



© 2002-2026 Timothy Ministries. Reproduction of any part of this document in works for which readers will be charged is strictly prohibited without the explicit permission of Timothy Ministries for such use. PERMISSION IS HEREBY GRANTED to quote from this document in noncommercial works so long the following notice is included with the quoted material: ©2002-2026 Timothy Ministries, www.timothyministries.info, used by permission.

THE PREACHER OF ECCLESIASTES AND PERSONAL WHOLENESS

RODERICK GRACIANO

Ecclesiastes At A Glance

- Title: *Ecclesiastes*, the Greek near equivalent to the Hebrew word *Qohelet*, which means “preacher, speaker in an assembly.”
- Author: King Solomon, who reigned over Israel roughly from 970 to 930 BC. He presents himself in this work as “the Preacher,” to signal that this is a spiritual teaching rather than a political decree.
- Literary Genre: Wisdom.
- Essential Message: Personal wholeness in life is attained by way of facing the implications of one’s inevitable death, and realizing that only relationships endure.

A Perturbing Book

If you find the book of Ecclesiastes disturbing, or even depressing, you are not alone in feeling such a response. This book, that dismisses so many aspects of our lives as “vanity,” has perturbed many, especially since it seems to have a morbid focus on mourning and death. What is today’s reader to make of a book like this?

It will help readers of the Bible to know that the book of Ecclesiastes is an instance of what is called “wisdom literature.” **Works classified as in the literary genre of “wisdom” are meant to help us make good choices.** Ecclesiastes is specifically meant to help us make

the choices that will lead to personal wholeness, or what today we might call fulfillment in life. To do this, Ecclesiastes presses us to see life and the world from a certain perspective, that is, from particular a worldview. In Ecclesiastes, the author, King Solomon, argues *for* the Yahwistic worldview (a worldview that takes Israel’s God, Yahweh, into account), and *against* a secular or materialistic worldview. So before addressing Solomon’s unhappy “vanity” refrain and dreary focus on death, let’s take a closer look at the concept of “worldview.”

Worldview 101

We do well to consider the matter of *worldview*, because everyone has one, and **our worldview will dictate how we live.** Yes, everyone has a worldview, even though very few people hold their worldview consciously. Normally, a person’s worldview is an unconsciously maintained

mental lens through which he understands his world. That mental lens consists of interwoven personal beliefs and assumptions. Frank Turek says it this way:

A “worldview” is a set of beliefs about the big questions in life, such as: What is ultimate reality? Who are we? What’s the meaning of life? How should we live? What’s our destiny? etc.¹

I add that our worldview is built upon a set of presuppositions, that is, our underlying assumptions that probably include the following:

- **I exist, and so do all the things that I perceive while conscious (not dreaming).**
- **Truth corresponds to reality.**
- **Rational knowledge of my world is possible.**
- **Every effect has a cause.**

Speaking of “the big questions in life,” during my season of teaching college-age young people, I polled my students each new school year about the top question they would like to ask Jesus (were He to step into the room). After tabulating a dozen years’ worth of responses, I realized that all their most concerning questions fell into the seven categories that a thorough worldview should address. Here are those categories:

- 1. Teleology:** What is the purpose and meaning of my life?
- 2. Happiness:** What is the most direct path to true fulfillment?
- 3. Ethics:** What is right and what is wrong?
- 4. Theology:** What is God’s nature and character? (Even an atheistic worldview must address the questions in this category, and explain how the non-existence of a God affects the answers to questions in the other worldview categories.)
- 5. History:** Why has history unfolded as it has, particularly with regard to the evil that is in the world?
- 6. Epistemology:** What forms of knowledge are reliable?
- 7. Ontology:** What is the origin and nature of existence?

With these worldview concerns in mind, we will see in our next reading of Ecclesiastes, that King Solomon, as the Preacher, touches on all seven. However, he particularly deals with number 7, the question of existence, with the aim of helping us with number 2, the question of happiness. He argues that **to understand our existence — and find the path to personal wholeness — we must recognize the sense of eternity that God has placed in our hearts** (Ec 3.11). To put it another way, he teaches that we will never understand the essence of our being if we give supreme importance only to what we can observe “under the sun.” In fact, he warns us that all those things and events, good and bad, that he himself had observed and analyzed “under the sun,” amount to nothing more than *vanity*.

¹ In *Stealing from God* (NavPress, 2014), p. xxi.

