

Ecclesiastes Illustrations-Today in the Word

Ecclesiastes 1

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Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

TODAY IN THE WORD

In his book [Leap Over a Wall: Earthy Spirituality for Everyday Christians](#) author Eugene Peterson writes of the spirituality of work. He points out that as important as sanctuary is for our spiritual life, it isn't the primary context that God uses for our day-to-day spiritual development. "Work," Peterson observes, "is the primary context for our spirituality."

This may come as a shock to some of us. Many believers have asked the question raised in Eccl 1:3 of today's reading: "What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun?" Thankfully, the answer is found throughout the Scriptures. Men and women were created to work because they were created in God's image and God is a worker. The wonders of creation are called the "works" of His hand (Ps. 8:6). That's not all—according to Jesus, God continues to work "to this very day" (John 5:17). Clearly, work itself is not a consequence of sin, since we find God Himself embracing work.

Jesus, too, was no stranger to the world of work. Prior to beginning His public ministry, the Savior submitted Himself to the daily grind. Jesus did not merely dabble in work—He became so proficient in the vocation of His earthly father Joseph that others knew Him as a carpenter long before they knew Him as a rabbi (Mark 6:3). The dignity of work is seen in the fact that our Lord didn't think it beneath Him to work for a living.

The apostle Paul also worked, supporting himself as a tentmaker during his apostolic ministry (Acts 18:3; 1 Cor. 4:12). What is more, Paul commanded the church to follow his example. Believers are to work so that they will not have to steal and will have something to share with those who are in need (Acts 20:34-35; Eph. 4:28)

Trusting God's unfailing love for us means trusting Him to know the best way to respond to our prayers. At times God's best answer may be to refuse our request. Take a few extra minutes to read the following passages: Deuteronomy 3:23-28; Matthew 26:38-46; and 2 Corinthians 12:7-10. What is the nature of the request in each case? How does God answer? Why do you think He responds in this way? When you are finished, spend some time in prayer thanking God for His unfailing love. Thank Him for loving you enough to say "no."

HEALTHY, WEALTHY, AND WISE? "If I were a rich man," muses Tevye, the main character of [Fiddler on the Roof](#), as he contemplates his sorry lot in life. For years, men and women have echoed his sentiments. If only we were richer, wiser, more powerful, more attractive . . . then, certainly, we would be happy. If we are honest, we realize this is not the case. In our study of Ecclesiastes this month, we will follow a frustrating search personified by King Solomon. He seems to have it all: he was richer than Bill Gates; beautiful women were at his beck and call; and he held the most powerful position in his kingdom. Yet, in the end, he evaluates his success and labels it all "vanity" (KJV) or "meaningless" (Eccl. 1:2, NIV). Looking back at his success, he concludes that the pleasures of this world are profoundly unsatisfying, and mere "chasing after the wind" (Eccl. 2:11). U.S. industrialist and philanthropist [Andrew Carnegie](#), once considered the richest man in the world, reached a similar conclusion. Carnegie writes,

"The amassing of wealth is one of the worst species of idolatry. No idol is more debasing than the worship of money. . . . To continue much longer overwhelmed by business cares and with most of my thoughts wholly upon the way to make more money in the shortest time, must degrade me beyond hope of permanent recovery."

Ed Comment: Here is an interesting note on Carnegie from Wikipedia - During the last 18 years of his life, he gave away to charities, foundations, and universities about \$350 million (in 2015 share of GDP, \$78.6 billion) – almost 90 percent of his fortune. His 1889 article proclaiming "[The Gospel of Wealth](#)" called on the rich to use their wealth to improve society, and it stimulated a wave of philanthropy.

This same problem troubles many of us today. Even as Americans increase their standard of living, experts do not see the overall sense of happiness increasing. We might ask: won't we be happier as our bank balance increases? "Not necessarily," warns Richard A. Easterlin, an economist at the University of Southern California. He explains that as our individual wealth has increased, our perception of the amount of money we require to be happy also rises. Easterlin concludes: "There has been no improvement in

average happiness in the United States over almost a half century . . .” It seems, that we are never truly satisfied. Is it human nature? It seems that the more we get—the more we want. (**Ed:** See **Topic: Contentment**) Certainly, for Solomon, a pressure to keep accumulating money and women marked his life. Yet, as he reflects on this pressure-filled life, he finds it marked by unhappiness: “Meaningless! Meaningless!” (Eccl 12:8). We have a tough challenge ahead of us. Modern-day advertising taunts us at every corner. It implies that happiness is ours, if we can pay the right price. If we have just a little more money, we can buy the right clothing, the right car, and the bigger house. Then we will be truly happy . . . or will we? The conclusion of Ecclesiastes issues a stern warning and a wise direction. We are to “fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man” (Eccl 12:13). (Joe Stowell)

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11 IS THIS ALL THERE IS? “Is that all there is?” [The question was hauntingly sung by Peggy Lee in her 1969 hit](#). The chorus asks, “Is that all there is? Is that all there is? If that’s all there is, my friends, then let’s keep dancing.” For as long as people have walked the earth, they have searched for the meaning of life. What is our purpose? Why are we here? Two Old Testament books, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs (or Song of Solomon) pose that question—and provide two very different but complementary answers. Ecclesiastes frames the answer by focusing on the mind. What is our reason for being? How can we understand our existence? When we study the Song of Songs, we will move from the mind to the heart. We are made to reason and think, but also to love and be loved. Ecclesiastes 1:1 identifies the author as “the Teacher,” who is a son of David and king in Jerusalem. The book has traditionally been attributed to Solomon. He declares the book’s purpose in Eccl 1:2, saying that everything is meaningless, “utterly meaningless.” The Teacher outlines a philosophy of life—that is, life “under the sun” (Eccl 1:3). Make a note of this phrase, which will appear throughout the book. He distinguishes the earthly existence from the eternal. He describes life “under the sun” as a cycle, transitory, and impermanent. People are born and then die. Even nature reflects this. Life is like a vapor: it cannot be contained and finally vanishes—almost like it never existed at all. For those who believe that our earthly existence is all there is, life’s purpose is not easily apparent. Life under the sun can feel exhausting. Many search for fulfillment in experiences or in another person. This book will lead us on a quest to find answers to our existence. Look at the use of imagery in today’s passage, specifically the examples of the cycle of life. Much of our lives are reflected in this kind of repetition. As you go about your daily activities, be mindful of the types of things you do repetitively: brushing teeth, making your bed, etc. Ask God to help you see beyond these repetitive tasks to your divine purpose. Please uphold in prayer the ministry of Dr. Junias Venugopal, provost and dean of education at Moody. Would you pray for the Holy Spirit’s leading as he and his team serve our students to provide them with solid biblical training?

WHEN WORK SEEMS MEANINGLESS Ecclesiastes 1

What do people gain from all their labors at which they toil under the sun? Ecclesiastes 1:3 - It’s been reported that after the Dallas Cowboys won their first Super Bowl, legendary football coach Tom Landry observed, “The overwhelming emotion—in a few days, among the players—was how empty that goal was. There must be something more.”

The Cowboys were not the first ones to learn that great professional success isn’t necessarily coupled with deep satisfaction. The author of Ecclesiastes reminds us this is an ancient experience. He was the king of Israel and yet writes: “I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind” (Eccl 1:14).

He is a conflicted soul as demonstrated via his arguments, often with himself, throughout the book of Ecclesiastes. It is particularly acute where work is concerned. In Ecclesiastes 2:11 he writes, “Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.” In Eccl we read, “I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God,” (Eccl 3:12–13). But that optimism is short-lived: “And I saw that all toil and all achievement spring from one person’s envy of another. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind” (Eccl 4:4).

Many people resonate with this cycle of enthusiasm and despair regarding their own labor. But the inclusion of this book in the Bible teaches us that God hears our troubles, that He acknowledges them, that He is not indifferent to the small frictions that loom large in our lives.

APPLY THE WORD - The phrase “under the sun” appears in this book 29 times. Does this reinforce the pointlessness of work with an image of the sun circling endlessly across the sky while nothing ever changes? Or does it refer to a world beyond the Fall, not “under the sun,” where work would not be in vain? Keep this question in mind as you read Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

TODAY IN THE WORD

What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun? - Ecclesiastes 1:3

In one of the first scenes in *The Lion King*, Disney’s biggest hit movie of the 1990s, the king of beasts teaches his son that a good king must show respect for every creature, from the ant to the antelope. His son inquires, “But, Dad, don’t we eat the antelope?” His father replies, “Yes, but let me explain. When we die, our bodies become the grass. And the antelope eat the grass. And so we are

all connected in the great Circle of Life.”

New Age philosophy? Certainly. But the author of Ecclesiastes would likely have dismissed this twentieth-century thought as “nothing new” and “meaningless.” Today’s reading takes us through the Teacher’s summary observations and conclusions, and he doesn’t seem to think the so-called “circle of life” is such a great thing. He categorizes the cycles of the earth as “utterly meaningless” (Ecclesiastes 1:2) and “wearisome” (Ecclesiastes 1:8). Take particular note of the description in verse 6, as the phrase “chasing after the wind” is repeated often throughout the book. Ecclesiastes paints the picture of life as a frustrating, circuitous course that ends right where it begins.

The rhetorical question about the profit of a man’s labor (Eccl 1:3) and the hopeless conclusion about man being remembered after his lifetime (Eccl 1:11) bring a sobering poignancy when applied to the events that followed Solomon’s life. His projects were astounding and his rule was the greatest Israel ever knew. But after his death, Solomon’s legacy became almost immediately irrelevant when his son, Rehoboam, rejected his father’s advisors in favor of the counsel of his younger friends (1 Kings 12:8). It wasn’t long before the throne of Israel was no longer his (1 Kings 12:20).

This is a good place to remind ourselves that our purpose in studying Ecclesiastes is not to judge the life of Solomon—we want to turn the light of God’s Word onto our lives and into our hearts!

Ecclesiastes 1:9

New appliances in the 1950s promised housewives a new identity. A new washer or dryer, mint–green electric stove, or upright vacuum cleaner would define her as competent and accomplished—and in addition, make her happy. The allure of these shiny new household objects was short–lived. Beneath the glitz of a new Frigidaire was merely the reality of daily work. Laundry still needed to be washed, another meal to be cooked, a dirty floor to be cleaned. The cycle of work was endless. Our study this month (May, 2010) will examine the ways that we define our identity and find meaning and value in our lives. As we study some of the promises of the world to bring meaning to our lives, we’ll also see what God’s Word says about our worth and true identity. In the book of Ecclesiastes, we read a record of this profound search for the meaning of life. Why am I here? What pleasure is there in this life? Is life “meaningless” (Eccl 1:2), or is there a purpose under heaven? The search for life’s meaning plays a key role in our search for identity. Some people find identity in their career, hoping to be fulfilled as a doctor, a teacher, or a lawyer. They might conclude, I am good at football—so I will be a football star. What happens to the star’s identity when what he does is no longer an option? If a teacher has no class to teach, or if a doctor has retired from practice, can he or she maintain an identity? Ecclesiastes aptly describes the cycle of life with its repetition and continuity. “Generations come and generations go” (Eccl 1:4). Even a great king or the richest man on earth is but one player in the rolling tide of generations. Even when you achieve wealth or glory or fame, life can seem meaningless. Finding our identity in a career is building a life on a shaky foundation. Jobs end. Skills decline. And subsequent generations may never remember our accomplishments. We need to look elsewhere for the ultimate source of our identity and worth.

APPLY THE WORD - It’s one of the most frequently asked questions: What do you do? Our culture tempts us to equate our identity and value with what we do for a living. Career accomplishments or the size of our paycheck are barometers of our success. But as Ecclesiastes reminds us, in the scope of the universe, this could be meaningless. During your time of prayer today, ask the Lord to show you the way that He values your life and desires to shape your identity, and ask for an eternal perspective.

Ecclesiastes 1:12-18

TODAY IN THE WORD

For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief. - Ecclesiastes 1:18

Growing up on the Mississippi, the mystery and wonder of the river enthralled Mark Twain. In his book, *Life on the Mississippi*, Twain notes that after realizing his dream of becoming a steamboat pilot and learning to read every detail of the river and its banks, the mystery faded. He compares this loss of wonder to how a physician would see a beautiful woman.

“Are not all her visible charms sown thick with what are to him the signs and symbols of hidden decay? Does he ever see her beauty at all, or doesn’t he simply view her professionally, and comment upon her unwholesome condition all to himself? And doesn’t he some-times wonder whether he has gained or lost most by learning his trade?”

Solomon’s field of expertise was life. He studied “all the things that are done under heaven” (Ecclesiastes 1:14). So if it’s true that much study yields a bland familiarity—a steamboat pilot can’t see the beauty of a river sunset and a doctor can’t appreciate the beauty of a woman’s face—then Solomon, an expert in everything, should be pitied above all, for he can’t see the beauty of anything!

Even though he admits in verse 16 that his knowledge and wisdom exceeded that of all the rulers Jerusalem had ever known, today's reading shows the limited boundaries of the wisdom to which Solomon refers. It's the phrase that's repeated over and over throughout Ecclesiastes: "under the sun" or "under heaven." Solomon knew that he could not know God with the same comprehensive wisdom with which he understood life on earth. During his dedication speech for the temple, Solomon acknowledged that God exceeded the confines of even the highest heavens (1 Kings 8:27). So he understood that the world "under the sun" did not encompass the full glory of God.

When examined in small portions, Ecclesiastes might give us a snapshot of wisdom that appears blurry or confusing. To take in the full impact of the wisdom of this book, it's best to read it through in one sitting. Pay attention to the emotions in the words as you read. Have you ever felt the way the Teacher does about life? Think about what Christ adds to the picture, and how these perspectives and emotions might change. As you go through the day, consider how your outlook on life resembles or differs from the mindset of Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes 1:12-18 KNOWLEDGE BRINGS GRIEF - Many equate wisdom with success. Going to an Ivy-League university and earning the highest academic degree means we are among the intellectual elite of our nation and the world. Solomon himself had wisdom and success. After Solomon succeeded his father, David, to the throne of Israel, God said to him, "Ask for whatever you want me to give you" (1 Kings 3:5). Recognizing the difficulty of the task before him, Solomon asked for a "discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong" (1 Kings 3:9). This answer pleases God. Rather than asking for power or for wealth, Solomon asks for wisdom. From the very first pages of Scripture, we know that God's wisdom is different from human knowledge. The pursuit of knowledge in and of itself does not bring happiness. Satan tempted Eve with fruit from the tree that would bring knowledge of good and evil (see Genesis 3). Solomon here comments on the lack of contentment that comes from the sphere of the mind. He compares human knowledge to a "heavy burden" (Eccl. 1:13). Once again, we see the phrase "under the sun" (v. 14). Solomon, with his knowledge and worldly experiences, finds the pursuit of the intellect exhausting. Acquiring knowledge for its own sake is never-ending, tiring, and meaningless. This end goal produces "madness and folly" (v. 17). A distinction is made between knowledge and happiness. We sometimes describe a miserable person as one who "knows too much." Knowing more does not necessarily make us content or happy. It can bring sorrow as we grasp the pain and sinfulness of this world. What is the difference between wisdom and knowledge? Wisdom emphasizes the discernment of right and wrong, not just acquiring facts. Pray that God will give you His wisdom to process the knowledge of this world that can overwhelm us each day. Ask God to help you see life that extends beyond our earthly limitations. It's a joy to give thanks to God for our students and lift them up in prayer. Please join us as we pray for our undergraduate and seminary students on Moody's three campuses: Chicago, IL; Spokane, WA; and Plymouth, MI.

Ecclesiastes 2

Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

TODAY IN THE WORD

Everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun. - Ecclesiastes 2:11

Epicurus was a Greek philosopher born in 341 b.c. Pleasure was the key word in his thinking. He defined philosophy as "the art of making life happy" and said the purpose of life was personal happiness. He did advocate the pursuit of virtue and reasoned that right behavior brought people the highest pleasures.

Despite the noble goal of virtue, "epicureanism" now means "a refined and calculating selfishness, seeking not power or fame, but the pleasures of sense, particularly of the palate, and those in company rather than solitude."

The author of Ecclesiastes could have taught Epicurus a thing or two about pleasure. We've been examining biblical principles concerning beauty and creativity, but in the area of leisure we need to scrutinize pleasure as well. We've already learned that God is the creator of all true pleasure and that pleasure is His gift--now we must ask how sin affects this truth.

Ecclesiastes tells the story of the search for meaning and purpose in life. In today's reading, we read an account of experimentation: "I refused my heart no pleasure" (Eccl 2:10). There's a description of various forms--partying with his friends, delightful projects such as parks and orchards, and accumulating possessions. The latter included pleasures such as music and sex. In short, he enjoyed all "the delights of the heart of man" (Eccl 2:8)--the pleasures of sex, wealth, nature, and achievement.

But it wasn't enough. Inspected under the light of wisdom, these pursuits proved "meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing

was gained" (Eccl 2:3, 11). As ends in themselves--as experiences sought for self-centered reasons--these pleasures failed to satisfy. They were inadequate to meet life's deepest needs.

Is your neighbor or co-worker an "epicurean"? Do they seem to be consumed with the pursuit of pleasure in a world that doesn't include God? American culture being what it is, probably each one of us knows at least one person like this.

