

LIFE WITH GOD IN THE
PICTURE—THE ONLY LIFE
WORTH LIVING!

A DEVOTIONAL AND
DISCIPLESHIP STUDY OF
ECCLESIASTES FOR CHRISTIANS

Solomon looks at life from two points of view. First there is life lived under the sun or under heaven. God is out of the picture. Secondly, God is in the picture.

He views life without a Creator. He sees what he sees and draws conclusions based on that. Cycles of weariness, futile achievements, pains, pleasures and death: life has no key *unless there is a creator*. And, that Creator is not just a god, or any god, it is the God of Solomon, of David, of His believing forefathers. It is the God of Creation. The God who made all things from nothing, by the word of His power, in the space of six days, and all very good. If there is any purpose to life, someone other than man must be its objective source. Without that man is disoriented, he has no compass and no chart, he is adrift on a sea with strong tides, and soon enough will sink without trace.

Why? Purpose and meaning are excluded by death and annihilation, *if there is no God and if man has no soul*.

Solomon wrote this treatise. Did he seek to enter the mind-set of the atheist, or is he writing from experience? This has evoked strong but futile reactions both ways. Perhaps the strongest argument to say that, (whatever follies he entered into in his life,) this book is not based solely on his backsliding is that he tells us how he conducted his research. Consider 1:13; And I set my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all that is done under heaven; 1:16-17 I communed with my heart, saying, "Look, I have attained greatness, and have gained more wisdom than all who were before me in Jerusalem. My heart has understood great wisdom and knowledge." And I set my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is grasping for the wind; and 2:3 I searched in my heart how to gratify my flesh with wine, while guiding my heart with wisdom, and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the sons of men to do under heaven all the days of their lives.

It may be that, though he had done some of these things, as all men do, his “thesis” here written up is not the result of his tasting and seeing every evil, but of his vicarious entering into them in considering within himself how the ungodly must think in these circumstances. In other words, he *mentally* put himself in their shoes.

The book seems to be structured in the following way:

SUMMARY CHAPTER 1:1-11 LIVING WITHOUT GOD IN THE PICTURE.

SERMON 1 — 1:12-3:15 "I CAN'T GET NO SATISFACTION - I'VE TRIED." MICK JAGGER

SERMON 2 — 3:18-5:20 "I MIGHT AS WELL BE DEAD!"

SERMON 3 — 6:1-8:13 WHAT'S THE POINT IN ANYTHING?

SERMON 4 — 8:14-12:8 DIE LIVING OR LIVE DYING - THE CHOICE IS YOURS.

CONCLUSION — 12:9-14 AND NOW THE GOOD NEWS: THERE IS A LIFE WORTH LIVING.

This work is a textbook for the evangelist. It is a tract for the atheist. It is a message to anyone who seeks to create meaning for life outside the God of the Bible. It explodes the smug satisfaction of the worldling. It wipes the smile off his face. It erases forever his shallow assertions that all is well.

Some live for pleasure, some for money, some for fame, some for an easy life, some for sin itself – and some for no reason, but just adrift on the sea of life. Some try to give life meaning. Some try to drown their thoughts in music for fear of thinking about things for

which they can see no answer. Some despair and even kill themselves under the sense of the futility of it all.

Solomon begins with a summary. He ends with a conclusion. At the outset he plunges into the summary of life lived apart from the purpose of life. He ends with a conclusion that life is worth living – if lived as God intended, and only if lived as God intended. Four messages that expose the futile attempts of men to create meaning for life without God separate the summary and conclusion.

Every undergraduate knows that the order of a thesis follows this same order: It begins with a summary. Then there is the supporting evidence. Finally there is a conclusion. That is what we have here. A summary, 4 pieces of supporting evidence and finally the conclusion.

The preacher's summary is a concise statement of life, based on the evidence collected, viewed through the atheist's eyes. His conclusion is an application to himself as a godly man

THE WORLD NEEDS A PREACHER.

Ecclesiastes Chapter 1

1 The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

The world believes it needs many things, but what does it really need? The answer is provided here. A preacher speaks. Think of the good done by preachers who have told the truth. Compare it with the messages of other influential orators.

Hitler galvanised and unified a nation. Stalin's speeches motivated an empire. Churchill's radio broadcasts encouraged a small island nation to fight them on the beaches, and never surrender. But what came of them all? War and bloodshed. Think then of the preaching of Latimer and Ridley, Wilberforce, Spurgeon, Moody, Wesley and Whitfield and so on. Sins were forsaken, homes mended, children blessed, holiness lived, hope given, heaven gained. Faith, hope and love followed the preachers of former generations.

It has been said, "God only had one son and He made Him a preacher."

In fact preaching is the chief means of all the good that will come to the world, for it calls men to repent, and when men repent sin stops, and when sin stops, sadness stops. When men turn to Christ sanctification begins, and then satisfaction begins.

But what should a preacher say? He addresses the 3 greatest questions men are asking. Where have we come from? Why are we here? Where are we going?

The preacher in this case is Solomon. What do we know of him? God gave him wisdom. God opened his heart. He was not only wise unto salvation, but he was of an understanding heart. He urged sons to seek this with all their might.

Proverbs 4:5 Get wisdom! Get understanding! Do not forget, nor turn away from the words of my mouth.

Proverbs 4:7 Wisdom is the principal thing; Therefore get wisdom. And in all your getting, get understanding.

Proverbs 16:16 How much better to get wisdom than gold! And to get understanding is to be chosen rather than silver.

LIFE IN A FALLEN WORLD WITHOUT GOD

THERE IS NO POINT TO LIFE VERSES 1-2

2 "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher; "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity."

What is the summary of a life lived without the true God In the picture? Futility! It is a preacher that must say so. Consider any part of life - that is what the preacher will do - no part has meaning. The key to life does not lie In life itself. It doesn't lie in any of its constituent parts, nor in the whole together. All is vanity.

THERE IS NO PROFIT IN LIFE VERSES 3-7

3 What profit has a man from all his labour In which he toils under the sun?

4 One generation passes away, and another generation comes; But the earth abides forever. 5 The sun also rises, and the sun goes down, And hastens to the place where it arose. 6 The wind goes toward the south, And turns around to the north; The wind whirls about continually, And comes again on its circuit. 7 All the rivers run into the sea, Yet the sea is not full; To the place from which the rivers come, There they return again.

The first cycle of repetition is in man himself. In Shakespeare's *As you like it*, a monologue begins with the words,

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

The cast keeps changing, but the play remains the same.

It is the same earth. It is the same sun that rises and sets. It is the same winds that return to blow again. The water falls, flows and then evaporates. Everything seems to continue and be permanent, even though there are changes, but man comes and goes and is gone forever. He lasts a generation and then another group of men come. What did the last generation gain from ever having existed, if there is no God, if they have no part of them that survives death?

There are the routines of day and night, the weather, and the water cycle, but men and women are on the treadmill. That treadmill keeps turning. The only changes are with the slaves monotonously walking on it. "We're busy doing nothing, working the whole day through: trying to find lots of things not to do." Not quite, for we are often trying to find at least something worth doing. God has put eternity in our hearts. We have an innate sense that it should be worthwhile. There should be more to life. We explore, dream and hope. These very aspects of life fill dying men with frustration. They can never arrive at knowledge. They will always finish their journey without arriving at the desired destination. The sense that we are busy going nowhere haunts our souls. We find that everything arrives back at its start point again. That is, except man, who comes from the womb and goes to the tomb.

THERE IS NO PEACE IN LIFE VERSE 8

8 All things are full of labour; Man cannot express it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, Nor the ear filled with hearing.

But (verse 8) without permanence all is vanity. Such is the wearisomeness of the situation that it is inexpressible, and all that is done is unsatisfying. Nothing man looks

into leaves him completely satisfied. Nothing he learns allows him to be at complete peace of heart.

Man wants to leave his mark in history, but what does he find?

THERE IS NO PROGRESS IN LIFE VERSES 9-10

9 That which has been is what will be, That which is done is what will be done, And there is nothing new under the sun. 10 Is there anything of which it may be said, "See, this is new"? It has already been in ancient times before us.

History repeats itself monotonously. There is a different cast and different costumes, but the same stage and the same storyline. Our morals and manners are a cycle of living in the routine of behaviour our forefathers handed to us.

Man says that technology is progress, but what is so different? The spear and the missile achieve the same end for those on the receiving end. The fundamentals are no different. The purposes to which man's progress are put show that the underlying movement is a cycle.

THERE IS NO PERMANENCE IN LIFE. VERSE 11

11 There is no remembrance of former things, Nor will there be any remembrance of things that are to come By those who will come after.

Man seems obsessed with the past. He digs up fossils and wonders where we have come from. When man finds the fossil of a monkey that is different he immediately says, "Ah! At last we know where we have come from." As if thinking we are naked apes finally

makes sense of life, instead of filling us with a sense of despair. It may remove any sense of future judgment, but it also removes any sense of significance.