Ecclesiastes' Main Motif

Please, let's not trip over this word *vanity*. It is the *main* one of five motif words and phrases, that help unify the book of Ecclesiastes and its message. Let's keep this list in mind:

1. Vanity, Vain²
2. Chase/Strive/Toil After Wind³
3. Under the Sun/Under Heaven⁴
4. Search, Seek, Sought⁵
5. Die, Death, Dead⁶

This list of motif words and phrases should encourage us that Ecclesiastes is a book for seekers (No. 4). It's also a book for people who feel like they've been working hard all their lives with little to show for it (No. 2). Perhaps most of all it's a book for people who fear death and are trying to live in denial of its inevitability (No. 5; we'll say much more about this shortly). But, as we've already mentioned, Ecclesiastes is Solomon's argument that things that exist only "under the sun" (No. 3) are vain (No. 1), and a worldview giving supreme importance to such things will not satisfy.

So, back to the word *vanity*. For many, the word *vanity* evokes little more than giving undue attention to one's physical appearance or social status. However, the Hebrew word Solomon used, הֶבֶל (*hevel*), refers to something else. It's the word for a *vapor* or a *breath*, and by extension this word is used to describe anything that is evanescent. Thus, Solomon labeled as *vain*, everything he saw "under the sun" or "under heaven" that was temporal, ephemeral, transitory, contingent or partial (not whole).

Now, I regretfully recommend that you *avoid reading* Ecclesiastes in the NIV or NLT. Both these Scripture versions do a great job with the other 65 books of the Bible, but with Ecclesiastes the NIV (followed later by the NLT) made one of the worst blunders ever in modern Bible translation. Both the NIV and NLT translate the key word of Ecclesiastes, הֶבֶל (*hevel*), with the anachronistic term *meaningless*. The idea of *meaninglessness* is common to our angst-ridden modern society, but not to Solomon's culture.⁷ We can illustrate the inappropriateness of using *meaningless* to translate Solomon's *vanity* very simply: think of a kiss. A kiss qualifies as short-lived, ephemeral, but it is not *meaningless*. In Ecclesiastes, Solomon does not teach that the things he calls *vanity* are meaningless, but only that they don't last and are not the whole of what life is about.

² Ec 1.2,14; 2.1,11,15,17,19,21,23,26; 3.19; 4.4,7-8,16; 5.6,9; 6.2,4,9,11-12; 7.6,15; 8.10,14; 9.9; 11.8,10; 12.8.

³ Ec 1.14,17; 2.11,17,26; 4.4,6,16; 5.16; 6.9.

⁴ Ec 1.9,13,14; 2.11,17-20,22; 3.16; 4.1,3,7,15; 5.13,18; 6.1,12; 8.9,15,17; 9.6,9,11; 10.5.

⁵ Ec 1.13; 3.6,15; 7.25,28-29; 8.17; 12.9-10.

⁶ Ec 2.16; 3.2,19; 4.2; 5.16; 7.1,17,26; 8.8; 9.3-5

⁷ There is no equivalent term for our word *meaningless* in the Hebrew Scriptures. Where the word *meaningless* appears in the NASB95 translation of Isaiah (29.21; 40.17, 23), it renders the Hebrew word introduced in Genesis 1.2, תֵּהוֹ, *formless, empty*. To express the idea of "meaninglessness," modern Hebrew uses the phrase, חִסְרֵ מַשְׁמָעוּת, *lacking significance*. *Meaning in life* was important to people of antiquity, but they rarely thought of life in general or anything in particular as "meaningless."

TERMS USED IN BIBLE VERSIONS TO TRANSLATE הָבֵלִי IN ECCLESIASTES

REFERENCE	NASB 95	ESV	NKJV	NIV
Ec 1.2,14; 2.11,15,19,21,23,26; 3.19; 4.4,7,8,16; 5.9; 6.2; 12.8	Vanity	Vanity	Vanity	Meaningless
Ec 2.1,17; 6.9; 7.6	Futility	Vanity	Vanity	Meaningless
Ec 5.6	Emptiness	Vanity	Vanity	Meaningless
Ec 6.4	Futility	Vanity	Vanity	Without Meaning
Ec 6.11	Futility	Vanity	Vanity	Less ... Meaning
Ec 6.12	Futile	Vain	Vain	Meaningless
Ec 7.6; 8.10,14; 11.8	Futility	Vanity	Vanity	Meaningless
Ec 7.15	Futility	Vain	Vanity	Meaningless
Ec 9.9	Fleeting	Vain	Vain	Meaningless
Ec 11.10	Fleeting	Vanity	Vanity	Meaningless

Things That Are Vain

The Theme Words Of Ecclesiastes

What specifically are those things that the Preacher calls “vain”? We will find them below, in the list of the secondary *theme words* of the book of Ecclesiastes. Theme words, along with the book’s motif words and phrases already listed above, are vital for grasping the overall message of Ecclesiastes. The composition of this book is the most chaotic of all the books in the Bible. The first few readings of Ecclesiastes give the impression of a hodgepodge of narratives, poems, and proverbs arranged randomly. However, with many readings and careful contemplation, the organization and unity of Ecclesiastes reveals itself through the motif and theme words that connect the varied parts of the book into a cohesive whole. Here are the theme words:

- Wisdom, Wise
- Pleasure
- Labor, Work, Toil
- Money, Riches, Wealth

With the things designated by the above theme words, Solomon who was king in Jerusalem during Israel’s golden era, takes us on a tour of all the ephemeral things that we prize in life. Like today’s billionaires, Solomon had the means to investigate, acquire, experience, or indulge in whatever caught his fancy. So he apparently did, and in the book of Ecclesiastes he reports that all those things are vanity, evanescent vapors. Do you value wisdom (ch. 1)? It’s vanity! Are you pursuing pleasure (ch. 2)? Vanity again! Are you dedicated to your career (ch. 4)? Vanity! Is wealth your goal (ch. 5)? Vanity of vanities!

What's the point? Are wisdom, pleasure, work and wealth wrong? No, neither are they meaningless nor futile. They are simply unworthy of being pursued for their own sake because in and of themselves they are not what life is all about. Let's look more closely at what made something "vain" in Solomon's eyes.

Things That Are Contingent

Solomon would label anything that is contingent as "vain." Contingent things depend upon something else for their existence. This includes everything material. The subatomic particles of every atom of every molecule in the universe are held together by the will of the Son of God (Col 1.17). Should He for a moment lift the infinite reach of His will from upon them, they (and we) would instantly disintegrate back into the nothingness from which He created all things.

When we realize this, we begin to understand that non-contingent things — like God the Son — are *what is most real*. Consider how the resurrected Jesus entered locked rooms (Jn 20.19,26). We can't fathom the technicalities of how He did this, but when people read about it, some wonder if He had become a kind of ghost or vapor-being that seeped through keyholes or wafted under the door. The reality, though, is that He presented Himself in solid form. Apparently, Jesus walked through the walls because He was more real, more solid, than stone and mortar. He walked through walls like we walk through fog. In His glorified state, He is much more solid and real than anything consisting of molecules and atoms held together by His own mind. He, with the rest of the triune godhead, is the one *non-contingent living entity* in the universe. Since He depends upon nothing else for His being, He is the most real and solid thing that exists. In contrast, everything else depends upon something other than itself for its existence, and thus can — and much of it will — finally cease to exist and be lost to us.

Everything That Is Temporal

Not all contingent things will cease to exist, but those that are vain will, for they are also inherently temporal. They will not follow us from time into eternity. If we dedicate our lives wholly and solely to them, we will enter eternity with nothing. "You can't take it with you," we remind one another (cf. Ec 5.15-16). However, that is *not* true of all things; it is only the nature of vain things.

Things That Are Partial

Perhaps the main thing that Solomon the Preacher wants us to understand about vain things is that they are inherently partial. *They are not the whole of life*, but only part of life. As we've already noted, vain things are not in and of themselves what life is all about.

Argentine pastor, Juan Carlos Ortiz illustrated this well with a story about work. Juan Carlos once asked an overly busy man from his congregation, "Why do you work?"

"Why do you think?" the man replied, "to make money."

Juan Carlos pressed him, "Why do you want to make money?"

"Are you crazy? To buy food and gas and stuff like that."

"Why do you want to buy food and gas?" Juan Carlos continued.

"Well, to stay healthy and keep the car going."

"Why do you want to stay healthy and keep the car going?"

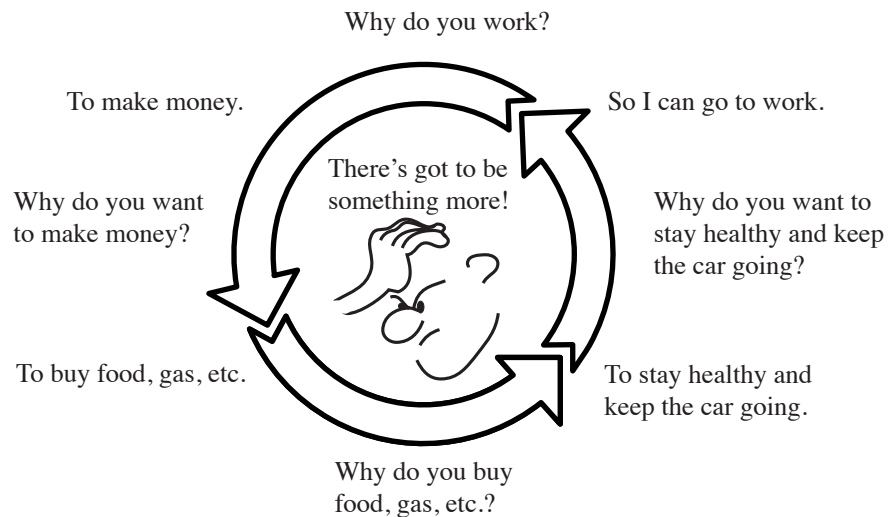
"So I can go to work!"