Ecclesiastes 2:1-11 THE PURSUIT OF PLEASURE - Elvis Aaron Presley, nicknamed the King of Rock and Roll, rose from poverty to fame in the 1950s. He built his Graceland mansion in Memphis, Tennessee. His songs topped the charts, and he starred in Hollywood movies. His fame and riches seemed to know no end, and he became recognized for his extravagant lifestyle, paying cash for Cadillacs and private airplanes. But all of his riches could not buy happiness. Twenty years later, Elvis's life spiraled out of control, and in 1973 he died of a drug overdose, leaving everything he had so carefully acquired. Centuries earlier, King Solomon discovered the same truth. Earthly riches cannot satisfy. Even the acquisition of all of life's pleasures can leave a person empty and longing for more. The king had acquired everything his heart could possibly desire. Solomon was known for his 700 wives and 300 concubines (1 Kings 11:1-7). He built vast homes and vineyards. He acquired people and animals. He stockpiled gold, silver, and treasures. Certainly, most would assume, this type of extravagant wealth would result in happiness. Yet the more he acquired, the more he was dissatisfied. He describes possessions, activities, and entertainment. He wanted his mind and hands to be busy and all of his senses delighted. But it was never enough. "I denied myself nothing," said Solomon (Eccl 2:10). Throughout Scripture, we see this trait of humankind: the sinful desire to have more. Consider Adam and Eve gazing at the Tree of Knowledge, or Lot, nephew of Abraham, looking at the land forbidden him. This sin is reflected in the Ten Commandments that tell us not to covet our neighbor's house or wife. Solomon learned this lesson well. No matter how much we manage to acquire, it will never seem enough. Each of us has a private wish list—things we desire that seem out of our reach. While these things are not necessarily bad, we must realize that even when we acquire them, they will not bring fulfillment and happiness. A life centered on possessions implies that this existence "under the sun" is all there is. Pray that God will help you see life through His eyes. For the next three days please pray for faculty and staff of Moody's Spokane campus. Thank the Lord for the lives touched and changed by the ministry of Jack Lewis, Daniel Churchwell, Wendy Liddell, Nathanael Schey, Carolyn Fisher, and R.J. Thompson.

Ecclesiastes 2:1-12, 24-26

TODAY IN THE WORD

To the man who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness - Ecclesiastes 2:26

In *A Complete Guide to Managing Your Money*, Larry Burkett writes, ""According to our attitude, wealth can be creative--it can be used to spread God's Word, build hospitals and churches, feed the poor, or take care of orphans. Or it can be wasted--spent on frivolous activities, lavish living, gambling or other foolish activity...The importance of money to God is that for this small sliver of time in which we are living He wants us to use it to help determine our usefulness to Him throughout eternity.""

Burkett lays out the opposite ends of the spectrum pretty clearly when it comes to the use of wealth. Our goal is to use wealth creatively, the way he describes. The fact is that even if we suddenly decided to pursue lavish living, very few of us would have the finances to accomplish it.

But Solomon didn't have that limitation. This king, who was famous for his wisdom and his wealth, decided to use his wealth to increase his wisdom. The path Solomon followed ""to find out what is good"" (Eccl 2:1) was pleasure, self-indulgence, and great accomplishments--and he left nothing off the list. The king did everything he could to pursue ""the delights of the heart of man"" (Eccl 2:8).

The Holy Spirit inspired Solomon to share his experiences with us. When we're reading the book of Ecclesiastes, we have to be careful not to jump to conclusions too quickly, because we don't have Solomon's final word on life until we've read the last verse. Life is not a futile, meaningless chasing after wind when we look to God.

Solomon himself drew some preliminary conclusions at various points in the book, and this is one of them. He tried it all in search of the so-called good life, and it all left him empty. Therefore, according to Solomon, we can scratch pleasure, indulgence, and achievements off the list of things that, in and of themselves, have the power to satisfy us and please God.

For people who want to be good stewards of God's gifts, this is valuable information. Let's take the advice of someone who went to the extreme and came back to tell us about his experience. Real enjoyment is a gift only God can give.

Life really does boil down to two basic choices. We can live either to please ourselves or to please God.

God's Word gives us a tremendous advantage in making that choice, because it shows us the results of each path. Self-indulgence

is a dead-end, but living to please God produces the gifts listed in today's verse. In fact, when you open your Bible every day, you have the secret to finding these gifts. How are you doing in keeping your daily appointment with the Lord?

Ecclesiastes 2:1-9

TODAY IN THE WORD

I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. -

Estimates of Bill Gates's net worth range upwards of \$30 billion, his house has about one and a half acres of total living space, and he continues to work feverishly to improve his business—Microsoft dedicated \$6.8 billion this fiscal year alone for research and development. Who can imagine being so wealthy, let alone the prospect of getting richer! If we were to compare any of our lives to Bill Gates's life, we probably wouldn't expect to find much in common.

And that can be our reaction when we read today's passage as well. It's easy to imagine the life of a king as some distant, fantastic dreamland that bears no resemblance to our own. But a closer look at this passage reveals a striking similarity to the life of a typical, everyday person . . . just carried out to an extreme degree.

Eccl 2:1–3 summarize the search for the good in life through selfish measures, and verses 4–8 show the details of the three main categories of the search: projects, possessions, and pleasures.

The projects described here don't seem to resemble an ongoing job or trade as much as leisure projects. The house-building, tree-planting, and reservoir-constructing in Ecclesiastes might correspond to a new shed, some tomatoes, and a sprinkler system in your backyard--on a grander scale than we're used to, certainly, but the intended result of personal enjoyment is the same.

Although we can't identify with the amount (or even the nature) of possessions listed in Ecclesiastes 2:7–8, everyone at one time or another has bought something with the hope that it would make life a bit more enjoyable.

Can you say, as Ecclesiastes 2:9 does, that your wisdom has stayed with you through it all? It's far too easy to use up our leisure time without thinking seriously about what we're doing.

Ecclesiastes 2:10-26

TODAY IN THE WORD

My heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward of all my labor. - Ecclesiastes 2:10b

Sixteen people working at an elementary school in Holdingford, Minnesota—fifteen lunch ladies and one custodian—hit the jackpot with a winning lottery ticket last year, collecting about \$2 million each. Only two of them retired. Serving food to little children, and cleaning up after them, may not be the most glamorous work, but these women love what they do too much to quit. One of them said that the main drawback of winning the money was that “you get more headaches.”

Imagine that—they love being surrounded all day by hundreds of kids, but millions of dollars make their heads hurt.

Solomon could have appreciated that attitude. He says in Ecclesiastes 2:10 of today's reading that the main reward of his labor, even more than the vast luxury his work produced, was the delight he got from working. He essentially repeats that sentiment in verse 24, noting that such happiness comes from God. But the rest of this passage reveals the far less optimistic conclusion that, in the end, there is no lasting earthly reward for all man's labor (Ecclesiastes 2:11).

This view, though, produced more than a headache. He sees that although a wise man is better than a fool, death awaits them both (Ecclesiastes 2:12-16). He then calls attention to the end result of great accomplishments, that a man must pass on his work to a successor with no assurance of its continuation (Ecclesiastes 2:18–21). This seems like a fitting attitude for someone who knew his kingdom would be stripped from his son (1 Kings 11:11–12). Solomon, it seems, finds no lasting reward for a life of painful, restless labor (Ecclesiastes 2:22-23). Ecclesiastes 2:17 stands out as a particularly harsh conclusion. What more could one man ask for than the life Solomon had enjoyed? If he “hated life,” what does that say about the worth of earthly pleasures?

Are you satisfied? If not, ask God to adjust your attitude and obedience. In Eccl 2:24, the phrase is “find satisfaction in his work,” not “find satisfying work.”

Ecclesiastes 2:12ff Nest Eggs The rich get richer and the poor get poorer—and it seems that compound interest would virtually guarantee it! Not so, according to investment counselor David Dreman. Writing in *Forbes* magazine, Dreman noted that most large fortunes diminish and sometimes disappear in only two or three generations. He observed, “Why most nest eggs dissipate over time

is a major problem..." (Today in the Word)

Ecclesiastes 2:12-16 THE WISE AND THE FOOL - The book of Proverbs, most of which is also attributed to King Solomon, is referred to as Wisdom Literature in the Old Testament. These books center around wise sayings and advice on how to live one's life. In Proverbs, the advice often takes the form of a couplet called in Hebrew a *mashal*, meaning a comparison. For example, the acts of a wise man can be contrasted with the deeds of a fool. Listeners are encouraged to learn from these comparisons and to choose the wise way of living. Here, Solomon reflects on the value of wisdom. As we remember, wisdom was the request Solomon made of God, and a "wise" request it was. He wanted to be gifted with intelligence and common sense. He wanted to view the ordinary decisions of life through God's perspective. For that reason, he would long be remembered as a wise king and judge. In this passage, the Bible notes that a life of wisdom has distinct advantages. It is "better than folly" (Eccl 2:13). Solomon compared foolishness to walking in the dark—being unable to discern what might trip you or get in your way. Wisdom is able to see ahead and consider the consequences. But the passage then takes a pessimistic turn. If wisdom is truly the purpose of life—to gain it and to use it—then why do both fools and wise men perish? Both meet the same fate. "Like the fool, the wise too must die!" (Eccl 2:16). Is wisdom bad? No. Wise choices provide a better life on this earth. But even wisdom in and of itself should not be the end goal of our lives. Solomon reminded us that both the wise and the fool will one day be forgotten. Wisdom alone does not promise eternal reward or satisfaction. While wisdom cannot guarantee eternal satisfaction, it is definitely helpful in navigating the paths of day-to-day life "under the sun." Many people read one proverb a day as a way of digesting the wealth of advice in Solomon's book of wisdom. Consider adding this to your daily routine. A proverb a day is a good habit to form. As we continue to uphold in prayer Moody-Spokane, please add these professors to your prayer list: Jonathan Armstrong, Craig Ferderer, Robert Jenks, John McMath, and Joshua Malone. May God bless their ministry to students.

Ecclesiastes 2:17-26 THE MISFORTUNE OF FORTUNE - Warren Buffett caused controversy among his heirs when he pledged \$31 billion, 99 percent of his fortune, to the Bill Gates Foundation. Buffett said the wealthy should not leave their children enormous fortunes. They should have enough money to do anything they want, but not so much that they are doomed to do nothing at all. He wanted his heirs to know the value of work. In this section, Solomon contemplated the result of work: "What is the purpose?" Some people work to leave behind a fortune. But, the author challenged, what if the people who inherit that fortune squander it all? The result would seem to prove that hard work is meaningless. This lack of reward for a life well-lived embittered Solomon. "So I hated life," he wrote (Eccl 2:17). Solomon described all the ways he had tried to make his life fulfilling. He asked God for wisdom. He acquired power and influence and stature. He earned more money than he could spend. He indulged in every delight: women, wine, and song. He completed industrious projects. He realized that there was no true satisfaction in any of it. Solomon, whose accomplishments impressed his people, concluded with a few possible answers. He again uses that important phrase: "under the sun." In this earthly existence, a person can find temporal satisfaction from pleasures and achievement. Yet we must recognize that each of these is a gift from God. As the Creator of all things in heaven and earth, God is the only true source of "wisdom, knowledge and happiness" (v. 26). While a good work ethic is not viewed as a negative quality, we must remember that God did not intend any of these activities to be an end in themselves. There is more to life than work. Have you considered what you will leave to your heirs? While most of us have not acquired great fortunes, we have other valuable things to leave behind: a cherished recipe, a favorite book, or a treasured photo album. Even better is the example of a life well-lived for God. As you serve Him in this life "under the sun," build up a godly inheritance. Concluding our prayers for Moody-Spokane, please support in prayer professors Jennifer Mills, Michael Orr, Christopher Rappazini, Floyd Schneider, and Gerald Vreeland. Pray that they would exalt Christ in every aspect of their teaching.

Ecclesiastes 2:24-26

TODAY IN THE WORD

One medical expert has said that the pervasive presence of cell phones, fax machines, beepers, and other devices has created a situation in which many people are working twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, even when they're not technically at work. The expert calls this a formula for "first-class exhaustion." The same publication reported the case of a young man who collapsed on his couch in total exhaustion and slept for a full week after graduating from business school!

If a week's worth of napping on the couch sounds like a good idea to you, you also may be suffering from mental and physical exhaustion. This graduate's case may not be as isolated as it sounds at first. There are many people who need to take a week off and do something to regain their strength. Summer vacations used to help, but now they often seem to be as frantic as the rest of the year.

We can't give you a week off, but we can go to the Word and spend a week with practical and refreshing advice on how to bring some biblical balance to life. You may want to use a bookmark to keep your place in Ecclesiastes, because we are going to be in this fascinating book for the next seven days.

You may be a real fan of Ecclesiastes, or among those who find it puzzling and pessimistic. What's interesting is that although

Solomon did have much to say about the futility of life in general and work in particular, his conclusions at the end of each section are invariably upbeat and even encouraging. We're going to study these wise pieces of advice.

It has been said that only Solomon could have written this book. Talk about the dream job--the wisest and richest person on earth, and a greatly admired king. Most people have a hard time believing someone like Solomon would be unable to sleep because of mental and spiritual distress (Eccl 2:23).

What is the most satisfying part of your work? Have you ever thought of making it the focus of your praise for a day?

Ecclesiastes 2:24-26; 5:18-20

TODAY IN THE WORD

Buddy Pilgrim, who is a founder of Integrity Leadership and a former corporate executive, says the most important principle for Christians who want to enjoy biblical success in the workplace is to have a sense of God's calling in their vocation.

That sounds very good; but in the day-to-day business of work it's much more difficult to keep this perspective. Millions of people "punch a clock" on the job every day with little or no sense of a higher purpose to their work. The sad thing is that there are many Christians among those millions. But God is intensely interested in how we handle the occupation that consumes most of our waking hours from Monday to Friday.

The book of Ecclesiastes emphasizes God's involvement in our work from the standpoint of finding satisfaction in what we do. This kind of contentment is a gift from God, the Bible says, and it comes most readily to those who sense His calling and His blessing on their work.

Because our job is such a big part of our responsibility to manage God's resources, it's important that we find out what He has equipped and called us to do. As Larry Burkett says, "If 5 p.m. on Friday is the best part of your week and 8 a.m. on Monday is your worst, God probably has something else in mind for you." God's will for us is fulfillment, not frustration, in our work.

The great thing about biblical principles of work is that they apply to all of us, whether we manage a multinational corporation or a household. Qualities such as honesty, integrity, and diligence are basic to being good managers of God's gift of meaningful work--and by the way, there's no such thing as meaningless "busy work" in God's kingdom!

Another side of this issue is making sure we use our God-given abilities and interests to the full. For some of us, that may mean staying where we are and praising God for His clear leading. Other believers may want to consider some Christian-based career testing that would help them identify the best way to use the gifts and talents God has entrusted to them.

Whatever the case, it is God's will that we as His children enjoy our work, and use it to further His kingdom--for His glory and our eternal benefit.

Larry Burkett's ministry, Christian Financial Concepts, has much helpful, Bible-based material on the subject of work.

You'll find information on this topic in your local Christian bookstore. If you have older teenagers, we especially encourage you to procure a career guidance system that can help them find God's direction. And wherever you will go tomorrow to report for work, why not stop right now to thank God for your job, and ask Him to help you fulfill today's verse this week in your work?

Ecclesiastes 3

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

TODAY IN THE WORD

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven. - Ecclesiastes 3:1

A generation ago, millions of people who had never read Ecclesiastes 3 knew that 'To every thing there is a season' (KJV). That's because they were familiar with a song called 'Turn, Turn, Turn,' performed in 1965 by a group called The Birds. The song, based almost completely on today's text, ended with a plea for peace in the middle of a violent and turbulent decade, but The Birds kept the basic concept intact.

It's not surprising that these verses would become material for a song. This is great poetry, after all, a powerful recognition of the fact

that all of life's events are ordained by God. Solomon illustrated his point by using a literary device known as merism, in which opposite extremes are used to indicate everything in between. Examples such as birth and death, love and hate, war and peace take in the totality of human experience.

Solomon says everything in life has its time and season and that includes our lives of faith as we seek to live for Christ day by day. This month, we are going to explore the seasons of faith, those times in life when our walk with the Lord mirrors the characteristics of the various seasons of the year.

For example, sometimes our faith is as fresh and promising as the first flowers of spring. At other times, we feel parched as in the heat and dryness of summer.

We are also going to see what God's Word has to say to us in different 'seasons' of life, whether it's youth, middle years, or old age. We are also going to discover that the Scriptures are relevant in every case to all ages.

We hope you'll find this to be an interesting, challenging study. There is certainly something in these pages for everyone. But the real payoff is in the theme that runs through all of our studies this month: the constancy, the faithful and unchanging character, of our great God no matter what season or stage of life we may be in.

We are very changeable up and down, in and out, hot and cold. But God 'remain[s] the same' (Ps. 102:27). His power, love, and purity give us hope in any and every season.

We would all love for our faith to be strong, fresh, and growing every day of our lives.

But since we're imperfect people, life doesn't work that way. We want to deal with our weakness in these studies, without looking for excuses for sin or failure. What season is your faith in as we begin the month? Take a few minutes for self-evaluation, and then ask God to help you find new strength and freshness for your Christian life through your study of His Word.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

TODAY IN THE WORD

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven. - Ecclesiastes 3:1

In the 1960s, thousands of years after it was written, the meaning of today's reading changed—and all it took was seven small words. The song, "Turn, Turn, Turn," made popular by The Byrds, set portions of today's reading to music. The only additional lyrics were the repetition of the word turn and the concluding phrase, "I swear it's not too late." What had previously existed as a bittersweet catalog of the conflicting activities of life became an optimistic cry of hope against the evils of war.

Of course, a simple song can't really change the meaning of Scripture, but if you hear the words "turn, turn, turn" echo in your head every time you read today's passage, you know how powerfully our culture can affect our perceptions. Although many people try to manufacture hope in the repetitive cycle of life without God, we must resist the temptation to follow the world's lead and instead take a fresh look at the categories of life listed here.

As we read through the seasons, it's impossible to miss the emotional symmetry running throughout it. The first half of Ecclesiastes 3:2 sums up man's existence in stark fashion, and the verses that follow categorize our lives in similarly simple, powerful terms. We gain life, and then we lose it. We give life, and we take it away (Ecclesiastes 3:2, 3). Our lives alternate between order and disorder (Ecclesiastes 3:3, 5–8). Our emotional expressions run full circle (Ecclesiastes 3:4, 5, 7, 8).

Ecclesiastes is very realistic in its observations of life. The Teacher hasn't left anything out of the human experience here, at least nothing from the strictly human perspective.

If we were the authors of our existence, we might choose to eliminate half of this list. How great would life be if there were no time to die, to weep, to mourn, or to hate? But we are surrounded by positives and negatives, so let's relate it all to God. Look at the good as God pouring out His grace on you. And view the bad as evidence of your need for God. Remember, Solomon eliminated as many negatives as he could—but he positively forgot that he needed God!