Men and women are amazed as they dig up old pottery or find ancient civilisations. Yet what do they learn from them? They seem to forget that the Inca ruins simply tell us that millions of unknown people lived and died without leaving anything permanent. Their love and hatred, wars and peace, politics and riches, families and friends – all lie forgotten as if they had never been. That is what life without God in the picture shouts, but the futility of it all escapes the unthinking man or woman who spend their lives unearthing it all and finding meaning in their own life of digging up the evidence of the meaninglessness of it all. Like some great philosopher some people find meaning in exploring meaninglessness.

“Those who forget history are bound to repeat it.” This saying, variously reported is both true and false. No one really remembers history and so we repeat the follies and madness of it. But also, no one can remember history - it is unsearchable. Most of humanity come into the world in darkness and even the most famous are soon obliterated in obscurity.

But who will be bothered about you 5 minutes after your funeral. Warhol said, “In the future everybody will be famous for 15 minutes.” You can be on Facebook, write a blog, be a columnist, and even present TV for years, yet be remembered by almost nobody.

Tell me, you who listen to Radio 4, apart from John Humphreys who else brings the news to you? Name the last 4 presidents of the USA. For that matter name the last 4 prime ministers of the UK. If these people are insignificant, what of the tramp, the drug addict, the soldier in Afghanistan, the child in the slums, the middle class man or woman in suburbia?

Go to the cemetery if you want to see whether people are forgotten. You will see unkept graves and on the stone is written, "Always remembered." It isn't true. Yes, I remember my grandmother lived, but how often does that thought come to mind? What do I remember? Some vague and actually inaccurate image of what they meant to me - not what they were. Memory is an illusion, it sanitizes or demonizes. One thing it does not do is bring back a true image of the past.

If we cannot remember recent history, how can we make sense of ancient history? This has a message for you. Without God in the picture, your life is utterly meaningless. If you want to leave some mark of your significance, forget it. If you think some literary monument, some building, some achievement, some invention will give you eternal significance, forget it. Those who come after are simply not interested in you. They will not care. They will live for their own pleasure, fame, gain, family, or just drift themselves.

Does this discourage you? It should not. It is not about a believer. The elect of God have significance, purpose, and permanence. They have been remembered from all eternity and will exist to all eternity with the God who chose them before the foundation of the world. As they live to God's glory their lives are not futile. They pray and speak to save souls. Even a cup of cold water given in His name is of eternal significance. Our works follow us all the way through life, through death and into eternity.

But we must preach to the minds and hearts of the godless. We must awaken their minds until their whole being cries out for God. The preacher does it by dragging them to the edge of the precipice of despair and compelling them to look down into the darkness of their own wish to live without God. He must show them that if they live without God they have made everything they do, say, think, desire or accomplish utterly meaningless.

So Solomon ends his summary of life without God. For such men and women life is an accidental collocation (arrangement) of atoms. Bertrand Russell, the atheistic philosopher voiced it. What gloom such a world view brings. No wonder such men are renowned for their despair.

LET US THEN CLOSE WITH SOME COMMENTS FROM ATHEISTS:

"I had reasons for not wanting the world to have meaning; consequently I assumed it had none." Alduous Huxley

"Which is it, is man one of God's blunders or is God one of man's?" -Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche

"Although the time of death is approaching me, I am not afraid of dying and going to Hell or (what would be considerably worse) going to the popularized version of Heaven. I expect death to be nothingness and, for removing me from all possible fears of death, I am thankful to atheism." Isaac Asimov

"I cannot conceive of a God who rewards and punishes his creatures, or has a will of the type of which we are conscious in ourselves. An individual who should survive his physical death is also beyond my comprehension, nor do I wish it otherwise; such notions are for the fears or absurd egoism of feeble souls." Albert Einstein

"Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; his origin and growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and beliefs are but the outcome of accidental collocations (arrangements) of atoms." (Therefore he concluded) "When I die, I rot" Bertrand Russell

Those following Nietzsche thought that the highest ideal of manhood when there is no god is to live with dignity in the light of absurdity!

Let us leave the last word from these philosophers with Jean Paul Sartre, **“Life has no meaning the moment you lose the illusion of being eternal.”** You see, even atheists see the truth of it all.

How has man responded to this meaninglessness? The answer is in three ways: suicide, inventing a god, finding meaning only in experiences.

It is to men and women and young people caught up in this meaninglessness that we go as preachers.

Some are saying, “There’s no point, so why bother?” They may never kill themselves, but they struggle on with the aching heart of emptiness. Some become religious to fill the God shaped vacuum. For them Karl Marx got it right: “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.”

Others throw themselves into something which gives them a sense of meaning: work, family, fun, music, leisure, hobby, TV, football. This is especially seen when things go wrong. One philosopher, Frankl, stated that finding a simple purpose was essential to survival. He described those who gave up in concentration camps and were soon dead. But those who decided on some purpose to stay alive lived – unless, of course, they were taken to the gas chambers.

We need to understand the people we are speaking to. In order to do that we do not need to watch reality TV, or read the newspaper, or some modern novel. We need to read our Bible, if we are to read the heart of man.

You may think this is all philosophy. It isn't. These atheists quoted above looked at men and women without God and described life almost exactly as the preacher did. But their message ended in the despair of meaninglessness. Their message is, "We have come from nothing, are here for no purpose and are going nowhere." The preacher had better news.

Let us carry these thoughts with us into our witness for Christ. But let us remember again and again that this futility is a thing of the past for the believer. His life has purpose. God created us to glorify Him, and only in serving and loving and trusting the One who gave His Son to save us does anything ever make sense.

IN A FALLEN WORLD WHERE CAN WE FIND SATISFACTION?

One of the greatest frustrations for men without God is that nothing makes sense. Man has a creative nature. He wants to build, to belong, to be someone, but whether he eats or drinks, buys or sells, is single or married, has children or none, is working or waiting, is well or ill, there is still a lack of satisfaction. Life should mean something, it should go somewhere. He wants to matter and not just to be matter.

This God shaped gulf is empty for those who try to fill it with religion or rituals, work, rest or play, things or thoughts—nothing satisfies his longing. There is restlessness within. He eats, but is never full, drinks but remains thirsty, sleeps, but cannot rest.

Why? Where does the problem lie? The preacher knows. He is speaking from experience, but from experience as a believer and not as an unbeliever.

1. THERE IS NO SATISFACTION WITH GOD OUT OF THE PICTURE

Man is made in the image of God. Such is the force of man’s being that he is in conflict within. Romans 1:19

Even Richard Dawkins in his dialogue with the Archbishop of Canterbury admitted to preferring to be called an agnostic rather than an atheist because he could not be certain God did not exist (reported Daily Telegraph 12/9/2012 from dialogue 11/9/2012). One might expect a little more humility from such a man.

But of course, if there is no God, however satisfying to his mind the theories of science are, what he calls his 'lump of meat', his brain, is simply a series of chemical reactions with absolutely no meaning or relevance whatever.

What of Jean Paul Sartre? Here is his take on life:

"That God does not exist, I cannot deny, That my whole being cries out for God I cannot forget." (Jean-Paul Sartre / 1905-1980) Here is the paradox that is man-without-God.

But man is perpetually seeking satisfaction, or contentment. He longs to feel that the journey for meaning is over. Without God in the picture, where does he look?

The preacher speaks of himself: **12 I, the preacher, was king over Israel, in Jerusalem.** He had prestige and possessions, he had authority and significance. He was a king. This is significant because if he had been a poor man, in an unknown town, employed in a mundane and trivial work, we might think he would have good reason to speak of a lack of satisfaction and significance. But this is the king of the castle. He has reached the high point in his career. No one is above him, everyone is below him. And what we know of him is that he was so rich. How rich? Read this:

1 Kings 10:14 The weight of gold that came to Solomon yearly was six hundred and sixty-six talents of gold, 15 besides that from the travelling merchants, from the income of traders, from all the kings of Arabia, and from the governors of the country. 16 And King Solomon made two hundred large shields of hammered gold; six hundred shekels of gold went into each shield. 17 He also made three hundred

shields of hammered gold; three minas of gold went into each shield. The king put them in the House of the Forest of Lebanon. 18 Moreover the king made a great throne of ivory, and overlaid it with pure gold. 19 The throne had six steps, and the top of the throne was round at the back; there were armrests on either side of the place of the seat, and two lions stood beside the armrests. 20 Twelve lions stood there, one on each side of the six steps; nothing like this had been made for any other kingdom. 21 All King Solomon's drinking vessels were gold, and all the vessels of the House of the Forest of Lebanon were pure gold. Not one was silver, for this was accounted as nothing in the days of Solomon. 22 For the king had merchant ships at sea with the fleet of Hiram. Once every three years the merchant ships came bringing gold, silver, ivory, apes, and monkeys. 23 So King Solomon surpassed all the kings of the earth in riches and wisdom. 24 Now all the earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom, which God had put in his heart. 25 Each man brought his present: articles of silver and gold, garments, armour, spices, horses, and mules, at a set rate year by year. 26 And Solomon gathered chariots and horsemen; he had one thousand four hundred chariots and twelve thousand horsemen, whom he stationed in the chariot cities and with the king in Jerusalem. 27 The king made silver as common in Jerusalem as stones, and he made cedar trees as abundant as the sycamores which are in the lowland.

