

Exhortation for 3rd May 2009: P Weller Reading Ecc.12

Dear Brethren and Sisters

Reading the last chapter of Ecclesiastes alone is like eating the icing without tasting the cake. It is the climax of so many ingredients that have been mixed into the instruction of Solomon by all his God given wisdom. The very first question Solomon poses in **1:3** “What profit hath a man of all his labour ?” is finally answered in **12:13**; No profit at all unless he possesses a reverential “fear of God”.

THE PRELUDE:

The opening chapter 1:4 tells us that there is nothing permanent in human life, other than the platform of the earth itself, on which the various actors in their lifetime play out their parts. We ourselves are some of those actors using life’s opportunities to prove our worth to God. Even then it is an endless repetition of people repeating the errors of past generations, all passing off the scene in death, replaced by the next, who yet still fail to find a true meaning or reward for their life. James citing Ecclesiastes says in **Jas. 4:14** “...ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a **vapour**, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanishes away.” This word **vapour** is the very meaning of Solomon’s repetitious word “vanity” widely used in Ecclesiastes.

THE PURPOSE OF THE BOOK: 1:13

Clearly the book is not written at the end of Solomon’s life when his wisdom failed him as this verse tells us he “**sought out by wisdom**” all the experiences people share in natural life to seek out any value that was to be found. He further says in **2:9** that his “**wisdom remained with**” him whilst he experienced the variety of exploits of mankind: His wisdom of course did not remain with him, in his personal errors at life’s end.

1Kings 11:6 Solomon “went not fully after the LORD, as did David his father”

THE ISSUES OF THE BOOK:

Solomon reviews life in its every aspect to examine any lasting value a person might gain by it all. He sees many anomalies in people’s priorities, which when viewed in wisdom, reveals such false expectations with no realities.

Labour:

He sees the futility of the labour of one, who tirelessly spent all his energy to gain wealth, only resulting in leaving it to another who has not actually worked for it all. **2:21-22**. He finds this a “vexation of his heart” a “great evil”. A man gives up his peaceful sleep at night for his self made “travail and grief” and cannot personally assess for himself the stupidity of his foolish pursuits.

Against this Solomon confirms that the “better” thing is to be content with enough food and drink, enjoy the simple work of one’s hands and sleep peacefully through the night. **2:24**

In **2:26** he says that the Godly man has this joyful attitude to life and it is the gift of contentment that God has established, as a ‘law’ of nature, and is unquestionably the best experience of natural life. It is so difficult for people to practise this restraint on the desire for ‘wealth’ and ‘status’, even when one knows by theory the truth of the Bible’s and Solomon’s conclusions, that such is a vain exercise.

TIME: SOLOMON’S CHALLENGING CHAPTER ON LIVING APPROPRIATELY: Chapter 3.

Another big issue of life is knowing how to respond appropriately in the various circumstances of life we are presented with. There is an appropriate time for every purpose in this life and being wise enough to know how to act appropriately at the right time is a skill of value to achieve. There are various and changing stages of life that we need to act appropriately in. Solomon tells us we are governed by time

in God's wisdom from babyhood to old age and a right way to act in every stage is fitting and responsible.

Spiritual profit comes from appropriate actions at the time of opportunity. The benefit or 'profit' of doing the right thing, is what he emphasises in the life of people like us, who live our lives always conscious of the eyes of our God being upon us. The Angel of the LORD encamps around them that fear God says the Psalmist.

CONTENTMENT:

Solomon's theme of contentment is throughout the book. Paul cites Ecclesiastes in writing to Timothy in **1 Tim 6: 6** that, "Godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world and it is certain we can carry nothing out." Solomon adds to this the thought that "God requires that which is past" **Ecc.3:15**, meaning that we will answer to God at the judgement after the resurrection, for the way we have lived our lives and God has set, in his purpose and in his 'time' schedule, a day when "he shall judge the righteous and the wicked". **V 17**.

THE SAD REALITY OF UNBELIEVERS:

It troubles the sensitive spirit of Solomon that some people live their lives in ignorance of God and he calls these people "**the sons of men**" whereas believers are spiritually defined as the "**sons of God**". In **3:18 -19** he explains that the 'sons of men' die just the same as any beast and their end is identical to the animal; "all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again." He sees this as the ultimate tragedy, that the intelligent person was not sensible enough in the time of opportunity in life, to live their life with God and ends up perishing, exactly, the same as the unintelligent beast. How important it is for us, who are believers and responsible to God, for our thoughts and actions to be godly, that we are not rejected at the judgement seat of Christ, to also end up 'perished' with the beasts of the field.