Like gerbils, too many people live in this kind of occupational treadmill, never escaping from what we can call “The Vain Work Cycle.” Yes, the picture is oversimplified. Real people don’t just work to work. They work toward vacations and retirement. Unfortunately, vacations never fully compensate a person for an otherwise unfulfilling job, and the hoped-for retirement, if attained, often proves as pointless as the preceding career. Some career people look back on a lifetime of striving for the future and realize with regret what John Lennon said in his song, Beautiful Boy: “Life is what happens to you while you’re busy making other plans.” In other words, they realize that while they poured everything into their career, they missed an abundant amount of life going on around them; **their work had been only a part of life, not the whole.** People are truly blessed when they have this realization earlier in life. They see the vanity of work-for-its-own-sake and say to themselves, “There’s got to be something more to life!”

Our Complacency Problem

There is “something more,” but we tend to be lax in our pursuit of it. We think we have “all the time in the world” to worry about the big questions of life. In reality, though, *time is short*, and this is why the Preacher of Ecclesiastes presses his readers to get serious now about what’s most important in life. He does this by reminding them of the inevitability of *death*. “It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting,” he says, “for this [i.e., death] is the end of all mankind, and the living [should] lay it to heart,” (Ec 7.2 ESV).

The Vain Work Cycle



Life is what
happens to
you while
you're busy
making other
plans...

John
Lennon

But death and dying are the *last things* we want to think about. Especially we Americans. In her humorous book, *Brit-Think, Ameri-Think*, Jane Walmsley, an American married to an Englishman, writes,

The single most important thing to know about Americans — the attitude which truly distinguishes them from the British, and explains much superficially odd behavior — is that Americans think that death is optional.... There's a nagging suspicion that you can delay death (or — who knows? — avoid it altogether) if you really try. This explains the common preoccupation with health, aerobics, prune juice, plastic surgery, and education.⁸

We Americans can indeed fixate on trying to increase our longevity! Trends forecaster, Faith Popcorn, called “slowing or reversing the aging process” our “new national pastime.”⁹ If we can't find the fountain of youth, though, we fix our attention on any little thing that promises to enhance the enjoyment of our lives while distracting us from its eventual termination. To use a Kierkegaard phrase, we indulge in “tranquilization by the trivial.” It's people like us, therefore, whom the Preacher of Ecclesiastes goads, as he did his own generation, to face the truly important issue of our departure from this life. He brings his book to its culmination with a haunting poem about death and its precursors (Ec 12.1-7 ESV):

Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before ...
the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened ...,
when the keepers of the house [i.e., muscles] tremble, ...
and the grinders [i.e., teeth] cease because they are few,
and those who look through the windows [i.e., eyes] are dimmed, ...
when the sound of the grinding is low [i.e., hearing fails],
and all the daughters of song are brought low ...
[when] the almond tree blossoms [i.e., the hair turns white],
the grasshopper drags itself along, [i.e.,] desire fails,
because man is going to his eternal home,
and the mourners go about the streets—
[Remember Him] before the silver cord is snapped,
or the golden bowl is broken,
or the pitcher is shattered at the fountain,
or the wheel broken at the cistern,
and the dust returns to the earth as it was,
and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

Notice the four irreparable things of the ancient world named at the end of the poem: silver cord, golden bowl, [clay] pitcher, and [stone] wheel. Broken items of silver or gold could not be glued back together, but would be melted down. Pieces of a broken pitcher could only be thrown on the trash heap to await future archaeologists, and pieces of a stone wheel were probably left where they lay. Solomon urged his readers to act before the irreversible occurred.

People's complacency toward death's proximity and inevitability seems to have burdened him for some time. While the above poem about aging and dying provides the climactic entreaty

⁸ Walmsley, Jane; *Brit-Think, Ameri-Think* (Penguin Viking, 1987), pp. 2,3.

⁹ Popcorn, Faith; *Dictionary of the Future* (Hyperion, 2001), p. 3.

of Solomon's "sermon" in Ecclesiastes, another bit of poetry could well have served as his introduction to the whole book. That fitting introduction appears in the last chapter of Proverbs! The proverbial introduction to Ecclesiastes is easy to miss, but let's take a look at it. We find it in Proverbs 30.15-16 (NASB95):

The leech has two daughters, "Give," and "Give."
There are three things that will not be satisfied,
Four that will not say, "Enough":
Sheol, and the barren womb,
Earth that is never satisfied with water,
And fire that never says, "Enough."

