**Ecclesiastes Commentary**

**Ecclesiastes Chapter 1**

Ecc 1:1

**“the Sage, son of David, king in Jerusalem.”** The title “Sage,” which is derived from the Hebrew word *qahal* (“to assemble”), has led to a variety of suggestions as to what the word might mean, with many of the suggestions having reasonable overlap. Coming from the verb “to assemble,” this title certainly means a gatherer or collector (of wisdom, wealth, or people). If this person has gathered people into an assembly, then he might function as a teacher or preacher. But the words “teacher” or “preacher” do not carry in their English translations the sense of a gatherer and collector if what is being collected is words of wisdom, which seems to be more the case in Ecclesiastes. It appears that *every* modern commentary has resolved to leave the title *Qoheleth* untranslated in their translation.[[1]](#footnote-24526) In sum, this person is an authoritative gatherer and collector of wisdom, and seeks to teach others about this amassed knowledge.

Ecc 1:2

**“pointless.”** The Hebrew word is *hebel* (#01892 הֶבֶל), and it has the basic idea of being a vapor or breath. In that, *hebel* combines different meanings, including that of being “futile, pointless, meaningless” and also “temporary, transitory, short-lived.” This makes *hebel* somewhat difficult to translate in Ecclesiastes because sometimes the primary emphasis is “pointless; futile,” but at other times the primary emphasis of *hebel* is “temporary, transitory,” with the undertone being “pointless; futile.”

Ecc 1:5

**“and panting.”** The Hebrew word *shaaph* (#07602 שָׁאַף) has several meanings, including “to pant, gasp, breathe heavily” from effort and exertion; “to long for, desire, ‘pant for’ in the sense of longing;” and “to hurry, hasten.” Here the sun is personified and is portrayed as “panting” with effort as it hurries to get back to where it rises so it can start its day all over again. The idea in the verse is that the sun gets no rest, and has to do the same thing over and over again with no end in sight. Versions that include the word “pant” include HCSB, Rotherham, YLT, and CEB. C. L. Seow says, “Qohelet, too, portrays the sun as one struggling to reach its destination, only to have to recommence.”[[2]](#footnote-25139)

Ecc 1:7

“**the place from which the streams flow, they return.”** That water in rivers, lakes, and oceans evaporates and falls to earth as rain, then flows back to those rivers, lakes, and oceans again is known as the hydrologic cycle. This cycle was supposedly “discovered” in 1580 by Bernard Palissy, but God knew about it and revealed it to Solomon almost 2500 years before Palissy’s time. It is also in Amos 5:8. Facts like these in the Bible are evidence that it is indeed authored by God and was not the work of the human mind.

Ecc 1:8

**“All things are full of weariness.”** This is both a hyperbole and a personification, even making inanimate objects have feelings as if they were human.

**“express.”** The Hebrew is the common word for “word, matter, speak.” In the clipped fashion of Hebrew poetry, the line is more literally and simply, “Man cannot speak.” People cannot express what they experience; the seeming meaninglessness of life leaves us speechless. The godless person can see little meaning in life. But later on in Ecclesiastes we learn that changes when a person finds God.

Ecc 1:9

**“What has been is what will be.”** The Jews taught that Ecclesiastes 1:9 showed that the Christ would do the same miracles that had been done in the Old Testament, so they were expecting him to be a great miracle worker. This in part explains why Christ spoke so sternly against the cities that did not repent, even though many of his miracles had been done there (Matt. 11:20-23). Also, that is why he told the Jews that the miracles he did spoke for him (John 10:25, 37, 38; 14:11).

Ecc 1:11

**“former things…those things.”** The Hebrew text can refer to either people or things. The English versions are split, with some referring to “things” (cf. DBY, ESV, NASB, NET, RSV), and some referring to “people” (cf. BBE, CJB, HCSB, NAB, NIV, NRSV). The REV went with “things” because it is more inclusive, including people.

Ecc 1:13

**“applied my heart.”** The Hebrew text is more literally, “gave my heart,” but this could be confusing in English because when a person “gives their heart” to something, like a girl giving her heart to a boy, the boy usually woos the girl. But in this case, wisdom did not woo the Sage, he applied his heart to it. And that is how we acquire wisdom; we apply ourselves to it.

Ecc 1:14

**“pointless.”** See commentary on Ecclesiastes 1:2.

**“herding the wind.”** Robert Alter uses the phrase “herding the wind,” and he writes: “The verbal root of the first Hebrew word here generally means to tend a flock (and in the Song of Songs, to graze), so the common modern translation, “pursuit of the wind,” is an interpretive liberty.”[[3]](#footnote-32331) The fact that the Hebrew can mean “to herd, to shepherd, to tend” explains why some versions say “feeding” or the NAB reads “shepherd the wind” in Hosea 12:1. Although the English versions translate the Hebrew phrase in a number of different ways, most of those translations make the point well, that what is done under the sun is pointless, futile. That is certainly true with herding wind, because it cannot be done and it is pointless to try.[[4]](#footnote-22415)

Ecc 1:16

**“I said to myself.”** This is an English nuance of the Hebrew text, which is more literally, “I spoke with (or “to”) my heart.”

**“my heart has seen.”** The phrase “has seen” is an idiom. To “see” something in this context has a broad meaning, including to experience and to obtain. Thus, the literal “has seen” seems to be a better choice than picking a more nuanced word that is narrower in scope.

Ecc 1:18

**“frustration.”** The Hebrew word is *kaas* (#03708 כַּעַס), and its semantic range includes anger, vexation, provocation, irritation, frustration, grief. One could easily conflate Ecclesiastes 1:18 in English and say, “For in much wisdom is much vexation, anger, grief, and frustration,” and that would be true, because knowing what should be done and the right way to do something is very irritating and frustrating if others are not doing something right, especially if their wrong actions cause hurt or harm. The *TWOT* says, “Although the root does not appear in Ugaritic, it is found in Aramaic, Akkadian, and Arabic. The former two emphasize the pain aspect while the Arabic usage stresses sadness and sorrow. Although the root can be used to express physical suffering, it much more commonly has to do with mental anguish.”[[5]](#footnote-17377) We decided to go with “frustration” in the REV.[[6]](#footnote-11795)

**“pain.”** The Hebrew word is *makob* (#04341 מַכְאֹב), and it means mental or physical pain, sorrow, or suffering. We translate it “pain” in the REV (cf. NASB, Rotherham, YLT), but it includes mental pain, sorrow, and suffering.

**Ecclesiastes Chapter 2**

Ecc 2:1

**“I said to myself.”** See commentary on Ecclesiastes 1:16. The Hebrew phrase is slightly different but the basic meaning is the same.

**“pointless.”** See commentary on Ecclesiastes 1:2.

Ecc 2:4

**“for myself.”** The repetition of the phrase “for myself” in Ecclesiastes 2:4-8 shows that the Sage was doing great things, but doing them in a self-centered way for a self-centered reason. He was not living to please God.

Ecc 2:6

**“groves.”** The Hebrew is singular, but the Hebrew word can be large or small, like “forest.” But in English meaning, a “grove” is small, but the Sage made “pools” of water to water his “groves” of trees.

Ecc 2:7

**“born in my house.”** This phrase refers to slaves, a point that is made especially clear when it is combined with slaves who were “bought.” Slaves could be bought, but also, the child of a slave was a slave who was “born in the house.” “Born in my house” does not mean that the slave was literally born in the exact house that the owner lived in, but rather that the slave’s mother was part of the extended household of the owner.

[For more on “born in his house,” see commentary on Gen. 17:12.]

Ecc 2:8

**“many *beautiful* concubines.”** Solomon had “700 wives, princesses, and 300 concubines” (1 Kings 11:3).

Ecc 2:9

**“remained with me.”** In Ecclesiastes 1:13 the Sage decided to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. In the process of doing that, there were many things that could have derailed the Sage and/or corrupted him. Yet after exploring many things, including wine, works, wealth, and women, his wisdom remained with him.

Ecc 2:11

**“pointless.”** See commentary on Ecclesiastes 1:2.

Ecc 2:14

**“has eyes in his head.”** This phrase is idiomatic for the person being able to see where he is going.

**“one event happens.”** This one event is death. The Hebrew text emphasizes this by the figure of speech polyptoton, in this case juxtaposing a noun and verb with the same root. It is hard to reproduce clearly in English, but it might roughly be translated, “one happening happens to them,” or “one occurrence occurs to them.”

[See Word Study: “Polyptoton.”]

Ecc 2:15

**“Then I said to myself.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “then I said in my heart,” but that is an idiomatic way of saying the person was talking to himself.

**“why then was I more wise.”** This is referring to Solomon’s wisdom, which at this point is human wisdom, which takes much work and comes to nothing. Solomon rightly asks if the fool and the person who has worked hard to acquire human wisdom both die, what is the point of working to be worldly wise? There is no point to it.

**“pointless.”** See commentary on Ecclesiastes 1:2.

Ecc 2:17

**“pointless.”** See commentary on Ecclesiastes 1:2.

Ecc 2:19

**“pointless.”** See commentary on Ecclesiastes 1:2.

Ecc 2:20

**“So I turned about.”** This is a mental conclusion and crisis that the Sage arrives at by what he sees and experiences in life as he turned about and looked in different directions. Life without God leads to despair.

Ecc 2:21

**“pointless.”** See commentary on Ecclesiastes 1:2.

Ecc 2:23

**“business.”** In this context, “business” is used with the wider connotation of what someone does in life. What occupies his time, what he is “busy with.”

**“pointless.”** See commentary on Ecclesiastes 1:2.

Ecc 2:24

**“There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink.”** This is the first of many verses in Ecclesiastes that encourage people to rejoice and have fun in life (cf. Eccl. 2:24-25; 3:4, 12-13, 22; 5:18-19; 8:15; 9:7-9; 10:19; 11:7-8). The encouragement to enjoy life now is stated in the context of some other things that must be kept in mind. We are to rejoice now while we are alive because we will not be able to rejoice when we are dead.

Ecc 2:26

**“pleases him.”** The Hebrew is idiomatic: “good to His face.”

**“to give to the one who pleases God.”** This is similar to Proverbs 13:22. This expresses an ideal situation, not what always happens in life.

**“pointless.”** See commentary on Ecclesiastes 1:2.

**Ecclesiastes Chapter 3**

Ecc 3:1

**“season.”** There is a season, or proper time, for everything. Knowing that can help us act in a proper and godly manner in life. For example, while there is usually wisdom and value to thinking things through and considering options, there are also times to act quickly; times when indecision or procrastination can be harmful or even deadly. Furthermore, some things in life, such as killing, can be very difficult in some circumstances, but there are times for that too (Eccl. 3:3). Life has times of great happiness and times of difficulty and sadness, but God has enabled us to go through all life has to offer and live in a godly manner.

The Hebrew could be translated “appointed time” (NAB, NASB, NET), but in English, the word “season” can have that implication. God does do some things at His appointed time, but there are also times when things happen due to cause and effect and people’s free will action and God’s reaction. For example, when King Saul sinned and ignored God’s warnings, God took the kingdom from him. God’s move was not due to His predestining Saul to fail, but He did decide when and how to take the kingdom from Saul because Saul kept sinning.

Translating Ecclesiastes 3:1 with the phrase “appointed time” opens the door to the huge misunderstanding that everything happens “when it is supposed to happen.” That is not accurate. Lots of things that occur on earth were never God’s will or intention. For example, God does not want anyone to reject Him and die unsaved, but that happens all the time.

**“under heaven.”** The list that follows is not prescriptive, but descriptive. It speaks of the things that go on under heaven, in the realm of humankind.

Ecc 3:2

**“a time.”** This is repeated at the beginning of each phrase, which is the figure of speech anaphora, (“Like sentence beginnings”). Anaphora brings emphasis to the section by catching our attention, and also by emphasizing each individual piece in the very long sentence. No one point is more or less important than any other. The whole of life and its parts are important.

[See Word Study: “Anaphora.”]

Ecc 3:4

**“a time to laugh.”** Many verses in Ecclesiastes encourage people to rejoice and have fun in life (cf. Eccl. 2:24-25; 3:4, 12-13, 22; 5:18-19; 8:15; 9:7-9; 10:19; 11:7-8). See commentary on Ecclesiastes 2:24.

Ecc 3:5

**“cast away stones.”** The farmer would want to get the stones out of his field, so he would cast them away to an area where he could not otherwise plow.

**“gather stones together.”** Stones would be gathered together and then used for the construction of houses, walls, boundary markers, and other such things as that.

Ecc 3:8

**“hate.”** The word “hate” in the Bible does not always have the meaning it has in English, a “deep, enduring, intense emotion expressing animosity, anger, and hostility towards a person, group, or object.”[[7]](#footnote-23764) In Hebrew and Greek, the word “hate” has a large range of meanings from actual “hate” to simply loving something less than something else, neglecting or ignoring something, or being disgusted by something. In fact, often in the Bible the word “hate” has a combination of meanings.

For example, when God tells us to “hate” evil and love good (Amos 5:15), He wants us to have nothing to do with evil, be disgusted and repulsed by it, and actively work to eradicate it. Ecclesiastes 3:8 lumps many different meanings of “hate” together. It says there is a time to “love” and a time to “hate,” but that can mean everything from there being a proper time to engage in helpful (loving) or hostile (“hateful”) activity toward someone or something; a proper time to be delighted in or disgusted by someone or something; or a proper time to pay attention to or neglect and ignore someone or something.

Ecclesiastes 3:8 is a verse with a great many applications. It seems that far too often we are too accepting of things that are against God (we “love” what we shouldn’t love) and are not hostile to those things against God (we don’t “hate” things that should disgust us). Also, far too often we do not put enough attention into the things we should (we don’t “love” enough), and we do not let go of, neglect, or ignore things that are not really helpful in our lives (thus, we don’t “hate” them, or hate them enough). Surely, there is a time to “love,” and a time to “hate.”

[For more on the large semantic range of “hate” and its use in the Bible, see commentary on Prov. 1:22, “hate.”]

Ecc 3:10

**“children of men.”** The Hebrew has the idiom: “sons of men.” The idiom refers to humans.

Ecc 3:11

**“he has set eternity in their hearts.”** People have an awareness of eternity, and that there are issues beyond our present life. That God has put eternity in people’s hearts in part explains why almost all cultures have a belief in an afterlife of some kind. Yet how God brought the universe into existence, and how he will sustain it, is beyond human knowledge.

**“yet not in such a way that.”** The Hebrew construction that starts the sentence occurs only here, and is introducing the fact that even though God has put eternity in people’s hearts, He has done so in a way such that they cannot discover all the work that He does from beginning to end. Norbert Lohfink has, “but not in such a way that.”[[8]](#footnote-28787)

Ecc 3:12

**“nothing better for them than to rejoice.”** Many verses in Ecclesiastes encourage people to rejoice and have fun in life (cf. Eccl. 2:24-25; 3:4, 12-13, 22; 5:18-19; 8:15; 9:7-9; 10:19; 11:7-8). See commentary on Ecclesiastes 2:24.

**“to do good.”** The literal reading of the Hebrew is “to do good.” But the word “good” sometimes does not have a moral implication, and has more of the implication of “enjoy,” which is why some versions have something such as “be happy and enjoy themselves” (NRSV) instead of “do good.” But it does not seem likely that God would not have some overtones of moral duty in this verse. While it is important to enjoy our lives, we must not forget that God created humankind with a purpose that was more than just having a good time. The conclusion of Ecclesiastes shows us this when it says that the conclusion of the matter is to fear God and keep His commandments, which is the whole duty of humankind (Eccl. 12:13-14). To be sure, there are verses in Ecclesiastes that focus on enjoying life, but when the text includes doing good, it is likely there because doing good is part of what God intends for people.

