ah, the tragedy of time and death. Time and death. Time—and death. Time. And. Death.

Our Work: Labor in the Lord Is *Not* in Vain

What are we to do about the tick and tock of time over our heads and the trapdoor of death beneath our feet? Shall we try to escape? Give up? Party? These are three widespread ways in which people deal with this meaninglessness of which Solomon writes: escapism, nihilism, and hedonism. In later chapters, I will exegete texts related to these three themes—for example, Ecclesiastes 2:3; 4:5; 6:7. For now, I will merely illustrate them.

10. Death is named or alluded to twenty-one times in the book: 3:2, 19–22; 4:2–3; 6:3, 12; 7:1–2; 8:8, 10; 9:3–5, 10; cf. 1:4, 11; 2:14–18, 20–21; 4:16; 5:15–16, 20; 7:14; 8:13; 11:8; 12:1–7.

11. From Meditation 17 of John Donne's *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, ed. Anthony Raspa (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 87.

The Escapist

I have an open invitation to watch Notre Dame football at a neighbor's house. I enjoy college football, the Fighting Irish, and my neighbor and his friends. But I was struck the first time I attended by the fact that six sensible, well-educated, reasonably successful men could gather together and spend a whole afternoon watching and talking only about the game and the games—as we switched from channel to channel, from football to baseball to golf. The most interesting and probing question that anyone asked all afternoon was about Wake Forest's team name, Demon Deacons. "Is the school religiously affiliated?" someone asked. The answer—via cellphone technology—came quickly: "Yes, Baptist." The word *Baptist* was the closest we got to talking about the meaning of life.

Perhaps I should have taken that opportunity to grab the remote, hit MUTE, stand up, and ask, "So, guys, what kind of work do you do? And does it ever bother you that it won't last forever?" I had no such courage. But can you imagine if I had? Such unorthodox behavior might have started a good conversation—or, more likely, a barrage of secret text messages: "Who *is* this guy?" "Please don't invite him again." "Oh, and pass the chips."

Some people—normal "good" people (your neighbors and mine)—deal with the bleak reality that Ecclesiastes addresses through *escapism*—not through drugs or alcohol or sex (although some do that), but through watching the game, going to work, playing with the kids, loving the wife, taking the family vacation, and then watching the game, watching the game, watching the game. Escapism.

The Nihilist

Others are more philosophical about life. They have attempted a staredown with time and death, and lost; thus, they have come to the end of themselves. The esteemed Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy was one such person. Despite having written two of the world's greatest works, *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, he considered his life to be a meaningless, regrettable failure. In his book *A Confession*, he wrote:

> My question—that which at the age of fifty brought me to the verge of suicide—was the simplest of questions, lying in the soul of every man . . . a question without an answer to which one cannot live. It was: "What will

> come of what I am doing today or tomorrow? What will come of my whole life? Why should I live, why wish for anything, or do anything?" It can also be expressed thus: Is there any meaning in my life that the inevitable death awaiting me does not destroy?[12]

Tolstoy is asking the same question that Pastor Solomon asked, in updated form.

Listen also to Jean-Paul Sartre, the French existentialist philosopher. Sartre was also a novelist and far more depressing than Tolstoy. We might call him nihilistic (*nihil* in Latin means "nothing," as in *ex nihilo*, "out of nothing"). Nihilism teaches that life has no objective meaning or intrinsic value. This is the soil from which postmodern thinking has grown. In his novel *La Nausée* ("Nausea"—an uplifting title indeed!), Sartre writes:

> It was true, I had always realized it—I hadn't any "right" to exist at all. I had appeared by chance, I existed like a stone, a plant, a microbe. I could feel nothing to myself but an inconsequential buzzing. I was thinking . . . that here we are eating and drinking, to preserve our precious existence, and that there's nothing, nothing, absolutely no reason for existing.[13]

These are depressing, hopeless answers. But apart from God, they are also realistic answers. Why continue on if life is meaningless? Why bask in the summer sunlight if you're just a leaf that will soon fall from a tree, only to be raked up and burned?