THE NEED OF GOOD COMPANIONS:

Chapter 4 speaks of the need to share life with others. A life of self interest is not for the believer. Appreciating the treasure of the knowledge God has given us should bring out in us a desire to share that priceless gift with others. 'Sharing' also derives a benefit for the sharer. **V9** "Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour." Making another happy makes one also feel the happiness of the good deed done. Friendship has many rewards. When in trouble another will come to our aid. Comfort and support is a characteristic of true believers. Forgiveness of offenders wins merit from God as well. **Matt 6:14,15** "For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Heavenly Father forgive your trespasses." How we should value our brothers and sisters and the friendship we should have with each other.

THE NEED OF GOOD VALUES:

In **chapters 5 -8** Solomon speaks about many wise attitudes to hold in life and contrasts them with the foolish ways people often act. Just to list them is instructive for us.

*Selfishness is an attitude seen as self- destruction.

*Genuine trustworthiness is seen as a virtue, not forgotten by men, and certainly not by God.

*Not being hasty to be angry is seen as spiritually discerning and defiant of personal pride.

*It is not sensible to bemoan past mistakes but rather to get on with fulfilling life's new opportunities.

*Don't listen to rumours about others but remember that we ourselves have many faults.

*The wise person faces up to difficult circumstances and does not run from meeting responsibility.

PROVIDENCE IN THE LIFE OF BELIEVERS: Chapter 9

In the 9th Chapter Solomon introduces how God is found in the life of the faithful. **v1** “The righteous and the wise, and their works, are in the hand of God’

By this proclamation he confirms a truth we need to know and live by. Nothing is done in our lives he does not either know or have an acute interest in. It calls the believer to lift the standard of their lives knowing God’s personal interest in them. It does not mean we will never share calamity however because Solomon tells us that all events of natural disasters affect both the ‘good’ and the ‘wicked’. **V2** “...one event to all...as is the good, so is the sinner.”

When the ‘**sons of men**’ die, their whole history perishes with them, and there is “no more a reward; “their memory is forgotten” **v5** It is forgotten by God.

But it is not so with the ‘**sons of God**’; **v7** “for God now accepteth thy works”.

He then lists for us how happy we should be together:

V7 Be joyful in this knowledge of God’s acceptance.

V8 Be bright of personality and refreshing to others who meet you.

V9 Live joyfully with your married partner all your life.

V10 Do your work, whatever it is, with a happy joyful disposition for death ends opportunity.

God is interested in us. He can either prevent problems, or bring them on us to correct us, but we cannot understand his greater reasons for either. Neither are we to judge one another as if we do know. In contrast to the ‘sons of God’, who are “in the hand of God” **v1**, the ‘sons of men’ are subject solely to “time and chance”, the haphazard events of life and natural disasters. **v11**

ALL ACTIONS IN LIFE ARE IN NEED OF SERIOUS CONTEMPLATION:

Chapter 10 gives great advice.

Think before you do anything as one foolish act can ruin reputation. **v1**

Always contemplate the spiritual implications in life’s big decisions. **v8-12**

WE CAN BE OPTIMISTIC OR PESSIMISTIC: Chapter 11

v1 Taking opportunity as it presents itself is the wise course. If one wishes to trade one must take the risk to put the produce on the ship or the return payment will not come. The farmer who is afraid to see his produce go to market will not see the benefit of the sale. So it is with God’s truth. We must take opportunity to speak it to others in an appropriate situation or we will not be rewarded by God for it.

V2 “Give a portion to seven, and also to eight”. This Hebrewism speaks of being generous to others and not restrained by self interest. To give more than is called upon you in every way whether of welfare, goods, or time to help, is an attitude endorsed by Jesus. **Luke 6: 38** We need to practise this in our lives. What would Christ say if we ignore his teaching?

Solomon tells us that if we are always generous to others we will also receive from others when we face our own difficult times.

SOME PEOPLE ARE PESSIMISTIC BUT IT IS NOT A RIGHT ATTITUDE FOR A BELIEVER:

V3 explains that many things occur in our life that cannot be predicted or prevented. Calamity comes by accident of nature and if it crosses our path we need to be positive and overcome the obstacles it presents. If it is going to rain, then rain it will, and we cannot change it even if it disrupts our plans. Accept it and get on with living.