Ecc 3:13

**“this is a gift from God.”** Many verses in Ecclesiastes encourage people to rejoice and have fun in life (cf. Eccl. 2:24-25; 3:4, 12-13, 22; 5:18-19; 8:15; 9:7-9; 10:19; 11:7-8). See commentary on Ecclesiastes 2:24.

That being able to enjoy life is a gift from God is mentioned also in Ecclesiastes 5:19. It is a gift of God to be able to have the health, financial ability, and freedom to enjoy life. God desires that for all people, but historically few have really had what it takes to enjoy life. Many people fight physical disabilities, or they are under harsh taskmasters that make life a continuous toil. One of the exciting promises about the next life is that it will be one of great joy (Isa. 35:10; 51:3; 61:7; Jer. 31:13). Life in the coming Kingdom of Christ on earth will be truly wonderful.

[For more on the coming Kingdom of Christ on earth, see Appendix 5: “Christ’s Future Kingdom on Earth.”]

Ecc 3:15

**“God seeks that which is pursued.”** The meaning of this phrase is unclear and has given rise to many different interpretations. For example, because “pursued” is sometimes related to “persecuted,” one interpretation is basically that God seeks the persecuted in order to help them and hold their persecutors accountable. This divorces the last phrase of Ecclesiastes 3:15 from the first part of the verse and connects it to Ecclesiastes 3:16 which is about justice.[[9]](#footnote-14079) However, it seems like this is not likely because a phrase about God acting on behalf of the persecuted would more naturally come later, such as at the end of Ecclesiastes 3:16 or 3:17.

Another interpretation is that the word “pursued” is related to the concept of pursuing, as in the phrase “pursuing the east wind” (Hos. 12:1, and cf. “herding the wind” in Ecclesiastes, REV) and thus the meaning is that God seeks and watches over the things that are “pursued,” i.e., the things that people have chased in vain but God is in charge of.[[10]](#footnote-11672)

A third interpretation is that God seeks that which has been “persecuted,” that is driven away or chased away, in this context meaning the things that are in the past and therefore no longer present—they have gone away. God seeks them with the intention of bringing them back, and this idea has led to translations such as “God will seek to do again what has occurred in the past” (NET).[[11]](#footnote-20505) The last two possible interpretations seem more likely than the first.

Ecc 3:17

**“I said in my heart.”** An idiomatic way of saying, “I said to myself” (cf. HCSB, NASB, NIV).

**“God will judge.**” The judgment of God on the Day of Judgment is a theme in Ecclesiastes, concluding in the very last verse in Ecclesiastes, Ecclesiastes 12:14. Furthermore, many verses say that on Judgment Day people will get what they deserve based on how they lived their life (cf. Job. 34:11; Ps. 62:12; Prov. 24:12; Jer. 17:10; 32:19; Ezek. 33:20; Matt. 16:27; Rom. 2:6; 1 Cor. 3:8). See commentary on Psalm 62:12.

**“for there is a time *of judgment* for every purpose and for every deed.”** The sentence is saying that God will judge both the righteous and the wicked, and although people are many on the earth, and their purposes and deeds are many, there will be time for everyone to be judged. Indeed, there will be a time of judgment for every purpose and deed, as the verse says (cf. James Bollhagen: “for there will be a time *of judgment* for every matter and upon every deed there”).[[12]](#footnote-11836)

This verse is not saying that every purpose and work has a proper time; that is stated in Ecclesiastes 3:1-8. Ecclesiastes 3:17 is saying that God will judge what people think and do, which is also stated in Ecclesiastes 11:9, and is also the concluding thought in Ecclesiastes: “For God will bring everything we do into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or whether it is evil” (Eccl. 12:14).

Ecc 3:18

**“God tests them.”** There is much discussion among scholars about the word “test,” but most commentators agree that “test” is in some sense the basic meaning of the Hebrew text. The context is about humans being an “animal” and dying like all the rest of the animals (Eccl. 3:19-20). That is true. Humans are not different from animals in our flesh and blood, nor in the soul life that animates us. Humans are only different from animals in that in certain ways we were created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26, but God certainly does not have flesh and bone). At death, both humans and animals are dead in every way and return to dust (Gen. 3:19; Eccl. 3:20).

These things are hard for most Christians to understand due to erroneous orthodox teaching. Orthodox Christianity teaches that humans have a soul but animals do not, which is not accurate: both humans and animals are animated by “soul.” Also, orthodox Christianity teaches that animals are dead when they die but humans live on after their body dies, but this also is inaccurate. As Ecclesiastes 3:18-21 teaches, humans are actually animals (v. 18), they both die the same way and have one “breath,” and in that sense, humans have no advantage over any other animal (v. 19). One great advantage that humans do have over animals is that the part of us that is created in God’s image gives us a unique mind with faculties such as insight, wisdom, a sense of purpose, and a conscience. God created humans to fellowship with Him and live forever with Him, and so God will raise humans from the dead.

The “test” that God gives humans, in part at least, is that as we pay attention to the humans and animals in the world we live in, we should see that our lives are short (Ps. 103:15-16; James 4:14) and we cannot control the day we die (Eccl. 8:8). The sense of purpose that God has placed inside us should then nudge us to believe that we are not here on earth just to live a short, difficult life and then die. That awareness should motivate us to want to stay alive longer—actually, forever—and if we continue to press in our search, that will eventually lead us to the existence of a creator God who can grant us everlasting life. Thus, people who pass the test find God and salvation, and will live forever, while those who fail the test will be self-absorbed to the end that they do not seek God, do not get saved, and eventually perish.

[For more on “soul” animating humans and animals, see Appendix 16: “Usages of ‘Soul.’” For people being dead in every way when they die and only made alive when raised by God, see Appendix 3: “The Dead are Dead.” For more on unsaved humans eventually being like the animals and ceasing to exist in any form, see Appendix 4: “Annihilation in the Lake of Fire.”]

Ecc 3:19

**“spirit.”** The Hebrew word translated “spirit” is *ruach* (#07307 רוּחַ), and it has a very broad semantic range. In this context, it refers to the life force that animates the body, which the Bible also calls “soul” (*nephesh*). “Soul” is a type of spirit like “poodle” is a type of dog, and sometimes the Bible uses the broad category of “spirit” to refer to the life that animates us while at other times it uses the specific word “soul.”

Both humans and animals have the same life force, just as this verse says. This fact has been obscured by orthodox Christianity, which teaches that animals do not have a “soul.” God will not judge animals on any Day of Judgment, that is true, but it is not because animals do not have “soul,” it is because they were not created in the image of God like humans were with the elevated mental faculties that humans have, such as self-awareness, sense of purpose, knowledge of good and evil, reason, imagination, etc.

[For more on the uses and meanings of “spirit,” see Appendix 15: “Usages of ‘Spirit.’” For more on the uses and meanings of “soul” see Appendix 16: “Usages of ‘Soul.’”]

**“pointless.”** See commentary on Ecclesiastes 1:2.

Ecc 3:20

**“All go to one place.”** That is, into the ground dead and eventually back to dust, as the rest of the verse says. Orthodox Christianity obscures the simple meaning of this verse by teaching that when a human dies their “soul” (or “spirit”) goes immediately to heaven or hell. When a person dies, they go into the ground and are dead in every way, their body turns back to dust and their soul is gone—dead—and stays dead until the resurrection.

[For more on dead people being genuinely dead and not alive in any form, see Appendix 3: “The Dead are Dead.”]

Ecc 3:22

**“nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his works.”** Many verses in Ecclesiastes encourage people to rejoice and have fun in life (cf. Eccl. 2:24-25; 3:4, 12-13, 22; 5:18-19; 8:15; 9:7-9; 10:19; 11:7-8). See commentary on Ecclesiastes 2:24.

**Ecclesiastes Chapter 4**

Ecc 4:1

**“Then I turned and saw.”** The Sage is starting on a new topic. He paints a bleak picture, but it is real life.

Ecc 4:4

**“pointless.”** See commentary on Ecclesiastes 1:2.

Ecc 4:5

**“eats his own flesh.”** The phrase refers to the fact that the person who does not work will have nothing to eat but himself. The NIV84, “ruins himself,” catches the ultimate end of the situation, but misses the punchy proverb. A way to ruin yourself is to not work.

Ecc 4:6

**“Better is a handful of rest.”** All rest with no work ruins one’s life, but all work with no rest is not as good as taking some rest. People who just work and work without rest and paying attention to family time or a restful break end up hurting themselves in the long run.

Ecc 4:7

**“pointless.”** See commentary on Ecclesiastes 1:2.

Ecc 4:8

**“pointless.”** See commentary on Ecclesiastes 1:2.

Ecc 4:9

**“wage.”** The word “wage” is used in a broader sense than just the wages paid for work, but any “wage” or benefit one gets from work. But there is clearly also the idea that people will get paid for the good work they do, even by God on Judgment Day. In contrast, the “wages” of sin is death (Rom. 6:23).

Ecc 4:12

**“*a man.*”** This supplied “man” is coming from the masculine verb.

**“broken.”** The Hebrew word is *nathaq* (#05423 נָתַק), which is not the usual word for “broken.” It can mean “broken,” but it more specifically means to tear apart.

Ecc 4:14

**“For out of prison….”** The pronouns in this verse and the difficult Hebrew grammar make this verse extremely unclear and the scholars debate its meaning. Many say it means basically the following: “For out of prison he [the poor but wise youth] came to be king even though he [the poor youth] was born poor in his [the old king’s] kingdom.

Ecc 4:15

**“are walking about.”** As in many cases, the average person is too busy with their own life to pay too much attention to what is going on with leadership other than to seemingly want something new and the promise of things perhaps getting better. Thus, the people would side with a new king coming along.

**“the next youth, who replaced him.”** Here the text introduces a third person, a second youth, who replaces the other youth who was born poor. Thus we see in this text a reflection of the theme in Ecclesiastes that there is a continual succession in life with one thing coming after another and the older things not really being remembered or regarded. Thus we see how ephemeral even royal power is.

Ecc 4:16

**“yet those who come later will not rejoice in him.”** People’s historical memory is notoriously short-lived. The people who come after even a good king do not usually remember much about him.

**“pointless.”** See commentary on Ecclesiastes 1:2.

**Ecclesiastes Chapter 5**

Ecc 5:1

**“Guard your steps.”** The Hebrew is more idiomatic, literally, “Guard your foot.” This is perhaps more awkward in English than our idiom, “watch your step,” but it is not saying “watch your step” in the sense of not tripping over something. To “guard” your steps was to beware of entering the presence of God without giving proper thought to what you were doing and why you were there.

**“Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools.”** In this case, “the sacrifice of fools” is the sacrifice and vow that a fool would make. The whole context, Ecclesiastes 5:1-6, is about words and vows. The fool makes a vow without counting the cost, and then cannot pay (Eccl. 5:4), and has to tell the messenger that the vow was a mistake, which makes God angry and leads to what the vow was made for in the first place being destroyed. The wise thing for people to do when in the house of God (the Temple) is to listen first, then make commitments.

Ecc 5:2

**“rash.”** The Hebrew word is *bahal* (#0926 בּהל), and in the piel form, as it is here, it has two meanings; to dismay or terrify; and also to act hastily or be hurried. Both meanings are true in Ecclesiastes 5:2. Although most modern versions are leaning toward “hasty” or “quick,” in part because the second phrase of the verse is about being hasty before God, the aspect of words that dismay or cause fear is an important meaning of the word, arguably the most important meaning. If we are not hasty with our mouth, many times we will not be rash or hurtful either. Thankfully, the English word “rash” can include both the meaning hasty and hurtful.

People should not be quick or hurried in what they say, but should think through their words. We are each responsible for making sure that our words are godly and that we speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15), and that what we say benefits the hearer (Eph. 4:29). The whole point of the phrase, “For God is in heaven and you are on earth,” is that God is our heavenly judge and He hears us and will hold us accountable for what we say. Jesus warned us about what we say: “And I say to you, that every careless word that people speak, they will give account of it on the Day of Judgment” (Matt. 12:36). It is in our power to speak in a godly way, which will result in blessings for both ourselves and others.

The book of James also has a lot to say about speaking, and has a number of parallels to Ecclesiastes. For example, James 1:19 says to be quick to listen and slow to speak.

**“utter a word.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “bring up (or “out”) “a word,” but the meaning of “word” can be quite broad. The NAB suggests a promise, which is certainly included by the fact that what is spoken is the sacrifice of fools, and fools promise many things to God that they do not really have any intention or means to fulfill. The Hebrew can also mean “bring up a matter,” as if the person was going to bring up something to God for consideration.

Ecc 5:3

**“cares.”** The Hebrew word is *`inyan* (#06045 עִנְיָן), and it generally refers to business, work, affairs, activity, tasks, occupation, but it carries a somewhat cynical meaning and so “cares” seems to fit this context well. In Ecclesiastes, the Hebrew word appears a number of times (cf. Eccl. 1:13, 2:23, 2:26, 3:10, 4:8, 5:2, 5:13, and 8:16).

Ecc 5:6

**“cause your body to sin.”** In this context, “your body” is a graphic way of saying “you,” and many English versions omit “body” altogether and simply say “you” (cf. ESV, NASB, NET, NIV). It is likely that James was using this verse in Ecclesiastes as background when he pointed out that the tongue was evil, “staining the whole body” (James 3:6). The wise person carefully guards their mouth and does not let their mouth cause them to sin.

**“the messenger.”** This is perhaps the Temple priest because the Temple was a likely place where a person would make a vow (the priests were messengers of God; Mal. 2:7). It is also possible that “the messenger” was some other messenger, perhaps a messenger from the person to whom the vow was made, inquiring why the vow was not fulfilled. The verse does not tell us exactly who the messenger is, and it is not important for understanding the verse. Angels were also messengers of God (the Hebrew word for “angel” means “messenger”) but “angel” is an unlikely interpretation here because how would someone tell an angel?

**“it was a mistake.”** That is, that the vow was a mistake.

**“destroy the work of your hands.”** This statement can be understood in the context. The person has made a vow, but for some reason cannot keep it or does not want to keep it. The vow almost certainly had to do with an exchange of some kind: “I vow this if you will do that.” But now the person who made the vow says he cannot (or will not) keep it, so whatever good he was trying to accomplish by making the vow will now be “destroyed.” Choon-Leong Seow, translates “destroy” as “take away,” and makes a good argument for that translation.[[13]](#footnote-24411) If the person reneged on his vow, what he received as part of the vow would be taken away.

Ecc 5:7

**“pointless.”** See commentary on Ecclesiastes 1:2.

Ecc 5:8

**“denial.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “robbery,” and denial of justice is a robbery, but we would not word it that way in English.

**“in the land.”** More literally, the “province” or “state,” but ​that does not communicate the Hebrew meaning as well as “in the land,” because when they thought of the “state” of Israel, it was the whole country, but a “state” to a Western reader does not have that as a primary meaning.

**“amazed.”** The Hebrew word translated “amazed” is *tamah* (#08539 תָּמַה). *Tamah* has a whole range of meanings. In this kind of context, there is no one single English word that captures the meaning, rather the verse is saying that when we see oppression and a denial of justice we should not be “amazed” (or, “astounded, stunned, surprised, dumbfounded, shocked, or wonder or marvel”) at the situation. We live in a fallen and evil world and until Christ reigns as king there will be all kinds of injustice on earth.