This preacher's message is:

THERE IS NO SATISFACTION IN INTELLECTUALISM — IN PHILOSOPHY

The first area the preacher speaks of is philosophy. He tries to think it through, to reason it out, to collect all the pieces together and finish the jigsaw. What is the outcome?

THE GREATEST MINDS CAN FOCUS ON THE PROBLEM, BUT CANNOT FIND THE ANSWER

First, he says: **13 And I set my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all that is done under heaven; this burdensome task God has given to the sons of man, by which they may be exercised.**

It is not too difficult to see men trudging into work each day, having their breaks, toiling in the sun, finishing their day's work, going home, eating, sleeping and returning to the same routine. Then various problems come. Rain or sun destroys some work, thieves or wars make it pointless. Mistakes in what is done mean that it isn't as fruitful as the worker might like. Employers are not satisfied with the end result. The worker has a sense of oppression and a lack of freedom. Life without God in the picture leaves thorns and thistles, diseases, aches and pains as conundrums in life. The idea of living in a cursed world where God has created sweat of the brow and the need to toil to maintain any productivity is lost from view.

The philosopher sees the problem, but what answer can he discover to it all? With no God in the picture there is none. All he can say is, "That's the way it is." Or, if he is devoted to evolution, "It's the survival of the fittest," and this requires not just the physically fittest, but the mentally and emotionally fittest.

THE GREATEST MINDS CAN FEEL THE PAIN, BUT CANNOT FIND A REMEDY

There is more: **14 I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and indeed, all is vanity and grasping for the wind.** The philosopher looks at the world. He is not stupid. He is trying to make sense of it, but what is happening? Men are stretching out their hands to grab hold of something worthwhile, something meaningful, something lasting — something satisfying. But he concludes they are grasping the wind. Henry Martyn, the missionary, sought and won top honours at Cambridge. It was all that mattered, and yet in his moment of triumph he exclaimed, “I was surprised to find I had grasped a shadow.”

And why is this? He includes a little proverb: **15 What is crooked cannot be made straight, And what is lacking cannot be numbered.** Things go wrong in our lives, our world, our families, and cannot be mended, and whatever is missing cannot be accounted for. We cannot make a complete list of the number of problems we face, or of the things that need putting right to make a perfect world. The sheer severity of the crookedness of life in a fallen world means we cannot mend the problem. The issues are too many to be numbered.

Where does this leave the philosopher? **16 I communed with my heart, saying, "Look, I have attained greatness, and have gained more wisdom than all who were before me in Jerusalem. My heart has understood great wisdom and knowledge." 17 And I set my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is grasping for the wind. 18 For in much wisdom is much grief, And he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.** This wise and thoughtful man explored life and realised that the more he thought about life and its turbulence and trouble, its problems and failed answers, the more grief and frustration and sadness filled his soul.

He could feel the pain, but could find no remedy.

And this left him seeing that there is no satisfaction in intellectualism— in philosophy.

THERE IS NO SATISFACTION IN HEDONISM — IN FUN

Perhaps there is some diversion to the perplexity of life! The preacher explored whether there is satisfaction in hedonism— in fun: **1 I said in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with mirth; therefore enjoy pleasure"**. The world is devoted to this. Everyone needs a bit of fun! That is their way of thinking. It is even their way of coping. When they speak of life this is what they mean, "Do things which give you pleasure."

One philosopher put it this way, "You will never be happy if you continue to search for what happiness consists of. You will never live if you are looking for the meaning of life." His idea is live out what makes you feel happy, but don't try to define happiness. We might well agree with the preacher as he continues: **but surely, this also was vanity.**

After all, if you want to have a laugh, what is the point of laughter? The preacher tells us: **2 I said of laughter — "Madness!"; and of mirth, "What does it accomplish?"** When Tommy Cooper went on stage for the last time he is said to have commented, "I have a new act tonight, but I am not sure how to finish it." That very performance he collapsed as the curtain closed and everyone thought it was part of the act. But it was the end. It was the end of the show, the act, the laughter, the life. What did Tommy Cooper accomplish as he left people in stitches of laughter? Their laughter ended and they returned to the reality of life with its problems and pressures. Their laughter was a diversion to the real issues of living.

Perhaps there is meaning in gratifying our appetites. The preacher tells us the answer: **3 I searched in my heart how to gratify my flesh with wine, while guiding my heart with wisdom, and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the sons of men to do under heaven all the days of their lives.**

Tasting wine, enjoying expensive restaurant meals— is that where life is really lived to the full? The Preacher tried to explore how, if you lived it up you could sort it all out and bring an answer to man’s problems and the complexity of life in a fallen world.

Perhaps there is something else we could do to bring satisfaction?

THERE IS NO SATISFACTION IN MATERIALISM — IN FORTUNE

One colleague once said to me , “I know winning the national lottery will not make me happy.” I asked him why then he bothered doing it. “I would like to prove it wouldn’t make me happy,” was his reply. He was right and he was wrong!

THERE WAS NO SATISFACTION IN WHAT I ACCOMPLISHED

Imagine being totally successful. You are able to accomplish every goal. The preacher did it. **4 I made my works great, I built myself houses, and planted myself vineyards. 5 I made myself gardens and orchards, and I planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. 6 I made myself water pools from which to water the growing trees of the grove.** He would have had a beautiful garden, his decorating is finished, the house of his dreams is built, everything was right, but nothing was quite right.

THERE WAS NO SATISFACTION IN WHAT I ACQUIRED

He not only did things, he had things. **7 I acquired male and female servants, and had servants born in my house. Yes, I had greater possessions of herds and flocks than all who were in Jerusalem before me. 8 I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the special treasures of kings and of the provinces. I acquired male and female singers, the delights of the sons of men, and musical instruments of all kinds.** He was the man with the newest gadget, the most DVDs, the top of the range car. He was the envy of all. If he looked at his bank balance he knew he could never spend it all. Recently a couple won £148 million on the Euro Lottery. They were in their late 40s. I am not too good at maths but I think at a minimum of 3% interest per annum this would give them a return of 4.44 million per annum. If they were taxed at 40% this would leave a meagre £2,664,000 pa. This means they would have to spend £7300 each and every day just to keep their savings at £148 million.

However, one man's will is said to have contained the words, "I, John Smith, being of sound mind, spent it all." If they wanted to spend it all and assumed they would live to be 85, which is just about the average age, they would have to spend £148 million over 40 years, which is just about £10,000 each and every day. Added together they could just about spend up the lot if each day they went out and spent, let's say, £15,000 give or take a thousand or two.

Do you think that when they have the house, car, stereo, TV, holiday, food, leisure and pleasure that they will be at peace?

The preacher knew the answer: **9 So I became great and excelled more than all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. 10**

Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, For my heart rejoiced in all my labour; And this was my reward from all my labour. He had everything, and he had the ability to evaluate what wealth and health and achievement and possessions meant. And sadly concluded, **11 Then I looked on all the works that my hands had done And on the labour in which I had toiled; And indeed all was vanity and grasping for the wind. There was no profit under the sun.**

Later Jesus would be asked to arbitrate in a dispute over possessions. This was His answer.

Luke 12:15 And He said to them, "Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses." 16 Then He spoke a parable to them, saying: "The ground of a certain rich man yielded plentifully. 17 "And he thought within himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no room to store my crops?' 18 "So he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build greater, and there I will store all my crops and my goods. 19 'And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry.'" 20 "But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?' 21 "So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."

A man's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses, and yet generation after generation joins the rat race for possessions.

Perhaps then the peace of mind and sense of purpose man is seeking lies elsewhere.

THERE IS NO SATISFACTION IN EGOISM — IN FAME

The preacher was a king. He has already told us of his pre-eminence. Is that the meaning of life? Is it important that I get a name for myself? Should I be building up my reputation? Should I seek to be known for some great achievement or merely for my position in life?

WISDOM IS BETTER THAN FAME

But, what can the successor to the king do? **12 Then I turned myself to consider wisdom and madness and folly; For what can the man do who succeeds the king? — Only what he has already done.** He just does more of the same. It is said that when the kings of Babylon and Persia succeeded each other one of their first acts was to erase the monuments to the victories of their predecessors and while carving out a name for themselves they ensured their own accomplishments were carved into the walls of their own palaces and cultural monuments. But what do kings do? They make war and marry, and eat and drink and have harems and bear children, and employ spies and are involved in intrigues. They then die—get assassinated, die in battle in some vainglorious war, get deposed and murdered as Belshazzar did, or die from a disease as Alexander the Great did, or just fade away and die in obscurity as Napoleon did! Tell me; what is the difference between what the Iron Lady, Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair did, or what the present Prime Minister will do, or the leader of the opposition would do? What is the significant difference between Clinton, Bush

and Obama or Trump? The Oval Office is still Oval. Changes in administration change little.

Wisdom is better than fame, for fame is simply a treadmill of repeating the actions of the former holder of that office.