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

TODAY IN THE WORD

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven. - Ecclesiastes 3:1

Scientists working at the National Institute of Standards and Technology in Boulder, Colorado, recently created the world's most accurate clock. Called an "optical atomic clock," it's made of an oscillating laser, a mechanism called a "comb" that counts oscillations, with a single mercury atom as the point of reference.

The optical atomic clock "ticks" one quadrillion times per second. Research is ongoing, but this type of clock could be up to one thousand times more accurate than current atomic clocks. Such precise timekeeping might be applied in navigation, communication technology, and deep space exploration.

Time, no matter how it's measured, is one of the inescapable realities of life. God ordained seasons in nature; He built them into the rhythm of life. There are seasons in our lives as well, and in God's plan for history (cf. Dan. 2:21; Titus 1:2-3; 1 Peter 1:3-5).

Beginning with this simple observation, later on this month we'll be exploring specific aspects of pilgrimage. We've given an overview and outlined key themes--now we'll look at the journey of the Christian life in more detail.

The observation about times and seasons may be simple, but it's important for keeping a sense of balance. Today's reading sets forth a principle, then fleshes it out with contrasts. Some events are pivotal, such as birth and death, war and peace. Others describe basic emotions, such as love and hate, weeping and laughter. Still others highlight fundamental patterns of action, such as speaking or keeping silent, searching or giving up. These events, emotions, and actions are the stuff and substance of life, the threads of which it's woven.

Getting hold of the truth that life has times and seasons can be one of the keys to inner peace and contentment.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15 TIME AND ETERNITY Many people have a hard time reading the first eight verses of Ecclesiastes 3 without humming the tune to "[Turn! Turn! Turn!](#)" popularized by The Byrds. The lyrics, taken almost word for word from Scripture, were rearranged to fit the song. "Turn! Turn! Turn!" appeared in the midst of the national turmoil over the Vietnam War. The United States was deluged by protests and a desperate longing for peace. These words, written several thousand years earlier, still could strike a resonant chord in modern hearts. Fourteen pairs of opposites begin chapter 3. They echo and illustrate the first verse of the chapter: "There is a time for everything and a season for every activity." The fourteen pairs cover the totality of the human existence. All the moments of our lives are reflected in these contrasting pairs. We are born and die (Ecclesiastes 3:2). We mourn and dance (Ecclesiastes 3:4). The verses are not meant to give approval to these activities but to simply illustrate the great span of our human existence. The experience of humanity includes moments of great satisfaction and other times of tremendous pain and loss. Because of this, the author concluded that life is not easily explained or understood. Considering this wealth of experiences, what is "gained" from this life? If life "turns" in a cycle, how can we find meaning? Scripture points out that the life we have on this earth or "under the sun" is both beautiful and full of burden. In our human existence, we feel the real conflict between the earthly seasons of our lives and the eternal nature God has given us. We are responsible for our activities on this earth, but God has destined us for a greater purpose. The eternal nature gives meaning to our earthly existence. Consider each of the pairs in the first eight verses of chapter three, and note the times in your own life that fall under these categories. How has God worked during each of these times? When have you seen His hand of blessing? When have you needed His intervention? Give thanks that God has guided you in each of these moments "under the sun." During your time of prayer, please mention Moody's media teams under the leadership of senior vice president Greg Thornton. Thank God for leading talented and committed people to Moody's media ministries: Moody Radio and Moody Publishers.

Ecclesiastes 3:9-13

TODAY IN THE WORD

That everyone may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all his toil--this is the gift of God. - Ecclesiastes 3:13

Solomon asks, "What does the worker gain from his toil?" (v. 9). This is one of the questions we hope to answer this month by exploring what God's Word says about the subject of work. We want to know what we should expect to gain from our work--and, more importantly, what God expects to gain from our work. Martin Luther summarized it this way: "To put it briefly, God wants people to work."

For most people, work is not a big philosophical issue. As the bumper sticker says, "I owe, I owe, so off to work I go." We know that if we don't work, we don't eat and the bills don't get paid. Very few of us have the option of not working.

But as Christians, we need to see our work as something more than an exchange of time for a paycheck. God is profoundly interested and involved in what we do to make a living, and that makes work a theological issue. Work is God's idea, and He even set the example as the first Worker in the universe.

We're going to tackle the subject from several different angles as we build a biblical theology of work. The studies will follow this basic outline:

1. Purposes for Our Work
2. Problems with Our Work
3. Principles of Profitable Work
4. Practical Advice for Workers
5. Precautions for Workers
6. Praise and Our Work

Ecclesiastes is filled with references to human work--and much of what Solomon has to say is negative. But we should remember that he was writing about life "under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:3), life as it appears from a limited, human standpoint. Solomon was also frustrated by his attempts to find meaning (Eccl. 2:1-11).

Whether you spend your days in an office, a shop, a classroom, or at home, the opportunity to work is a gift from our gracious God.

Ecclesiastes 3:9-22

TODAY IN THE WORD

I know that everything God does will endure forever. - Ecclesiastes 3:14a

Peter Pan, the title character in J. M. Barrie's play and novel, told Wendy that he ran away the day he was born. He explained, "It was because I heard father and mother talking about what I was to be when I became a man. I don't want ever to be a man. I want always to be a little boy and have fun. So I ran away." If only Solomon had thought of that!

Today's reading actually resembles Peter's "just have fun" philosophy, the chief difference being that Ecclesiastes doesn't provide the escape clause of Neverland. The primary direction given to us in chapter 3 is to enjoy life and be satisfied (Ecclesiastes 3:12, 13), and that's the second time Ecclesiastes makes that point (Eccl 2:24). But we need to understand that idea in its context. The end of today's reading brings up for the third time the issue of enjoying one's lot, but with a qualifier--no one knows what comes next (Ecclesiastes 3:22).

Likewise, we can miss the point of Ecclesiastes 3:11. It's natural to single it out as a warm, sentimental statement about the glory of each and every part of creation. But this passage really emphasizes the humility of all creation. It is God who dictates the seasons of life, and He alone understands the eternal plan. The labor of man is subject to change and death, but what God does lasts forever (v. 14). That is the unmistakable distinction between God and man.

And so it follows that, although men won't remember the rulers of the past (Eccl 2:16), God keeps record of all man's deeds, and will judge them righteously, unlike the fallen system of this world (Ecclesiastes 3:15-17).

Few people in the world illustrate how our actions can have enduring meaning quite as poignantly as our mothers. A mother's love is an important channel of God's grace in our lives, and a mother whose example leads her child to faith in Christ has taken part in a wonderful, never-ending accomplishment. So what better gift to give your mother, no matter where she might be, than to rededicate your life to following Christ, bringing honor to her and glory to God. (Of course, flowers are a nice touch, too.)

Ecclesiastes 3:16-22 WALK LIKE ANIMALS - An Associated Press poll reported that nearly half of American pet owners consider their pets to be full members of their families. They take pets on family vacations and even include animal photos in the family holiday card. One in five people let their dog sleep in their bed every night, and more than half of women talk to their dogs. While our pets are lovable, are they the same as humans? This question regarding the worth of humanity is reflected in chapter 3 of Ecclesiastes. The book is divided into what some commentators have labeled "sermons." The author transitioned with this phrase: "And I saw something else . . ." (Ecclesiastes 3:16) to begin a new "sermon" on judgment, justice, and the worth and value of the human existence. Solomon noted that life under the sun is distinguished by man's enormous capacity for wickedness. Judgment and justice seem elusive in our earthly existence. People in their wickedness often act like animals, without thought or reasoning. The simile, someone "acts like an animal," indicates a lack of moral consciousness. Humans have demonstrated often that they have a tremendous capacity for doing evil and feeling little remorse. Both humans and animals will meet the same fate: each will perish. If both animals and humans have the same end, what is the advantage to being human? If our earthly existence is the only reality, would it be safe to conclude that humans have no superiority over animals? An atheistic view of life questions the value of humanity. It puts people on the same level as animals. In response, Solomon comforted himself with the reminder that God is the holy judge. He will judge humanity for evil acts and punish the wicked. Solomon is not saying we should treat animals poorly. God has shown

from the very beginning of His Word that we are charged with caring for His creation. But humans are also given a unique purpose. We have an eternal future and an ability to place our trust and faith in God. Thank Him that He has created you with an eternal destiny. Give praise to God for Moody Publishers Operations team— Gregory Miller, Duane Koenig, Sandy Kleinhans, and Elizabeth Ireland—and their contribution to the fulfillment of Moody Publishers' slogan, "The Name You Can Trust."

Ecclesiastes 4

Ecclesiastes 4:1-8

Emptiness at the Top

In this text Solomon exposes the emptiness of many who make it to the top. This is not a plea for mediocrity. The problem with the people he's talking about soon becomes clear; they have no fear of the Lord. For people like this, tyranny can become a calling card. Since they view people as pawns, it's easy for the powerful to become abusive. Sadly, those whom they oppress often have no one to help or comfort them (Eccl 4:1). Their lot is so painful Solomon concludes that the dead or unborn are better off than the oppressed. If all of this sounds familiar, it's because these verses capture much of the history of the human race. That's why those who strive for success must also strive for compassion.

Another reason many successful people feel empty is that they see others as competitors to be beaten rather than as companions to be embraced. It isn't easy to make friends under those conditions. That's why those who strive for success must also strive for companionship.

The overachiever can also feel empty because success may bring with it a pack of problems he hadn't expected. For these people, Solomon's advice in Eccl 4:6 is worth heeding. That's why those who strive for success must also strive for contentment.

Solomon's final picture (Eccl 4:7-8) is a sad one: a successful person alone with his money. Yet his loneliness and frustration drive him even harder. A person like that needs help! That's why those who strive for success must also strive for cessation—knowing when enough is enough. (Today in the Word)

Ecclesiastes 4:1-8

TODAY IN THE WORD

F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel, *The Great Gatsby*, serves as a modern-day Ecclesiastes. Jay Gatsby epitomized the reckless extravagance of the Roaring Twenties as well as the hollow dreams that left America as a whole unsatisfied. He amassed enormous wealth to impress another man's wife—and he never really experienced genuine love, only affectionate greed. As Fitzgerald assessed, "No amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man will store up in his ghostly heart."

In the book, Gatsby died alone, but sadly he's not alone in his pursuits. At the outset of today's reading, the Teacher bemoans the evil oppression that pervades this world and the suffering it causes (Eccl 4:1–3). Look at the extreme terms used to describe the hopelessness of the situation! Verse 4 gets at the reason behind the sad state of affairs—greed. Notice that it's not just personal desire, either. It's a matter of wanting what someone else has. At its extreme, greed causes oppression. At the very least, though, it results in meaningless labor (Eccl 4:6).

The image of the hands in Eccl 4:5–6 provides a gripping mental picture. To fold our hands and rest would be laziness, to grab everything within our reach would be greedy, but to take only what we need without seeking something more brings peace and satisfaction.

Verses 7–8 point to a good test of satisfaction—is there anyone to enjoy life with? A life of envying one's neighbor only promotes alienation and loneliness. The questions that the man asks are remarkably probing. For whom am I doing all this (Eccl 4:8)? "Myself," would be quite an empty answer, and the Teacher can find no good motivation for such an existence.

Today's passage shows how our outlook on life involves more than just ourselves—so this is a good time to search out your life for any signs of greed. Does the statement in Eccl 4:4 apply to any part of your life? Try asking yourself the question in Eccl 4:8: "For whom am I toiling?" Make a concerted effort today to turn the focus of your attitude outward—work to serve others and share the love of Christ!

Ecclesiastes 4:1:16 SOLITARY EXISTENCE "I've fallen, and I can't get up!" is the tag line for television advertisement for a medical alarm and protection company. The commercial pictures an older woman lying on the floor. She is scared that no one will hear her

plea for help. Fortunately, with the medical service, she can speak into a device and talk to those who will send help. Most of us understand this fear of being alone without anyone to help care for us. In this section of Ecclesiastes, Scripture addresses the weaknesses of living in solitude. The passage addresses the problems of oppression and isolation. As Solomon considered oppression in the world, he declares that it would be better for some to have never been born (Eccl 4:3). While this pessimistic view of life might seem shocking, it also forces us to recognize the amount of cruelty and evil in this earthly existence. Solomon noted the futility of living life for one's self. This is meaningless or "chasing after the wind" (Eccl 4:4). This vivid image is repeated throughout the book. Chasing the wind would be an impossible task. The wind can never be contained—and the job would never be done. Likewise, a life lived purely for selfish ambition would include that type of chasing—a task that would never be completely fulfilling. The meaning of life is not found in solitude. Even the wealthiest loner is ultimately dissatisfied. This portion of Scripture is often read at weddings: "two are better than one" and "a cord of three strands is not quickly broken" (Eccl 4:9, 12). There is strength and power in companionship. Our lives are interconnected and dependent on community. In God's plan, men and women are not meant to live alone. Do you know someone who is lonely or who lives alone? Pay a visit, write a note, or make a phone call to that person today. Lend a helping hand or a listening ear to someone who needs companionship. We are designed by God to live in community with others. You do not know how a smile or warm word can change the direction of someone's day. Today, as we continue to focus our prayers on Moody Publishers' Operations team, please mention Mattie Hill, Ann Hackler, and Michael Davis during your time with God. May God encourage their hearts with the truth of His Word!

Ecclesiastes 4:4-12

TODAY IN THE WORD

Better one handful with tranquillity than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind. - Ecclesiastes 4:6

The late British Bible teacher G. Campbell Morgan gave this powerful description of what a lust for money does to a person: "It dries up the springs of compassion in the soul. It lowers the whole standard of morality. It is the inspiration of all the basest things, even covetousness. . . . Avarice is often created by prosperity and the consequent possession of money. It is also often powerfully present in the lives of those who are devoid of wealth. It is wholly material, the result of a wrong conception of life." That's quite a list of evils. Solomon had seen enough of life to agree that there are some wrong and futile motives for working hard and trying to be successful. He explained two of them here, and then offered an antidote. We need to learn what Solomon learned from experience and wise observation.

The first wrong motive is envy. Verse 4 is true from the sinful world's standpoint--exactly the perspective from which Solomon wrote, as the term "under the sun" indicates.

But the answer to the driving force of envy is not foolish laziness, which also brings a person to ruin (Eccl 4:5). The cure is contentment, being willing to settle for less materially if it means we can have some "rest" or "quietness," good alternate translations for tranquillity.

The next evil motive is greed (Eccl 4:7-8), illustrated by the person who is driven to always get more even though he has no one to share it with and will someday leave it all to nobody.

At least this hypothetical overachiever finally woke up and realized he was beating his head against the wall and missing out on life because he was all alone in his world. One way to conquer greed is by refusing to live our lives in isolation from other people. Connection and meaningful relationships with other people help overcome both loneliness and greed.

No matter where you work or what you do for a living, we hope you have some godly friends who form a "cord of three strands [that] is not quickly broken" (Eccl 4:12).

Ecclesiastes 4:4-8

TODAY IN THE WORD

Competition is a hallmark of American life. We're taught at an early age that being the best is what it's all about. But competition can cut both ways, sometimes with deadly results.

Our nation learned that shocking lesson several years ago when a mother in Houston arranged for the murder of another woman—the mother of her daughter's chief competitor in a cheerleading competition. The woman's reasoning was chillingly simple: her daughter would have a better chance to win the competition if her rival was too distraught over her mother's death to perform well.

We can be grateful that incidents such as that one are relatively rare. But we should ask ourselves—how can the so-called competitive spirit become so corrupted? Today's text suggests a reason and a solution.

In Eccl 4:4 Solomon gives us another word for what we often call competition: envy. When he says that “all labor and all achievement” have their source in envy, he’s using poetic hyperbole. But the point is no less valid. Much of what goes on “under the sun” (Eccl 1:3) is driven by an inordinate desire to outdo the other guy.

The competitive urge is so ingrained in most of us that our immediate reaction is to say, “So what does Solomon expect us to do? Fold our hands and quit?”

Eccl 4:5 answers that question. What Solomon is decriing is the extreme case in which envy drives a person to work until he ruins his health and his enjoyment of life, all for no good reason (Eccl 4:7-8). That kind of madness makes life seem empty and meaningless.

The cure for envy is not sloth (which we will study later this month). The picture of the lazy fool in Eccl 4:5 is graphic. Literally, he “eats his own flesh.” He destroys himself, wasting away because he won’t work.

A lesson such as today’s usually raises the question: “Didn’t Paul tell us to run to win, go for the prize, and all of that?”

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Four Reasons Why Two are Better Than One

1. First, two together reap a greater profit (Eccl 4:9).
2. Second, friends offer encouragement and help (Eccl 4:10).
3. Third, a friend offers special warmth (Eccl 4:11).
4. Fourth, a friend gives us strength (Eccl 4:12). (Today in the Word)

Ecclesiastes 4:9-16

TODAY IN THE WORD

Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work. - Ecclesiastes 4:9

During the reign of Nicholas II, the last czar of Russia, Vladimir Lenin was arrested multiple times for his radical conduct, but he emerged as a powerful new leader after the October Revolution. After Lenin died, Joseph Stalin, son of a shoemaker, took the Soviet helm. All three rulers had one thing in common—their popularity waned completely by the end of their lives, but their spirit of tyranny lived on. It was out of that state of oppression that renowned author Alexander Solzhenitsyn fled the KGB. His friend, the famous musician Mstislav Rostropovich, risked his career and life to give Solzhenitsyn asylum, where he was able to continue writing in peace for years.

The second half of today’s reading takes us through a power-shifting scenario much like the one Russia endured, and it shows us just how fleeting public support of a leader can be. The old ruler can succumb to stubborn foolishness (Eccl 4:13), to the point where he can be overthrown by an imprisoned foe or succeeded by a poor commoner from his own land (Eccl 4:14). The masses may be swayed by the hope a new leader brings (Eccl 4:15), but before long the newness wears off and the ruler’s approval rating plummets (Eccl 4:16).

Eccl 4:9–12 show that the fleeting approval of many is far inferior to the loyalty of one friend. When two join together, their work is more efficient (Eccl 4:9), they can rescue each other from downfall (Eccl 4:10), and they can keep each other safe and warm (Eccl 4:11, 12). The history of Russia illustrates the point here—Solzhenitsyn gained more from the love of one friend than any Russian ruler ever received from the near-absolute power they wielded.