This is one of the Bible's numerical proverbs. This kind of proverb presents multiple points of wisdom, with the intent to emphasize one of those points. To illustrate, consider the refrain of Jim Croce's 1972 tune entitled "You Don't Mess Around With Jim." The song is about a big and mean pool hustler named Jim. The refrain goes,

You don't tug on Superman's cape
You don't spit into the wind
You don't pull the mask off the old Lone Ranger
And you don't mess around with Jim

In the fictional cultural setting of the song, each of the four lines presents good advice, but they lead up to the main counsel of the refrain: "You don't mess around with Jim!"

The numerical proverb about the *Four Things That Are Never Satisfied*, works the same way as Croce's refrain. Primed with an introduction that directs our minds to hypothetical creatures so insatiable that their names are *Give*, the proverb lists four real-world things that never stop wanting something. To appreciate the gravity of this proverb, it will help to imagine its audience as members of an agrarian society in an ancient or developing country. In such a society, people were well familiar with Sheol (i.e., death or the grave) and the fact that it was never satisfied. People understood that a man could never say to himself, "Countless people have died through the ages, so surely Death is satisfied by now and will never come looking for me." Likewise, in a society that so valued offspring as did ancient Israel, it was good advice to tell the husband of a barren wife, "Don't shrug this problem off as no big deal, and think that in time your wife will just get over it." Similarly, in times of drought, a farmer could not say to himself, "My land has soaked up plenty of rain in the past; I don't need to irrigate my crops now." Finally, it is wise to teach both farmer and city dweller that fire is never satisfied. If a corner of the barley field, or of the house, catches fire, the onlookers must not say to themselves, "Fire has consumed so much before now, it must be nearly satisfied; surely it will go out by itself any moment now."

Upon reflection, we realize that this numerical proverb warns *against complacency*. The message is, "Don't be complacent in the face of urgent need." Like all proverbs, this one presents us with a choice: Will you be wise and respond to urgent need, or be foolishly complacent and suffer irretrievable loss? The correct choice is obvious. To grasp the full teaching of this proverb, however, we must take the additional step of discerning the emphasized item.

Two things helped readers of antiquity find the emphasized item of a numerical saying. First, they checked to see which items have to do with people or relationships (biblical wisdom is first and foremost relational). Second, they looked again at the last point and the first. Hebraic literature favors placing the emphasized point last, but will sometimes list it first. Checking our four items in Proverbs 30.15-16, we see that the second item is indeed personal, having to do with barrenness in a marriage. But then, as we look again at the first and last items, we see that the first is also personal, pertaining to every person's inevitable meeting with death, whereas the last item about fire is about a very important but less personal concern. So, is the main item of the four about the barren womb or about Sheol? **It's prominence at the top of the list tells us that the author's main point is that death is never satisfied.** In other words, while one must never be complacent about a wife's emotional agony, nor about drought, nor about fire, the fact is that childlessness, failed crops and burned down barns *can be survived*, but death cannot. The most important wisdom message of this numerical proverb is that **the wise person will never be complacent about death.** He will neither lightly risk his life, *nor postpone pursuing right relationship with his Creator*. Now, *every* item in a numerical proverb presents a true gem of wisdom, so we must not fail to meditate on each item.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the wise reader of this proverb will embrace the most important item, and come to terms with the finitude of this life without delay. Thus, Proverbs 30.15-16 leads us right in to the message of Ecclesiastes.

The “Something More”

The Things That Remain

Once motivated by the inevitability of our death and its possible proximity, we are ready to relinquish our “tranquilization by the trivial,” and seriously pursue the “something more” in life. The Preacher of Ecclesiastes points us to it. The “something more” that we seek is *all that which isn't vain*, in other words, those things that are neither contingent, temporal nor partial. Is there anything that fits this description besides God Himself? Yes, a few things. Long after Solomon's time, the apostle Paul summed them up as the “three things that remain”: faith, hope and love (1Co 13.13). These things are not God Himself, but they are solid, real and enduring because they are aspects of God's eternal nature. They are relevant to us because they are the three legs of the metaphorical chair upon which fruitful relationships repose,¹¹ and relationships are the main thing that we can take with us beyond the grave. Relationship is the one treasure besides God Himself that is not vain,



¹⁰ My friend Rick Dupea has pointed out that in this numerical proverb there is a spiritual warning in the lesser three points: If one does not prepare for death by repentance and faith, his spiritual life becomes barren and dry, and his works are turned to ashes.