**“watches over another authority.”** Even people in high positions have people over them watching them. There is also the possible meaning that “watch” is actually “watch over, protect,” which is a meaning of the Hebrew. In that case, the point the verse is making is that evil is throughout the system, and when a lower official perverts justice, officials above them often protect them for various reasons, thus making the whole world’s system corrupt, which is certainly true in a sense. If both meanings are indeed being set forth in the verse, it is an amphibologia, where one thing said has two true meanings.

[See Word Study: “Amphibologia.”]

Ecc 5:9

**“But the profit of the land is taken by all.”** After speaking about how corrupt the government can be in previous verses, Ecclesiastes 5:9 points out that even the king is served by the land. This fact should be reflected in the way rulers rule over others, but it seldom is. Ungodly rulers usually control the land and forbid the commoners who work the land to profit from it.

Ecclesiastes 5:9 is very difficult to translate due to the different ways the Hebrew can be interpreted and translated. The NET text note reads that the Hebrew word translated “served” in the translation above “has been understood in four ways: (1) adjectival use of the participle, modifying the noun ‏שָׂדֶה (*sadeh*, ‘field’): ‘cultivated field’ (RSV, NRSV, NJPS, NAB); (2) adjectival use of the participle, modifying ‏מֶלֶךְ (*melekh*, ‘king’): “the king who cultivates” (NASB); (3) verbal use of the participle, taking ‏שָׂדֶה‎ (‘field’) as the subject: ‘field is cultivated’ (NEB); and (4) verbal use of the participle, taking ‏מֶלֶךְ‎ (‘king’) as the subject: ‘the king is served’ (KJV, NASB); also ‘the king profits’ (NIV).” As we can see, there are various ways to translate and understand the verse, and it is hard to be 100 percent sure of which one is correct. However, given the corrupt leadership mentioned in the context, and the testimony of history that many rulers, ancient and modern, unjustly control the land (and even lakes and ocean waters) and what they produce, the translation in the REV seems very reasonable and appropriate. Tremper Longman translated the verse: “The profit of the land is taken by all; even the king benefits from the field.”[[14]](#footnote-23209)

Ecc 5:10

**“money.”** The literal Hebrew is “silver,” but silver was money in the biblical world. Ecclesiastes was written before coinage, when silver and gold were measured directly by weight (see commentary on Gen. 42:25).

**“will not be satisfied with money.”** A person who loves money will never be satisfied with money, because they have not built their Hope on God, but have built their confidence on the so-called security and power that money often brings on earth. 1 Timothy 6:10 says, “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.”

**“pointless.”** See commentary on Ecclesiastes 1:2.

Ecc 5:11

**“consume.”** The literal Hebrew is “eat,” but this is not just about “eating.” The Hebrew “eat” has a wide range of meanings, and so “consume” is a more appropriate English translation in this context.

**“to the owner.”** That is, the owner of the goods that increase.

Ecc 5:14

**“nothing to pass on.”** The idea is that the man has fathered a son but at the end of his life has nothing to pass on.

Ecc 5:15

**“can carry away in his hand.”** This is the same “in his hand” that occurs at the end of Ecclesiastes 5:14. In verse 14, the man has nothing to pass to his son, and in verse 15 the man has nothing he can take to the next life for himself.

Ecc 5:18

**“appropriate for one to eat and drink.”** Many verses in Ecclesiastes encourage people to rejoice and have fun in life (cf. Eccl. 2:24-25; 3:4, 12-13, 22; 5:18-19; 8:15; 9:7-9; 10:19; 11:7-8). See commentary on Ecclesiastes 2:24.

**“see good.”** This phrase is idiomatic, and it is hard to understand exactly what the idiom means in this context. Generally, “seeing” something is experiencing it, and thus it can mean to “experience good,”[[15]](#footnote-31002) or it can have the meaning of “find enjoyment” or “enjoy good.”[[16]](#footnote-28676) Or “see good” can mean to “prosper.” Or the idiom can mean all of these things, which is why the idiom might have been used in the first place. By leaving the idiom in the text, the reader is presented with all these meanings.

Ecc 5:19

**“to enjoy them.”** The literal Hebrew is to “eat of them,” but in the culture, a major way of enjoying riches was to eat the good food that riches could buy, so “eat” was often used for “enjoy.”

**“to accept his portion.”** Life is unpredictable and difficult. This should not catch us off guard, because Scripture is clear that we live in a fallen world, there are many evil people, and the Devil controls much of what happens (1 John 5:19). But in spite of that, many people somehow expect life to be easy and wonderful, and are angry when it is not (Eccl. 5:17). To live a peaceful, joyful life, we must be honest about the fact that this life will be difficult; and we have to have a clear hope in what will certainly be a wonderful future life.

The translation “accept his portion” or equivalents points out that a key to leading a peaceful life is to accept what comes up in life and not constantly be fighting it (cf. CEB, ESV, GW, NIV, NLT, NRSV, RSV).[[17]](#footnote-10100)

**“these are a gift from God.”** The Hebrew is literally, “this is the gift of God.” This also occurs in Ecclesiastes 3:13 (see commentary on Eccl. 3:13).

Ecc 5:20

**“brood much over.”** The literal Hebrew is “remember,” but this is the “pregnant sense” of remember, which includes not only memory, but spending mental time thinking, fretting, considering, etc. In that context, “remember” gives somewhat the wrong impression in English. Humans usually stay so busy with the life they are living that they do not think too much about the days of their life and the way they were spent and why they were spent that way.

**Ecclesiastes Chapter 6**

Ecc 6:2

**“himself.”** Literally, “his soul,” but here meaning “himself.”

**“eat of it.”** To “eat” something was often a metaphor for fully experiencing and enjoying it. In Jeremiah 15:16, the prophet Jeremiah “ate” the words of God. Jesus said his followers would “eat” his flesh (John 6:48-58; see commentary on John 6:54).

**“a stranger eats it.”** What is unspoken is that the man has no heir, and this contrasts with Ecclesiastes 6:3 where a person has 100 children.

**“pointless.”** See commentary on Ecclesiastes 1:2.

**“terrible tragedy.”** The Hebrew word translated “terrible” is from the root word for “evil,” which is why some English versions have “evil,” and the Hebrew word translated “tragedy” can also be translated “sickness” or “disease.” The world is in a fallen state, under the influence of the Devil. It is indeed “sick” and in need of healing, which the Messiah will bring when he conquers the earth. There are many severe afflictions and tragedies in this sick world. There is some similarity between Ecclesiastes 6:2 and Luke 12:16-21, in which Jesus spoke a parable about a rich man who did not live to enjoy his wealth. Life, and the ability to enjoy it, is uncertain; but what is certain is that if a person is rich toward God there will be a wonderful next life.

Ecc 6:3

**“his soul.”** “His soul,” in this context the word “soul” refers more to the depths of the person, what is in his heart. This person, for reasons unstated in the text, is not satisfied with what he has.

**“good things.”** Here, the adjective “good” is used as a substantive, “good things.”

**“no burial.”** In the biblical world, this would almost be inexplicable since it was a major responsibility for children to bury their parents (cf. Gen. 50:5; Matt. 8:21). No one could conceivably have 100 children but not be properly buried unless they made themselves so repulsive that they were rejected by literally everyone. A burial showed that a person was honored and respected, and in the Bible, people were left unburied as a sign of disrespect and contempt, and their dead bodies were usually eaten by animals and birds (see commentary on Jer. 14:16).

Ecc 6:4

**“the stillborn.”** The Hebrew text just says “for comes” with no subject, but it refers to the stillborn child, so the REV adds that for clarity.

**“pointlessly.”** “Pointlessly” picks up on the use of “pointless” throughout Ecclesiastes (cf. International Standard Version). See commentary on Ecclesiastes 1:2.

**“its name is covered with darkness.”** The “name” of a person was important because it often revealed much about the person, was used to mean the person’s reputation, and was the way the person was remembered. The name of a stillborn child never gained a reputation and was “covered with darkness,” it was not remembered.

Ecc 6:5

**“it has more rest than the other *man*.”** The next verse, Ecclesiastes 6:6, explains why. Both the stillborn child and the miserable man eventually end up in the grave where there is no life; no knowledge or wisdom (Eccl. 9:10), but the stillborn child had rest in the grave its whole existence, while the miserable man had no rest during all the years he was alive. Which is better, to be stillborn and never know misery and suffering, or to live many years and be miserable through all of them? Although this verse seems dismal, it, and its context, is actually quite an encouragement for people to do what it takes to enjoy life: change your attitude, look for the good in things, be satisfied with what you have rather than let your desires wander the earth seeking to be fulfilled (Eccl. 6:9), and have a strong relationship with God (Eccl. 2:24-26).

[For more on dead people being actually dead and not alive in any form, see Appendix 3: “The Dead are Dead.”]

Ecc 6:6

**“a person.”** The Hebrew would normally be translated “he,” (the subject is in the verb, which is masculine singular) but at the start of this sentence that would be unclear in English because the previous verses were speaking about a stillborn baby, who obviously could not live 1,000 years. Some other English versions adjust the text to make it clearer as well (e.g., CSB, JPS, NAB, NASB, Rotherham).

**“enjoy.”** The Hebrew word is “see,” but in this context that is idiomatic for “experience” or more fitting to this context, “enjoy.”

**“Do not all go to one place?”** Every person goes to Sheol, the state of death, when they die. It is certainly God’s intention that people enjoy their lives on earth, and if they don’t, then they are just prolonging suffering. No wonder Ecclesiastes says over and over that it is the gift of God that one enjoys their life (cf. Eccl. 2:24; 3:13; 5:18, 19; 9:9).

[For more on the dead being dead and not alive in any form, see Appendix 3: “The Dead are Dead.”]

Ecc 6:7

**“appetite.”** The Hebrew word is *nephesh*, sometimes translated “soul.” In this context it primarily seems to mean “appetite,” but “soul” (in the sense of the inner longings of the heart) and “desire” also fit to some extent. People’s need for sustenance is often the driving factor behind them working day after day.

**“filled.”** The use of “filled” here is using imagery that was common in the culture and used by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. For example, in Matthew 5:6, Jesus spoke of those who “hunger and thirst after righteousness” and being “filled.” The need for food and the enjoyment of a good meal along with the distressing pangs of hunger and/or worry about there being enough food to eat made food and eating a primary subject in people’s lives and led to there being many idioms in the language that involved food and eating.

Ecc 6:8

**“For what advantage has the wise more than the fool?”** This sentence must be understood against the background of what in the culture was taken for truth, in this case, that wisdom led to wealth, long life, and happiness. But the Sage has just spent some considerable time showing that wealth, children, and long life do not necessarily mean happiness. So now the question is not a “given,” but is a cause for thought. To have any advantage, the wise person must enjoy what he has.

**“What *advantage* does the poor man have who knows how to walk before those who are living.”** The thrust of this verse seems to be that the poor person has always been assured that if he became wise he would gain wealth and happiness. But now the Sage has shown that wisdom, if it leads to wealth and long life, does not always lead to happiness in life. So again, this verse becomes something to ponder. There is no reason to learn to walk (live; conduct one’s life) before others (i.e., in a way acceptable to them) if it only leads to more misery. How does one become truly satisfied and happy?

Ecc 6:9

**“Better is the sight of the eyes.”** It is better to deal with reality, what you can actually see in front of you, than to dream wild dreams that will never be fulfilled.

**“wandering.”** This is the verb, *halak* (#01980 הָלַךְ), which commonly means “to walk, to go.” The same verb is used in Ecclesiastes 6:8 with a different meaning, which is possibly the figure of speech antanaclasis (“word clashing”), where a word is used in close proximity with two different meanings to catch the attention of the reader. In Ecclesiastes 6:8 *halak* means to live life, while here it means ‘to wander.” In many ways, this sentence is similar to Proverbs 17:24.

[For more on antanaclasis, see commentary on 1 Sam. 1:24.]

**“pointless.”** See commentary on Ecclesiastes 1:2.

Ecc 6:10

**“That which is, already his name was called.”** This seems to be about God calling Adam, “Adam,” and working with him. Almost all commentators make this section of Ecclesiastes about predestination, but it does not have to be that at all. It can simply be pointing out that the way life is, is the way life is, and arguing with God about it is pointless. As Ecclesiastes 11:3 says, where the tree falls is where it is, and what God has done or planned is done. We can argue, but to what end?

**“one who is mightier than he.”** This refers to God, and Adam found out through experience that God was more powerful than he. It is pointless to argue with God.

Ecc 6:11

**“things.”** The Hebrew word *dabar* here is very broad and means “things,” “words,” and “matters.” It seems to be in the context of contending with God (Eccl. 6:10), and so words and things fit well, and “things” fits well with the next verse (Eccl. 6:12) as well. People can contend with God, and use more and more words and things in arguing against Him, but they have no effect other than increasing the pointlessness of the argument.

**“pointless.”** See commentary on Ecclesiastes 1:2.

Ecc 6:12

**“pointless.”** See commentary on Ecclesiastes 1:2. Here we see the meaning of “temporary” take on more significance, that life is temporary, and given the context, “pointless.”

**“he makes like a shadow.”** The subject is unclear. Does a person make his life like a shadow, passing quickly and not well remembered, or does God (getting the subject from Eccl. 6:10) make a person’s life like a shadow? It may well be both and is left unclear for our consideration.

**“will be after him.”** In Hebrew, the future is generally “after” a person, also, it is said to be “behind” them in the sense that it cannot be seen (cf. Eccl. 3:22; 7:14).

**Ecclesiastes Chapter 7**

Ecc 7:1

**“a good name.”** In the biblical culture, and in most Middle Eastern and Asiatic cultures, a “good name” was very important. As used in this context, a person’s name included their reputation (cf. Prov. 22:1). God promised to make Abraham’s name “great” (Gen. 12:2). Joshua was concerned that if Israel was destroyed by the Canaanites that God’s “great name” would be ruined (Josh. 7:9). In the future Millennial Kingdom, God’s people will have a “name” in the world (Zeph. 3:19-20).

**“good perfume.”** The comparison between a good name and good perfume was chosen in part because the two words, “name” and “perfume” are very similar in Hebrew, “name” being *shem*, and “perfume” (or ointment) being *shemen*. The Hebrew is short and punchy: *tov shem mashemen*. It is easy to remember and a true and important lesson. In the Hebrew, the sentence is an epanadiplosis because the word “good” both begins and ends the sentence. The word “good” is also important because often people think of things as being good, when to God there are a lot of “good” things that are much better than “good” material things.

**“better.”** The concept of one thing being “better” than another runs through this section of Ecclesiastes (Eccl. 7:1, 2, 3, 5, 8 (2x), Eccl. 7:10). The word “better” also plays a major role in the book of Hebrews in showing that Jesus Christ brought “better” things to believers than they had before he came.

**“the day of *one’s* death *is better* than the day of one’s birth.”** At first glance Ecclesiastes 7:1 seems strange and even contra-logical. Life is usually considered preferable to death in Ecclesiastes, and a living dog is better than a dead lion (Eccl. 9:4). But Ecclesiastes presents life as being difficult, oppressive, and often seemingly meaningless or futile (Eccl. 1:2, 18; 2:11, 17, 23; 4:1-2; 5:15-16). Thus, the day of a person’s birth is the start of a journey that is full of hard work and pain, whereas the end of a good life is, in the experience of the person, a time of everlasting joy (cf. Isa. 35:10; 51:11).