Yesterday we learned that greed and envy lead to oppression and loneliness—today we concluded that any popularity gained from such selfish ambition is easily lost, but the love of friendship offers a more lasting reward.

Ecclesiastes 5

Ecclesiastes 5:1-7

A Portrait of a True Worshiper

First, we are to enter the place of worship to listen (Eccl 5:1-3).

Second, we are to enter worship intending to keep the commitments we make to God (Eccl 5:4-6).

Third, we enter worship in awe of God (Eccl 5:7). (Today in the Word)

Ecclesiastes 5:1-7

TODAY IN THE WORD

In her short story, "Greenleaf," Flannery O'Connor draws a parallel between realizing the truth about God and being charged by a bull. The character Mrs. May, who had dismissed religious people as simple, suddenly finds herself squarely in the path of a bull's ferocious horns. As the beast pierces Mrs. May's heart, O'Connor writes, "she had the look of a person whose sight has been suddenly restored but who finds the light unbearable."

Sometimes God's revelations to us can be striking, perhaps coming too late in life to take advantage of the truth. Solomon may have fit into that category. Eccl 5:1 in today's reading is a vast departure from Solomon's grandiose approach to offering sacrifices. This is a strong warning against taking God and His glory too lightly.

Eccl 5:2 puts us in our place, drawing the distinction between our confinement under the sun and God's elevated presence in heaven. It doesn't seem like Solomon to do anything in a limited way, but Eccl 5:2 and Eccl 5:3 give wise counsel against multiplying our words to God.

The last section of this reading seems to come from the point of view of someone who learned the hard way not to leave vows unfulfilled. If any of Solomon's numerous fellowship offerings were the result of a vow, he would have likely regretted the unbridled enthusiasm with which he made them. James repeats this wise advice when he warns against swearing by heaven, earth, or anything else (James 5:12).

As you plan to attend church tomorrow, now is a good time to prepare your heart for corporate worship. Before you go to bed tonight, quietly reflect on the great things God has done in your life, His glorious attributes, and His unfulfilling promises.

Ecclesiastes 5:1-7 WEIGHT OF WORDS - As children, many of us probably uttered the pledge, "Cross my heart and hope to die." It was meant as a solemn assurance that we were telling the truth, often accompanied by the motion of crossing our heart with one hand. Some adults remember extending the phrase: "Cross your heart and hope to die, hope the cat will spit in your eye." Even children know that a promise is serious business. Chapter 5 of Ecclesiastes explores the seriousness of our words. Solomon cautioned his readers to have the right attitude, in manner and speech, when encountering God. Echoing other famous passages of Scriptures, we are warned of the power and dangers of our speech. We should avoid being in a rush to respond to situations. The chapter contains wise advice about our use of language: "Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart" (Eccl 5:2). Moving slowly and speaking cautiously is a sign of wisdom; only fools rush to act. God is described as dwelling in His house (Eccl 5:1), our heart (Eccl 5:2), and in heaven (Eccl 5:2). Each of these places is to be regarded as holy—and God, no matter where we encounter Him, demands our respect. Making rash pledges to God, demanding His action in response to ours, is not something to be taken lightly. If we do make a promise to God, we must be quick to fulfill our end of that pledge. We are reminded that we are on earth, and God, our Creator and Judge, is in heaven. Our view of God must influence our actions and every word that we utter or think, both to God and to those around us. Are you conscious of the words that you speak, think, or even post on Facebook or tweet? How do your statements on social media reflect the mind and heart of Christ? Is God honored by your words? Knowing God should influence our every action and our words. Be mindful of what you write, speak, and think today. Steven Mogck, executive vice president and chief operating officer, welcomes your prayers today for wisdom in leading his staff and efficiently serving Moody's departments he oversees.

Ecclesiastes 5:8-12 MAD FOR MONEY - [The Occupy Movement](#) protest was voiced by activists as a stand against corporate greed and social inequality. "We are the 99 percent," read T-shirts and posters, as marchers staged sit-in protests in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, New York, and other cities across the country and world. Money and control of wealth were the primary contention issues. The problem of inequality and oppression, whether real or perceived, is not new. Solomon spoke of oppression thousands of years ago. He said that when we see oppression, we should not be surprised. This is a mark of human nature: at each level of society, there is someone higher who is the oppressor (Eccl 5:8). Only the king, who sits at the top of the human pyramid of power, will profit. How much is enough? No amount! The Teacher gives a type of proverb here, explaining that the love of money is unsatisfying (Eccl 5:10). The word "meaningless," used frequently in Ecclesiastes, reappears here in conjunction with money and power. There will never be enough money or supplies to satisfy our hunger. The more that is produced, the greater the demand. The Bible teaches that satisfaction does not come from owning more. While wealth might bring temporary comfort, it also brings problems. Landowners with abundant possessions also had troubled sleep. With wealth came complications. While the laborers suffered physically and did without material belongings, they were given peace of mind and "sweet" sleep (Eccl 5:12). The pursuit of

wealth and power in this “life under the sun” is meaningless, leading to a life of stress and problems. The meaning of life does not lie in increasing the dollars in our bank accounts. Many of us find security in money. We associate worry with few dollars and happiness with more. This passage reminds us that money does not answer life’s problems. As you pay your bills or balance your checkbook, ask God for a heavenly perspective on your finances. Ask Him to help you see the riches you are storing in heaven. We value the dedicated work of the Facilities Maintenance team—Paul Heggeland, Vincent Camera, Matthew Morris, Jacob Shumaker, and Carl Bjerga—who take good care of our Chicago campus. They will appreciate your prayers!

Ecclesiastes 5:8-12

Selfish Desire for Wealth

First, Solomon notes that a selfish desire for wealth can lead to oppression.

A second danger to remember is that love for money leads to dissatisfaction.

Third, Solomon notes that a love for money leads to anxiety (vv. 11-12) (Today in the Word)

Ecclesiastes 5:8-17

TODAY IN THE WORD

The sleep of a laborer is sweet, whether he eats little or much. - Ecclesiastes 5:12a

In the late 1980s, a revolutionary anti-depressant drug hit the market, and by the early '90s, the name Prozac entered the popular vocabulary of American culture, along with yuppies, thirty somethings, and workaholics. The drug was intended to treat a chemical imbalance that caused clinical depression, but it became a fashionable cure for anyone with a priority imbalance for whom success, career, and money just wasn't enough to bring happiness. Fulfillment in a pill.

Ecclesiastes diagnosed that condition long ago. We read in our passage today that oppression, injustice, and denial of basic human rights is to be expected because the sickness of greed is widespread, and even the king is not immune (Eccl 5:8, 9). The basic problem is inherent in their desires: a love affair with money can never be satisfied (Eccl 5:10).

Verse 11 points out an additional problem with wealth: the more you have, the more people tend to turn up at your doorstep wanting their share. This type of friend doesn't offer any of the benefits mentioned in chapter 4—shared labor, rescue, warmth, protection—all they bring is superficial acceptance that fades just as fast as the money that they're spending.

The next observation stands out as the sole positive point in this passage. A hard day's work yields a good night's sleep (Eccl 5:12). But the sheer accumulation of riches brings insomnia. The next verses give us some idea why—wealth, whether it's hoarded or lost altogether—seems to be a grievous evil either way (Eccl 5:13, 14). In the end, riches really do not matter, because, as the saying goes, you can't take it with you (Eccl 5:15, 16). If you're ever in danger of making money too much of a priority, Eccl 5:17 should instantly cure that line of thinking. An existence marked by “great frustration, affliction and anger” isn't worth pursuing. A pill might alleviate those symptoms for awhile, but no pharmacy can change the end result!

Once again, Ecclesiastes reveals that so much of life depends on attitude and desire. What is your attitude toward money? A good test is to ask yourself this question: do I have enough money?

Ecclesiastes 5:10-12.

TODAY IN THE WORD

In a report that should surprise no one, the Better Sleep Council says Americans are chronically sleep-deprived. In the last twenty years, we have added 158 hours, nearly an entire month, to our yearly work schedules. That doesn't include time spent taking care of our homes and families. The hazards of sleep deprivation are numerous, from aches and pains to loss of productivity, greater vulnerability to sickness, and more accidents at work and on the road.

The report did not mention fretting over finances as a major reason for this massive inability to sleep. But the fact that many now work almost thirteen months a year says a lot about our focus. Instead of wasting time turning in our beds, we need to turn to the timeless wisdom of God's Word.

Solomon has a lot to teach us here. The futility of giving our lives to the accumulation of wealth is a recurring theme in Ecclesiastes. Today's text is helpful because it reveals the core problems with this pursuit and suggests a cure.

Eccl 5:10 contains a truth that is richly illustrated all around us. Part of the seduction of wealth is that its accumulation brings no lasting satisfaction. It has been well documented that people's standard of living tends to go up in proportion to the increase in their

income. The result is more consumption (v. 11) and no real progress.

When finances become the focus, another result is worry instead of sleep. This is true whether we have a lot or a little. The problem is with our wants, not with our wealth.

Many of us reason that if we could just get out of debt and have enough in the bank to be comfortable, we'd stop worrying about money. But the Bible never allows us to fall for that flawed logic. If money is your passion, you'll fret either about getting it or about hanging on to it.

Will worry over finances rob you of sleep tonight?

If so, try this antidote to nighttime worry, suggested by Psalm 63:6-8: 1. Make the Lord the focus of your thoughts as you go to bed, and turn your thoughts back to Him if you awaken.2. Sing in your heart to the Lord, offering praise to Him through one of your favorite hymns.3. Picture yourself clinging to the Lord like a child to a loving parent, as His mighty hand holds you securely.

Ecclesiastes 5:10-12

TODAY IN THE WORD

The sleep of a laborer is sweet, whether he eats little or much. - Ecclesiastes 5:12

Since the Sacagawea dollar was introduced in late January, the U.S. Mint has made hundreds of millions of the gold-colored coins. But these coins, which honor the Shoshone Indian woman who was an interpreter on the Lewis and Clark expedition, seem to be having circulation problems. A newspaper report in May said that relatively few people were using Sacagawea dollars, although 500 million had been minted by that time. The reason is that people are apparently collecting Sacagawegas instead of using them--either because of their novelty or because people think the coins will be valuable someday.

The problem of loving and hoarding money is not a new phenomenon. Some people who have a Sacagawea dollar or two will want to add them to their collection--just in case the coins become valuable.

The result of this is summed up in verse 11. Solomon didn't have coin collecting in mind when he wrote these words, but the Sacagawea situation illustrates the problem. In fact, the government is worried that as more Sacagawea coins are put into circulation, more people will collect instead of use them. But the only benefit to the coin owners will be a stack of coins they can feast their eyes on.

This part of Ecclesiastes isn't one of the book's summaries, and the writer doesn't offer any particular advice. But the beginning of verse 12 makes it clear that gaining real satisfaction and enjoyment from our work has nothing to do with what we have, but with what has us.

God warns us against wearing ourselves out to accumulate money and the stuff it can buy not because He doesn't want us to enjoy ourselves. Solomon says repeatedly that God is the only source of true satisfaction. God warns us about loving money because it can replace our love for Him (Matt. 6:24), and devour the people who chase after it.

We have heard this admonition before, but we still need to be reminded of it. Greed and contentment have nothing to do with the amount of money we have.

Ecclesiastes 5:12 - ARE YOU SLEEP? "The sleep of a laborer is sweet."

Having trouble concentrating? Maybe it's those sleepless nights. . . . Experts have discovered that too little sleep impairs our ability to concentrate. Our brain, without adequate sleep, can be so depleted in energy that it fails to make important connections. Research has also shown that deep sleep helps release important growth hormones in children and young teens. For people of all ages, sleep has proven vital to both memory and learning. Not surprisingly, ABC's news magazine show 20/20 reported that "tens of millions of Americans" suffer from severe sleep deprivation. Scientists have found that the results of living on five or six hours of sleep a night are "shocking." The United States, they say, is becoming "a nation of chronic short sleepers." The verdict is in: we need more rest. As believers, we can be guilty of believing that "rest" equals "laziness." Much like Martha, who prided herself on her industriousness, we fail to value our need to set aside our daily cares "to get apart and rest awhile" as Jesus did. From the very beginning, God chose to create a day of rest. In Genesis, we know that on the seventh day of Creation, God rested! "By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work" (Ge 2:2). Surely God was not tired, right? Yet, He saw value in this time for rest, for He "blessed the seventh day and made it holy" (Ge 2:3). That is not to say that too much rest cannot be dangerous. Scripture speaks of rest as both a blessing and a curse. Proverbs 6 warns, "How long will you

lie there, you sluggard? When will you get up from your sleep?" (v. 9). On the other hand, Ecclesiastes 5:12 concludes, "The sleep of a laborer is sweet." In the New Testament, Jesus tells us, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). Revelation 14:13 says, "They will rest from their labor, for their deeds shall follow them." There is the rest of those who have died, the rest of a job well done, the much-anticipated rest of a vacation, and the spiritual rest of a weary soul. This month in Today in the Word we will study Scripture to see what God thinks of our leisure. We will ask why rest is important, how God can be the focus of our rest, and how we can enjoy rest as God intended. We live in a culture that values speed and busyness, where every minute counts. We rush from one activity to the next—waking with our alarm, hurrying off to our day's work, and squeezing errands into our spare moments. What a good idea to focus on getting the rest that we need. In the midst of this busy world, Jesus invites us to slow down, to take the time to enjoy His rest, and to rejuvenate our souls. (Joe Stowell)

Ecclesiastes 5:13-20.

TODAY IN THE WORD

In the first four months of 1996, personal bankruptcy soared to the largest four-month total ever, according to statistics compiled by MasterCard International. In fact, personal bankruptcy claims account for all but a few percent of all bankruptcies in the last six years. Three major reasons were cited for the record rate of filings: high levels of personal debt, corporate downsizing, and medical expenses.

Eccl 5:14 of today's text describes a situation similar to that experienced by a bankrupt person. Someone who loses everything comes to understand a truth we all must face some day: we will take nothing of this world's wealth with us when we leave (Eccl 5:15-17). The bankrupt person just learns this lesson a little early.

Here is the ultimate answer to the question of why striving to accumulate wealth is so futile. We no sooner "arrive" financially than it's time to depart. And as author Tony Evans says, the only reason we even leave this world in a new suit is because someone else dresses us!

But a sudden, catastrophic loss of wealth is just one reason the Scripture warns against hoarding. Eccl 5:13 outlines a different problem. This person did not lose his money. On the contrary, he had it piled high. But he still wound up getting harmed. How? Because as we saw yesterday, knocking ourselves out to pile up wealth leads to misery and enslavement to the trap of "more."

You may be reading this and thinking, "Wait a minute. The rich people I see on television don't seem to be so miserable." No one ever said money can't buy a lot of creature comforts. But from a spiritual standpoint, the person who makes money his god is headed for darkness, frustration, affliction and anger (Eccl 5:17).

Will worry over finances rob you of sleep tonight? Some of us are by nature worriers and brooders, fretting over the brevity of life and the unpredictability of wealth.

Ecclesiastes 5:13-20 WHISTLE WHILE YOU WORK - In the 1937 Disney animated film Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, a beautiful girl finds a cabin in the woods inhabited by seven short laborers. Trying to be useful as she hides from the wicked queen, Snow White tidies their cabin. While she sweeps, she sings a merry tune called "Whistle While You Work": "When hearts are high, the time will fly, so whistle while you work." Up until this point, Ecclesiastes paints a pessimistic view of life's existence. Solomon described the oppression of the wealthy upon the laborers. At the same time, he observed that the wealthy are not immune to trouble or worry. What is the point of our work? Why labor if it is worth nothing in the end? The author observes that no one can take possessions to the grave. We come into this world with nothing, and we will leave in the same way. Working only to amass material possessions is like toiling for the wind. Just like the picture of "chasing the wind," working for the wind would be pointless, lacking direction or completion. Then the passage contrasts the pointlessness of life with what is good. While our time on this earth is short, God has meant us to find some measure of satisfaction in the things of this world. We are to enjoy the results of hard work, both our money and the things that can be bought. We are also to live with an attitude of contentment, whether rich or poor. We are to be "happy" in our work (Eccl 5:19). This foreshadows Colossians 3:17: whatever we do is to be done with "gratitude in our hearts." What we do and who we are—these are gifts from God. Ultimately it is God, not our work, who makes our heart glad. What do you do for work? Some of us go to work each day in an office, others as students, still others work in the home. Whatever we are given to do, it is a gift of God. We are to take each day as a gift and to do our work with a cheerful heart. Perhaps today you can whistle while you work and thank God for His graciousness in your life. As we pray for the rest of the Facilities Maintenance team today, please add Troy Billow, Edgardo Bartolome, Thomas Addison, and John Addison to your prayer list. Ask that they would receive strength and God's guidance in their day-to-day responsibilities.

Ecclesiastes 5:18-20

TODAY IN THE WORD

There is more to the story of the new Sacagawea dollar we told you about yesterday. The U.S. Mint expects to have one billion of the gold-colored coins in circulation by the end of summer. But the government is so concerned about people hoarding instead of spending the one-dollar coins that it has launched a \$40 million advertising campaign to help the Sacagawea's circulation. The message is simple: "It's money. So use it." Putting it in biblical terms, we could say the message is, "If you've earned the money, enjoy the fruit of your hard work."

That's the message that Ecclesiastes conveys. Solomon isn't saying just to go out, spend freely, and live it up. And he certainly isn't teaching the kind of pagan fatalism and surrender to pleasure embodied in the idea, "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die."

At the same time, Solomon recognizes the legitimate enjoyment of honestly earned income. He keeps telling us that the ability to work and gain satisfaction and income are wonderful gifts from God. If we receive these gifts and use them in ways God approves, we will find the enjoyment Ecclesiastes describes.

The money God gives us from our work isn't meant to be hoarded. When that happens, the result is invariably harm to the money's owner (Eccl. 5:13).

Are you bothered by the idea of having to accept our "lot" in life? As we said above, the Bible doesn't teach fatalism. Some commentators say a better translation of the word "accept" (Eccl 5:19) would be "receive," suggesting that our life situation is also a gift from God's hand.

