

George Philip Bible Readings

Ecclesiastes

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Poem

THE PULLEY

When God at first made man,
Having a glasse of blessings standing by,
Let us (said he) poure on him all we can.
Let the world's riches, which dispersed lie,
Contract into a span.

So strength first made a way,
Then beautie flow'd, then wisdome, honour, pleasure.
When almost all was out, God made a stay,
Perceiving that alone of all his treasure
Rest in the bottome lay.

For if I should (said he)
Bestow this jewell also on my creature,
He would adore my gifts instead of me,
And rest in Nature, not the God of Nature.
So both should losers be.

Yet let him keep the rest,
But keep them with repining, restlesnesse.
Let him be rich and wearie, that at least,
f goodnesse leade him not, yet wearinesse
May tesse him to my breast.

George Herbert.
The Temple, 1633

INTRODUCTION

Speculations about this book, its origins, compilation, authorship, and about the interpretations of its message are legion. Those who desire the technical scholastic introduction must read it for themselves.

From whatever standpoint the book is approached its seemingly pessimistic tone must be interpreted in spiritual categories. Scripture testifies that, "Here we have no continuing city," (Heb. 13: 14) and urges man to consider the shortness and uncertainty of life (Psa. 90: 6) and in so numbering his days to give himself to the business of acquiring true wisdom (Psa. 90: 12).

The centrality of the Cross in Christian theology signifies that man in himself and by himself and in his own independent, unaided experience has no real ground for optimism.

"Salvation from a higher source
flows to the human race."

The message of Ecclesiastes echoes, even if it does not specifically state, this great need of man. It is indeed a hard life for man if he has nothing but himself and a few short years of existence. To begin in mystery, to live in difficulty, and to die in uncertainty and darkness is hopelessness indeed.

To read Ecclesiastes is to be linked in thought with Paul's great exposition of salvation in Romans where he speaks of hope for the whole order of creation that is groaning in its bondage (Rom. 8: 20ff.). Life from the dead is the need and the answer. Some go as far as to say that Ecclesiastes is an exposition or illustration of the curse of the fall of man in Genesis 3: 17-19, with its ensuing confusion, complication and frustration.

Certainly, to leave out God from the story of human experience is to come very quickly to the assessment of life that confesses that all is vanity. But Ecclesiastes goes further than the poet, who said,

"Death is the end of life,
Ah, why should life all labour be?"
(Tennyson)

There is an awareness of God, His activity and His judgment, running right through the whole book. No one section of Scripture says everything, and Ecclesiastes makes men ask the right questions. Man does not live by bread alone and if he tries, then, vanity of vanities, all is vanity.

CHAPTER ONE

The Book of Ecclesiastes is contemporary. It represents the secular outlook on life, which is the atmosphere of our own post-Christian or sub-Christian generation. It deals with a secular outlook mingled with the remnants of religious belief and this also is applicable to our generation, which is not yet totally irreligious. There is something of a residue of Christian belief.

The speaker in the Book of Ecclesiastes is the preacher, or the debator, who is arguing about life. Perhaps it is best to regard him as the observer, who goes to secular society saying, "I have been watching the way you live, listening to the things that you say, and I want to take you to task about your chosen philosophy of life." If you go through life with a delightful hazy, spiritual glow in front of your eyes, you will never be a preacher. This is the only way to be a true preacher. Look fair and square at life as it really is, and speak to that situation in the name of God and by the truth of God.

The preacher is the observer and he has set himself (1: 13, 14, 17) to seek and to consider this business of life.

"I applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to the sons of men to be busy with."

He has seen everything that is done under the sun (v. 14). He has made it his business to find out about life. He applied his mind to more wisdom, more madness and folly, and there was no realm of human experience that did not come under his scrutiny (v. 17). This man of faith is coming to grips with the world of men as it really is and dealing in this book with human experience in what he calls 'life under the sun.' He seems to come to some morbid conclusions,

"Vanity of vanities, all is vanity."

But at times there is a need to challenge men and women to look at their life to see how empty and pointless it is. Ecclesiastes tackles men on their own level, and by exposing the futility of their way of life, he points to true life. This is why the Book of Ecclesiastes is part of the Scriptures which make us wise unto salvation.

This is a new Testament procedure. You have it, for example, in the Epistle of James, 4: 13-15

"Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and get gain'; whereas you do not know about tomorrow. What is your life?"

We do not know about tomorrow; we may never see tomorrow; there may not be a tomorrow. What is your life?

"You are a mist that appears for a little time and vanishes."

When you come to think of it, life that is not rooted and grounded in the God of grace and salvation is a non-substantial thing. It is vapour-like. It is vanity. That is what the preacher says. The Book of Ecclesiastes exposes the pretension of this world, and its failure to give to men and women the life for which their hearts cry out. There is a word from the lips of our Lord Jesus Christ Himself from the story of the woman at the well of Samaria that covers the whole Book of Ecclesiastes in its consideration of life under the sun:

"Every one who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give will never thirst." (John 4: 13, 14)

That verse should be placarded above the door of every place of worldly, secular entertainment, be it sensual or aesthetic. Whoever drinks of this water shall thirst again! It cannot satisfy.

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This book is a critique of all that we mean by secularism, that philosophy which underlies the permissiveness of our own generation. It has its focus and fixation on earthly things. We have it expressed in the New Testament:

"Many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, live as enemies of the cross of Christ. (Even though they call themselves religious.) Their end is destruction, their God is the belly (the God of their life is their own appetites)." (Phil. 3: 18, 19)

That is secularism. Never be taken in by all the idealistic claims of secular society. It is idolatry of the basest kind. Their God is their belly, their appetites; they glory in their shame, because they have nothing else to glory in, with their minds set upon early things.

Keep clearly in mind that secularism in society need not be without 'religion'. But religion is thought of as having a job to do, namely to ease or improve human life under the sun. This is why society patronises the Church, so long as the Church concentrates her activity on all that is meant by 'christian aid', helping people 'under the sun'. Society says that this is religion's job, and, while the Church sticks to that, it will not interfere. It will give the Church a pat on the back and may even give a donation. But society rebels and refuses the Church when she introduces gospel truth, that is, when she declares the objective truths of God: the doctrines of sin, salvation, regeneration and the reality of the world to come. We need to declare clearly that religion is not a 'tool'. God may not be made the servant of men.

The preacher comes to men and women and tells them to look at their lives. What is there in life that has any real abiding quality? People say that life seems to be slipping away. Indeed it is, at high speed, and if the whole of your life is concerned with earthly things, when these slip away you are left with absolutely nothing, and that is the emptiness of Hell. What is your life? Look at it as I have done, says the preacher. It is empty; it is not what you want; it is not what you need. Read the first eleven verses of Ecclesiastes 1 and see if there is life and liberty. The words speak about circles. Some people, when feeling frustrated, say, "What is wrong with me? I seem to be going round and round in circles and getting nowhere." Exactly! That is worldly life. There is neither hope nor fulfilment in it. Throughout the whole of Ecclesiastes the preacher presses home this truth, almost ruthlessly. To worldly men and women he says, "Face up to it; you are trapped."

"Stop the world I want to get off." People become aware of the malicious merry-go-round of what they call the world, and deep in their hearts they don't like it. This is why people become fascinated by what they call 'transcendental meditation', and things that go under the name of 'psychedelic' or 'occult'. They are trying to get out of this world of experience and into something that might possibly be life. The preacher comes right to the point at the beginning of the chapter with the words, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity," frustration, nothingness, emptiness. If there is one thing that the human heart is frightened of it is emptiness. The dreadful word 'nihilism', this philosophy of nothingness, dogs our present generation. Little wonder people are frightened. They are desperately trying to think only of today, because when they think of tomorrow there is an uncertainty, a darkness, a 'something' that makes them feel that tomorrow is a great gaping void.

There is the story of the young lad who was nearing the end of his school years and a Christian relative asked him what he was going to do after he left school. The conversation went:

"I will go to University."
"And what then?"
"Oh, I will graduate."
"And then?"
"I'll go into business."
"And then?"
"Eventually, I suppose I will retire."

"And then?"

Finish the conversation! You say you will die. And what then?

"It is appointed for men to die once,
and after that comes judgment.
(Heb. 9: 27)

The Book of Ecclesiastes seeks to press home to society its lostness. What we have to do, in Christ's name, is to speak to this generation in its own language and show it the futility of all its attempts to find life, make it face the facts, and, having convicted it of emptiness, we must show men and women not religion, but Jesus Christ who said,

"I came that they may have life, and
have it abundantly." (John 10: 10)

This is important because by and large the people of the world can be divided into three groups, only two of which are realistic. First of all, there are those who have a radical, personal faith; not a vague faith in a God of some kind somewhere, but a sure personal faith in the God who speaks, who saves and who calls men to purpose, destiny and life eternal in Jesus Christ, His Son, the only Saviour.

The second group who are also realistic, but sadly so, are those who have no faith at all and make no pretence about it. Their attitude is that they will eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow they die. They are materialistic, naturalistic, earthy, sensual, and essentially amoral. Moral questions just do not impinge upon them. They may have a wide range of interests, but all they have is in this world, and when this world has gone they have nothing. They say that is what they believe and they live accordingly.

The third group, who are perhaps the saddest of all, are those who are neither believers nor unbelievers. They are not the kind of people who are committed to Christ and who can glory in salvation. On the other hand they cannot find it in themselves to be blandly careless, materialistic and godless. They will not come to Christ, and yet they cannot or will not let go of the remnants of religion. They are people whose religion has spoiled their lives. They do not like their religion and would rather do other things on a Sunday. But they feel they ought to go, especially on a Communion Sunday because, after all, they are religious! Isn't that sad?

Rank unbelievers get more out of life than those whose religion is a burden and an embarrassment. But many people are neither believers nor unbelievers; no glorious rejoicing in salvation; no blatant materialism; but living with the remnants of religion, trying to be religious and not religious at the same time; trying for the best of both worlds and succeeding only in spoiling themselves for both worlds. 'Religion' to many people is like an appendix. It seems a residual thing. They are not quite sure why it should be there, nor what it is supposed to do. Every now and again it gets infected and causes them a lot of pain, misery and sickness, and deep down in their hearts they wish that the wretched thing wasn't there. I think that many honest folk wish they were not religious. They come to a certain kind of building, sing hymns to tunes they don't know with words they don't understand, although they may stir childhood memories. The man in the pulpit says, "Let us pray," shuts his eyes, speaks into the air and they don't know what they are supposed to do. He reads the Bible without explanation and it does not make sense. They look at their watches and hope it won't be long before it is all over. That is religion, and I for one could not live with that.

But I can be a Christian. That is different altogether, because Jesus Christ is the one who takes me, as He has done many a time, by the scruff of the neck and says, "No more of this nonsense! Let's get down to real things, the kind of person you are, the kind of life you are living, the kind of person you are becoming, the kind of destiny that you are heading for and the kind of eternity that will be yours." Jesus Christ is real and does things with sinners. It is glorious being a preacher of this Gospel for it is a

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word of good news to people in a world of lonely lostness.

Do you know Wordsworth's lines from Tintern Abbey, where he speaks about:

"Hearing often-times
The still sad music of humanity."?

A poem by Matthew Arnold speaks of man as:

"A foil'd circuitous wanderer."

What a picture of worldly folk. Think of the words of Ecclesiastes:

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

I remember the late Dr. Johnson Jeffrey, a godly man, giving a speech at Glasgow Presbytery when he was being congratulated on fifty years in the ministry. He described mankind saying,

"Man has not only lost his way, he has
forgotten his address."

A contemporary Russian writer spoke about a country in which there were no sign-posts, because there was nowhere to go. What a picture of the world; vanity of vanities. What profit is there?

The preacher says in Ecclesiastes 1: 1-11 that you are nothing and you will soon be forgotten. If there is no goal, no objective, everything becomes monotony, repetition, futility. This is what has caused the inertia of society, that lassitude, that lack of effort, that 'couldn't-care-lessness' of society and industry. Emerging out of that atmosphere is the frantic lust for a 'boost' of some kind. It does not matter what it is if only it will break the monotony. "Dust thou art and to dust thou shalt return." "The tides come in, the tides go out." You go to this, or that or the other activity and for an hour or two you are enveloped in it and it is marvellous. Every fibre of your being thrills (sometimes!) in response to the chosen stimuli, and then it is all over and the tide begins to go out and you are back to the weary round. Paul speaks in Romans 8: 19, 20 of the whole creation being subject to futility. Think of Shakespeare's words:

"All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely
players:
They have their exits and their entrances;"

They come in out of obscurity, move across the stage and then go out. Look at Ecclesiastes' description (1-8)—fading, forgotten, a weary search in which the eye is not satisfied with seeing nor the ear with hearing. Whatever the level of activity in verse 11, the word speaks of the disillusionment of forgetfulness. One commentator says that in this secular worldly existence you are like the section of a road in the middle of a desert. Where that road came from is lost in nothingness and where it is going is lost in nothingness. Vanity of vanities, all is vanity!

But that is not the end. Jesus says,

"I am the way, and the truth, and
the life." (John 14: 6)

He, the Son of God our Saviour, is the way through the uncertainty and confusion, the way to destiny, the way to eternity, the way to God. He, in the fulness of His word and work, is the truth in the midst of all the lies, the uncertainties and the contradictions. Jesus Christ, risen, and victorious is life

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standing over against death.

If there is anyone in church this morning who says, "Preacher, that is what I need," then take it, by taking Christ. In a moment we shall say the words, "This is my body broken for you, take .. ." God comes near. God offers. The bread and wine, the visible confirmation of the sermon that has just been preached, all brought to you. The bread broken and the wine poured out tell you that Jesus Christ the Son of God has come. He has lived and He has died and He has risen from the dead to bring you life. Will you take Him? Don't take the bread and wine if you have not taken Christ. But by faith, in these simple actions, take Christ. Let Him become your very life, and as you go out into the world again remember Jesus' words as you look round the worldly world with its vanity.

"He who drinks of this water will thirst
again, but whoever drinks of the water
that I shall give will never thirst."

I pray God, in this needy day and generation, that you will come with me now to Christ.

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CHAPTER TWO

We have identified the purpose of Ecclesiastes as being a critique of secularism in all its aspects even when it is religious. It can never be Christian, because these two attitudes to life are mutually exclusive. Secularism insists that our concern is with this world only; but the message of the Christian gospel affirms that all our thinking about and dealing with this world must be set in the context of the world that is to come. Ecclesiastes, from the ground of faith in the God of Salvation who has revealed Himself, seeks to compel men and women to face up to the facts of life as they really are. The preacher talks in the language of man's experience, and he challenges people to try to find life or to explain life without reference to God.

There is a school of philosophy which says the explanation of life is simply that there is no explanation to life. This is the negativeness, pointlessness, and the frustration of all we mean by secular humanism. The preacher challenges men regarding this kind of life fixed on earthly things, and when they explain it all enthusiastically he says, "But..."

In the second chapter the preacher reminds men that satisfaction is itself a temporary thing and that the shadow of death casts a gloom over the whole of life. People of all ages tend to do their utmost to evade the fact of death. They expend great energy in the business of life, saying it is living that counts. Yes, but you die, and then where are you? This is the challenge: their way of life fails to give life; satisfaction itself is temporary; the shadow of death casts a gloom of futility over the whole of life and experience, because worldly man has no sure hope at all of the world that is to come.

We are compelled to realism by the Word of God. The Bible is a disturbing book. Shut it and you can deceive yourself about many things; leave it open and realism will dog your steps. This is one of the reasons why people do not like biblical and evangelical Christianity. A minister was horrified by the suggestion that I was going to impose on my congregation a series of studies on the Book of Ecclesiastes. That same man wrote to one of our members referring rather caustically to this 'back to the Bible attitude' declaring this 'naive and dogmatic attitude' to be the kind of thing that makes people despair with regard to the preaching of the Gospel. He went on to speak of how wrong it was that we should retreat into a conservative Biblicism that has little or no relevance to the spiritual dilemma of today. But the last thing the Bible allows me to do is to retreat into a cosy imaginary world where my thoughts drift around aimlessly, never disturbing me. The Bible is the most shockingly realistic book you can get. It is the very thing to bring people down from vague meanderings of thought, the speculative imaginary theology that conjures up a God who is exceedingly adjustable, indeed a figment of the imagination.