The unspoken assumption in Ecclesiastes 7:1 that comes from the context and that makes the day of death better than the day of birth is that the person has lived a godly life and has a “good name,” and is looking forward to everlasting life. There will be a Day of Judgment (Eccl. 8:13; 11:9; 12:13-14), and those people who are righteous in the sight of God will experience everlasting joy and not the “second death” (Rev. 20:14-15). At the end of his life, the apostle Paul wrote about what he accomplished in spite of all he went through: “For I am already being offered, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. In the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give to me on that day…” (2 Tim. 4:6-8). At a person’s death we often say, “Rest in peace,” and that is true. The hard work and pain of life are over.

Ecc 7:2

**“the house of mourning.”** There were no funeral homes in the ancient Near East. When a person died, they were kept in the home in which they lived and died until the grave was prepared and the person was buried, often late in the afternoon. People of the village would go to the person’s house, the “house of mourning,” and pay their respects and comfort the family. God told Jeremiah not to go into a house of mourning because God had removed His blessing from Judah and many people would die in the wars with Babylon (Jer. 16:5).

To “go to the house of mourning” is to go to visit and comfort the family of the dead person and to consider things about life and death. It does not mean that you go to live there, or constantly live in a morose and depressed state thinking about death. Given the two choices, going to a house of mourning or going to a house where there is a feast and party, the Sage says that it is “better” to go to the house of mourning because death is the end of all people and we cannot lose our focus on that and live as if there is no Day of Judgment coming for us in the future (cf. Eccl. 11:9; 12:13-14).

**“feasting.”** The Hebrew word can mean “drinking bout,” and it generally refers to a meal with wine. The word is generally translated as “banquet” in the REV.

**“for that is the end of all humankind.”** “For that” refers to being dead and in the house of mourning. It is commonly taught in business that if a person is going to be successful they must “begin with the end in mind,” whether “the end” is the goal for the day, the year, or one’s working life. Similarly, if we are going to be fully successful with God, we should live the same way, keeping “the end,” our death, in mind, because we are only here for a short while and then will stand before the Lord on Judgment Day. That there is a day of judgment coming for every person should not surprise anyone because God has said a lot about it. God wants every person to have a good day on Judgment Day, so He tells us to take our mortality to heart and live in a way that will please Him.

**“should take this to heart.”** The Hebrew literally reads, “gives to his heart.” The same phrase occurs in Ecclesiastes 9:1. The phrase is idiomatic and conveys the idea of keeping something in mind or remembering it. Here the reality and certainty of death should be something people don’t lose sight of but “take to heart” and live life accordingly, knowing that life is brief and death always looms on the horizon and so should not be left out of the equation of life.

Ecc 7:3

**“Sorrow.”** The Hebrew word is *kaas* (#03708 כַּעַס), and it can mean sorrow, anger, vexation, grief, frustration, etc., depending on the context (it is “anger” in Eccl. 7:9). Here the context is unclear, in part because the word translated “sadness” in the phrase “sadness of the face” is much more often translated “evil” or “bad.” Many versions have “Sorrow…sadness” (ESV, KJV, NAB, NASB), because of the context about living and dying. But anyone who has dealt extensively with death knows that different people react differently and often people’s emotional states change with time. Alternate but very acceptable translations instead of “sorrow” include “aggravation” (CEB); “grief” (HCSB); “vexation” (DBY); “anger” (Douay-Rheims); and “frustration” (NIV). Similarly, a “sad” face is literally “an evil face,” and it can refer to a sad face; a “sober” face (NET); a “troubled” face (Tremper Longman[[18]](#footnote-18543)), and even a marred face (Rotherham)—perhaps a face marred by weeping and being distraught in one’s soul.

Ecclesiastes 7:3 uses vocabulary that allows us to go deeply into the mind and heart of people who are experiencing death in some close or visceral way, and/or people who contemplate death deeply and allow it to affect their heart and change it for the better. Living with the end in mind is always better than ignoring the reality of life (cf. Eccl. 7:2).

**“the heart is made good.”** Like the previous phrases in Ecclesiastes 7:3, the fact that the heart is made “good” has a great depth of meaning. The word translated “good” can be translated “well” or even “better,” and the heart can be made good or well as people deal honestly with life and death and do not live in denial of what will certainly come in the future. When we are honest with life and death, and also with the everlasting life offered by God, and do not hide from or ignore reality, our heart changes for the better, and that fact is reflected in many of the various English versions. The NLT paraphrases the Hebrew text, and has “sadness has a refining influence on us.”

Although some English versions say the heart will be made “glad,” that is likely not the emphasis in the text. Sadness does not make people “glad,” but when handled well, it can deepen their heart and make it good.

Ecc 7:4

**“The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning.”** Ecclesiastes 7:4 is very similar to Ecclesiastes 7:2 and reminds us to live with the end in mind. In this verse, however, instead of reminding the living to take their own mortality to heart, God goes somewhat the opposite way and contrasts the wise with the fool. The wise keep their mortality in mind, while fools ignore it and spend their time on frivolous activities. The contrast between the wise person and the fool is common in the wisdom literature, especially Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Although Ecclesiastes points out that the wise and the fool both die (Eccl. 2:14-16), there is still a definite advantage to being wise, as we see here (cf. Eccl. 10:12).

Ecc 7:5

**“the rebuke of a wise person.”** This is a wonderful exhortation for both the person who needs advice and also to the wise. A wise person knows when and how to rebuke a person so that it does the most good (cf. Prov. 17:10). The person struggling with something should be thankful that wiser people are willing to help, even if by rebuke. Sadly, people in our modern culture tend to be very arrogant and unappreciative of instruction in any form, and due to that many wise people refrain from trying to instruct, rebuke, or correct those acting in ways that clearly are not in their best interest. Wise people should take courage from the potential good that they can do and take a risk in order to accomplish the greater good.

**“the song of fools.”** Besides the wider meaning of different songs that fools might sing when they are inspired or excited, typical “songs” in the biblical world were written and sung to praise someone or something, or in order to remember something (cf. Exod. 15:1, about escaping from Egypt; Num. 21:17, about getting water in the wilderness; Deut. 31:19, about the Israelites in the wilderness; Judg. 5:12, about Deborah’s victory over the enemy; 1 Sam. 1:18, extolling Saul and Jonathan; 2 Sam. 22:1, David’s song about his deliverance from King Saul; Job 30:9, that people sang about the misfortunes of Job). In that light and in this context, the “song of fools” would be a song extolling some undeserving person or event, or outright flattery. The point is that the rebuke of a wise man might sting for a moment but be very helpful in the end, and that is much better than the flattering song of a fool, which might make a person feel good for a moment but will hurt instead of help in the end.

It has been suggested that “song” in this context means “praise,”[[19]](#footnote-28903) but since songs very often were about praise and something fools would do, there is little reason not to see the standard meaning of “song” here.

Ecc 7:6

**“thorns underneath a pot.”** In this verse, the rhyme grabs the attention and causes one to pause and think about the saying. The words used here for “thorn” and “pot” are homonyms, they are spelled the same but have different meanings. The word *sir* (#05518 סִיר or )fem.סִירָה ( sirah), means “pot,” a household pot, and also means “thorn,” “briar,” or “hook.” The Hebrew is *hasirrim tachat hasir* (הַסִּירִים֙ תַּ֣חַת הַסִּ֔יר), “thorns [plural] underneath a pot.” There is really no way to reproduce the rhyme and wordplay of the Hebrew text into English, although some scholars have tried. One such attempt is, “the sound of nettles under the kettle” but that falls far short of the Hebrew.

Since everyone cooked over a fire, and since it was common to burn thorns, everyone was familiar with the characteristics of burning thorns. There are a couple very distinct things about thorns when they burn. Thorns burn loudly; they make a loud crackling sound when they burn. Similarly, fools are generally loud and obnoxious. Also, thorns burn up quickly and then are gone. Similarly, fools may laugh now, but they soon pass away and then are gone forever. They foolishly reject God and so do not have everlasting life. They are fools, so why listen to them? It is much better to listen to the rebuke of a wise person (Eccl. 7:5).

[For more on dead people being dead in every way when they die, see Appendix 3: “The Dead are Dead.” For more on unsaved people being annihilated in the Lake of Fire instead of “burning forever in Hell,” see Appendix 4: “Annihilation in the Lake of Fire.”]

**“pointless.”** See commentary on Ecclesiastes 1:2.

Ecc 7:7

**“For.”** The standard meaning of the Hebrew word is “for.” Tremper Longman explains that the “for” likely connects to the last phrase in Ecclesiastes 7:6, that “this too is pointless.” Longman writes, “The wise are not above suspicion. There are factors as to why their advice and/or rebuke may not be reliable.”[[20]](#footnote-26592) Despite the very possible connection between 7:6 and 7:7, most translators agree with the explanation given by James Bollhagen: “The opening כִּיis usually interpreted as an asseverative [a positive affirmation], the intensifier “indeed,” as in Eccl. 4:16 and 7:20.”[[21]](#footnote-24664) However, Longman’s advice is to translate the text as it stands, “for” and that seems correct.

There is no real reason to doubt the connection between Ecclesiastes 7:6 and 7:7, especially in light of the whole flow of Ecclesiastes, which up to this point (and continuing forward for most of the book) has a decidedly cynical view (some might say “a very honest view”) of this earthly life and what goes on in it. It would be nice if the rich and powerful were always honest and wise, but far too often the “wise decisions” that they make are based on ulterior motives and pressures from behind-the-scenes players.

**“extortion.”** The translation “extortion” (getting something, often money, through force or threats) is a good one, and here it also would include various ways of extorting money or favors, including blackmail. The rich and powerful, usually considered “wise,” are subject to extortion, and the last phrase in the verse mentions bribery, which was so common that the Mosaic Law mentions bribes several times (cf. Exod. 23:8; Deut. 16:19; 27:25. Deut. 10:17 says the God will not take a bribe).

**“makes the wise man foolish.”** The Hebrew verb means to make foolish.[[22]](#footnote-29877) Although there are some scholars who think the word relates to being “mad,” the lexical and contextual evidence supports “fool” being the correct meaning of the Hebrew text.

Ecclesiastes 7:7 adds questionable motives and therefore questionable quality to the advice of the wise. It points out what often happens to the rich and powerful people who are supposedly wise and give wise advice: they succumb to extortion and bribery. By giving in to evil, through pressure or because of their own greed and aspirations, the “wise” person becomes a “fool.” This life is short—very short—and eternity is a very long time. The person who trades everlasting life and/or future rewards for material gain in this life is indeed a fool.

The fact that the “wise” people give in so often to evil forces that pervert their judgment and advice adds to the seeming pointlessness of this life. But it also forces people to a point of decision: we can be cynical about this life because so much of it seems wrong and unfair, or we can be positive about this life, realizing that it is a war zone between good and evil and we can support God and good in this life and look forward to a wonderful next life as well. The Devil is the god of this age, and God is a man of war (Exod. 15:3) fighting against him, and we can be cynics and negative and inadvertently give aid to the Devil, or we can have a positive point of view and spread the good word about our loving God and the wonderful next life He will provide.

**“destroys the heart.”** In biblical Hebrew, the “heart” can be the mind or understanding, or as it does here, it can have the wider meaning of the center of one’s life and personality (see commentary on Prov. 15:21). The heart is always changing, and it can change for the better or for the worse. The hearts of people who refuse to acknowledge God grow “dark” (Rom. 1:21). People who participate in evil spiral downhill. Their hearts become harder and harder and their lives become more and more ungodly (Eph. 4:18-19).

Ecc 7:8

**“matter.”** This verse has a depth of meaning that is difficult to bring out in English because the Hebrew word can mean “word” or “matter,” and both make sense in the context (but for different reasons), and therefore both apply and are worth our studious consideration. The translation “matter” is more inclusive than “word,” and is therefore to be preferred, but beyond that “matter” connects Ecclesiastes 7:7 with Ecclesiastes 7:8 very well. It can be impossible to tell why “wise” and powerful people make the decisions they do, and whether or not there is extortion or bribery involved, but the end of the matter is better than the beginning because the truth will eventually come out, and the patient person sometimes gets to see the that.

On the other hand, the translation “word” makes the two halves of Ecclesiastes 7:8 fit together very well, because one reason that a patient person is better than a proud person is that proud people usually go on and on about themselves and their interests and the “word” (message) that they speak never seems to end. In contrast, a patient person is generally sparing with their words. Furthermore, we are not able to truly judge the value and wisdom of what someone says until the whole message, “the end of the word,” is given, but if there are too many words the message may get lost. That is in part why Ecclesiastes 5:3 says, “the voice of a fool *comes* with a multitude of words.”

**“patient spirit...proud spirit.”** The Hebrew language is very concrete, and that is the case here. The “patient spirit” is literally in Hebrew the “long spirit,” and the “proud spirit” is the “high spirit.” This is an example of when trying to translate an idiom literally into the receptor language can be a problem. “High spirit” in Hebrew means “proud,” but in modern English if a person is in “high spirits,” they are happy and excited.

Ecc 7:11

**“Wisdom with an inheritance.”** Both wisdom and money are a defense against some of the troubles of life, as the next verse, Ecclesiastes 7:12, says. But money can go away, while wisdom provides much more reliable security.

**“those who see the sun.”** A poetic way of saying “those who are still alive.” This would especially apply to those in the family because an inheritance was usually passed in the family.

Ecc 7:14

**“about his future.”** The Hebrew simply reads, “after him,” but the phrase is unclear in and of itself. Some commentators say it refers to the person’s future, while others say it is referring to after the person dies. However, the fact that the text seems to be clearly referring to the person being joyful in prosperity and in deep thought and consideration during adversity, the weight of evidence favors the verse being about what will happen to a person in their own future.

Ecc 7:15

**“pointlessness.”** See commentary on Ecclesiastes 1:2.

Ecc 7:16

**“excessively righteous.”** In this context, “righteous” is being used as doing right and righteous actions. Some people are overly worried about making a mistake or not doing enough for God and others. While it is good to want to do what is right, we will never be perfect, and that concern adds pressures to life that can affect one’s mental and physical health, just like the verse says.

Another aspect of being excessively righteous is that there are times when strictly enforcing a rule is clearly wrong (for example, a person rushing to the hospital with a dying person in the car, and running a red light when there are clearly no cars coming does not need to get a ticket for running a red light). Thus, the New Testament tells leaders to be “reasonable” (1 Tim. 3:3).

Ecc 7:18

**“but do not withdraw your hand.”** Cf. Ecclesiastes 11:6.

**“will come out from both of them.”** The Hebrew text is unclear as to whether it is saying, “come out from” (ESV), or “come out with” (NASB). The previous verses had given two extremes, and the person who is wise does not get caught up with either one.

Ecc 7:20

**“who does good and does not sin.”** Solomon said basically the same thing at the dedication of the Temple (1 Kings 8:46; cf. Rom. 3:23).

Ecc 7:21

**“cursing you.”** There are several words translated “curse” in the Old Testament. The one used here in Ecclesiastes 7:21 is *qalal* (#07043 קָלַל), and its root meaning is “to make light of, make of little account, treat as insignificant.” The semantic range of *qalal* ranges from just speaking badly about someone or “making light of them,” to genuinely putting a curse on someone. So “curse” can mean just badmouthing someone. For example, the CJB has, “Also, don’t take seriously every word spoken, such as when you hear your servant speaking badly of you.” The TNK has the final phrase as hearing “your slave reviling you.”