WISDOM IS BETTER THAN FOLLY

Perhaps then a man just needs wisdom. Instead of pursuing philosophy, fun, fortune and fame he should live thoughtfully and wisely. The preacher could conclude: **13 Then I saw that wisdom excels folly As light excels darkness. 14 The wise man's eyes are in his head, But the fool walks in darkness.** Fools are just living life; or rather life itself is in the driving seat. "Eat, drink and be merry," just about sums up their lives. But they forget what the wise man perceives: **Yet I myself perceived That the same event happens to them all.** Lurking in the shadows of life is death. It is appointed unto men once to die. Philosophers have a lot to say about death:

'Death is more universal than life; everyone dies but not everyone lives.' A Sachs

'There is no cure for birth and death except to enjoy the interval.' George Santayana (1863 - 1952), SOLILOQUIES IN ENGLAND, 1922, "WAR SHRINES"

A fool walks in the dark trying to get most out of life while being stalked by death in a game which must end with his own demise.

Wisdom is better than fame and folly, but the Preacher tells us something else:

WISE OR A FOOL—THEY FLY, FORGOTTEN, AS A DREAM...

The old hymn says:

Time, like an ever rolling stream,
Bears all its sons away;
They fly, forgotten, as a dream
Dies at the opening day.

That is the frustrating, wearisome conclusion of the thinker: **15 So I said in my heart, "As it happens to the fool, It also happens to me, And why was I then more wise?" Then I said in my heart, "This also is vanity." 16 For there is no more remembrance of the wise than of the fool forever, Since all that now is will be forgotten in the days to come. And how does a wise man die? As the fool!** He is saying that there is not even any point in developing the mind and trying to think and behave with wisdom. Plato summed up his own thoughts with:

‘Must not all things at the last be swallowed up in death?’ Plato (427 BC - 347 BC), Dialogues, Phaedo

DEATH DEFINES THE MEANING OF LIFE

Those who write God out of the picture are left with a Black Hole of emptiness. It sucks into it all meaning, purpose, true joy, contentment. Jean Paul Sartre the Philosopher said of death: "Death is a continuation of my life — without me..." (Jean-Paul Sartre / 1905-1980 / The Condemned of Altona / 1959) Think of the nonsense of it. He is even try to salvage something of himself after he thinks himself non-existent.

THE CERTAINTY OF DEATH BRINGS A SENSE OF DISTRESS

A man thinks of life and tries to make sense of it in the light of death. Where does it lead him? The Preacher compels anyone who tries to view life with God out of the picture to explore his philosophy to its logical conclusion: **17 Therefore I hated life because the work that was done under the sun was distressing to me, for all is vanity and grasping for the wind.** I remember as a young child thinking how unfair it was to have life imposed on me with only one certainty before me. I would most definitely die. I hated being alive. It scared me because death scared me. Nothing else mattered in life because of death. The ultimate statistic is that one in one dies, and I could not face life because of death. I was one of those who **through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.** Hebrews 2:15

THE CERTAINTY OF DEATH BRINGS A SENSE OF DISGUST

Life must and will be lived. Time will carry every one of us from the womb to the tomb. Money may accrue. Possessions may come. But, what then? Death will take it all away. Pharaohs had themselves buried with ships, gold, slaves, and wives and so on. But what the grave robbers didn't get the archaeologists did. They left it all behind. As a man dies his hand slips open for the last time and his last possession goes to another dying man. This gives us a sense of disgust about everything. It is so unfair. I know a man who left 30 houses to be inherited by his grandchildren, but they were put in trust under the care of his son. This verse came true. **18 Then I hated all my labour in which I had toiled under the sun, because I must leave it to the man who will come after me. 19 And who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will rule over all my labour in which I toiled and in which I have shown myself wise under the sun. This also is vanity.** That son borrowed from the 30 houses and sold them one by one until

there was nothing left for the grandchildren. All those good intentions that grandfather had have been thwarted by a foolish and greedy son. All that labour lost. That happened in my mother's family. One of her great grandfathers earned a great deal of money through inventing the underwater watch. His son spent the whole fortune on drink and died a pauper. It should fill us with a sense of disgust at the folly of it all. Parent after parent saves and scrimps and invests and writes a will. What happens? Some godless son or daughter inherits it and blows it on a holiday, a new car, a better house, new decor... Tell me, where is the value in working all through your life with the intention of passing it on to anyone? For myself, I believe that all I have is from the Lord, and all I have should return to Him and advance His cause. The very thought of handing unneeded resources over to already wasteful or wealthy children seems to show an absence of wisdom and certainly can only lead to the question, "Why ever did I even bother saving anything. I should have used it while I was alive."

THE CERTAINTY OF DEATH BRINGS A SENSE OF DESPAIR

20 Therefore I turned my heart and despaired of all the labour in which I had toiled under the sun. 21 For there is a man whose labour is with wisdom, knowledge, and skill; yet he must leave his heritage to a man who has not laboured for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. 22 For what has man for all his labour, and for the striving of his heart with which he has toiled under the sun? 23 For all his days are sorrowful, and his work burdensome; even in the night his heart takes no rest. This also is vanity.

And so, if a man is distressed and disgusted at life because death makes it all futile, there is no wonder that it leads to a dead end. Despair is a lock without a key, a closed door with no handle. It is a tunnel with no light at the end. When I

was young we travelled by train from Flitwick to Bedford. Just outside Ampthill was a tunnel. That tunnel had a curve and therefore as you entered it was all dark. Then a small arched doorway of light appeared at the end. It stayed small for a while before it enlarged and rushed towards those of us leaning out of the windows of the carriages. It was the light at the end of the tunnel. Despair plunges us into a tunnel where there is no end, no light, and no glimmer of relief.

Here is a man or woman. They go to work. Their business is a success. Their home life is a success. Their children grow up successfully. Their investment portfolio is a success. Their holidays are a success. Then a heart attack takes them away. What has been gained from all that working, planning, worrying, waiting, decision-making, investing, saving, spending, eating and drinking? They have gone to their **eternal home, And the mourners go about the streets.** Ecclesiastes 12:5

The preacher again sums up the search for satisfaction in philosophy, fun, fortune and fame: **this also is vanity.**

Is there a life worth living? Is there a life which can be lived contentedly? Can man work in a fallen world and still have a sense that it is all worthwhile, and can he be satisfied? The answer of the Preacher is very simple. Yes, he can. Where is this satisfaction to be found?

2. WITH GOD IN THE PICTURE LIFE IS WORTH LIVING

Preachers have a message worth delivering. I once saw a cartoon with two men knocking on people's doors giving away literature. The literature was a blank piece of paper. The astonished homeowner said to them, "But there's nothing on

this tract.” The men said, “We know. We’re atheists!” That’s it. Apart from pointing out that there’s no final purpose in anything the atheist is silent. He may urge you to try and give life meaning, but any thoughtful person knows that death makes everything meaningless if we have come from nothing and are going nowhere except into oblivion.

What about those who live in a fallen world, but who know the God who created, cursed and covenanted to send a Saviour? For them it is different.

THERE IS SATISFACTION IN THE ENJOYMENT OF GOD’S GOODNESS

THERE IS A GOD-GIVEN JOY IN FOOD AND CLOTHING, NOT FAME AND FORTUNE

24 Nothing is better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and that his soul should enjoy good in his labour. This also, I saw, was from the hand of God.
25 For who can eat, or who can have enjoyment, more than I?

Materialism has been called the organised emptiness of the spirit (Frankl) But a believer can enjoy life as he sees the goodness of God in a fallen world. Joseph can labour meaningfully in slavery and even in jail unjustly condemned. He can be satisfied, because **“having food and clothing, (he can) therewith be content.”** He can **be content with such things as (he) has.** Why? Because the Lord has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you. Hebrews 13:5

There is a poem that says,

In the heart of London city,
'midst the dwellings of the poor,
these bright golden words were spoken,
"I have Christ, what want I more."
He who heard them, ran to fetch her
something from the world's great store;
it was needless, she died saying,
"I have Christ, what want I more."

I have heard many say something like this, but they all seemed to be quite well off. By contrast, he Preacher knew he could have as much enjoyment from possessions as anyone, yet unless he received his goods as from the hand of God as tokens of mercy and goodness all was futile. He was eating and drinking damnation. What would be sweet to the taste would be bitter in the end.

THERE IS A GOD-GIVEN JOY BEING GOOD NOT HAVING GOODS

But there is not only contentment and satisfaction in receiving good as from God, there is satisfaction in wisdom. The man who looks at the world through eyes made wise unto salvation recognizes that there is a life worth living: **26 For God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy to a man who is good in His sight; but to the sinner He gives the work of gathering and collecting, that he may give to him who is good before God. This also is vanity and grasping for the wind.**

Everything works together for good to them that love God and are the called according to His purpose. This means that even evil men doing evil deeds work for the blessing of God's people. Joseph saw it clearly. **"You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good."** You sold me, but God sent me.

Paul could say that he had learned to be content in whatever state he was. Philippians 4:11 He was satisfied, and yet there was a holy dissatisfaction. Satisfaction is still only partial, but it is not elusive for the believer. His greatest contentment comes later.