¹¹ Any relationship of true value must have trust in its interactions, the expectation of good arising from it, and the assurance of acceptance by the participants: faith, hope and love. The relational chair will fail if any one of these three legs is missing.

assuming it is a relationship that includes Him. Any relationship pursued by God's grace and for Christ's sake has ultimate value because we will be able to enjoy it and deepen it for eternity. Relationships like this *are* "the something more" that we seek.

The Relational Basis For Fulfillment

Put another way, fruitful relationships are the basis for *personal fulfillment*, and where to find this personal fulfillment is what the Preacher of Ecclesiastes drives at, even if not in those words. In Solomon's terms, he wants his readers to know what makes a man *whole*. Admittedly, he used an unusual strategy to get to his point, namely, the strategy of expressing a "scorched earth" pessimism about the approach to life that will *not* make a man whole.¹² The preacher wanted to make sure his readers understood the implications of living only for what's "under the sun," for stuff that "you can't take with you." So, he painted a picture of the awful hopelessness of the secular worldview that values things — even "things" as noble as the pursuit of wisdom — more than relationships. Dramatically, Solomon described the despair of this worldview as if experiencing it himself, and he *probably did* during his season of investigating all the things that the ancients eagerly sought after.

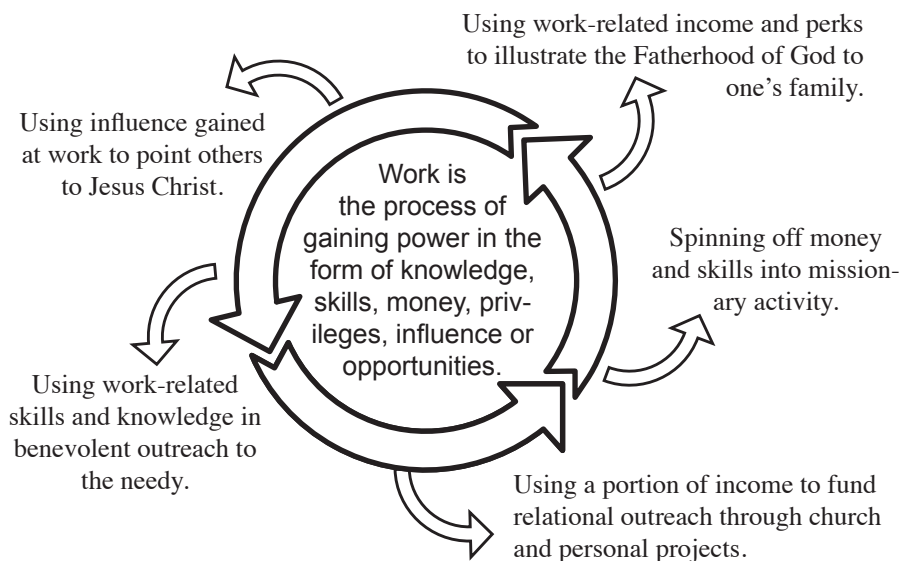
However, having completed his investigation, Solomon refocused on that which is *not* vain and that *will* make a man whole. For him, "personal wholeness" derived from meaning and purpose, just like "fulfillment" does for us. From earliest times, the yearning for meaning and purpose has been universal for all humans who have had the luxury of time for existential contemplation, and the inclination to think about life's big questions. Ironically, though, I have heard people ask, "Why does life have to have meaning and purpose?" This question usually reveals a disingenuous attempt to avoid accountability to a Purpose-Giver, but none who have asked it are truly content to live with a total void of meaning and purpose. Nevertheless, sinful humans are prone to equivocate and procrastinate in dealing with the important questions of life, in spite of the spiritual hunger in their hearts.

Turning From Vanity To Fruitfulness

Crises and other unsettling circumstances can force people to finally face that heart hunger and the need for their life to have meant something. For some, the catalyst arrives in the form of a frightening medical diagnosis. For others, it might take the form of end-of-career aimlessness. We've all heard stories about the man who gave his heart and soul to the company for forty or fifty years, only to receive a gold watch and slice of cake at the office retirement party, and nothing more to show for his labor than a pension. If such a man was like Pastor Juan Carlos' workaholic, "working to work," he might be apt to ask himself if there was anything left for him in life besides waiting to die. Thinking about his mortality as he wanders through the rooms of his quiet house, wondering what to do with himself now that he has no job to report to, he might begin to ask what his life has been worth and if it has had any meaning at all. Sure, he can resort to more "tranquilization by the trivial," but he will find no satisfaction there. If, as has too often been the case, the retired workaholic had alienated his wife and children, haunting "could of, would of, should of"

¹² He does admit to some balancing truth, as in Ec 8.12-13.

The Fruitful Work Cycle



thoughts might tip him toward despair. What alternative approach to life might have brought a happier outlook to such a man's retirement years?