Life is difficult and all of us say things in the heat of an emotional moment that we did not really mean or think through, as Ecclesiastes 7:22 says. So we cause ourselves a lot of problems and endure much emotional trauma if we do not learn how to ignore and/or let go of things that people say and do. If we take to heart everything we hear people say about us, we will have nothing but worries and bad days. When we make a mistake or say something unkind, we are happy if other people ignore it and let it go, and we can have a very peaceful life if we learn to do that too. We will never have the “peace that surpasses all understanding” (Phil. 4:7) if we are offended by everything that people say.

Ecc 7:23

**“but it was beyond my reach.”** The “it” refers back to wisdom. The Sage starts to test the things in life by the wisdom that he has (Eccl. 1:13), and he makes the decision that he will be wise. But in the end, the true wisdom and understanding of life were still beyond him, and his conclusion fits perfectly with the next verse, Ecclesiastes 7:24.

Ecc 7:24

**“That which is.”** The Hebrew more properly means, “That which has been” (cf. Eccl. 1:9), but occasionally it has a present tense meaning, as here.[[23]](#footnote-32418) The true “whats” and “whys” of life are too deep and complex for a human to discover.

**“beyond reach.”** The same Hebrew word “beyond reach” that is in Ecclesiastes 7:23, but verse 23 has the pronoun “my” (me).

**“deep, deep.”** The Hebrew doubles the word for emphasis, which is technically referred to as the figure of speech epizeuxis. The emphasis is “very deep,” or “exceedingly deep.”

Ecc 7:25

**“the reason for things.”** The Hebrew word is used in business and especially accounting, and it refers to how things fit together and add up. There is no good single English word to bring out all the meaning in the text.

Ecc 7:29

**“God made humankind upright.”** God’s original creation of humankind was perfect, but He gave Adam and Eve free will, which they used in disobedience to God and lost their upright status. Although “humankind” is singular, it is a collective singular as can be seen by the “but they search,” which is plural.

**“schemes.”** This word “schemes” is almost identical to “reasons” in Eccl. 7:25 and 7:27. God has made things with specific reasons, and the wise person looks for them, but sadly, fallen humanity searches out its own schemes and ignores what God has done. This word “schemes” is from the same root as the word in 2 Chronicles 26:15, where King Uzziah made cleverly designed war “devices” to throw rocks and arrows.

**Ecclesiastes Chapter 8**

Ecc 8:1

**“interpretation.”** This only occurs here in Ecclesiastes. This is used in Daniel of the interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream. It is also used in the Qumran literature about giving the interpretation of the text. It is about understanding something.

**“thing.”** This is the common word for “word,” “matter,” or “thing.”

**“makes his face shine.”** The demeanor of a person reflects what is happening in the life of a person.

Ecc 8:2

**“the oath of God.”** The Hebrew is unclear as to whether this is the oath of God to support the king or the oath a person takes to God to obey the king. The scope of Scripture supports that this refers to the oath of God to the king, based on God establishing and supporting human government (cf. Rom. 13).

Ecc 8:3

**“Do not be hasty to go out of his presence.”** This is following Ecclesiastes 8:2, about the king. Do not be hasty to go out of the king’s presence.

Ecc 8:4

**“authoritative.”** God has ordained human authority in government, and in general, supports kings and rulers. This is the same word as “power” in Ecclesiastes 8:8.

Ecc 8:5

**“will not come to harm.”** Literally, “will know no evil.”

Ecc 8:6

**“there is a proper time and procedure for every matter.”** This is somewhat similar to Ecclesiastes 3:1, 17.

**“even though the misery of man is heavy on him.”** The Hebrew conjunction that begins the verse can be translated different ways, and the versions differ, but the evidence supports the commentators and translators who see the second phrase as being connected by reason with the first phrase (cf. CSB, ESV, NASB2020, NIV, NLT, NRSV, RSV). The misery of mankind, which weighs heavily on us all, often causes us to take shortcuts in life that are ungodly, immoral, and even sometimes illegal. The New Testament is clear that “if anyone competes as an athlete, he is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules” (2 Tim. 2:5). Wise people, who keep everlasting life and rewards in mind, do the godly thing even when life is difficult and “cheating a little” would give them what they wanted in life. As Ecclesiastes 8:6 says, there is a proper time and procedure (way of doing things) for all that we do. The glory we receive for doing things the right and godly way will far exceed the suffering we are going through now (Rom. 8:18).

Ecc 8:7

**“when.”** The Hebrew text reads “when,” but the Aramaic and Vulgate amend that to “what” (sometimes translated “how”), but the emendation is unnecessary. While it is true that we often don’t know what, in this context, the timing seems to be the major issue. For example, we know we will die, we just don’t know when.

Ecc 8:8

**“power over the spirit.”** The Hebrew word translated “spirit” is *ruach* (#07307 רוּחַ), and it is the common word for “spirit,” but it has many meanings. It refers to the spirit life in man, thus “life” or sometimes “breath;” the attitudes and emotions of man; God, who is the Spirit; angels; demons; the wind; and more.

[For much more on the use of *ruach*, see Appendix 15: “Usages of ‘Spirit.’”]

Many commentators think that in this verse, *ruach* refers to the wind, and that may be possible, but in light of the second phrase about the day of death, it seems to be more connected to our life, making “spirit” a good translation (cf. ASV, ESV, KJV, NLT, Rotherham, and cf. NAB). The fact is that any person reading the Hebrew text itself would read *ruach* and immediately see all the possibilities, including both our life and the wind, neither of which we can retain or restrain. For all the bravado about how powerful we humans are, the actual fact is that we don’t know that much and don’t have much power. God, on the other hand, knows everything available to know and created the whole universe from nothing. No wonder Jesus told us to trust God (John 14:1), and no wonder Jeremiah said we would be cursed if we trusted in humans and relied on human power (Jer. 17:5).

**“that war.”** The war between life and death. The Hebrew is literally, “the war,” but “that war” is nuanced from the context.[[24]](#footnote-25264)

**“rescue its owners.”** There is an inherent deception in witchcraft and evil in general, and that is that the person who is doing the evil “owns” it, that is, they have a measure of control over the demons they are using or the evil they are doing. The person doing evil may feel that they are in control of their situation and that what they are doing will get them what they want—power, prestige, money, sex, etc.—but in the end, they will find that aging and death happen to everyone. They will discover that the evil they have been involved with will not be able to rescue them from death no matter how much power and/or control they thought it gave them in life. After the Fall, God decreed that humans would age and die, and after death comes the Day of Judgment (Heb. 9:27), and wickedness cannot rescue an evil person from death and the Lake of Fire and everlasting death that comes after Judgment Day. In fact, far from delivering the wicked, Psalm 34:21 even says that wickedness will kill the wicked.

[For information on annihilation in the Lake of Fire, see Appendix 4: “Annihilation in the Lake of Fire.]

Ecc 8:9

**“to his hurt.”** The text is not clear about who is hurt, and likely for good reason. The oppressed are the ones generally hurt in this life (although the oppressors are hurt in this life too), and the oppressors are hurt on Judgment Day. The Hebrew is ambiguous, and likely for the very reason that both the “oppressors” and the “oppressed” are hurt.

Ecc 8:10

**“wicked buried.”** The fact that a wicked person was buried indicated that he or she was buried with respect.

**“and were praised.”** This translation follows the Septuagint, Vulgate, and several other ancient sources, and makes very good sense in the context and so is supported by a number of scholars. The Hebrew text is that they “were forgotten,” which also could make sense. The wicked practice wickedness to get ahead, but are eventually forgotten just like everyone else.

**“pointless.”** See commentary on Ecclesiastes 1:2.

Ecc 8:11

**“the sons of men.”** An idiom for humankind.

Ecc 8:12

**“fear God, who are reverent before him.”** The word “fear” is repeated twice, but with a slightly different emphasis, and the REV translation tries to bring that out (cf. NIV).

Ecc 8:14

**“pointless.”** See commentary on Ecclesiastes 1:2.

Ecc 8:15

**“So I recommend the enjoyment *of life*.”** Many verses in Ecclesiastes encourage people to rejoice and have fun in life (cf. Eccl. 2:24-25; 3:4, 12-13, 22; 5:18-19; 8:15; 9:7-9; 10:19; 11:7-8). See commentary on Ecclesiastes 2:24.

Ecc 8:16

**“sees sleep with his eyes.”** This cute phrase catches the attention because people don’t “see” sleep with their eyes, their eyes are closed. The word “see” here is being used in its common idiomatic sense of “experience.”

Ecc 8:17

**“the work of God.”** Contrasted with the work of the wicked and the work of the righteous in Eccl. 8:14).

**Ecclesiastes Chapter 9**

Ecc 9:1

**“I laid to my heart.”** The essence of this phrase is that the Sage reflected on and considered what was said.

Ecc 9:2

**“righteous...wicked...good…clean...unclean.”** The words are singular: the righteous person, the wicked person, etc.

Ecc 9:5

**“the dead do not know anything.”** When a person dies they are dead, lifeless, in every way. They are not alive in heaven or “Hell” or any other place, they are dead, as Ecclesiastes 9:5-6 describes. Because dead people are actually dead, they “do not know anything.” The grave is called “the land of forgetfulness” (Psalm 88:12) and it is a place of silence (Ps. 94:17)

[For more on people being dead and in *Sheol*, the state of being dead, see commentary on Rev. 20:13. For more on dead people being lifeless in every way, see Appendix 3: “The Dead are Dead.” For more on what the “soul” is, and that it does not live on after a person dies, see Appendix 16: “Usages of ‘Soul.’”]

**“nor do they have any more a wage.”** The Hebrew word translated “wage” is *sakar* (#07939 שָׂכָר), and its primary meaning is “wage, hire, fee, pay,” and it is also sometimes used with the more expansive sense of “reward, benefit.” Although most English Bibles read “reward” or “benefit” or something similar, there is no reason not to read “wage” here. In fact, “wage” makes excellent sense in the scope of Scripture.

People earn “wages” in the spiritual world while they are living. Thus, Proverbs 10:16 says, “The wage of the righteous person *is* life; the revenue of the wicked *is* sin” (Prov. 10:16 uses different but applicable Hebrew words for “wage.” Cf. Prov. 11:18). In the context of evangelizing, Jesus said that the person who reaps receives wages (John 4:36). Romans 6:23 says the wages of sin is death, and 2 Peter 2:13, speaking of unsaved people who will be destroyed, says they will suffer wrong as the “wage of wrongdoing.”

Once a person dies they do not earn any more wages—they have what they have earned. The sinner has earned death, and the righteous person has earned everlasting life. However, some people teach that there will be a “second chance” on Judgment Day and that people who are raised from the dead will have a chance to confess their sin and be saved. That is not the case. Scripture says that we have this life to live and please God, and after this life comes the judgment (Heb. 9:27).

So in the context of the scope of Scripture, we can see why the Bible would say that dead people “do not have anymore a wage,” because they cannot earn a wage anymore—they are dead. So Ecclesiastes 9:5 is an encouragement to righteous people to keep working to earn “wages,” i.e., rewards in the future. It is also an encouragement for sinners to get saved and earn the “wage” of everlasting life, because if they die before getting saved they will not have another chance—they will be resurrected and awake to Judgment Day and their doom.

**“the memory of them is forgotten.”** That is, the person is forgotten. In the Jewish world, that people are remembered after death is very important. That people will eventually be forgotten is stated elsewhere in Ecclesiastes (cf. Eccl. 1:11).

Ecc 9:6

**“envy.”** The Hebrew word can refer to envy, jealousy, or zeal. These are all very strong emotions (and can be negative or positive; cf. Ps. 69:9), but once a person is dead they have no emotions.

**“a portion.”** A share, and a “portion” can also refer to an inheritance (cf. Num. 18:20).

**“forever.”** The Hebrew can mean “forever” or just “for a long time.” In this case, it means both, because the wicked will be destroyed but the righteous will be resurrected to life on a glorious earth. Thus, concerning the righteous, “forever” is technically a hyperbole for “a long time.” And it has indeed been a long time since Ecclesiastes was written. On the other hand, for the wicked, “forever” means “forever,” because the wicked will be raised and on Judgment Day they will be found guilty and punished by being thrown into the Lake of Fire where they will burn up and be everlastingly dead.

[For more on the righteous living on a restored earth, see Appendix 5: “Christ’s Future Kingdom on Earth.” For more on annihilation in the Lake of Fire and not everlasting torment in “hell,” see Appendix 4: “Annihilation in the Lake of Fire.”]

Ecc 9:7

**“Go and eat your bread with pleasure.”** Many verses in Ecclesiastes encourage people to rejoice and have fun in life (cf. Eccl. 2:24-25; 3:4, 12-13, 22; 5:18-19; 8:15; 9:7-9; 10:19; 11:7-8). See commentary on Ecclesiastes 2:24.

**“God has already accepted your works.”** This verse is not saying that God accepts every “work” or action people do. The Hebrew text does say that God “already” accepts your works, and many English versions follow the Hebrew text in that translation (cf. ASV, CJB, HCSB, DBY, ESV, JPS, NASB, NET, REV, RSV). However, many English translations avoid “already” because many translators think it makes the verse sound like God approves whatever people do, but that is not what the verse is saying. Since the Hebrew text says “already,” it is best to leave “already” in the English versions and then properly understand the verse, because when Ecclesiastes 9:7 is properly understood, it teaches a powerful lesson.

Many people think or are taught that to be truly spiritual a person has to let go of the things of this life and become an ascetic in one way or another. This has shown up in many ways throughout history, with supposedly spiritual people giving up fine food, wine, material wealth, marriage and family, and even giving up talking to others. But these are man-made regulations based on man-made ideas of what would please God

God made the world and many of the things in it to be enjoyed, and things to be enjoyed include food, drink, marriage, and children. It does not draw us closer to God to give up those things (it does occasionally happen that a person becomes so entangled with those things that it helps to give them up for a season).

Ecclesiastes 9:7 is in the larger context of the message in Ecclesiastes that a person has one life, and that life is difficult and uncertain and ends in death. But in this challenging life, God has given the gift of food and drink and companionship in marriage, and the person who engages in those activities does not have to wonder if they are okay with God, the Bible says, “God has already accepted your works.” God cannot make our fallen world easy and fun, but He can give us some things to enjoy, and He wants us to enjoy them, and when we do, He accepts our works.

Ecc 9:8

**“white.”** The white in this context is associated with joy.

**“oil.”** In the culture, oil had an association with joy. It smelled good and kept the skin from drying in the sun.

Ecc 9:9

**“Enjoy life.”** The Hebrew is literally, “See life,” using “see” in its idiomatic sense of “experience” (as in the phrase, he will not “see death,” i.e., die). Thus to “see life” with your wife is to “experience life,” and in this context, “enjoy life.”

**“have loved.”** The Hebrew verb is in the perfect tense, “have loved.” Although it may be the man’s love has continued, it seems clear that the Sage is pointing out that at one time the man had a great love for his wife, no matter how he felt about her now.

**“pointless.”** See commentary on Ecclesiastes 1:2. Here again we see the meaning “temporary” become more important than just “pointless.”