Thinking of the promised Saviour, David says, **Psalm 17:15 As for me, I will look upon Your face in righteousness: I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with Your likeness.**

THERE IS SATISFACTION IN THE RECOGNITION OF GOD'S PURPOSES

Added to a sense of meaning and contentment in acknowledging God's goodness, there is also the recognition that it is not chaos out here in the world. Time and chance may appear to happen to all, but there is timing, a plan and purpose in what happens in a fallen world. The unbeliever may not acknowledge it, he may not like it, but the believer sees that in the cycle of life in a God-cursed and sin-cursed world there is still purpose seeming to go in circles and cycles, but ever moving forward.

THERE IS A TIME FOR WORK

1 To everything there is a season, A time for every purpose under heaven: 2 A time to be born, And a time to die; A time to plant, And a time to pluck what is planted; 3 A time to kill, And a time to heal; A time to break down, And a time to build up; 4 A time to weep, And a time to laugh; A time to mourn, And a time to dance; 5 A time to cast away stones, And a time to gather stones; A time to embrace, And a time to refrain from embracing; 6 A time to gain, And a time to lose; A time to keep, And a time to throw away; 7 A time to tear, And a

time to sew; A time to keep silence, And a time to speak; 8 A time to love, And a time to hate; A time of war, And a time of peace. 9 What profit has the worker from that in which he labours? 10 I have seen the God-given task with which the sons of men are to be occupied.

In this beautiful poem the believer, living in a sin troubled world, sees that life must be faced head on. There is a time — but what for? **“A time for every purpose under heaven.”** There is a purpose to life. Even here on earth since the fall there is a point to living. God has given these tasks to men. He can eat and drink to the glory of God. He can work and rest to the glory of God. He can live, and even die for the glory of God. Life with God in the picture may appear the same for the believer and the unbeliever, but the king on his throne without God lives a meaningless life, but the lowest caste street sweeper in Calcutta who knows the Lord can work contentedly, satisfied with God alone as he waits for the day when he awakes in Christ’s likeness and receives his inheritance.

But there is not only a time for work—

THERE IS A TIME FOR WONDER

The second part of satisfaction in God’s purpose is to recognize that the very sense of eternity, beauty, purpose and so on, are from God and are part of God’s image in man. Does a cow look out and see and appreciate beauty? But, **11 He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end.** Man is constantly trying to understand. He explores macroscopic and the microscopic. He looks back and tries to look ahead. Yet the universe while yielding up some things, keeps most of its secrets locked up from man. They

boast they have found the ‘God particle’. But what they will find is yet another something, but will they piece it all together into a great ‘theory of everything’?

The answer is given here: **12 I know that nothing is better for them than to rejoice, and to do good in their lives, 13 and also that every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labour — it is the gift of God.** What we are matters more than what we have. What I am is me! What I have, merely mine. Rejoice and do what pleases God and blesses others—enjoy what God grants you in His goodness. That is God’s purpose for you.

THERE IS A TIME FOR WORSHIP

Yet there is something more. There is a time for work and for wonder. Man has to work and man is constantly filled with a sense of the greatness and complexity of it all. Yet there is a further step.

What man does is so temporary. His buildings collapse. His plans fade. His hopes collapse. But **14 I know that whatever God does, It shall be forever. Nothing can be added to it, And nothing taken from it.** What He begins He completes. “Whom He foreknew, He also predestined..., called, justified, and glorified.” That’s it. If He creates, no one need add to it. If He saves, no one need add to it.

But why does God do anything anyway? **God does it, that men should fear before Him.** It is that they might find their utter contentment, satisfaction and purpose in the joy and blessing of knowing Him. There is a time for worship.

15 That which is has already been, And what is to be has already been: Yes! There is a sense in which everything is the same. Yet, there is something man has

not really added to the equation of life. Without God in the picture man is just being fattened up as food for worms. Yet that is not quite true. In fact it is utterly wrong. Whether man acknowledges God or not man will exist through the eternal ages in heaven or hell. How do we know? Because there is a God whether man believes it or not **And God requires an account of what is past.**

In other words, **It is appointed unto men to die once, and after this the judgment. Hebrews 9:27**

LET US CONCLUDE:

MAN WITHOUT GOD SUMS UP LIFE AND SAYS;

Such, in outline, but even more purposeless, more void of meaning, is the world which Science presents for our belief. Amid such a world, if anywhere, our ideals henceforward must find a home. That Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins—all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths,

only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built. (Bertrand Russell—A free man's worship)

But the One Man sent from God said,

I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly. John 10:10

“I might as well be dead!”

Living without God in the picture is a demoralising thing. As we saw previously the preacher shows that the unconverted man looks at a broken and fallen world and says, “What is lacking cannot be numbered.” (Ecclesiastes 1:15) Thoughtful, but unsaved men, can see the problems, but what are their remedies? In summary it is this, “Make the best of it.” They cannot see a way forward so they try to live within the world taking things as they come and trying to see the best in it, or to do their best in it, or to make the best of a bad time.

This sermon looks at what the problems are and two totally different answers to those problems.

The message is in two parts:

1. Problems in a fallen world and responses to them:
 - a. When you are a man of the world
 - b. When you are a worshipper
2. The dominant problem in a fallen world and responses to it:
 - a. When you are a worldling
 - b. When you are a worshipper

1. How shall we respond to the problems of life?

a. Worldlings can see the problems but what are their answers?

Here are a series of problems in this sad and fallen world. If God is not your Lord, and you have no divine reference point in the God of the Bible how will you cope? Will you become cynical? Will you become a fatalist? Will you despair?

Most people opt to make the best of a bad job.

i. How do men of this world cope with injustice?

Ecclesiastes 3:16 Moreover I saw under the sun: In the place of judgment, Wickedness was there; And in the place of righteousness, Iniquity was there. The men of this world can see that there is no real justice. Rich people get away with it. The politician claims thousands of pounds in expenses and if caught pays it back and may get suspended. Scores did it, but only one or two ended up in the courts. The out of work mum goes shoplifting and comes away with a criminal record. You will know of many cases where you have asked, "Where's the justice in that?" But within man there is a sense that God will judge it all. We know it from Romans 1:32—**who knowing the judgment of God, not only do the same, but approve those who do them.** So how do we make sense of it without really knowing what God has said?

Like Solomon thinking as a man of the world we may conclude: **17 I said in my heart, "God shall judge the righteous and the wicked, For there is a time there for every purpose and for every work."** In other words, "If there is a God, He will sort it all out later." This gives some alleviation of the frustration of men when they see injustice.

Perhaps, if they believe in some kind of God they may go further: **18 I said in my heart, "Concerning the condition of the sons of men, God tests them, that they may see that they themselves are like animals." 19 For what happens to the sons of men also happens to animals; one thing befalls them: as one dies, so dies the other. Surely, they**

all have one breath; man has no advantage over animals, for all is vanity. 20 All go to one place: all are from the dust, and all return to dust. Perhaps God is just showing us, says the thinking man without a revelation of God, that God is showing that we really are just ‘naked apes’, brute beasts, no different from *other* animals, (as they perceive themselves to be. After all, who thinks that when a lion brings down an antelope there is injustice? Who watches the hen coup and sees the pecking order that one hen is pecked by all the others, that this is unfair and that the top *dog* of the hen coup should be punished?

So, he asks a question as a doubter **21 Who knows the spirit of the sons of men, which goes upward, and the spirit of the animal, which goes down to the earth?** Who can even know whether we are any different? Perhaps we do all go down to the earth and there is no spirit to fly up to heaven or to live on apart from the body?

What then is the answer? How do we cope with the sense that there is injustice in the world, and that even in the judicial system there is wickedness and unfairness against the poor? The best thing is to make the best of it—

22 So I perceived that nothing is better than that a man should rejoice in his own works, for that is his heritage. The answer is that in the light of the badness it is better to get on with your own life, and not be bothered about bigger issues. Mind your own business! Why go looking for trouble?

After all — **For who can bring him to see what will happen after him?** This may well mean, “Who can be sure there will be a judgment day when all wrongs are righted?” Or perhaps, “This is all there is, so it is the only thing worth doing anyway!”

ii. How do the men of this world cope with oppression?

But there are other problems in the world. The second is oppression by the powerful and wealthy of the poor. **Ecclesiastes 4:1 Then I returned and considered all the oppression that is done under the sun.** This is particularly evil for the grief and sadness, the loss and deprivation it produces. Thoughtful men and women are horrified at it, and say, **And look! The tears of the oppressed, But they have no comforter — On the side of their oppressors there is power, But they have no comforter.** They are asking, “Who is on the side of the poor? Who will speak for the oppressed? Who will stand up for the weak?” The oppressor has wealth, power and influence. He may have military might, political power and find legal loopholes, but the poor has not even got a shoulder to cry on.

How do men of the world cope with it, especially if they are among the oppressed? **2 Therefore I praised the dead who were already dead, More than the living who are still alive.** They say, “I’d be better off dead!” Thinking that death is the end, they wish for death. But there is something even better than death—**3 Yet, better than both is he who has never existed, Who has not seen the evil work that is done under the sun.** “I wish I had never been born.” That is the way to cope! Imagine wishing you had never known anything rather than live through the experience of being trodden.