Here's another exercise you can do to reinforce the value and benefits of honest, hard, God-honoring work.

Ecclesiastes 5:18-20 **TODAY IN THE WORD**

A recent survey of American households attempted to discover the relationship between income and happiness. They polled people at varying income levels from very poor to extremely rich. The results came as some surprise to the group conducting the study. The only connection found between an increase in money and an elevated sense of happiness came at the poverty line. Families who had trouble meeting their basic needs—clothes, food, a warm home, etc.—were generally less happy than other families. But from that point on, even as the income level increased, the satisfaction level stayed the same.

If you've been following along with the study so far, you shouldn't be surprised at all by those findings. Today's reading marks the fourth time that Ecclesiastes has come to the conclusion that it is good for us to enjoy what we have and find satisfaction in our work (cf. Eccl 2:24; 3:13, 22). The fact that it has been repeated so often makes the point worth driving home again. We've already gone over the idea that attitude and obedience play a major part in determining satisfaction and happiness. The previous passages, like today's, have also made the point that the ability to enjoy what we have comes from God (Eccl 5:19, 20).

But today's passage adds a new wrinkle. It is God who gives a man his wealth and possessions (v. 19). It's not a new idea that everything we have comes from God, but in this context it's particularly noteworthy.

Isn't it interesting how concerns about money can distress us? Whether it's retirement or a new job, welcoming a new baby into the world or sending him on to college, building a new home or downsizing—all those issues can fill our minds with oppressive worry.

Ecclesiastes 6

Ecclesiastes 6 **TODAY IN THE WORD**

For who knows what is good for a man in life? - Ecclesiastes 6:12a

Shakespeare's Hamlet had issues. In quite possibly the most famous soliloquy in any play, he asks the question, "To be, or not to be?" He had reached the point that many people come to when he wondered if it was better to suffer the pains of life or to end them altogether. But for Hamlet, the rub was the unknown. The uncertainty of "what dreams may come" during the sleep of death was enough to stop him from ending his life. But the inability to bear the suffering that life brought kept Hamlet from enjoying one second of his existence.

Hamlet, in effect, was fighting the same inner struggle as Ecclesiastes in today's reading. Eccl 6:12 is the key verse in this chapter, because it essentially asks the question, "What's the point of living, and what comfort can you find when you don't know what comes

next?”

The chapter starts out with an “about face” from the point we left off. The previous verses discuss enjoying a worry-free life. But if God doesn’t enable a man to enjoy life, look out (Eccl 6:2)! It’s meaningless, but it’s worse than that. The passage makes the case that it would be better not to have lived at all than to live a long, productive life without joy.

Next comes a string of observations on the subject. First, we have a sobering revelation about human motivation that brings to mind Jesus’ powerful statement in John 6:35: “I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry.” But without Christ, our appetites are never satisfied. Eccl 6:8 raises an interesting question about the worth of wisdom, conjuring the ironic picture of a homeless man with excellent manners. Eccl 6:9 speaks of longing for things that are distant from us by time or space. For example, during a cold winter, Chicagoans often wish they could fly to Florida or turn the calendar forward to June. Such longing, though, is meaningless.

If you ever need motivation for witnessing, this passage is a good source. Thoughtful people who don’t know Jesus Christ as Savior are tormented by the reality of this passage. They, like Hamlet, find no meaning in the suffering of life—and they are frightened by the horrible unknown future that awaits them after death. You have the message of hope and light that their souls long to hear. Share it with someone today! No endeavor could be more meaningful than to lead someone to saving faith in Jesus.

Ecclesiastes 6:1-11 INSATIABLE APPETITE - [Heshen was a Chinese ruler](#) in the eighteenth century. He began his career as an imperial bodyguard known for his handsome appearance and charm. After a revolt in 1796, Heshen was put in charge and, at the same time, he began to put money into his own pockets. His wealth was legendary. He reportedly owned 8,000 acres of land and 60 million ounces of silver. There were 600 women in his harem. But his career ended when he was removed from power and forced to commit suicide. Wealth and power do not guarantee a long and happy life. In Eccl 6:2, Solomon made an observation about “another evil” in this life. The first part of his statement, if taken alone, seems overwhelmingly positive. Some people, he notes, are given everything their hearts desire: “wealth, possessions and honor.” They are denied nothing they want. How wonderful to have such a full life! Using the contrasting word “but,” Solomon mentioned that there is a catch. “But God does not grant them the ability to enjoy them.” This contrast sets up the chapter. It would be better to have not been born, suggested the Teacher, than to have everything and enjoy nothing. He used the extreme example of a stillborn child (Eccl 6:3) to illustrate a life not lived or enjoyed. If you never saw sunlight, never experienced anything, wouldn’t it be the same as the wealthy person who is miserable? The problem seems to lie with what he calls our insatiable appetite. In this context, the appetite is linked to both our mouth and our eyes. We always desire what we do not have. We eat and eat, yet we are never full. Satisfying our earthly appetites can be like “chasing after the wind” (Eccl 6:9). The meaning of life cannot be purchased or consumed. The more we have, the more we desire. Solomon’s illustration of the prosperous person who cannot enjoy life should be a warning. Acquiring more wealth or more power will not bring happiness or provide meaning to our lives. Pray that God will grant you contentment for this very moment in your life, no matter what the circumstances. Dr. Thomas Shaw, vice president of student services, oversees several departments that deal with various aspects of students’ lives on campus. He welcomes your prayer support today for his teams and for students under their care.

Ecclesiastes 7

Ecclesiastes 7:1-14

TODAY IN THE WORD

Yesterday, Ecclesiastes posed the question, “What is good for a man in life?” Today’s reading is an implicit answer to that question, as today’s verse indicates. Wisdom is a good thing, and this passage is filled with pearls of wisdom that hope to form a string of meaningful truth. The struggle, though, is that this inspired wisdom from God is intentionally limited to the para-meters of “under the sun” thought. This is, in essence, wisdom for the here and now without a thought given toward eternity. But the wisdom it offers for us today is still powerful.

The comparison of a good name to fine perfume is a piece of poignant poetic imagery—a reputation has a way of lingering like an odor, good or bad. It also marks the first of seven “better than” statements that offer wise guidance for our choices. The mood of the passage shifts immediately, as mourning is counted better than laughter (Eccl 7:1–4). Before we dismiss that notion as the depression of someone detached from God, consider that James reinforces the same sentiment in his epistle (James 4:9). A sober attitude is the fruit of a humble heart.

Rebukes are generally not our favorite thing to hear, but wise correction is better than foolish reinforcement (vv. 5, 6). That’s a difficult truth to accept sometimes, but again, humility is important. Verse 7 refers back to the issue of money and acceptance—a love

for either can be used against even a wise man through bribes or extortion. Verse 8 gives us an insightful contrast between proudly beginning a project and patiently enduring until the end. Part of that patience is having the humility to be slow to anger—notice what a key factor humility is in wise living.

There is a strong connection between Ecclesiastes and the book of James. Both of them focus especially on the here and now in different ways. While Ecclesiastes looks to answer this world's questions without looking into heaven, James commands us to put our heaven-bound faith into practice on earth. We will study the book of James later this year, and you can get a head start. Set aside some time to read through all of James and compare it to what we've read so far in Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes 7:1-18 - EXTREME LIVING - In the 1990s, the term [extreme sports](#) gained popularity. It described sports with extraordinary risks. Participants engaged in activities that involved attaining great speed or height and took an extraordinary amount of exertion. Wave jumping, wind surfing, snow boarding . . . many extreme sports pitted one person against uncontrollable elements in a sort of survival contest. Ecclesiastes 7 explores the desirable quality of wisdom, but it also warns against a life lived in the extremes. The extreme contrast to wisdom is foolishness, and the first nine verses contrast the actions of wise individuals with the opposite lives led by fools. Solomon pointed out that, in this life under the sun, wisdom may not always seem very desirable. He claimed that it is better to go into a house of mourning than one of feasting (Eccl 7:2). It is better to be frustrated than to laugh (Eccl 7:3). He is urging here not a life of disappointment but a serious, rather than frivolous, attitude toward life. The wise person realizes both the brevity and purpose of life. Some people manipulate situations and extort others to achieve a desired outcome. If our goals are the most important things—no matter the cost—then evils like extortion would be justified. Solomon urges the harder and slower route of “patience,” with a greater goal in mind than instant satisfaction (Eccl 7:8). Wisdom provides a long-term perspective, an ability to consider our life and God's purposes in it. It must be coupled, however, with “righteousness” (Eccl 7:15). Both are needed. We must not be wise merely in our own eyes or those of the world. We must see life through God's eyes. Only God can keep us balanced to avoid extreme and foolish living. Too often we let our emotions control our actions. We associate God's blessing with our feelings. Today you may be feeling encouraged by life's circumstances—or perhaps your current situation is stressful. No matter what you are facing, remember that God is unchanging and in control. Allow Him to give you His long-term perspective today.

Ecclesiastes 7:9; James 1:19-20.

TODAY IN THE WORD

Prominent 18th-century British physician John Hunter suffered from angina. Finding that his attacks were often brought on by anger, Hunter lamented: “My life is at the mercy of any scoundrel who chooses to put me in a passion.”

Unfortunately, those words proved prophetic. At a meeting of the board of London's St. George's Hospital, Hunter became involved in a heated argument with other board members. He walked out of the meeting—and dropped dead in the next room.

Heat is an excellent metaphor for anger. Our language is peppered with phrases that relate anger to a sudden rise in someone's emotional temperature. We speak of getting “hot” or “steamed,” “blowing up,” or “losing our cool.”

Anger is that feeling of displeasure or agitation. It often comes in such a rush that it's hard to control our actions. Anger definitely deserves its place in sin's “Hall of Shame” as one of the Seven Deadly (or capital) Sins.

Like sexual desire, anger is a powerful emotion that can quickly blaze out of control. We hear a lot about legitimate versus illegitimate anger, and there are plenty of professional and self-help books written to teach us how to bring our anger under control.

That's a needed emphasis because anger is too volatile a substance for us to toy with. If you'll trace the word through the Bible using a concordance, you'll find that the overwhelming testimony of Scripture is that anger is bad news in anyone's hands but God's.

Today's Scripture verifies that sentiment. Both in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, Solomon emphasizes the folly of being “quick-tempered” or “quickly provoked.” The person with a short fuse will often find a bomb of anger ready to explode in his lap (Eccl. 7:9).

Since anger is hard to deal with once it starts to burn, it's better not to light the fuse in the first place.

Ecclesiastes 7:15-29

TODAY IN THE WORD

By this point in our study of Ecclesiastes, you may have asked yourself, “If Solomon had so much wisdom, how could he possibly turn to other gods? Isn't that the most foolish thing anyone could ever do?” But today and tomorrow we'll see that wisdom, even for the wisest of people, has its limitations, especially when the perspective is limited to this earth.

For instance, how can a wise men make sense of the fact that righteousness sometimes can lead to death, while some wicked people enjoy long lives (Eccl 7:15)? Such a question leaves an “under the sun” mind with two possible answers: either a) righteousness has no immediate or long-lasting benefits over wickedness, or b) righteousness is impossible to obtain.

Eccl 7:16 includes a tough statement to process, but it helps to look at it together with Eccl 7:20—no one can be truly righteous, let alone overrighteous, and it’s hard to imagine anyone being overwise, either, especially to the point of self-destruction. Overwicked or foolish, that’s easier to picture (Eccl 7:17). But the verses may be speaking more about self-perception than an actual state of being—a person with a proper view of God seeks after wisdom and righteousness, but falls short of thinking of himself as supremely good or wise (Eccl 7:18).

Overall, this passage offers a realistic look at one man’s search for wisdom. After an interesting admonition not to hold other people’s speech to a harsher standard than your own (Eccl 7:21, 22), this wise man admits that even he falls short of ultimate wisdom (Eccl 7:23). He seeks to understand the stupidity of wickedness and the madness of folly (Eccl 7:25).

Beneath the surface of today’s passage lies the difference between wisdom and righteousness. Part of wisdom is recognizing one’s own sinfulness, but the remedy doesn’t come through wisdom—righteousness comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe (Ro 3:22).

Ecclesiastes 7:19-29 NO, NOT ONE - Nominees to the United States Supreme Court undergo rigorous scrutiny during the appointment process. Potential justices are nominated by the president and given thorough background checks. According to Article II of the U.S. Constitution, the Senate is required to provide “advice and consent” on the presidential nominees, which today usually takes the form of extensive Senate judicial committee hearings. Once confirmed, the justice holds his or her position for life. In today’s passage, Solomon talked about the value, and near impossibility, of finding a truly wise and righteous person. The value of this type of person is immense. As the Teacher stated in verse 19, such a person holds great power. Eccl 7:20, however, reminds, us that no one can live up to God’s perfect standards. The verse is similar to Romans 3:10, often quoted in the gospel message: “There is no one righteous, not even one.” All of humanity falls short of God’s glory. No one measures up. A wise person avoids listening to gossip and to dissension. No one can please everyone all of the time—and following God’s calling may not lead to popularity. Solomon, who was granted divine wisdom, put this quality to the test. One of Solomon’s greatest failures involved women. Involvement in illicit relationships is compared to a “snare” and a “trap” (Eccl 7:26). The wise man avoids this sin. Solomon loved many foreign women (1 Kings 11:1), and his comments here reflect that experience. “As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods” (1 Kings 11:4). As one commentator wrote, “Who knows how differently he would have stated his feelings if he had been blessed with just one wife who was loyal and wise?” What is a snare in your life? For Solomon, it was women. For some, it is gossip, pride, or lack of self-control. Ask God to give you His wisdom and His strength to overcome the traps that so easily distract us. Write this specific request on a slip of paper and keep it as a reminder of your need for God’s control in your life.

Ecclesiastes 8

Ecclesiastes 8

TODAY IN THE WORD

[Eliot Ness](#), the well-known lawman who brought [Al Capone](#) to justice, never enjoyed financial success. Even as his crime-fighting career continued after such a remarkable achievement, he and his family had to settle for common means. How humbling it must have been to see the criminals he chased enjoy riches beyond his wildest dreams. He died before his one chance at commercial gain, the publication of his book, [The Untouchables](#).

King Solomon, through all his exposure to foreign rulers, must have seen many cases of wicked, powerful men enjoying prolonged reign over their kingdoms. And with an “under the sun” mentality, it’s hard to see the value of living righteously when wicked men are rewarded with prosperity. Today’s reading is a product of observing life through that lens—justice isn’t always carried out “under heaven” (Eccl 8:11, 12).

But the beginning and the ending of today’s reading offer an insightful look into wisdom. Ecclesiastes 8:1 and Eccl 8:17 both point to the fact that even a wise man can’t explain everything about life—but his wisdom still allows him a positive outlook! Even if he disagrees with the king, a wise man can still act appropriately with respect and obedience (Eccl 8:2-6). But not even the king has ultimate power (Eccl 8:8). Death is the great equalizer that brings an end to a wicked man’s glory days (Eccl 8:10). Even if the wickedness continues for years, life will be far more enjoyable for the man who does good (Eccl 8:11–13).

Have you ever been under the authority of someone with whom you disagreed? If not a king, perhaps a boss or even a church leader? Eccl 8:2–6 are quite valuable for anyone in such a situation. When a person in authority has the power to make decisions with or without your approval, it's best to seek "the proper time and procedure" for any action you might take instead of making a rash, emotional decision. Ask God to show you the appropriate course of action with a prayer for wisdom today.

Ecclesiastes 8:1-17 A WISE LEADER - Abraham Lincoln's face is among the most well-known of the American presidents. He led the nation during a time of political dissent and civil war. "The Great Emancipator," as he was called, will forever be remembered for both saving the Union and freeing the slaves. He was noted for his self-confidence and ability to listen well. This quote is often attributed to him: "Better to remain silent and be thought a fool, than to speak and remove all doubt." Ecclesiastes 8 describes the limitation of earthly leadership, and it contrasts again the difference between wisdom and foolishness. Wisdom is a desirable quality and can actually alter one's appearance. How do we respond to earthly leaders, wise or foolish? First, we are to respect authority (Eccl 8:2). Second, questioning leadership should be done carefully and cautiously. Some commentators think that the passage suggests it is better for believers to avoid getting too quickly caught up in political causes and protests. Certainly it is better to wait for the "proper time and procedure" (Eccl 8:4, 5). This phrase is repeated for emphasis. There is a proper time and way to influence leadership. This advice on how to live under the rule of earthly leaders is followed by an explanation. Why should governmental authority be respected, even if it is faulty? Solomon realized that only God knew the future. We must recognize the earthly limitations of any human leader. Life on this earth will never be completely fair. True justice may seem elusive. The wicked will often go unpunished, and the righteous will suffer. Even the greatest leader has limited ability to comprehend "what goes on under the sun" (Eccl 8:17). Note the contrast between human effort and what God has done. Today, make a list of your leaders: president, vice president, congressmen, governor, and mayor. Pray for each of them, that God will enable them to lead your city, state, and country in a wise and just manner. When your heart is troubled about a governmental issue, ask God to give you the proper time and way to make your concerns known.

Ecclesiastes 8:14-17

TODAY IN THE WORD

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights. - James 1:17

Sometimes, when two completely different sets of standards collide, the result can be very costly. That's what happened last year when a NASA space probe to Mars was lost. The Lockheed Martin company and NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory used different measurements. Lockheed did its calculations in pounds and feet, while the Laboratory used the metric system of kilograms and meters. The two standards were never coordinated on the project, and the \$125 million spacecraft got too close to Mars and either broke apart or burned up. That can also happen in the spiritual realm when we use our limited, human standards trying to figure out an infinite God and reduce Him to our terms. We'll crash and burn on that project in a hurry, because God hasn't chosen to share all of His ways with us. Let's trust Solomon's wise counsel. He became concerned with life's unfairness, observing that people did not always get what it seemed they deserved. So he had to understand what God did and why He did it. Solomon stayed awake night and day to observe the world around him and to arrive at a satisfying answer to his questions. But he concluded that the more he tried to unravel God's ways, the more impossible that became. Therefore, Solomon turned to a familiar piece of advice: accept the good things God gives us and leave the unsolved mysteries to Him. Again, this is not passive fatalism, but an active decision to leave our questions with God and get on with the things He has given us to do. Solomon was not saying that finding contentment in our work will solve all the riddles of life. In fact, it's because life is often so hard to explain that we need to get past the futile exercise of trying to make sense out of everything. We often hear people say that it's OK to doubt, that God is big enough to handle our doubts, and so on.