**“for that is your portion in life and in your labor.”** Enjoying life and being with the wife that you loved is your portion in life and in your labor; that is, the wife is to be a part of your life and a support and joy in your life and in your work. Ecclesiastes 9:9 continues the theme of finding joy in life that was clear in Ecclesiastes 9:8; “he who finds a wife finds a good thing” (Prov. 18:22). Wine, oil, and wonderful companionship were designed by God to help make this difficult life joyful.

Ecc 9:11

**“Then I turned.”** This is a break and introduces a new subject (cf. Eccl. 4:1).

Ecc 9:12

**“his time.”** In this context, “his time” refers to the day of his death.

**“evil time.”** This is a use of “evil” that does not have the connotation of morally evil, but just “evil, bad, inopportune” from the standpoint of the one who is experiencing the disaster. Similarly, the “evil net” is not morally evil, it is simply a disaster from the perspective of the fish.

Ecc 9:13

**“Also in this.”** This refers to the examples to follow in the next couple of verses.

**“made a great impression on me.”** The literal Hebrew is “was great upon me,” and this seems to be an idiom for made a great impression upon me.

Ecc 9:15

**“poor wise man.”** In contrast with the “great king.” “Poor” is not only in money, but could be “poor” in other ways; not respected, pitied (cf. Eccl. 4:13, the “poor” young man).

**“remembered.”** This is the idiomatic sense of “remember,” meaning to honor, favor, help. The poor man was still alive, as we see from Ecclesiastes 9:16.

Ecc 9:16

**“Wisdom is better than strength.”** The one with the strength was the great king; the one with the wisdom was the poor man who delivered the city.

Ecc 9:18

**“but one sinner destroys much good.”** This last phrase of Ecclesiastes 9 connects the closing subject of chapter 9 with the opening subject of chapter 10. Wisdom is good, as we have seen in the last few verses, but it can be undone by even a little foolishness, as chapter 10 points out.

**Ecclesiastes Chapter 10**

Ecc 10:1

**“Dead flies.”** The Hebrew is literally “flies of death,” using the noun construct as an adjective.

Ecc 10:2

**“right hand.”** In the biblical culture, the right hand was always more highly esteemed than the left hand. In fact, in some contexts, the left hand was considered the hand of cursing. The reason the left hand came to be associated with evil or cursing was due to the fact that in the biblical culture people always washed themselves with their left hand after they went to the bathroom, which also meant that they only ate with their right hand. In some contexts, however, such as Proverbs 3:16, the “left hand” does not convey a sense of cursing, but rather it is simply less esteemed than the right hand. Also, because people used their right hand more than their left, the right hand and arm were usually stronger or more capable, so the “right hand” became associated with success and accomplishment while the left hand became associated with weakness and ineffectiveness.

It is also essential to know that although in our Western culture, the “heart” is associated with emotions and feelings, in the biblical culture it was associated with the mind and included thinking and planning. Ecclesiastes 10:2 is saying that the “heart” (i.e., the thinking, plans, attitudes, and actions) of the wise person leads him into blessings, while the heart of the fool leads him into trouble, into curses. Stripping the idioms away from the Hebrew text and giving the meaning of the verse yields something like the way the NET loosely translates the verse: “A wise person’s good sense protects him, but a fool’s lack of sense leaves him vulnerable.”

Ecc 10:3

**“understanding fails him.”** Literally, “his heart is missing (or “lacking”).

[For more on “heart” and its use of “understanding” or “good sense,” see commentary on Prov. 15:21.]

**“fool.”** The Hebrew word for “fool” is *sakal* (#05530 סָכָל), which is a quite rare word for “fool” and occurs only in Ecclesiastes and Jeremiah (Eccl. 7:17; 10:3, 6, 14; Jer. 4:22; 5:21), and not at all in Psalms or Proverbs.

**“and he says.”** The fool shows by his words and actions that he is a fool. His actions are “speaking.” The Bible has quite a bit to say about how fools behave (cf. Prov. 12:16, 23; 13:16; 14:3, 16; 15:2; 18:6, 7; 29:11), but Proverbs does not use this particular word for “fool.”

Ecc 10:4

**“spirit of the ruler.”** In this context, “spirit” refers to the attitude or mindset. In this case, the ruler becomes angry or upset with you.

[For more on the use of “spirit,” see Appendix 15: “Usages of ‘Spirit.’”]

**“leave your place.”** That is, abandon your place or position. Leaving “your place” refers to physically leaving the scene, but it extends to not giving up the position you have taken on a subject, but be calm, because that can open the door for the ruler to change his attitude and even his ideas. The author is playing with the verb, because “leave” and “rest” are the same word; “leave” is in the second person (referring to “you”) and rest is in the third person (the subject is “calmness”), and both verbs are hithel imperfect. The idea is do not abandon your position, let the calmness do the work.

**“for calmness lays great offenses to rest.”** This is quite similar to Proverbs 15:1, that a “soft” answer turns away wrath. The Hebrew is “lays great sins to rest,” where “sins” is the cause, which is put by metonymy of the cause for the effect. The cause was sin, but the effect that is laid to rest is an “offense.”

Ecc 10:5

**“from the one who has power.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “from the presence of the one who has power” or “from before the one who has power,” but this is an idiomatic way of saying “from the ruler.”

Ecc 10:6

**“Foolishness.”** The word “foolishness” is the figure of speech personification of the trait and is also a metonymy for the people who exhibit it and are “fools.”

**“in many high positions.”** That is, in many exalted positions or places of honor. For example, at a feast, to be closer to the guest of honor or host was to be “higher” than others (cf. Luke 14:10). Ecclesiastes 10:7 gives the example of servants on horses while officials walk.

**“the rich.”** This refers to people who are “rich” physically and mentally, for example, in wealth and/or wisdom.

Ecc 10:7

**“servants on horses.”** Riding a horse in this kind of circumstance is a sign of dignity and power (cf. Esther 6:8-11). The Hebrew word “servant” can also mean “slave,” and that explains why the English versions are divided, with some having “servant” and some having “slave.” The native Hebrew reader would see both meanings and in fact, the situation is the same for both servants and slaves. The ultimate example of this is Jesus Christ, who, although he was “Lord of all,” walked on the earth like a servant; but when he returns as king he will ride on a white horse (Rev. 19:11).

Ecc 10:8

**“pit.”** An Aramaic loanword and the only occurrence of the word in the Old Testament. This is very similar to Proverbs 26:27, but Proverbs has more of the connotation of purposely digging a pit to hurt someone. Ecclesiastes leaves open the possibility that the person may be digging the pit, or breaking through a wall or hedge, in order to do evil, or they may be doing it simply as an ordinary task in life. In any case, Ecclesiastes 10:8-11 sets forth the uncertainty of life, that if you do something inherently dangerous you may be hurt.

**“wall.”** This could be a “hedge,” or a wall like those around a vineyard that is just made of stacked stones. This does not necessarily mean a wall like a house would have that was mortared together.

Ecc 10:9

**“quarries stones.”** Like the quarrying of stones for Solomon’s Temple (cf. 1 Kings 5:31).

**“wood.”** The Hebrew word for “wood” is general and therefore ambiguous. It can refer to cutting trees, splitting logs, or just splitting wood even as a task in carpentry, and in fact, all those activities involve some danger. The focus of the verse is not on the exact task, but on the uncertainty of life.

Ecc 10:10

**“the iron.”** A tool of iron. This could be an ax, wedge, chisel, etc.

**“wisdom brings success.”** In this case, the wisdom is to sharpen the tool, but wisdom brings success in many areas.

Ecc 10:11

**“no advantage to *having* a charmer.”** If the snake bites before the charmer arrives, then there is no profit in calling in a snake charmer. But some versions interpret the verse as saying that if the snake bites before the charmer arrives, then there is no “profit,” no money, given to the charmer. This verse about snake charmers is likely in Ecclesiastes because snake charmers were thought to have a special wisdom that allowed them to charm the snake, and wisdom is a major subject in Ecclesiastes.

**“charmer.”** The Hebrew uses what seems to be an idiomatic phrase to describe a snake charmer: “the master of the tongue.” In Akkadian, the “master of the tongue” was a person who spoke many languages.

The King James Version sees a different meaning in the verse (although they did not have access to Akkadian at the time) and takes “the master of the tongue” as a babbler, and like the snake, he will hurt you if you do not “charm” (pacify) him. Choon-Leong Seow notes that the Sage uses the phrase “master of the tongue” to refer to the snake charmer but notes that he likely uses that unique phrase in order to make the bridge to Ecclesiastes 10:12-14, in which the mouth and lips of the wise and fools are focused on.[[25]](#footnote-15618)

Ecc 10:12

**“the lips of a fool swallow him up.”** The word picture that the “lips” of a fool “swallow him up” grabs our attention, but the meaning is clear. The words that come from a fool eat him up; they are self-destructive. The words of a fool cause him trouble in this life and the next. Thus, the Sage returns here to the benefits of wisdom, which has been a subject earlier in Ecclesiastes.

Ecc 10:13

**“The beginning...the end.”** This is a polarmerismos (giving the two extremes to include the whole). The “beginning” and the “end” are the two extremes, and by juxtaposing them with each other Ecclesiastes 10:13 is saying that everything that the fool says is hurtful foolishness (which is a hyperbole, but makes the point).

[For more on polarmerismos, see commentary on Josh. 14:11.]

**“hurtful.”** The Hebrew is “evil,” but the way the Hebrew uses “evil” often does not have a moral quality, but means more like “hurtful” and refers to disaster or harm. That is the case here.

**“end of his mouth.”** Here, “mouth” is put by metonymy for that which comes from the mouth, which is words. We have this kind of saying in English, for example, when we say, “Watch your mouth,” meaning watch what you say.

Ecc 10:14

**“yet the fool also multiplies words.”** The foolish person has very little self-awareness or understanding of how what they do affects other people.

This phrase is likely the end of Ecclesiastes 10:13, and 10:14 is the two phrases: “A person does not know what will be; and what will be after him, who can tell him?”

Ecc 10:15

**“The labor of fools wearies them.”** The verse actually reads, “The labor of fools wearies him,” but the lack of agreement between “fools” (plural) and “him” (singular) occurs occasionally in the Old Testament. Also, it sometimes occurs that God uses the singular to emphasize the fact that people stand or fall on their own. We don’t live before God as a group; people are approved or disapproved by God based on their own actions alone.

**“he does not know how to go to a city.”** Likely a proverb expressing stupidity concerning that which is commonly known. We might say, “That person does not know to come in out of the cold.” The fool goes on and on about things he supposedly knows, but in reality what he “knows” is just foolishness.

It is also remotely possible to translate the verse as one long statement: that “The labor of fools wearies him who does not know how to go to a city,” in other words, what fools do confuses the ignorant or stupid. But that would be a very unusual use of “labor.”

Ecc 10:16

**“youth.”** Although this could be literal, it is more likely figurative, in other words, the king is acting in immature ways.

**“your officials feast in the morning.”** The typical biblical “feast” involved a lot of drinking, and this shows up in the next verse, Ecclesiastes 10:17. Woe to the land whose leaders are drunkards.

Ecc 10:17

**“the son of nobles.”** This is an idiom and means “of noble character,” the sons having the character of the father. It does not mean that the king would literally be a son of a nobleman, although he might be. Similarly, a “son of light” is a godly person while a “son of darkness” is an ungodly person, and a “son of Satan” has the characteristics of Satan.

**“in due season.”** That is, at the proper time (cf. Eccl. 3:1).

Ecc 10:18

**“laziness.”** The Hebrew text has the dual ending on lazy, as if it is saying, by “double laziness” (or perhaps implying the laziness of both hands), the roof sinks in.

**“rafters sag.”** The rafters support the roof, which is usually packed dirt on top of the rafters then roof material. If the rafters sag, then the roof has a dip in it that collects water and the roof will leak, guaranteed.

Ecc 10:19

**“People make food for laughter.”** Many verses in Ecclesiastes encourage people to rejoice and have fun in life (cf. Eccl. 2:24-25; 3:4, 12-13, 22; 5:18-19; 8:15; 9:7-9; 10:19; 11:7-8. See commentary on Ecclesiastes 2:24). People prepare meals, invite friends over, and have a good time. This has been the case for ages past. Meals should not be just a time to sustain the body, but a time for fellowship and fun with others.

**“wine gladdens *one’s* life.”** God made life to enjoy. It is not God’s will for people to be ascetics, drinking water at every meal.

Ecc 10:20

**“Do not curse.”** This can be an actual curse, or simply making light of the person, speaking in an unsupportive way.

**“not in your thoughts.”** What people think often comes out in unguarded moments. There is a possibility that the Hebrew text could read something such as “not with your friends.” Michael Fox translates the verse, “Don’t revile a king even among your intimates.”[[26]](#footnote-13473)

**“do not curse the rich.”** The tie-in between Ecclesiastes 10:19 and 10:20 could be that money helps with everything, and in the ancient world, money was often tied to who you knew and your connection with them. If the king of the rich people felt you did not support them they might cut off your source of money.

**“the air.”** The Hebrew uses the standard phraseology for air: “bird of the heavens.”

**Ecclesiastes Chapter 11**

Ecc 11:1

**“Cast your bread upon the waters.”** This is likely speaking of “bread” as the grain that can either be eaten as food or sown into the soil as seed for next year’s crop. In saying, “cast your bread upon the waters,” the verse is saying, “Don’t eat the grain; plant it.” After the grain harvest, people had to decide how much grain they had to hold back as seed for the next year’s crop and how much of it could be eaten, usually as either parched grain (Ruth 2:14) or ground into flour. If there was a small harvest, it was a struggle for people to knowingly go hungry through the fall, winter, and spring, but they had to in order to have seed to sow for the next year’s crop. When there was a small harvest, people “sowed in tears” because they were sowing into the ground the very grain they could eat, but because they were disciplined enough to plant the seed, they would then “reap with a ringing shout of joy” at the harvest next summer (Ps. 126:5).

The plowing and planting in Israel was different from what is done in most modern countries. In Israel, planting was done with a surface scratch plow after the rains started in October. It was necessary to wait until the fall rains (the “former rains”) to plow so that the ground that had been baked hard by the summer sun for over 5 months was softened by the rain. Once the rains softened the ground then the farmer scratched the surface with his plow and loosened the dirt. Then he scattered the grain onto the surface of the ground where it would be in contact with the loose soil and sprout. Note that in the Parable of the Sower (Matt. 13:1-9), the sower just sows the seed onto the soil and it grows where it lands.

The sower would sow the seed onto the “waters,” the puddles and soil that was wet from the rain, but he had no guarantee that it would grow. However, in most cases, it would grow and the farmer would “find it after many days,” the time it took the seed to germinate. Although it is possible that rice was literally sowed onto water in Egypt, Henry Van-Lennep points out that Ecclesiastes 11:1 is likely speaking of sowing seed in a somewhat similar way in Israel.[[27]](#footnote-10706)

Some commentators think that Ecclesiastes 11:1 is illustrating the general principle of giving and receiving, and that a person who “sows” seed to others will have it come back to them. Other commentators think that the verse is speaking about engaging in the risks of trade and receiving back a profit after a time. It is true that people who give to others often get back from others (cf. Eccl. 11:2), and that people who engage in trade often prosper, but those interpretations, while possible, seem much less likely than the verse being literal and referring to the actual sowing of seed. There does not seem to be a reason to use such vague language about bread and water if all the verse is saying is “give and you will get back after many days,” or “trade and you may prosper.” Also, the definitive statement, “after many days” is very literal if the subject is planting and harvesting a crop.