But it is the way some cope. They spend their life wishing they had never been born.

iii. How do men of this world cope with envy?

A third evil in the world, that is general and evident is that of greed and envy. The rich want to keep it and the poor want to get it. A man has a tremendous ability or skill. He invents something, or he has a bumper harvest, or he skilfully and wisely invests in a project and the returns are enormous. But others look on with resentment and envy. **4 Again, I saw that for all toil and every skilful work a man is envied by his neighbour. A**

thoughtful worldly man looks at it in disgust, thinking: **This also is vanity and grasping for the wind.**

Yet at the same time **5 The fool folds his hands And consumes his own flesh.** There is however, so often a relationship between a man's effort and his success. It is not always true. But it is the norm that a fool will do nothing and starve to death! In the end, if our hands are inactive we will have nothing to eat. Yet still those who sit back and do nothing speak with resentment of those who succeed or whose children succeed.

A young person goes to Cambridge. His parents worked hard to get him educated. They had a stable home and did all they could to inculcate a right attitude to work. Here is a young person from some council estate whose parents never bothered. He didn't learn and is now unemployed. We may sympathise with him for what may have been avoidable problems he inherits for many reasons. But where his parents have been neglectful do they have the right to envy the success of the young person at Cambridge? If their son has been casual and lazy, does he have any right to be spiteful towards the man with the degree and a good job? Life is more complex, but this does happen.

How then do men of the world cope with envious and resentful people eyeing what they own and how they earn it with a bitter and critical attitude? They say, **6 Better a handful with quietness Than both hands full, together with toil and grasping for the wind.** They say that it is better to have less and not have the bother and criticism and envy and unpleasantness that comes with success and wealth.

iv. How do men of the world cope with greed?

Solomon looks at another evil **7 Then I returned, and I saw vanity under the sun: 8 There is one alone, without companion: He has neither son nor brother. Yet there is no end to**

all his labours, Nor is his eye satisfied with riches. He sees a miser. He is alone. He has no one he works for except himself. He has more than he could need. He has all he wants, but he is never satisfied. There is always another deal to close, another, investment to make, another pound to save.

But he never asks, "For whom do I toil and deprive myself of good?" This also is vanity and a grave misfortune. But he never stops his Scrooge-like obsession with money long enough to ask, "What's the point of having more than I can ever spend?"

The man of the world responds and copes by seeing the value of friendship. **9 Two are better than one, Because they have a good reward for their labour. 10 For if they fall, one will lift up his companion. But woe to him who is alone when he falls, For he has no one to help him up. 11 Again, if two lie down together, they will keep warm; But how can one be warm alone? 12 Though one may be overpowered by another, two can withstand him. And a threefold cord is not quickly broken.**

He says, "Two are better than one!" Have you seen people sitting in a restaurant on their own? No one to talk with; no one to eat with—they may have the very best meal, but the only benefit is the taste! A meal is not about eating it is about getting together and communicating with each other. The food is fundamental, of course, but it is also incidental.

When you work with someone else and it is successful you have a better reward—you share in the benefit together. Then, what if it goes wrong? You can pick each other up. What about when the day is done and you go home? Two lie together and in marriage warm and comfort each other. And if someone attacks you, verbally, emotionally, physically, two are better than one. And, Solomon says, three are therefore even better.

So, the man of the world looks at a miser and says, "Companionship is how to cope with life." The Beatles said they would get a little help from their friends, but they meant drugs, not people. But the philosophy of the man without salvation is that it is 'me, my family and my friends.'

v. How do men of this world cope with fading popularity?

They say something like this, **13 Better a poor and wise youth Than an old and foolish king who will be admonished no more.** Here is a poor young fellow. He is better off than a stubborn old man, even if he is king. Why? **14 For he comes out of prison to be king.** The king came out of prison to rule, just as Nelson Mandela did. Public opinion is ever changing. First Maggie Thatcher is in, and then she is demonized. Tony Blair was for education, education, education, and then he is kicked out! So, it seems popularity and fame is such an up and down thing. The popular person **Although he was born poor in his kingdom** may become today's idol. Yet what about tomorrow? **15 I saw all the living who walk under the sun; They were with the second youth who stands in his place.** What a turnaround! He who displaced the old king is now displaced by some new rising star. And for a while **16 There was no end of all the people over whom he was made king;** that is, he is held high by everyone. **Yet those who come afterward will not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and grasping for the wind.** However, popularity comes and goes. The youth of today have their pop-idols, but give it a couple of years. Most of those who are top of the hit parade today will be bottom of the bin tomorrow.

How do we cope with it all? Do we just come to terms with it? Do we simply say, "That's life; here today, gone tomorrow"?

To live for any of these things in a fallen world is therefore pointless. Thoughtful but fallen man sees the problems and tries to find some remedy, or some way of coping with it. He has no real answer, he just finds a way to cope and get through life until he too dies!

b. Worshippers can see the problems but what is their answer?

With God in the picture life makes sense. The problems are still there, but the worshipper understands men because he takes time to learn from God.

i. A God-fearing man curbs his words

Ecclesiastes 5:1 Walk prudently when you go to the house of God; and draw near to hear rather than to give the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they do evil. A fool goes through the routine of making a sacrifice, but to obey is always better than sacrifice. A godly man looks at life and instead of frustration and perplexity, finding a way to cope, or even despair, he listens to the word of God. He isn't constantly questioning or even criticising God for allowing evil to continue. He quietly seeks to understand and worship the God of the Bible from the heart. He doesn't shoot his mouth off, and rant and rage about the problems of life. He doesn't protest and speak as if he is right and all the world is wrong. He doesn't pontificate about knowing the answers. He sits and learns from God as He has revealed Himself in His word.

2 Do not be rash with your mouth, And let not your heart utter anything hastily before God. For God is in heaven, and you on earth; Therefore let your words be few. In particular he doesn't come before God either complaining about all the problems in the world and the injustice and unfairness of it all. Rather his ears are open and his mouth closed. Instead of trying to make sense of it all, he seeks to submit his reasoning and questioning to God in the awe and reverence of worship.

3 For a dream comes through much activity, And a fool's voice is known by his many words. This is a proverb that what consumes our thoughts in the day fills our dreams at night, and just as true is that fools are never short of words, but how tragic that is when it is true of foolish worshippers, who do not stop to learn from the Lord.

ii. A God-fearing man keeps his word

4 When you make a vow to God, do not delay to pay it; For He has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you have vowed — 5 Better not to vow than to vow and not pay. 6 Do not let your mouth cause your flesh to sin, nor say before the messenger of God that it was an error. Why should God be angry at your excuse and destroy the work of your hands? The God-fearing man is a man of his word. If he promises, he pays. If he says he will do a thing, he will. And the proverb has to be repeated: **7 For in the multitude of dreams and many words there is also vanity.** That just as our dreams are empty things, so is much of what we say.

Instead we should **(But) fear God.**

And that is the end of a series of problems. Men look at them and find a way to cope with them without God. But how should we live? By curbing our words and keeping our word. Others may be unjust and oppressing, envious and greedy or seeking popularity. We fear God. We learn from God about living in a world full of problems. We do not complain and criticize. We trust the Lord who controls the very breath we breathe and helps us to know the human heart and understand why things are as they are. Also, when we speak we have something to say. When we worship we take our words seriously. When we promise we pay up. The world will continue to be a place of injustice, oppression and greed, but we will get through without contributing to those evils. But our remedy is not

to worry, not to wash our hands of it all, not to walk away from the problems and live as best we can; we worship; we sit still and know that He is God.

2. How shall we respond to *the* problem of life?

Once again we go back to viewing life through the eyes of the man of this world. He may believe there is a God, but he doesn't worship the God of the Bible. But that man looks at this world and sees the problems. How should he respond? The preacher tells him.

a. Worldlings can see the great problem— wealth—but they have no answer.

8 If you see the oppression of the poor, and the violent perversion of justice and righteousness in a province, do not marvel at the matter; for high official watches over high official, and higher officials are over them.

The problem lies in wealth. Injustice, oppression and so on—all are rooted in the greatest and most common pursuit of man—wealth. Later we learn, "The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil."

So don't be surprised at corruption, injustice and oppression. Everyone is pursuing the same goal. The worker has a supervisor has a manager has an owner and all want a slice of the action. They are all where they are for the money.

9 Moreover the profit of the land is for all; even the king is served from the field. This is easily proven a poor man works in the field but the king eats from it.

However we are to think of the futility of pursuing wealth. It is a worldwide problem because it is so completely futile. And thinking men can see the problem.

10 He who loves silver will not be satisfied with silver; Nor he who loves abundance, with increase. This also is vanity.

No matter how rich a person is he is not satisfied that he is rich enough.

11 When goods increase, They increase who eat them; So what profit have the owners Except to see them with their eyes?

When riches increase, responsibilities increase. A man lives in a hovel. He doesn't need keys and CCTV, but let him win the Lottery and soon enough he has security issues. No one begs from a beggar, but the rich are courted for donations constantly. So here is the man with money, but what is money but something other people want from him, and if he buys something with it what can he do except look at what he has bought!