The Hedonist

Most people are not honest enough to come to the nihilist position. This explains why the philosophy department will always be smaller than the business/economics department. It is also why, instead of becoming nihilistic, most people become hedonistic. They live for pleasure as the ultimate pursuit. Their slogan is "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" (Isa. 22:13; 1 Cor. 15:32). We know we are dying, so let's live life for all it's got. Peggy Lee's famous refrain about breaking out the booze and having a

12. Leo Tolstoy, quoted in Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 201.

13. Jean-Paul Sartre, quoted in ibid., 127.

ball still resounds today.[14] Just pick up an issue of *People* magazine, as I did one day while waiting for an oil change, and you will see this lifestyle in living color. Or take an hour to read another French philosopher's short and witty novel—Voltaire's *Candide*—which I did after the oil change. Candide allegedly lives in the "best of all worlds," yet he experiences one senseless and random suffering after another until finally he abandons the view of his upbringing and embraces hedonism. He decides that since "we can't know the whys and wherefores of what happens in this world," we should just do our "very best to enjoy it while [we] can."[15]

We will examine hedonism further in Ecclesiastes 2:1–11. Stay tuned for that sorry show.

Gospel Glasses

Escapism, nihilism, and hedonism—these are three prevalent answers offered by our world to Ecclesiastes' questions. Thankfully, the Bible directs us to a vastly different resolution. While God's Word certainly shows us the circular nature of our existence, it also moves us forward in a linear, hopeful direction. Although our text does conclude that the answer to the question "What do we gain from all the toil at which we toil under the sun?" is "Nothing," it does not offer this same bleak conclusion to the question "In light of such vanity—that time and death makes all human work 'vain'—how, then, should we live this temporary life under the sun?" The answer to the second question is not "Nothing," but "Something," something very wonderful. In Pastor Solomon's sermon, this is the answer (and we will soon hear it): abandon human wisdom, embrace divine wisdom, and then receive all the good things of this life as a gift from God. In the words of Jesus, the greater Solomon, the answer is this: "Seek first the kingdom of God . . . , and all these things will be added" (Matt. 6:33).

Having contemplated what the tyranny of time does to our work—nothing new, nothing remembered—we turn now to "consider the work of God" (Eccl. 7:13; see also 8:17; 11:5), most notably the work of God in Jesus Christ.

14. Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, "Is That All There Is?," available on Peggy Lee, *All-Time Greatest Hits*, vol. 1, Curb Records D2–77379 (compact disc).

15. Voltaire's *Candide*, as summarized by Bart D. Ehrman, *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 11–12.

If we put on gospel glasses and look at Ecclesiastes 1:3–11 again, we see clearly how what we have in God's Son transforms a world shrouded in hopeless blackness into a garden of beautiful and brilliant light—or, to change the metaphor, how it changes a buried seed into a budding flower.

Why work? When we put on gospel glasses, we see that Jesus' work mattered. Our work—nothing new, nothing remembered. Jesus' work—it was and is *new*, and it has been and will be remembered. Therefore, the work that we do, as enabled by and through Christ, matters, too. We can put it this way: life *under the sun* is brief and bleak, but life *through the Son* is eternal and joyful.

The Work of Jesus

First, we have the work of Jesus. Here I am not referring to our Lord's work with Joseph as a carpenter (Mark 6:3), although that work mattered, too, because it was part of his humanity. Rather, I am referring to Jesus' work of redemption, which entails not only his death and resurrection but also every deed recorded for us in the Gospels: his obedience to and fulfillment of the law, his proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom, and his miracles. Jesus was about his Father's business (Luke 2:49).[16]

The Gospel of John, especially, emphasizes the work of Jesus. In John 4:34, Jesus says, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work." In 5:36, he speaks of the works that his Father has given him to accomplish, the very works he is doing. In 9:4, after healing the man blind from birth, he speaks of working "the works of him who sent me" (cf. 10:32ff.; 17:4). And when upon the cross he cried out, "It is finished" (19:30), his work of atonement was indeed finished. He had accomplished the work that the Father had sent him to do.

If we are viewing Ecclesiastes 1:3–11 through gospel glasses, we see the significance of Jesus' work. His work is *new*. Through our Lord's life, death, and resurrection, for the first and only time the fundamental problem of humanity's sin has been fixed. Jesus has done what no one before or after him could accomplish: the Son of God has reconciled the children of Adam to their Creator.