Ecclesiastes challenges those who leave out God, except as a hazy, adjustable notion. They leave out all that evangelical Christians mean by 'soul' and refuse the message of 'salvation' saying it is not what people need. They claim that people want to hear about bad housing, economics and about politics (and there is plenty to say about these). This secular philosophy, having deprived a generation of 'soul' and 'heaven', has left it in a vacuum, and is in consequence responsible for encouraging and propagating what is called in general terms the drug movement. People feel instinctively that there must be more than materialism and they want to reach 'out yonder', they want 'beyond', they want something 'other'.

The secular humanist tells us to concentrate on 'life'. Ecclesiastes challenges such men because they are not in fact concentrating on life. They are selective because it is too painful to be otherwise. Yet, because of the very constitution of our humanity, we are compelled to think.

"I applied my mind to seek and to
search out by wisdom all that is done
under heaven; it is an unhappy business

that God has given to the sons of men
to be busy with." (1: 13)

When you try to think your way through life, detached from God, it is indeed an unhappy business. People don't like thinking, because it is too painful, and the result is that they try desperately, as an alternative, to manufacture 'mood'.

Some of the poets express this very thing wonderfully. Wordsworth, who in many ways was 'not far from the Kingdom', in his lines composed above Tintern Abbey speaks of,

". . . That blessed mood,
In which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world is lightened."

He retraced his steps, going back to places where he had been many years before, remembering what it had been like then and trying to recreate or recapture the mood that once meant so much to him.

"Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?"
(Ode on Intimations of Immortality)

These words are sad. They send us to the Bible. Put the poet's words on one side and over against them put the words of our Lord.

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"Come to me, all who labour and are
heavy laden, and I will give you rest."
(Matt. 11: 28)

Come to grips now with the specific content of the first two chapters. In chapter 1: 1-11 there are three sections. In verses 3-7 the preacher's theme is the circularity of life. We talk about going round in circles and not getting anywhere. This is what the preacher is compelling the worldly man to think about, the apparent purposelessness of life. In verses 8-10 he begins to protest about the frustration, the fatalism and the boredom of life, and when he comes to verse 11 he speaks about the nothingness of life. It will soon be past and you will be dead and buried. Even if men place a memorial stone over your grave, in no time at all you and all you ever did will be forgotten. Just as you have forgotten about the people before you, so the ones coming after will forget about you. Futility; pointlessness; nothing, not even remembered! People try to recall the great times they had in the past. You can't live in the past.

The worldly life of the unbeliever is a burdensome vanity. You drag yourself all over the world looking for life, that evasive thing that eludes you at every corner, leaving you with a feeling that in the end you are going to be cheated out of it altogether. It is not so for the Christian believer because, in Christ Jesus, there is life which is eternal, life the world can neither give nor take away. You can look all the experiences of the world square in the face, even though they may make you tremble, because in the depth of your heart, by your faith in God through Jesus Christ and by the indwelling Holy Spirit, you can say that the best is yet to be. Ask worldly people if their philosophy of life allows them to make such a claim. In Wordsworth's Ode on the Intimations of Immortality, in the passage beginning, "Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting" the poet says,

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"Shades of the prison-house begin to close
upon the growing boy,"

and at the end of the passage he speaks of how all the promise and hope will,

"Fade into the light of common day."

That is the poet's comment on life. There is not much hope in it.

In Christ we enter into life. But when secular man is compelled to be realistic what are the avenues of his thought and experience? The answer is in the passage 1: 12 - 2: 23. Chapter 1: 12-18 we could entitle 'Philosophy'. Man tries to think his way into life. Hard thinking is a good thing, in spite of what is said in Ecclesiastes 12: 12. The trouble with most of us in relation to our Christianity is that we do not think it through. But while thinking is good, you cannot think your way into life nor can you think order into a disordered world of experience. As the preacher says in chapter 1: 15, and this seems to be the real meaning of the verse, there are pieces that just will not fit.

"What is crooked cannot be made
straight, and what is lacking cannot
be numbered."

No matter how hard you think, as one commentator puts it, "You are left with a hole at the centre." The New Testament says,

"The world by wisdom knew not God."
(1 Cor. 1: 21 A.V.)

Listen in to some of these apparently profound religious-cum-philosophical discussions on television. They are impressive. But have you ever tried to discern exactly what the main speaker is saying? Often he is not saying anything, because in actual fact he has nothing to say. Having evacuated soul and eternity from his philosophy of life he is left with a big hole in the middle. People will always gather round to look at a hole, but it is scarcely an ecstatic or a creative experience.

Depart from philosophy, suggests Ecclesiastes, and concentrate on pleasure (2: 1-3). Pleasure is the tyrant god of many. Enjoying yourself can be very hard work. Worldly friends talk of how they have enjoyed themselves and even the re-telling of it leaves me exhausted. There is such a lot of rubbish talked about pleasure. These songs are very out-of-date but there was a time when they sang,

"Laugh and the world laughs with you,
Cry and you cry alone."

or

"When you're smiling, the whole world
smiles with you."

If you are smiling, the world will be quite friendly with you, but if you have a burden in your heart that is making you grieve, many will not want you because you would be a wet blanket and you would spoil their pleasure.

These verses speak about the whole range of hedonistic activities, the search for pleasure. The preacher says the lot of it together does not amount to satisfaction of life.

"Whatever my eyes desired I did not
keep from them; I kept my heart from
no pleasure ..." (2: 10)

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This is permissiveness deluxe. If the man was Solomon, he had such personality, character, position and wealth that he could do it. We cannot live like this. There are pleasures in this world that are far beyond our purse and always will be. But Solomon tried the lot. It was all emptiness. He says so in verse 11,

"Then I considered all . . . and behold,
all was vanity and a striving after
wind, and there was nothing . . ."

This points to something we must pray about. One of the tragic facts that emerges from counselling youngsters, 17, 18, 19 years of age and younger, is that so many have done everything; everything straight and everything perverse. People do everything in their search for life but are jaded and disillusioned. It is true as Ecclesiastes says that the whole range of hedonistic, pleasure-loving, indulgent activities is not equal to satisfaction of life because satisfaction, essentially speaking, has to do with the 'afterwards' of pleasure, rather than the immediate moment. Satisfaction and gratification are very different. Whatever the pleasure be, cultured and refined or gross and debased, it is not the immediate moment of the experience that constitutes satisfaction but the afterwards. One of the proofs of this is the lewdness that is littered all over our society, on railway station bookstalls and in too many so called respectable bookshops. The very existence of such books is a testimony to the fact that a generation obsessed and preoccupied with the sins and the lusts and the pleasures of the flesh has not found satisfaction. If the activity satisfied, the literature and its stimulation would not be needed!

The preacher says (2: 1-3) that there is no satisfaction in pleasure. Even if you take 'pleasure' and make it apply to the whole range of all that we mean by culture, the fact remains that we need more and more stimulus to get the same amount of result, and that is how people become addicts. Once a week is enough to begin with, then it has to be twice a week, then three and four times a week. There is no end to the treadmill of pleasure. Now, it is only a step from there to the biblical doctrine of Hell, which is described by our Lord Jesus Christ in terms of the worm that does not die; it just eats and eats and devours.

'Philosophy', thinking your way into life, and 'pleasure', living it up, trying to find life, are both exposed in their failure. Ecclesiastes turns next to the motive of profit, and in pursuing this man forgets for a little the hunger of his heart (2: 4-8). In these verses you see secular man trying to build his Eden, his garden of life, love and satisfaction, without God. It has been so from the beginning of man's history. But all he is doing, however well organised, however many ramifications his activity has, is trying to build a garden that will serve as an escape or a hiding place from reality. With wealth gained and position and opportunity to use it, the man turns to permissiveness (2: 9-12). The meaning of verse 12:

"What can the man do who comes after
the king? Only what the king has
already done,"

is simply that if I, with all my opportunities cannot find life, no-one else can.

The next section (2: 13-23) is a sad passage. What the heart of man is in fact craving for is permanence. Think of the words: philosophy, pleasure, profit, permissiveness permanence. The whole of secular man's life seems so pointless. The wise man, the fool, the sensual man, the ascetic man, all come to the same in the end.

"Dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou
return." (Gen. 3: 19 A.V.)

With a little gleam of realism the secular unbelieving man thinks to himself that he is a fool and says, "Here I am slaving out the whole of my life amassing wealth, and when I die it will be left possibly to

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someone who is of no worth, who will take all the fruit of what I have done and in a matter of a year or two waste it all."

Running through this whole chapter is the cry of man's heart, "What's the use?" He has searched, striven, struggled, indulged himself, denied himself, done everything that he can think of to do, and yet he knows that he has missed what he searched for, which was life. When men speak out of their hearts like that (and sometimes we have to wait until they reach that point) we open our Bibles, and we introduce them to the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, our Saviour. We tell them how on one occasion He stood up in the midst of a crowd and said,

"If any man thirst, let him come to me
and drink." (John 7: 37)

"The water that I shall give him will
become in him a spring of water
welling up to eternal life." (John 4: 14)

"Now," says Jesus, "put Me to the test; take Me at My word; prove Me, and enter into life."

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CHAPTER THREE

Instead of trying to deal with the detail of every verse, grasp the sweep of the message of these chapters which have as their objective persuading man that apart from Christ we have no life at all.

The philosophy and practice that we call secularism is fixed on this world, the things of earthly experience, and the lives of secular men and women are governed and determined by these things because they have nothing else to live by. They do not believe in a world to come; they do not accept a transcendent God; they deny the spiritual and absolute categories of the Christian message. Their world is this world, and by this world they live.

The Christian is anchored in, and lives by the reality of the world to come, and in the power of the world to come. All that we mean by the 'world to come' is not postponed to some future date. The power of the world to come is ours here and now in and by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is this that makes the Christian life totally different from the life of secular man. But at the same time the Christian does not in any sense abandon the world, as if the world belonged to the Devil. It does not! It is God's world, created to do God's will, and the Christian must not for one moment think of handing it over to the Devil. This is the temptation of despair.

It is easy for the worldly man to throw his jibes at the evangelical Christian and say, "You people are so heavenly minded that you are no earthly use." It can be true. There are some people who are so impossibly 'spiritual' that they are very difficult to live with. But it is also true to say that there are people who are so earthly minded that they are no use for anything at all. They are blinkered and, as they cannot see one degree beyond the limit of their blinkers, they assume in dreadful arrogance that the totality of experience consists of what they can see. Their narrow vision is confined to the things that are of the earth, earthy. This is the philosophy of life being pumped out to us by the mass media and much of this flow of earthiness is 'muck'. It is certainly not life, and this is why its advocates have to conjure up such grotesque forms of earthiness simply to maintain interest. They have to be like this because, having cancelled out God, all they have left is slipping away into nothingness. No amount of 'shock' culture or 'happenings' can conceal the fact.

Many people are dogged by this feeling that their life is just slipping away from them and they cannot hold on to it. I used to be amused at the Hogmanay Watch-Night Service where I was an assistant minister because the congregation expected the quotation, just before midnight:

"The year is going, let it go,"

as if we could do anything else! People fool themselves. They think that because they get hold of a few lines of rhyme they have found some profound philosophy. The year is going and so will next year and the year after that. As the years go on they seem to fly past quicker than ever. While life under the sun is slipping away into nothingness, the Christian rejoices in:

"Jesus Christ, the same yesterday and today and forever," (Heb. 13: 8)

and has a future. We have only begun to discover the glories of life as it is in Jesus Christ. The best is yet to be. Please God I will remember this when I am dying and be able to say to my loved ones, "Don't worry about me, I am going to start living, because the best is yet to be." The Christian has a future about which there is no doubt. That is why he is able to live in the present.

"Vanity of vanities, all is vanity,"

says the preacher. What a weary struggle life can be. Recall chapter 1: 13:

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"I applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to the sons of men to be busy with."

You can see that writ large on peoples' faces whether they are going home from work on a week-day or from pleasure on a Saturday or Sunday. It is an unhappy business, and it cannot be anything other than that because of man's lostness. One of the divinity students was bringing my theology up-to-date the other day and telling me that a famous theologian defined sin in terms of lostness'. You do not need to read the theologians to find that. It is in the Bible! Lostness is a word that has a sad echo in it. That is what is wrong with man. He is lost. He has lost his soul, his manhood, his identity, his dignity, his direction and his destiny.

In chapter 3: 11 Ecclesiastes takes up this theme and says that the feeling of lostness is inevitable because God

"has put eternity into man's mind."

There is much debate about the meaning of this verse. It is best to take it that God has put the constituent element of eternity, the consciousness of and desire for eternity, into man's mind and heart, so that there is in man an inbuilt frustration which has its expression in 'life under the sun' in terms of bondage (3: 1-8), frustration (3: 9-15), and resignation (3: 16-22).

This feeling of being trapped (bondage), disappointed (frustration) and the attitude of being resigned are marks of worldly society. They cannot be hidden. People are aware of the fact that life and pleasure are passing, and indeed passing them by. All they can do is to anticipate hopefully the next pleasurable occasion, yet knowing instinctively that it too will soon be past. This is worldly life and its nature is confirmed from Scripture. We sing about it in the words:

"My heart is pained, nor can it be
At rest till it finds rest in Thee."
(Tersteegen)

But we can illustrate this also from the world of secular society. One evening in a friend's house a long-playing record was put on for background music. I was so struck by the words of a song that I wrote them down there and then. They were being sung by the fellow who finishes his television programme sitting in a rocking-chair singing. I think he must be the heart-throb of the middle-aged. The song was entitled, 'The Mad, Mad World', and the words indicate what worldly society is saying about its own life. The song was near the top of the charts at that time.

"Everybody's running in a mad, mad world
But nobody's going nowhere,
Everybody wants to have more than the other,
Got to have more than his share.
Ever since the Devil tempted woman with an apple,
We've all had a burden to bear,
Now the world keeps turning and things are getting faster,
But nobody's going nowhere.

They say the grass is greener on the other side,
But when they cross over they find
That everybody's searching like you and me,
Trying to find peace of mind.

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See that little boy fishing by the river,
If only I could be like him,
I'd close my eyes and let the mad world go by,
If only I could be like him."

That is what the world is saying about its own life, "Nobody's going nowhere," and at the end of the song come the words, "If only . . ." Here is where the Christian Gospel comes in. You don't need to say despairingly, "If only." There is life that is life indeed, and it is found in Jesus Christ.

Consider the chapter systematically. Verses 1-8 speak about bondage. There is debate about the exact meaning of the verses and they can be understood in terms of either fatalism or faith. Take them first of all as being words of tremendous encouragement in respect of God's timing. He is a perfect time-keeper. In Shakespeare's words:

"There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune."

This puts the emphasis on our part and our responsibility. The thought in this section however is of a God in control. Think of this with regard to the birth of the Saviour in Bethlehem. Throughout the Old Testament the prophets waited and longed until the fulness of the time had come. (Gal. 4: 4; 1 Pet. 1: 10-12) We must do the same. We have to seek God's time, learning to recognise it and to submit to it in faith. Some say that faith must keep on knocking at the door that is shut. I doubt if that is true. It can be the knocking of unbelief, and we must learn when we have knocked and knocked unavailingly to ask, "What does this mean?" It is either not God's door or not God's time. Then He may unexpectedly open another door. Why should this be so? There is a time for everything. God's time!