Well, once a person understands the supreme value of fruitful relationships, he can escape the ultimately disappointing treadmill career model. By the grace of God, anyone of us can approach our occupational career in a way illustrated by the

adjacent Fruitful Work Cycle diagram. Having realized that the thing that will give meaning to our occupation is investing in people, we can start using what we gain from our job to enrich relationships. God intends that we gather up the power we gain from our work, be it money, skills, influence or other assets, and use it to move other people toward right relationship with Him and with others. Of course we should apply this principle first in our own homes. The fruit of our labors should enrich the relational life of our own family, without delay. Having first provided for our family, both materially and emotionally, we can then spin off assets to support local ministries, like our church and our own outreach to neighbors and friends. Then we should invest in missions, by participation that is more than financial if possible. As we spin off the fruits of our labor to invest in human relationships that will last forever, we will simultaneously be investing in our relationship with our Creator.

The Whole Message And The Whole Man

The Preacher's Summation

I have a T-shirt that I can't wear anywhere in today's social climate, particularly near any government building or public school. I can't wear it because, even though it has Ecclesiastes 12.13 written out on its back, it summarizes the message of Ecclesiastes on its front with a smiley face and the words, "YOU'RE GONNA DIE." Ecclesiastes *does* emphasize death's inevitability, but thankfully, "you're gonna die" is not the book's whole message; it's only a refrain to goad us toward recognizing the vanities of life, and understanding what will make us whole.



The Preacher sums up his real message in Ecclesiastes 12.13, and I give my translation here:

The conclusion of the message;
the whole *message* has been heard:
Fear God and keep His commandments,
for this *is* the whole of man.

Some Bible versions translate the last clause of Ecclesiastes 12.13 differently, having it say, “for this is the whole duty of everyone.” However, nowhere else in the book of Ecclesiastes do we read anything about “duty,” and inserting the word *duty* where it does not appear in the Hebrew text is grammatically unwarranted. Among our standard English versions, the New King James Version has kept closest to the original Hebrew for the final line of Ecclesiastes 12.13: “For this is man’s all.” The Complete Jewish Bible (CSB) draws out the meaning, rendering it, “this is what being human is all about.” For anyone interested in the technical aspects of translating this clause from the Hebrew, please see “Translating The Final Clause of Ecclesiastes 12.13,” at the end of this document.

What Does Does The Preacher Mean?

The Preacher’s counsel to “fear God” may not at first alleviate the discomfort we already feel while reading Ecclesiastes. However, recall that Solomon has urged us to pursue something *more real and lasting* than the ephemeral things that engage us “under the Sun.” As we’ve said, the most real entity in the universe is our Creator. For this reason, Solomon exhorts us to “fear” Him, using Bible shorthand for, “acknowledge God as your King and live as one of His subjects” (cf. 1Ki; Ps 47.2; Pr 24.21). Submitting ourselves to God in this way, and embracing Him as the *most real* thing in our life, is to make the right choice — as opposed to the wrong choice of living our life without reference to anything higher than what we can see “under the Sun.”

What about the counsel to “keep His commandments”? We must not read this as a charter for somekind of legalism, and much less as an exhortation to try to save ourselves by good works. Wisdom literature provides its readers with principles for maintaining good relationships and for living fruitful lives, not with treatises on the role of law in justification. By encouraging us to keep God’s commandments, Solomon shows his understanding of what Jesus, the “greater than Solomon,”¹³ would later state explicitly, namely, that the two greatest commandments, upon which “the whole law and the Prophets” depended are:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.

You shall love your neighbor as yourself.¹⁴

Regarding strictly human interactions, Jesus said, “In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.”¹⁵ Thus, **keeping God’s commandments boils down to maintaining right relationship with God and man.**

¹³ Mt 12.42.

¹⁴ Mt 22.34-40 (NASB95).

¹⁵ Mt 7.12 (NASB95), emphasis added.

So, by his God-given wisdom, the Preacher of Ecclesiastes concludes with a lovely play on words. Throughout the book he used the Hebrew phrase “all of the man” (כָּל־הָאָדָם) in the sense of “every man” *within a particular subset of humanity*, for example, “every man to whom God has given wealth” (Ec 5.19/Hebrew Bible 5.18). Now, in Ecclesiastes 12.13 he writes,

the whole (הַכֹּל) message has been heard... [and] ... this is the whole (כֹּל) of man.

With the final clause of Ecclesiastes 12.13, Solomon no longer speaks of a subset of humanity, but zeroes in on the very essence of what it is to be a human person, or as the CJB read, on “what being human is all about.” What will make a person *whole*, Solomon says, is to prioritize right relationship with God, which in turn implies prioritizing caring relationships with other people. These twin priorities, the very ones Jesus pointed us to by identifying the two greatest commandments, will allow a man to integrate all the parts of his life — parts which would be vanity by themselves — into a fruitful, meaningful whole. This is the Preacher’s secret for personal wholeness and fulfillment.