16. Every deed that Jesus did was *justifying* "wisdom" (Matt. 11:19). Wisdom's "deeds" (11:2) here allude to Jesus' deeds in 11:5 (cf. chaps. 8–9), which pave the way for the identification of Jesus as wisdom incarnate ("come to me" in 11:28–30).

Jesus' work is also *remembered*. At the Last Supper, Jesus established the new covenant, and through our perpetual celebration of his death in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, we remember his work. Jesus' work is *new* and *remembered*—something that very few people can claim. More precisely, many people can claim it, but few can prove it. Yet for Jesus it continues to be proved two thousand years after the fact. We prove it every Sunday as we gather together in his name, singing and speaking of him and of what he has done. Jesus' work will never vanish into the "great, black packet of time."

A New Workforce

When we come to believe in Jesus—partaking of the new covenant that gives new birth, new life, and a new commandment—we enter into a new workforce.[17] Now what we do matters. Even the smallest, seemingly insignificant act, such as giving a cup of cold water to a disciple (Matt. 10:42), matters—if done in faith, for the sake of the gospel, and for the glory of God. Our labor is not in vain. "Vanity of vanities . . . ! All is vanity." True, unless we work "as to the Lord," as Paul puts it (Eph. 5:22; 6:7).

Allow me to illustrate. Think of the thief on the cross, who saw his sin for what it was, repented, and came to faith in Christ—all while hanging next to Jesus. While dying, he was brought to life; while suffocating, he breathed in the Holy Spirit. In his profession of faith, the penitent thief said to Jesus, "Jesus, *remember* me when you come into your kingdom." With kingly confidence, Jesus replied, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:42–43). In other words, "Remember you? Of course I'll remember you!" We might think that Jesus would have had other more important things to do as he died and went into glory than to remember this criminal. But as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 8:3, "If anyone loves God, he is known by God." Isn't that extraordinary? Do not take that verse for granted. "If anyone loves God, he is *known* by God."

It is not as though God doesn't know everything and everyone equally. But he especially knows—in a unique, fatherly way—what is going on in the lives of those who believe, who call out to him as sons and daughters

17. Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Songs of Songs*, New American Commentary 14 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 288.

through Christ, "Abba! Father!" (Gal. 4:6–9). And because he knows us, he knows our work. In Philippians 2:12, Paul echoes the wisdom literature by instructing believers to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." This kind of work is known to God and thus meaningful because, as Paul goes on to say, ultimately it is God's own work through us: "For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (v. 13).

Think of what Jesus said in Matthew 25 about the righteous—those who cared for the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned. He stated, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me" (v. 40). Or think of the example in Matthew 26 of what kind of work matters. A woman came to Jesus as he was reclining at table and poured on his head an alabaster flask's worth of expensive ointment (the equivalent of a whole year's wages). The disciples were indignant. "What a waste!" they said. But Jesus replied, marvelously:

> Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a beautiful thing to me. . . . In pouring this ointment on my body, she has done it to prepare me for burial. Truly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, *what she has done* will also be told *in memory of her*. (Matt. 26:10–13)

The woman's little act of sacrificial love made it into the Bible, and to this day preachers are still talking about her and what she did. Jesus was right! This fascinating prophecy is fulfilled as we read it.

The woman's work for Jesus mattered, and so does ours. Paul gives an analogy in 1 Corinthians 3:9–14. God is building a kingdom. Jesus is the foundation. We are called to build on that foundation. If we work for ourselves and our own glory, it is like building our own foundation with wood or hay or straw. It will not last. But if we build for the sake of our God, it's like building a medieval cathedral: our names might be forgotten by man, but our names and our work will be remembered by God.

Our work under the sun: nothing new, nothing remembered. But our work in and through the Son: something very new. It is significant, substantial—something that will be remembered and even rewarded.

An Eternal Orchard

Perhaps you have dreamed of accomplishment, fed ambition, and traded nights of sleep for tomorrow's success. Yet perhaps you have discovered, as Pastor Solomon did, how as the seasons change and the leaves twist and tumble to the ground, our own work under the sun will vanish into that "great, black packet of time."

Yet through Christ our work can be substantial and lasting. Jesus brings life out of death. He takes decaying apples that have fallen to the ground and births from them a vast and beautiful and everlasting orchard, one full of fruit and life and joy.

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