Over against this, taken in terms of fatalism, these first eight verses can be demoralising as recognition is given to the cancellation or contradiction of all experience: a time to be born, then this dark cloud, a time to die; a time to plant and a time to pluck up. Is all experience a contradiction? This is the kind of thing that makes many say of joy and sorrow alike, "It can't last." That is true. In worldly terms it cannot last. Does there not seem to be here the suggestion of real bondage? There seems to be no freedom. Man's external activities, his planting and building (2), and his inward emotions (8), all seem to be products of necessity. Life becomes a meaningless story, a rut; and the only difference between a rut and a grave, is the depth. Secular man talks about being free, and advocates permissiveness as the way to freedom. Man cannot be free, because of what he is: because of heredity, circumstances, personality and sin. Man is trapped. There is only one Man who is free and who can set you free and that is Jesus Christ. The alternative to being free in Jesus Christ is to be in bondage, everlasting bondage, to yourself, to the world, to the flesh and to the Devil. (Eph. 2: 1-3)

In verses 9-15 the theme is futility. One philosopher said,

"The best thing is not to have been born,
and the next best thing is to die."

That is total depression. There is a God-shaped blank (11) in the human heart, an inbuilt factor of frustration and therefore dis-satisfaction. It means that a man's heart can never be satisfied by mere animal satisfaction. It is a fact of experience that the hungriest of men and women are those who are most sated by all that the world can offer. The greater the natural capacity of the man or woman, the more they are able to reach out into all the possibilities of life under the sun, and the more they are doomed to live with that yearning and craving that cannot be satisfied. Would God we could warn young folk of the craving of lust. By its very definition and nature, lust cannot satisfy.

It can only re-create and multiply itself, leaving that yearning, gnawing hunger of heart that is a foretaste of Hell.

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As he lives his life under the sun, having broken free, as he would say, from all the shackles of Christian dogma, worldly man finds, as the prodigal found, that all he hungers for is to be found only when he returns to the Father's house. The story of the prodigal is the story of all men. He left the Father to go and find life, and he found it only when the misery of experience, the bondage, frustration and the resignation of it, brought him in his rags back to his true home. If you listen to popular songs or to the social conversation of the world you will become aware of the call of eternity, deep calling unto deep. Think of the songs about all the lonely people, such as the one about a young girl looking into a shop window, seeing her reflection, and saying,

"Is that lonely woman really me?"

It is a cry of anguish, a cry of loneliness. In a vast store or in the midst of a great crowd you can tell when a child is lost. You can see it in the child's face. It wants to be found. That is what the world is crying for in its bitter experience of life under the sun, trapped, disappointed and resigned.

In verse 15 we are told,

"God requireth that which is past."
(A.V.)

"It is appointed unto men once to die,
and after this the judgment."
(Heb. 9: 27 A.V.)

Little wonder that there is resignation in verses 16-21 when man begins to speak of his end being the same as that of the beast, with the glory of man and all his aspirations destined for the dust. What of the life to come?

"Who knows whether the spirit of man
goes upward and the spirit of the beast
goes down to the earth." (v. 21)

Is that all there is to it? Are we left with hopeless uncertainty? Is there no sure word? What of the men in the Bible who said,

"For to me to live is Christ, and to die
is gain." (Phil. 1: 21)

"I am hard pressed between the two.
My desire is to depart and be with
Christ, and that is far better."
(Phil. 1: 23)

"I know whom I have believed, and am
persuaded that he is able to keep that
which I have committed unto him
against that day." (2 Tim. 1: 12 A.V.)

"I know that my redeemer liveth ...
and though . . . worms destroy this
body, yet in my flesh shall I see God."
(Job 19: 25, 26 A.V.)

The remedy for the futility of life under the sun is not rebellion, but fellowship with the God who made you for Himself. The way to God is Christ, and the way is open. In Christ you find not bondage but freedom; not death but life; not the end but the beginning. Jesus said,

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"If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed." (John 8: 36)

Let your heart respond to the Word of God. Make your way this day to the Giver of life, to the Saviour who is the only answer to that inbuilt call for Eternity. His name is Jesus Christ, and our hearts are pained, nor can they ever be at rest, until we find rest in Him.

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CHAPTER FOUR

This chapter is being studied on the day of National Remembrance. Some will find it strange that we continue to observe Remembrance Sunday, feeling that it is something of an anachronism in this present day when wars are reckoned to be so futile. Yet on such an occasion we have opportunity to consider the lessons of history. One of the failings of our generation is simply that we forget that we are part of something which has been produced out of the travail of the past.

Beginning at chapter 3: 16 and going right through chapter 4, Ecclesiastes considers the sociological conditions of the generation and comes to the conclusion that the dead are better off than the living. Many would tend to agree. Scan the chapter and see the things that depressed this observer of human life. He sees the oppressed, for whatever reason they are being oppressed, with no-one to comfort them. He goes on to consider industrial and commercial competence, observing that hard work and skill have a habit of leading, as one of their main products, to envy. The man who has £40 a week wants £50 a week, but having got it, if he realises that someone down the street has £60 a week, then he wants £65. There is nothing new under the sun. The observer also sees wealth (take the word in its fullest sense) leading to loneliness, and old age often marked by folly and weakness in spite of position and opportunity. Leaving God out, the sum total of life is not worth-while, and when the pointlessness and contradiction of life begin to hang like a cloud over our consciousness, then experience becomes a nightmare.

The thing that gives pain to our experience and makes it impossible for us to be resigned and submissive is our natural aspiration. There is a dynamic hopefulness in human nature. Watch people battered and bruised, cribbed, cabined and confined and you become aware that something in them is wanting to break free. By his very constitution, made in the image of God, in spite of all that is significant by the fall of man and the vitiation of the whole of his personality, there remains this amazing aspiration. It is this that makes frustration so agonising. But there is something tragic about hopefulness that is not centred in, stemming from, and finding its objective ground in God.

This spirit appears in many different aspects of life, not least in the songs that express the culture of the younger generation. There is always a gleam that man thinks he sees on the horizon and this is why, desperately frustrated, he keeps on struggling and striving to reach it. He feels a deep yearning, an ache of the heart, a wistful longing for a better time to come. This is one of the noblest remnants of grace in fallen man. Instinctively he rebels against the dire and gloomy prognosis of Scripture:

"You are dust, and to dust you shall return." (Gen. 3: 19)

The heart rebels against death, but not necessarily against sin, of which death is the fruit. Do you ever think of and grieve over the blight of sin upon humanity? Watch man, even Christian man, developing, gradually realising something of his true potential, and then, in the end, dust he is and to dust he returns. But the Christian dies in the sure hope of resurrection to life that is eternal.

Man, with this innate yearning, finds himself foiled and frustrated by the facts of nature and experience. Out of this stems social vandalism and that vaster vandalism we normally call war. The hope that man tries to focus on is scarred and distorted. Scripture speaks of this. Jesus said,

"Out of the heart come evil thoughts,
murder, adultery, fornication, theft,
false witness, slander. (Matt. 15: 19)

Man is man's biggest problem. You find this in the testimony of the apostle Paul when he says,

"When I would do good, evil is present with me." (Rom. 7: 21 A.V.)

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It is comprehensively expressed in the words of the prophet Jeremiah:

"The heart is deceitful above all things,
and desperately corrupt." (Jer. 17: 9)

These facts of nature and experience, confirmed by Scripture, compel us to say that there is no point in talking about the brotherhood of man. Go back to the start of human history, to the story of Cain and Abel, and see what emerged from these brothers. It was murder, which arose out of jealousy and led to tragedy!

Is there not righteousness with God? Yes! Look at Ecclesiastes 3: 16, 17:

"Moreover I saw under the sun, that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness. I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for he has appointed a time for every matter, and for every work."

The following verses go on to disturb and deflate us, as they picture the righteousness of God operating in human experience in a way that undermines man's hopefulness.

"All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knows whether the spirit of a man goes upward and spirit of the beast goes down to the earth? So I saw, and there is nothing better than that a man should enjoy his work, for this is his lot." (3: 20-22)

At least at work man's mind can be occupied with immediate things and he may possibly forget what is to come, the things that are ultimate and eternal. But man, by his very constitution, cannot forget for long. This is his tragedy! It is all very well to quote:

"Though the mills of God grind slowly,
yet they grind exceeding small;
Though with patience he stands waiting,
with exactness grinds he all."
(Longfellow)

But that is not a comforting quotation, not least because of the inbred apprehension in the hearts of men and women about what God thinks of them. God's ways are not always evident nor always explained, not even at the end of the road. There are many explanations that emerge and are grasped only in the world that is to come. But then, if secular man denies the reality of the world to come, he is left in grim experience with neither interpretation nor explanation. This leaves man living for man and this, says the observer, is vanity and vexation.

We scarcely need to expound this chapter because it is very readable in a modern translation. In verses 1-3 we read about inhumanity.

"Again I saw all the oppressions that are practised under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no-one to comfort them. And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive; but better than both is he who has not yet been, and who has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun."

What a picture of hopelessness! Of course it is one thing to pontificate about oppression when we are not directly involved. But it may come; and when the power of the oppressor is part of our experience, what then? Oppression can call forth great character, individually and nationally, but how permanent is the result? Some of the bravest men in prisoner-of-war camps, for example, when they came back were

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no longer brave men of dignity, morality, and righteousness. Some of the most materialistic, most secular, most godless men walking the face of the earth are men whose breasts are covered with medal ribbons. God is not in all their thoughts.

In verse 4 oppression, seen in all its starkness, gives way to envy. We speak in a blasé way nowadays of healthy competition. What do we mean by that phrase? What is the motive? It is that of 'getting on', of 'keeping up', of 'keeping ahead'. This dreadful scourge of materialism and worldliness is seeping into the life of even the evangelical Christian Church. We love our creature comforts. We are indulgent and take very good care of ourselves. Envy is a destructive thing and when it is found in the work of the Gospel it is a disaster. That God's will and God's work should be done is the vital thing, and whether it is done by us or others is largely irrelevant. If it is done by us while others get the credit it may be painful, but it is safe, and it guarantees that the glory that accrues to the work is a glory that will go to God and none but God.

Worldly man, who makes himself an island, cannot think like this.

"The fool folds his hands, and eats his own flesh." (4: 5)

That possibly means that the lazy fool wears himself out perhaps even quicker than anybody else.

"Better is a handful of quietness than two handfuls of toil and striving after wind." (4: 6)

But there are seasons of quietness that have to be grasped and used. This, says the writer, is far more Christian than restless activity that is incapable of stopping. What does the New Testament say:

"Godliness with contentment is great gain." (1 Tim. 6: 6 A.V.)

The theme of verses 7-16 is success. What does success do? It insulates you, as it did to the rich man in the story of Lazarus (Luke 16). The man was so successful that his capacity for genuine feeling was de-sensitised so that he could walk past the poor beggar at his door and never notice him. He was the kind of man who might say, "If I had known the man's need I would certainly have helped." He should have known the man's need, but his success had insulated him! These verses tell us also that success isolates a man and makes him very lonely.

"Again, I saw vanity under the sun: a person who has no one, either son or brother, yet there is no end to all his toil, and his eyes are never satisfied with riches, so that he never asks, 'For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?' " (4: 7, 8)

He has to go on and on in the lonely road of success. But he does not master his success; his success has mastered him.

Verses 9-12 tell a simple story that goes right to the heart, for they speak of the need to love and to be loved. This is what the Bible calls fellowship, and this is what men and women need. This, amongst other things, is the tragedy of those who choose to be solitary exclusive believers, especially when fellowship is well within their reach. In Jesus Christ and among His people there is no need to be lonely. Our hearts are open (or they should be) that all may come and share fellowship. I often share my heart with you and grieve when you will not share your heart with me. Fellowship with all its

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possibility must be two-way traffic. In Jesus Christ there are the joys, riches and light of fellowship. Remember John's words:

"That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing this that our joy may be complete." (1 John 1: 3, 4)

This is the shelter in this world for the lonely people, whatever the cause of their loneliness. This is the place of hope for all the hopeless. This is the place of life for all the dying. This is the place of comfort for all the weeping. This is the place of food and satisfaction for the hungry and thirsty. In the end, of course, it is not a place at all, it is a person, whose name is Jesus.

The last verses speak about change and decay, and of the fickleness of fame and popularity. They speak of what we might call 'the generation gap', the conflict between the old and the young and the competition between youth and age. They seem to speak of that part of life that is temporary and passing, and urge us to think of the story Jesus told about the two men who built their houses, their lives, on shifting sands and solid rock. (Matt. 7: 24-5.)

There is a place which is not the shifting sands of the chances and changefulness of life. There is the rock that is full of strength and tenderness. That rock is Christ. On this Remembrance Sunday, with sore hearts and troubled minds and longing in our souls, believe me when I say that there is a Jesus in whom there is life and peace and hope that are eternal.

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CHAPTER FIVE

We approach this chapter in general rather than specific or detailed terms. The subject is religion and politics, a highly explosive set of twins. They are considered not so much in relation to each other, but in the sense that both these aspects of human life and experience are put under scrutiny. We could change the terminology and refer to worship and work. The chapter divides fairly clearly: verses 1-7 being concerned with religion or worship, and verses 8-20 dealing with politics, work or society.

We have already made clear that secular man can still be religious. Of course, the humanist 'god' will always be a very hazy and ill-defined notion. Secular man prefers this because, if God comes out of the fog and becomes clearly defined, coherent and understandable, then we are obliged in honesty to listen to Him, consider Him and take Him seriously. But the fact that men are vague about God does not mean that God is vague. People err in assuming that God is as vague as their thoughts about Him. This is defective reasoning. The Christian position is that of Scripture which declares that God is. We do not argue the point. God is; this is categorical, final, absolute. God is real, God is living, God is present: God is the God with whom we have to do, whether we call ourselves by the name Christian, or humanist. God does not cease to be because people refuse to believe He exists! God is the God with whom we have to deal, whether we like it or not, whether we believe it or not, whether we are prepared for it or not.

This God with whom we have to do deals with us in terms of reality. He does not go in for histrionics. Neither is He long-winded. He has the uncanny knack of getting right to the point with the least possible delay, and this brings us to the potent verses at the opening of this chapter,

"Guard your steps when you go to the house of God." (5: 1)

I prefer the translation, "Watch your step." It is as if an angel messenger stands at the church door to challenge you, saying, "Wait! Are you sure that you want to go in? Watch your step. God is real." When we go to the House of God the important thing is not ritual. Some men give the impression that it is vital that everything should be done just exactly at the right time in the service, from the right place: the pulpit, reading desk, or the lectern, looking East or West or North or South or any direction you care to choose! The important thing is not ritual, nor routine, going through the motions of accepted forms of service, standing, sitting, kneeling, singing, praying. The vital thing is reality.

God says, "Watch your step." Take time to think what you are doing before you ever enter into the House of God. Remember that going to church is dangerous, because when God sees you there He is entitled to assume that you want to meet with Him, and that is not always the case. Think of the story of Jacob at Bethel, and his dream of the ladder with the angels ascending and descending. When he awoke in the morning he said,

"Surely the Lord is in this place; and I did not know it." (Gen. 28: 16)

What Jacob really meant was that if he had known God was there he would not have stayed overnight. Imagine someone in church. Half-way through the service he becomes aware of the fact that God is there, taking his presence as indicating that he wants to meet with Him. The man may well say to himself that he had no such specific intention or desire, and decide to clear out at once. That would be reality.

In like manner, prayer is dangerous because God assumes that you mean it. Not long after I became a Christian I was, as new converts are apt to be, rather boastful in spiritual talk about prayer in company with some older Christians. One man turned to me and said, "Watch what you pray for. You will get it." I have never forgotten that day. There are times when I compose myself to speak to God in prayer in the privacy of my own heart and home and find that there is an element of hesitation in my heart. I

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have to say to myself, "Watch your step. Before you start saying things to God, remember He will assume you mean it!" We go down on our knees and say, "Oh God, make me a holy man." God will take us at our word. "Oh God, make me usable in the service of Jesus Christ." God will take us at our word!

Going to church is dangerous. Prayer is dangerous. Singing hymns is dangerous, because we are saying things to God and we are saying them publicly. It should be with tremendous exercise of heart that a minister chooses hymns for a service, especially the closing hymn. We must be careful what we invite people to sing. It is so easy to end up singing lies to God. Think of the hymn:

"Take my life, and let it be
Consecrated, Lord, to Thee."