12 The sleep of a labouring man is sweet, Whether he eats little or much; But the abundance of the rich will not permit him to sleep.

In comes the man from a hard days graft. He eats a meagre and plain meal and then sleeps away, but the rich man's mind is planning and scheming or worrying and keeping him awake..

13 There is a severe evil which I have seen under the sun: Riches kept for their owner to his hurt. 14 But those riches perish through misfortune; When he begets a son, there is nothing in his hand.

Then, of course, what if a man works hard, but something goes wrong and all his wealth melts away. A flood, a storm, a robber, a failed investment—the reasons are legion. He

had so much and now he also knows the pain of losing everything. He inherits a fortune, but has nothing to write in his will.

15 As he came from his mother's womb, naked shall he return, To go as he came; And he shall take nothing from his labour Which he may carry away in his hand. 16 And this also is a severe evil — Just exactly as he came, so shall he go. And what profit has he who has laboured for the wind?

But the final frustration of living for money is that there is no pocket in a shroud. He was born with nothing and he dies with nothing. He leaves it all behind. What was the point of the sweat and toil? There wasn't any point in it whatever.

17 All his days he also eats in darkness, And he has much sorrow and sickness and anger.

But he doesn't have to wait until he dies to see the futility of money in the bank. Let bereavement come; what can money do to ease the pain? Let sickness get a hold; how can money be medicine? Let something go wrong; how can money ease his sense of frustration, vexation and anger?

Is there a life worth living? After all, we all do need money!

Is there any point in life?

b. Worshippers can see the problem, but they have an answer

The worshipper lives in the same world. He sees the same things. He may be tempted to view the vanity of life in the same way. But he doesn't.

i. God given work is good — it is meaningful

18 Here is what I have seen: It is good and fitting for one to eat and drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labour in which he toils under the sun all the days of his life which God gives him; for it is his heritage. (to be continued)

ii. God given wealth is a gift —is worthwhile

19 As for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, and given him power to eat of it, to receive his heritage and rejoice in his labour — this is the gift of God. 20 For he will not dwell unduly on the days of his life, because God keeps him busy with the joy of his heart. (to be continued)

WITH DEATH IN THE PICTURE, WHAT'S THE POINT—IN ANYTHING? ECCLESIASTES

CHAPTER 6:1-8:13

Is there any point in anything? We have already seen that the man who tries to live without God in the picture can find no satisfaction in philosophy, fun, fortune or fame. Why? Because as soon as death is in the equation it makes a mockery of everything. And yet there is a life worth living. There is a time for work, wonder and worship—and it makes life worthwhile, because God exists.

Thoughtful men and women look at the enormous problems in the world. It is a broken, fractured, fallen world, but what is their remedy? “Keep your head down and live your life as best you can.” That’s it! Men can see the problem, but have no answer; they can feel the pain, but have no cure. And so with death in the picture we might as well be dead because injustice, oppression and so on, continue. The bullies win and the poor are downtrodden.

Yet the worshipper listens to the word of God to understand what life is really about. And he can see value in serving God in the mundane and laborious work of a fallen world.

And what now happens is that the preacher begins again.

He is looking at life, but he is also thinking of death as part of life. And so he looks now at how people look at their options and he makes clear that some things in life are better than others.

WEALTH IS GOOD!

WHAT'S THE POINT OF LIFE'S LITTLE LUXURIES WITHOUT LONG LIFE?

Chapter 6:1 There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, and it is common among men: 2 A man to whom God has given riches and wealth and honour, so that he lacks nothing for himself of all he desires; yet God does not give him power to eat of it, but a foreigner consumes it. This is vanity, and it is an evil affliction.

WHAT'S THE POINT OF LONG LIFE WITHOUT LIFE'S LITTLE LUXURIES?

3 If a man begets a hundred children and lives many years, so that the days of his years are many, but his soul is not satisfied with goodness, or indeed he has no burial, I say that a stillborn child is better than he — 4 for it comes in vanity and departs in darkness, and its name is covered with darkness. 5 Though it has not seen the sun or known anything, this has more rest than that man, 6 even if he lives a thousand years twice — but has not seen goodness. Do not all go to one place?

WORLDLY-WISDOM IS BETTER!

Does wisdom have any value? Is there any advantage in thinking about life and its

meaning?

7 All the labour of man is for his mouth,

The first value in wisdom is that it is not like work. A man earns a living, but his money can only ease the needs of the body. He feeds his hunger and satisfies his body. He is fed and clothed, warm and dry, safe and sound—but all this can be true with a restless heart: And yet the soul is not satisfied.

So we ask about wisdom: 8 For what more has the wise man than the fool? Here is a wise man, whether rich or poor. Does he have the advantage over the fool? Yes! What does the poor man have, Who knows how to walk before the living? The wise man knows how to walk, that is, how to live and behave among those who are still alive. And this leads to a series of proverbs that display this wisdom. It is as if the Preacher shows how wisdom leads to life worth living. Wisdom can see a life worth living, but the best worldly wisdom can do is come up with a series of comparisons.

Thoughtful men and women can appreciate something of the value of weighing up life in a fallen world. What do they conclude? He lists the products of such wisdom in a series of proverbs.

CONTENTMENT IS BETTER THAN CRAVING

9 Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of desire. This also is vanity and grasping for the wind.

This is the same idea. Whatever you are, rich or poor, well or ill, black or white there is one thing you are and you cannot change. You are a man. That is your designation! 10 Whatever one is, he has been named already, For it is known that he is man; You can wish for the stars, but you cannot overturn God's providence. There are limits and boundaries to your life and forces greater than yourself restrict and restrain, frustrate and perplex. You can fight against them, but you cannot win the fight: And he cannot contend with Him who is mightier than he.

In any case, a man can crave for something that will only increase the meaninglessness of life. My friend said, "I know that winning the lottery will not make me happy." But added, "But I'd like to prove it!" 11 Since there are many things that increase vanity, How is man the better?

The fact is that man doesn't even really know what will bring meaning and contentment to him. 12 For who knows what is good for man in life, all the days of his vain life which he passes like a shadow? His life is a vapour, a shadow and like a summer dew, and when he's gone will he have made a difference? Who can tell a man what will happen after him

under the sun? Life will go on just as well without him.

And so contentment with what is and what you have is a better life than always thinking the grass is greener on the other side of the fence. How often I have seen a cow stretching its head through the wire of its fence to eat grass in another field, when the grass in its own field looked perfectly good. That is man for you!

BEING GOOD IS BETTER THAN HAVING GOODS

Chapter 7:1 A good name is better than precious ointment, And the day of death than the day of one's birth.

Reputation is better than riches, and when a good man leaves this world it is better than when he is born. After all, I am sure Hitler's parents were full of joy at his birth, but what if they could have seen where his life would go and how it would end?

FUNERALS ARE BETTER THAN FEASTS

2 Better to go to the house of mourning Than to go to the house of feasting, For that is the end of all men;

Thoughtful and wise people using common sense may well conclude that going to funerals makes men think! It makes men serious and value what is valuable. They may become more considerate and caring. They may change their behaviour and put away feuds and grudges.: And the living will take it to heart.

Connected with that is that 3 Sorrow is better than laughter, For by a sad countenance the heart is made better. This doesn't mean tears make us feel better, but that sorrow reveals the change of heart that man needs. We ought to be sorry for any wrongs we have committed, and wise people, that is worldly wise people do see the truth of that.

4 The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, But the heart of fools is in the house of mirth. So a wise man governs his life so that he acts in the light of death, whereas the fool just eats, drinks and is merry, for tomorrow—and he is sure that is a long way off—he dies.

A REBUKE IS BETTER THAN REVELRY

5 It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise Than for a man to hear the song of fools. 6 For like the crackling of thorns under a pot, So is the laughter of the fool. This also is vanity.

Another guiding principle is that a teachable spirit is a good thing. To learn from one's mistakes is a very good thing. This requires us to hear words of correction rather than the cackling of a fool. Yet, wise as it is, it doesn't really answer the problem of life. It is a step in the right direction, but doesn't make life meaningful.

A GOOD HEART IS BETTER THAN A WISE HEAD

7 Surely oppression destroys a wise man's reason, And a bribe debases the heart.

Another problem the wise man sees is that of corruption. Wise men get turned away from the truth. A wise head can sit above a covetous heart, and this can be turned by bullying or bribery.

A GOOD FINISH IS BETTER THAN A GOOD START

8 The end of a thing is better than its beginning;

Yet againmarathon, but how long will he keep up his pace? Anyone can sit an exam, but who can pass it. Joab looked loyal, but proved treacherous. Mark joined the team but left early. We can all see this is a good life principle.

SELF-CONTROL IS BETTER THAN SELF-EXPRESSION, thoughtful men can perceive that anyone can start well. The sprinter may look well in the

The patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit. 9 Do not hasten in your spirit to be angry, For anger rests in the bosom of fools.

Another guiding principle worth considering is that venting one's anger, is not the best response. Any fool can rage, but a wise man can wait.