Ecclesiastes 9

Ecclesiastes 9

TODAY IN THE WORD

According to an old French legend, the walled city of [Carcassonne](#) came under siege during the Middle Ages. As the story goes, the people trapped inside had run almost completely out of food, and although the city walls kept the powerful army at bay, starvation seemed imminent. One person came up with the idea to take the one remaining pig in the city and stuff it with all the grain they had left. They threw the animal over the wall for the attacking army to see—and the troops gave up hope of ever wearing down such a "bountiful" city and finally passed them by. Some storytellers claim the city was named for the hero in this story, but it's likely that if the legend has any basis in reality, the truth behind the heroism has been lost forever—no one from that time is around to verify the facts! And that's the point Ecclesiastes hammers home in today's reading. The fight against death is a hopeless battle, no matter how skilled or well-known the warrior may be (Eccl 9:11, 12). Eccl 9:13–15 take us through an account of a poor but wise man that

saved his entire town against a mighty army—and he received no glory, no recognition. We never even find out his name. But then again, we never learn the identity of the powerful king either. In time, though, they all passed on at their appointed time. Under the sun, they both share the same destiny—beyond the sun is another matter altogether. Today, Ecclesiastes asks a probing question: who can know man's destiny?

Ecclesiastes 9:1-10

TODAY IN THE WORD

Whoever said death and taxes are the only two certainties in life wasn't far from the truth. Solomon would agree with at least the first part of that statement, because he emphasized in the book of Ecclesiastes that death is a certainty for every person, regardless of status, wealth, or wisdom—or the lack thereof. You may be thinking that discussing death is not a very encouraging way to begin today's study. However, the certainty of death is an important part of the lesson Solomon wants us to learn about life. The fact is that even for God's people the future is uncertain (Eccl 9:1-3). We don't know what awaits us. There are no guarantees that life will always land sunny side up. Death, however, is certain (Eccl 9:4-6). So what should we do about these two inescapable realities? An uncertain future and a certain death may seem like a bleak outlook, but Solomon's advice for us is anything but morbid. As we look at this passage, we need to issue a theological disclaimer. Ecclesiastes is not God's only, or His final, word about life. Therefore, we can't build an entire theology on these verses. For example, when this book addresses themes such as certainty and uncertainty, the doctrine of salvation is not in view. Solomon was concerned with life "under the sun." That being said, let's consider the king's advice on how to live as God's stewards in the face of life's uncertainties and riddles that can't be figured out. If you have read Ecclesiastes you know that instead of urging us to retreat to the top of a mountain and ponder the unexplainable ways of God, Solomon's counsel is to enjoy the good gifts from God. One conclusion of this book is that only God can give us the ability to enjoy His gifts. It's because "God favors what [we] do" (Eccl 9:7) that we can delight in His provision for our need of food and drink. The idea is that the presence of these gifts indicates God's approval. The same is true for gifts such as marriage and the work God puts before us. Our days are not "meaningless" in the sense of being futile. Instead, our days are fleeting, passing quickly. Let's make the most of them to serve and please God. The fact that life is short doesn't mean we have to be morbid about it.

Being God's steward was never meant to be a grim affair. Does your life reflect the joy that comes with knowing God and living according to His principles? Evaluate the level of joy in your life today. List four or five reasons you have to be joyful, then share what you found with your family or friends.

Ecclesiastes 9:1-10

In 2004, the Two Hearts Pet Loss Center became the first funeral home in the United States dedicated exclusively to memorializing pets. What may have struck many as a frivolous service has become a lasting trend rather than a passing fad. Many more such businesses have sprung up around the country, and a growing number of traditional funeral homes are offering increased options for animal funerals, burials, and cremations. Many people love their pets dearly enough to mourn their loss with a similar grief they show for people. Some of the deepest grief stems from a lack of hope for the reality of an afterlife. King Solomon's darkest hour produced a much different reaction than what his father expressed in yesterday's study. Ecclesiastes was composed from a viewpoint intentionally restricted to what can be observed under the sun, or in creation. When one can look no further than the grave, the conclusions weren't hopeful. "All share a common destiny," wrote the man known still today for his wisdom (Eccl 9:2). The same fate of death awaits us all; evil and righteous, wise and foolish, animal or human. Solomon used images we've seen before: a lion to represent the height of majesty in the animal kingdom, and a dog as an animal of little regard (Eccl 9:4). But when the two ends of the spectrum meet at the grave, a breathing dog is superior to a fallen lion—and presumably superior even to a person who has passed. Solomon explained further that those who are alive have hope of enjoying what is before them and even fearing what awaits (Eccl 9:5). But to the dead, all knowledge is erased (or at least it becomes useless in this life). It's important to remember the narrow perspective Solomon used in Ecclesiastes. These conclusions are the natural result of removing the factor of eternity from the equation. Solomon does conclude with a valuable lesson, even if it does feature the word meaningless more frequently than we might like. We are called to make the most of the days we have and enjoy what we do—leave no amount of energy or enjoyment in reserve. **APPLY THE WORD** We do have a hope that lasts beyond the grave! As the writer of Hebrews put it, "Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess" (Eccl 10:23). Yet, even with the eternal in mind, it's important to recognize the importance of every day on earth. What if this day were your last? Would you spend it complaining? Would you ignore those who mean the most to you? Would you be ashamed to profess your faith? Answer those questions this day with a resounding no.

Ecclesiastes 9:7-10

TODAY IN THE WORD

Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might. - Ecclesiastes 9:10 - During the Civil War, Union general [George McClellan](#) became well known for being hesitant to respond to the enemy and move his army out into the battle. In 1862, two Union soldiers found a copy of the Confederate army's detailed plans for a campaign in western Maryland, and gave the plans to McClellan. Despite this advantage, McClellan was reluctant and timid in his attack, and the battle of [Antietam](#) turned into a bloody

carnage. General McClellan had no reason to hold back with the battle plans in his hands. The time of opportunity was short, and he needed the resolve to move out and take advantage of the moment, which is really what Solomon is calling us to do in today's reading. The setting is very different, of course, but the principle is the same. Life is short, so enjoy God's goodness. The context for these verses may not seem very upbeat. The subject was the certainty of death for everyone. We might expect Solomon to offer gloomy advice after reflecting on death and its finality. Once again, the wisest person who ever lived counseled his readers to lay aside thoughts of gloom and the shortness of life, and accept what God has given. In case that recurring word "meaningless" bothers you, remember that Ecclesiastes isn't the Bible's only word on the meaning of life. Besides, it is true that many things that perturb people mean very little in light of eternity. Solomon was helping us bypass the emptiness for something that mattered. Ecclesiastes doesn't tell us to lie down and quit, and neither does it encourage us to spend our days on a mountain trying to solve the mysteries of life. You have to appreciate the practicality of the things Solomon urges us to enjoy: physical nourishment, love and companionship . . . and work! White clothing and anointing oil (v. 8) were signs of rejoicing and gladness. They weren't necessities in the same sense as food and drink.

Ecclesiastes 9:9

TODAY IN THE WORD

Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love. - Ecclesiastes 9:9 - While the church has always valued moral purity, at some points in history it has felt ambivalent about marriage. Sex in particular, even within the confines of marriage, has been an uncomfortable subject. As early as the second century, some Christian leaders reacted against growing worldliness in the church by urging believers to practice extreme forms of asceticism. They even urged married believers to abstain from sex altogether—or at least not to enjoy it too much. This point of view was reflected in the "desert fathers" of the second century, who chose to live a solitary and ascetic lifestyle. They told the married believers who came to them for spiritual counsel to live like celibate monks. Augustine taught that sexual intercourse, even in marriage, should not be enjoyed for its own sake. He believed that it was only for the propagation of mankind. This stands in sharp contrast with today's sex-obsessed culture. Wendy Shalit, in her book entitled [A Return to Modesty](#), noted that sex on many college campuses today is so frequent and impersonal that the two partners may as well be "two airplanes refueling." Both views—the aversion of some in the early church to sex within the confines of marriage, and modern society's casual approach to sex—are equally unhealthy and unbiblical. The Song of Solomon does not portray sexual pleasures in marriage as a necessary evil that must be suppressed or endured. Instead, the bride and groom are encouraged to enjoy themselves until they are satisfied (Eccl 9:1). Procreation is certainly one of the obvious purposes of sex within marriage. The first command to the human race recorded in Scripture was the command to "be fruitful and increase in number" (Gen. 1:22). But as we see in the Song of Solomon, enjoying sex in marriage is also important. Every day we face a constant barrage of sexual images from films, television programs, and magazines. Passion, however, is not the problem. Society's problem is not that it enjoys sex too much. The problem is that our culture has removed the boundaries God set in place for sexual expression. His rules are not intended to spoil our fun, but to protect us from the consequences of unbridled passion. Those who choose to quench the fires of passion by having sex outside the confines of the marriage relationship are destined to get burned.

Ecclesiastes 9:10

TODAY IN THE WORD

Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might. - Ecclesiastes 9:10 - So many major league baseball players entered military service in World War II that by 1944, there weren't many able-bodied players left. That June the Cincinnati Reds set a record for the youngest player ever to appear in a big league game when they sent a 15-year-old lefthander named [Joe Nuxhall](#) to the mound. The nervous youngster pitched two-thirds of an inning, giving up two runs, five hits, and five walks. Nuxhall did return to the majors in 1952, and won more than 100 games in his career. There are some things younger teenagers are not expected to do, such as defeat older, more seasoned opponents. No one had to convince Nuxhall or the Reds that he was out of his league that day but no one could convince a young David of his so-called disadvantage. Today's lesson marks a shift in focus for our seasons of faith study, from the seasons of the year to those of life: youth, the middle years, and old age. God's Word has wonderful, wise, and encouraging things to say about each season, and we'll study some great passages. All of us fit into one of these age categories, so there's something here for everyone. What better way to begin talking about the season of youth than with David's victory over Goliath? This story has become a part of our general cultural knowledge, but most people think of it simply as an inspiring story of the little guy beating the big guy. Lots of people love to cheer for the underdog. But that has nothing to do with the heart of this exciting account. David didn't win on youthful exuberance. He came against Goliath in the name and power of the God of Israel, to vindicate God's honor (Eccl 9:37, 46-47). In this story, the giant was the underdog. However, it is impossible to ignore the fact that David was 'only a boy' (Eccl 9:42). His age was a drawback as far as the other people in the story were concerned. David's older brothers got mad at him because they thought their little brother was showing off. Saul shook his head at the sight of a boy in a man's armor. And Goliath mocked David for daring to challenge him. But none of that bothered God's shepherd-warrior. Let's make sure we don't underestimate what God can do with young people who are sold out to Him. 'Set an example for the believers,' Paul told young Timothy (1 Tim. 4:12). For most of us in the Today family, our challenge is to encourage the young and help equip them

spiritually to be the kind of examples Paul wrote about. Here at Moody Bible Institute, we have a campus full of godly young men and women who are preparing for spiritual leadership. Please pray for them today.

Ecclesiastes 9:1-18 A COMMON DESTINY - Tucked behind a library, a church, office buildings, and homes in Westwood, California, is a small cemetery. At first glance, Westwood Village Memorial Park may look like an ordinary collection of gravestones, but the names read like the Who's Who of Hollywood. Celebrities buried at the cemetery include Marilyn Monroe, Walter Matthau, Mel Torme, Dean Martin, Natalie Wood, Roy Orbison, Burt Lancaster, and Peggy Lee. Celebrity graves reflect the tone of this chapter—no matter how rich or famous, we all share a common destiny. It does not matter whether we are rich or poor, righteous or wicked (Eccl 9:2), we will eventually meet the same fate. Whatever we achieve during our time on this earth is merely temporal. In the first two verses, the author described various types of people. Here, he concluded that the same destiny awaits them all. He mentioned the varied and vibrant emotions of the living. In this life we love, hate, and get consumed by jealousy. Once we die, however, these emotions will vanish. Because human existence is temporal, we are encouraged to take advantage of the time we are given on this earth. Solomon urges, "Go eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart" (Eccl 9:7). In biblical times, white garments were symbols of purity and joy, so to always wear white would mean to live life joyfully (Eccl 9:8). Life is unexpected, warned Solomon. The typical winners of a race have no advantage over others in the race of life. Everyone meets the same fate and no one knows when this life will end. Much of what happens in this earthly existence seems to be dependent on time and chance. We must live the life set before us, trusting that God is in control. What happens after we die? This question is often used in evangelism because we all share a common destiny. Everyone must eventually face the grave. When you have an opportunity, ask someone what they believe happens to them after death. Be prepared to share your view of your eternal destiny and use the opportunity to tell of God's gift of eternal life!

Ecclesiastes 10

Ecclesiastes 10:1-12:8

TODAY IN THE WORD

An entire performance of Rossini's opera, *William Tell*, lasts about six hours—more than most human voices, or ears, can endure. But its overture (basically the symphonic synopsis of the story) is likely the most well-known piece of music of its kind. It has four parts, all of which are fairly popular: the sunrise on the cello, the storm on the drums and brass, the peaceful pastoral scene by the English horn and flute, and the galloping call of the trumpet—the tune that gave the Lone Ranger his theme. The four-part construction resembles the four seasons as it summarizes the entire six-hour epic through its full circle of emotions in a matter of minutes. Today's passage does much the same thing for the book of Ecclesiastes. It's a string of wise sayings and observations that, in a sense, guide us through the author's entire view of life "under the sun." There are too many quips and phrases in this passage to cover them all today, so let's focus on a few. What political conservatives would love to use as a verse to condemn liberals (Eccl 10:2) is really a statement noting how the wise man and the foolish man head in completely opposite directions. That theme runs throughout this passage. Scattered along the way are some very good pieces of advice. Remain calm in the face of anger, even when its source is a powerful leader (Eccl 10:4). There may be great temptation to storm away from an outburst, but calmly continuing in your duties can quiet the waters. Along the same line of respectful humility, don't show disrespect to your superiors, even when you think you're alone. In fact, we shouldn't let hatred enter our thoughts—such attitudes have a way of making themselves known (Eccl 10:20). It may be difficult to spend time each day thinking about life in such broad, sweeping strokes. Now might be a good time to clean the palate, so to speak.

Ecclesiastes 10:1-20 SWEET SMELL OF WISDOM - In Old Testament times, perfume was often used in religious ceremonies but was also used for personal enjoyment. Oils were applied to the skin and to garments and pieces of furniture such as beds. The perfumes, created mainly from spices imported from Arabia, were helpful in the hot climate where smells could easily become offensive. Because they could be quite costly, no one wanted flies to destroy this treasure. As he neared the end of Ecclesiastes, the Teacher began to share wise bits of advice in the style of proverbs. Rich imagery fills this chapter. These images, culturally significant in that time and place, helped show his listeners what wisdom looks and acts like. Verse 1 begins with those dead flies in perfume. The insects turn what should be beautiful into something repulsive. They illustrate the destructive power of foolish words and actions. A dull ax and snake charmers are examples of mouths and lips illustrating the key point: wisdom is of great value. As he said earlier in the book, leaders are not always wise and life is not necessarily fair. The world we live in is filled with injustice and risk, and people will experience the results of the fallen nature in this lifetime. Foolish leaders would feast "in the morning" when the day's work had not yet been done (Eccl 10:16). Wisdom, however, has its rewards: when leaders are wise, the entire country benefits. Practical advice for a life well-lived is illustrated in the second half of the chapter. A wise person controls his tongue. It is better to speak carefully than to speak in haste. It is better to be industrious than lazy or idle. When we speak of people behind their backs, our unkind words might be found out. Solomon's sage advice comes from his experience as king. Consider the fragrance of

your life and actions. Do the words that you say and the things that you do give off a pleasing aroma? Or do hasty words and thoughtless action leave behind a bad odor? What impression are you making on those you encounter? Do you bear sweet witness for Christ?

Ecclesiastes 11

Ecclesiastes 11:1-6

TODAY IN THE WORD

Sow your seed in the morning, and at evening let not your hands be idle. - Ecclesiastes 11:6

Maybe you've seen the bumper sticker, "I'm not indecisive . . . am I?" We hesitate to mow the lawn or wash the car because it might rain. Or we keep putting off a decision until we're positive that nothing will go wrong. There's nothing wrong with caution. But indecision can be paralyzing when it becomes a way of life, and some people go through life without ever being sure of anything or taking even the smallest risk. After a week of studying Ecclesiastes, we can understand why Solomon tells us to make the most of our God-given opportunities. The context of these verses is one of the familiar themes of Ecclesiastes: we don't know the future, and we can't figure out what God does or how He does it. Three times Solomon said, "You do not know" (Ecclesiastes 11:2, 5, 6), and for good measure he added, "You cannot understand" (Ecclesiastes 11:5). We already know that Solomon did not consider life's shortness or its mysteries as reasons to crawl in a hole and hide. In fact, he used the examples of sea trading and farming to say, "Don't wait for conditions to be perfect, because that will never happen. You don't know what's going to happen tomorrow. So go ahead, ship your grain out and plant your seed today while you can." That's very practical advice for workers, whether you're investing in the stock market or mowing lawns. We're not only being urged to try, but to try different things in the hope that some will succeed. This doesn't mean changing jobs every few months. The Bible is giving us permission to explore to the fullest the gifts and opportunities we receive from God. Today, it seems like the only people giving Ecclesiastes-type advice are the secular self-help gurus who have a video and a course to sell.