That is not an easy hymn to sing honestly.

Ecclesiastes, who is putting all religion under scrutiny, says in verse 6,

"Let not your mouth lead you into sin,
and do not say before the messenger
that it was a mistake."

Don't let your prayers run away with you. Put a brake on. You may think this is a strange thing for a minister to say when he normally insists on the importance of praying. But it is reality we are after. Let not your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say to God's messenger (an angelic messenger) who comes and claims payment of the vow you entered into that it was all a mistake, that you did not mean it. Think of a couple who come into the House of God to be married. They take their vows to each other and sometimes within a year they say they did not really mean it, and want a divorce. Why did they do it in the first place if they did not mean it? Vows are valid things; once made, they are binding. And we are referring to our dealings with God as well as to marriage.

Guard your step when you go to the House of God. Stop and ask yourself some questions. Why are you going? In what frame of mind are you going? In what condition of spirit are you? Ask yourself another question, "Do I really want to draw near to God, or would I prefer God to remain somewhat remote?" We are apt to brush our suits and comb our hair in preparation for going to the House of God, but how many of us take time on a Sunday morning before we leave our houses to examine our hearts? Some commentaries, especially the older ones, have interesting comments to make here. They say, "Sunday begins on Saturday!" Indeed it does; and it should go on into the week. If our worship does not impinge on all that we are and do every day of the week, there is something far wrong.

The Devil could get at us here. Next Saturday night and Sunday morning we could find people saying, "I have been such a dreadful sinner this week. I haven't done right by God. I feel totally unworthy. If I go to church I will just be a hindrance. I will stay at home." That would be to fall into the snare of the Devil. What we are saying about watching our step as we go to the House of God is no ground for saying, "I'm not going because I'm not worthy." If we are not worthy, and feel we have been miserable, wretched sinners every day of the week, then all the more reason to go, not only to church, but to God. The dirtier we are, the more we need to go to that fountain that is open for sin and uncleanness and wash and be clean. (Zech. 13: 1)

4Apply the principle to prayer, but use the word to include all talking about God and to God. There are some people who are always talking about God as if they were the most intimate confidants of the Almighty. I think it was G. K. Chesterton who said that the thing that annoyed him about Christians was that they knew too much about God. Some secularised theologians, who are really unbelievers although they don't like the description, have a great tendency to talk about God. They talk in volumes, and the volumes are all expensive to buy. It is often assumed that because a book is expensive and impossibly dull and hard to read, it must be profound! But some men are so busy pronouncing about

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God, theorising about God, that they have no time to listen. It is fatal when men have no time to listen to what God is saying about Himself and themselves. We must learn, especially in the matter of prayer, to be still and know that God is God. There is a need not only in church but at home, before beginning to express our prayers, for sitting down, perhaps even with Bible closed, to let our thoughts centre on God.

Don't let your mind go blank. Don't try to manufacture 'feelings' about God. This is what the Devil wants. In a blank mind he can produce all sorts of psychic histrionics! Sit down in quietness; think about God, His dealings with you and your dealings with Him. Think of God's dealings with your congregation and your community. Take time to be still, and to know that your God is a real God, then open your Bible and begin to read, whatever section of Scripture you are reading, systematically. At times break away from your normal pattern of reading. You need to know your Bible to do this. Go to places where by the Spirit of God in your quiet meditation you are prompted to go. Read and consider what God says about Himself. Having been still in the presence of God, having allowed God to speak to you, then, in a way in which your mind, heart and spirit have been refined and confirmed, begin to speak your prayers.

I had a man, who was in great need, on the 'phone some time ago and, whether rightly or wrongly, I felt I could help him. But he talked and talked and talked, so that I could not get a word in. Some might find that difficult to believe, but it was true. In the end I bellowed into the 'phone the two words, "Shut up!" He did. I said nothing, until there was a tentative noise from the other end of the 'phone and I said, "Now, will you listen?" There is a sense in which God says to us to shut up and listen to what He has said about Himself, not to our own ideas about what He is like, nor our theorising and philosophising about Him and His Kingdom. Listen to what God has to say; then speak your prayers.

Keep in mind that prayer must not be allowed to become merely a lever to extort 'blessings' from God. Nor must prayer be allowed to become our chosen way of impressing God with our spirituality. In both public and private prayer we tend to give God a great deal of information He was fully aware of before we were. That does not in any way contradict the fact that we must talk out the burdens and perplexities of our hearts before God. This is what we were learning at Bible Study in the story of Jonah. That man was very angry with God and God said, "Come, Jonah, speak about it." Instead of Jonah having to bottle it all up within himself, God encouraged him, aided him, and gave him the opportunity to talk. It eased the pressure and Jonah felt much better after it.

We must not allow our prayer to degenerate to unworthy levels. Nor must we ever think of God as someone to be made use of to get us out of a fix. As the old hymn says, "Prayer is the soul's sincere desire." Prayer is the expression of the heart, made safely to God. Do you sometimes find yourself in company, when things are bothering you and you would like to tell someone, but it is not safe to do so and you know it? It is safe with God. Prayer is speaking to God. We make it difficult and artificial, putting barriers in our own way. Why can't we learn just to sit down and speak to God as if He was right there in the room with us? This is in fact the situation. God is with us, waiting to listen. This is not being familiar with God, nor being irreverent. It is reality. God is as near as that, and He is the One who, above all else, can safely be trusted. Our eyes and hearts are fixed on Him.

Guard your step as you go into the House of God. Guard your prayers. Guard your vows. Here is the bridge that takes us over to daily life. Don't play games, saying things to God that you do not really mean and have no intention of keeping to. Remember that a multitude of pious words can be nothing other than a hiding place from God. It is difficult to grasp what verse 7 means. The commentaries suggest things such as the relationship between dreams and words, and dreams crowded with detail producing a fantasy, make-believe world. We can do this without talking; in our thoughts we make a fictitious world in which our God is not taken very seriously.

In the last half of the chapter where we move over from religion to politics, from worship to work, the Word speaks about the civil magistrate and about the vanity of riches in the light of destiny. Beginning

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at verse 8, the writer says we are not to be amazed at evil. Right up the scale there is iniquity, even in the highest places, and that is a sobering thought. On the other hand, right up the scale there is accountability; ultimately accountability to God. Verse 9 seems to suggest that a king who knows his people is the best system of all. I know of only one king who knows His people like that, the King Jesus.

In verses 10-20 the reference is to the vanity of riches. There is a difference between success and greed, but it is a fine distinction. Is it not true that success can produce greed, just as greed can produce success? These verses are not in any sense a plea for asceticism, an extreme physical denial of yourself, a scourging of the flesh. We can become proud of our self-denial. The Bible says that God has given us all things richly to enjoy and that all things are to be received with thanksgiving. (1 Tim. 6: 17) But those who enjoy things most are those who are least cumbered with them. There is a detachment from things which alone makes life pleasurable. By riches we do not speak only of cash. There are riches of personality, of family and friends, of capacity, of culture. The word `riches' is a very wide one, and taking it in its widest sense, consider our Lord's words:

"With what difficulty shall they that
have riches enter into the Kingdom of
God." (Matt. 19: 23, 24)

These varied riches can so easily get in the way. They can anchor us to a world which, at the best, is temporary. And what shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world's riches at the cost of his soul?

From the last few verses (14-16) the observer of life draws a very profound conclusion. What we acquire, we leave behind us. We have no option. We can't take it with us when we die. What we acquire we leave behind, but what we become in the process of that acquiring we take with us into eternity. This is the burden of the chapter. Be real, and guard your step when you come to the House of God.

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CHAPTER SIX

The Bible compels us to look at life honestly. If worldly people had the courage to read this book they would be forced to admit the counterplay in their lives of desire awakened and desire denied. There are a great many experiences in life that make your heart ache with desire and longing, and at the same time, having awakened that desire there comes the realisation that it can never be satisfied. Ecclesiastes emphasises this ghastly frustration until all the raw nerve ends of experience are exposed.

The objective is to reveal to men and women that they are fed up, disappointed in life, jaded and feeling cheated by experience. Then with the humility of grace (not with superiority) the gospel messenger says to them that Jesus Christ came into this world that we might have life. He has the words of eternal life. (John 6: 66)

From a standpoint of genuine faith, but keeping his own faith completely in the background, Ecclesiastes asks men what they have in life that is really worth having. This is a searching question. The life you have chosen to live, what does it give you? What does it mean?

Faith should have courage to ask this question of any man. Secular man protests that he is not going to be inhibited by these religious cranks who take the Bible far too radically. Very well, leaving Bible religion aside, let us look at life. This chapter insists that worldly man resents his experience. Many people are aware of this. There is a deep resentment at and reaction to the way life has worked out. Man feels that life has given him a raw deal so that he has not been able to be what he thinks he could have been and what he knows he should have been. Man does not like to think that he is the same as the beasts, and he is right. He rebels against the suggestion that he is just an impersonal computerised number, or a cog in some vast grinding machine. He is right. He has an instinct of destiny, and yet he is dogged all the while with the feeling of destiny being denied. This is what brings frustration, and this is the theme of the chapter.

It is introduced by the closing verses of the previous chapter (5: 18-20), which seem to advocate the grasping of life's opportunities and the enjoying of them.

"Behold, what I have seen to be good and to be fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life which God has given him, for this is his lot. Every man also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and find enjoyment in his toil—this is the gift of God. For he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart."

Here Ecclesiastes agrees with worldly man and says we should grasp life's opportunities and enjoy them. This is good advice because life can be wasted, and it cannot be recalled. Many, even comparative youngsters, can look back and wish most earnestly that they had made better use of the opportunities given in earlier days. But in the final verse of chapter 5 there seems to be the suggestion that in grasping the opportunities of life and enjoying them to the full, there is a real danger of being so taken up with the business of living that we forget that life itself is flying away.

"For he will not much remember the days of his life (how short or how long they may be), because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart."

We are left essentially with the treadmill of trying to live. But this is living for the fleeting moment and it is insubstantial.

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This leads on naturally to the theme of frustration in chapter 6. Having read and re-read the chapter in terms of preaching a sermon on it, I found my mind carried forward to the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 6: 19-34) where Jesus says,

"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also . . . Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on."

It is amazing how much time we spend considering what we are going to eat at the next meal, as if we felt that if we missed one meal we would die of malnutrition. Be realistic and admit we eat far more than is good for us!

"Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life?"

Which of you by working yourself into a state of anxiety can guarantee that you live one day longer? It can't be done!

"And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these . . . Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' (as if that was the sum and substance of life). For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness (because that is life, and apart from that there is no life) and all these things shall be yours as well."

Think also of the fascinating picture in Pilgrim's Progress of the man with the muck-rake. He was looking for life. He was putting his back into it, raking the muck for all he was worth, totally oblivious of the fact that just behind him and above him there was a messenger from the angels of glory offering him the crown of life. He was so busy raking in the dirt that he never noticed. What a picture that is of worldliness! What is your life? What have you got that is really worthwhile? What does it give you? Are you like the man with the muck-rake?

Consider some of the familiar sayings of the world. Robert Louis Stevenson said,

"To travel hopefully is better than to arrive."

I know something of what he meant. But I cannot agree with him. To travel all the time in hope and never to arrive would be demoralising, and you cannot live like that. It is destructive. The Bible has a surer word when it says that:

"Hope deferred makes the heart sick,
but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life."
(Prov. 13: 12)

Some worldly people think they are being profound and even religious when they say, as they do in Glasgow, "What's for you won't go past you." That is not a healthy attitude. It breeds a basic feeling of futility. "What's the use of trying? What's the use of anything? What's for you won't go past you." The

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Word of God says that we are saved in hope. Christians, do not for one moment think all your salvation is here and now. It is not! Our salvation, glorious and real as it is, is essentially a salvation in hope. It is present but it is also future, and the best of it is yet to come. "Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast." (Heb. 6: 19 A.V.)

Here is the difference between worldly man and Christian man. Worldly man has a sense of destiny and denial of that destiny. But a man in Christ Jesus is persuaded of a destiny that cannot be denied.

"Saints by the power of God are kept,
Till the salvation come:
We walk by faith as strangers here:
But Christ shall call us home."
(Watts)

In Christ we have life which is to be interpreted not in terms of uselessness, futility or frustration but in terms of the whole plan of God's redemption. Consider Romans chapter 8, from verse 18 onwards. It speaks of the whole order of creation longing, waiting for the day of the sons of God. The next time you are lying awake at night and hear the wind sighing, say in your heart to the wind, "Tell creation the day of its redemption is coming," the day when Christ shall come in His glory. Of course, this interpretation of the travail of experience in terms of creative destiny falls to the ground if you do not have Christ. If Christ in His glorious Gospel is excluded, what is left? There is nothing but the frustration of worldly experience as you have it in Ecclesiastes.

In Chapter 6: 1, 2 the observer speaks of the power of enjoyment being withheld by God. If this applies to the good things, the legitimate things of life, how much more does it apply to evil things, all that we call sin. Let it be said briefly but plainly, because many are battling with the struggles of temptation and the pressures of a wicked world, that by the inspiration of the Devil the anticipation of sin promises you everything, but the reality denies and deprives you of everything. Take that as a warning if you want to trifle with things that are evil. There is allurements so potent that sometimes your whole being, not only your mind and your feelings but your very flesh, is in an agony of anticipation, desire and longing. It is a lie. God does not give the power to enjoy that which is evil. The anticipation promises but the reality denies.

The frustrations of human experience declare that we live in a world that has gone wrong. Is it not true that a shadow falls on even the best of life's experiences? Have you never found in a sweet moment of life that the clouds have shadowed the sun of your pleasure? Perhaps you have looked at a loved one and you have known that this exquisite joy will not and cannot last.

When you read down to verses 6-9 you find this frustration expressed by the observer when he says that death concludes all. This is 'the last enemy' as the New Testament calls it and, no matter how long it is delayed, in the end it claims all. This is perhaps why we have in verse 9 the rather perplexing statement:

"Better is the sight of the eyes than
the wandering of desire."

Is this what the world means when it says, "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush"? Is concentrating on what we can see and feel and know and keep hold of, better than letting this hunger for destiny make us think of the future and make us unhappy, not least at the spectre of death? Better the desire of the eyes, says the worldly man. Live for what you know, and leave the rest, because in any case all is fatalistically ordered.

"Whatever has come to be has already
been named, and it is known what
man is, and that he is not able to

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dispute with one stronger than he.
The more words, the more vanity." (6: 10, 11)

That is the picture. What is there for man but hopeless resignation, making the best of it for the few days of his vain life? (v. 12) The Bible says we spend our days as a tale that is told. (Psa. 90: 9 A.V.) The pages turn and turn until you come to a page with only two words on it, "THE END."

Worldly man says at the end of the chapter,
"Who can tell man what will be after
him under the sun?" (6: 12)

The Word of God can tell.
`It is appointed unto men once to die
and after this the judgment . . .

Therefore let a man give diligence to
make his calling and election sure . . .

For there is one name given and no
other name than the name of Jesus,
whereby we must be saved."

It is appointed unto men once to die and after this the judgment ... But

"God so loved the world that he gave
his only Son, that whoever believes in
him should not perish (should not go
into the dark destruction of a destiny
that is lost) but have eternal life." (John 3: 16)

Jesus said,

"I am the resurrection and the life; he
who believes in me, though he die, yet
shall he live, and whoever lives and
believes in me shall never die."
(John 11: 25, 26)

There are times when as a minister I have to stand by an open grave. How glad I am to say in Christ Jesus, and it can be said only in Christ Jesus,

"O death, where is thy sting? O grave,
where is thy victory?" (1 Cor. 15: 55 A.V.)

It is gone because death has lost its prey. All the futility and frustration of the world is challenged and answered by the Christ who came,

"Born to raise the sons of earth,
Born to give them second birth."
(Wesley)

It is new birth from above into life that is eternal with a destiny to be claimed and to be enjoyed.