If a storm comes and a tree falls, where it falls cannot be changed: Accept it as a fact and do what is necessary to repair the damage or remove the obstacle: But do not grieve over it because it cannot be changed. Where it falls is where it is. Get on positively, without regret, to handle the problems of life as

they occur. This is the attitude of the faithful. Don't postpone acts of faith out of fear of adverse circumstances.

Solomon tells us that just as we cannot understand the wonders of God's creation so we should never underestimate God's ability to bring results by us proclaiming the truths of his word. **V5** We cannot understand how the child grows in the womb. It is a work of God's spirit. If it is God's work He will make it prosper. All we need to do is be positive and live and proclaim his truth.

V6 Start early in the day to sow the seed, and be generous to others in the evening in feeding those with need. Live with optimism in God's service, that if you sow he will bring the harvest, and God will bring the results when we live and speak His word.

The closing words of **Chapter 11:9-10** exhort us to be responsible before God as we live our lives. For the 'young' the vigour of youth is natural and the body's response to our natural faculties is strong and vigorous. Young people are meant to have happy times and enjoy their healthful vigour. This is designed by God. But nature's lusts need to be curbed in the knowledge of God because we will be answerable in judgement before Him. A moral standard is laid down for all by Christ and by His Father and it cannot be contravened without penalty. **2Tim 2:22** "Flee youthful lusts: but follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart."

THE FINAL APPEAL Chapter 12:

Youth is a time of mental agility & learning. If it is used to study and meditate upon God's word; to develop a prayerful dependence upon him; to build a storehouse of Divine information; then it will insulate against the 'evil' days of old age that surely follow, when study becomes difficult and retention of new thoughts are not easy. Only the remembrance of the past is now important. If there is no pleasure in such a past, that is of any profit, then one's life has proven itself to be meaningless.

Solomon describes the deterioration of human faculties in the 'aged' using the figure of a grand old stately family home, where once vitality and life throbbed, but has fallen into ruin.

v2 Youthfulness is like the brightness of Sun, light and stars and even some patches of gloominess quickly pass as the clouds that give way to another bright day. The young quickly revive from any disappointments they encounter.

However It is not so in old age: **v3** "the keepers of the house tremble": The **hands and arms** shake. The 'strong men' or the **legs** 'bow themselves':

"The grinders cease"; the loss of **teeth**.

"those that look out of the windows be darkened": The **eyesight** fails.

v4 "the doors shall be shut in the streets," the **hearing ears** fail.

"he shall rise up at the sound of a bird"; a **light sleeping condition** that is easily awakened.

"The daughters of music be brought low"; or the failure of the **vocal chords**.

v5 Describes the nervous and frail condition of those who shuffle along with the aid of a stick who convey a picture resembling a grasshopper.

The mourners go about in the streets because everyone who sees such a one knows that death is near for them.

v6 The last holds on life now break: Our precious life is likened to a golden lamp now smashed in its fall after hanging on a silver cord that has frayed and snapped.

Or like the pitcher hanging in a well from the wheel above that wound it up: But the rope has decayed and the pitcher fallen and the wheel itself broken and fallen into disrepair.

v7 Takes us to Genesis **3: 19** "the dust shall return to the earth, and the spirit (or breath) to God who gave it'

V8 THE ULTIMATE OF ALL VANITY: DEATH

THE CONCLUSION: FINALE v9 -14.

The only protection against the all conquering power of death is the teaching of the 'wise', inspired by God, as Solomon was. **v9**

The words of the wise come from God himself, the Master Shepherd, and give security to the faithful believers.

v12 There are endless numbers of books in the world that can be studied but worldly learning is only a weariness of the flesh with no ultimate benefit seeing death robs it of any worth.

v13 Tells us that only one occupation is of any ultimate value; unquestionably: "Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man."

We owe it to ourselves to fulfil this duty in life.

Our lives are lived in the reality of God's final judgement to come. There are many secret things in our life but God knows them all. Many of these are 'good' and God will not forget such labours of love done in his name. But neither can he forget the 'evil'.

As we share the emblems today, may we personally pray for God to help our weaknesses, forgive our sins and help us develop the qualities of life Solomon has instructed us in.