LIVING FOR TODAY IS BETTER THAN LOOKING BACK

10 Do not say, "Why were the former days better than these?" For you do not inquire wisely concerning this.

Here is a bit of worldly wisdom that many Christians have lost sight of. How many look back to days of revival and ask why things were better then and there? Yet we are not wise. The fact is that we can try to evaluate and come to a conclusion, but to make an accurate conclusion you need some pieces of the equation that no man can know, and I do not mean the providence of God either. There are so many issues in culture and the heart of man that cooperate in making men concerned for their souls. There are many things in the lives of believers that quench the Spirit or grieve the Spirit. However, even unconverted thinkers can see the value of living for the day rather than constantly wishing the clock was turned back. I have seen people in the 1940s re-enactments who live 70 years ago and only come into this age to earn enough money to escape back to WWII—death and destruction absent, of course.

GODLY-WISDOM IS BEST!

GODLY WISDOM DEFENDS FROM DESPAIR

11 Wisdom is good with an inheritance, And profitable to those who see the sun.

Of course, if wealth is good and wisdom is better, what a blessing to have both! That is

how the worldly person thinks. But true wisdom is better than money. 12 For wisdom is a defence as money is a defence, But the excellence of knowledge is that wisdom gives life to those who have it.

True wisdom gives life. It makes sense of a broken world. Worldly wisdom can give some life principles, but can it really make sense of this fallen world. That is what I think the Preacher turns his attention to as he says, 13 Consider the work of God; For who can make straight what He has made crooked? Think about this world, he seems to say. It is God who has made it crooked. The curse is God's putting a spoke in the wheel, creating woodworm, and thorns, earthquakes and storms. But also there is what some call time and chance; God's providence which frustrates man's plans and brings his hopes crashing down, who can straighten out the mess the world is in, when God is behind the troubles? So godly wisdom says, 14 In the day of prosperity be joyful, But in the day of adversity consider: Surely God has appointed the one as well as the other, So that man can find out nothing that will come after him. Godly wisdom isn't fatalistic. In trials, those for whom Christ is made unto them wisdom, can see that you cannot predict the future. Man is left utterly to rely on God's providence. The gambler thinks he can predict the outcome of a football match, a horse race, or guess at the numbers on the lottery balls, but he forgets that God can make it all go pear shaped! The godly live in faith in the providence of God

WISDOM DEFEND

The preachers looks back at life. He can say, 15 I have seen everything in my days of vanity: There is a just man who perishes in his righteousness, And there is a wicked man who prolongs life in his wickedness. Good men die young, some even because they are righteous. Evil men live long, sometimes because they are wicked. This may make some say, 16 Do not be overly righteous, Nor be overly wise: Why should you destroy yourself? 17 Do not be overly wicked, Nor be foolish: Why should you die before your time? However, 18 It is good that you grasp this, And also not remove your hand from the other. Do not get into a mindset that keeps its head down— not too good, not too bad! Why is this philosophy something the truly godly must avoid? For he who fears God will escape them all. The answer is that those who fear God—which is the beginning of all true wisdom— will escape every evil in the end.

In fact 19 Wisdom strengthens the wise More than ten rulers of the city. Wisdom is such a beneficial thing. One wise man is worth more than all the strength and strategy of politicians. 20 For there is not a just man on earth who does good And does not sin. If you put your trust in princes you are trusting sinners. Don't be taken by surprise when men sin.

It is in their very nature to sin and err, to cheat and steal and to break their promises and fail you.

21 Also do not take to heart everything people say, Lest you hear your servant cursing you. 22 For many times, also, your own heart has known That even you have cursed others. These verses remind even the godly that their own failures mean that 'all have sinned'. Confidence in sinners isn't wise. Criticism of them isn't right!

WISDOM DELIVERS US FROM SIN

This passage is quite difficult until we remember who the preacher is. It is Solomon and he has proven something by wisdom! 23 All this I have proved by wisdom. I said, "I will be wise"; But it was far from me. 24 As for that which is far off and exceedingly deep, Who can find it out? He discovered that wisdom is unnatural; that common sense is usually not common and not very good sense either. And he saw something else: 25 I applied my heart to know, To search and seek out wisdom and the reason of things, To know the wickedness of folly, Even of foolishness and madness. He saw the moral element of folly. Folly is wicked. It is not rooted in stupidity or lack of education, but lack of ethics. It is not a problem arising from a bad mind, but bad morals.

And so, from his personal experience he could say, 26 And I find more bitter than death The woman whose heart is snares and nets, Whose hands are fetters. He who pleases God shall escape from her, But the sinner shall be trapped by her. 27 "Here is what I have found," says the Preacher, "Adding one thing to the other to find out the reason, 28 Which my soul still seeks but I cannot find: One man among a thousand I have found, But a woman among all these I have not found. He learned from bitter experience that rare as he personally discovered good men, he never discovered a good woman! But though he could not see why so few men and no women from his experience were godly, he did discover one thing: 29 Truly, this only I have found: That God made man upright, But they have sought out many schemes." He discovered that God did not create man with a wicked heart. Man had turned aside voluntarily, and chief among the characteristics of the heart of fallen man is deceit.

Chapter 8:1 Who is like a wise man? And who knows the interpretation of a thing? A man's wisdom makes his face shine, And the sternness of his face is changed.

Therefore God's wisdom gives an understanding that worldly wisdom cannot. True wisdom lifts man from the darkness of despair and discouragement and in place of anger, resentment and frustration, there is peace and trust, contentment and gentleness in a fallen world of ongoing sin and deceit.

WISDOM DELIVERS US FROM JUDGMENT

Having considered women, he now turns to consider a man—the king. Wisdom will deliver you from snares that lead to sin, but it will also keep you from such actions that may lead you to death. I believe he uses this as an illustration. An earthly king has the right of life and death, so he says 2 I say, "Keep the king's commandment for the sake of your oath to God. 3 "Do not be hasty to go from his presence. Do not take your stand for an evil thing, for he does whatever pleases him." Don't be a rebel. Don't be a traitor. Don't be dissatisfied with the king and oppose him. Remember that an earthly king has power to do as he pleases. In other words: 4 Where the word of a king is, there is power; And who may say to him, "What are you doing?"

Now 5 He who keeps his command will experience nothing harmful; And a wise man's heart discerns both time and judgment. That is, if you submit to the king you will not be imprisoned or executed; and remember a wise man does reflect on the reality that there is a time and there is a judgment day!

The wise man recognises that the day will come: 6 Because for every matter there is a time and judgment, Though the misery of man increases greatly.

But when will it come? The wise man can see clearly that:

NO ONE CAN PREDICT IT

7 For he does not know what will happen; So who can tell him when it will occur?

NO ONE CAN POSTPONE IT

8 No one has power over the spirit to retain the spirit, And no one has power in the day of death.

NO ONE CAN PREVENT IT

There is no release from that war, And wickedness will not deliver those who are given to it.

Solomon had seen what some of us have seen

9 All this I have seen, and applied my heart to every work that is done under the sun: There is a time in which one man rules over another to his own hurt. A man becomes king and yet it does him no good. He is a ruler, but he is ruined by it. His kingly rule corrupts him or kills him.

10 Then I saw the wicked buried, who had come and gone from the place of holiness, and they were forgotten in the city where they had so done. This also is vanity.

And also there are those who journey from holiness to hell. They are like Judas who forget about the judgment day and walk away from the Saviour. Imagine being someone

who kissed the door of heaven and yet went to hell. But how can it be? Why does it happen?

Wisdom may deliver us from judgment because we remember that there is a time for judgment, but the fool takes his chances.

11 Because the sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil.

I said to a man once, "You know God will judge you, don't you?" He said, "Yes! But I am still not willing to give up my way of life."

And sometimes they may seem to get away with it. We saw in the last message that injustice thrives in this world, and it enables many to carry on in the hope that just as they will get away with it here, they may get away with it there as well.

However the preacher finishes his message with this firm declaration:

12 Though a sinner does evil a hundred times, and his days are prolonged, yet I surely know that it will be well with those who fear God, who fear before Him. 13 But it will not be well with the wicked; nor will he prolong his days, which are as a shadow, because he does not fear before God.

Godly wisdom is best! The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. A man fears God and repents of sin. A man fears God and seeks a way to be pardoned. A man fears God and turns to Christ, lives for Christ, loves Christ and finally will live with Christ forever. It will be well with those who fear God.

But just as John Bunyan finishes Pilgrim's Progress, so it is true of the wicked.

When (Ignorance) was come up to the gate, he looked up to the writing that was above, and then began to knock, supposing that entrance should have been quickly administered to him; but he was asked by the men that looked over the top of the gate, Whence came you? and what would you have? He answered, I have ate and drank in the presence of the King, and He has taught in our streets. Then they asked him for his certificate, that they might go in and show it to the King; so he fumbled in his bosom for one, and found none. Then said they, Have you none? But the man answered never a word. So they told the King, but He would not come down to see him, but commanded the two Shining Ones that conducted Christian and Hopeful to the City, to go out and take Ignorance, and bind him hand and foot, and have him away. Then they took him up, and carried him through the air, to the door that I saw in the side of the hill, and put him in there. Then I saw that there was a way to hell, even from the gates of Heaven, as well as from the City of Destruction!