I leave you with the words of the great Apostle,
"I know whom I have believed, and am
persuaded that he is able to keep that

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which I have committed unto him
against that day." (2 Tim. 1: 12 A.V.)

That is the future yet to come. What is your life? There is only one Life, and it is summed up in one name, and that name is Christ!

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CHAPTER SEVEN

This is possibly the most complicated chapter in Ecclesiastes. It is hard to understand for a variety of reasons. It is full of wise but paradoxical sayings. It says one thing, then it seems to say the very opposite, and you are left trying to balance the two. It seems to be full of exaggeration and yet is full of part-truths. You find many statements which seem to be wrong and not true to life and experience. Of course, just because we may have no knowledge or experience of certain things, that is no ground for denying their existence. That would be stupid pride, reducing the whole of God's world to the dimension of our knowledge, experience and understanding.

What is the Word of God for us here? Taking it in the context of the main purpose of Ecclesiastes, which is to bring into focus the thinking of worldly people with regard to their life, this chapter develops the previous one which dealt with the idea of a rigid fatalism dominating life. It is introduced by the last verse of chapter 6.

"Who knows what is good for man
while he lives the few days of his vain
life, which he passes like a shadow?
For who can tell man what will be
after him under the sun?" (6: 12)

This questioning is negative and demoralising, "Who knows . . . who knows . . . who knows?" If that verse introduces this chapter, then the last verse of chapter 7 sums it all up.

"Behold, this alone I found, (as a result
of all his thinking through the business
of life and experience) that God made
man upright, but they have sought out
many devices (inventions)."

The title of a book by the theologian and philosopher Reinhold Niebhur, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, gives a good key to the chapter. Lack of consideration of this theme has produced the confusion of thought and attitude which bedevils human experience.

If you start with man's experience you will get nowhere. You will ask why man acts as he does and you will be told that that is just how man acts. If you change your ground and consider the nature of man (and you can't do that adequately without the Scriptures), then you begin to realise that it is because man is essentially bad that he does what he does. This is basic to Christian thinking with regard to the world. To think this way will help us to understand the experience of man. To consider the destiny of man will bring into perspective the whole of life, and at the same time, it will provide the dynamic for the business of life. But without the guide of God's revelation as it is in Jesus Christ, which truth is enshrined and recorded in Holy Scripture, man will only confuse himself and in his thinking will end up in bitter and cynical resignation.

Look for example at verse 8,

"Better is the end of a thing than its beginning."

Is that true or is it an expression of cynicism? It is true that when something you start is finally brought to completeness there is tremendous satisfaction. On that basis the statement is true. But take this verse with regard to life, assuming that God is being left out. Can you say, "Better is the end of a thing than its beginning"? Ask those who feel they are growing old, their essential faculties beginning to be limited, if this is better than the earlier days of their life when they were hale and hearty, young and athletic, taking life at full speed. They will reply in the negative as they look back to the joy of these

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early days. But Ecclesiastes says we should not spend our days looking back because the end is better than the beginning.

The key thought for chapter 7 is the last verse. In the rest of the chapter he is thinking hard about life. If salvation could come by hard thinking this man would have got it. The trouble is that man himself confesses that there is no salvation by thinking, its process or its fruits. In verse 29, as the result of all his thinking, he says,

"Behold, this alone I found, that God
made man upright, but they have
sought out many devices."

Man, with his inherent capacity for trouble has thought out many devices, inventions, capacities, opportunities and atrocities, through all of which he expresses himself. The result is the sorry story of the world that we read in our daily newspapers.

Behold, God made man upright, but . . . In that word 'but' there is a recognition of all we mean theologically when we speak of the fall of man. Man is not now as he was made in the original intention and image of God. Man has fallen. Some people say that they are not prepared to think in this way about their fellow men. We have to think it about ourselves and about others because it is the truth. This is quite basic in the realms of theology, sociology and political theory; and the rock upon which many brilliant ideas conjured up by men founder is the fact that their ideas are formulated on the premise that man is essentially good. He is not; he is fallen. Man is not what he was made. He was made in the image of God, for the purpose of God, and for fellowship with God. Because man is fallen he is consequently at variance with God, and with himself. This is why so many people are going to psychiatrists. There is an inner conflict, a contradiction that is not being resolved. Man is also at variance with other people. This is why there are so many fights and broken friendships. Man is also at variance with his circumstances, thus making the whole of his life a conflict and a frustration. Ecclesiastes has already said,

"It is an unhappy business that God
has given to the sons of men to be
busy with." (1: 13)

Man, in this kind of circumstance, is tragically aware that all his effort and worry does not add one cubit to the span of his life, and in this conflict and frustration he is also aware that he has no real guarantee of life. Life at the very best is but a little season that flies away. That is why you find Ecclesiastes saying,

"In the day of prosperity be joyful, and
in the day of adversity consider; God
has made the one as well as the other,
so that man may not find out anything
that will be after him." (7: 14)

Even in his moments of pleasure and joy man is looking over his shoulder and saying, "It can't last." He is right. This is the basic uncertainty of life. People of all kinds say that no-one can know or be sure of anything. "It is all a mystery," says the worldly man.

The question then has to be posed, "How do we come to terms with experience?" The first thing we have to do is to recognise the essential fallen-ness of man and of the whole world order. Grasping this has made a tremendous difference to me in my own life and work as a minister, in preaching and pastoral counselling. If we do not have as the basis of our thinking about human experience a persuasion that the world and man in it are fallen, gone wrong and become a confusion and contradiction, we might go mad with frustration as we try to help people and solve situations. What is

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more, we will expect far too much from ourselves, from others, and from the world. It is sinfully wrong to expect from people what they are constitutionally incapable of giving and being. This applies to Christians as well as non-Christians.

We need to be radical in our thinking with regard to the fallen-ness of man and must learn to grasp that phrase, very seldom heard nowadays, 'total depravity'. This does not mean that we are all as bad as we could be. We know perfectly well that that is not true. Fear and self-interest can exercise a remarkable restraint. By the operation of the grace of God there is restraint in the world and in human experience. That is the explanation of our deliverance from some very dangerous situations. We may not have been aware of God's presence and activity. We may have thought it was our own doing when we decided, "Now, that's far enough." But it was God who put on the brake! It was God who diminished the pressure!

When we use the phrase 'total depravity' we are signifying that all of man, every part of his nature and personality, has in measure at least been affected, vitiated, limited, twisted by the Fall. This includes our thinking, and in a very real sense we cannot get through to reality by reasoning. There is a blockage, a bafflement, and we are left mystified and groping. At the same time there is an echo within our souls that intimates to us that this is not all there is to life. There is an echo of eternity in our experience that makes us think, that makes us restless, that makes us long and yearn. Scripture (Rom. 8: 18ff.) speaks of a groaning within the whole order of creation. Is the sighing wind mourning for days that once were, when God looked upon creation and declared it was very good? A glory has passed away from creation although gleams of it remain. Creation itself is disordered. There is a clash and disturbance in the earth and in the heavens which is echoed within our own hearts.

Think of the words of Tennyson's Ulysses, where he speaks of :

"This gray spirit yearning in desire
To follow knowledge like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bound of human
thought."

What wistfulness! In that same poem Ulysses says:
"I am a part of all that I have met;

Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'
Gleams that untravell'd world, whose
margin fades
For ever and for ever when I move."

Through the arches of his experience he seems to glimpse the horizons of possibility which waken the longing of his heart. "This is for me," he says, and he begins to go after it, but it fades, it escapes him in the very process of the search. We need to be reminded that Scripture also speaks of a day when the desert shall blossom as the rose, the mountains shall sing and the trees shall clap their hands. There is fulfilment. Even the lion and the lamb will lie down together and there will be neither hurt nor destruction. There is a day of restoration (Acts 3: 21 A.V.).

We may not have dealt with the details of the chapter but we have dealt with the message of it. We now summarise the contents.

In verses 1-14 we are called to face the facts of life, the negatives as well as the positives. We face up to death as well as to life, to denial as well as to fulfilment. Young people especially must not go through life with the idea that all their deepest longings are going to be fulfilled. Prepare yourself for this. Do not pretend that life is not harsh or demanding. Be real. Don't spend your life looking back to the days that once were, saying that the former days were better than these. Older people did not in fact say that when they were young. They said then, "When I am finished my degree . . . , when I am settled

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in my job . . . , when my family are grown up . . . !" Isn't it strange: half of our lives we spend promising ourselves how great it is going to be, and the other half we spend looking back, telling ourselves how marvellous it used to be. Be real. Don't live your life pretending that all is well. Don't shut your mind to the fact of death. Integrate death into the pattern of your thinking. That is the message of verses 1-3.

Do not try to escape through the avenue of empty laughter (5, 6).

"As the crackling of thorns under a pot,
so is the laughter of the fools."

What a description! Watch comedians on television grinning from ear to ear when they are before the cameras. What are they like as soon as the show is over? Many of them will be doing anything and everything, trying to forget all about it. Some of the most brilliant of them plumb the depths of depression. Don't try to escape into empty laughter. Face up to verse 14.

"In the day of prosperity be joyful, and
in the day of adversity consider."

Consider what? Consider what you have that will hold you. There is a telling verse,

"If thou hast run with the footmen, and
they have wearied thee, then how canst
thou contend with horses? And if in
the land of peace, wherein thou
trustedst, they wearied thee, then how
wilt thou do in the swelling of Jordan."
(Jer. 12: 5 A.V.)

There are many swellings in the river and jungle of Jordan long before we come to what is called death. Someone was asked if he had faith and he replied that he had a very little faith that he was trying hard to hold on to. How sad! What we need in life is not something to hold on to but something that will hold on to us, especially something that will hold on to us when we don't want to be held.

"Be practical," says the worldly man (15-22). Play safe, stand back, don't really get yourself involved, be sensible. This is indeed vain worldly counsel: make life work for you, don't get too involved, manipulate things as they come and don't go in for anything too seriously. Be not righteous over much (16). Go to church now and again but draw the line. Don't be extreme about it. Don't think too hard; why should you destroy yourself?

Then comes verse 17:

"Be not wicked overmuch, neither be a
fool; why should you die before your
time?"

What duplicity and dishonesty there is in worldly thinking. Take it as it comes; don't go in for anything very seriously; and as was once said to me by an elder of the church, "Take your profit when you get the chance and let things slide when you are up against it." What a philosophy of life! Don't be too worried about standards; don't try to do anything; don't try to be anything; it is no use. That is the philosophy that has caused the younger generation to grow up in the 1970's sick to death of the attitudes, the prescriptions and the proscriptions of the adult generation. Some of these youngsters stand back and watch us and they are not impressed. Do you blame them?

Verses 23-28 urge man to think it through. But if a man has no light except what is within himself he cannot think it through. All his thinking about this life and the life to come will be essentially a haze. He will live the whole of his days in what may be called a limbo of uncertainty. You say that is a grim

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thought? I agree. Are you not glad that the Bible tells you about one whose name is Jesus Christ, who said,

"I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." (John 8: 12)

You may answer that it is not really understanding that you want, even though you need it. What then do you want? It is life, peace, hope and release; deliverance from yourself, from your sins, and from your circumstances. One man in the Bible who had thought deeply about human experience cried, "O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me?" (Rom. 7: 24) There is only one deliverer. He is Jesus Christ, who in His death and resurrection for you and for me brings us life that is eternal.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

To return to a series of studies the Sunday after Christmas is good. After the thrill and excitement of the Nativity stories there is no dull process of tailing off. Christ has come. God the Saviour is present among men. Get to grips with life.

This is how it should be because the Christian gospel is not escapism. We stand our ground and refuse to capitulate to the irrelevant rush, the physical, financial, mental, spiritual, and moral exhaustion of these times of celebration. Even in worldly company we can and we must stand back and view the whole scene of human experience with calm composure because of the reality of the Gospel.

We can face experience, whatever it has been or will be, because we are persuaded about the message, "God with us." God is right down here beside us, working on our behalf, gloriously active, not only around us and amongst us but in our very hearts by His eternal Spirit. If we believe this we can face anything, and still find hope.

The fact of God is the key to our understanding of life. Faith refuses to leave Him out. I was grieved when I read a leading churchman's Christmas message in the press. He called on us to do away with all this dogmatic business of a Confession of Faith and get everybody to be clear in their own minds concerning what they really think about God. Could anything be more absurd and irrelevant, not to say untenable? You can have ideas about God that are a million miles from the truth, ideas as changeable as the weather. This is intellectual dishonesty. It is not Christianity! The Christian gospel has to do with the God who has made Himself known. This makes a practical difference to the running of life.

The chapter divides into two sections and one commentary gives the sections the unfortunate titles, 'The necessity of compromise' (8: 1-9) and 'The aimlessness of history' (8: 10-17). From a Christian standpoint the theme seems to be submission of spirit.

"Keep the King's command, and because
of your sacred oath be not dismayed;
go from his presence, do not delay . . ." (8: 2, 3)

Another translation has,

"Be not hasty to go ..."

Don't be the kind of person who, when he comes up against a difficult situation, says at once, "Here is my resignation." That is not Christian. Submission is the Christian attitude. Do not be hasty to go, and do not insist on arguing the point. We must witness, but there is a world of difference between witnessing and arguing, just as great as the difference between witnessing and trying to ram the Bible down peoples' throats. The one is Christian, the other is sub-Christian. This first section (1-9) can be expounded in terms of the need for submission of spirit, which can come only by the grace of God.

The second half of the chapter, verses 10-17, which seems to speak of the aimlessness of history, when examined more closely constitutes what is essentially an exposure of long-range and long-term sins. Men say, "It is not so bad, nor so dangerous or disastrous as we thought." Because consequences are not immediate, the heart of man leaps to the conclusion that he has been misled by all this preaching about the dangers of sin and he reckons that this is not how it is. Men say that they sinned but did not suffer from any complications or consequences. That is a short-term assessment. The second half of this chapter deals with long-term issues.

"Sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth
death." (Jas. 1: 15 A.V.)

The issue is often not evident at all at the beginning. Think of an old grannie sitting in her fireside chair knitting, fingers and needles going steadily all the time. You can almost see the garment

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appearing before your very eyes. Sin is like a pair of knitting needles held in the hands of the Devil, and the wool is life's threads being knit together. Sin is to be reckoned on in the long term.

Look more closely at verses 1-9 which we have already spoken of in terms of the submission of grace. In these verses there is the picture of a servant and a king whose commands and expectations are often apparently unjust and arbitrary. What is a man to do? Look back to chapter 7: 29:

"This alone I found, that God made
man upright, but they have sought out
many devices."

That verse speaks of human corruption and confusion and prepares us for the fact that experience will be marked by anarchy. How do you live in such a situation? Some would say by compromise and others by submission. The first of these two words, 'compromise', seems to suggest a man trying hard to hold together things that he has set value upon, balancing the one against the other. He is not prepared to abandon God, but on the other hand he is not prepared to abandon the world. He is not prepared to say that he cannot be bothered with God, but neither is he prepared to make God first in his life. This is compromise, and it is an exhausting business. God says that it cannot work, but man says that it must.

The word 'submission' on the other hand seems to suggest a man who believes that there is much more to life than this. Do you know this prayer?

"God grant me the serenity to accept
the things I cannot change; courage to
change the things I can; and wisdom
to know the difference."

There is great wisdom in that. It is that grace which knows the difference that seems to be spoken about in the beginning of the chapter.

"A man's wisdom makes his face shine,
and the hardness of his countenance is
changed." (8: 1)

The face of the compromising man has a hardness in it, whereas the face of the man who has found that glorious submission in Jesus Christ is at least beginning to show signs of a gentleness which signifies strength. In the first verse we see the kind of man who has learned serenity because his God is a real God and he knows that the issues of life are in His Hands.

We need submission, but there is a submission which is not of faith, the attitude that says, "What's the use?" That is resignation. There is also a submission which is really opportunism.