This section of Scripture, Ecclesiastes 10 and 11, has many verses about the uncertainty of life, and sowing seed in the ground is certainly an uncertain venture, but we must take chances in life in order to succeed, and often if we are too cautious we will not succeed (Eccl. 11:4). If things do not succeed for us, then we must ask for help from others, which is easier to do if we have been helpful to them (cf. Eccl. 11:2).

The Hebrew has a wordplay between “waters” (*mayim*) and days” (*yamim*). This mnemonic device may have helped people remember to take the necessary chances in life.

Ecc 11:2

**“Give a portion to seven, or even to eight.”** Ecclesiastes 11:2 could well be about being generous to others so that when times are difficult then those other people will be able and willing to help in return. The general context contains verses about the uncertainty of life and how things may or may not work out for us (Eccl. 10:8, 9; 11:1, 4, 6). Given that, it is important that when things are going well for us, we share what we have with people in need, and hopefully, if the situation is ever reversed and we are the ones in need, others will be willing to help us (cf. 2 Cor. 8:14). Also, it is important to diversify, because we do not know which things will be successful and which may not at all be.

When it comes to the phrase “seven, yes, even to eight,” the pattern “x then x+1” is a well-known pattern in the literature of the ancient Near East and so it makes sense that it would also be in the Bible. For example, the Bible has examples of “three things…four” (Prov. 30:15; 30:18, 21, 29; Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1, 4, 6). It also has “six things…seven” (Job 5:19; Prov. 6:16); and “seven things…eight” (Eccl. 11:2). Although in the literature, sometimes the pattern places the emphasis on the second number because in some cases the second number is literal, usually the pattern is simply a way of expressing a large number. For example, when God is speaking of the sins of the countries in the book of Amos and says, “for three sins, even for four” (Amos 1:3), He is using the literary device to point out that there are actually a very large number of sins.

Here in Ecclesiastes 11:2, the pattern, “seven, yes, even to eight,” is using the larger numbers of seven and eight to point out that it is wise to be generous to a large number of people because “you do not know what evil may happen on the earth,” and if the situation ever arises that you yourself are in need, there should be a large number of people who would be willing to help you because of your generosity to them.

Thus, this verse may be about being generous, and it may be about diversifying what you have, or it may contain both ideas.

**“evil.”** This is another example in Ecclesiastes of the word “evil” referring to a disaster of some kind and not a “moral evil.”

Ecc 11:4

**“He who watches the wind will not sow.”** People get handcuffed by an uncertain future. The future is uncertain, and to succeed we must take some chances.

Ecc 11:5

**“the way the spirit *comes* to the bones in a womb with child.”** The lesson here in Ecclesiastes 11:5 is that humans do not really understand much about the inner workings of life or of God, and so trying to figure out what is going to come in the future is not profitable. People should take reasonable chances in life. The overly cautious will not move forward even if the opportunity is there (Eccl. 11:4), and so God encourages us to “sow our seed” (Eccl. 11:6) and move ahead with life.

Although many English versions translate the Hebrew text of Ecclesiastes 11:5 as if it were three phrases, there is really no need or justification for that. For example, the NET has: (1) “Just as you do not know the path of the wind,” (2) “or how the bones form in the womb of a pregnant woman,” (3) so you do not know the work of God….” But the second phrase does not start with a conjunction such as “or,” “nor,” or “and” in the Hebrew text, and also the second phrase does not have a verb in the Hebrew text despite the fact that many English versions supply one (“form” in the NET; “grow” in many other versions). The Hebrew text is difficult, but it is much better understood as one phrase, and woodenly translated it is something like, “Just as you are not knowing what is the way of the spirit as [or “in” in some Heb. Mss] bones in the full womb….”

In line with that basic idea, Michael Fox has the translation, “Just as you do not know how the lifebreath passes into the limbs within the womb of the pregnant woman….”[[28]](#footnote-18885) Craig Bartholomew has: “Just as you do not know the way of the spirit in the limbs in the mother’s womb….”[[29]](#footnote-10182) Choon-Leong Seow has: “Just as you do not know how the life-breath gets into the fetus in the belly of the pregnant woman….”[[30]](#footnote-29239) The ESV has: “As you do not know the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child….” Many other English versions contain the same basic idea (cf. CEB, GW, NAB, NRSV, Rotherham, RSV).

One of the great mysteries of human existence is how life comes together in the fetus as it forms, and God uses that to make the point that things work out even when we do not understand them, so we should not let a lack of knowledge paralyze us into inactivity.

**“womb with child.”** Literally, “a full womb.”

Ecc 11:7

**“Truly.”** The *vav* is emphatic and starts a new section.

**“good for the eyes to see the sun.”** This is a beautiful and poetic way to say, “it is good to be alive.” This is not making a comment that it is good to see the sun versus having a cloudy or rainy day. The Sage has been speaking about the value of being alive, and that continues in the next verse, Ecclesiastes 11:8.

Ecc 11:8

**“many...many.”** Even if a person lives “many years,” the years after death will be many also. The repetition of “many” makes the sentence catch the attention.

**“let him rejoice in them all.”** Many verses in Ecclesiastes encourage people to rejoice and have fun in life (cf. Eccl. 2:24-25; 3:4, 12-13, 22; 5:18-19; 8:15; 9:7-9; 10:19; 11:7-8). See commentary on Ecclesiastes 2:24.

**“let him remember the days of darkness.”** In this context, the “days of darkness” are the days when the person is dead. The verse is saying rejoice in the life you are living, but remember death and the Judgment Day that follows it, and live wisely.

**“pointless.”** See commentary on Ecclesiastes 1:2. Here we see the meaning of “temporary” coming more to the front, but the primary meaning still is “pointless,” especially in light of what the Sage already said in Ecclesiastes 1:11, that even the things that are still future will not be remembered by the things that will come after them.

Ecc 11:9

**“and walk in the ways of your heart and in the sight of your eyes.”** This seems to be surprising advice since Moses seems to have said the opposite: “remember all the commandments of Yahweh and do them, so that you do not seek after your own heart and your own eyes” (Num. 15:39; although the verbs in Numbers differ from the verbs in Ecclesiastes). It is very possible that this is the Sage’s advice to the young man who is just learning about life, and telling the young man to follow his heart and eyes, and thus learn about life, but in the learning keep in mind that there is a judgment coming. The exhortation throughout Ecclesiastes is that we are to enjoy life, but that enjoyment has boundaries that must be learned, often by experience. The Sage is not being sarcastic or tongue-in-cheek here and saying to the young man, “You can follow your heart but you will suffer for it.” He is encouraging the young man to discover the proper boundaries of life. Enjoy life, but keep in mind the Judgment Day that is to come, and set your boundaries accordingly.

**“for all these things God will bring you into judgment.”** That God will judge people for how they have lived and what they have done is stated several times in Ecclesiastes (cf. Eccl. 3:17; 11:9; 12:14).

Ecc 11:10

**“frustration.”** The Hebrew word is *kaas* (#03708 כַּעַס), and it can mean sorrow, anger, vexation, grief, frustration, etc., depending on the context (it is “frustration” in Ecclesiastes 1:18; “sorrow” in Ecclesiastes 7:3 and “anger” in Ecclesiastes 7:9). Although the REV has “frustration,” more than one meaning fits well here, including “anger,” “vexation,” “sorrow,” “anxiety,” etc., and the English versions differ widely. This is a good example of how the student of the Bible must be aware that the English translation is often only one choice among a number of “good choices,” and why the Bible must be read and discussed with different possible meanings in mind.

**“dawn *of life*.”** The word “dawn” might also be “black” depending on the Hebrew root it is derived from. Everet Fox takes this to mean the blackness of hair, versus the grey hair of the old men. But the translation “dawn” occurs a number of times in the Bible. Both words, “youth” and “dawn” (or “black”) occur in Psalm 110:3.

**“pointless.”** See commentary on Ecclesiastes 1:2. Here we see the meaning of “temporary” coming more to the front, as in Ecclesiastes 11:8, but the primary meaning still is “pointless.”

**Ecclesiastes Chapter 12**

Ecc 12:1

**“Remember.”** This is the idiomatic or “pregnant sense” of the word remember, and it means not just keep in mind, but honor Him.

[For more on the idiomatic sense of “remember,” see commentary on Luke 23:42.]

**“in the days of your youth.”** Ecclesiastes has said a number of things about death coming and God’s judgment coming after death. Ecclesiastes 12 now gives a progression of some of the things that occur with old age that emphasize that people should “remember” (honor, worship) God in the day of their youth. To fully understand that it must be remembered that “worship” under the Old Covenant was not just a state of mind, but actions taken with the proper state of mind. Thus, doing sacrifices and offerings, or going to Jerusalem to sacrifice or participate in a festival such as Passover or Tabernacles, with the right heart and state of mind, was considered worship. But it is a lot easier to offer a sacrifice or go to Jerusalem when you are young than when you are old and feeble.

**“before the evil days come.”** The “evil days” are the days of old age, and the text will now describe why the days of old age are considered “evil,” in this context difficult and troublesome.

The Hebrew sentence uses the word “not,” which James Bollhagen suggests means more like, “during the time the evil days have not come.”[[31]](#footnote-15303) Given that the “evil days” are old age when strength decreases, eyesight dims, and teeth give the person problems, the literal rendition, more like “so that the evil days do not come” (which appears in 12:1, 2 and 6), cannot be the meaning of the text. Remembering God does not stop old age and the lack of ability that comes with it, but if you remember God throughout your life, you will be prepared for death.

**“I have no delight in them.”** The text is not saying that there is no delight at all in old age, because there is. However, the aged remember the days of their youth when they were energetic and strong; when they could run and jump and lift and carry, and in contrast to that there is no delight in being old and feeble. We have to keep in mind that the biblical culture was extremely physical. Water had to be lifted out of the well and carried to the house; cooking was done by chopping and carrying wood and tending the fire and the pots full of food; getting daily food required effort and strength, and so forth. The weakness of age made life difficult.

Ecc 12:2

**“and the stars are darkened.”** This verse refers to the dimming eyesight in old age. Especially in the ancient world, eye problems were frequent and most people had trouble seeing when they got old.

Ecc 12:3

**“in the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men bow themselves.”** The meaning of this phrase is not stated in the text, but contextually it could well be that the “keepers of the house” are the arms, which are constantly moving to keep the house running, while the “strong men” are the legs that are relied upon to carry the heavy loads of life from place to place.

**“the grinders cease because they are few.”** The “grinders,” the teeth, become fewer and fewer with age.

Ecc 12:4

**“doors will be shut...sound of grinding is low.”** This is likely referring to the fact that in old age a person’s hearing begins to fail, and it seems as if everyone in the village has their doors shut and the joyful sound of grinding grain cannot be heard like it used to be.

**“the daughters of music will be brought low.”** This may still refer to an aged person’s failing hearing, or more likely that the strength of the voice begins to fail.

Ecc 12:5

**“afraid of heights, and terrors will be in the road.”** The aged are afraid of falling, so heights, and obstacles in the road, which may not be as easy to see and avoid as they were in the days of youth, are terrors. It also must be kept in mind that roads were “public places” that did not belong to anyone and so were not kept up. Eventually, they became full of rocks and holes and could be difficult to walk on (see commentary on Mark 1:3).

**“the almond tree will blossom.”** This may refer to the white hair of old age. Or it may be that “the almond tree is despised” (“despised” coming from a different Hebrew root), meaning that the sense of taste is gone with old age so even almonds, normally a delicacy, are not enjoyed. Or it may be that the almond tree is despised because in old age as death is on the horizon the beauty of the almond tree sort of taunts the aged person, who will not get to enjoy it for much longer.

**“the grasshopper will be a burden.”** As a person gets old and weak, even small things can be a burden.

**“and desire will fail.”** The usual meaning would be that the aged person’s sexual desire will fail, but in this context, it may also refer to desire to live. It is very common that aged people who are at peace with God see death as a release from a painful existence.

**“age-long home.”** This is not the “eternal home” as some English translations suggest. The grave is an “age-long home,” that is, the length of “this present evil age” (Gal. 1:4). Some versions say “eternal home” instead of “long home” or “age-long home,” but the Hebrew word *olam*, translated “age-long,” can mean either eternal or of long duration. Christians who believe that when people die they immediately go to heaven or hell and stay there forever say the person goes to his long home at the time that he dies. However, the truth in the Bible is that when people die they go to the grave and are dead, awaiting their resurrection. Thus, the grave is the “long home,” after which comes the resurrection and the person’s Judgment Day. If at the Judgment the person is deemed worthy of life, then they live forever with the Messiah. If the person is not deemed worthy of life, they are burned up (annihilated) in the Lake of Fire, and have no “home” at all. That Ecclesiastes calls the grave the “long home” indicates God had not started to reveal to people that the Day of the Lord was close.

[For more information on dead people being dead in every way, body, soul, and spirit, see Appendix 3: “The Dead are Dead.” Also, see Graeser, Lynn, Schoenheit, *Is There Death After Life?* For more on the different resurrections, see commentary on Acts 24:15. For more on unsaved people being annihilated in the Lake of Fire rather than burning forever, see Appendix 4: “Annihilation in the Lake of Fire.”]

**“and the mourners go about the streets.”** The aged person, now dead, is mourned by those who knew them.

Ecc 12:7

**“the dust returns to the earth as it was.”** The meaning of Ecclesiastes 12:7 is that when a person dies, their body returns to dust and their life returns to God. When a person dies, they are dead in every way—they are not alive anywhere in any form. They will be reanimated when God raises them from the dead at one of the resurrections.

[For more on the resurrections, see commentary on Acts 24:15. For more information on the dead being dead in every way, see Appendix 3, “The Dead are Dead.”]

“**and the spirit returns to God who gave it.”** The phrase “returns to God” is quite simple, although it has been clouded by years of tradition. If we go back to Genesis 2:7, we see that life came from God. Genesis 2:7 reads, “God formed man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul.” So when God made Adam, He made his body and then gave it life, which is figuratively expressed by the phrase, “God breathed into his nostrils.” Then, when a person dies, the Bible says, “the spirit returns to God,” which is a phrase that means that God remembers the person and will reanimate them at the resurrection.

When God gave Adam “life,” that life is sometimes expressed by the word “soul” or sometimes by the word “spirit.” Before he was given life, Adam was a dead dirt body (Gen. 2:7), and then God put “soul” or “spirit” into him—He gave him life. Here in this context in Ecclesiastes 12:7, the word “spirit” refers to the natural life of the person. The natural life of a person (or animal: Eccl. 3:21) is sometimes called “soul” and it is also sometimes called “spirit” because “soul” is a type of “spirit.”

When a person dies, the Bible says, “the spirit returns to God,” such that God remembers the person and will reanimate them at the resurrection. God is everywhere, so “returns to God” does not refer to going to a place, it refers to where the life came from—God. The life came directly from God, from His creative mind and power, and it goes back to God in the same way—back to God’s mind and power. Before Adam was given life, and before a human baby is conceived, God did not already have a “soul” or “spirit” somewhere, as if He had a giant storage closet of “souls,” and then gave one to Adam and to every other person when they were conceived in the womb. No, “soul” or “spirit” in this context in Ecclesiastes means “life” and it comes directly from God and goes back to God in the sense that He remembers it. God may actually somehow absorb it back into Himself, but the Bible is not clear on that. What we know is that God, who is everywhere, remembers both the spirit and body of the person and will rebuild and reanimate him or her at the resurrection.