Joy In The Times Of Departure

When a person has lived out his years loving God and enriching the lives of others, he experiences joy rather than emptiness when he reaches retirement. He may no longer have a mentally stimulating job to engage in every day, but like the shrewd manager of Jesus’ parable (Lk 16.1-9), he has plenty of people in his life ready to bless and encourage him. Happily, he will be filled with the sense that his life mattered.

Likewise, when such a person’s departure from this life approaches, like the apostle Paul, he will not resent his mortality, but will have the sense that he has successfully finished his race (2Ti 4.6-8). He will know that as good as this life may be, “to die is gain” and to “depart and be with Christ ... is much better” (Php 1.21). I saw this outlook in my dear mother, Verna Mae Graciano. She loved the Lord and had dedicated her life to His service. After years of missionary work and teaching elementary school, she continued to take every opportunity to minister to others. In the final season of her life she often spoke of her joy in the prospect of soon seeing Jesus. **But she loved her life!** I was struck by the seeming paradox: Mom loved the life she had, ministering to family and friends, but was so excited about her departure. Yes, she felt the discomforts of aging, but she did not long for death as an escape from aches and pains — that *was not* why she was excited about her nearing departure!

Dear reader, I wish for you and for myself the kind of fulfilled life that I saw in my Mom, and that we read about in Paul’s epistles. Thanks to the way opened to us by Jesus Christ, this personal wholeness is available to us now, *if* we take the Preacher’s advice and turn to our Creator in faith and repentance, involving the Eternal One in the fabric of our life *without delay*.



Verna, out for Mexican food on her 79th birthday.

Translating The Final Clause of Ecclesiastes 12.13

The Hebrew of the final clause of Ecclesiastes 12.13, if read word-for-word without reference to context or rules of grammar, would say: “... **for this whole of the man.**” However, correctly rendering this clause requires attention to the larger context of Ecclesiastes, along with the following grammatical factors in the verse itself:

1. The state of the word כָּל (“whole/all”), which in this instance is the construct state rather than the absolute state;
2. The presence of the article (“the”) before the word “man/mankind,” making this final noun definite;
3. The joining of the word כָּל (“whole/all”) to the word אָדָם (“man/mankind”) by the long dash called a *maqquph* (כָּל־אָדָם);
4. The Hebrew Bible syntax of the phrase כִּי־זֶה (“for this”; often with *maqquph*);
5. The lack of a preposition before the word אָדָם (“man/mankind”); cf. Ec 2.24; 6.12; 8.15.

When all the exegetical factors are taken into account, we see that:

- The larger context of Ecclesiastes excludes the idea of “duty” as foreign to the text. This makes the insertion of the word *duty* into the final clause of Ecclesiastes 12.13 by the ESV, KJV, NIV, NLT, NRSV and RSV an unwarranted interpolation.
- The insertions into the final clause of Ecclesiastes 12.13 of the preposition *for* by the CSB (“this is **for** all humanity”), and the phrase *applies to* in the NASB, Tanakh, and other Jewish translations (“this **applies to** all mankind”), are unwarranted because of the lack of a preposition in the Hebrew text, where a preposition should appear in order to produce these readings.
- In biblical usage, the phrase כִּי־זֶה (“for this”) without following terms that build the word *this* into a noun phrase, e.g. **this two-year famine** (Ge 45.6), requires the reader to mentally insert the verb *is* immediately after the word *this*.
- When the word כָּל (“whole”) in construct state (indicated in Ec 12.13 by its short vowel and a *maqquph*) is followed by a definite noun, it means *whole* or *all*, and the definite article of the noun can migrate backwards in translation to stand before the word *whole*. Thus, in Genesis 1.29, the Hebrew phrase *all-the-earth* translates into English as *the whole earth* (NIV84).

Therefore, the relevant rules support the following translations of the final clause of Ecclesiastes 12.13:

- CJB: “this is what being human is all about.”
- D. A. Garrett (*New American Commentary*): “for this is the whole of humanity.”
- J. J. Owens (*Analytical Key to the Old Testament*): “for this is the wholeness of man.”
- LXX (Septuagint) and LES (*Lexham English Septuagint*): ὅτι τοῦτο πᾶς ὁ ἄνθρωπος = “for this is the whole person.”
- NKJV: “For this is man’s all.”
- P. G. Ryken (*Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*): ““this is the whole of man.”
- RVR95: “Porque esto es el todo del hombre,” = “because this is the whole of the man.”