"He who obeys a command will meet no
harm, and the mind of a wise man will
know the time and way." (8: 5)

That is the man who is always on the watch saying, "The boss is feeling like that today. I'd better do whatever he says, never mind my Christian principles, the things about which I feel strongly. Wisdom suggests that today I should just be quiet, knuckle under and bow down." That is not the submission of faith but the opportunism of unbelief and it leads to compromise.

People say it is difficult not to compromise. Verse 4 speaks of the kind of compromise in which a man does what he is told to do, whether it is good or bad, saying that it is not really his responsibility:

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"For the word of the king is supreme,
and who may say to him, 'What are
you doing?' "

Some say to preachers, "You don't understand my situation." Preachers live in this world too! People say they may lose their job. Haven't many people lost their jobs for Jesus' sake? Preachers in this country don't lose their jobs, but do you think it is easy in church assemblies to stand over against the establishment? Would you have me compromise? You want a minister who will stand? I want a congregation who will stand with me.

Think out what you are involved in.

"Every matter has its time." (8: 6)

Calculate your time, weigh it up, because man cannot escape from the reality of experience.

"No man has power to retain the spirit,
or authority over the day of death." (8: 8)

He cannot keep his life. Man has no power to retain the spirit, not even in the sense of curbing man's inhumanity to man. No man can escape the essential war of experience; there is no discharge, for man cannot escape the power of moral evil. Nor will wickedness deliver those who are given to it. No man has authority over the day of death, the shadow that is over all of us.

As a result of all this the worldly man goes on (10-17) to speak of the aimlessness of history. He looks at all the contradictions of experience (which is not an easy thing to do) and, seeing in the world of experience the prosperity of the wicked, he asks, "Where is your God?" He sees the suffering of children and asks, "Where is your God?" He seems to see the pointlessness of all effort and says, "What is the use?" Then he says in verse 15:

"And I commend enjoyment, for man
has no good thing under the sun but
to eat, and drink, and enjoy himself,
for this will go with him in his toil
through the days of life which God
gives him under the sun."

This is the process of trying to forget.

Look at verse 11:

"Because sentence against an evil deed
is not executed speedily, the heart of
the sons of men is fully set to do evil."

Here is the essential fallacy of worldly thinking, calling God to account and saying, "Why does your God allow this? Why doesn't God do this? Why doesn't God do that?" This is blasphemy, because God made man upright. It is man who has sought out many inventions. The world as it is now is man's choice. Why doesn't God change things? Because man has chosen that this should be. Why doesn't God intervene? Because man has requested that God shouldn't. Worldly men and women take a far too short-term, limited and localised view of things. There is something we have to learn. It takes the submission of faith to learn it, and the eye of faith to see it, and the heart of faith to believe it. You won't do this without a real God, a Bible God, not a God of your own imagining. We must learn to take a longer view of things, to watch and wait, and in the end to say "this" is explained by "that".

People say, "Why should this happen to me?" Often I can't answer them, but sometimes I can. I have to say to them, "Think back five or ten or twenty years of your life. What started then is what you are having to live with now." Granted there are experiences in life that cannot be explained in these terms.

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There is a mystery. Many things cannot be explained, others can. Take some illustrations. Go back many years in history to the brutality of the slave trade and then think of America and other places that now have a race problem. Go back many years to the arrogance of colonialism and then come forward to consider the turbulence of the emerging nations. Go back many years to the hypocrisy of formal religion and you have an explanation why many of the younger generation will have nothing to do with the Kirk. "This" is "that"! We must learn that we have to live with the consequences of our own and our fathers' choices and philosophy.

Because his fingers are not burned at once, man concludes that he has got off and he goes gaily on his way (11). His way can never have the blessing of God but it takes time to demonstrate this. Sin is a long-range factor in experience. It is difficult at times to say, "This is judgment," and we must be very careful before we go around explaining other people's experiences. There are foolish Christians who are far too quick to pronounce that certain things are a judgment of God. If casual acquaintances come round telling you that, tell them to mind their own business! The Bible says we know in part.

Ecclesiastes speaks of wicked men who go in and out of the house of God and are praised. This is vanity. He sees righteous men suffering and unrighteous men prospering. Yes, but the end of the story is not yet. Read Psalm 73 which speaks of the wicked flourishing like the green bay tree. The Psalmist did not understand and felt he could not live with this contradiction, until he went into the presence of God and realised, as the second half of our chapter says, that the principle of righteousness operates throughout all experience. Then he understood the end of wicked men.

In the ultimate analysis we must not judge nor must we assess the issues in terms of time, but only in terms of eternity. This thought points us on to the future. Don't look only into next year. Look right through to when time shall be no more. People say this is disturbing. It can be. Ecclesiastes says at the end of the chapter that man by all his toil and his searching cannot find his rest or his home. He is lost, bewildered and frightened. He cannot find it out (17). That is how it would be with you and me if Jesus Christ had not come. Into that lostness and hopelessness, from the eternity of glory, there came the Son of God to seek and to save that which was lost. With Jesus there is a sweetness of peace that passes all understanding. There is a great deal we do not know nor understand, and cannot find out. But this we know: Jesus came for us. Has he got us?

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CHAPTER NINE

This chapter is so full of detail, with so many verses capable of stimulating thought, that it is impossible to deal with it verse by verse, or even section by section. We deal with the substance and indicate the main sections.

In a chapter full of wise sayings and powerful realism, we begin to see the essential sadness of secularism and are made aware of the truth that it is hard work indeed to make sense of experience, let alone enjoy it, if we exclude from our thinking God and eternity. It is not enough just to bring God into our thinking about life. If we limit our understanding to the few short years that we have here upon earth (and how short they are we do not really know), with no thought about the world that is yet to come, then we will make no sense of experience. It is a fact we have to live with that some things are never explained in the whole course of this earthly life. There are things which God will allow or ordain which will still be baffling us when we are lying on our death beds. There are things that are never explained, solved or remedied in this present world, and we have to come to terms with this.

There is some justification for the Scottish custom of celebrating Hogmanay and New Year. The generally alcoholic pattern of that celebration is deplorable, but it is good to mark the passing of the years. Some do so with relief. Some good Glasgow folk will say, "Thank God that year is past," but there will be others who will mark its passing with regret. Either way, the whole tenor of our thinking, our attitude and disposition is to concentrate on the years of this world and to forget the world that is to come. Between the middle of December and the first Sunday in January how often have we consciously thought of eternity? We have been busy with festivities, well-wishing and good cheer, but have we consciously brought ourselves to face the fact of the passing of the years and the abidingness of all that we mean by eternity?

"But he who is joined with all the living
has hope, for a living dog is better than
a dead lion. For the living know that
they will die, but the dead know
nothing, and they have no more reward;
but the memory of them is lost." (9:4, 5)

It is this world-centred thinking that causes many people, including many professing Christians, to lose their souls. We grow absorbed in the business of business and we forget that, to a great extent, it is irrelevant. We have souls that are eternal, that need to be saved, and we never give them a thought. This is alarming. It is folly.

We tend to concentrate on what happens to us rather than on why it happens. This is a superficial attitude to life because, as this chapter says, everything happens to everybody. We are all in the same boat.

"Since one fate comes to all, to the
righteous and the wicked, to the good
and the evil, to the clean and the
unclean, to him who sacrifices and him
who does not sacrifice. As is the good
man, so is the sinner; and he who
swears is as he who shuns an oath."
(9: 2)

We also fail to consider the further question of what we are becoming in the process of the various happenings of life! The preacher may not know all that has happened to you in the past year and he

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may or may not have some idea why these things have been happening. But, he may well be aware of what some are becoming.

The start of a new year is a good time to ask further, "Where am I going in relation to the things of God?" Most people here this morning would claim in some way or other to have made a fairly radical profession of Christian faith and commitment. Where are we going? I say "we" because I involve myself. I do not for a moment assume that ministers go on morally and spiritually without a care in the world. The country is littered with 'has-been' evangelical ministers, and I do not want to be one of them. Let each face the questions: "What is the kind of life I am living doing to my soul? What is my life doing to me in relation to my usefulness to God?" Ask a final question: "Have I a witness that marks me out as belonging to Christ?" Some must confess that in past days they had a witness, but no longer. These are serious questions, and it is God who searches the heart.

As we face experience there will always be a necessary tension but not a contradiction, between faith and the facts of life. Scripture says,

"By faith we understand." (Heb. 11: 3)

It is not by understanding that we come to faith. It is by faith that we understand. But faith must always trust, and that trust operates in a measure of darkness. This is of the very essence of faith. We walk by faith, not by sight (2 Cor. 5: 7). We know only in part. We see through a glass darkly (1 Cor. 13: 12 A.V.). We can at best discern only the vague contours of the future. Therefore it is essential that we should find the ground of faith, stand on it, and live by God and His word. There is a tremendous danger in drifting away from God. If we do, we depart from the one and only place where we can view experience in true perspective and where we find power to cope with the essential tension between faith and the facts of life.

There will be many occasions on which people will say to us, "Where is your God now?" We have all at times said that kind of thing in our hearts. But even when the darkness becomes total, faith asserts its trust in God saying in biblical language, "I know that my Redeemer lives. Grim and costly though the experiences of life may be, knowing my Redeemer as I know Him, and walking with Him as I walk with Him, though He slay me, yet will I trust Him. I am persuaded, not only that neither death nor life, nor things present nor things to come, have the power to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord, but that the explanations that are withheld here are given there!" This is why the whole of our life must be lived consciously on the border-land of eternity. Many a time, by faith, in the dusty streets of this life's experience you will sense very close to you the whisper of the Almighty Himself saying, "My child, how is it going?" How would you answer? With a never-dying soul, with a life that is precious to God, how goes it? Is it well with your soul? Is it right with your life?

If we view life apart from this categorical ground of faith we will find that experience is full of tremendous negatives, and this is the burden of Ecclesiastes 9. The observer of 'life under the sun' says that there are three things man cannot reckon on. He cannot assume, first of all, that good fortune will necessarily follow good character (1-6). Sometimes it does, sometimes it doesn't. This is a fact of experience. Man cannot assume secondly, that skill and ability will necessarily lead to progress (11, 12). Thirdly, man cannot reckon on wisdom necessarily leading to honour (13-18).

On the basis of these tremendous negatives, the things that man cannot count on, worldly man says: "Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has already approved what you do. Let your garments be always white; let not oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life which he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun.

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Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going." (9: 7-10)

That is to say, "Do your best and take what life can offer." Underline the word 'take' because it signifies the curse of our generation. All are concerned about what they can take, what they can get out of life, what is to be given to them for nothing. We are sorely sick if we are preoccupied with taking, yet this is the advice of worldly man (7-10). Many people have this attitude to life but it is not Christian. It is because people think like this that life has become aimless, lacking in purpose and we have landed ourselves with a generation without a soul, a generation that is under the tyranny of the profit motive. Will it sell more? Then let us do it! Will it corrupt the youngsters? That does not matter so long as there is profit. I am not the kind of person who cares much for demonstrations but I will be at the Festival of Light in George Square on Wednesday to stand and protest against the dirt that is purveyed for profit in all the media of communication. I love this land. I am persuaded that Scotland has still a place and a significant spiritual part to play in the affairs of the world. But it is sad that in this dear land men and women now sell their souls when once they used to die for principles. Stands Scotland where she once stood?

Verses 1-10 speak of life as being a race in which we all have the same hurdles and hazards. Like all races the course is measured out in laps and we have finished one such lap as a year ends and another starts. How far gone the course is we cannot tell. How many laps we have still to run we cannot tell. But what we can tell from Scripture is this, that at the end of the race there is an account to be given. This is not only in respect of our sins but also regarding the stewardship of all our privileges in Christ Jesus. There are excuses for some people because they have never been taught the Scriptures, but there is no excuse for this congregation, not even for those who for years have declined to come to church. At the end of the race the great God will say to us, "You knew, didn't you? You were taught, encouraged, challenged; why did you never respond?"

It often seems in the course of Christian life that God is indifferent. It often seems that righteous and evil both prosper. That is quite true, but the Lord knows them that are His. God does not take men to task now. He waits that He might be gracious. He is long-suffering. But in the end there is the account. Now is the accepted time. Now is the day of salvation. Today if you hear God's voice speaking to you, answer Him. Now is the time for remedy. Now is the time to re-affirm that we are Christ's, and that we shall be Christ's and that we shall grasp all that is Christ's. Now is the time. I cannot make you do it, but I pray that this word might be so blessed by God that the Word itself will make you do it.

The alternative to grasping all that is ours in Christ is time and chance (11-18). There is no word here of a God who saves, a God who orders and a God who plants you where your soul will grow and where you know increasingly that this brief life here is only the beginning. How many are there who come to the gates of eternity, weak, wasted and bankrupt, their souls saved, yet so as by fire (1 Cor. 3: 10-15). Think, throughout the Bible, of the stories of the men of God who sold their souls for love of this world and its praise.

"Tell me the same old story
When you have cause to fear
That this world's empty glory
Is costing me too dear." (Hankey)

Think of Lot: he lost his soul because he chose his house in the wrong place, a worldly choice, with not a place within reach where he could go to find spiritual worship and instruction. Think of Esau: he was a go-ahead fellow, he had drive, in many ways personality-wise he was streets ahead of Jacob. He sold his soul for life's immediate satisfactions. Think of Samson who sold his soul for a girl friend. Read it in the Book of Judges. Think hard about what you are doing with life and what you are becoming. Choices are important!

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This is the question we must ask: "Which world are we geared to, this or that?" All that the Bible means by wisdom is expressed in these words:

"I determined not to know anything
among you, save Jesus Christ, and him
crucified." (1 Cor. 2: 2 A.V.)

That is the text I preached on when some of you came to listen to me and to consider me as the possible minister for Sandyford. I stand by it after all these years. Where do you stand? A whole year lies open before us. What will it be?

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CHAPTER TEN

Part of the difficulty in studying this perplexing book lies in the repetitive nature of the material. At the same time it is profitable in terms of blessing and encouragement. In spite of the difficulties there is a real message. It is best to regard this chapter as being in the form of lecture notes. There are verses or groups of verses which cry out for elaboration, and the material here is designed for use in a tutorial rather than in a straight-forward lecture. The notes are meant to be amplified in the process of delivery or discussion.

Chapters 10 and 11, two very complicated chapters, belong together and we must seek for any clear theme running through them. What are they about? One verse (19b) says that money is the answer to everything! That is not a Christian statement. What then is the theme?

What is your philosophy of life? As you get down to the business of living what are the things, the thoughts, the attitudes which guide and determine your choices and actions? This observer of life asks worldly, materialistic men and women concerning the guidelines by which they live.

One way to approach this chapter is to spiritualise the details and draw lessons for life. This is how some commentators deal with it. They interpret (with some justification) 'dead flies' as 'flies of death' and suggest that here we have an illustration of those things that we call 'little sins'. These little sins, these flies of death, fall into the perfume or ointment, spoil it and make the whole thing go putrid. The ointment, says this same commentator, speaks of the 'oil of anointing', spoken of right through the Old Testament. It refers usually to the unction of God for service. Now, if we go to Christian service without the unction of God, then our service falls to the ground. It is fruitless. And everybody knows it. This is one way to draw a spiritual lesson. The flies of death, these little sins, mingled with the oil of anointing, strip us of our spiritual vitality and make us fools.

There is much in the chapter about fools, and the significant thing about them is that their influence is one of hindrance and destruction.

"One sinner destroys much good." (9: 18)

There may be a group of people labouring very hard for a long spell of time who feel that they are just beginning to bring forth out of the situation something that is good to the glory of God. Then along comes a fool, sometimes a Christian fool, and he barges in and in no time at all the labour of months is lying in shambles at their feet. We may all have known this kind of situation. Ecclesiastes says that this folly is something which simply cannot be concealed. Even when the fool walks on the road he lacks sense (3) and he proclaims by his manner, his attitude, his words and his actions that he is a fool.

Following this method of spiritualising the details we could refer to the ruler in verse 4 as being God. This we could link up with Hebrews 12: 5ff.

"My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord."