Ecclesiastes 11:1-8

TODAY IN THE WORD

However many years a man may live, let him enjoy them all. - Ecclesiastes 11:8 - Thomas Dewey is a name the older generation will know. He was a brilliant young attorney who won widespread recognition for his battles against organized crime. Dewey became a front runner for the Republican presidential nomination in 1940, when he was just thirty-eight. An official in Franklin Roosevelt's administration made fun of Dewey's age by saying he had 'thrown his diaper into the ring.' Dewey didn't get the nod, but in 1944 and 1948 he was nominated, although he was defeated in both presidential races. He also suffered defeat in the 1938 race for governor of New York, but went on to be elected for three terms as governor. Few things are more uncertain than the outcome of a political race, yet Thomas Dewey was willing to 'cast [his] bread upon the waters' (Ecclesiastes 11:1). He sounds like the kind of person Solomon described in Ecclesiastes 11. Since the future is uncertain, the king says, there's no need to be too cautious about pursuing various plans. In fact, if we are too timid, always afraid of what might happen, we won't get anything done (Ecclesiastes 11:4). At first glance, Solomon's advice may seem contradictory. You might think he would say that since life is so uncertain, don't take too many chances. But Solomon advises exactly the opposite. In modern terms, he is saying, 'Go for it!' Now before we make Solomon sound like some kind of tenth-century B.C. motivational speaker, we need to remember that his advice is tempered by several important theological truths. For example, in Ecclesiastes 11:5 we read that God holds the central place in the universe. Plans made without Him are doomed to ultimate failure. The reason any of our efforts succeed at all is because He is at work, guiding and deciding.

We're also reminded that the days of opportunity won't last forever (Ecclesiastes 11:8). Life is short, in other words. This is an especially good word for people in the prime of young adulthood. The Bible isn't being cynical or pessimistic, just realistic. The other truth that guides these verses isn't so apparent here, but it's part of the context of the whole book. Solomon can encourage us to enjoy our years because God has given human beings the gift of happiness, which comes from a life well lived. If you have a 'go for it' type of personality, you're probably saying amen to Solomon's counsel. But whether you're the all-out or the cautious type, you're wise to submit all your plans, dreams, and hopes to God for His review, redirection, or approval. That's because He alone can judge a person's true motives (Pr. 16:2). In light of this, here's a good verse to memorize: 'Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and your plans will succeed' (Pr. 16:3).

Ecclesiastes 11:1-10 LIFE IS A CHOICE - Motivational speaker Betty Bender once said, "Anything I've ever done that ultimately was worthwhile ... initially scared me to death." Author Leo Buscaglia echoed her thoughts: "The person who risks nothing, does nothing, has nothing, is nothing and becomes nothing." Life, they agree, involves risk. Chapter 11 of Ecclesiastes examines the

unpredictability of “life under the sun.” This is a common theme throughout the book, and explored more fully here. Verse 1 illustrates the point by noting the risk of a maritime trader. Sending your ship out to sea, involves risk—from both nature and enemies—yet it might also bring great financial reward. Verse 4 offers the same practical advice: those who risk nothing will gain nothing. If we continually “watch the wind,” we will not accomplish anything on this earth. Only God knows the outcome of our actions. If we believe that God is the Creator and Sustainer of life, we must realize that nothing that we do upon this earth is under our complete control. The response to understanding life’s risks is renewed faithfulness in our daily tasks. We must do the jobs that are set before us without worrying too much about the results. What we do can only accomplish so much. Any success is inevitably up to God. This analysis of the uncertainty of life is not meant to discourage us, but to encourage us to live each day to the fullest—to seize the day for the Lord. Solomon encouraged young people to enjoy the energy of their youth and to take advantage of the life before them. This foreshadows Paul’s words in Colossians 3:23: “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters.” Take risks and make wise choices, knowing that God controls the outcomes and that He alone is our final judge. What are you afraid of doing? What do you worry about in your future? Write down your top three or four answers to those questions. Then, pray over each item. Ask God to remind you that He alone controls your future. Ask Him to give you courage to act wisely without shrinking from difficult tasks. He can help you accomplish great things!

Ecclesiastes 11:1-12:1

TODAY IN THE WORD

Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it again. - Ecclesiastes 11:1

In a wonderful little book entitled *Money Smart*, Christian financial counselor Larry Burkett says that while advice from unsaved experts to Christians may be good as far as it goes, “their counsel is lacking the most essential element: God’s Word. It has been my experience that most counsel from unsaved financial advisors is aimed at protecting the assets of their clients.” But, Burkett says, as Christians we have priorities other than financial gain. There’s a word for the element that is missing in so much of the advice we receive from non-Christians: stewardship. It makes a big difference whether you consider yourself owner and master of all you have, or as a manager of God’s resources whose first responsibility is faithfulness (1 Cor. 4:2). The writer of Ecclesiastes understood the importance of setting life’s goals and making decisions with the knowledge that we are accountable to God. Being a wise counselor, he reminds us to keep our focus on the Lord, and not on His gifts and blessings. Nowhere does God’s Word tell us to hoard our time, our spiritual gifts, or our money out of fear that we might make a mistake or lose something. Remember, the only servant the master judged in Jesus’ parable of the talents was the one who hid his money because he was afraid of losing it and displeasing the master (Matt. 25:25-27). God intends His gifts to be used. Once we have our spiritual vision adjusted, we are ready to take on the challenges He gives us. Life is full of uncertainties, Solomon says, but those aren’t our concern. That which we can’t see or understand is in God’s hands. Our job is to invest our lives in the work of His kingdom. Ecclesiastes 11:9b may sound like dangerous advice. However, Solomon balances it with the reminder that our desires and decisions will come under God’s review. It is also true that when we make the Lord our delight, He will “give [us] the desires of [our] heart” (Ps. 37:4). If we had to give a title to today’s study it would be, “Go for it, but don’t leave out God.” In other words, let’s not pack our lives so tightly, even with good things, that God is squeezed out. A good question to ask yourself today is this: are your heart, your mind, and your schedule so full that God would have to do something spectacular just to get your attention? Pray today that God will help you keep your spiritual eyes and ears open to Him.

Ecclesiastes 11:1-12:8

In the popular game show *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* the host asks the contestant progressively more difficult questions. The first questions have obvious answers, and it is fairly simple to pick the correct answer from the four options. But as the prize gets larger, the questions get more difficult. If you’ve ever played along with the show, you may feel fairly confident about your own intelligence—until it passes the \$32,000 mark. At that point, the questions get much more specific and the field of knowledge begins to narrow. Even a well-educated person realizes he may not know everything there is to know. The game is not as easy as it initially appeared. The ending of the book of Ecclesiastes shows that this game of life is not as easy as first thought. Ecclesiastes 11 begins with the command, “Cast your bread upon the waters” (Ecclesiastes 11:1). The chapter continues to echo the overall theme of Ecclesiastes—life occurs in the cycle of history. What has been learned at the end of this journey?

Even our best-laid plans can go awry. Our job is not to figure out what lies ahead, but rather to do the task at hand: “you do not know the path of the wind” (Ecclesiastes 11:5). There is so much we do not know. Scripture cautions against relying on our own knowledge, intelligence, or understanding. “You cannot understand the work of God” (Ecclesiastes 11:5).

Though we cannot know the future, we are still advised to take certain actions: “let not your hands be idle” (Ecclesiastes 11:6). No matter how old we become, we should “enjoy” each year (Ecclesiastes 11:8). “Be happy” when we are young and “let your heart give you joy” (Ecclesiastes 11:9).

The true key to meaning, suggests Ecclesiastes, is not exclusive investment in work or planning for the future. It is not found in

ourselves or in endless self-analysis. The key is to focus on the Creator: "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth" (Eccl 12:1). We are to look for God who will satisfy the craving for meaning and purpose in our lives.

APPLY THE WORD - An epitaph is the inscription that will be engraved on your gravestone. These few words will summarize who you are and what your life represented. What will your epitaph read? What has your life meant to others? What would you like it to say? It's never too late to "Remember your Creator" and make a choice to live a life with eternal purpose. As the words of a classic poem remind us, "Only one life, 'twill soon be past; only what's done for Christ will last."

Ecclesiastes 11:1-12:14

From 2003 to 2005, 180 people died in Japan in 61 separate instances of group suicides. What makes these cases particularly disturbing is that the people, most of whom were young, apparently didn't know each other before meeting to die together. In a typical case, five or six people in their 20's would be found asphyxiated in a car. Many people question, "What's the point of life?" Some struggle to find an answer, and since death will come to everyone at some point, why bother waiting? Yesterday we saw some instruction for young people that came from early in Solomon's life. Today's reading comes from the book of Ecclesiastes, written late in Solomon's life, after he had pursued everything life had to offer and then reflected on this question: *What's the point of life if death is coming?* Earlier in this book Solomon had examined the value of pleasure, work, popularity, and wealth, and found that none of them provided an answer to his question. Now he offers a word to young people. Enjoy your youth—but have an eternal context (Eccl 11:9). Be happy—but know that judgment will come on the decisions that you make. Don't spend time burdened by anxiety and worry—but don't place your hope in youth or strength (Eccl 11:10). Make God a priority now—because old age and death will come, and then it will be difficult or even too late to change (Eccl 12:1). We live in a culture that idolizes youth and fears aging and death, but the words of Ecclesiastes remind us about eternal priorities. Youth is a time to enjoy the blessings of life but also to remember the Source of those blessings. Youth is not a time to idolize or cling to, because it will end and then be considered worthless (Eccl 12:8). Finally, Ecclesiastes provides the answer to its central question: "Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man" (Eccl 12:13). Death is not the end of the story; in light of eternity, only obedience to the will of God matters. Is God the top priority in your life? What does your checkbook reveal? How about your daily planner? Are you more focused on knowing and obeying God, or on pursuing wealth, popularity, pleasure, or work? If you need to surrender some aspect of your life to the Lord, take the time to pray through that issue today, and resolve with the help of the Holy Spirit to live with eternal priorities.

Ecclesiastes 11:9 12:1, 13-14

TODAY IN THE WORD

Let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. - Ecclesiastes 11:9

Charles Spurgeon, the great British preacher who was called to a pastorate in London in 1854 at the tender age of twenty, said of youth, 'Every age has its temptations. The young will learn that there are peculiar snares for little ones. Christ knew these. It was no small temptation at 12 years of age, to sit among the teachers, hearing them and answering their questions. It would have turned the head of most boys, yet Jesus went back to Nazareth and was subject to His parents.' Youth, which in the Bible refers to anyone up to age forty, is a great season of faith. It's well known that more than eighty percent of all conversions occur by the age of eighteen. A person in his or her youthful years, when energy and commitment are usually abundant, can make a tremendous impact for Christ. But as Spurgeon said, youth has its 'peculiar snares.' One of the most common is a tendency toward pride and self-sufficiency a feeling of invincibility that can lead young people to think they can do no wrong, or that the rules of life don't apply to them.

Today's verses offer a powerful, one-word antidote to that kind of thinking: God! Wonderful possibilities await the young with all of their energy and ideas, but they can't afford to live as if God didn't have anything to say about their lives. Actually, none of us can afford to live that way. Yesterday we mentioned the fact that Solomon didn't have any problem telling young people to enjoy the blessings of life God had for them. This king who had started out so wisely in his own youth just didn't want young people to forget that every person is accountable to God. This is interesting advice, coming from someone who had started his career on the throne of Israel as a young man wearing the title of 'the wisest person who ever lived.' Solomon fell on bitter times in his later years, mainly because he didn't follow the advice he offers here. But those who are careful to remember God, keeping Him in the forefront of their thinking when they are young, will avoid the bitterness and disappointment of a life lived in His displeasure.

One reason the gospel is good news is that even if you're past your youth, it's not too late to begin your season of faith. Maybe you have never come to Christ or you're not sure where you stand with Him. You can settle the issue today. Admit that you are a sinner (Rom. 3:23) deserving of God's eternal judgment (Rom. 6:23). Recognize that Christ died for your sins on the cross (Rom. 5:8), and believe in Him for your forgiveness and salvation (Rom. 10:9-10). And if you know the Lord, share this good news with someone else today, if possible.

Ecclesiastes 11:9

TODAY IN THE WORD

After the civil war in seventeenth-century England had ended and Oliver Cromwell was leading the nation, he ordered all troops in the British army to carry a Bible. One young soldier bristled. He had joined the army for good times, not to be a "Bible-toter." But he submitted to the order and stuffed the Bible in his pocket. Later, after a battle, he discovered that the Book had stopped a bullet aimed at him. The bullet had penetrated to Ecclesiastes 11:9, a warning of God's judgment on youth. The message was too plain for the young soldier to miss, and he put his faith in Christ. We can't guarantee that if you practice biblical submission to authority you will be spared from all of life's "bullets." But we can promise you, on the authority of Scripture, that obedience to this "one another" command will bring blessing. God always honors obedience.

Ecclesiastes 12

Ecclesiastes 12:1 Grim Reaper

According to an old fable, a man made an unusual agreement with Death. He told the Grim Reaper that he would willingly accompany him when it came time to die, but only on one condition—that Death would send a messenger well in advance to warn him. Weeks winged away into months, and months into years. Then one bitter winter evening, as the man sat thinking about all his possessions, Death suddenly entered the room and tapped him on the shoulder. Startled, the man cried out, "You're here so soon and without warning! I thought we had an agreement." Death replied, "I've more than kept my part. I've sent you many messengers. Look in the mirror and you'll see some of them." As the man complied, Death whispered, "Notice your hair! Once it was full and black, now it is thin and white. Look at the way you cock your head to listen to me because you can't hear very well. Observe how close to the mirror you must stand to see yourself clearly. Yes, I've sent many messengers through the years. I'm sorry you're not ready, but the time has come to leave."

Ecclesiastes 12:1; 1 Timothy 4:4-5

TODAY IN THE WORD

Remember your Creator. - Ecclesiastes 12:1 - Do people want a better, happier life? Of course they do, and the publishing industry has seized on this very natural desire. Multitudes of self-help books fill the shelves of American bookstores, and millions of people buy them. A recent search on Amazon.com turned up 18,726 self-help titles, while Barnes & Noble claimed 23,070 books in this same category! They ranged widely in topic, covering everything from "how to find inner peace" to "how to make more money" to "how to win friends." Chances are that no matter what you think is the key to a more fulfilling life, you can find a book with a "how to" method covering it. The wise king Solomon also wrote a "self-help" book, Ecclesiastes, the story of his search for a better life. But compared to the thousands of books we have today, his advice at the conclusion of Ecclesiastes is simple and succinct. How can we live "the good life"? "Remember your Creator." "Remember" doesn't mean "look back in time," because Solomon said to do this "in the days of your youth." Instead, "remember" means to recognize a truth, to see it clearly, and to meditate and live with it constantly in mind. The implication is that doing so will make our lives more meaningful, valuable, and pleasurable. If we do so while we're young, we'll build a good foundation, as opposed to realizing the truth when we're older and time has been wasted (a poem on old age follows this verse, Eccl. 12:1b-7). Part of a right attitude to the Creator is a right attitude to His creation (1 Tim. 4:4-5). As God declared throughout Genesis 1, it's all good--no exceptions (cf. 1 Cor. 10:25-26). The right attitude then is to enjoy His creation with thanksgiving, to receive it worshipfully. By means of the Word and prayer, it is consecrated or made holy. We can revel in the goodness of the created world; the key is a right relationship with the Creator. As we conclude this month's devotions, write out the top three insights you've gained from our study of the doctrine of creation. Why did they make such an impact on you? What do you think the Lord wants you to do from now on concerning these insights?

Ecclesiastes 12:1-14 Many people fear growing older. They may get frustrated when their AARP card arrives in the mail or when they discover gray hairs upon their head. Some people ignore their birthdays, hoping to prolong their youth. The fear of aging, called "[gerascophobia](#)," is an irrational fear of old age or death. While most people may not have a pronounced phobia about growing old, many of us wish we could stay young a bit longer. Through poetic imagery, the final chapter of Ecclesiastes illustrates the negative feelings associated with growing older. As we age, we realize life is temporal and fragile. We know there is a time limit to our existence upon earth. Solomon compared old age to darkness or clouds returning after rain, a dismal picture (Eccl 12:2). He uses the imagery of a home or a village to paint a portrait of aging. Words like "tremble" and "stoop" form pictures of frail aging bodies (Eccl 12:3). The almond tree blossoms are white, like graying hair, and when the end of life is near "people go to their eternal home" (Eccl 12:5). The human condition is not renewable—our physical bodies are breakable. We ultimately return to "dust" (Eccl 12:7). Solomon concludes that if "life under the sun" is the total sum of our existence, our destructible bodies would imply that it is meaningless. Following this poetic description of aging, the wise Teacher spoke of truths learned through a life well lived. His age and experience have allowed him to discover the meaning of life. Our main duty, he concluded, is to "fear God and keep his

commandments” (Eccl 12:13–14). God will bring every deed—hidden or open—into judgment. In this final verse, Solomon emphasizes that the central purpose of existence is focused not on our earthly bodies or on the limitations of this life, but on the Almighty God. Are you young or old? If you are young, look ahead to the days you have left on this earth. Ask God to help you make wise choices and to honor Him in all that you do. If you are old, or approaching senior years, ask God to help you devote your final days to Him and His glory. Ask Him to give you His wisdom and to focus on your eternal destiny

Ecclesiastes 12:1

Leftovers

Leftovers are such humble things,
We would not serve to a guest,
And yet we serve them to our Lord
Who deserves the very best.

We give to Him leftover time,
Stray minutes here and there.
Leftover cash we give to Him,
Such few coins as we can spare.

We give our youth unto the world,
To hatred, lust and strife;
Then in declining years we give
To him the remnant of our life.- Author Unknown

Ecclesiastes 12:1-7

The Four Calls

The Spirit came in childhood and pleaded, “Let me in,
”But oh! the door was bolted by thoughtlessness and sin;
“I am too young,” the child replied, “I will not yield today;
There’s time enough tomorrow.” The Spirit went away.

Again He came and pleaded in youth’s bright happy hour;
He came but heard no answer, for lured by Satan’s power
The youth lay dreaming then and saying, “Not today,
Not till I’ve tried earth’s pleasures.” The Spirit went away.

Again He called in mercy in manhood’s vigorous prime,
But still He found no welcome, the merchant had no time;
No time for true repentance, no time to think or pray,
And so, repulsed and saddened, the Spirit went away.

Once more He called and waited, the man was old and ill,
And scarcely heard the whisper, his heart was cold and still;
“Go leave me; when I need thee, I’ll call for thee,” he cried;
Then sinking on his pillow, without a hope, he died!