Another way we know that “spirit” in Ecclesiastes 12:7 simply refers to “life” is that Ecclesiastes 12:7 is about a person dying—any person, every person—not just a saved person dying. The “spirit” (life) of every single person “goes back to God”—God remembers them and will resurrect them. Christians add their pre-conceived theology to Ecclesiastes 12:7 and say that when a person dies, their spirit “goes to heaven or to hell,” but that is not what the verse says. The spirit of every person who has ever lived will “return to God who gave it.” This is not going to heaven or hell, this is returning to God in the sense of His remembering the person and thus being able to resurrect them.

Christian tradition—which is basically the same as Greek mythology—is that the “soul” or “spirit” is like a ghost that is in the human body and lives on after the person dies. But that is not what the Bible teaches. No one was a ghost or spirit being that was alive somewhere before they were born which then, at birth, God placed inside the fetus in the mother’s womb. Similarly, no one is a ghost or spirit being after they die. The “spirit” goes back to God who gave it, but when God gave it, the “spirit” (or “soul”) was simply the life. The spirit (or soul) was not a ghost or living spirit with mental faculties when God gave it, and it is not a ghost or living spirit with mental faculties when a person dies. That is why the Bible says, “there is no work, or planning, or knowledge, or wisdom, in Sheol [death], where you are going” (Eccl. 9:10). Dead people are dead in every way, their life has “returned to God” and they are no longer alive.

When the body dies, there is nothing left to sustain the life of the body, so the life, whether called “soul” or “spirit,” just goes back into the mind of God who will reanimate the body later, at the resurrection. At the time of the resurrection, God puts “life” back into the body that He is raising. Note that in the resurrection described in Ezekiel 37:9-10, God simply puts “spirit” (i.e., “life”) into the dead bodies. There is no indication in that text or anywhere else in the Bible that each individual had his or her own spirit that then had to rejoin the dead body once it was raised. God just put “spirit” back into each dead body and they come to life.

We should also remember that the vast majority of the people who have died in the thousands of years since Adam are totally gone. They have completely disintegrated. So the resurrection is not like God already has a lot of dead bodies that He puts life into. Rather, at the resurrection (Rev. 20:4-5, 13) there is nothing there to start with—no “body” at all—and so God has to assemble molecules and form them into a body and then put life into that body. Actually, that process is what God did for Adam and is somewhat similar to what Ezekiel 37:1-14 describes, with bones coming together, then flesh forming on the bones, then finally there was a body that God could put life into, so He put “spirit” into the bodies and they came to life (Ezek. 37:14).

It is worth noting that although the Bible does not speak about the bodies of unbelievers when they are raised, Christians get brand new bodies that will be like Christ’s body (Phil. 3:21; 1 John 3:2).

Also, although “soul” and “spirit” are sometimes used interchangeably for the natural life of the body, sometimes “spirit” refers to the gift of holy spirit that comes from God. Like natural life, “spirit” was not like a ghost somewhere before it was placed in a person, it was simply “spirit life” that was in the mind and power of God. So when a person with natural life, soul, gets born again, God puts spirit—spirit life—inside them. It is not like a ghost any more than the soul life inside them is like a ghost. It is simply another kind of life energy. Thus the born-again believer is empowered by their natural soul life and their supernatural spirit life. Like soul life that cannot exist without a body to animate, spirit life cannot live without a body either. So when a believer dies, both their soul life and their spirit life simply goes away, it is not designed to be without a body. We could say both forms of life are somehow absorbed back into God, but the Bible does not describe anything like that except to say the “spirit” goes back to God.

In conclusion, Ecclesiastes 12:7 is the reverse of what God did for Adam in Genesis 2. In Genesis, God took Adam’s dead dirt body and gave it life—the life came from God. Then, when a person dies that life goes back to God and He remembers the person and can resurrect them on the Day of Judgment even if they have been dead for thousands of years and the body that died is just molecules scattered around the earth.

[For more on the uses of “soul,” see Appendix 15: “Usages of ‘Soul.’” For more on the usages of “spirit,” see Appendix 16: “Usages of ‘Spirit.’” For more information on dead people being dead in every way when the body dies, see Appendix 3: “The Dead are Dead.”]

Ecc 12:8

**“pointless.”** See commentary on Ecclesiastes 1:2. Ecclesiastes 12:8 repeats the same message as 1:2.

Ecc 12:9

**“because.”**[[32]](#footnote-14095)

**“also taught.”** This is likely in contrast with just writing. While “also taught” seems somewhat awkward, we don’t really know how much ancient Sages were expected to verbally teach.[[33]](#footnote-19901)

**“proverbs.”** The book of Proverbs notes that Solomon spoke and wrote many proverbs, and 1 Kings 4:32 says Solomon spoke 3,000 proverbs, but there are only some 900 proverbs in Proverbs, and some of them are not from Solomon

Ecc 12:10

**“delightful words.”** “Delightful words” are not necessarily words that make one feel good, but words that bring a person closer to God. The words of the wise are goads (Eccl. 12:11), and so they can hurt, but they are delightful in the end (cf. Heb. 12:11).

There are scholars who say that some of the Sage’s words in Ecclesiastes are not “delightful,” but in saying that they use “delightful” in a modern sense that means it makes people feel good and gives them a “warm fuzzy feeling.” But there is no justification for using “delightful” in a way that agrees with the majority opinion and “modern sensibilities.” God, and God’s prophets and sages, use vocabulary in a way that fits with God’s purpose and actions, which is not the purpose and actions of most of the people on planet Earth today.

God uses vocabulary according to His standards, not the standards of the world. For example, God says, “Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; (Isa. 5:20). That verse, written over 2,700 years ago, certainly applies today, and the people who are calling “good” evil, and “evil” good, call God and His rules “evil,” and also “dictatorial,” “narrow-minded,” “outdated,” and much more. Tom Jacobs, writing for Pacific Standard news, correctly stated, “…we quite literally create God in our own image, and envision him in ways that imply he is meeting our emotional needs. That means the God of liberals has a different look than his conservative counterpart.”[[34]](#footnote-14056)

But the problem with creating God in our own image is that we did not create God, He created us. Furthermore, on Judgment Day, we will not be the judge, God will be. Also, as much as some people may deny it, the Bible is crystal clear that on Judgment Day those people who have been “evil” by God’s standards will be thrown into the Lake of Fire while those people who have been “good” according to God’s standards and have gotten saved will be escorted into a wonderful everlasting life.

We do not “naturally” think and act in a godly manner because the natural heart is selfish and corrupt (Jer. 17:9). However, the wise person realizes that thinking and living in a way that pleases God leads to a wonderful life and so makes a diligent effort to conform their thoughts and actions to God’s ways.

[For more on how to be saved and live forever, see Rom. 10:9. For more on the destiny of the wicked, see Appendix 4: “Annihilation in the Lake of Fire.”]

**“what was written uprightly.”** The Sage not only wrote proverbs, but he also sought and studied the words of others, as per Ecclesiastes 12:11. There is no need to see “what was written” as an active, “what he wrote,” as many scholars do. The most natural reading of the Hebrew text and the reading of the Septuagint are passive (cf. ASV, DBY, GNV, JPS, KJV, YLT).

Ecc 12:11

**“goads.”** See commentary on Acts 26:14.

**“masters of collections.”** The meaning of this phrase is the subject of much discussion among scholars, but it fits the context that the “masters of collections” are the scholars who knew the various collections of wisdom literature and wise sayings.

**“given by one shepherd.”** The words of the truly wise will agree with each other. True wisdom comes from God and is not scattered or diverse. The One Shepherd is God, the source and fount of all wisdom, and He entrusts faithful shepherds with His work (Jer. 23:4).

Ecc 12:12

**“My son.”** This is the first time we see that the Sage has included his son in the audience he is addressing.

**“beware of anything beyond these.”** People are to beware of words that are beyond the words of the wise. There are many “words” and “voices” in life, calling out for us to leave God’s straight and narrow path and be “independent,” to “do our own thing,” and to “obey our own heart,” but humankind was not designed to live without God and we cannot please God by defying or ignoring Him. Our hearts are not essentially godly, they are corrupt, which is why so many people live in defiance of God, or just plain ignore Him. Jeremiah says, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and it is exceedingly corrupt; (Jer. 17:9). It takes discipline to overcome the natural desires of the heart and obey God.

Paul spoke of leaders in the Church, that they must hold firmly to the faithful word that they had been taught (Titus 1:9). God’s people are not to be distracted by fables and things that give rise to speculation (1 Tim. 1:3-6; 2 Tim. 4:2-4).

**“much study is a weariness of the flesh.”** Although mental effort must be punctuated by breaks, and intense study can be tiring, in the context of Ecclesiastes, the “much study” mainly seems to refer to studying and trying to find out things that are beyond human comprehension and thus just leads to speculation. Ecclesiastes 3:10-11 speak of the business that God has given people to be busy with, and how although God has set eternity in people’s hearts, yet we cannot find out the work of God from beginning to end.

Ecc 12:13

**“All has been heard.”** Of course “everything” has not been heard. This is a hyperbole to emphasize that everything has been heard that people need to see how life works and what is important in life.

**“the whole *purpose* of humankind.”** In the Hebrew text, the phrase is, “for this is the all of humankind.” Although the REV adds “purpose” for some clarity in English, in essence, James Bollhagen summarizes the phrase well: “...translations with added words [such as “duty”] actually limit the force of the statement, which is much more comprehensive than that. In this context כָּל־הָאָדָֽם [all of humankind] means “the entirety of man,” that is, the sum and purpose of human existence. The essence of living and being a person can only be understood in terms of a person’s relationship to God.”[[35]](#footnote-15660)

God created humankind, and He created them for, and with, a purpose. God did not create people so they could be self-willed and live any way they chose. He created them to love Him, fellowship with Him, serve Him, and be blessed and be a blessing. Ephesians 2:10 says we were created to do good works. All of human life is designed to be in relationship with God.

Ecc 12:14

**“For God will bring everything we do into judgment.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “God will bring everything done into judgment.” Although the Hebrew text lacks the personal pronoun, “we,” it is implied in the context because obviously, someone has to do the things that are done. Leaving out the pronoun puts more emphasis on the short and punchy “everything done” so we understand that God will indeed judge everything, and not leave things out.

There are many verses in the Bible that point to the fact that on the Day of Judgment, people will have to give an account of how they have lived (e.g., Eccl. 11:9; 12:14; Matt. 12:36; 16:27; Rom. 2:16; 2 Cor. 5:10; 1 Pet. 4:4-5).

Jesus Christ stands at the right hand of God and in true oriental fashion is the agent through whom God acts. Just as Pharaoh ruled Egypt through Joseph (“Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘I am Pharaoh, and without you will no man lift up his hand or his foot in all the land of Egypt.’” Gen. 41:44) so God rules and judges through Jesus Christ. Even before his death and resurrection, Jesus knew he was going to be God’s agent to judge people, and he said, “…the Father does not judge anyone, but he has given all judgment to the Son” (John 5:22; cf. Acts 17:31; Rom. 2:16). When Christ spoke about his return, he said, “he” would repay people for what they had done (Matt. 16:27).

The Bible teaches that the decision on Judgment Day is for more than just whether a person will receive everlasting life or everlasting death. It is also for the rewards (or lack thereof) that one will receive in the next life. For example, the Apostles served faithfully in difficult circumstances, and will be appointed as judges in the next life (Matt. 19:28). Other people, who have gotten saved but have not supported Christ’s cause in any way may end up with no rewards in the next life (1 Cor. 3:14-17; 1 John 2:28; 2 John 1:8). Rewards in the next life are a big deal, so Christians need to be serious about how they live and the stand they take for the Lord Jesus Christ (Matt. 10:32-33; Luke 12:8-9).

[For more on the Judgment, see commentary on Rom. 2:16. For more on the fact that on Judgment Day people will get what they deserve, see commentary on 2 Cor. 5:10.]

**“every hidden thing.”** Many things in life are hidden, some we are aware of and some people do without being consciously aware of them, but this certainly includes hidden motives.

1. Cf. *Hermeneia*, AB, WBC, OTL, CC, JPSBC. [↑](#footnote-ref-24526)
2. C. L. Seow, *Ecclesiaste*s [AB], 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-25139)
3. Robert Alter, *The Wisdom Books : Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes*, 348. [↑](#footnote-ref-32331)
4. Cf. Tremper Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* [NICOT], 81-82. [↑](#footnote-ref-22415)
5. Laird, Archer, and Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 425. [↑](#footnote-ref-17377)
6. Cf. Tremper Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* [NICOT]. [↑](#footnote-ref-11795)
7. Arthur Reber, Rhianon Allen, Emily Reber, *Penguin Dictionary of Psychology*, s.v. “hatred,” 342. [↑](#footnote-ref-23764)
8. Norbert Lohfink, *Qoheleth* [CC], 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-28787)
9. Cf. Duane Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* [NAC], 303. [↑](#footnote-ref-14079)
10. Cf. C. L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes* [AB], 165-66. [↑](#footnote-ref-11672)
11. Cf. R Murphy, *Ecclesiastes* [WBC]. [↑](#footnote-ref-20505)
12. James Bollhagen, *Ecclesiastes* [ConcC]. [↑](#footnote-ref-11836)
13. C. L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes* [AB], 193, 196-97. [↑](#footnote-ref-24411)
14. Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* [NICOT], 157. [↑](#footnote-ref-23209)
15. C. L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes* [AB], 222-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-31002)
16. R. Belcher, *Ecclesiastes*, Mentor Commentary. [↑](#footnote-ref-28676)
17. Also see R. Belcher, *Ecclesiastes*, Mentor Commentary; D. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* [NAC]. [↑](#footnote-ref-10100)
18. Tremper Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiates* [NICOT], 180. [↑](#footnote-ref-18543)
19. Referenced by Tremper Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiates* [NICOT], 180. [↑](#footnote-ref-28903)
20. Longman, *Ecclesiastes* [NICOT], 186. [↑](#footnote-ref-26592)
21. Bollhagen, *Ecclesiastes* [ConcC]. [↑](#footnote-ref-24664)
22. Koehler and Baumgartner, *HALOT* *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. [↑](#footnote-ref-29877)
23. James Bollhagen, *Ecclsiastes* [ConcC]. [↑](#footnote-ref-32418)
24. Cf. Michael V. Fox, *JPS Bible Commentary: Ecclesiastes*. [↑](#footnote-ref-25264)
25. Seow, *Ecclesiastes* [AB], 318-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-15618)
26. Cf. Michael V. Fox, *JPS Bible Commentary: Ecclesiastes*, 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-13473)
27. Van-Lennep, *Bible Lands: Their Modern Customs and Manners Illustrative of Scripture*, 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-10706)
28. M. Fox, *JPS Bible Commentary: Ecclesiastes*, 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-18885)
29. C. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes* [BCOT], 335. [↑](#footnote-ref-10182)
30. C. L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes* [AB], 328. [↑](#footnote-ref-29239)
31. Bollhagen, *Ecclesiastes* [ConcC]. [↑](#footnote-ref-15303)
32. See M. Fox, *JPS Bible Commentary: Ecclesiastes*. [↑](#footnote-ref-14095)
33. Cf. Tremper Longman, *Ecclesiastes* [NICOT], 275. [↑](#footnote-ref-19901)
34. Tom Jacobs, “Conservatives and Liberals Have Differing Mental Images of God,” psmag.com., June 13, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-14056)
35. Bollhagen, *Ecclesiastes* [ConcC]. [↑](#footnote-ref-15660)