This spiritualising method could be followed right through the chapter with a degree of profit, but with an element of danger.

Another way to deal with these two chapters is to recognise the complexity of life in this world. Many people find their lives almost unbearable because they have assumed that life should be essentially simple. It is not. It may have been so in the Garden of Eden, but from the moment sin entered into the world of man's experience life has been anything but simple. Ecclesiastes helps us to recognise this sore fact. Then, having recognised it, we must try to see the tremendous difference when we approach life with the realism of faith.

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The unbelieving world says that faith lacks realism. This is not so. The only true realism you find in the world is the realism of faith. Christianity is no escape. Faith compels you, rather forcibly at times, to face life as it really is. Faith refuses to let you run away. If you do run, the moment you stop you have God to face (Psa. 139: 9, 10).

There is all the difference in the world between the realism of faith and the essential compromise of unbelief, which is the theme that runs right through this chapter and finds expression in the twentieth verse. Be careful what you think, let alone what you say, because a little bird may tell!

One thing is made clear from verse 8ff. Life is far too explosive to be tampered with casually. It is too big a risk. He whose job is to dig a pit may possibly fall into it in the process. If you are a demolition man and you are knocking down walls then you might very well find a snake of some kind coming out of the stonework and biting you. He who quarries stones, he who strips logs, may very well find himself fatally involved. Life is like this. As the Bible says, we do not know what a single day may bring (Prov. 27: 1).

This chapter shows one philosophy of the worldly man. He is calling for caution. Drive with your foot on the brake. Chapter 11 calls for the complete opposite, the end of caution and a launching into venture. But both caution and a spirit of venture can be regarded as Christian attitudes. When are we to be cautious? When are we to launch out? This calls for wisdom. But there are different kinds of wisdom. Consider the Epistle of James (3: 13-17):

"Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good life let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This wisdom is not such as comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, without uncertainty or insincerity."

There are different kinds of wisdom. There is wisdom which is essentially calculating and self-motivated. But there is wisdom that has God in it. It is only in the second kind of wisdom, God-given, God-centred, that we can begin to come to grips with life in all its complexity and contradictions. Don't try to pretend that life isn't difficult. It is. There are times when it throws you backwards and forwards like a shuttlecock and you hardly know what is happening to you. Now the wisdom that you need in order to come to grips with this kind of thing is the wisdom that comes from God and from nowhere else.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, says the Book of Proverbs (1: 7), and it goes on to say that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (9: 10). Leave out the fear of the Lord and what do you find? Scripture, testifies regarding the limitation of human wisdom,

"For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe." (1 Cor. 1: 21)

Mere wisdom cannot find God, please God, nor find solutions. Where there is no vision, says Scripture, the people cast off restraint (Prov. 29: 18). Vision of what? God! His wisdom, His purposes, His grace, His love, His power, His eternity. When these things are no longer in men's minds the people cast off restraint and you end up not only with anarchy (the beginnings of which we are living

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with in our own nation), but with an amoral society, a society that does not know the meaning of moral standards. It is not simply immoral, but amoral, without any sense or standard of right and wrong.

This brings about the situation in which objective standards of life and behaviour give place to what is called subjectivism. If a man feels something is right, then it is right; if he feels he wants something badly, then it is right to have it; if a particular thing gives him fulfilment, then he reckons it is permissible. This is the slippery slope on which our nation, and the Church of Jesus Christ within it, is beginning to journey, turning its back upon absolute and biblical standards of life and of doctrine. In no time at all this permissive spirit of the world infects the Church, and 'experience' becomes the final authority. One consequence is that the evangelical church is splintered into groups each saying that the other is not 'spiritual' because it has not had a certain 'experience'! This subjectivism is a deep cause for concern and drives us back to the Word of God. In the realism of faith which centres upon what God has spoken there is the beginning of life and the understanding of it. Ecclesiastes declares by means of reasoning, argument and question, the need for such faith in order to cope with life. Nothing else can hold you steady enough to see you through the grimness of life.

From the last verse of chapter 9 to verse 2 of chapter 10 the theme is the effect of folly, and folly here is the same as sin. The effects are quite disproportionate to the initial action. Why do we speak of little sins? It did not seem a very big thing for the woman to take an apple from the tree in Eden. But the issue was vast. It wasn't a terribly big sin for a complacent man, walking in boredom on the roof of his house, to glance down into another house and see a woman called Bathsheba. It was just a glance, but the issue was great. It doesn't seem terribly important when you read in the story of Abraham that "Abraham journeyed toward the south." But the consequences! Scripture abounds in illustrations. In our own lives, when challenged we say, "You are not going to make a big issue of that, are you?" Yes, if it is not of God, however small it may seem the issue will be far-reaching. The reason for this is that the act of sin, whatever it be, signifies a life-direction and a life-choice.

From verse 5 onwards we begin to read about how folly and wrong seem to prosper. This is one of the great mysteries of life. One family works hard and honourably and yet is struck by tragedy. Another family breaks all the rules and nothing seems to happen to them. We find some godly souls suffering excruciatingly and we can find someone, perhaps a brother or a sister, or a father or a mother, revelling in godlessness with apparent impunity. Life is difficult and baffling. It is also very uncertain. Anything can happen, either individually or socially, and the worldly man, but not the man of faith, views life as a deep complexity and contradiction. He recognises that anything can happen at any time and his attitude emerges, "What's the use? Why bother trying?"

In verse 4 we find an expression of the attitude of the world that says, "The least said, the soonest mended." People make that comment as if they were adopting a high moral standard. They are not! People say, "I know that he is in the wrong, but don't tell him. It wouldn't do any good." Least said, soonest mended. Is that how you want to live? That is escapism; it is neither realism nor responsibility.

Verses 8-11 say, "Don't interfere. Don't try to change things. It is too dangerous. Leave well alone." Is that realism? It reminds us of rats leaving a sinking ship. Their one interest is their own preservation. People protest and say it is not their responsibility: it is not their ship. But it is. We are all in the business of life together. We are our brother's keeper.

Verses 12-20 can be summarised very simply by saying that talk is dangerous. Many people are really patting themselves on the back as they recount to you some situation. But when you ask them, "What did you say?", they reply, "Oh, I didn't say anything." Was that helpful, constructive or redemptive? In Jesus Christ we know God and have life that is eternal; by the eternal Spirit of the living God we are equipped for service; yet we say nothing! This is the compromise of unbelief. This is not the realism of faith, it is the way of the world.

Where does all this end? Look at verse 20. Perhaps this is the kernel of the whole chapter.

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"Even in your thought, do not curse the
king, nor in your bedchamber curse
the rich; for a bird of the air will
carry your voice, or some winged
creature tell the matter."

Do not give vent to 'cursing' even if you feel strongly and even if you recognise wrong and defect. I remember vividly as an ordinary rating in the Royal Navy being told by an officer who felt he was giving sound advice, "Be quite clear, you do not get punished for doing wrong. You get punished for being found out." That attitude runs right through this chapter. This worldly philosophy of life is essentially a policy of discretion; not discretion in the good sense but in the sense of cautious self-interest and even cunning. The counsel here is not to abstain from dishonourable and wrong things because they are dishonourable and wrong, but to abstain if you are likely to be found out. If you think you can get away with it by all means go ahead and do it. This is a dangerous, demoralising and destructive philosophy of life.

Faith does what is right even if it is done in the secret of God's presence with not one other person in the world seeing or knowing anything about it. Faith does it because it is right, even if it is criticised and accused of doing wrong. The worldly man does not think this way. He is negative, adjustable, compromising. He may abstain if he feels he will be caught out but if he feels it is safe he will do wrong. He fails, of course, to recognise that he will be found out. "Be sure your sin will find you out," (Num. 32: 23) even when no-one else finds out about your sins. Some people by sheer cleverness manage to keep their sins hidden. But that is not escape. God will see to it that what you have done catches up with you.

This chapter has dealt with the policy of unbelief. Faith takes a different stand. Faith looks to God with trust and hope. Faith knows that our times are indeed in God's hand. Faith knows that God is good, that God can be trusted and that God will explain in the world to come if not in this world. Faith knows that God will keep and that God will save. Faith knows that God's desire is to bless His children with life that is eternal. Faith looks into the face of God and then turns round and looks fair and square into the perplexity and the contradictions of life. Faith says,

"Perish policy and cunning,
Perish all that fears the light!
Whether losing, whether winning,
Trust in God, and do the right.

Some will hate thee, some will love thee,
Some will flatter, some will slight;
Cease from man, and look above thee:
Trust in God, and do the right."

(MacLeod)

Faith does this no matter the evidences of experience, because the issues are with God.

What is your philosophy of life? Is it the realism of faith: faith that sometimes digs in its heels, hunches its shoulders, grits its teeth, faces the winds of adverse experience, and stands, and having done all still stands, because God is God? Or is your philosophy of life the compromise of unbelief? One has hope and the other is hopeless. But we cannot go on into life's experience in the realism of faith with our minds, our hearts and our lives cluttered up with the 'dead flies' of sin and wrong.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

From this continuation of the observer's lecture notes we must consider the things which determine and guide our choices and attitudes as we go through life.

Life is complex. It is also contradictory and can be baffling and painful as well as enjoyable and satisfying. Consequently many find that a great part of their energy has to be devoted to the business of coming to terms with life. In doing so there is a great difference between the realism of faith, which the worldly man does not have, and the compromise of unbelief which the worldly man must necessarily make. We must not be too hard on worldly men and women because without faith, the only thing that makes life bearable for them is compromise, which so often means evading the real issues, or shutting the mind to them. The man of faith is constantly setting life in this world against the background of the world that is to come. This is of the essence of faith. It is reality. But this is exactly what the worldly, unbelieving man does not do.

In chapters 10 and 11 two opposite philosophies of life seem to be propounded. In chapter 10 there is the element of caution all the way through. Be careful, be calculating, weigh it up, and whatever else, don't be rash. In chapter 11 you find the opposite.

"Cast your bread upon the waters." (11: 1)

Let there be an end to calculated caution, launch out into the deep. Both caution and carelessness are necessary, but it is the man who has the wisdom of faith who can discern the time for each, when to hold back and refuse to act and when to recognise the guiding light of God, however small, and go after it.

There is material here for a series of sermons. In verses 1, 2 the theme could be Christian generosity, linking up with the New Testament teaching that the Lord loves a cheerful giver (2 Cor. 9: 7). The word 'cheerful' is literally 'hilarious', and Christian liberality is seldom like that nowadays. In verse 4 the theme is the sin of caution that is begotten of fear. We could preach sermons from verse 5 on the essential mystery of life, from verse 9 on the blessings of youth, from verse 10 on the emptiness and the contradiction of worldly advice. Read carefully up to verse 10 and you find that worldly man is saying that everything in this world is vanity; that everything which is supposed to be coming is also vanity; so that the thing to do is to enjoy this world, which is vanity. How illogical!

The two main sections of the chapter are verses 1-6 and verses 7-10, with the culminating challenge in verse 1 of chapter 12. In the first section (1-6) we have what could be essentially worldly advice.

"Cast your bread upon the waters, for
you will find it after many days."

This is simply saying that it pays to be generous. But that devalues generosity. You are giving with an eye to what you are going to get back. The second verse is again worldly advice: don't have all your eggs in one basket.

"Give a portion to seven, or even to
eight, for you know not what evil
may happen on the earth."

In verse 1 there seems to be a reference to sea-trading. The man loads up his vessel and sets sail; if he reaches the other side and the cargo is sold the captain comes back with a great profit to the owner. But ships are known to sink sometimes, so verse 2 counsels to play it safe. Divide up your interests to seven or eight because you can never be quite sure what will happen.

Verse 3 seems to focus on the blank comment some people make. In great need you go to someone and speak to them out of the brokenness of your heart, but all they are able to say is, "Well, you know,

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these things happen." The world has little to offer. Verse 4 again pinpoints the attitude of the worldly minded man, "You can never be sure."

"He who observes the wind will not sow."

It is too windy today, wait until tomorrow and the wind may have dropped. Of course, it might be stronger tomorrow, so wait again. You wait and wait, and you miss the sowing time.

"He who regards the clouds will not reap."

He does not like the look of the black clouds. Wait until tomorrow. But tomorrow may have two black clouds and in the end the harvest is left to rot. The world says you cannot help these things. You can never be sure. Life is a mystery.

"As you do not know how the spirit
comes to the bones in the womb of a
woman with child, so you do not know
the work of God who makes everything." (11: 5)

That is why blundering interference with the basic processes of life is exceedingly dangerous. Think of abortion, to name but one issue. Interference is dangerous because it involves man taking the place of God, and man has neither the right nor the capacity, let alone the wisdom to decide the issues of life and of death. There is so much man simply does not and cannot know. Do you know when newly conceived life in the womb becomes a true person? Life is a mystery.

Verse 6 says simply that we never know, and that accidents do happen.

"In the morning sow your seed, and at
evening withhold not your hand; for
you do not know which will prosper,
this or that, or whether both alike will
be good."

Right through these six verses there is a spirit of resignation and this is something that is more and more evident in society. I am sad when people shrug their shoulders, their eyes lacking lustre, and say, "You must just make the best of it." I am glad my life is not like that. Don't think for a minute that it hasn't bafflements, perplexities and burdens. It has. But it has much more! There is God.

This does not mean that we take refuge in religious clichés. When upheavals come people tend to say it is 'an act of God'. I remember going home after one morning service to find that the ornamental ceiling in the dining room had fallen down. Next day I was off to the Insurance Company to make some claim against them. The man in the office was reading through the terms of the policy and he said that he thought there might be no claim since this came under the category of 'an act of God'. God gave me grace without a moment's hesitation to suggest to the man that he had got the wrong department: that he would have to go downstairs rather than upstairs for the explanation. I don't know if he was a Christian, but he certainly laughed! An act of God. How many people drag God in as a last resort by way of explaining life. But it is a God they do not know. Listen to the things that people say and try to count how many of their easy-going phrases have absolutely no meaning or content. They are nothing but evasions.

The spirit of these first six verses hits hard at worldly attitudes. Our understanding is increased if we take a phrase that is often on people's lips, 'The best days of your life'. People have told me in different ways what the best days of my life are. They can't all be right! They say that the best days are your childhood, or when you are at school, or a student, or the early days of your marriage, or when your children are young. People exhorted me to enjoy my children when they were small because it is never

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the same again. What a desolate philosophy. The direction of these observations is backwards. There is a 'past-tense' complex! This kind of talk reveals that at heart people have a tacit assumption that as life goes on it gets less and less. A phrase of Scripture taken right out of its context expresses it:

"When I am old shall I have pleasure?" (Gen. 18: 12)

Faith refuses to concede that life is a disappointment. Faith will not accept the proposition that life, in God by Jesus Christ, is a thing of reducing returns. If I thought it was so, I certainly would not be standing in a pulpit. Does life get less and less so that in the end there is just a feeble spark left? Not if you are a Christian. That is not the life of faith. That is not what is ours in Jesus Christ, because in Him we are able to say all the time that the best is yet to be. Read 2 Corinthians 5: 1-5:

"For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. Here indeed we groan, and long to put on our heavenly dwelling, so that by putting it on we may not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we sigh with anxiety; not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee."

Paul speaks of the temporary tent of this life being taken down and dismantled, and our being given a permanent dwelling, secure and lasting. While we are down here we are longing, not for escape (the Christian's attitude is never negative) but for fulfilment. It is not hopeless longing. You can view the whole of life and affirm, in Christ, that the best is yet to be. There is a book of Bible readings entitled Travelling towards Sunrise. That is a marvellous description of Christian life, travelling, not towards the gloom of evening and the darkness of night, but towards sunrise! This is one of the assurances that take away the pain of life's experiences. But if you believe that there is nothing to come beyond this present life you are poor indeed. People say, "How do you know? How can you be sure?" The answer is, Jesus Christ. People say that no-one has ever come back from the dead to tell us. That is utter nonsense! On the third day Jesus rose triumphant from the grave and He proclaimed that death had lost its sting, that there was life, pleasure, joy, peace and fulfilment in the Kingdom of God opened up for all those who believe. This is the Gospel.