Ecclesiastes 12:9–14

The book of Ecclesiastes might be one of the most famous and puzzling sermons in the Bible. It is ascribed to “the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem” (Eccl.1:1). The Hebrew word that is translated “teacher” seems to refer to someone who speaks to the assembly. The book’s strangeness may be partly attributed to the author’s goal. His aim was “to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens” (Eccl. 1:13). More than this, his goal was to understand these things in light of their apparent futility. Life and all that accompanies it is like a smoke or vapor. Its pleasures are fleeting; its pains universal. One generation gives way to another, and all they seem to leave behind are dust and ashes. How are we to find meaning in such a world of shadows? Today’s passage contains the Teacher’s summary and conclusion based on these matters. He boils the “big idea” for this sermon down to a single thought: “Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind” (Eccl 12:13, cp 1 Samuel 12:24). Fear in this context does not mean “to be terrified” but “to reverence.” Only God can give meaning to a world that seems to be futile. After exploring the pleasures and pains of the world at length, the Teacher’s conclusion is that we must have a higher regard for God than we do for the world around us. This does not mean that we ignore the world—just the opposite. In this sermon we are urged to take

delight in our spouses and enjoy our work. This is a spiritual strategy for the real world. The actions we take in this life are loaded with meaning. God evaluates everything we do, even those things that nobody else can see. APPLY THE WORD - The author of Ecclesiastes was wiser than anyone who had ruled before him (Eccl. 1:16). Yet we know something that the Teacher did not. We know that God will bring every deed into judgment, and we know that Christ is the judge (see 2 Cor. 5:10)! Pray that the Spirit of God will help guide your thoughts and actions so that you will please the Judge, our Lord and Savior

Ecclesiastes 12:9-12

TODAY IN THE WORD

Sometimes truth is like a refreshing drink of cold water on a hot summer day. Just when we feel like the heat of the world will overcome us, God's Word brings encouraging reminders to us that energize and motivate our weary souls. Yesterday's passage in John 1 was a great example of that effect.

Other times, though, the truth is not so kind and painless. Sometimes we feel God's truth penetrate our hearts like the horn of the bull in "Greenleaf". His wisdom is piercing, and our conviction stings. Ecclesiastes is filled with that second type of truth, which makes it a particularly difficult book to absorb. But if we want the truth to make a permanent impression in our lives, we need it to be powerful and sometimes even painful.

Hopefully the Teacher has imparted his knowledge to you this month, and we're reminded in verse 10 today that his words are appropriate and valid. We normally take that as a given in the Bible, but Ecclesiastes is full of passages that we'd like to explain away without too much consideration. We might think to ourselves, for instance, "Yes, life is meaningless . . . without God," and then we move on. But we need to examine our lives—how many times in the day do we act as if God were completely distant? That's when Ecclesiastes thinking shows up, and that's when we need Christ to charge our lives with meaning!

We don't always look forward to hearing wisdom that comes from God, because it is like goads, sharp instruments used to prod and drive oxen (v. 11). His wisdom may secure us like well-driven nails hold wood, but we're not always quick to put our hearts under His hammer!

So we turn to other sources of wisdom, don't we? Walk into any bookstore, secular or Christian, and you'll find no shortage of books waiting to direct and drive your life in every conceivable direction. But the Teacher tells us to beware such sources (v. 12). There are many gimmicks that promise to give you the secrets to successful life, but none stand the test of time like God's Word has!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY - At the beginning of the month, we recommended that you read through Ecclesiastes in one sitting, to take it in as a poetic expression of human emotion and heaven-sent wisdom. This would be a good time for you to repeat that reading, this time with a fuller understanding of its implications in your life. Think about how your perception of this book has changed since the month began. How has this book changed you? Ask the Holy Spirit to make those changes permanent in your life.

Ecclesiastes 12:13-14

TODAY IN THE WORD

Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. - Ecclesiastes 12:13

We can't finish this issue of Today in the Word until we have heard "the conclusion of the matter" (v. 13). Since that was Solomon's concern too, the book of Ecclesiastes gives us a good closing word.

Ecclesiastes is not the final revelation from God on issues such as work. But remember that Solomon's advice comes to us by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Old Testament professor and biblical writer Donald Glenn notes the following about Solomon's summary: "Solomon counseled his readers to enjoy life in the fear of God as God enables." What does this mean for us in our work?

The most important piece of advice Ecclesiastes has for us is to fear God, or reverence Him and worship Him for who He is. We can live out the fear of God at work by working every day as if He alone were both our only Customer and the only Boss we would ever have to please.

Keeping God's commandments also becomes very practical in our work. We are commanded to do everything to God's glory in the name of Christ, to care for God's workers, and to honor God with the resources He supplies. If that sounds like a heavy duty, remember that God has built enough satisfaction, challenge, and pure pleasure into human work that we can actually enjoy what we do to the fullest.

Solomon says that these things apply to every person (v. 14, an alternative to the translation, “This is the whole duty of man”). As far as Solomon is concerned, this is the answer. This is how a person enjoys life even in a world that is often unfair and puzzling, filled with things that are ultimately meaningless in terms of eternity.

Fearing and obeying God encompasses every part of our life. The New Testament’s specific commands and principles concerning work could easily fit into one of these categories. Solomon’s final reminder that God will judge everything impartially helps to remind us that as Christians, we will stand before Christ someday to give Him an account of our work (1 Cor. 3:10-15).

One good way to finish this study would be to review some of the lessons or principles that have stood out to you or met a particular need.

STAYING HAPPY IN A HOLLOW WORLD

Ecclesiastes

Robert Morgan

This fall I’ve decided to depart from my usual approach in the pulpit—which is expositional—to bring a series of topical messages on how Christians are to relate to the popular culture. How can we be in the world, but not of the world, as the Bible commands? And this morning, I’d like to talk about the philosophical underpinnings of our age. Our text is from the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes, chapter 1:

The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem: “Vanity of vanities,” says the Preacher; “Vanity of Vanities, all is vanity.” What profit has a man from all his labor in which he toils under the sun? One generation passes away, and another generation comes; but the earth abides forever. The sun also rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it arose. The wind goes toward the south and turns around to the north; the wind whirls about continually, and comes again on its circuit. All the rivers run into the sea, yet the sea is not full; to the place from which the rivers come, there they return again. All things are full of labor; man cannot express it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear with hearing. That which has been is what will be, that which is done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun.”

This rather dismal passage was written by a man who had turned away from God, and, as a result, had lost all sense of meaning and purpose in life. He had lost the philosophical and theological underpinnings of life, and now nothing made sense to him. Everything was empty. He saw generations born and he saw them die. He was the repetitious cycles of nature. And he no longer understood what life was all about. He found himself empty, and in his emptiness were the silent screams of despair.

One of the big stories in the news this week has been the revelations being published about Princess Diana by her former butler. The London newspaper, the Telegraph, said this week in a column: “The sheer emptiness of Princess Diana’s life also rings achingly true. When Burrell sees her for the last time, it is on a trip to the Kensington Waterstone’s (book store) to pick up half a dozen books on spirituality, psychology and healing to pass the long hours on her mini-break with Dodi Fayed.” Princess Diana was arguably the most famous woman in the world, admired by people in every nation. But at the end of her life she was sending out for books on spirituality, psychology, and healing to try to make sense of what life is all about.

Recently I read something that a popular writer named Kathe Koja said. She claimed that the inner despair and emptiness of the human heart is at the core of every novel she has ever written. She spoke of “a black hole” (that) is at the heart of every novel... the emptiness we each carry close to our hearts, the emptiness of being alive in a world that doesn’t care. And the way we fill that Freudian hole, well, that’s the novel.”

When asked about that statement in an interview recently, she said, “Everyone is cored by that existential void, the deep hole in the heart that cries for radiance; our entire consumer culture is predicated on the belief that, if you stuff enough things down that hole, you can finally satisfy it into silence. That has never been the case. Nor does creativity, sex, art, or even love fill that hole.”

Several years ago while traveling in Brazil, I saw graffiti scrawled across a building, written in Portuguese. I asked my guide what it said, and these were the words: “We are beautiful drunkards, comets wandering alone, looking at the stars, waiting for a future that doesn’t come.”

It reminds me of the words of the philosopher Bertrand Russell who wrote in his autobiography, "What else is there to make life tolerable? We stand on the shore of an ocean, crying to the night and the emptiness; sometimes a voice answers out of the darkness. But it is the voice of one drowning; and in a moment the silence returns."

Well, here in Ecclesiastes, the writer, Solomon, has turned away from God and is searching in other places for answers for the meaning of life. But he was disappointed and disillusioned at every point. In chapter 1, he tries education, but he finds that it's a chasing after the wind. In chapter 2, he tries pleasure but that also proves meaningless. He turns to alcohol, then to materialism, building a palatial home for himself. He institutes great public works, achieving fame and renown. But nothing filled his heart, because he had rejected the God of the Bible.

The French physicist Blaise Pascal said, "There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God the Creator made known through Jesus Christ."

I don't think anyone illustrates this better than the German philosopher, Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche. He was born in Saxony, in Germany in 1844. His father and his grandfather were both German Lutheran ministers. His father suffered a mental collapse and died when Nietzsche was young, about five years old. As a result, he was raised by a house full of "holy" women, as they have been called by biographers: his mother and grandmother, two aunts, and a younger sister.

At age 13, Nietzsche was sent off to boarding school, and by the age of 18, he was doubting his faith. At 19, he went to the University of Bonn to study theology and to prepare himself, despite his doubts, to follow in his father's footsteps into the Lutheran ministry. While at Bonn, he joined a fraternity and began drinking with his fellows. It was also about that time that Nietzsche visited a brothel in Germany, in Cologne, and became infected with syphilis.

During those days, too, Nietzsche was tremendously influenced by the philosophy of pessimism articulated by Arthur Schopenhauer. When he enrolled in Leipzig University, Nietzsche was physically frail and sick, mentally alert and brilliant, and philosophically moving further and further from Christianity.

During these years, he also became acquainted with the composer Richard Wagner, who was one of the most twisted ego-maniacs who has ever lived. Nietzsche was drawn into his world. And at age 24, Friedrich Nietzsche was invited to teach at the University of Basel in Switzerland, not all that far from Wagner's home on the shores of Lake Lucerne. There he began taking long walks during which he formulated his philosophy. He articulated his "Will to Power," and his philosophy about a coming "superman," and especially his thoughts about the death of God. Perhaps his most famous parable along those lines is called The Madman.

Nietzsche said that a madman appeared in the marketplace one morning, holding a lighted lantern in the bright daylight. He startled everyone by crying, "I'm looking for God! I'm looking for God!" The people made fun of him. They said, "Do you think God got lost? Do you think he's hiding?" But the madman jumped into the middle of the people, his eyes wild with alarm. He said, "Where is God? I'll tell you where he is. We have killed him—you and I. All of us are his murderers. We have cut ourselves off from God as though we had unchained the earth from the sun, and we are wobbling out of control, plunging backward, sideward, forward, in all directions. We're becoming cold and dark and empty. Don't you feel it?"

And then Nietzsche asked a profound question: How shall we, the murderers of all murderers, comfort ourselves? Nietzsche was saying that in removing God from our civilization, our life, and our philosophy, we were removing our source of comfort. We were stripping ourselves of hope and peace. We were crossing what another philosopher, Francis Schaeffer, would later call the line of despair.

Nietzsche understood that when you abandon Christianity, you lose all basis for moral absolutes. You lose all basis for eternal life. You lose all basis for inner peace. But he thought that after an initial time of chaos and despair, his God-is-dead philosophy would pave the way for a great superman to come and take charge of the human race, someone who could lead humanity to its zenith.

What happened to Nietzsche? The insanity he predicted for the world eventually came upon himself. His health deteriorated so much that he had to resign from teaching, and he wandered here and there through southern Europe, seeking emotional and physical healing. He was unknown and unread at that time, a virtual homeless philosopher, wandering around, writing brilliant philosophy, living a sick and sad life.

In January 1889, while walking down a street in Turin, Italy, he collapsed and flung his arms around the neck of a horse that had just been whipped by its driver. Nietzsche was helped to his room, and rapidly went insane. No one knows for certain the reason. Most biographers attribute it to his syphilis. But perhaps it was nudged on by a philosophy that rejected God and Christianity, and which,

of followed to its logical conclusions, led to absolute and utter despair.

Most historians say that Nietzsche's philosophy not only contributed to his personal insanity; it contributed to the insanity of the Nazi Holocaust; and the superman he predicted for the world was personified in the person of one of his greatest disciples—Adolf Hitler....

William Lane Craig, a brilliant Christian philosopher and apologist, put it this way: "Modern man thought that when he had gotten rid of God, he had freed himself from all that repressed and stifled him. Instead, he discovered that in killing God, he had also killed himself."

The reason is because only Christianity provides a comprehensive explanation for the reality of death and a satisfying answer for the problem of death; and only Christianity has authenticated its message about death by providing a leader who actually rose from the tomb. The world has never found another answer to death; and therefore death is the death of philosophy. All non-Christian belief systems crash and burn when they come to the subject of death.

I've never read a better summation of this than Craig's. He states with terrible eloquence the logical implications of rejecting Christianity. He wrote:

I realize I am going to die, and forever cease to exist. My life is just a momentary transition out of oblivion into oblivion. And the universe, too, faces death. Scientists tell us that the universe is expanding, and everything in it is growing farther and farther apart. As it does so, it grows colder and colder, and its energy is used up. Eventually all the stars will burn out and all matter will collapse into dead stars and black holes. There will be no light at all; there will be no heat; there will be no life; only the corpses of dead stars and galaxies, ever expanding into the endless darkness and the cold recesses of space — a universe in ruins. The entire universe marches irreversibly toward its grave. So not only is the life of each individual person doomed; the entire human race is doomed. The universe is plunging toward inevitable extinction — death is written throughout its structure. There is no escape. There is no hope.

Look at it from another perspective: Scientists say that the universe originated in an explosion called the "Big Bang" about 15 billion years ago. Suppose the Big Bang had never occurred. Suppose the universe had never existed. What ultimate difference would it make? The universe is doomed to die anyway. In the end it makes no difference whether the universe ever existed or not. Therefore, it is without ultimate significance.

The same is true for the human race. Mankind is a doomed race in a dying universe. Because the human race will eventually cease to exist, it makes no ultimate difference whether it ever did exist. Mankind is thus no more significant than a swarm of mosquitoes or a barnyard of pigs, for their end is all the same. The same blind cosmic process that coughed them up in the first place will eventually swallow them all again.

And the same is true for each individual person. The contributions of the scientist to the advance of human knowledge, the researches of the doctor to alleviate pain and suffering, the efforts of the diplomat to secure peace in the world, the sacrifices of good men everywhere to better the lot of the human race — all these come to nothing. In the end they don't make one bit of difference, not one bit. Each person's life is therefore without ultimate significance. And because our lives are ultimately meaningless, the activities we fill our lives with are also meaningless. The long hours spent in study at the university, our jobs, our interests, our friendships — all these are, in the final analysis, utterly meaningless. This is the horror of modern man; because he ends in nothing, he is nothing.

One of the great Christian minds of the 20th century was Francis Schaeffer. As a young man he grew up in a liberal church and was heading toward agnosticism or atheism. But then he discovered the Word of God, and as he read the Bible he compared the answers he found there with the questions he was reading in his philosophy books. He became a Christian and years later wrote a book entitled *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*. In that book, he said:

There is no other sufficient philosophical answer. You can search through university philosophy, underground philosophy, filling station philosophy —it does not matter which—there is no other sufficient philosophical answer to existence. There is only one philosophy, one religion, that fills this need in all the world's thought, whether the East, the West, the ancient, the modern, the new, the old. Only one fills the philosophical need of existence, of being, and it is the Judaeo-Christian God—not just an abstract concept, but rather that this God is really there. He really exists. It is not that this is the best answer to existence; it is the only answer. That is why we may hold our Christianity with intellectual integrity.

Schaeffer goes on to say that what when you abandon God and Jesus Christ, you cross a frightening and ultimate line of despair.

That, he says, is where our post-modern world is now living—below the line of despair.

If there is no God, there is nothing but despair. If there is no Christ, we are of all men most miserable. Perhaps that is why there is so much alcoholism in our society today, and such rampant drug dependence. That's why we flooded by sexual images, and why the entertainment industry is such a global phenomenon. That's why the movie box-office is such a symbol of our weekends, and why we want 500 channels on our television cable. Modern humanity can live with neither itself nor its despair, so it drowns itself in diversions.

But the diversions don't provide real, spiritual satisfaction, and that's why non-Christian world views make it impossible to live both consistently and happily. Bertrand Russell, for example, admitted that life without God is absurd; but he said we have no choice but to put a good face to it. He claimed we must build our lives on the firm foundation of unyielding despair. We must recognize life's absurdity, and then love one another.

If you really live a life consistent with that philosophy, happiness is impossible. If you live happily, it is because you are inconsistent. The anti-theistic worldview has build-in logical contradictions and existential inadequacies that ultimately make it philosophically unlivable. Without Christ, "a philosophy of meaninglessness is an unavoidable consequence." The Apostle Paul said that if Christ hasn't risen from the dead, we are to be pitied, we are of all men most miserable.

"But," the Apostle Paul continued, "Christ has risen from the dead and has become the firstfruits of those who sleep." There is a philosophy that satisfies the soul. There is a theology that strengthens the heart. There is a Gospel! There is Good News!

Solomon ended Ecclesiastes by declaring there is an answer to meaninglessness and despair. After searching all the philosophies and speculations and pursuits of mankind, he came to this conclusion: "Fear God and keep his commands, for this is the whole duty of man."

One of the reasons we believe Christianity is true is because, in the final analysis, all other philosophies, if followed to their logical ends, lead to chaos and irrationality. Only Christianity gives meaning to life. Only with theism in general and Christianity in particular can one be both consistent and happy. As the Psalmist said 3000 years ago, "My soul finds rest in God alone" (Psalm 62:1).

Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

He said, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10).

He said, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even if he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die" (John 11:25).

He said, "Because I live, you also will live" (John 14:19).

If you've never had a personal experience with Jesus Christ, why not follow the evidence where it leads—to the foot of Calvary's Cross. Commit your life to Jesus Christ. Place your faith in his shed blood and glorious resurrection. For these things are written, said John, "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name (John 20:31).