The subject of life appeals to the worldly man and this is dealt with in verses 7-10. Many worldly people say, "Let's leave out God; let's live for life." But it is made clear that there is light and darkness in life as there must necessarily be light and dark in every good painting, Go after life. This seems good advice.

"Rejoice, O young man, in your youth,
and let your heart cheer you in the
days of your youth; walk in the ways
of your heart and the sight of your
eyes. But know that for all these things
God will bring you into judgment." (11: 9)

Looking at the faces of many who are living for life you do not get the impression that they are getting much out of it. There is often a solemn lugubrious appearance about them. They talk about being 'switched on' but they seem to be switched off. Never mind the noise they make, look at their faces. Look into their eyes and see if you see the sparkle of life. Unfortunately, there are many Christians who are desolatingly gloomy. That worries me. "Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth."

But what of the second half of the verse which seems scarcely Christian?

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"Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes."

That is simply saying, "A little of what you fancy does you good." Fair enough! Life is sweet, and life is for living. The young need to rejoice and some of us need to be told not to deny youth their youth. Don't try to put old heads on young shoulders. Don't deny children their childhood because in so doing what often happens is that we project our ambitions on to our children. That is not fair.

We must not project even our spiritual ambitions on to our children, trying to make our children too spiritual and too Christian too soon. "When I was a child, I spoke as a child, and I thought as a child," says Paul, and that is how it should be. This is not an incidental thing. Children need their childhood and adolescents their adolescence. Earlier physical development is not matched by emotional maturity, and this leads to problems. There is confusion if we ignore the basic principle expounded in Scripture that growth is a necessity and that it takes time. Let our young people be young. Don't deny them their youth, but at the same time don't fall into the error of prolonging youth. "When I became a man," says Paul, "I put away childish things." (1 Cor. 13: 12) There are too many Christian men and women who have declined to grow up, who are still overgrown members of a Scripture Union class or a University Christian Union. They think and act as they did years ago. That is not right either.

Rejoice, young man, in your youth and let your heart cheer you, but be very careful, especially those of us involved in Christian work, not to isolate youth into a world of its own. That is not right psychologically or biblically. The biblical pattern is that of a family of all ages together and there is a big question mark against what is called 'youth work'. Youth grows up. The attitude of youth itself is that by the time you are twenty you are 'past it', you are too old. Take your fill of life,

"But know that for all these things, God will bring you into judgment." (11: 9)

That introduces another solemn thought. The age of wrong-doing seems to be getting lower. There was a time when it was the thirty-year olds that got into trouble; then it became the twenty-year olds. Now it is the fifteen-year olds, and the age is dropping! Live for life? Is it working? Where is it leading? That it does not bring life is testified to by the hungry agony deep down in the hearts of those we call youth. Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes, but allow for the fact that the heart and the eyes are unreliable guides. So many people wish things were different. How many young folk have said sadly in the complication of their lives, "This is not what I wanted." They have been beguiled as Adam and Eve were in the Garden of Eden, and they have lost life.

"Know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment." You live with what you make yourself, both now and in the world to come. This is the folly of the 'now' generation. It obliterates the future from its thinking, but not from its experience, and this is one reason why there is such a frenzy in life. If you are becoming persuaded that there is nothing here, and that there is nothing to come, you have to work hard at life to make something bearable out of it.

"Remove vexation from your mind, and put away pain from your body; for youth and the dawn of life are vanity."
(10: 10)

How is this to be done? There is an appeal in that exhortation and people are looking for some means of doing it. But if there is nothing here, and there is nothing to come, we can only make the best of what is here, but how can you make the best of nothing?

At this point there appears in the experience of men, the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who says,

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"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." (John 10: 10)

Therefore,

"Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come." (Eccles. 12: 1)

It is later than we all think. Remember the man who left it so late that in the end he said, "I have played the fool, I have erred exceedingly." (1 Sam. 26: 21) There are many who play the fool. They live for life, this temporary, passing life. I too love life and enjoy it more than I ever did before. But I would not like to think that this life is all I have. The best is yet to be. Thank God.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

This last chapter is perhaps the most difficult in the whole book apart from its opening verse of exhortation and the deep and varied feelings that can be evoked by the second half of verse 12. That verse must appeal to the student fraternity if not to their teachers! There is truth in that verse, because a substantial proportion of the books in circulation should never have been written, and the business of trying to read and understand them, especially those couched in indeterminate, philosophical language, is indeed a weariness to the flesh.

The twelfth verse does in fact give us a clue to the chapter because it focuses on the hard labour that is the experience of men and women who study to understand life, especially if they try to do so without reference to God. This struggle is testified to in newspapers and current literature. Read them, but be selective about which you read because much of it is unnecessary, undesirable and even salacious. Read newspapers, watch programmes on television, listen to the radio and to people's conversation, and you will become aware of the fact that there is a laborious struggle on the part of many to find some explanation or understanding of life. Many claim that bringing in God serves only to confuse the issue. As for the Bible, it is considered irrelevant. But when you shut the Bible and lay it aside you must substitute other books, and book after book is written, producing many changing theories and prescriptions, but no answers.

The tragedy politically, sociologically and economically nowadays is that the people who are trying to solve the problems of the world don't understand their own problems. They are operating on the basis of arbitrary precepts, patterns and standards which they do not defend and cannot justify. They are blatantly selective, and having started operations, they assume their first principles to have been proved and to be regarded as absolute and sacrosanct. This is intellectual dishonesty.

At the beginning of our studies we said that Ecclesiastes was not so much a preacher as an observer, and, never moving from the standpoint of faith, he challenges people of a secular disposition with regard to their chosen attitude of life, which is essentially materialistic and confined to this world. They choose to exclude God (Rom. 1: 19-25). People say, "Don't bring God into it." You don't need to bring God in, He is in. He was in before us, He will still be in after we are no longer in this world. God is; He is in; and we have to deal with Him. By all means exclude 'religion' which often is both mechanical and meaningless, something left over from parental influence, a habit. But God cannot be excluded!

Throughout these twelve chapters Ecclesiastes has exposed the pretentiousness and the emptiness of life without faith. The life of the world has been demonstrated to be not life but mere existence. Over against man's unhappy experience we must set the word of salvation and life which is found only in Jesus Christ the Son of God, who Himself said,

"The thief comes only to steal and kill
and destroy; I came that they may
have life, and have it abundantly."
(John 10: 10)

This is the message to proclaim to a world, barren and bankrupt of life and frustrated by experience.

Ecclesiastes requires us to consider the marks of faith and the marks of unbelief. If our God is what He says He is, the great and mighty King, the everlasting Shepherd, the glorious faithful Friend, the God of the covenant of grace, and if we believe this God, then the marks of faith must be calmness, assurance, peace, rest and hope. That last word is a glorious one. The Christian should never be the one with his head hanging. Our heads should be held high. The Psalmist speaks about God being:

"But thou, O Lord, art a shield about me, my glory, and the lifter of my head." (Psa. 3: 3)

He hopes in God.

Eliminate God, as unbelief does, and you find the marks of unbelief. The first is emptiness (because there is nothing). The second is tension. It is a grim job to come to terms with a life that is essentially a vacuum, because your heart cries out that it cannot and will not be at peace with a vacuum. The next mark is unrest. That word describes our generation: they are restless, backwards and forwards; they cannot be at peace because in standing still they begin to think, and that brings panic. This is why there is clamour for noise. It is an attempt to escape from thinking. Emptiness, tension, unrest and finally effort are the marks of unbelief. When there is no God there is only effort leading to that endless note of struggle which is essentially hopeless. There is an eternity, an infinity of difference between faith and unbelief. The one is marked by hope, the other by hopelessness.

The hopelessness of life without God and without the Gospel becomes more and more poignant as old age creeps on. This is the theme of the chapter. We have considered the man of the world advising people to take life as it comes, to grab each day and capitalise on it. But life draws on and we find that we are less and less able to grasp it. Our grip loses its firmness and its capacity. It is all very well to speak of the passing of the years in terms of weaving the pattern of life. But Job says,

"My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle, and come to their end without hope." (Job 7: 6)

The same sentiment is expressed by the Psalmist,

"For all our days pass away under thy wrath, our years come to an end like a sigh." (Psa. 90: 9)

I think of the Authorised Version translation,

"We spend our years as a tale that is told."

The pages turn and then comes the end. Finished!

"The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away."
(Psa. 90: 10 A.V.)

Have you ever asked yourself why some playwrights write plays that in fact have no end? It is a reflection of the writer's lack of hope. The lust and self-indulgence of the characters should lead to something eventually. But it doesn't. The play goes on and while you wait for it to get somewhere, it is finished. There is no end, it just goes on and ceases to be. You are left in nothingness.

There can of course be a ripeness in old age. I remember in my student days being introduced to an old lady well into her seventies, so full of rheumatism she could hardly get out of her armchair. But what a thrill it was to go and see her. She knew more of what was going on in Christian circles in Aberdeen than I did, and she was a woman of prayer. I once told her that I was to be preaching the next Sunday and that I was apprehensive. She looked at me and said, "What right have you to be frightened?" With a great God such as I have, what right had I to be frightened? Spending a little time with that old lady

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every other week was one of the most profitable aspects of my divinity course. There is a ripeness in old age and it is wonderful to find yourself in the company of men and women who are 'far ben' with God. It is mostly women who are close companions of God when they get old. I don't know what happens to the men.

By and large however, as we see people growing old, we see them becoming less and less. We say sadly of so many that they are only a shadow of what they once were. This is the picture in Ecclesiastes 12: 2-7. In verse 2 the storm clouds are darkening the sky, the light is fading, the days are shortening and the winter is coming. It is a picture of twilight. The second description is much more picturesque and poetic. In verses 3-7 the various members of the body and the faculties are portrayed as growing weaker. The passage is allegorical and we consider the successive phrases. The "keepers of the house", the hands, begin to tremble. The "strong men", the legs, are bent, and the "grinders", the teeth, cease to function effectively because they are few. "Those who look through the windows", the eyes, are dim. The "doors on to the street", our ears, whereby we have association and fellowship with the rest of the world, are shut. "The sound of the grinding is low." There seems to be a suggestion here of an old person in a room with various others all talking. He hears the general sound of conversation but not clear words.

It is not only the senses which are affected. Activity is also inhibited. "One rises up at the voice of a bird." This may mean old people waking up very early in the morning because they don't need the same amount of sleep, or it may refer, as Shakespeare has it, to the voice of the old man getting back to something of a quivering treble note, like a boy's. All "the daughters of song" are brought low. All that we mean by the music of life becomes indistinct. These old people are afraid of height (5), and they are afraid of the "terrors in the way." They are timid about going out. They used to like going out but now are reluctant to make the effort. The reference to the "almond tree blossom", the "grasshopper dragging itself along" and "desire failing" gives rise to so much disagreement among commentators that we make no comment. There may be a reference to the thought of Spring giving way to Summer, Summer to Autumn, and man going to his long or eternal home.

The "mourners" are the official, paid mourners who weep but who do not feel the sorrow. Often at funerals it is not the immediate family who are demonstrative in their grief. God by His grace seems to give them dignity and composure. But those who are on the perimeter of the sorrow often bring an intrusive cloud of unreal emotion into the situation. The end of life is spoken of in terms of the silver cord that suspends the lamp from the roof being snapped and the golden bowl, that has the oil and the wick, falling and breaking. The light and the life are gone. The same end of life is described as the pitcher being broken at the fountain, and the wheel by which the bucket is wound up being broken at the cistern. Man stands helpless at the well of life having no more anything with which to draw water. The dust returns to the earth as it was and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

It is the picture of old age and the dissolution of life, the separation of body and soul, and the spirit returning to God who gave it. But returning to what? Remember the story Jesus told about the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16: 19ff.). The two men died and were buried. But for one it was eternal unhappiness, and for the other it was the rest and blessedness of faith. That there is no assurance of eternal life spoken of in verses 6, 7 is evident from verse 8 where the preacher says, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." It is at this point that we see the force of:

"Remember also your Creator in the
days of your youth." (12: 1)

Start young, because this is what old age is like: the deafness that isolates you, the timidity that restrains you, and the grasp that can no longer hold. Don't leave the issues of faith and salvation until you are old.

George Philip Bible Reading In Book

A young minister told me of how after a few weeks in his first charge he paid a happy visit to the home of an old lady who had not been well. Before he left he suggested that he should pray with her, and she said, "Oh no, I'm not so ill as that." What a tragedy! You pray only if you think you are dying! Another minister told me how he visited one of his elders who had been ill, and at the close of the visit he suggested a prayer. The elder said, "No, no-one is going to pray in my house." How the Church has fallen from grace if its elders do not want to pray! Don't leave spiritual issues until you are too old to grasp them.

Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth, but not in the sense of bringing God into your life as something of an 'extra'. Remember God. Remember the facts of life: it is short. Remember the perspective of life. Don't live for the 'now', for now will soon be gone. People spend the whole of the week looking forward to Saturday, then Saturday is gone. Remember the weaver's shuttle, how it whisks across the loom of life.

Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth. Tell the young that life is not a game and tell them that, as you grow older, it gets harder and harder to change. Choices have been made that cannot be withdrawn; decisions and relationships have been made; and even more basically, dispositions of life have been so established that, whether you like it or not, you will be carried along that road for years to come. You will not be able to change. Even when people come to Jesus Christ and find salvation there will still be the consequences of these decisions in themselves and others to live with. There will still be that personality already forged to be lived with, even within the glorious forgiveness of God.

This is an urgent appeal. Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth. Remember the God who made you, the God without whom you can never be yourself, a true person with a real life. Remember while your ears are still open, your eyes still capable of seeing, your heart able to feel and your will pliable enough to respond, because with the passing of the years your personality, your capacity, your faculties become more and more brittle, and less capable of being moulded and changed and re-channelled. The Psalmist says,

"For with thee is the fountain of life;
in thy light do we see light." (Psa. 36: 9)

The Son of God came down to earth to say it more clearly,

"I came that they may have life, and
have it abundantly." (John 10: 10)

The epilogue, verses 9-13, is difficult. There is reference to the words of one Shepherd (11) who is God. Verse 12 seems to pose the question, "Can man by searching find out God?" (Job 11: 7 A.V.) The answer is, "No." He can write books, read them, study them and the process will weary him. By his searching he can find nothing but labour and confusion. But God has found man. God has come in His Son Jesus Christ. God has spoken in His Son Jesus Christ. The end of the matter, says Ecclesiastes, is,

"Fear God, and keep his commandments;
for this is the whole duty of man." (12: 13)

But the word 'duty' should not really be there. Fear God, and keep His commandments; for this is the whole of man. This is life. Recall the story of the young man who went to the Son of God and said,

"Good Master, what things need I do,
that I may inherit eternal life?" (Matt. 19: 16)

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Remember the Philippian jailor who, in the fear of his wicked heart on the very brink of eternity, called out and said, "What must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16: 30) This is the echoing cry of the human heart. What must I do?

I long for life. Tell me what to do. They said to Jesus,

"What must we do, to be doing the work of God?"

And Jesus answered,

"This is the work of God, that you
believe in him whom he has sent."
(John 6: 28, 29)

Do you honestly want the will of God? What must you do? This is the will of God, that you believe on Him, whom God has sent, even Jesus Christ His only Son, our only Saviour, in whom alone is life eternal.

What shall we say then to these things, as we shut the Book of Ecclesiastes? On the one hand there is the hunger of the human heart for life; on the other hand, the Lord, the giver of life. He says,

"Behold, I stand at the door and knock;
if any one hears my voice and opens
the door, I will come in to him and
eat with him, and he with me."
(Rev. 3: 20)

On one side of that door there is the world with its hopelessness, and on the other there is Christ with life and with hope. "If any one hears my voice . . ." Do you hear the voice of God that speaks of life as it is in Jesus Christ? Today, if you hear God's voice, harden not your heart.

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